The Science and Art of Feminist Somatic Sex Education: Teaching Pleasure in the Mid- to Late Twentieth Century

by

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək^{w}əŋən (Songhees and X^{w}sepsəm/ Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək^{w}əŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Today, female orgasms promise freedom: freedom from bad sex, from unhappy relationships, and sometimes even from the patriarchy. For those who struggle to orgasm, a plethora of "sexperts" offer solutions often in the form of somatic sex education. "The Science and Art of Feminist Somatic Sex Education: Teaching Pleasure in the Mid- to Late Twentieth Century" explores the evolution of somatic sex instruction for pre-orgasmic women from a tradition of *scientia sexualis* to an *ars erotica*. Using archival texts, oral histories, and secondary literature, this thesis highlights the sexologists William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, the psychologist Lonnie Barbach, and the artist Betty Dodson as important shapers of the discourse of female sexuality. Dissatisfied with the psychoanalytic treatments of "frigidity," they set out to create new methodologies. In the 1960s and 1970s, Masters and Johnson achieved nationwide fame for their physiological research into the human sexual response and their consequent method for treating couples' sexual "inadequacies." Building on their work, Barbach created "pre-orgasmic therapy groups," a distinctly feminist alternative to Masters and Johnson. This positions her in a sexual scientific discourse which Foucault termed *scientia sexualis*. Dodson, on the other hand, created a more artistic and spiritual approach with her Bodysex workshops, which place her in the orientalist and essentializing discourse of *ars erotica*. This thesis argues that its subjects were not lonesome pioneers who rose against the oppressive mainstream, even though many like to frame them as such. Instead, it locates them within wider discourses, such as the sexual revolution, radical and cultural feminism, neo-spirituality, and oppressive structures of race and gender. Barbach and Dodson have been overlooked by historians, but their stories are an important part of second-wave pro-sex feminism and help us better understand how sex has been framed as a site of empowerment.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family, whose unwavering support of me and my winding path means everything. Your never-ending pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and joy is a constant source of inspiration.

I also dedicate this thesis to Pia, Lima, Myrto, and Julian. Your love and friendship carried me through school, UCR, and UVic, all the way to the completion of this thesis.

Thank you to my roommates and friends in Victoria, the UVic Grad Writing Room, especially Natalie Boldt, and theDock for being my home away from home.

Lastly, I am incredibly grateful to my supervisors. I thank Dr. Rachel-Hope Cleves for reading and giving feedback on draft after draft, weathering my rabbit-holing, and patiently correcting my erratic capitalization. Even when I had my doubts, you have always believed in this project. Thanks also go out to Dr. Lynne Marks, who found the time to read my draft and offer fresh insights while bargaining for better terms of employment for UVic faculty and staff.

The following chapters are built on the premise that no one exists or creates in a vacuum. Instead, we are all products of the people and discourses around us. In this way, this thesis and I are creations shaped by your guidance, support, and encouragement. Thank you all!

Introduction

In 2019, Netflix released the teenage sex-comedy series *Sex Education.* All four seasons were highly successful and critically acclaimed. As the title suggests, the show's main message is that good sex education is integral to having great sex, good relationships, and being true to oneself. The socially awkward main character Otis is the son of a sex therapist and has learned much about sex growing up. Following his mother's footsteps, he opens a sex therapy clinic at his secondary school where he helps his peers navigate their sexual experiences, queer awakenings, sexual transmittable infections, kinks, trauma, and heartbreak.[1]

In Season One, Episode Six, the popular girl Aimee Lee seeks out Otis for help. Her boyfriend, she explains, is into sexually assertive girls. But as she has always faked her pleasure, she does not know what she wants. When Otis suggests that she think about what she likes when masturbating, she is alarmed, "Ugh! I don't do that. Yuck!" He responds that women tend to consider masturbation to be taboo or dirty and often feel shame around it. "You should probably figure out…you know… what works for you and your body." Aimee's eyebrows are raised in doubt. "So, you're prescribing a wank?!"[2]

That evening, it takes Aimee several tries to allow herself to experience her own rather than a boyfriend's sensual touch. Only by the third attempt, something suddenly feels good, and she lets herself fall into a night of unrestrained masturbatory exploration that takes her into all corners of her room. The next day, she meets Otis at school. Almost melting into the wall, she smiles drunkenly with satisfaction. "I've been wanking all night. I ate four Packs of Crumpets. And I think my clit might fall off. But I know exactly what I want." She

[1] *Episode 6*, episode 6, "Sex Education," written by Laurie Nunn, aired 2019, on Netflix.
[2] *Episode 6*, "Sex Education," at 14:48-15:53.

taps his cheek in thanks, “I gotta go find Steve,” and walks off swaying. That evening, she tells Steve to rub her clit with his left thumb, slow at first, then faster. When she starts shaking, she wants him to blow on her ear “and get ready for fireworks.”[3]

Sex Education portraits Aimee’s pleasure journey in a refreshingly funny and youthful light, without oversexualizing the young character. But it is also just one of many examples of pop culture telling us for several decades that to be confident, liberated, and happy in our relationships, a woman must be sexually experienced. On TV, the young women in “Sex and the City” (1998-2004), “Gossip Girl” (2007-2012), “Girls” (2012-2017), and “Broad City” (2014-2019), amongst many other shows, show us that the modern woman is urban, self-reliant and sexually adventurous. In music, Madonna was “wanting, needing, waiting” for her lover’s sexual attention in 1990; Beyonce sang that “tonight I’ll be your naughty girl” in 2003; and in 2020, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion rapped about their “Wet-Ass Pussies.”

For women who do not feel very confident when it comes to sex, this omnipresent message can be disheartening. Insecurities and inexperience in the bedroom have become proof that one is not a modern woman. Even *Sex Education*, with its explicit effort not to shame anyone, tells Aimee’s story as a development from self-sacrificing male-oriented sexual service to embodied sexual assertiveness and happiness. Of course, many have spotted the possibility to profit from such insecurities, and so “help” is widely available. Magazines like Cosmo have offered sexual advice since the 1960s. Sexual self-help literature fills shelves at every bookstore. Podcasts allow commuters to improve their sex lives on the way to work, and subscription services like omgyes.com and the feminist audio-porn app Dipsea offer detailed guides to connect to one's sexuality. For women who learn better face-to-face, there is a plethora of somatic sex education workshops available. They have names like

[3] *Episode 6*, “Sex Education,” at 27:01-27:53, 46:59-47:13.

"Pleasure Alchemy," or "Come into yourself: the multi-orgasmic woman," and promise "wild & mystic erotic potential," the awakening of the "love-body," or the experience of the "bliss-gasm."[4]

This sexual advice discourse, so omnipresent in North America and Europe and crucial to my own sex education (in elementary school, I loved reading teen girl magazines and surprised my parents and teachers with the extent of my knowledge about sex), is the subject of this thesis. Where and when did it originate? Who created it? What influences shaped it? How did it become so pervasive? I found part of its origin quite quickly, and unsurprisingly, in the American feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, two socioeconomic developments caused a moment of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, the sexual revolution and an increasingly sexual consumer culture required women to be excited sexual subjects. On the other hand, a lack of truly informative sex education and overt messages of sexual conservatism left women sexually uninformed.

Popular sex manuals at the time, for instance, were torn between sexual enthusiasm and conservatism. Women, sociologist Janice Irvine notes, "were often trapped in the dichotomy that simultaneously required of them virginal innocence and seductive sensuality."[5] Many women felt confused and insecure due to the onslaught of mixed messages and went looking for help. However, some saw a problem in the sexual support landscape: it was littered with male experts and their unhelpful advice. Two of those critical voices were the psychologist Lonnie Barbach and the artist Betty Dodson. Independently of each other, the two set out to offer a feminist alternative to the sex therapies available since the end of the

[4] *Krista Nova | Sexual Expression and Tantra Coaching and Workshops*, n.d., accessed November 7, 2025, https://www.kristanova.com/; "Sacred Sexuality Workshop | Somatic Sex Educator | Pleasure Alchemy," *Body Beloved*, n.d., accessed November 7, 2025, https://bodybeloved.ca/pleasure-alchemy/; "Sensual Bliss," *Chelsy Brause | Intimacy Coach*, n.d., accessed November 7, 2025, https://chelsbra.com/sensual-bliss/.
[5] Janice Irvine, *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology* (Temple University Press, 2005), 49.

war. Around 1973, Betty Dodson facilitated her first group masturbation workshops in New York. At about the same time, Lonnie Barbach hosted her first feminist therapy group in Berkeley for women who wanted to learn how to orgasm.

It is surprising how few historians have paid attention to Dodson and Barbach. Barbach, a psychologist herself, is occasionally discussed by sexologists and psychologists. In 2006, for example, the sex educator Leonore Tiefer suggested that "humanist sexologists" like Lonnie Barbach, who moved away from a purely medical approach and focused on personal empowerment, authentic communication, and body-mind connection, offered a solution for the fragmented field of twenty-first-century sexology. On the one side, explained Tiefer, stood the "New Age humanistic sexual body-workers, who have extensive but untested insights into sex as a mind–body phenomenon," on the other, the "white-coated sex experts, mired in medical mystification and reductionism."[6] Incorporating approaches like Barbach's, she proposed, might offer some unifying direction for sexology.[7]

Tiefer claimed that Barbach and her humanist-sexology colleagues were "all but forgotten," yet every now and then, a psychologist remembers them and publishes an article noting the valuable work they did. In 2008, for example, the psychologists Stephanie Both and Ellen Laan suggested that Barbach's method for the "treatment of female orgasmic disorder," combined with future pharmacological treatments, might be more "efficacious" than the program alone.[8] Historians, however, have overlooked Barbach and her role in shaping "humanist sexology," with the exception of April Haynes, who mentions her in the

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[6] Leonore Tiefer, "Sex Therapy as a Humanistic Enterprise," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 21, no. 3 (2006): 359–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/14681990600740723.
[7] Tiefer, "Sex Therapy as a Humanistic Enterprise."
[8] Stephanie Both and Ellen Laan, "Directed Masturbation: A Treatment of Female Orgasmic Disorder," in *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Applying Empirically Supported Techniques in Your Practice*, 2nd ed., ed. William T. O'Donohue and Jane E. Fisher (Wiley, 2008), 158, https://www.perlego.com/book/1009538/cognitive-behavior-therapy-applying-empirically-supported-techniques-in-your-practice.

epilogue of her 2009 book *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America*.[9]

For a long time, Betty Dodson and her Bodysex workshops were just as overlooked as Barbach, mentioned here or there in an epilogue, or as an afterthought. More recently, in 2024, Rebecca L. Davis dedicated an entire chapter of her book *Fierce Desires. A New History of Sex and Sexuality in America* (2024) to Dodson. Davis argues that Dodson, "stripped sex of its contexts, idealizing instead an erotic experience unaffected by race, class, gender, or other identities," illuminating "the radicalism as well as the limitations of sex-positive feminism."[10] Dodson was blind to how race and class shaped sex and its importance to sexual equality. She diminished the dangers of assault and sexual abuse and oversimplified the causes of women's subjugation by focusing on "orgasmic independence."[11] Nevertheless, by dedicating an entire chapter to her, Davis positions Dodson as an important figure in the history of sex and sexuality in America.

The lack of attention to Dodson and Barbach's work can be explained by the fact that it was just a small part of the much larger feminist movement that pursued multiple goals, from ratifying women's rights in the Constitution to closing the pay gap between men and women to ending sexualized violence. I argue that the history of sexual empowerment as a goal of second-wave feminism is just as important to study as these other goals. Unfortunately, few historians have done so besides Jane Gerhard, who discusses the importance of sex to second-wave feminism in *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of Twentieth-Century American Sexual Thought* (*2001*), and now Rebecca

[9] April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.
[10] Rebecca L. Davis, *Fierce Desires: A New History of Sex and Sexuality in America*, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2024), 250.
[11] Davis, *Fierce Desires*, 251.

Davis.[12] This scarcity in scholarship is reflective of a general disinterest in female sexuality for its own sake. The historiography discusses female pleasure mostly in relation to questions of religion, marriage, reproduction, or vice. Joining Gerhard and Davis, I aim to contribute to the scholarship by arguing that today's feminist sexual discourse originated in the 1960s and 1970s and is directly shaped by feminist sex educators such as Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson. Their and others' argument that women's social and political empowerment is rooted in their sexuality has been carried all the way into today's public discourse.

As so often in the history of sexuality, theories by Michel Foucault prove useful in explaining these discursive continuities. Foucault makes a distinction between two sexual discursive traditions. In eastern societies such as China, Japan, India, and the Arabo-Moslem world, says Foucault, pleasure is evaluated in terms of intensity, quality, and duration -- in the "reverberations in the body and the soul."[13] Pleasure is a masterful art and knowledge about it, passed from master to disciple in esoteric initiations, must be deflected into the sexual practice to amplify and shape its effects: "an absoluter mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and all its threats." Sexual knowledge, created and passed on in sexual acts, must be kept secret lest its effectiveness and virtue be divulged.[14]

Western civilizations, Foucault posits, do not possess such an "*ars erotica*." Instead, the West practices a "*scientia sexualis*," the scientific study of sex, which serves their system of knowledge-power. Central to *scientia sexualis* is the confession, the West's preferred method of producing truth. It is thus a confessional science in which truth was hidden before being spoken incompletely and blind to itself, needing to be completed by those who listened,

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[12] Jane F. Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of Twentieth-Century American Sexual Thought* (Columbia University Press, 2001).
[13] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction - Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 57.
[14] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 58.

recorded, and interpreted it. Sex became something natural and therefore subject to pathological processes, a site of hidden mechanisms, in need of normalizing and therapeutic interventions. The confession, first only a tool of knowledge creation, became a tool of therapeutic operations. Lacking a true *ars erotica*, the West invented a new kind of pleasure: the pleasure derived from discovering, reproducing, and exposing the truth about sex.[15]

Critics have fairly criticized Foucault's account of the *ars erotica* as Orientalist. Nevertheless, the distinction he draws can be adapted to make sense of two different forms of American feminist sex education during the 1970s and 1980s. Foucault's *ars erotica* serves as a foil for what he actually wants to develop, a notion of a Western *scientia sexualis*. Thus, *ars erotica* remains useful as a signifier for the Western concept of the artistic and spiritual pleasure practices of "the Orient" rather than a real tradition.

This thesis shines light on two sexuality educators, both representatives of one tradition, and shows how both altered and reproduced existing medical, psychological, and spiritual discourse. The psychologist Lonnie Barbach operated within the tradition of *scientia sexualis* by joining a group of mostly male behavioural therapists who set out to find an alternative to psychoanalysis to treat "sexual dysfunction." She abandoned the prevalent model of couples therapy developed by the influential sexologists William Howeel Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, and adapted their methods to an all-female seminar approach. In line with the broader feminist movement, she taught women that their sexual issues were not individual but part of a wider cultural problem. Nevertheless, she still framed the concept of sex as something that could be understood scientifically, which, as Foucault notes, creates the possibility for the treatment of sexual issues.[16] The artist Betty Dodson, on the other hand, understood pleasure as an erotic art. Conjuring the spiritual power of the Goddess and the

[15] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pt. 3.
[16] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pt. 3.

orgasm, she believed deeply that pleasure was the key to women's liberation and even world peace, and had a fierce aversion to the Christian church and psychologists.

Feeling misunderstood and rejected by many feminist leaders, Dodson positioned herself as an outsider who had understood something that others failed to see. Yet this thesis argues that neither Dodson nor Barbach was an outsider, a pioneer, or even a trailblazer. These words are often used when describing historical figures. They paint a picture of uncharted territory, unknown lands, adventure, and courageous individuals. Histories of pioneers and trailblazers are exciting, but seldom true. Just like the pioneers who left Europe due to social factors and relied on those who had known the "new world" for centuries, Dodson and Barbach's work was motivated and shaped by social pressures and built upon the knowledge of others.

Constructing Female Sexuality Since the Nineteenth Century - A Historical Overview

To fully understand the significance, uniqueness, and timing of the methods developed by Barbach and Dodson, it is helpful to understand the development of American sexual discourse. The second part of this introduction offers an overview of how sexuality has become central to women's political subjectivity, how American white female sexuality has been constructed in relation to race and class, and how wider social changes shaped and were shaped by the role of sex in society.

Second-wave feminists who proclaimed that becoming orgasmic was a political act were not the first to tie sexuality to political personhood. April Haynes shows how moral reformers of the antebellum North used the notion that women were sexual beings in order to make claims for women's political rights and duties. In the 1830s, (a)roused by the lectures

and writings of the diet and sexuality reformer Sylvester Graham, the women of the moral reform movement began organizing around the perceived dangers of female masturbation.[17]

Before then, masturbation was known as "Onanism," after Onan, the biblical figure and first spiller of semen, and was considered a male issue. Graham rebranded onanism as "the solitary vice," which centred on sexual gratification in addition to the unhealthy loss of semen. A Presbyterian minister who had never received medical training, "Dr. Graham" lectured that masturbation caused insanity, illness, and death. Most importantly, he argued that women shared men's capability of sexual desire and that they, too, should actively abstain from masturbation. For his contemporaries, this claim was so outrageous that Graham was met with several violent riots. Not long after Graham began his lectures, female moral reformers started spreading his message independently of him. Ultimately, they replaced him with female lecturers and gathered in small groups to encourage each other to follow his methods.[18]

While the public reaction may suggest otherwise, the female potential for sexual desire was not a new concept. Angus McLaren claims that for about fifteen hundred years, it had been common knowledge in Europe and, eventually, North America that women had the capacity for sexual desire and satisfaction. Essential in the proliferation of this knowledge was the ragingly successful sex manual *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. It was first published in 1684 and taught readers up until the 1930s that both sexual partners were required to have an orgasm for conception to be possible.[19] Female pleasure was thus a necessity and actively sought out by women and men. Some of the editions of the *Masterpiece* give special attention

[17] Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*. Today, Graham's possibly most enduring legacy is the cracker he invented in 1829. He believed the blandness of the cracker and other foods could stifle lustful behaviour.
[18] Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, chap. 2.
[19] Mary Fissel, "When the Birds and the Bees Were Not Enough: Aristotle's Masterpiece," The Public Domain Review, accessed November 4, 2025, https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/when-the-birds-and-the-bees-were-not-enough-aristotle-s-masterpiece/.

to the clitoris, and some contemporary sex manuals even suggest that it allows women to experience more pleasure than men.[20]

As most people considered female sexual pleasure a necessity for centuries, a significant cultural shift was necessary for Graham's lectures to cause such a ruckus. This shift, however, did not occur equally across all social strata. McLaren explains that it was caused by scientists who observed that many women conceived children without enjoying the sexual act. This information reached the educated white middle class, which recast respectable femininity as asexual and in opposition to the unthinking and hedonistic upper and lower classes, where the old theories were still deeply rooted.[21]

What McLaren fails to establish, however, is how this new middle-class femininity took shape in opposition to the powerful myth of the hypersexualized Black woman. Deborah Gray White termed this caricature the "Jezebel," a fiery, vulgar, hysterical, animalistic Black woman who was believed to be in need of being civilized through slavery. Within the order of slaveholding white superiority, the "Jezebel" myth rendered Black women available for the gratification of white male lust and as breeders to sustain cheap labour.[22] Americans across the country adopted this southern establishment of white femininity in opposition to the Black "Jezebel." Thus, another reason why violent mobs chased Graham in the 1830s was that he had unsettled the established order of race and class by reattaching the capacity for sexual pleasure to middle-class white femininity.

In 1844, an entrepreneur called Frederick Hollick popularized the idea that women should enjoy moderate "amative" heterosexual intercourse within marriage to channel their

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[20] Angus McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1984), 20.
[21] McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century*, 20.
[22] Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, 20–23.

desire and prevent masturbation. Like Graham, "Dr." Hollick was not a medical doctor. Yet he "scientifically" linked female sexuality to love and marriage. Women, he lectured, had to be skillfully pleasured by their husbands, preferably vaginally, to satisfy their sexual needs. Otherwise, they would not be able to withstand the solitary vice which would deplete their nervous system and overtax their brains. He further perpetuated the myth that sexual excess was located in the bodies of Black women, scientizing it using the authority of his unearned doctoral title. White reformers excitedly picked up and disseminated his theories, establishing healthy white feminine sexuality as essentially linked to heterosexual sex within marriage and in opposition to Black hypersexuality.[23]

By the early twentieth century, urbanization and industrialization further challenged the ideal of the asexual white woman. Young women working in factories or pink-collar jobs increasingly frequented heterosocial spaces like dance halls, where some engaged in sexual relations with young men. Concerned about how this uptick in overtly sexual behaviour might lead to an increase in prostitution and venereal disease, moral reformers worked hard to "protect" these young women.[24]

While moral reformers worried about the effects of women's sexual behaviour on their physical health and wider society, Sigmund Freud fundamentally redefined the role of sexuality in human life. His theories shape the sexual discourse to this day. Before Freud, sex was something one did, often believed to be motivated by an intrinsic biological desire. After Freud, sex, or more accurately libido, became the omnipresent yet hidden motivating force of any human thought, dream, and action. Even infants, he claimed, were driven by this libidinal force, which would change throughout childhood and adolescence. Problems arising during

[23] Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, chap. 4. Haynes argues that Hollick's mechanism of reframing marital white heterosexual sex as a solution against the solitary vice helped to purify it, which created a foundation for heteronormativity, which other scholars usually pinpoint in the sexology of the end of the century.
[24] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, chap. 1.

these developmental stages would consequently shape a person's sexuality later in life. For women, this meant that they had to develop a healthy adult sexuality, which Freud believed to be defined by the vaginal orgasm. Clitoral orgasms, he posited, belonged to girlhood.[25] As part of a not easy but necessary transition, the girl would not only give up clitoral stimulation but also "a certain amount of activity" in favour of the more passive vaginal sexuality.[26] The vaginal orgasm, according to Freud, was a necessary step towards heterosexuality, which was an achievement rather than biologically inevitable.[27]

The psychologist Leslie Margolin explains that Freud was the "architect of the theoretical structures underlying the new conceptualization of frigidity" by insisting that everyone had "an inner wellspring of sexual energy."[28] Nevertheless, he was not very invested in frigidity and suggested that it still needed to be better understood. Two close followers of his, the psychoanalysts Edmund Bergler and Edward Hitchmann, would take on this task in the 1930s.[29] Whereas frigidity was previously only loosely defined, the two clarified the diagnostic criteria for frigidity as the incapacity of women to have a vaginal orgasm, no matter the existence, strength and duration of previous arousal. For women, they claimed, penetrative sex was fundamentally connected to love and therefore integral to a functioning marriage. Here, they further naturalized Morrow's and others' claims that female sexuality was linked to love and marriage. Clitoral pleasure, they claimed on the other hand, would cause feminine neurosis and ill health. Feminism and the destruction of the family thus

[25] Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," *W. W. Norton & Company*, 1933, 161.
[26] Freud quoted in Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Zone Books, 2003), 393.
[27] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 20.
[28] Leslie Margolin, *The Etherized Wife: Privilege and Power in Sex Therapy Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 33.
[29] Both were Austrian Jews who, like Freud, had to flee to America after the Anschluss to escape Nazi persecution.

became a result of an aggressive and neurotic clitoral sexuality. Hitchmann and Bergler effectively pathologized clitoral pleasure and connected it to the notion of frigidity.[30]

Psychoanalytic theories reached America at a time when white Americans had worked themselves into a panic about the possibility of the "white race" committing suicide. The early years of the twentieth century saw an immense increase in Italian, Slavic, Jewish, Chinese, and Japanese immigration. At the same time, Black people began moving north and westward in what would later be known as the Great Migration. Aware of their own steadily decreasing fertility rate, white people believed that both non-white immigrants and Black people were especially sexually potent. Their anxieties were amplified when women did not leave the heterosocial realm of work and leisure to return to their homes after the First World War ended.[31] Panicked commentators encouraged the white middle-class to loosen their sexual self-control. This, they hoped, would help them procreate more effectively.[32] Psychoanalytic notions of the importance of motherhood to women's psychological and sexual well-being may have proved useful for people eager to promote healthy marriages and reproductive sex amongst white people.

The fights against the solitary vice, prostitution, promiscuity, VD, the collapse of the American family, and race suicide were more often than not fought by the same people, a movement now referred to as the social hygiene movement. World Wars I and II soon sparked a wave of government-funded sex education in the army, colleges, and even schools to fight VD amongst soldiers and young women who flocked to army towns looking for a good time. It is in this "sexual assertion on the wartime home front" that historian Amanda Littauer sees the beginnings of the transformation of American sexual culture, which would ultimately lead

[30] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 40–43; Margolin, *The Etherized Wife*, chap. 2.
[31] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 18–19.
[32] Julian Carter, "Normality, Whiteness, Authorship: Evolutionary Sexology, and the Primitive Pervert," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (Routledge, 1997), 156.

to the sexual revolution of the 1960s.[33] The end of WWII did not bring an end to young women's (and men's) sexual experimentation. The spread of sexual liberalism required conservative politicians and organizations to actively push against the tide of the ragingly successful *Playboy* magazine (1953), a flood of spinoff magazines, tabloids, and erotic novels. Experts pathologized extramarital sex, abortionists were arrested, gay men were persecuted, obscenity laws were mobilized to restrict the circulation of erotic literature, and interracial relationships were violently policed. Nevertheless, interracial marriage became legal in several states, obscenity laws were weakened, and in 1953, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, five years after publishing his report on the human male.[34]

Kinsey's report offered empirical evidence for women's sexual capacity, and openly defied "the Freudian map of women's sexual body."[35] Rejecting psychoanalytic expert consensus, he reported that his research suggested that women's sexuality was, in fact, centred in their clitoris, and that the vagina is likely to provide more pleasure to men than it does to women. A trained biologist, Kinsey compared the clitoris to the penis, likened female to male sexuality and argued that all kinds of sexual behaviour are natural, it was society that deemed some sexual behaviour as acceptable and others as deviant. Kinsey supported his arguments with his statistics that found that a significant majority of women had either petted or had intercourse before marriage, many reaching orgasm this way. He supported his subject's sexual choices, arguing that premarital sexual relations helped form sexually satisfactory marriages, of which he, too, believed America to be lacking. Kinsey's research found that over two-thirds of married women experienced orgasm, either infrequently or

[33] Amanda H. Littauer, *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion Before the Sixties* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 3, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/12/monograph/book/41354.
[34] Littauer, *Bad Girls*, 5–6.
[35] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 58.

inconsistently. Even though Kinsey broke with all sorts of traditional understandings, he still believed in the importance of marriage. For him, women being sexually unsatisfied was a threat to the American way of life.[36]

In the early 1950s, American moral authorities feverishly tried to keep the population's sexual escapades in check. They believed that American strength and superiority over the Soviet Union lay in the nuclear family. Educators, family sociologists, psychologists, teachers, and parents agreed that some kind of instruction on how to be a good American man or woman was needed.[37] And so, they transformed sex education, which had previously focused on the prevention of venereal diseases and promiscuity, into "family life education." This new subject taught students the acceptable way of courtship (usually paired with lessons on abstinence), marriage and reproduction, and often paired this information with lessons in how to be a good capitalist and consumer.[38]

It was those students who would only a few years later enjoy the sexual freedoms that defined the "sexual revolution" of the late 1950s and 60s. The contraceptive pill, which entered the market in 1960, allowed sex without the threat of unwanted pregnancy. Gays and lesbians took to the streets to demand equal rights as sexual citizens, and the consumer market was filled to the brink with sexually explicit goods from magazines and books to movies and fashion. On the East Coast, couples were swinging. On the West Coast,

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[36] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, chap. 2; Littauer, *Bad Girls*, chap. 3. Kinsey further reported that about a third of his subjects had previously felt erotically responsive to other women, and many had experienced same-sex sexual contacts. He himself was attracted to both men and women and promoted tolerance for homosexuality. He believed homosexuality to be just another form of sexual expression. Here again, he broke with psychoanalytical theory, whose stigmatization of homosexuality had become widely accepted in the sciences and pop culture.

[37] Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 138, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv22zp3kg.

[38] Moran, *Teaching Sex*, chap. 5.

communes were experimenting with nonmonogamy. Meanwhile, in the heartlands, college students were fighting curfews and other institutional controls on their sexual behaviour.[39]

This sexual revolution and reactionary actions by the establishment informed simultaneously occurring nationwide movements. It shaped the beat and hippy movements, as well as the more organized and political Civil Rights and Chicano movements, and the New Left. Benita Roth establishes that Black, Chicana, and white feminisms (note the plural) emerged from these movements respectively. Each of them was, for different reasons, dominated by men and restrictive for women who were pushed into traditionally female roles and often subject to sexual objectification. Female activists were fed up with the way they were being treated and disappointed with the male leaders' unwillingness to consider gender as a cause to rally around. Subsequently, many left their respective movements and began organizing around women's issues, bringing the skills they had learned and their movement ideologies into the new feminist movement(s).[40]

Historian Alice Echols describes how the white feminist movement went through different yet overlapping stages. In the early stages, "politicos," the women who had just left the larger radical movement, attributed women's oppression to capitalism. Their primary loyalty was to the left. Shortly after, liberal feminists founded organizations such as the National Organization for Women to fight for formal equality in the public sphere, especially in the form of the Equal Rights Amendment, which was ultimately not ratified due to interference by conservative activists. Radical feminists opposed both politicos and liberal feminists. They were social constructionists who understood male supremacy as more than a

[39] Beth L. Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, 1st ed. (Harvard University Press, 1999); John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 1. ed (Harper & Row, 1988); Davis, *Fierce Desires*.
[40] Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815201.

symptom of capitalism, and argued that "gender, not class, was the primary contradiction."[41] Their potentially most impactful practice was called consciousness-raising, which one feminist described as "'the political reinterpretation of one's personal life.'"[42] During a consciousness-raising meeting, women would come together to listen to and share about personal experiences. Hearing that their struggles were not individual but shared by many other women, participants realized that the root of their problems did not lie within themselves but with wider societal structures.

By the mid-1970s, radical feminism was weakened by schisms and a lack of direction. It became eclipsed by cultural feminism, which offered a uniting philosophy of essentialist female superiority. Cultural feminists regarded women as naturally more democratic, peaceful, benevolent, and nurturing. This essentialism of female supremacy framed radical feminists as aggressive and masculinist. It allowed feminists, often disenfranchised by their radicalism in the 1960s, to retreat into the comfortable realm of a distinctly female culture and the Goddess.[43]

The historiography often portrays second-wave feminism as a secular movement. But a growing body of scholarship and the centrality of the Goddess to cultural feminism provide evidence to the contrary. The religious studies scholar Ann Braude points out that this misconception is partly due to Protestantism's centrality to second-wave feminism. As the most represented religion in America, it is often considered unmarked, which prevents scholars from "seeing" Protestant feminists' religiosity.[44] As she and the historian Laura Foxworth show, Jewish and Catholic women also played important roles, especially in the

[41] Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 3, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvqmp26c.
[42] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 83.
[43] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, chap. 6.
[44] Ann Braude, "A Religious Feminist—Who Can Find Her? Historiographical Challenges from the National Organization for Women," *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 555–72, https://doi.org/10.1086/422480.

fight for the ratification of the ERA and against sexism in their churches and synagogues.[45] While second-wave feminism was not a religious movement, it was nevertheless shaped by religious women and influenced religious institutions.

Many feminists at the time also understood their movement to be secular. Many women felt alienated from their religions due to sexist structures and rules. This led to an exodus of young women from their institutions of worship, antireligious writings in feminist publications, and hostilities against feminists who chose not to leave their congregations. Some of the women who left established religion were drawn towards alternative spiritualities, especially witchcraft and Goddess spiritualities. For these women, the anthropologist Kathryn Rountree explains, the Goddess was both "a political and psychological tool for women seeking liberation and empowerment."[46] Nonspiritual feminists criticized these Goddess feminists as "self-deluded escapists" who avoided dealing with the systemic issues of the "real' world and perpetuated essentialism. This, Rountree argues, led to a false distinction between political and spiritual feminists. Many Goddess feminists, she observed, were actively involved in political efforts ranging from feminism to environmentalism.[47]

The feminist scholars Becky Thompson and Chela Sandoval caution that understanding second-wave feminism as a movement that developed through stages leads to feminists of colour and anti-racist white feminists being erased from history. Thompson upholds Roth's account of the emergence of second-wave feminisms as an alternative to the "old litany" of "hegemonic feminism," a notion coined by Sandoval to describe how the

[45] Braude, "A Religious Feminist—Who Can Find Her?"; Laura Foxworth, "'No More Silence!': Feminist Activism and Religion in the Second Wave," in *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, ed. Angie Maxwell and Todd G. Shields, SpringerLink Bücher (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62117-3.
[46] Kathryn Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 43, no. 2 (1999): 156.
[47] Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess."

second-wave has been constructed as a white, middle-class movement with succeeding phases or branches.[48] Consequently, Sandoval stresses, "a unique form of U.S. third world feminism became invisible."[49]

While the construct of consecutive feminist branches is blind to the work of feminists of colour, it is still a useful tool for understanding white feminism, the realm in which Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson moved. By the early 1970s, radical feminism began to crumble, giving way to the emergence of cultural feminism. Different feminist groups utilized the philosophy of this new kind of feminism to define competing definitions of feminist sexuality. Anti-violence and some lesbian feminists took up the critique of male sexuality in general and argued that women naturally desired love and intimacy rather than orgasms.[50] Years of sharing experiences at consciousness-raising groups had heightened their awareness of the ubiquity of battery, rape, and coercion. Many believed that men learned such behaviour from sexist imagery in mass media and focused their attention on changing the media landscape. Others believed that pornography was the cause of rape and that it should be legally restricted. It was this latter group that would define the burgeoning feminist anti-violence movement and its goals. Using cultural feminist ideas of inherent differences between men and women, they claimed that women desired sensuality and sexual intimacy while men were socialized to be insatiable and sexually violent.[51] Lesbian separatists shared those essentialist notions. Lesbianism, they insisted, was the key to women's liberation and "any woman relating to a man cannot be feminist."[52] For these inaccurately termed "anti-sex"

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[48] Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy H. Hewitt (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 39.
[49] Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Theory out of Bounds 18 (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 50.
[50] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, chap. 5.
[51] Lynn Comella, "Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 437–62, https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2015.0025.
[52] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 154.

feminists, women became perpetually threatened by the omnipresence of unsatisfiable violent male sexuality. Concerned about these developments, feminists of colour "pushed feminist radicalism to include race and class in the structuring of women's sexual identities." They cautioned that stereotypes of Black male hypersexuality and false accusations of rape have been historically used to oppress Black men and pointed out that white women have historically ignored sexual violence against Black women.[53]

On the other side of the rift, a racially and sexually diverse cast of sex radicals "took up the revolutionary potential of women's sexual pleasure and advocated for even greater acknowledgement of women's unique sexual desires within feminism."[54] These "pro sex" feminists were not ignorant of the ways in which women were constrained and endangered by sex. And they, too, made use of cultural feminist notions of an inherent female sexuality. But they were concerned about how "dramatically the boundaries of acceptable sexual speech had narrowed" since the sexual revolution, and they were unwilling to define female sexuality in terms of danger and victimization or restrict it to a desire for emotional intimacy.[55] Instead, they advocated for a more nuanced discussion of sex, which allowed them to claim sex for women and criticize sexism simultaneously.

In 1982, the disagreement between "pro-sex" and anti-pornography feminists culminated in open hostilities. Anti-pornography feminists picketed the 1982 Scholar and the Feminist Ninth Conference "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" at Barnard College, which hoped to "challenge the conservative feminist sexual discourse that held sway in the women's movement."[56] Protestors handed out leaflets in opposition to the conference and called out

[53] *Desiring Revolution*, 153.
[54] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 153.
[55] Davis, *Fierce Desires*, 270.
[56] Comella, "Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," 452.

organizers by name. These "ad-feminem" attacks caused some pro-sex feminists their jobs and publishing opportunities, broke apart organizations, and deeply shook organizers and attendees emotionally – they had become the enemy. These battles, Lynn Comella notes, "caused deep and enduring rifts within the broader feminist movement that are still felt today."[57]

Chapter Outline

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knowledge about female sexuality was created and disseminated by charlatans, moral reformers, physiologists, psychoanalysts, and sexologists, the most influential of whom were male. They were joined by institutions like schools and health departments, which utilized fearmongering tactics to try to control women's sexual behaviour. By the middle of the twentieth century, as the sexual revolution entered full swing, old notions of female sexuality as inherently passive and emotional still lingered. It was that moment of cultural dissonance that gave birth to Betty Dodson's Bodysex workshops and Lonnie Barbach's Preorgasmic workshops. Women who were taught in school, church and the family that they should be chaste and respectable were told by pop culture that they should engage in premarital sex and wear miniskirts. They were warned from collecting any sexual experience but expected to be sexually skilled and adventurous as soon as they were married. When they rejected sexual invitations, they were met with angry accusations of prudishness and frigidity.[58] Both Barbach and Dodson worked to help women overcome these opposing messages and consequently helped create a new discursive branch and somatic practice which inform our sexual discourses and therapies until today. This new discourse centres the expression of women's sexuality as an inherent right and liberating act

[57] Comella, "Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," 439.
[58] See for example Estelle B. Freedman, "Introduction," in *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics: Essays*, ed. Estelle B. Freedman, Gender and American Culture (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 6.

rather than a service to men. It acknowledges that society left women sexually misinformed and repressed but expects them to be willing, even eager, to learn and grow– for their own sake and that of other women.

This thesis, a genealogy as well as biographical exploration, explores this argument across three chapters. In Chapter 1, "Treating Frigidity without Freud," I discuss the emergence of behavioural sex therapy as an alternative to psychoanalysis. This chapter begins with the groundbreaking work of William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson and describes their rise to fame. I argue that the two were not working in a theoretical vacuum but built their approach on the work of psychologists such as Arnold Lazarus, W. Charles Lobitz, and Joseph LoPiccolo. Chapter One shows that male therapists failed to see female sexual problems in their full complexity, which created the need for a feminist alternative. As Masters and Johnson have received the most scholarly attention amongst those figures discussed in this thesis, I make use of a number of secondary sources, including works from the fields of psychology and sociology, as well as primary sources such as magazine and newspaper articles about them, and videotaped interviews. Collectively, these sources provide a good overview of the academic and media perception of the people I discuss. However, they offer no personal insight into the experiences of those whom Masters and Johnson and their contemporaries treated.

In Chapter 2, "Pre-Orgasmic, not Anorgasmic: Lonnie Barbach," I discuss how Lonnie Barbach adapted Masters and Johnson's approach and combined it with the practice of consciousness-raising to create a distinctly feminist program to help women who were still "pre-orgasmic." The chapter argues that Barbach moved out of a framework of sexual pathology and introduced the importance of social, political, and economic realities into the understanding and treatment of sexual issues. Yet she did not fully leave behind scientific

understandings of sex. There is next to no scholarship on Lonnie Barbach, but I do explore the limited sources on somatic sex education more broadly in this and the following chapters. This chapter relies most heavily on primary sources, and Barbach's own writings inform much of it. They are accompanied by magazine articles, most of which are from small feminist magazines of the time. As the sources lack any personal accounts from seminar participants, these magazines offer some, if not much, insight into perceptions of Barbach's workshops.

Chapter 3, "Liberating Masturbation?: Betty Dodson," is concerned with Betty Dodson's life, her beliefs about pleasure, her rejection of Western religion and psychology, and her quarrels with contemporary feminists. Dodson's Bodysex workshops ultimately filled the same gap as Barbach's seminars. But Dodson's approach was more embodied and spiritual, situating her with the tradition of *ars erotica*. Orgasmic pleasure, she believed, held the potential to bring global harmony. While there is more scholarship on Dodson than on Barbach, this chapter, too, relies mainly on primary sources. Dodson's personal writings are central to the chapters. They offer excitingly, frank discussions about her sexual life and work, but provide little insight into participants' perceptions of her workshops. Again, articles from contemporary feminist magazines help to fill the gap, if only sparsely. In addition, some secondary literature on new age spiritualities prove helpful to situate Dodson.

Throughout the thesis, I used different methodological approaches. As my sources are mostly texts written by Masters and Johnson, Barbach, and Dodson themselves, I rely on close reading and some discourse analysis. This allows me to analyze how they participated in broader discourses and constructed their own notions of female sexuality. Due to the lack of client-written primary sources, this also gives me the best insight into the therapy sessions and workshops. I supplement these written texts with oral histories recorded by others. In

Chapter 3, I employ some visual analysis which offers insights into Dodson's spirituality and her participation in Goddess feminism. My overall approach is grounded in a feminist, constructivist, and intersectional framework. I therefore understand female sexuality to be socially constructed and shaped by race, gender, and notions of health and pathology.

In the conclusion, I explain how looking at second-wave feminism through a lens of sexual pedagogy opens exciting avenues for future research. I also argue that knowing how existing discourses shaped Masters and Johnson, Dodson, and Barbach helps us appreciate the effectiveness of their methods and their legacies without falling for essentializing notions of sex and gender. Few feminists, I conclude, shaped today's (somatic) sex education as significantly as Barbach and Dodson.

Chapter 1: Treating Frigidity Without Freud

In 1963, at Washington University, a small group of researchers was crammed behind a one-way mirror, paying little attention to the woman in the adjacent room. She was lying on something that resembled an examination table, the room was dimly lit, and incense was burning. She was naked, her body covered in a myriad of sensors to measure her heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension, amongst other bodily functions, and several cameras were recording different parts of her body. Unconcerned about, maybe even a bit aroused by, the scientists behind the mirror or the instruments attached to her, she was reading erotica and pleasuring herself until she reached orgasm, the machines fervently recording any and every change in her body. Unimpressed by what was happening in the other room, the researcher's attention was glued to the data the machines spat out. It was all much like they had been expecting; after all, they had already observed hundreds of other women and men masturbating in this little room. The woman enjoyed a moment of post-orgasm relaxation when research assistants entered the room to remove the measuring instruments. When she was dressed, a researcher left the room to thank her, while the others began cataloging the data.

William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson's approach to scientifically measure the body's reaction to sexual arousal was not entirely novel. Already in 1872, Dr Joseph Beck published his observations of the female orgasm to help settle the dispute regarding the importance of the orgasm in procreation. After stimulating his patient, he claimed, he watched her "fallen uterus" contract in a sucking motion. It was not clear whether the woman consented to this experiment, as she was seeing him to treat her uterine prolapse.[59] In the early decades of the twentieth century, the gynecologist Robert Latour Dickinson made a

[59] Edward M. Brecher, *The Sex Researchers* (Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 289.

more deliberate effort to observe sexual response during intercourse and masturbation by using a phallus-shaped glass tube and an early version of the vibrator to sexually excite women.[60] Thus, a wide variety of data on the physiological response to sexual arousal, including heart rates, blood pressure, respiratory changes and the like, existed even before Masters and Johnson began their work.

Even though physiologists had been researching human sexuality since the late nineteenth century, psychoanalysts of the early twentieth century made any problem "that could be traced back to psychosexual development" their domain.[61] In fact, even if female patients' concerns were not sexual in nature, psychoanalysts quickly found a way to connect their afflictions to their sexuality. At the root of this diagnostic tradition lies Sigmund Freud, whose theories form the foundations of psychoanalysis. In a revealing case study, he turned his client Dora's complaints of sexual assault by a family friend into her desire for sexual contact with him. Following in Freud's footsteps, his followers and mid-century

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[60] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 67.

[61] Peggy J. Kleinplatz, "History of the Treatment of Female Sexual Dysfunction(s)," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 14, no. 1 (2018): 29–54, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-050817-084802. Early in his career, Freud presented a paper in which he argued that "at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience" (he seems to use "premature sexual experience" interchangeably with words like "rape," "abuse, and quite unfittingly "seduction"). Later, Freud moved away from this idea, arguing that memories of sexualized violence during childhood were simply products of a woman's (and sometimes a man's) imagination. Consequently, mental health professionals who worked in the tradition of psychoanalysis told victims of sexual violence to acknowledge that their memories were not real but rather imaginations caused by the Oedipal complex. , Psychoanalysis was working with the assumption, of course debated and always subject to the individual practitioner, that women should not try to achieve orgasm by stimulating their clitorises and they should not be believed when sharing about experiences of incest.

In 1984, Jeffrey Masson published his disruptive and contentious book *The Assault on Truth – Freud´s Suppression of the Seduction Theory.* In this book, he explained that he had uncovered previously unpublished correspondence between Freud and some of his close relations. Masson argues that Freud did not abandon his Seduction Theory out of conviction but due to social pressure from colleagues and fear of being ostracized from the medical community. Fearing political implications, the psychoanalytic community was enraged that Masson had shared these findings with the public. Masson was fired from his position as the curator of the Freudian archives. A later article by *New Yorker Magazine* unfavorably portrayed Masson as an arrogant, sex-obsessed womanizer and misquoted him repeatedly. He sued for libel, a court case that reached the Supreme Court, which consequently adjusted existing libel laws. After twelve years, Masson lost the case as his team was unable to prove malice on the side of the defendant. Nevertheless, Kleinplatz credits the publication of Masson´s findings with ending the psychoanalytical practice of not believing survivors of incest and other sexualized violence during childhood. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (Penguin Group, 1985), http://archive.org/details/assaultontruth-freudssuppressionofseductiontheory.

psychoanalysts Eduard Hitschman and Edmund Bergler turned a wife's wish to leave her husband into a sadomasochistic enjoyment of his cruelty.[62] Psychoanalysis was built on the assumption that solutions to female (and male) sexual problems could be found by a usually male therapist who would locate the root of the client's problem by analyzing their psychosexual history. Once they detected the source of the problem, often related to the client's relationship with their mother, they would help them talk it away. However, as Freudian theory infantilized any clitoral stimulation and consequently strongly discouraged it, it is likely that very few psychoanalysts were successful in helping their clients reach climax. Even though psychoanalytic theory infantilized and pathologized female sexuality, it took a strong hold on American (sex) therapy and its broader society.[63]

In the 1960s, a team of two sexologists, dissatisfied with psychoanalytical methods, developed an approach to treat sexual dysfunction based on empirical findings rather than theory. Or, in their own words, based on "physiological fact rather than phallic fallacy."[64] The sexologists who developed this new and prominent approach to treating "sexual inadequacy" were William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson. Physiologists, rather than psychiatrists, the two developed partner work centred on desensitization, a technique central to behaviour therapy. Their approach was built on the groundbreaking findings of their eleven-year study on the human sexual response, which was based on the premise that "categorically the greatest handicap to successful treatment of sexual inadequacy was a lack of reliable physiological information in the area of human sexual response."[65] Their findings, Masters and Johnson wrote in the introduction to their report, "presented a first step toward an open

[62] Margolin, *The Etherized Wife*, 36.
[63] Margolin, *The Etherized Wife*, 46.
[64] William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Little, Brown and Company, 1966), http://archive.org/details/humansexualrespo00will.
[65] William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 1, https://archive.org/details/humansexualinade0000mast/mode/1up.

door policy." Alfred Kinsey, who was a biologist before he began researching human sexuality, had cracked that door open when he published the first extensive sociological report on human sexual behaviour, putting "his foot firmly in this door despite counter-pressures that would have destroyed a lesser man."[66] Most significantly for the feminist project, Masters and Johnson were able to provide physiologically scientific evidence for the existence of female sexuality beyond marital coitus. In direct opposition to dominant Freudian assumptions, and confirming Kinsey's sociological findings, they showed that the clitoris, not the vagina, was central to women's pleasure. They found that women were most likely to experience orgasm through self-stimulation, and some, if not all, female subjects were able to have several orgasms in a row.[67]

Not many scholars discuss Masters and Johnson, but those who do focus on the assumptions that shaped their work and the consequential essentializing effects and methodological failures. Psychologists Ross Morrow and Janice Irvine, for example, highlight that Masters and Johnson worked within existing heteronormative frameworks. Irvine points out that, like most other contemporary sexologists, Masters and Johnson worked within a marital ideology, combining a rigorous scientific method with a stress on the importance of white middle-class heterosexuality. Their ultimate goal, Morrow notes, was to fix the American marriage, which they believed was in crisis.[68]

Morrow further cautions that Masters and Johnson's failure to question their own assumptions led them to make mistakes in their research. Consequently, they did not look into the possibility that orgasm was not the natural sexual conclusion, that female bodies might also be able to ejaculate (which some of their subjects reported), or that not just women but

[66] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, vii.
[67] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*.
[68] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, pt. 1; Ross Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy: A Sociological Analysis of Masters and Johnson* (Routledge, 2008), chap. 4, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203939659.

also men could experience multiple orgasms (which was later proven to exist in other studies). He points out that their vehement insistence that their work was purely physiological and objective, paired with their inherent biases, ultimately led to the reification of "dominant essentialist and hetero-coital views of sexuality."[69]

In her masters thesis in psychology Hanni Smolyanitski builds on Morrow's critique and, quoting Foucault, argues that the duo helped medicalize sexuality: "since sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it – as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom – in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior."[70] Similarly, the author and journalist Thomas Maier claims that it was Masters and Johnson who made sex, previously within the domain of religion, poetry, and psychoanalysis, the subject of science.[71] Both Smolyanitski and Maier overlook that sex had already been medicalized for several decades.

The historian Jacinthe Flore, whose genealogy shows how medical techniques shaped modern understandings of sexual appetite, makes a more nuanced observation. While she argues that Masters and Johnson were not the first physiologists to reframe sex as a physiological and medical question, their use of machines, charts, and statistics established a new scientific understanding of the "calculable subject." Referring to Foucault, she highlights that such scientific reframing of an age-old subject is integral to the systems of modern governance.[72]

Smolyanitski also points out that while Masters, who was an obstetrician-gynecologist, connected his research to medicine, he and Johnson failed to be in

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[69] Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy*, 178.
[70] Hannie Smolyanitsky, "Moving Instructions: A History of Sex Therapy, 1954-2001" (Masters Thesis, York University, 2023), 19.
[71] Thomas Maier, "Science of Master's & Johnson," Distinctive Voices, August 18, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znaBIFSUfW8.
[72] Jacinthe Flore, *A Genealogy of Appetite in the Sexual Sciences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), chap. 4.

"conversation with extant psychotherapeutic modalities," which left their work in a "theoretical vacuum."[73] However, Masters and Johnson's distance from, and even disdain for, psychoanalytical theory did not mean they worked in a vacuum. As I will show, their research and therapy were built upon the work of other physiologists, sexologists, and behavioural therapists, even if they do not refer to their sources with in-text citations.

Even though there is much to critique about the work of Masters and Johnson, Janice Irvine notes that they had a direct positive effect on many women's lives: They moved sex further away from "both moralism and the Freudian mystique of sexuality" and framed sex as a natural drive rather than a "suspicious and inchoate impulse." And while they held a particular disdain for feminism, they reframed sexuality as a biological right for both men and women and "insisted on the importance of a woman's voice in describing her own sexuality," as well as the importance of the clitoris as a sexual organ.[74] Their research resulted in new contraceptive methods as well as an increase in the quality and quantity of the available sex education.

In this chapter, I join Jacinthe Flore and Janice Irvine in plucking Masters and Johnson out of their position as extraordinary individuals and "pioneers of sex-research." I then place them back into their rightful place within the tradition of *scientia sexualis*, beside their contemporaries, without whom their work and success would not have been the same. I argue that, because Masters and Johnson worked in a physiological framework that moved sexuality back into the realm of medical sciences, sexuality was lifted out of the unconscious back into the body, where it became subject to scientific scrutiny and psychomedical interventions. I show that Masters and Johnson did not participate in a discourse of deviance or understanding sex as an issue of social hygiene, with its aims to curb venereal disease,

[73] Smolyanitsky, "Moving Instructions," 6.
[74] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 14.

prostitution, and other sexualized vices. Both frameworks were central to the medical sexual discourse of previous centuries. Instead, they focused explicitly on pleasure, something new to the *scientia sexualis* and an important step towards a feminist approach to "treating" sexual dysfunction.

Furthermore, while the two still considered sex to be a natural drive, an essentialist assumption, their approach offered patients a much more active involvement in the shaping of their sexuality than did psychoanalysis. Masters and Johnson's work rendered sex malleable. One did not have to uncover deep-seated traumas to "treat" one's sexual issues anymore, but could simply learn the right techniques and relationship skills. This simplification of the treatment of sexual dysfunction would ultimately allow for the dissemination and democratization of knowledges and practices. Eventually, to find a solution for an inability to orgasm, a woman did not have to go through many hours of costly therapy. Instead, she could simply pick up a book at the local bookstore and try out the exercises described in it. Masters and Johnson were no feminists. However, their research had a profound impact on the zeitgeist of their time and informed the work of many feminists, including Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson, the "main characters" of this thesis.

While Masters and Johnson are often framed as pioneers in the field of sexology and sex therapy, they were not the first to research or treat sexual problems.[75] The first therapist to suggest the use of behavioural therapy to treat "frigidity," the female inability to become sexually aroused or achieve orgasm, was Arnold A. Lazarus. Lazarus published his findings on his treatment approach in 1963, seven years before the publication of Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Inadequacy*. He was born and lived for much of his early life in

[75] Derek C. Polonsky, "Sexuality in Women," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 9, no. 6 (2001): 310–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/10673220127906; Smolyanitsky, "Moving Instructions"; Kevan Wylie, "Masters & Johnson – Their Unique Contribution to Sexology," *BJPsych Advances* 28, no. 3 (2022): 163–65, https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2021.53.

South Africa. While he was working on his PhD on phobias at the University of Witwatersrand, the controversial psychologist Joseph A. Wolpe was conducting psychological research on systematic desensitization at the medical school. His work was so different from the psychological work that had been done to date that professors called his ideas "nonsense lunatic fringe" and "just hogwash." Lazarus himself was very "unimpressed," but when a friend contemplated a prefrontal lobotomy to treat her agoraphobia, he suggested she try out Wolpe before taking such a drastic step. Once Lazarus saw Wolpe's approach prove successful, he began secretly "hanging around" with him. Over time, he became convinced of behavioural therapy's potential as an alternative to psychoanalysis and, under the guidance of Wolpe, wrote his PhD about it, which he finished in 1960. Exemplifying the dogmatism of psychoanalysis at the time, his examiner, an ardent psychoanalyst, failed him, and another panel of examiners had to be established to ultimately let him pass.[76]

In a 1963 paper, published three years after completing his PhD, Lazarus describes cases in which he used Wolpe's systematic desensitization, originally intended to treat anxieties and phobias, in the treatment of frigidity. Lazarus believed frigidity, like phobias, to be learned behaviour that could be reversed using systematic desensitization. Breaking with the psychoanalytic definition of frigidity as the failure to achieve orgasm during penetrative sex, he suggested that it should be understood as a continuum from those who enjoy sex but fail to orgasm to those "for whom all sexual activities are anathema."[77] Many of his patients, he stated, had developed feelings of hostility towards their husbands or men in general. Lazarus observed that his more introverted patients experienced anxiety in sexual situations while the more extroverted ones experienced vaginismus. Even though the underlying

[76] Terence Wilson, "Arnold Lazarus on Multimodal Therapy," 1944, Video, https://www-psychotherapy-net.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stream/Victoria/video?vid=256.
[77] Arnold A. Lazarus, "The Treatment of Chronic Frigidity by Systematic Desensitization.," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 136, no. 3 (1963): 272, https://doi.org/10.1097/00005053-196303000-00009.

reasons for these women's sexual issues seemed to differ, Lazarus employed systemic desensitization for them all. First, Lazarus guided the patient into a state of deep relaxation and then asked them to imagine increasingly distressing scenarios related to their sexual anxieties. Only when the patient was comfortable imagining the least distressing situation did he move on to the next situation on their list.

Of sixteen cases, he deemed nine as successfully treated, a rate that Lazarus considered "anything but spectacular." He noted that the woman's character and the vividness of her imagination affected the outcome of her treatment. Furthermore, the treatment length also seemed relevant. While all women who underwent more than fifteen sessions reported enjoying and initiating sexual activity, most of those who quit the treatment earlier continued feeling anxious or disgusted during sexual intercourse. Regarding this latter group, Lazarus notes that one should not overlook that a frigid woman might be homosexual, which could explain some of the therapeutic failures.[78]

Behaviour therapy has a history of being at the center of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression Change Efforts (a more accurate terminology than the more colloquial "conversion therapy").[79] These efforts mainly utilized aversion therapy and positive or negative reinforcement rather than systematic desensitization. Some of the therapists discussed in this chapter believed their therapeutic methods could be used to "treat" homosexuality. This includes Masters and Johnson, Joseph LoPiccolo, and Donald W Hastings. The latter, interestingly, also co-founded the Transsexual Research Project at the

[78] Lazarus, "Treatment of Chronic Frigidity," 277.

[79] In 2022 the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies formally apologized for the role it played in Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression Change Efforts (SOGIECES). Jonathan S. Comer et al., "Reckoning with Our Past and Righting Our Future: Report from the Behavior Therapy Task Force on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression Change Efforts (SOGIECEs),"
Jonathan S. Comer et al., "Reckoning With Our Past and Righting Our Future: Report from the Behavior Therapy Task Force on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression Change Efforts (SOGIECEs)," *Behavior Therapy* 55, no. 4 (2024): 649–79, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2024.05.006.

University of Minnesota after being deeply moved by the story of a transgender woman he was treating. Throughout the ten-year lifespan of the program, twenty-five trans women received gender affirming care, including surgeries, hormone treatment, and therapy.[80] A treatment was considered successful when a participating trans woman entered a heterosexual marriage (with a cisgender man), passed as cisgender, and cut all ties to her genderqueer and homosexual friends. As the archivist and historian Myra Billund-Phibbs points out, the ultimate goal of this project was "to make acceptable the unacceptable, to erase homosexuality and gender difference, and to 'treat' transsexuality by rendering it invisible."[81] In other words, just like his colleagues, Hastings was moving within a heteronormative framework. His motivation to help was to change people to fit the norm, rather than changing the norm to fit the people.

Another foundational influence on Masters and Johnson's therapy style was Donald W. Hastings. He published two books, a guide for psychologists and a sex manual for any interested reader, discussing frigidity and impotence in 1963 and 1966.[82] In the introduction to his first book on the matter, aptly titled *Impotence and Frigidity,* Hastings explains that he remembers no mention of human sexuality in medical school. The knowledge he had of this subject matter was taught to him by prostitutes who were brought to the hospital where he interned after they got arrested. He was supposed to examine them for venereal disease, and "the brighter ones quickly recognized how unsophisticated their doctor was, and in their own way they undertook to give the lectures the medical school had omitted."[83] Hastings was the first doctor to openly recommend masturbation to increase a woman's pleasure. Regular

[80] Myra Billund-Phybbs, "Transsexual Research Project," MNOPEDIA.Org, 2023, https://www.mnopedia.org/thing/transsexual-research-project.
[81] Billund-Phybbs, "Transsexual Research Project."
[82] Donald W. Hastings, *Impotence and Frigidity* (Little, Brown, 1963), http://archive.org/details/impotencefrigidi00hast.
[83] Hastings, *Impotence and Frigidity*, vii.

masturbation, he argued, would decrease the orgasmic threshold — the more a woman would masturbate, the faster she would orgasm with a partner. Hastings' argument was based on suggestions by some of his female patients. Learning about sexuality from prostitutes may have taught Hastings that those with personal experience could offer more knowledge than the medical institutions could provide. The "technique" he describes begins with the woman reading some "stimulating literature," followed by her manually stimulating the genital area to the point of orgasm, even if this takes a long time. The woman would repeat this technique until she reaches orgasm more quickly, at which point she invites her partner to join. He cautions, however, that some women may not be open to "certain methods" due to "an individual's attitudes and possible ethical objections."[84]

Just like Hastings, William Masters, and most other medical students in the middle of the twentieth century did not receive any training on the treatment of sexual matters during their education. Consequently, doctors were just as subjected to misinformation and myths as those without a medical degree. In 1954, the year Masters would begin his research into human sexuality, a survey found that one-third of the graduating class of a major medical school and twenty percent of their professors believed that masturbation caused mental illness.[85]

Masters did not set out to be a sexologist. He wanted to be an English teacher and study at Cambridge. But World War II made that dream impossible. So, he decided to study at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry, where he would work in the lab of George Washington Corner. Corner was pioneering the research of reproductive hormones and had written two small sex education manuals, one for boys and one for girls.

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[84] Hastings, *Impotence and Frigidity*, 93.
[85] *Masters & Johnson: The Science of Sex Part 1*, Documentary (A+E Networks, 1997), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOjNX7AfH4M&t=326s.

Working with Corner gave Masters a first-hand impression of the poor state of sexological research. At the time, it was virtually nonexistent. When Masters let Corner know that he wanted to close the research gap, that he wished to research human sexuality, Corner advised him that he would be "committing professional suicide." "But if it had to be that," Masters remembered thinking, "so be it."[86] But at first, Masters did listen to Corners' advice to first establish himself in the medical world with less controversial work, so he became a gynecological surgeon and did research into hormone replacement surgery for menopausal women and infertility. During that time, he and his wife had two children. But Master's interest in human sexuality did not wane. So, in 1954, William Masters, a registered Republican and church-going Episcopalian, began his research into human sexuality in a "plain brick building" at Washington University in St. Louis.[87]

In the early stages, Masters believed it would be impossible to find subjects for his research. While thousands of people were willing to be interviewed by Kinsey and his team, Masters must have worried that performing sexual acts in front of researchers was too scandalous for people to participate. So, undoubtedly knowing that his choice could affect the legitimacy of his study, he turned towards the only other group with a professional relationship with sex: prostitutes. He obtained permission from the Washington University Chancellor, Ethan Sheppley, on the condition that he create a review board that included the St. Louis police commissioner, the publisher of the St. Louis Globe, and the head of the St. Louis Roman Catholic Archdiocese.[88] It was the police commissioner who put Masters in contact with the prostitutes he would work with. The commissioner arranged for Masters to watch the prostitutes and their clients from small voyeur booths in brothels in Canada,

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[86] *The Science of Sex 1*, at 6:04-6:14.
[87] *The Science of Sex 1*; Richard Severo, "William H. Masters, a Pioneer in Studying and Demystifying Sex, Dies at 85," U.S., *The New York Times*, February 19, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/19/us/william-h-masters-a-pioneer-in-studying-and-demystifying-sex-dies-at-85.html.
[88] Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy*, chap. 4.

Mexico, the US Midwest, and the West Coast (whether the sex workers and their clients always knew that they were being watched is unclear). After their appointments were over, Masters interviewed the female prostitutes and examined their genitalia. During these interviews, the women shared knowledge about their sexual techniques, vaginal orgasms, orgasms without genital stimulation, and multiple orgasms.[89] They "described many methods for elevating or controlling sexual tensions and demonstrated innumerable variations in stimulative technique" to the researcher.[90] Many of the sexual techniques they shared would later "have direct application in therapy of male and female sexual inadequacy."[91]

In total, 118 female and twenty-seven male prostitutes allowed Masters to observe and interview them. Their active participation and influence on the research and later sex therapy was ultimately a subversive epistemic reversal. While historically sex workers have mainly been the subjects of knowledge produced by others about themselves, they were, in this case, actively involved in the production of knowledge about the sexual behaviour of others. Furthermore, all those who, over the years, have sought help from Masters and Johnson, and all those who continued and adapted their work, ultimately profited from the embodied knowledge collected and developed by sex workers.[92] One of these early female participants would significantly change Master's life. She got rather annoyed with him: "You´re never going to know anything about the female sex. Why don´t you get yourself a partner or interpreter or whatever you want to call it?"[93] And the more he thought about it, the more he

[89] Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy*, chap. 4.
[90] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, 10.
[91] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, 10.
[92] However, due to "migratory tendencies" which would not allow long-term studies and higher "varying degrees of pathology of the reproductive organs usually present in this population," their statistics were excluded from the overall findings. Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, 11.
[93] *The Science of Sex 1*, at 11:32-11:50.

saw what a great idea that was. And so, two years into his research, he put an ad in the Washington University placement bureau for a "mature woman who was good with people."[94]

At the same time, Virginia Johnson was looking for a job. Johnson was born in Missouri in 1925. She went to college with the dream of becoming an opera singer and majored in music. After a brief marriage with a lawyer, because of whom she moved to St. Louis, she married a local band leader.[95] She was a singer for his orchestras and their public face, while also taking on other modelling jobs. The couple had two children, and Johnson found her husband to be lacking as a father.[96] So, when her son was four and her daughter one, the couple divorced, and Johnson began searching for a job to support herself and her two children. Her dream of becoming a musician, or even the short-lived idea of pursuing a doctorate in sociology, ended in single motherhood. When she came across Masters' listing and applied, she did not know what kind of work she would be assisting with. But as it would turn out, she was the perfect person for the job. She was, in fact, so good at it that she would soon rise from being Masters' assistant to being his research partner. In Johnson's words:

> It was a gift that he gave me. But I think it served him well. He really gave me quite equal status. He made me earn it, but at the same time, he was never reluctant to give it. He realized that, to do the work he was trying to do, he needed a man and a woman cast in the role of the traditional couple. And he couldn´t have been more right.[97]

In the early phase of the research, after having developed the methodology with the help of local prostitutes, Masters and Johnson thought it would be hard to find volunteers to be subjects of the studies. However, in an interview, Johnson recounts how wrong they were:

> Curiously enough, getting research subjects was easy. […] You had to wade through the fraternities who sent their pledges to be interviewed. And the poor dears were

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[94] *The Science of Sex 1*, 11:56-11:58.
[95] A. Shay, "Behavior: Repairing the Conjugal Bed," *TIME*, May 25, 1970, https://time.com/2976273/masters-of-sex-time-cover/; *The Science of Sex 1*.
[96] Shay, "Behavior."
[97] *Masters & Johnson: The Science of Sex Part 2*, Documentary (A+E Networks, 1997), 0:33-00:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqvG29_T5Y4.

> stammering and stuttering and so on because they did not come of their own free will. […] That was very easy to screen out, of course, and kind of fun in a way.[98]

Having developed new machines like a clear dildo with a light and camera inside it, Masters and Johnson were able to measure and record the human body and its sexual response in ways that had never been done before. In 1964, they moved their research off campus and founded the Reproductive Biology Research Foundation (later renamed as the Masters and Johnson Institute in 1978).[99] It is unclear what motivated this change, but it is likely that it allowed them more freedom to conduct their research as they saw fit, without being restricted by regulations or concerns from Washington University leadership.

Masters and Johnson knew that their work was controversial. Masters' previous attempts to publish preliminary results resulted in one psychological journal rejecting his paper as too pornographic and in two other journals of obstetrics and gynecology banning him for life.[100] Especially considering their decision to use prostitutes as subjects, Masters and Johnson made sure to keep their research hidden away from journalists. This required constant vigilance. A neighbouring doctor, for example, spied on the team by pressing his stethoscope against the wall between a bathroom and the lab, and someone sent an anonymous envelope with pictures taken from across the street through the windows.[101] Nevertheless, Masters and Johnson managed to keep their work out of the public eye until the psychoanalyst Leslie H. Farber published an open and rather ostentatious critique of it in *Commentary* magazine. Farber, who at a different time claimed that women who do not know about orgasms do not miss it, argued that Masters and Johnson's work showed "that sex for

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[98] *The Science of Sex 1*, 14:53-15:14.
[99] Joseph Selling, "From Kinsey to Masters and Johnson," Sources for Christian-Ethics.Be, accessed October 18, 2025, https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/christian-ethics/sex/relations/r1a.html#note1; Linda Banner, "Virginia Johnson — Human Sexuality Pioneer," *Translational Andrology and Urology* 2, no. 4 (2013): 32123–323, https://doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2223-4683.2013.09.12.
[100] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 58.
[101] *The Science of Sex 2*.

the most part has lost its viability as a human experience."[102] The researchers claimed that Farber based his writing merely on hearsay and felt forced to publish their work to set the record straight.[103] To do so, they published *Human Sexual Response* with Little, Brown and Company in 1966. To make sure the book was free of any potentially arousing content which could generate more backlash, they wrote it in dense medical language and focused exclusively on the physiology they were researching.

The book sold out even before its official publication date and was the number three New York Times bestseller on the non-fiction list for several months (following *How to Avoid Probate* by Norman F Dacey, and *The Last Battle* by Cornelius Ryan, later replaced by *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* by Eric Berne).[104] By 1968, it had sold over 300,000 copies, about 2,000 to 3,000 per month, and was translated into nine languages.[105] In the late 1990s, Hugh Hefner, whose foundation had donated $25,000 to the Institute by 1970 and continued to donate annually, explained, "If the Masters and Johnson book would have arrived in '55 or 1960, it would have been blasted. It arrived at almost a perfect time. It arrived at a time at which people were throwing off a lot of taboos and repression related to their sexuality."[106] Similarly, when a bookseller, who displayed the book in his store window, was asked if people were embarrassed buying it, he responded, "On the contrary. This is an enlightened age, and people are interested in sex."[107] Masters and Johnson had hit a nerve. "The book was published on Monday, and by Friday, the mail began coming

[102] Leslie H. Farber, "'I'm Sorry, Dear,'" *Commentary Magazine*, January 11, 1964, https://www.commentary.org/articles/leslie-farber/im-sorry-dear-1/.
[103] "Sex and the Married Couple," U.S., *The Atlantic*, December 1, 1970, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1970/12/sex-and-the-married-couple/303647/.
[104] "Best Seller List," *The New York Times*, August 28, 1966; "Best Seller List," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1966.
[105] Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy*, 92.
[106] *The Science of Sex 1*, 20:03-20:18; *The Atlantic*, "Sex and the Married Couple."
[107] *The Science of Sex 1*, at 19:48-19:59.

in by sacks, I mean literally. We had to employ three secretaries on a part-time basis to answer the mail."[108]

Not everyone was excited about the book's publication and what it stood for. Aligning with Farber, many believed the duo's mechanistic devices and physiological tests, so central to *scientia sexualis*, gave the impression that they devalued the emotional aspect of sex.[109] The journalist and author Midge Decter, whom the New York Times described as an architect of neoconservatism and the culture wars, called Masters and Johnson "busy sexual engineers." Similarly, the psychologist Dr. Natalie Shainess denounced them as a "'priest and priestess' of sex who detached 'the sex act from the moods, feelings and emotions of desire and love.'"[110] Other psychiatrists and clergymen agreed that a book about sex which did not use the word "love" once was unacceptable.[111] The psychiatrist Rollo May, for example, complained, "They put the emphasis on orgasm when it should be on love. They help some couples, and I congratulate them for that, but their total impact on society is to send us further down the road of misunderstanding ourselves and our need to love one another."[112]

In an attempt to protect themselves, and with some stubbornness that is hard not to read as arrogance, Masters and Johnson decided not to let themselves get too affected by such attacks. They were aware that Dr. Kinsey, to whom they owed so much, had been driven into severe depression when he tried to defend his work from critics in the last years of his life.[113]

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[108] *The Science of Sex 1*, 21:44-22:00.
[109] Linda Wolfe, "Masters & Johnson Pop," Archives, *The New York Times*, January 19, 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/1975/01/19/archives/masters-johnson-pop-the-pleasure-bond-a-new-look-at-sexuality-and.html; Douglas Martin, "Midge Decter, an Architect of Neoconservatism, Dies at 94," Books, *The New York Times*, May 9, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/books/midge-decter-dead.html.
[110] Wolfe, "Masters & Johnson Pop."
[111] Shay, "Behavior."
[112] *The Atlantic*, "Sex and the Married Couple."
[113] John Corry, "Research into Sexual Physiology Disclosed After 11-Year Inquiry; 382 Women and 312 Men Observed in Study--Authors Hope Their Work Will Aid Treatment of Inadequacy Research on Sex Is Made Public," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1966, https://www.nytimes.com/1966/04/18/archives/research-into-sexual-physiology-disclosed-after-11year-inquiry-382.html.

They decided not to follow in his footsteps and forcefully stood by their work and results.[114] Janice Irvine describes how Masters and Johnson defended their work by appealing to the scientific and even medical nature of it. In the Introduction to *Human Sexual Response,* for example, they describe the book as a medical text and repeatedly refer to themselves as medical professionals. By doing so, they actively positioned themselves within the widely trusted discourse of *scientia sexualis,* in which truth could only be produced by experts who followed standardized processes. This turned out to be a rather clever marketing move and was central to Masters and Johnson's overall success.[115]

While early papers were not accepted by medical journals, one of their main findings, the Human Sexual Response Cycle (HSRC), would later serve as the underlying theory for the diagnosis of sexual dysfunction in the third and fourth editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published in 1980 and 1994, respectively. Only in the DSM-5, published in 2013, did the authors move away from any sexual response model. This was mainly due to growing (feminist) critiques of the scientific, clinical, and gendered flaws, but also to avoid "any 'one size fits all' model of sexual response."[116]

In 1959, five years into their research and years before the publication of *Human Sexual Response*, Masters and Johnson established a clinic for the treatment of sexual dysfunction at the Washington University School of Medicine, which was transferred to the Reproductive Biology Research Foundation in 1964. Again, the duo conducted their work discreetly for many years. Only in 1970 did they publish their approach in *Human Sexual Inadequacy.*[117] Based on their research findings and eleven years of experience treating

[114] Shay, "Behavior."
[115] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 59,73; Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*.
[116] Cynthia A. Graham, "Reconceptualising Women's Sexual Desire and Arousal in DSM-5," *Psychology & Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (2016): 34–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2015.1024469.
[117] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*.

couples who struggled with their sex lives, the book explains Masters and Johnson's approach to treating sexual dysfunction. It acts as a guide for other therapists and sexologists, but was available to anyone. Consequently, couples who struggled with their sexual performance did not necessarily have to book a trip to St. Louis. Instead, they could buy *Human Sexual Inadequacy* at their local bookshop and closely follow the detailed instructions in their own four walls.

Masters and Johnson's therapy approach was built "on the basic premise […] that there is no such thing as an uninvolved partner in any marriage in which there is some form of sexual inadequacy." Thus, their approach involved both partners, even if just one experienced sexual difficulties, as well as a pair of "co-therapists," a man and a woman, to ensure that both the female and male patient felt understood and represented. A female therapist may be able to articulate something the female client had been unable to put into words, which would help the husband better understand her position, and vice versa. Working within a heterosexual framework, Masters and Johnson did not offer possible adjustments to the approach if the clients were a same-sex couple.[118] By 1972, the duo, together with five other co-therapist teams, treated about 225 couples a year at the Institute.[119]

Masters and Johnson invited the couples to spend two weeks at the Institute, away from their daily lives, including work and children. The Institute booked the couples into elegant accommodations like the Chase Park Plaza Hotel or one of the two small apartments it rented at the Forest Park Hotel.[120] Before the first session began, Masters and Johnson asked the couples not to have sex unless they were instructed to do so as a homework exercise. To help their clients pass the time that was left after sessions and homework,

[118] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*.
[119] *The Science of Sex 2*.
[120] *The Atlantic*, "Sex and the Married Couple."

Masters and Johnson instructed their staff to provide information on "restaurants, areas of interest, amusement, educational potentials, etc." They wanted staying at the Institute to feel like taking a vacation.[121]

The first two days of therapy were spent on "History taking." During history taking, each co-therapist interviewed the clients individually. On the first day, each individual was interviewed by a therapist of the same sex. The goal was to get an in-depth sexual history of the patient. However, Masters and Johnson stress that this history is not a

> statistical review of the patients´ sexual experiences. […] Rather, foundation sex-history-taking is structured to develop material within a chronologic framework of life-cycle influences, which reflects sexually oriented attitudes and feelings, expectations, experiences, environmental changes, and practices.[122]

The next day, the individuals were interviewed by the therapist of the opposite sex to fill potential gaps or clarify statements that did not correspond with what the partner said.

This first step, the detailed confession of one's entire sexual life, is deeply rooted in the tradition of *scientia sexualis*. Foucault spends much of the introduction to the History of Sexuality talking about confessions, which he believed to be the central tenet of *scientia sexualis*:

> [Our civilization] is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession.[123]

The "art of initiations and the masterful secret" he is mentioning here refers to the *ars erotica*, which treats sexual knowledge like a desirable secret a master passes on to their apprentice.

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[121] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 18.
[122] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 24.
[123] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 58. Foucault does not define "our civilization." I assume he means the western European culture which was disseminated through colonialism and can be found in Europe, the Americas, and Australia, but also institutions like universities in places which are not considered "Western."

Conversely, *scientia sexualis* treats sexual knowledge as a potentially shameful secret, restricted to the bedroom and scarcely uttered. Physicians, psychologists, sociologists, and other scientists unearth these secrets through the institution of the confession to build a scientific body of knowledge that, in turn, defines inadequacies to be treated with methods rooted in that science, thereby solidifying its power. In psychotherapy, the act of confession itself is considered cathartic and thus a treatment in itself.[124] As Freud's contemporary and psychologist Carl Jung points out, psychoanalysis was "built upon the practice of confession," which was anticipated by the "much older confessional in the church."[125] Its use by Masters and Johnson suggests that the rift between their work and psychoanalysis is not as pronounced as the two may have wished. Furthermore, it solidifies their placement in the tradition of the *scientia sexualis*, highlighting that, while their machines may have been new, their methods were not as novel as they were portrayed.

On the third day of Masters and Johnson's treatment, the couple underwent a medical and physical examination to rule out physiological causes for the sexual problems. If no physical causes were found, all four parties, the couple and the two therapists, met for a roundtable discussion. Here, the couple recapitulated what they had told the therapists during the interviews. The goal was not just for them to be aware of each other's history, but also to learn effective communication. At the end of the discussion, the therapists gave the couple their first physical homework exercises. The therapists asked the couple to do some sensate focus exercises, an idea Johnson had in the early stages of her and Masters' work. In this exercise, the couple explored each other's bodies through touch, one person at a time. At this stage, the genital area and breasts are left out, so the couple can focus on the rest of the body with "no specific 'sexual' stimulation" unless otherwise directed. To decrease pressure and

[124] Elizabeth Todd, "The Value of Confession and Forgiveness According to Jung," *Journal of Religion and Health* 24, no. 1 (1985): 39–48.
[125] Carl Jung quoted in Todd, "The Value of Confession and Forgiveness According to Jung," 46.

focus attention on the acute sensual experience, the exercise did not end after a specific time or when orgasm was achieved, but rather when the couple did not feel like continuing anymore.[126]

On day four, the experiences of the previous day were discussed in a roundtable setting. Afterward, the couple went back to their room with instructions to repeat the previous exercise. This time, the goal was to improve their nonverbal communication. The receiving partner was asked to place their hand on their partner's hand and guide them in exploring their body, including breasts and the genital area. If they were unaware of the anatomy of their own or their partner's genitals, the therapists instructed them to familiarize themselves with those body parts using images provided in *Human Sexual Inadequacy*. Again, the exercise was specifically not goal-oriented, but any physiological sexual response was welcomed. The last days of the program focused on the couple's specific sexual problem (e.g. erectile dysfunction or orgasmic dysfunction). For each problem, Masters and Johnson had developed different approaches.[127]

If the couple's sexual troubles were caused by the woman's inability to orgasm, the goal of the treatment plan was to help her communicate better with her husband. The exercise began with the woman sitting on the bed, her back leaning against her partner's chest. To explore sensual touch, the husband caressed her body but avoided overstimulating the clitoris. Just like with the previous exercises, the goal was not to reach orgasm, and the exercise was to end as soon as the woman felt physical or emotional fatigue. Once the couple felt secure and happy doing this exercise, the therapists instructed them to try the female-superior coital position the next time the couple was sexually excited. In this position, the woman could get used to the feeling of his erect penis in her. After she felt comfortable enough, the woman

[126] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 60–75.
[127] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 75–85.

could start moving in ways that created pleasure for her.[128] Once the couple was confident in this position, they moved on to a lateral coital position, with her on her back and him on top of her. Masters and Johnson claimed that this position "is reported as the most effective coital position available to man and woman, presuming there is an established marital-unit interest in mutual effectiveness of sexual performance."[129]

By ending their program with a slightly altered missionary position, Masters and Johnson reveal their commitment to traditional ideas of love, sex, and marriage. While their work was built on their own findings that female sexuality is centred in the clitoris, the only organ whose sole job is to provide pleasure, their treatment approach to anorgasmia in women concludes in penetrative sex with no mention of continuous stimulation of the clitoris or other erogenous centers like the nipples or anus. This does not necessarily mean that they did not stress the importance of continuous clitoral stimulation at the end of some sessions. However, it indicates that even the two people who scientifically proved the importance of the clitoris to female sexuality were unable to fully rid themselves of the centrality of vaginal penetration.

Despite their shortcomings, Masters and Johnson were highly praised as pioneers by many of their contemporaries. In an interview for the 1997 documentary *Masters & Johnson: The Science of Sex*, the psychiatrist Sandra R. Leiblum, for example, stresses:

> Their contribution really could not be overestimated. It was enormous. And it really did change for most of us how we approached sexual problems, how we assessed sexual problems, and how we treated sexual problems […] Basically, [*Human Sexual Inadequacy*] launched Sex Therapy as a specialty.[130]

[128] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 214–50.
[129] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 310.
[130] *The Science of Sex 1*, at 3:46-4:04.

Possibly due to Master and Johnson's questionable citation practice, commentators like Leiblum overlooked that their work was built on that of others, especially Lazarus and Wolpe. Masters and Johnson's successful approach of slowly reintroducing sensual touch, starting small and building up to penetrative sex, clearly follows the methodology of systemic desensitization first developed by Wolpe and applied in the treatment of sexual issues by Lazarus. Even though this foundational work is often overlooked, behavior psychological methods opened new and important paths in the treatment of sexual dysfunction. According to Leiblum, the "number of sex therapists, sex clinics, anddual sex therapy teams that sprang up within a year of the publication of their book was enormous."[131]

Masters himself did not seem happy with the proliferation of sex clinics. In a 1974 article called "Phony Sex Clinics—Medicine's Newest Nightmare," he estimates the number of new clinics to be between 3500 and 5000. He laments that some of these clinics prescribed "normally proscribed sexual activity."[132] Couples, Irvine writes, who sought help for their ailing marriage at such clinics may well have been told to explore group sex, swinging, and even sex between therapists and patients for therapeutic purposes. She explains this development with an influx of practitioners with esoteric and unconventional techniques, whom Masters himself called "incompetent, cultist, mystics, well-meaning dabblers, and outright charlatans," who capitalized on the 1970s "ambience of free love."[133] Additionally, the field lacked licensing, universally accepted standards of practice, training, and ethics, and had no regulatory bodies. At the same time, some organizations set out to regulate sex therapy. Universities began introducing graduate training programs and granted PhDs in human sexuality, and thus ensured sex therapy could be offered by trained professionals. Masters and Johnson spearheaded the effort to regulate sex therapy, and in 1975, the

[131] *The Science of Sex 2*, 2:59-3:13.
[132] Masters quoted in Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 70.
[133] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 70, 72.

American Association for Sex Therapy and Research (AASECT) developed and awarded certifications for sex educators, sex therapists, and sex counsellors.[134]

Evidently, Masters and Johnson, who valued medical accuracy, set loose an avalanche of unregulated sex therapy that was not easy to bring under control. Yet, the existence of "incompetent" and "cultist" practitioners did not distract critics enough to prevent Masters and Johnson from being the subject of scathing critique yet again. Their use of surrogates, women who would take up the role of single men's wives so they could participate in the program, upset many. While Masters and Johnson understood surrogates to be specialists whom they trained, critics believed them to be prostitutes. The *New York Times*, for example, wrote in 1972, "Some sex therapy groups appear to be little more than prostitution rings purporting to offer the 'surrogate wife' technique once used by Masters and Johnson."[135] Even in the 2001 New York Times obituary for Masters, the surrogates are mentioned and described as "prostitutes" that he had hired.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Bernie Zilbergeld, who would later become the director of the Human Sexuality Program at the University of California, San Francisco Medical School, and his colleague Dr. Michael Evans openly critiqued Masters and Johnson's work in articles in *Psychology Today* in 1980 and the pornographic magazine *Forum* (published by *Penthouse*) in 1983. They claimed the researcher's success rates were misleading and that the research was "nonreplicable, and virtually worthless."[136] Their critique was accurate: Masters and Johnson's work was neither representative nor replicable. Their participants were from academic circles, primarily white, generally of average or high intelligence, highly educated,

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[134] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, pt. 2.
[135] Boyce Rensberger, "Clinics for Sex Therapy Proliferate Over Nation," Archives, *The New York Times*, October 29, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/29/archives/clinics-for-sex-therapy-proliferate-over-nation-sex-therapy-clinics.html.
[136] Jane E. Brody, "Masters and Johnson Defend Pioneer Sex Therapy Research," U.S., *The New York Times*, May 27, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/27/us/masters-and-johnson-defend-pioneer-sex-therapy-research.html; Banner, "Virginia Johnson — Human Sexuality Pioneer."

and between eighteen and forty years old. Due to a lack of information about the operationalization, other researchers would be unable to replicate their experiments accurately.[137] For Zilbergeld and Evans, for example, it was unclear exactly when Masters and Johnson considered a treatment successful. Their public critique was harsh and unforgiving. As Time Magazine reported in 1983, Zilbergeld claimed to have met Masters at a San Francisco bar where the latter "disclosed his lax standard for successfully treating lack of orgasm in females: one orgasm during the two-week intensive therapy treatment at the Masters & Johnson Institute in St. Louis and one more orgasm at any time during the next five years."[138] When a colleague of Masters and Johnson suggested that Zilbergeld and Evans should put aside their "ideological differences" in the interest of science, they declined.[139] The field of sexology was fragmenting over Masters and Johnson.

The two sexologists tried to continue ignoring most of the critique they received and toured the country speaking at talk shows and medical conventions.[140] But as the public debate, fired up by Zilbergeld and Evans, was so heated and long-lasting, they decided to defend their work. At the 1983 World Congress of Sexology meeting in Washington, D.C., they described their measurements, explained their choices for what to include in the book, and clarified their definitions of "success" and "failure." Masters described Zilbergeld's critique as false contentions and simply "ludicrous," and Johnson added that "she and Dr. Masters did not regard *Forum* as an appropriate place to carry out a scientific debate."[141] This seems somewhat hypocritical, as other authors have noted, since it was Masters and Johnson

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[137] Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy*, 4. Nevertheless, some researchers did use the available information to repeat the experiments. While Masters and Johnson deleted all their video recordings, these researchers did not. Clips from these recordings can be seen in the documentary "The science of Sex." *The Science of Sex 1*.
[138] Guy D. Garcia, "Sexes: Sexology on the Defensive," *Time*, June 13, 1983, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,952020-1,00.html.
[139] Michael D. Evans and Bernie Zilbergeld, "Evaluating Sex Therapy: A Reply to Kolodny," *The Journal of Sex Research* 19, no. 3 (1983): 302–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498309551191.
[140] *The Atlantic*, "Sex and the Married Couple."
[141] Brody, "Masters and Johnson Defend Research," 13.

who moved the discourse into popular outlets in the first place by giving interviews to news outlets like the *New York Times*, *Redbook*, and *Playboy*.[142]

While other sex therapists had their own critiques of Masters and Johnson, many came to the team's defence. The psychiatrist Dr. Harold Lief reprimanded that "Criticism of scientific work should be made at scientific meetings and/or professional journals, not in *Forum* and *Psychology Today*." And a sex therapist at Cornell's Payne Whitney Clinic noted, "You cannot overestimate the contribution of Masters and Johnson. Because of them, today there's an excellent prognosis for the treatment of sexual problems. Most people can be cured very rapidly." Their technique, she continued, built the "foundation for all subsequent therapies and […] 'their method has stood up in cultures throughout the world.'"[143]

Lastly, Dr. Richard Green, a professor of Psychology who had recently sued Zilbergeld for openly questioning his scientific integrity, a claim Zilbergeld later fully retracted, told the New York Times

> It's always easy to go back years later and attack pioneering work - whether it's Freud, Kinsey or Masters and Johnson - and say 'That's how it should have been done.' I'm less concerned about whether absolutely rigid criteria were followed 15 years ago than about the overall impact Masters and Johnson have had on sexual health.[144]

His and others' support for the research conducted at the Institute reflects the acceptance of many that novel research sometimes requires bending the strict rules of the scientific method, especially when the research has a strong and positive effect on the field.[145]

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[142] Smolyanitsky, "Moving Instructions"; Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy: A Sociological Analysis of Masters and Johnson*.
[143] Brody, "Masters and Johnson Defend Research," 13.
[144] "Masters and Johnson Defend Research," 13.
[145] Ultimately, even Zilbergeld would change his mind. At the end of his life, he told Lonnie Barbach, who was a longtime friend and colleague and whom I discuss in chapter 2, that he regretted the way he had critiqued Masters and Johnson. While he still believed the criticism to be valid, if he had a chance to do it all over again, he would go about it differently.

While Zilbergeld's critique may suggest that Masters and Johnson followed in the footsteps of Kinsey, who had "developed an overpowering ego, would not train a qualified successor, and thus guaranteed that his work would end with his death [… and who] was obsessed with the thought that everyone was trying to steal his data," the two were actually very interested in training others to continue, build upon, and adjust their work.[146] By 1972, they had trained seven additional teams of co-therapists, who founded programs in New York, Washington, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Maryland, and Michigan.[147]

One of their trainees was June Dobbs Butts, who was the first Black person to study under Masters and Johnson. Butts, who was serving on Planned Parenthood's Board of Directors at the time, met Masters and Johnson at a conference at the University of Notre Dame in the 1970s. After much persuasion by Johnson, she finally moved to St. Louis to work at the Institute. Butts had a friendly relationship with Johnson before moving west. But once she had arrived in St. Louis, Johnson began distancing herself from her, which left her feeling unsupported. Additionally, in spite of a rigorous work schedule, every weekday from nine to six and a few hours on both Saturdays and Sundays, the Institute did not pay Butts a salary that would afford her a place in St. Louis, which forced her to commute every day. Consequently, after working for Masters and Johnson for eighteen months, she left on good terms to start her own practice in Maryland. While most of her patients at the Institute were white, ninety percent of the clients in her own practice were Black. To make her therapy more accessible, she made some adjustments to Masters and Johnson's approach. Her clients were not required to stay at a clinic, and the appointments were held once a week for two months. This reduced costs and made the program available to people who could not afford to take two weeks off work. Furthermore, the Masters and Johnson approach was too clinical for her

[146] *The Atlantic*, "Sex and the Married Couple."
[147] Rensberger, "Clinics for Sex Therapy Proliferate Over Nation."

liking. She thus placed greater emphasis on interpersonal issues such as money, children, adultery and combined "medical advice, common sense and soul-searching guidance for women who often lack the self-esteem to know when they´re being mistreated."[148]

Over the years, Butts worked at a mental health clinic supporting transgender people, got her PhD (which she said ended her marriage), wrote several articles for *Ebony* magazine and a column called "Sexual Health" for *Essence* magazine, authored four book chapters, and published in the *American Journal of Health Studies.* For Dobbs, educating other Black people, especially children, about sex was a question of creating a better future for Black people. Even though she, in contrast to some white feminists, did not believe that sex education "is 'the key' which will unlock the door to all possible things in life," she stressed the importance of education in the liberation of Black people historically.[149] Her work was rooted in the knowledge of an ongoing history of sexualized violence against Black women. This, she believed, led Black people to hold knowledge about some sexual truths that were specific to their experience. Thus, sex education for Black communities did not necessarily have to explain "where babies come from."[150] Instead, Butts stressed the importance of teaching about and modelling a healthy relationship and intimacy.[151]

Butts' work as a sex educator and therapist, not yet discussed in scholarly literature, offers some insights into how Black feminists navigated sexuality in the 1970s and onwards. Over the years, sex and sexuality were just as central to Black women's struggle for freedom as they were for white women. However, sex was central to their respective fights in different ways. Black feminists' claim to sexual pleasure was rooted in a history of sexual violence and

[148] Michael McQueen, "June Dobbs Butts, Pioneer Work on Sex Therapy's New Frontier," *Washington Post*, October 9, 1974; "June Dobbs Butts Oral History Interview, 2016-01-29," January 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVLzxaS3kQY&t=4338s.
[149] June Dobbs Butts, "Sex Education: Who Needs It," *Ebony*, April 1977, 96.
[150] Dobbs Butts, "Sex Education: Who Needs It"; McQueen, "Butts, Pioneer Work on Sex Therapy's New Frontier"; "Butts Oral History Interview."
[151] McQueen, "Butts, Pioneer Work on Sex Therapy's New Frontier"; "Butts Oral History Interview."

the denial of Black women's privacy and bodily integrity. Many Black feminists felt that white women's struggle was irrelevant to them as long as they did not add racial oppression to their discussions of sexual oppression. For some, like Linda La Rue, "racism defined her gendered identity as powerfully as sexuality," and for most, sexual relations between Black women and men were a source of strength and empowerment.[152] Unlike Butts, Masters and Johnson, who were both white and did not discuss race in any significant way in *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, were unable or unwilling to constructively integrate questions of race in their research and therapy.

The fame and praise for Masters and Johnson hide similar work which others conducted at the same time. In 1966, seven years after Masters and Johnson began their sex therapy clinic and three years before they would publish their work in *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, the psychologist Joseph LoPiccolo began directing the Sex Research Program at the University of Oregon Psychology Clinic. At the clinic, he and his coworker, psychologist W. Charles Lobitz offered treatment to couples with sexual difficulties. The clinic was part of a doctoral training program in clinical psychology and, based on the assumption that sexual dysfunction is a learned phenomenon, it successfully treated about twenty-five couples a year. They based their work on the procedures developed by Wolpe and Hastings. And after 1970, their "general program" was "modelled very directly after the procedure developed by Masters and Johnson," another indicator of the wide-ranging impact of the duo's work.[153]

Lobitz and LoPiccolo had their client couples meet in fifteen sessions with male-female co-therapist teams. Unlike Masters and Johnson, they did not ask their clients to

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[152] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 102.

[153] Joseph LoPiccolo and W Charles Lobitz, "The Role of Masturbation in the Treatment of Orgasmic Dysfunction," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 2, no. 2 (1972), https://doi.org/doi:10.1007/bf01541865; Joseph LoPiccolo and W. C. Lobitz, "New Methods in the Behavioral Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction," *Journal of Behavioral Theory and Experimental Psychiatry* 3 (1972), https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/b978-0-08-020373-7.50012-7.

retreat from their lives for two weeks. Instead, the couples stayed at home and were required to participate in fifteen sessions with the therapy team. While this may have been more accessible for local couples who could not afford to take a hiatus from their jobs, children, pets or other commitments, it also made the program less accessible for couples living outside of Eugene, Oregon. Throughout the duration of the program, the two psychologists asked their clients not to engage in intercourse, restrict their sexual activity to the homework exercises assigned at the end of each session, and log all their sexual activity on a daily record form specifying "its duration, numerical ratings of the pleasure and arousal that he obtained, and subjective comments about the activity." To encourage their clients to follow these rules, Lobitz and LoPicolo required them to pay a twenty dollar "penalty deposit," which would be refunded if the rules were followed. For every violation, an increasing amount of the deposit would be forfeited until, after the sixth "violation," the treatment would be terminated. Such violations also included not keeping an appointment or failing to turn in the daily sexual activity record.[154]

In the description of their method, Lobitz and LoPiccolo barely discuss women's inability to orgasm. They merely refer to a separate paper in which they described a nine-step program aimed at teaching women to orgasm. They developed this approach conscious of the effects societal taboos have on women's sexual behaviour. But it was only an addition and not a central aspect of their program.[155] The nine steps for women to reach orgasm were based on the program by Masters and Johnson and were as follows: (1) the client was asked to "examine her nude body [and genitals] carefully and try to appreciate its beauty."[156] Additionally, she was asked to begin Kegel exercises, which Arnold Kegel invented in 1952 to help women who were peeing involuntarily when sneezing, coughing, or having an orgasm

[154] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "New Methods," 266.
[155] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "New Methods," 266.
[156] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "The Role of Masturbation," 167.

by strengthening the pubococcygeus (pelvic) muscles. Additionally, it turned out that strengthening this muscle led to higher numbers of orgasms. (2) The client was asked to explore her genitals through touch. (3) The exploration of the genitals was to be continued to find pleasurable areas. (4) The client was asked to begin "manual stimulation" of these pleasurable areas. (5) If the client had not yet experienced an orgasm, she was told to "masturbate until something happens," using "pornographic reading material or pictures to enhance arousal."[157] Lobitz and LoPiccolo believed 30-45 minutes to be a reasonable limit or "until she becomes tired or sore."[158] If the client still had not had an orgasm, she was asked to purchase and use a vibrator, lubricants, and pornography. Here, they mention that in one case, it took one woman "three weeks of daily forty-five-minute vibrator sessions" to "produce orgasm."[159] If it became evident that the woman is unable to orgasm because she feared losing control, screaming, urinating, or defecating involuntarily, Lobitz and LoPiccolo asked her to role-play orgasms at home. (7) Once the woman had experienced her first few orgasms, she was asked to masturbate while her husband was watching. This way, she got used to her husband watching her in a state of arousal, and simultaneously, her husband could learn more about her preferences. (8) In step eight, the husband was asked to take over what the wife had been doing (i.e. using her fingers or a vibrator to stimulate herself). (9) In the final step, the couple was asked to have intercourse while the man was stimulating the woman's clitoris.

Lobitz and LoPiccolo were likely aware of the sexual importance of the clitoris even before Masters and Johnson published their research. "The Role of Masturbation in the Treatment of Orgasmic Dysfunction" was published two years after *Human Sexual Response.* It cites Masters and Johnson's scientific findings that the clitoris is central to female pleasure and that masturbation often causes more intense pleasure than coitus or manual pleasure by a

[157] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "New Methods," 268.
[158] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "New Methods," 170.
[159] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "New Methods," 169.

partner. But they also cite Donald Hastings, who seems to have been the first to suggest clitoral stimulation as a medical method to treat frigidity in 1963.[160] Lobitz and LoPiccolo's work as sex therapists began in 1969, a year before the publication of *Human Sexual Response*, but considering their knowledge of Wolpe's work, it is likely that they already assigned clitoral stimulation before anyone knew who Masters and Johnson were.[161]

While Lobitz and LoPiccolo's work would later be important to the feminist work of Lonnie Barbach, and while they were helping individual women experience pleasure, they were not feminists. They were two male therapists who considered women's inability to orgasm to be an individual problem, though caused by systemic misinformation, to be solved in a generalizable yet individualistic manner. While clearly progressive psychologists, the authors barely discuss social factors inhibiting female sexuality. Initially, their article "New Methods in the Behavioral Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction" centred the male clients' perspective —the "client" being the man of the relationship. The woman and her potential problem were only mentioned as an afterthought. The reader, assumed to be a fellow sex therapist, is instructed to ask the female client to "masturbate to orgasm" after being aroused by erotica or fantasies. There is an assumption that the client was comfortable masturbating, not considering that while the policing of men's self-pleasure had decreased since the sexual revolution, most women did not enjoy this novel freedom, which, according to people like Barbach, was one of the reasons they struggled with their sexuality in the first place. Furthermore, the psychologists' certainty that all women who struggled to achieve orgasm did so out of ignorance about their own bodies displayed a certain authoritarianism: "the client is told that she is 'out of touch' with her own body, that indeed she has never really known her own body nor learned to appreciate the beauty of her sexual organs."[162] While it was true that

[160] Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*; LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "The Role of Masturbation."
[161] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "The Role of Masturbation"; Hastings, *Impotence and Frigidity*.
[162] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "The Role of Masturbation," 167.

many preorgasmic women struggled with their relationship to their vulvas and the rest of their bodies (Barbach would build her feminist approach on similar assumptions), Lobitz and LoPiccolo's instructions did not encourage other therapists to explore the individual woman's experiences or consider the complexity of social forces besides misinformation that may have led to anorgasmia. Instead, it seems as if this therapist duo assumed that every anorgasmic woman just needed some authoritative help to appreciate her own body and to masturbate to exhaustion. If she followed the program, her problem would be fixed sooner or later.

On the other hand, Lobitz and LoPiccolo still emphasized clitoral stimulation at the end of their program, something that Masters and Johnson did not do. If clients, "especially those who have been exposed to psychoanalytic theory and its specious distinction between "clitoral" and "vaginal" orgasm," expressed the desire to achieve orgasm without manual clitoral stimulation they stress "the importance of achieving adequate clitoral stimulation from some source (e.g., the husband's symphysis, a joint connecting the pubic bones) during coitus and point out that this stimulation is most effectively achieved through direct manual manipulation." Furthermore, instead of just working towards a lateral (missionary) position, they also recommend "superior sitting," or "rear entry coital positions."[163] While noteworthy, these are only slight deviations from the dominant notions of the right way to have sex, small enough to leave a vacuum to be filled by those who understood sexuality to be more than the result of psychosexual development, learned sexual behaviour, or the sexual response cycle. Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson would fill this vacuum in different ways: the former continuing on the path of *scientia sexualis*. The latter, with her roots in new-age spirituality, was part of the Western appropriation of what Foucault termed *ars erotica*.

[163] LoPiccolo and Lobitz, "The Role of Masturbation," 170.

This chapter has illustrated how Masters and Johnson continued the long tradition of *scientia sexualis*. They were not the first experts to show scientific and therapeutic interest in sex and sexual dysfunction. Before them, Lazarus, Hastings and Kinsey did work on sex and sexuality in their respective academic fields, as did many psychoanalysts and authors of marriage manuals. The publication of the first edition of Playboy in 1953, as well as the high interest in marriage manuals by the 1960s, when their sale accounted for one million dollars a year, indicate the public interest in sex and solutions to sexual problems.[164] As Foucault highlights, it would be inaccurate to state that sex was shamefully repressed to then be lifted out of ignorance into the light of twentieth-century sexual curiosity.[165] Instead, sex had been in the domain of medicine, psychology, and the law long before Masters and Johnson began their work at Washington University. Through these institutions, sexual practices have been shaped and sexual norms reinforced. Masters and Johnson continued this tradition of *scientia sexualis*, including its essentialization, institutionalization and patriarchalization. Masters and Johnson, as well as Lazarus and Lobitz and LoPiccolo, reified notions of sexual function and dysfunction, gender binaries, and the idea of a natural sex drive. On the other hand, they participated in the reassignment of sexuality from psychoanalysis to the medical sciences, taught a new generation of therapists like June Dobbs Butts, and spread information on the importance of the clitoris to millions of readers all across the country. All this was necessary for the scientific discourse about anorgasmic women to enter the realm of feminism.

[164] Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*, 49.
[165] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

Chapter 2: Pre-Orgasmic, not Anorgasmic

It was one of those warm Southern California winters in Pacific Palisades. On this particular day in late 1973 or early 1974, it probably would have been warm enough to gather outside, the air smelling of pine and eucalyptus trees. Yet the women attending this lecture hosted by the Western Association for Women in Psychology were sitting inside the meeting hall of a church campsite, listening intently to a young woman with dark hair speaking openly and unashamedly about female pleasure, masturbation, and a new approach to helping women who are preorgasmic, a term one of her clients coined, to finally orgasm. One woman in the audience leaned towards her friend, a journalist who attended with more than just "a desire to report the news," and whispered, "This is revolutionary!" The speaker's name was Dr. Lonnie Garfield Barbach, and while the group therapy approach she was presenting may not have been revolutionary, it was indeed extraordinary and part of a wider and dramatic cultural shift. "Women are taking back the authority for their own sexuality," she explained, "We are out of touch with our own sex. Our sexual expectations are defined by men. We are making the woman an authority on herself so then she can tell her partner."[166]

Barbach is mentioned in very little literature, and if so, only in passing. Smolyanitski, for example, who wrote an entire thesis on Masters and Johnson, doesn´t offer Barbach much more than one page. A simple search for her name on Google Scholar returns only her own publications, some psychology books, and papers that mention her, but no historical analysis of her work.[167] But Lonnie Barbach is a central figure in the history of women's sexuality workshops, as she has created one of two major group-centred approaches to help women learn how to orgasm and improve their overall sex lives. Other women took up and altered

[166] Cathleen Hendrix, "A Seminar on Women´s Sexuality: Participants Seek Information, Discuss Attitudes, Experiences," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1977.
[167] Smolyanitsky, "Moving Instructions"; Tiefer, "Sex Therapy as a Humanistic Enterprise"; Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*.

Barbach's approach to begin hosting their own workshops, often following a therapist's guide authored by Barbach herself. The power of these groups did not only lie in their replacement of methodologies designed by Freudian psychologists or even Masters and Johnson or Lobitz and LoPiccolo. They also offered women spaces to share in ways most had never before, to support and learn from each other, and to build embodied knowledge independent of male authority.

In this chapter, I show how Barbach continued the tradition of *scientia sexualis*, even as she adopted a more holistic approach. Her methodology was built on the physiological search for truth by other sexologists, which she, too, combined with a confessional practice in which women are asked to share thoughts and experiences they may not share in any other setting. While she created an alternative to existing sex therapy, she still moved within the same framework. Nevertheless, her work had subversive elements. Firstly, and most evidently, after centuries of male "expertise," Barbach and those whom she trained to facilitate her workshops were mostly women. Consequently, women's pleasure was not just discussed as a means to an end (which was mostly an undefined "good marriage"), but an end in itself. When women attended Barbach's workshops because they wanted to learn how to experience pleasure only to improve their relationship, she asked them to reframe their motivations. If they were unable to do so, they would not be able to attend the workshop. Furthermore, the sex therapy/ Consciousness-raising group hybrid allowed for a broader evaluation of sexuality, which included social expectations and sexism. Where Masters and Johnson loosened a patient's sexual experiences from the grasp of psychosocial development and added the aspect of learned behaviour, Barbach introduced social, political, and economic realities to the mix; she allowed the political to be deeply personal. Lastly, reframing anorgasmia as pre-orgasmic shifted her approach away from a pathological framework. And yet, while the participants were free to set their own goals, the ultimate goal of Barbach was

still pleasurable intercourse — the zenith of sex was still to have a penis in the vagina. She, too, while explicitly identifying as a feminist and focusing her approach around female pleasure, could not shake off that sticky phallocentric societal concept of sex. Nevertheless, Barbach's approach, in which the women in the pre-orgasmic workshops gave each other advice, and her books, which gave step-by-step instructions for those who could not attend her seminars, redefined female pleasure as a form of self-actualization rather than a marital privilege or duty.

Because Barbach positioned women's discovery of their sexuality as a feminist act, created her workshops as an alternative to a male-dominated field, and even modelled her approach after consciousness-raising groups, she can be located within radical feminism. This branch of feminism was the first to center sexuality as a political issue and worked to create feminist alternatives to patriarchal systems. But Barbach began her work in the early 1970s, the heyday of cultural feminism, which believed women and men were fundamentally different and that women should create their own realm rather than trying to change existing systems. Elements of this new phase can be found in Barbach's work. Her workshops were distinctly female spaces, and women's sexuality was discussed as something unique and separate from male sexuality.

Lonnie Barbach's career as a sex therapist began in the early 1970s. It was the sexual revolution, and she was a PhD student at the Wright Institute, a graduate school of psychology in Berkeley, California. She lived in San Francisco, was a feminist, recently divorced, and in dire need of a job. After she presented on pregnancy and abortion counselling at a Planned Parenthood seminar, she was approached by a woman from the audience. The woman's name was Lea Potts, and she liked what she heard during the presentation. She informed Barbach that she was leaving her position as a sex therapist at the University of California Health Care Center and encouraged her to apply for the job. It did

not matter that she had no experience in sex therapy, she assured Barbach. Excited about the possibility of getting paid for doing psychotherapy before getting her PhD, Barbach applied for the job and encouraged her friend Bob Cantor to join her. Having read Masters and Johnson and spoken with local sex therapy experts, she knew that a male/female team was required to offer couples counselling.[168]

Too overwhelmed by coursework, his dissertation, and his job, however, Cantor soon informed Barbach that he would not be able to take on this additional commitment. "I not only would have to forego this exciting new position, but I would have no income. I was desperate…" Barbach remembered.[169] But then she got lucky. Six women, some without partners, some with partners who refused to go to sex therapy, called the U.C. program for help. They all were unable to orgasm. No male partners meant no male psychologist necessary, and Barbach got creative. The previous year, she had attended a Consciousness-raising group, a feminist practice in which women came together to discuss personal experiences and feelings in relation to broader gender structures. She had also taught six Personal Encounter Groups, an unstructured type of group therapy developed by the psychologist Carl Rogers, emphasizing personal growth, development and communication. And she had taken a course in group psychotherapy. Combining these experiences with the findings of Masters and Johnson, and Lobitz and LoPiccolo, she developed a vision for a new form of group therapy.[170] Because of these influences and because her seminars were a form of therapy, Barbach's approach is easily located within the tradition of *scientia sexualis,* at the center of which lies the diagnosis and treatment of sexual problems.

[168] Lonnie Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity," Speech, n.d., 2.
[169] Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity," 2.
[170] Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity."

Like Masters and Johnson, Barbach believed that such groups should be led by two therapists. So, Nancy Carlson, another sex therapist, joined her, and together they led the first therapy group for women who were unable to orgasm. By the end of it, all women were orgasmic through masturbation, and some even achieved orgasmic sex with their partners. "We were not frigid," one of the women said, "we were not non-orgasmic; we were just pre-orgasmic." This "positive, non-dysfunctional label stuck, and the pre-orgasmic women's groups process had been born."[171] During the last session of the first group, over a celebratory bottle of champagne, Barbach and Carlson admitted that this was the first such group ever to be hosted. The women needed a minute to recover from the shock, but ultimately thanked the two therapists for not telling them earlier and offered to attend future groups to share their testimonies of the group's success.

Barbach's approach stood in direct contrast to one of Masters and Johnson's central tenets, that to cure sexual inadequacy, both partners had to be treated together. Barbach believed that sexual dysfunction was caused by the history, values, or experiences of the individual woman, all things that led therapy to work best without a partner, at least at first. Even if the cause lay with an unskilled lover, the woman's inability to show him how to do better was believed to be rooted in her personal history. Having experienced the effects of Consciousness-raising groups, Barbach believed that instead of trying to do this life-changing, sometimes even painful and sad work alone, women working in groups could learn from each other, feel less isolated, and see that their issues were more common than they had thought. The experiences of the women in her first preorgasmic groups confirmed her hunch. She also noticed that women experienced some light group pressure that motivated them to do their homework. On top of that, they offered each other positive reinforcements when

[171] Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity," 3.

achieving their first orgasm. And, as Barbach learned quickly, once the first woman reached her first orgasm, the rest of the group's trust in the effectiveness of the seminar rose.[172]

No matter the group's success, Barbach was struggling to make it financially sustainable at first. When she tried to be hired by Berkeley's Human Sexuality Program (HSP), they were unable to fund her. Luckily, the HSP director, Jay Mann, believed in the seminar's importance and reached an agreement with Barbach: she would charge the participants, rent a room from the HSP, and use the school's name for credibility.

Much of the early success of the seminars was owed to the popular radio host Don Chamberland and his show California Girls. On this show, Chamberland, who had an MA in psychology and was instructed by Masters and Johnson, only accepted calls from women, whose questions on relationships and sex he answered candidly. In the first edition of the women's erotica Magazine *California Girl*, an erotic magazine for women that was named after the radio show, he explained,

> I tended to regard the show as a lark, an amusing, titillating, sexy experiment in entertainment. But I rapidly began to realize that the show had the potential to reach large numbers of women who had never before had the opportunity to be heard and not judged, listened to and not made light of, helped and not humiliated because they sought answers to their questions and help for their problems.[173]

His show was not the first radio show about sex, but none was as successful as his. By the time of the publication of *California Girl*, which included pictures of naked men on each centrefold, and articles like "Is Vasectomy Becoming Our Most Popular Form of Birth Control," "Elegant Erotica," and "Erotic Objects d'Art," Chamberlain was the best-paid radio performer in California.[174] One critic called his program a "call-in heaven for sex intrigued

[172] Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity."
[173] "Chamberlain," *California Girl*, March 1973, 10.
[174] *California Girl*, "Chamberlain."

women."[175] And a colleague of his stressed the importance of the work the show was doing, "There were legions of women who, until that time, often had nowhere else to turn for help with their intimate personal questions. Don and the show offered them a vehicle to find answers."[176]

When women called in who struggled reaching "complete sexual fulfillment," a phrase he used as his radio station did not allow him to say "orgasm," he suggested Lonnie Barbach's Preorgasmic Groups. Consequently, within six weeks, Barbach and Carlson had a waiting list of over a hundred women. Immediately, they began training interns at the HSP to facilitate the groups. The approach was so successful that even in groups run by trainees, ninety percent of the participants were orgasmic at the end of the program. Soon, it became clear that, given the groups' financial success, it would be more equitable for the HSP to hire Barbach to give lectures and teach their trainees.[177]

Barbach based her method on a few common causes of pre-orgasmia, some of which had already been discussed by Masters and Johnson and Lobitz and LoPiccolo. However, Barbach's elaboration of possible causes was more extensive than those of her male colleagues. Such causes included misinformation like the Freudian myth that clitoral orgasms are a symptom of psychosexual regression; social scripts that taught women to be passive, quiet, and sexually inexperienced while men were to know instinctively what their partners desired in bed; and, of course, general misinformation (or missing information) about what an orgasm is.[178]

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[175] Michael Dougan, "Ex-Radio Host Don Chamberlain Dies at Age 64," Find a Grave, March 2, 1992, https://de.findagrave.com/memorial/149535751/donald_leroy-chamberlain.
[176] Dougan, "Radio Host Don Chamberlain."
[177] Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity," 7.
[178] Lonnie Garfield Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm: A Therapist's Guide to a New Treatment Approach* (New York : Free Press, 1980), http://archive.org/details/womendiscoverorg00barb.

Due to misinformation and a lack of experience, a substantial number of women who came to her for help did not know what an orgasm would be like. Some believed an orgasm would shake the world and make her feel "one with the universe."[179] For some, it turned out that their expectations of orgasms were too high and that, in fact, they had been experiencing orgasms for a while. Barbach did not believe that simply teaching technique was enough to help women, some of whom were afraid of orgasms, become confident in their sexuality. Consequently, she focused her approach on learning about social misinformation, expectations, and female physiology. Women learned to take control over their own bodies and lives, that they were not alone in their struggles, and that everyone is unique.

Unlike consciousness-raising groups, preorgasmic groups could not be facilitated by anyone. Barbach states explicitly that they "are therapy groups, and skilled therapists [who were trained to handle a myriad of psychological issues] are required to run them."[180] After all, emotions like anger, disgust, aversion, or sexual trauma would often come up and need to be handled with care. Here too, Barbach's participation in the *scientia sexualis* is evident. While her approach was less hierarchical, it still required an expert, trained within the psychological tradition, who listens to and interprets the retellings of a person's most private experiences.

Treating women in groups was less time-intensive than couples therapy, allowing therapists with limited time to help more women. However, when possible, Barbach continued her colleague's approach of working with another therapist, which offered more experience and skills to draw on. If necessary, this allowed her and her colleague to carefully assume contrasting relational approaches, with one person supporting and the other confronting a woman who seemed resistant to the process. By discussing their own concerns

[179] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 68.
[180] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 22.

in front of the group, two therapists could show that, in most cases, there was no perfect answer to someone's question. Dual leadership also weakened the individual therapist's authoritative position, which was already uncommonly small for a therapy session due to the size of the group.[181] Barbach's choice to weaken the power a therapist has over their clients located her, at least in parts, within radical feminism and its efforts to restructure patriarchal institutions.

The groups, ideally five to nine women, met once or twice weekly for two hours. Barbach preferred meeting twice weekly for the first three weeks and then once a week for the remaining four weeks. That way, the participating women could not procrastinate on the one hour of daily homework at the beginning, but could schedule time with their boyfriends or husbands, or, less frequently, girlfriends, once they were assigned exercises that included their partners. At the beginning of the process, the homework followed Lobitz and LoPiccolo's nine-step masturbation program but quickly got individualized to each woman's situation and adjusted based on her experience with the previous set of homework exercises.[182]

Barbach typically began the process with intake interviews to determine who would benefit from group therapy and who would be better helped with individual or couples therapy. She selected participants for the group based on external factors such as age, race, sexuality, and relationship status, ensuring that everyone had someone else they could relate to. Once selected, the participants would meet for the first time at the first session. They would usually be anxious and nervous. To make the women feel more confident, but also to get them into a reflective mindset, Barbach would open by asking how they felt being there.

[181] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 54–58.
[182] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 4.

Once everyone had shared and developed a sense of each woman's current emotional state, Barbach asked them about their experiences of sex.[183]

In one of these sessions, one woman, Pamela, shared that during this stage, she felt "tremendous frustration and anger and turning inward and hating myself for not being able to be a complete person."[184] Then a woman called Abby spoke up, stating she should have gotten an Academy Award for how well she faked orgasms when she was between eighteen and twenty, and Maria shared that she cannot masturbate and would get mad at her husband when he did not make her orgasm. In this first session, the women would usually start speaking about the messages they had received from others without the therapist's invitation. The last forty-five minutes of the meetings were always reserved for introducing the homework exercises.[185]

After the first session, Barbach asked the women to read a few chapters of her book, *For Yourself,* and the chapters on women's sexuality in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Collective. The collective was founded in 1969 after a group of women participated in a workshop called Women and Their Bodies held at Emmanuel College in Boston at one of the first feminist conferences. There, the authors discovered that they shared similar frustrations when it came to their sexualities, abortion, pregnancy and childbirth, and health care in general. They began reading medical books and wrote papers which they discussed with an increasing number of members. In 1970, they combined the papers they had written into a newsprint book titled *Women and Their Bodies*, which sold 27,000 copies at seventy-five cents each. In 1971, they renamed the book Our Bodies, Ourselves and were taken on by the publishing house Simon and Schuster a year later, under the promise of a

[183] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 4.
[184] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 82.
[185] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 5.

seventy percent discount for low-income women and a provision for a Spanish translation. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* has gone through nine editions, has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for years, and has been translated into thirty-four languages.[186]

Previously, there was very little medical information about women accessible to anyone. But besides the obvious achievement of making knowledge about women's health accessible to those who relied on it the most, the literary scholar Susan Wells offers another reason why the text is so important to the feminist project: "They were among the most successful of second-wave feminists at offering reliable information and a feminist analysis in colloquial, accessible language, and they have repeatedly reworked that language to include broader groups of readers"[187] They offered a vocabulary that allowed women to create a feminist discourse about their bodies and medical needs. "Anatomy was offered both as a record of oppression and as a catalogue of strategies and practices of resistance."[188] In other words, the authors opened a path for ordinary women to no longer be passive subjects of the *scientia sexualis* discourse but become productive and even subversive participants, Especially the demarcation of the clitoris as a woman's "sexual base" as well as the encouragement to explore one's vulva were central strategies of resistance at a time when women held next to no knowledge about their anatomy and Freudian psychology pathologized clitoral pleasure.[189]

Barbach also instructed the women to set aside an hour each day to relax. For some, that meant locking the door to their room or unhooking the phone — anything to ensure some

[186] Susan Wells, "Our Bodies, Ourselves: Reading the Written Body," *Signs* 33, no. 3 (2008): 82, https://doi.org/10.1086/523710; Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels across Borders*, 1st ed. (Duke University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12102r3.4; "Global Translations and Adaptations of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves,'" Our Bodies Ourselves, accessed October 21, 2025, https://ourbodiesourselves.org/global-projects.
[187] Wells, "Our Bodies, Ourselves," 698.
[188] Wells, "Our Bodies, Ourselves," 701.
[189] Wells, "Our Bodies, Ourselves"; Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, 2.

undisturbed time. Some women were so used to never doing anything for themselves that doing this first exercise felt almost impossible. Once fully relaxed, they were to take a mirror, move to a well-lit corner, and observe their bodies from all angles, including more awkward ones such as bending down and looking between one's legs. Lastly, following Lobitz and LoPiccolo's method, she asked the women to begin practicing Kegel exercises every day.[190]

While Masters and Johnson and Lobitz and LoPiccolo did not allow sex during the first part of their programs, Barbach was concerned about possible negative reactions by the women's partners. If a woman's partner was frustrated because he or she was denied sex for several weeks, the consequential tension in the relationship might build resistance to the program. Thus, before the session ended, Barbach informed the women that while they were still allowed to have sex with their partner, from now on, women who had never orgasmed before were, paradoxically, not allowed to do so. Women who had experienced orgasm before were not allowed to experience them in new ways. That way, Barbach took away the pressure to achieve orgasm from those who had not done so yet, and those who had were kept from trying too much and failing. At the same time, they were not to concentrate on trying to orgasm, which would have been counterintuitive. Instead, they were to focus on which sensations felt good and pleasurable, and which did not—information to be shared later with the group.[191]

When the women met the next time, Barbach would give a lecture on the physiology of the female sexual response cycle as described by Masters and Johnson, as well as the anatomy of the female reproductive system using photographs and drawings by the artist Betty Dodson, whom I discuss in Chapter 3. Later that session, they would be asked to view and draw their vulvas as a homework exercise. The goal here was to realize the similarities of

[190] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 5.
[191] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 4.

the female sexual response and the diversity of vulvas. Yet, Barbach had to caution that the clitorises in most of Dodson's drawings are usually too big, and if one's clitoris is smaller, one should not worry. After she was done lecturing, the group discussed the homework exercises.[192]

Here, Barbach needed the group to be as explicit as possible; she would not have allowed any vagueness. What did they do? When and where? Did they notice anything? Did looking at their bodies confirm any of their previously held beliefs? Did anything surprise them? Did they notice anything new? This sharing of such intimate information, taboo in most other conversations, has, of course, stark similarities with the confession which Foucault places at the center of *scientia sexualis*. However, a significant difference here is that it is more of a homework report than the telling of a secret. The homework exercises had been performed with the intention of sharing their results and were therefore never meant to be kept secret.

It is quite possible that the detailed sharing of pleasurable experience was an erotic experience in itself for some of the participating women. In her study of the anti-masturbation movement in the antebellum North, April Haynes notes that for some women, lectures about the dangers of masturbation offered "erotic stimulation. […] For example, Mary Grew listened to Hollick's rhapsodies about clitoral stimulation and had multiple orgasms while seated next to Margaret Jones Burleigh." The two women, who were active in the anti-slavery and moral reform movement and who openly endorsed sexual expression for women, would enter a romantic relationship that they did not try to hide from family, friends, or fellow activists.[193]

[192] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 4.
[193] Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, 122.

The detachment of sex and pleasure from men in a space filled by women may have allowed Barbach's women to consider eroticism in relation to women for the first time. Some may have realized that they were sexually attracted to women, others may have just found that arousal can happen without any men or masculine presence (e.g., photos of men) at all. Barbach only discussed the homoerotic dimensions of the groups in relation to a video of a masturbating woman, which she showed on the third day. Some women, she explains, felt nothing, some feared that they might have "latent homosexual tendencies," and others were turned on by the sight of another woman pleasuring herself.[194] One woman, whom Barbach called Pamela, for example, shared with her group after they finished watching the film: "My heart is beating fast. […] I liked watching her touch herself, and I kind of wished she was touching me." She continued to explain that she envied how freely the woman in the video touched herself, while Pamela herself felt inhibited. This does not necessarily mean that Pamela was "a latent homosexual." Instead, she may have just found erotic inspiration in the pleasure of another woman and felt that her body reacted physically to the video. Pamela's reaction to the video is a good example of why Barbach showed it. It helped her to teach them that it is "natural to feel stimulated by many things [and] a woman is free to feel whatever she feels because she has control over whether or not she acts in accordance with her feelings." After all, "it feels a shame to ward off the good feelings."[195]

At the end of the second session, Barbach told the women not just to look at but also to touch their bodies during the week's homework sessions. Additionally, they were to visually explore their vulvas until they were comfortably able to do so for fifteen minutes. They were then to draw the vulvas and use their fingers to explore them, noticing what each part felt like, maybe even smelled and tasted like. This exercise was to be more scientific than

[194] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 113.
[195] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 114.

sexual; being aroused was not a goal (but allowed). Furthermore, following her conviction that a woman is responsible for her own body, Barbach showed them how to perform a breast exam and asked them to do so this week. Lastly, if applicable, Barbach invited some women to reach out to their mothers to ask them about their sexuality and about why they did not pass on more knowledge about sex and pleasure.[196] Here again, Barbach showed that she understood women's sexuality to be more than an individual's ability to orgasm. Instead of telling her clients to simply masturbate until something happens, the way Masters and Johnsons, and Lobitz and LoPiccolo did, she took into account behaviours, and fears passed on from mother to daughter, and possible consequential resentment. However, unlike many parent-child analyses at the time, her consideration of the mother-daughter bond was not Freudian. Instead, she acknowledged that it was the mothers who were expected to pass on sexual knowledge, that those mothers were often un- or misinformed themselves, and that their daughters may have felt left alone or lied to.

When they met for the third time, Barbach asked the women to set a realistic goal they hoped to achieve by the end of the ten sessions. For preorgasmic women, this would usually be to experience orgasm during masturbation. Women who were situationally orgasmic should set a specific short-term minimum goal, usually successfully masturbating to orgasm, and one short-term maximum goal, such as being orgasmic most of the time she has sex with a partner. Then Barbach would show the women the film of the masturbating woman, who was not too pretty so that the women could identify with her. The film would help women understand how to masturbate and demystify orgasms — one does not (necessarily) scream, thrash around, or lose consciousness. To decrease anxiety, Barbach preferred showing such films over having a group leader or model masturbate in front of the group. She notes, however, that Betty Dodson used live models in her Bodysex workshop

[196] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 107.

with good results. At the end of the third session, Barbach instructed the women to masturbate at home for the first time. However, they were not allowed to orgasm. Instead, she encouraged them to concentrate on the smaller feelings and to stop as soon as their feelings got too strong.[197]

In session four, after the participants shared their experiences masturbating for the first time, Barbach introduced the importance of mental arousal to physical arousal. She discussed the problem of distractibility and the positive impact of fantasizing, reading or viewing erotica, or listening to music. While Barbach's language, methodology and analysis were well within the psychological tradition, Barbach judged the quality of a woman's sexual experience mostly in relation to itself, rather than in relation to coital effectiveness as Masters and Johnson or Lobitz and LoPiccolo did. Evidently, the growing discourse of *ars erotica*, which evaluates pleasure "in terms of its intensity, its specific qualities, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul," had reached her and left an impression.[198] This shows that while any form of historical categorization is difficult and usually imprecise, organizing historical subjects into discourses is especially problematic. Discourses coexist, overlap, and most people, including Lonnie Barbach, move within several of them. Thus, even though she can be clearly located within the tradition of *scientia sexualis*, it would be wrong to assume she was not also shaped by other discourses, including *ars erotica*.

Session four was the last session with a pre-planned didactic approach. For homework, Barbach asked them to continue masturbating, including incorporating these enhancements in their practice.[199] In the following three sessions, the approach became individualized. Here, the skills of the therapist(s) were of special importance. They would

[197] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 4.
[198] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 57.
[199] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 4.

have to be able to keep an eye on each participant, provide support, and deal with possible resistance, anxiety or fear, failure, mental blocks, or lack of arousal. Each woman would receive homework assignments tailored to her individual needs. She may have been asked to tense her muscles more or less, breathe differently, role-play, or even take a break from masturbating for a couple of days to reduce the pressure to perform. Often, women had to be reminded that reaching orgasm was their own responsibility and that they had to take control (while other participants were told that they had to let go of control). And, to some women's disappointment, they had to be told that this new, underwhelming feeling they were describing was, in fact, an orgasm.[200]

Once a woman was ready to include her partner in these exercises, Barbach asked her to begin with so-called bridging exercises. This could include masturbating with the wrong hand to teach her that other stimulation than the ones she had gotten used to could also be successful, or inserting phallic objects like dildos into the vagina while masturbating to get used to the feeling of penetration. In addition to dildos, Barbach also suggested the use of empty bottles and even vegetables (washed and peeled).[201] This may be because it was not easy to buy dildos in the 1970s and 1980s — sex shops which women could comfortably frequent were scarce (the first sex shop for women was only founded in 1973). Furthermore, explicitly suggesting such objects would have helped decrease the shame around using everyday objects for sexual pleasure. Once a woman was comfortable with the bridging techniques, the partner would be included. Together, the couple would work on nonsexual communication and touch to help reopen channels of communication, and later, sexual

[200] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 5.
[201] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 180.

communication and touch to introduce the new techniques the woman had learned and continue exploring together.[202]

At the final session, Barbach let the women write their own homework exercise plans to work on until the follow-up session, which usually happened two months later. Many women expressed a wish for the group to continue, and about forty percent sought individual or couples therapy afterwards. It was during this session that the women reflected on their success and long-term goals. Here, too, Barbach diverged from Masters and Johnson, and *scientia sexualis* more generally, who measured success as achieved if the woman was orgasmic half of the time she had sex. "I do not agree," wrote Barbach, "that orgasm 50 percent of the time is a fair measure of success for a woman who desires orgasm 95 percent of the time. (How many men would be satisfied with this criterion of success.)"[203] Instead of defining success by a scientifically defined numerical value, she let the women set their own goals and celebrated each orgasm as a success in itself.

Barbach's approach was highly effective. The co-directors of the Human Sexuality Program at UCLA, Susan Price and Anna Geyer Heinrich, presented a paper at the American Psychological Association in 1977 in which they found that one hundred percent of the fifteen participants of one of Barbach's groups were orgasmic within ten sessions. When they followed up after two months, they found that thirteen of the fifteen women were reliably orgasmic with their partners, seven of them during coitus.[204] While this was not always the case, and some women would leave the group still being pre-orgasmic, most participants felt like their lives were positively affected in unintended ways. Several studies, including one by Barbach herself, concluded that participating in this program made women feel better about

[202] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, chap. 7.
[203] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 60.
[204] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 23.

their bodies and more in control over their lives. One study found a decrease in maladjustment in the fields of sex and work. Another found a significant increase in women's sense of internal control. Interestingly, one study found a reversal in attitudes towards sex roles with some women rating themselves "as having more 'masculine' traits, that is, as being more assertive, aggressive, and strong as opposed to sentimental, dependent and domestic."[205] This may suggest that while increased confidence, a mental state necessary to be assertive and strong (if not necessarily aggressive), was not an explicit goal of the pre-orgasmic seminars, the daily focus on the women's individual needs left them with a better understanding of their own intrinsic value and understanding that they deserve just as much as the men around them. It is no surprise that, with newfound confidence and strength, these women would question their domestic roles and their dependence on the men in their lives. If they then acted accordingly, for example, by putting time away for self-care, or making decisions for the family without the husband, the increased independence would likely decrease feelings of sadness and nostalgia.

The early success of the preorgasmic groups left Barbach so busy that she barely had time to work on her dissertation. Even though she was offering group therapy left and right, she was not yet a therapist. Mann, the director of the HSP, suggested she write a book and use the proceeds to finance herself until the end of her degree. This book, he proposed, could help women who were not able to participate in pre-orgasmic groups. So, she wrote proposals for both her self-help book, *For Yourself: The Fulfilment of Female Sexuality*, and *Women Discover Orgasm: A Therapist's Guide to a New Treatment Approach*. Three publishers entered a bidding war to print *For Yourself*, and Barbach took half a year off from university

[205] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 23–24.

to write the book, which Mann, being unable to do much else due to phlebitis, edited to keep from getting bored.[206]

It was the late 1970s, two years after Barbach published *For Yourself*. She was standing in front of an audience in one of America's many Holiday Inns, this specific one located in Westwood, Los Angeles. The event was organized by Seminars on Sexuality (SOS), which offered sexual information and support in group settings for women. Sitting at round tables and listening just as intently as the group three years earlier in Pacific Palisades, were "well-dressed, middle-class white women of all ages; a few mother and married daughter pairs."[207] This was a group of women who had come to "develop their sexual potential." Barbach was narrating slides that depicted images of vulvas, likely the ones drawn by Betty Dodson, which Barbach liked to include in her seminars. She was relaxed, after all, she had been giving these talks for several years now, and made jokes that left the audience roaring with laughter. Each one of these Vulvas, she assured the audience, was just as normal as the others. After showing the last image, maybe one of a vulva with longer inner labia, one with fleshy outer labia, or one with an elongated clitoris, she moved on to showing a video of a woman, "looking not so much sexy, as sexual," masturbating to orgasm. Some women laughed nervously under their breath, but no one sneered, voiced their protest, or left the room. After all, they were there to learn. For those who were interested, the founders and directors of Seminars on Sexuality, Sharon Goldsmith and Cookie Cohen, announced that there would be a series of seminars, facilitated by Goldsmith, beginning in January.[208]

Sharon Goldsmith, a nurse, was one of several women who adapted Barbach's approach to host their own seminars. They mostly followed the steps Barbach outlined in

[206] Barbach, "Sex and Serendipity."
[207] Hendrix, "A Seminar on Women´s Sexuality," 1.
[208] Hendrix, "A Seminar on Women´s Sexuality."

Women Discover Orgasm, which Barbach specifically wrote for women like Goldsmith. However, this approach was usually adapted in a few significant ways to fit the facilitator's expertise or to fill gaps they found in Barbach's method. The first major difference between Goldsmith's and Barbach's seminars was that Goldsmith was not offering therapy in a group setting (nor did she describe it as a consciousness-raising group). It would, however, be structured and facilitated by a medical professional, and every woman could participate to the degree they felt most comfortable. She assured the audience that the seminar would not include any "confrontations, accusations, judgments."[209]

Goldsmith's promise that participants would not be subjected to such personal attacks indicates a general awareness of practices of mutual criticism central to several countercultural groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such groups, often religious and seeking new ways to live in community, practiced mutual criticism to hold group members accountable, foster group identification, police behaviour, and ultimately strengthen the community. Lenin, Stalin, and Mao adopted a similar practice. They used self- and communal criticism in the form of local community meetings and large-scale public humiliation as a tool of mass indoctrination necessary for the establishment of communism. During the Cold War, any practice associated with communism was viewed with a hefty amount of suspicion. Nevertheless, or maybe as a logical consequence, Radical groups of the American New Left adapted these practices in the 1960s and 1970s. Even cults like the Peoples Temple (Later Jonestown) practiced mutual criticism but likely took inspiration from American religious communities from the previous century.[210] While the communities and governments that practiced some form of mutual criticism praised the practice, and while it effectively bound a member to a group, witnesses described it as "extremely unpleasant,"

[209] Hendrix, "A Seminar on Women´s Sexuality," 8.
[210] Christopher M. Gleason, *American Poly: A History* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2024).

"severe and scathing in the extreme," or "institutionalized bullying." It was framed as a tool for self-reflection, but it was ultimately an instrument of indoctrination.[211]

By assuring her listeners that they would not experience confrontations, accusations, or judgments if they participated in the seminar, Goldsmith actively distanced herself from the New Left, spiritual communities, and communist practices. The preorgasmic groups were not supposed to be fringe leftist feminist groups attended only by those who might be attracted to mutual criticism practices (i.e., women who attended consciousness-raising groups or politicos who organized in the New Left). Instead, Goldsmith intended them to be for any kind of woman, perhaps especially those who did not feel comfortable in the countercultural spaces that already approached sex and sexuality in new and different ways. By insisting that the seminar was not group therapy and distancing herself from more radical leftist practices, Goldsmith positioned herself somewhere between the medical establishment with its tradition of *scientia sexualis*, which included Lonnie Barbach, and the counterculture, ensuring accessibility to women from either side of the spectrum.

The second way in which Goldsmith's approach differed from Barbach's is that she included vibrators in her seminars. The first vibrator, originally and more accurately called a percussor, was developed in 1877 by Joseph Mortimer Granville. He intended it to be used as a medical massager to treat pain and potential mental issues. Contrary to popular and scholarly misinformation, he did not introduce it as a (clitoral) stimulator to treat hysteria.[212] In fact, he stated explicitly that he did not "strongly urge recourse to the method in a considerable number of troublous affections in the treatment of which [he] had not yet had

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[211] Maura Brewer and Maya Gurantz, "A Brief History of Mutual Criticism," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 7, 2020, 64, 65, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/brief-history-mutual-criticism.

[212] In *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*, Rachel Maines suggests that early vibrators could have been used to cure hysteria. This claim was taken up and reproduced as historical fact by authors like Lynn Comella and inspired the movie *Hysteria* by Tanya Wexler. Debbie Lawlor, "The Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria', the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction.," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 30, no. 4 (2001): 904–904, https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/30.4.904.

any large experience of its use. Among these may be mentioned hysteria […] and disorders of the sexual organs, particularly impotence and […] spermatorrhea."[213] In its early years, doctors like James Craven Wood, who used "rubber vibratrodes" to alleviate period pain, cautioned not to use vibrators too close to the clitoris to avoid "sexual excitement" in "over-sensitive women."[214] To avoid such sexual excitement, the rubber vibratrode was to be inserted vaginally. Wood published his findings in 1917, just a few years after his contemporary Sigmund Freud had declared that in a healthily developed female, the clitoris must be replaced by the vaginal orgasm. Physicians like Wood were aware that even in the most sensitive females, the vagina was less sensitive to stimulation than the clitoris. Yet, Freud's unfounded belief that clitoral stimulation was somehow "lesser" would become the dominant opinion over the next half-century.

When Wood warned fellow physicians not to accidentally arouse their patients while using a vibrator, the Shelton Electric Company was already selling vibrators as a medical device for the home. The Shelton Vibrator, the company claimed, could aid in treating diverse conditions, including "asthma, dandruff, impotency, obesity, watery eyes, and wrinkles."[215] In her book *Vibrator Nation: How Feminist Sex-Toy Stores Changed the Business of Pleasure,* Lynn Comella states that the "erotic uses [of vibrators] were known, advertisers in the early twentieth century were coy, using coded language to both hint at and mask the vibrator's sexual capabilities."[216] While not intended as such, the vibrator was quickly turned into a sex toy.

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[213] Joseph Mortimer Granville, *Nerve-Vibration and Excitation as Agents in the Treatment of Functional Disorder and Organic Disease* (J. & A. Churchill, 1883), 126.
[214] James Craven Wood, *Clinical Gynecology* (Boericke & Tafel, 1917), 21.
[215] Lynn Comella, *Vibrator Nation: How Feminist Sex-Toy Stores Changed the Business of Pleasure* (Duke University Press, 2017), dup;9780822372677/1, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372677.
[216] Comella, *Vibrator Nation*, 24.

Only in the 1970s would the vibrator take its position in society as a tool for pleasure for anyone at any time. Even though, as early as the nineteenth century, the gynecologists Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson, Dr. W.F. Robie and Dr. LeMon Clark recommended that their female patients use a vibrator if they experienced problems reaching orgasm, it was sex educator Betty Dodson who popularized it when she advocated for self-pleasure using the Hitachi Magic Wand, a vibrating massager, as a feminist act.[217] While Goldsmith presented a vibrator at the first meeting and told the women where they could get one, Barbach was reluctant to assign exercises that included vibrators this early in the program. "My concern about assigning the vibrator initially," she wrote, "is that some women may use it as a way to avoid touching their genitals, especially when discomfort in touching their own genitals is related to discomfort in having a partner touch them."[218] This echoed a wider feminist concern that the vibrator, designed by men, might further alienate women from their bodies. Thus, Barbach only encouraged women to use a vibrator if manual stimulation did not help at all. One example was Clare, a woman who was so resistant to any sexual pleasure that she would not do any of the homework Barbach assigned. She had "all routes to attaining orgasm blocked." So, Barbach suggested she should try out a vibrator, and the following week, Clare arrived at the meeting with a new haircut and wearing a skirt instead of her usual pants. When another group member asked her about the vibrator, Clare responded that she had had several orgasms using it and almost had one when her husband stimulated her manually. In such cases, Barbach believed, vibrators might be necessary.[219]

Spring had arrived in Los Angeles. Nine weeks earlier, a group of women had sat on chairs or the floor of a house belonging to a woman called Maria. They had been waiting for

[217] Emily Sutton, "Pedagogy, Politics, and Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 49, no. 2 (2024): 311–31, https://doi.org/10.1086/727205.
[218] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 148.
[219] Barbach, *Women Discover Orgasm*, 151.

the arrival of Goldsmith and the start of a three-month seminar that would teach them all about orgasms. Nervously, they had been nibbling on some cheese, sipping some wine or coffee. Now, at the end of the seminar, they were very comfortable with each other. They had shared and listened to each other's most intimate experiences, had disagreements over how they should show up for each other, made crude jokes about pornography, vibrators, and the difference between briefs and boxers, and had learned to enjoy their sexuality more. Nevertheless, many were still not fully comfortable communicating their needs to their partners, had not achieved orgasm, and all agreed that they still had a long way to go.[220]

Another woman, Liza Little, who was a counsellor and nurse from Vermont, also organized her own female sexuality groups. Like Goldberg, she did not call her workshops therapy groups. In fact, she criticized that all kinds of sex therapy had "a 'problem' approach and a mechanistic outlook — as if a woman's body, her feelings, beliefs and cultural background could all be reduced to a mechanical problem — like fixing a broken car."[221] This included any kind of sex therapy from Masters and Johnson to Barbach, but also Goldsmith's approach, even if she did not call it therapy. What these approaches were missing, Little believed, was a celebratory approach "where women would have the opportunity to explore their sexual issues, learn from one another and practice the skills of problem solving in the area of sexuality."[222] Ultimately, Little criticized the problem-centred approach central to *scientia sexualis* and proposed an alternative that moved further away from the psychological and scientific treatment approach of Masters and Johnson and Lonnie Barbach.

She had crafted her own program, during which women would work on "our attitudes and belief systems, our feelings and emotions, and our sexual behaviour or how we express

[220] Hendrix, "A Seminar on Women´s Sexuality."
[221] Liza Little, "Sexuality Enhancement for Women," *Common Woman*, 1983, 5.
[222] Little, "Sexuality Enhancement for Women," 5.

our sexual selves."[223] The objectives were thus the same as those of Barbach and Goldsmith. However, Little's exercises differed significantly. Throughout the eight-week program, Little asked the participants to do homework exercises like writing a sexual autobiography, writing a letter to one's genitals and having them write back, reading, doing communication exercises, and doing body exercises. During the sessions, they watched films together, did self-speculum exams, and had one session on self-help. Little always ended her program with a celebration. They would share erotic art they made of themselves, host parties, or jump in a hot tub together.[224]

The examples of Little and Goldsmith show how Barbach's approach was adopted by other women, who made it their own. While they had varying levels of success, they all reported helping the women in their groups feel more comfortable with their bodies and themselves. These women had taken the treatment of "anorgasmia" out of men's hands, moved them into living rooms like that of Maria, placed their experiences in wider societal discussions, and found support and friendship amongst each other in the process. And even though Goldsmith and Little distanced themselves from pre-orgasmic group therapy, they nevertheless followed in Barbach's footsteps, simply taking her critique of traditional sex therapy one step further — they were not so radically different. Not, at least, when contrasted with Betty Dodson, who asked every woman who came to her workshops to take her clothes off at the door.

While Barbach's pre-orgasmic groups can still be located within *scientia sexualis* and its essentializing notions of sex and gender, she, for example, considered treatments for heterosexual women as universally applicable, it was nevertheless a subversive project. Firstly, Barbach did not evaluate pleasure based on a scientifically determined numerical

[223] Little, "Sexuality Enhancement for Women," 5.
[224] Little, "Sexuality Enhancement for Women," 14.

value, suggesting that she was influenced by the less prevalent discourse of *ars erotica*. Secondly, her preorgasmic groups were part of a broader feminist move away from male-dominated, institutional, individualized, and authoritative treatments of women's issues towards women-dominated, communal yet person-centred approaches. The woman was now responsible for herself while being guided through a process by someone closer to a peer than an authority figure. Corresponding shifts happened in other fields. In the field of medicine, for example, women came together to learn how to perform self-speculum exams so they would no longer be dependent on male gynecologists. And unsatisfied with the work of the police, women taught each other self-defence and established women's help lines. Similarly, pre-orgasmic group work was based on the understanding that women were responsible for their own bodies and pleasure. It was not the partner's nor the therapist's job to miraculously make the client orgasm. Instead, it was each woman's responsibility to show up for the meetings, be open to the process, and, most importantly, do their homework. This centring of the woman's responsibility for herself subverted the power over women's bodies and actions held by male psychologists and physicians who were working within phallocentric frameworks. Women's liberation did not only bring new rights but also new responsibilities — first and foremost, the responsibility for oneself.

The creation of the pre-orgasmic therapy approach and subsequent programs based on Barbach's method did not lead to a complete overhaul of all sex therapy methods. Instead, sex educator, psychologist, and activist Leonore Tiefer claims, Barbach's and others' humanistic approaches to solving sexual issues were overshadowed by the success of Viagra and the possibility of a drug to treat female sexual dysfunction, and by sexologists' desire to adhere to the scientific method. Feminist practitioners, however, continued to create alternatives to phallocentric sex therapies. In 2000, Tiefer founded the Campaign for A New View of Women's Sexual Problems, which hosted five conferences over the next six years.

The "grassroots network" of feminist sexologists and sex educators acted as watchdogs to stop the over-promotion of sexuality drugs, which followed the raging success of Viagra. More importantly to this thesis, they wrote the *New View Manifesto*, in which they promoted a social constructivist model as an alternative to the existing medical model of sexual dysfunction and a treatment approach similar to Barbach's preorgasmic groups.[225] Tiefer's work, which was shaped by Barbach and others who thought like her, significantly influenced the changes and classifications made to the definition of Female Sexual Dysfunction in the DSM-5 in 2013. Instead of focusing on the genital aspects of female sexuality, this version puts more emphasis on subjectivity, variability, and relationality. This new definition makes it harder to overpathologize short-term issues, just as the rephrasing of anorgasmia to 'pre-orgasmic' did.[226]

Authors like April Haynes, Alice Echols, and Jane Gerhard point out that the right to free sexual expression and the fight against its instrumentalization by the patriarchy were at the center of white second-wave feminism.[227] It is unimportant that preorgasmic group therapy did not become the new norm for treating women who were struggling to achieve orgasm. Barbach's work was not in vain. As shown above, her work indirectly affected today's DSM. Further, independent of her impact today, her historical importance lies in showing that women within the scientific tradition chose to use the tools at their disposal to build feminist alternatives to a male-dominated field. Just as self-speculum exams did not eclipse the gynecologist, or self-defence courses made the police obsolete, the importance of pre-orgasmic groups does not lie in their overpowering of patriarchal systems, but their empowering of women within them.

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[225] Tiefer, "Sex Therapy as a Humanistic Enterprise."
[226] Graham, "Reconceptualising Women's Sexual Desire and Arousal in DSM-5."
[227] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, chap. 4; Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*.

Chapter 3: Liberating Masturbation?

It was March 4, 1975, in New York City. A group of mostly white and middle-class women listened eagerly to a naked woman called Betty Dodson, who was holding an electric massager in her hand. It was plugged into an outlet next to her and vibrated noisily. Earlier, she had explained that masturbation was the single best thing for women's health, mental wellbeing, and that learning how to orgasm was central to liberating women from the patriarchy. Now she announced that she would distribute massagers to everyone in the room and coach the women through a masturbation session until they each reached orgasm, the main event of her Bodysex workshops.

While Barbach's pre-orgasmic workshops added another method to the psychotherapeutic repertoire, one still within the tradition of *scientia sexualis*, Betty Dodson hosted a different kind of workshop. There is more literature on her than on Lonnie Barbach. Yet, her impact and centrality to second-wave feminism have been largely overlooked. In *Riotous Flesh* (2015), April Haynes mentions Dodson shortly in her introduction and epilogue. Outside academia, an episode of Gwyneth Paltrow's 2020 Netflix show *Goop Lab* moved Dodson and her work further into the popular consciousness. And in 2024, Rebecca Davis dedicates an entire chapter of her book *Fierce Desires: A New History of Sex and Sexuality in America* to Dodson and her workshops.

Dodson's goals were similar to Barbach's: teach women how to orgasm, connect them to their sexuality and help them, ultimately, to shake off the restraints put on them by a lack of sexual information, the sexual revolution, and patriarchal expectations (i.e. the vaginal orgasm). However, unlike Barbach, Dodson based her work on spiritualist philosophy and practice and identified as a "sister teacher" rather than a therapist. Thus, she can be located within the American discourse of *ars erotica*.

As I have explained in the introduction, Foucault invoked an orient of *ars erotica* to produce a dialectic occident of *scientia sexualis*. He was not the only French theorist to do so, as Leon Antonia Rocha highlights in his discussion of *ars erotica*, *scientia sexualis* and China: "Barthes, Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, Lévi-Strauss, Bataille, Lyotard, Sollers, Irigaray" and others did the same.

Rocha argues that these theorists used "China" as a

> 'utopian strategy' to escape the world in which they inhabited [sic.], as a kind of cognitive estrangement, shock treatment for ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. 'China' is used to defamiliarise, to remind us of the specific history that lies behind dichotomies and classifications which furnish the way 'we in the West' understand the world around us. 'China' is deployed to unsettle our smug, lazy patterns of thought, our delusions of grandeur and universality. 'China' is meant to be dumbfounding, astonishing, astounding, a space outside of the fortress of 'Western' thought.'[228]

This "dreaming about the east" was not restricted to China, nor was it limited to French theorists. Especially relevant in this thesis´s context is the western appropriation of Tantra, which Hugh Urban explores in *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion.* Similar to the French theorists who were looking for a "shock treatment for ethnocentrism and eurocentrism," American and European counter-culturalists looked towards India to find the quintessential "other": "passionate, irrational, effeminate, a land of disorderly imagination."[229] For them, the "otherness" of the Orient did not aid in the construction of the West as superior to the East, as argued by Edward Said. Instead, they believed the Orient to be the place of truth and liberation. Amongst the intertwined spiritual practices of yoga and meditation, these counterculturalists, including rock stars like Jimi Hendrix and Mick Jagger, embraced Tantra as an alternative to restrictive Western sexual

[228] Leon Antonio Rocha, "Scientia Sexualis versus Ars Erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 42, no. 3 (2011): 328–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.01.003.
[229] Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy Politics, and Power in the Study of Religions* (University of California Press, 2003), 3.

discourse and practices. By then, it had been transformed into uniquely American spiritualities such as neo-Tantra, American Tantra, and the Church of Tantra.[230]

While the Americanization of Tantra may suggest the existence of an "original Tantra," Urban points out that the term "tantrism" itself is a Western creation and, as such, a floating signifier, bundling together a "diverse and heterogeneous body of concepts and traditions" which have been subject to change over many centuries.[231] Nevertheless, moving further away from Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, he argues that Tantrism, in its simplification of the complex, is not an Orientalist imagination created solely by the West. Instead, he defines it as a "dialectical category," created in the dialectic between the East and the West: "a complex, shifting fusion of both Western and Indian discourse, a composite construction of Orientalist projections, indigenous counter projections, and the play of misrepresentation between them."[232]

A good example here is Osho, born in Madhya Pradesh as Chandra Mohan Jain and also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Born in 1931, Osho majored in and taught philosophy, then became a preacher of his own version of spiritual enlightenment in 1967. He quickly grew a following, called himself "Bhagwan," or God, built himself an ashram, and ultimately fled the country to evade financial and legal problems. Together with his by then many followers, he bought a sixty-four-thousand-acre ranch in Antelope, Oregon and built a spiritual business emporium. As his programs were not cheap (a three-month rebalancing program cost $7,500), the farm generated revenue of $120 million. Amongst many other things, Osho taught that the power of sex, its radical acceptance of everything, the good and the bad, would provide a way to cure the split personalities western religions created. Tantra,

[230] Urban, *Tantra*.
[231] Urban, *Tantra*, 23.
[232] Urban, *Tantra*, 15.

he promised, was the path to "absolute freedom and instant deification."[233] At its peak, his followers counted twenty-five thousand members. The case of Osho shows how the production of orientalist sexual practices in America differs slightly from Said's argument of the production of the Orient and Foucault's belief that *ars erotica* was a distinctively eastern sexual practice. Instead, Osho's sexual practice and philosophy were the product of his work to adapt traditionally Indian spiritualities and traditions for an American audience who craved an alternative to American religions and the post-WWII way of life.

The binary truth Foucault claimed to have observed ultimately essentializes notions of Eastern esotericism and Western scientism. He created a discursive dichotomy which, according to Rocha, was carelessly and uncritically reproduced by too many. Nevertheless, Foucault's notion of *ars erotica* remains useful in this context if redefined slightly. Instead of a signifier for a generalizable eastern approach to sex and sexuality, *ars erotica* should be understood as a signifier for a process integral to Western new-ageism. I use *ars erotica* in this context as a deeply Western "erotic art" that is rooted in the cherry-picking and appropriation of practices belonging to different, unrelated faith traditions. This erotic art is created through the westernization (a melding of eastern traditions and western ideals such as individual freedom and self-reliance) of such practices through processes that may or may not involve leaders from the original faith traditions. *Ars erotica* fulfills the deep desire of the practicing Westerners to find an alternative to Western spiritual and sexual discourses and practices (including the *scientia sexualis*).

While Urban offers the broadest historical overview of Tantra in the West, he fails to discuss its importance in feminist endeavours beyond the occasional sentence or two. Yet, *ars erotica* and the cultural feminist project of empowering the self through the liberation of

[233] Urban, *Tantra*, 241.

female sexuality have much in common: the belief in the powerful freeing possibilities of sexuality, the believe in western values like individual freedom and self-reliance, the celebration of the feminine (if in a masculinist framework in the case of Tantra), the necessity of bio-spiritual essentialism, and lastly an aversion to the western mainstream.

A useful case study to explore where *ars erotica* and cultural feminism met and how sex moved from the domain of radical feminism into that of cultural feminism is Betty Dodson and her BodySex workshops. Before Dodson taught women how to masturbate, she masturbated alone and in secret. She was a fine artist who, fascinated by the human body, drew larger-than-life nudes at a time when "serious" art was Avant-Garde. In 1959, at age twenty-nine, she married Frederick Lief, who had a sizable income and was willing to support her art career, which allowed her to fully concentrate on painting.[234] But the couple's sex life was sparse, and on the rare occasions they did have sex, her husband "would come too fast, and [she] wouldn´t come at all."[235] Once he fell asleep, she would masturbate under the sheets "without moving or breathing, feeling sick with frustration and guilt the whole time."[236] When she told her husband and their mostly Freudian psychologists that she believed they had a "sex problem," they disagreed and told her to "relax and take it easy."[237] As shown in Chapter 1, the psychologists' dismissal was typical. As the couple was having penetrative sex, there was not much reason to worry from a Freudian perspective. Dodson felt that the psychologists and her husband believed her desire for more pleasure to be an indicator that she was a pervert and sex fiend, again a feeling likely shared by many women. So, she retreated into painting, locking herself into her studio, unhooking the phone, and

[234] Betty Dodson, *Sex By Design: The Betty Dodson Story*, 4th ed. (Betty A Dodson Foundation, 2016).
[235] Betty Dodson, "'Getting to Know Me' in Ms. Magazine," Betty Dodson & Carlin Ross, accessed June 17, 2025, https://www.dodsonandross.com/articles/getting-know-me-ms-magazine.
[236] Dodson, "Getting to Know Me."
[237] *Betty at Chicago State 1970*, directed by Carlin Ross, 2022, 01:00:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNo1JBhVOhk.

creating her own world, unable to cope with the real one, painting for up to eighteen hours a day.[238] After five years of marriage, Lief left her for his secretary, a fact that she, who believed romance and marriage were tools of oppression, was so ashamed of that she kept it a secret for many years.[239]

After the divorce, Dodson dove headfirst into sexual exploration. Additionally, she took up Yoga, which, together with martial arts exercises, would become an important element of her sexual practice and later teachings. Yoga, which would inspire much of her teachings and art, had just recently entered the American mainstream. It had been introduced in the late nineteenth century by Swami Vivekananda and Ida C. Craddock, who combined Christianity with Tantra and Hatha Yoga to simultaneously achieve "sexual pleasure, birth control, and closeness to God" in a "divine sexual union between husband and wife."[240] Craddock faced severe prosecution, as the pamphlets she mailed through the US Postal Service to disseminate her ideas violated the Comstock laws. She spent time in prison, and before she could be sentenced a second time, she took her own life to "die a free woman."[241] Craddock was followed by the tantric Yogi Pierre Bernard, who combined hatha yoga and tantra into a yogic sexual practice. Bernard believed sex belonged as much outside marriage as within and built a wide following. Andrea J. Jain notes that this spiritual cocktail elicited much negative public attention and stained the image of yoga in America through a public association with occult magic and Tantra's association with "sex magic".

Swami Vivekananda, the "father" of modern yoga, worked hard to sanitize the scandalous public image of yoga and offered an alternative spirituality that promised "the

[238] *Betty at Chicago State 1970*.
[239] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chap. 3.
[240] Andrea A. Jain, "Subversive Spiritualities: Yoga's Complex Role in the Narrative of Sex and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States," in *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States*, ed. Gillian Frank et al. (University of North Carolina Press, n.d.), 37.
[241] Jain, "Subversive Spiritualities," 38.

realization of the unity between one's self and divinity."[242] Vivekananda's success laid the groundwork for the explosion of yoga's popularity in the 1960s. Yogic teachings, disseminated by a growing number of gurus who were able to immigrate from India to the United States due to changed immigration laws, found an eager audience in the budding counterculture. With its new popularity, it also shifted from "a subversive mode for pursuing spiritual perfection" to "a normative mode for pursuing a different kind of self-control, one put in service of physical perfection and beauty." The shift back into the body encouraged a reimagination of yoga as a tool to achieve a more attractive body and more sexual prowess.[243] Unlike half a century before, the sexual revolution was now in full force, and what previously caused scandal and prosecution now just added to yoga's popularity.

Betty Dodson taking up yoga was on brand. It seems unsurprising that a woman who felt sexually stifled, with no interest in Christianity, would find a practice that promised spirituality and sexual prowess intriguing. Furthermore, Dodson believed that contemporary beauty standards left women physically weak. Having experienced situations which required her to use her body strength to escape sexual assault, building muscles was a feminist act for her. Yoga's new image as a fitness practice in addition to its transcendent properties was thus a perfect fit. To further strengthen her self-defence, Dodson took up Kung Fu.[244] With its "oriental" roots and focus on self-control, it fits well with her yoga practice. While the rest of her life centred on pleasure and hedonism, Dodson's efforts to perfect her body were rigorous and restrictive.

In addition to strengthening her body, Dodson also changed her eating habits to lose weight. By 1974, she had fully eliminated coffee, sugar, red meat, and alcohol, with the goal

[242] Jain, "Subversive Spiritualities," 41.
[243] Jain, "Subversive Spiritualities: Yoga's Complex Role in the Narrative of Sex and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States."
[244] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chap. 14.

of one day eating only "raw vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, sprouts and herbs."[245] Dodson began to fast, sometimes every other day, sometimes for four days, to "let the body eliminate waste and heal itself."[246] If she over ate, she "simply" induced vomiting: "the gagging and stomach contractions releases a lot of tension. It's like having an orgasm with your stomach."[247] This practice was inspired by the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who promised that the gag reflex, just like an orgasm, released tensions and allowed one's repressed feelings to come closer to the surface.[248] Dodson's admiration for Reich, whom she repeatedly visualized during masturbation, as well as her sporadic mentions of Masters and Johnson, demonstrates that she was not unaffected by the dominant discursive tradition of *scientia sexualis*.

Romantic love, Dodson believed, was an ideal that forced women to squeeze themselves into a mould which did not allow them to be fully themselves. Women who became "romantic addicts" were weak, sexually repressed, and mentally unwell. In 1970, she described her teenage self as addicted to romance overweight (pictures from that time depict an average-sized girl) and ugly, and her married self as pimply, pudgy, and fat (here too, images from the time do not depict an overweight woman.)[249]

And with romance came instructions of how sex should work: only as a couple, missionary position, male dominance, and either female graceful passivity while waiting for an orgasm or female responsibility to provide an orgasm for the husband. Dodson associated a very thin, almost malnourished, and toned body with mental well-being, sexual freedom, and strength. Drawings of what Dodson considered orgasmic women depicted very skinny,

[245] Betty Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love* (Betty Dodson, 1974), 39.
[246] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love*, 38.
[247] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love*, 37.
[248] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chap. 2.
[249] *Betty at Chicago State 1970*; Dodson, *Sex by Design*, 205–6.

very toned bodies, the ribs protruding.[250] The portraits of women who fell for what she called the romantic love "trip," on the other hand, depict them with fat rolls around their bellies, rounded backs, drooping shoulders and necks, and hanging breasts.[251]

Dodson's obsession with a slim and toned body was in no way a feminist endeavour, even if she argued along those lines. Instead, she was fully aligning with contemporary beauty trends. In *Reducing Bodies: Mass Culture and the Female Figure in Postwar America,* historian Elizabeth M. Matelski describes how desired female body shapes shifted from curvy and strong in the immediate aftermath of the war to extremely thin, a shift from Marilyn Monroe and Sophia Loren in the 1950s to Twiggy in the late 1960s. This shift, Matelski argues, was caused by faulty and widely distributed standardized tables produced by the insurance industry stating that being overweight was deadly; the fashion industry with Dior's "new look" (with its extremely slim waist), bikinis, mini-dresses, and skirts, and less shaping underwear; and cultural anxieties about communism, which required American women to look dainty and slim as opposed to communist women who were usually depicted to be heavy and brutish.[252] Prescriptive literature advised women to eat next to nothing. Diet pills were taken like candy (literally, in the case of "vitamin candy"). "Fat camps," exercise salons, and reducing support groups (e.g., Weight Watchers) sprouted all across the country. The weight loss industry was a billion-dollar business targeting women at much higher rates than men, even though the latter are more affected by diet-related health issues (e.g. cardiovascular disease).[253]

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[250] See for example Betty Dodson, *Woman Power - Self Portrait*, 1972, 40''x27'', https://www.dodsonandross.com/fineart/woman-power-self-portrait; Betty Dodson, *Post-Orgasmic Nude*, 1973, 18''x24'', https://www.dodsonandross.com/fineart/post-orgasmic-nude.
[251] See for example Betty Dodson, *Romantic Love*, 1956, 16''x10'', https://www.dodsonandross.com/fineart/romantic-love; Betty Dodson, *Woman with Her Cat*, 1963, 26''x41'', https://www.dodsonandross.com/fineart/woman-her-cat.
[252] Elizabeth M. Matelski, *Reducing Bodies: Mass Culture and the Female Figure in Postwar America* (Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545660.
[253] Matelski, *Reducing Bodies*, chap. 4.

Matelski points out that this diet craze did not reach Black women in America. While Black teenage girls still wanted to lose weight, their goals were much more realistic and magazines like Jet and Ebony celebrated models, celebrities, and athletes who did not conform to white female beauty standards. Matelski is perplexed as to why this may be the case, but Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* offers some answers. Strings argues that the Atlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism resulted in the association of fatness with sinful "African Savages." Strings points out that the association of slimness with whiteness preceded the medical concerns about fatness. Ultimately, the same mechanism that disciplines white female bodies, which Dodson happily participated in, shames Black female bodies, further naturalizing racial and gender hierarchies.[254]

Dodson's aversion to fat rolls and hanging breasts was thus not an individualistic, liberated opinion, but rather a consequence of many decades of social, cultural, and economic forces. Like the women working in the beauty industry, Betty Dodson wanted women to feel sexual, empowered, and comfortable in their bodies. But instead of teaching them to accept their bodies the way they were, she encouraged them to become stronger and skinnier in her workshops and books. For her, body fat was a sign of passivity and complacency (a belief rooted in racism following String's analysis), and only a physically strong woman could truly stand up for herself.[255]

Two weeks after her separation from Lief, Dodson met Grant Taylor, who was recently divorced and had just resigned from his position as an English professor at New York University, at a meeting for those who want to quit drinking. Thanks to Taylor's sexual

[254] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York University Press, 2019).
[255] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chaps. 1, 14.

curiosity and his overflowing sexual creativity, Dodson's long-anticipated sexual exploration began. Taylor was the one who first taught her to include clitoral stimulation in partner sex, who introduced her to porn magazines and "split beaver" pictures (pictures of women sitting with their legs apart, holding their vulvas open for the camera), which taught her that her longer inner vulva lips were normal and, according to Taylor, actually quite pretty. He would be her first non-monogamous relationship, she would experience her first group sex with him, and he would edit much of her writing throughout the years. Dodson and Taylor, who struggled with depression throughout his life, had many ups and downs throughout their friendship. But they were integral to each other's sexual liberation and remained there for each other until Taylor died in 2008.

Dodson's life was so impacted by her new sexual experiences that she became convinced that sexual liberation, specifically the freedom to masturbate, held the key to personal liberation. After her 1968 "Love Picture Exhibition," a collection of large classical drawings of people having sex, was a raging success, Dodson decided to follow it up with an exhibition of large drawings of her masturbating friends. It was 1970, and the exhibition ended her artistic career. No one bought the paintings, her gallery dropped her, there was no media coverage, and, to top it all off, she lost about 3,000 dollars in the process. However, her paintings sparked conversations with the visitors at the gallery. She answered questions about her art and masturbation honestly, and after a few days, she "felt like [she] had uncovered the bottom line of sexual repression: the prohibition to masturbate."[256]

Enthusiastically, she shared her orgasmic experiences and knowledge with the women in her consciousness-raising groups, which she joined as soon as she noticed the early stirrings of second-wave feminism. She demonstrated different positions for masturbation,

[256] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, 103.

showed women how she used her vibrator, how they could move their hips to increase pleasure, and facilitated assertiveness trainings during the meetings. One of those women told the editors at *Ms*. Magazine that Dodson was hosting masturbation classes. At the time, this was not true, but Harriet Lyons, an editor at *Ms*., quickly reached out.

So far, Lyons explained, they were only aware of Dr. David Reuben writing about masturbation, and he was a man. *Ms.* wanted to print an article written by a woman about female masturbation. Excitedly, Dodson began to write, believing the moment to liberate masturbation had finally arrived. But her first draft was rejected, and after a lunch with Gloria Steinem, who founded *Ms.* in 1971, Dodson realized that she needed help with the article. She reached out to Taylor to be her editor. But the new version, too, was rejected by *Ms.,* whose editors worried about losing subscriptions over an article that still seemed too radical. So, Dodson, Taylor, and their sexual friend Sheila printed a thousand copies of her draft, stapled the pages together, added a publishing logo, a drawing of the Goddess Kali next to the words "Goddess Books," and distributed them as Dodson's feminist manifesto.

It would take three years for Ms. to print a shortened version of the article under the title "Getting to Know Me" in 1974. It was noted that the reader could order the entire manifesto by mailing three dollars to *Ms.* When the orders came pouring in, Dodson was living in San Francisco's Castro district and decided that, instead of a manifesto, she would write a book. A picture taken at the time depicts her sitting naked on the carpet floor, her legs crossed (during that time she drew a yoga guide for her workshops and book in which she encourages the reader to always sit in full-, half- or modified lotus pose) with a board on her lap to write on, her hair shaved short, paper, candles, a pack of cigarettes, an ash tray, and a phone scattered around her. Some flyers are hung up on the wall in front of her. Otherwise,

the room is empty.[257] She wrote *Liberating Masturbation* in three months, self-published it, and sent each copy out individually with the help of some friends. The first print of five thousand copies sold out quickly, and so did the reprint of ten thousand copies. Yet Dodson's most stable source of income and possibly most effective way of spreading her gospel was her sexual consciousness-raising workshops, which she began hosting after *Ms.* first reached out to her.

Not fully knowing what she was doing, she and her "sexual friend" Sheila, whom she asked to co-host the workshops, improvised her first few workshops. Combining consciousness-raising style discussions with show-and-tell, she quickly learned what women were interested in and what they were not. Showing women how she vomited up warm water, which she considered a cleansing ritual, inspired the women less than she had hoped. Her demonstration of vibrators and sexual positions, however, was greeted with curiosity. Most impactful, Dodson quickly realized, was her genital show and tell, "which became one of the most healing rituals in the thousands of groups [she] would conduct over many years to come."[258] Using a lamp and a make-up mirror, she showed her vulva to the women sitting around her, explaining that she always thought her elongated inner labia were a deformity until Taylor showed her "split beaver" images in his porn magazines. Together, the women would look at their own vulvas, many of whom had never seen or named them before. Exploring the way their vulvas looked, comparing them with those of others, and being encouraged to call them "cunts" or at least "genitals," helped the participants to develop a new relationship to their vulvas, realizing that, no matter what they looked like, they were not unnatural or deformed. Unlike Barbach, whose seminars were shaped by scientific

[257] Betty Dodson, *Betty Dodson Bodysex Design*, 1974, drawing, 12''x9'', Dodsonandross.com; *Betty Writing Liberating Masturbation*, n.d., Photograph, Dodsonandross.com, accessed April 7, 2025, https://www.dodsonandross.com/node/7901.
[258] Betty Dodson, *Betty Dodson Bodysex Design*, 1974, 169, drawing, 12''x9'', Dodsonandross.com.

methodology, Dodson's workshops were more akin to an art class: they were hands-on, explorative, with intimate support by a teacher, rather than a psychologist, and the knowledge gained through trial and error was to be "deflected back into the sexual practice itself."[259] While her fine arts career had ended, Betty Dodson had become an artist of the erotic.

Dell Williams, one of the women attending Dodson's second round of workshops, asked her to help organize the first National Organization for Women Sexuality conference in 1973. Dodson carried the knowledge gained in her workshops into this new project. She wanted to do a "slide show of split beaver for feminists."[260] At the time, anti-pornography feminism was on the rise. Often called anti-sex feminists, these women were highly critical of the kind of sex Dodson promoted. No doubt influenced by anti-pornography rhetoric, some of the organizers of the conference objected to Dodson's favourite word "cunt" and others disliked her drawing for the conference's poster because the elongated vulva lips she drew looked too phallic. Dodson resented these feminists and their objections until the end of her life. Ultimately, however, her participation in the conference was an immense success. Her drawing was chosen as the logo of the conference, and when she showed a slide show of drawings of her friend's vulvas, the audience spilled into the hallway.

But the resistance she experienced haunted Dodson until old age. She believed the women who organized the NOW sexuality conference and edited *Ms.* Magazine to be part of the feminist establishment, the branch historians usually refer to as liberal feminists. She felt like they were not progressive enough due to their belief that sex and romantic love belonged together. Overall, the people Dodson criticized the harshest were women. While some contemporary feminists were convinced that men were the root of all problems, causing some

[259] *The History of Sexuality*, 57.
[260] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, 170. Inspired by the vibrators Dodson introduced to her, Dell Williams would later open the first women´s women-centred sex-shop in the United States and call it Eve´s Garden.

to become “political lesbians” (women who decided that they would only have sexual and romantic relations with other women because of their political objection to men) or celibates, Dodson’s antagonists were not men in general. Instead, she despised anyone who wielded their power to control others, a point of constant conflict in her sexual friendship with Grant Taylor, who liked things to go his way. This group included rich and powerful men who thought they could have anything they wanted, but also “controlling matriarchs,” a term she used to refer to overpowering or jealous housewives as well as radical lesbian separatists, the editors of *MS. Magazine*, and the organizers of the National Organization for Women.[261] Interestingly, “controlling matriarchs” were always women utilizing power that came in forms that were asexual and traditionally considered male characteristics. Controlling Matriarchs would tell their husbands what they were allowed to do and what not; they would speak up at feminist conferences about what they believed other feminists ought not to say (like the word “cunt”); or they would decide what they wanted to print in their magazine — if Dodson felt restricted in her quest to spread her message, it was generally because of a controlling matriarch.

Their problem, she was convinced, was that they still believed in the primary oppressive myth: romantic love. Never having had a good experience with a long-term monogamous romantic relationship, always desiring more freedom and pleasure than her partners could or would offer, Dodson did not believe that the traditional relationship could provide the sexual expression needed to liberate humanity from the oppressive restraints of religious morality. Wives, she argued, depended too much on the financial stability provided by their husbands to demand to be sexually satisfied, resulting in bad and increasingly little sex for both partners. Consequently, husbands do not experience the pleasure of having sex

[261] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chaps. 14, 15.

with a sexually liberated and orgasmic wife, leading to resentment, affairs, and potentially violence.

What she wanted everyone to understand was that masturbation "is the sexual base"; everything beyond self-pleasure was just how one chose to socialize their sex life.[262] Dodson believed that by prohibiting masturbation, society, especially the church, deprived people of healthy sexual expression. She held the deep conviction that masturbation, a practice she understood to be spiritual as well as simply fun, was indeed liberating. If everyone, including politicians, would just have a regular good wank, all injustice would come to an end and world peace would be imminent. Ever the artist, Dodson understood pleasure and masturbation to be a skill that can be improved by doing it a lot – it takes ten years to master a skill, she points out in her memoir. Her relationship to the women who learned from her was that of a "sister teacher," and when she had a ten-year relationship with a young man less than half her age in her seventies, she called him her "apprentice." Dodson clearly understood sex in terms of Foucault's erotic art. She experienced it as pleasure, evaluated it in relation to its own quality, and believed it should be taught from master to apprentice.

The orientalism of *ars erotica* is quite central to Dodson's philosophy and art. Sex was not just a skill for her but also spiritual. She called it a form of meditation, combined it with yoga and martial arts, and spoke of energy centers, chakras, and female and male energies. Deliberately, she aligns herself with more or less mythical figures in an effort to naturalize her teaching by rooting it in several cultural traditions, none of them European or Christian: Hindu Goddesses of sex, old female tantric sex teachers, "tribal […] aunts and uncles who taught the young women and men in the villages," unspecified sexual priestesses, the "divine orgasmic mother" of us all, and, tracing her lineage far back to an Indigenous

[262] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love*, 18.

ancestor, she also mentions a Native American "fire woman, a wise elder who taught sex to the young braves."[263] While not all these traditions are "oriental," they serve the same purpose of legitimizing Dodson's work as not simply made up by her but built on centuries of knowledge belonging to cultures other than her own.

Dodson's spirituality and *ars erotica* is most discernible in the art she created for *Liberating Masturbation* and the many flyers she drew for her workshops. For example, one of the early flyers, created in 1974, before she decided to call her sessions Bodysex workshops, depicted a drawing of Dodson, naked and with her legs crossed in a modified lotus pose, her hands resting on her knees, thumbs and index fingers touching in the shape of the Gyan Mudra. She is extremely skinny with strongly defined abdominal muscles. Her hair is short, her eyes open, and the corner of her mouth slightly raised. She is framed by a circle of light and sitting on an upside-down pyramid of words spelling an invitation to a workshop. Starting on February 6th, for a fee of sixty dollars, women could participate in four workshops on physical and sexual consciousness-raising, covering topics like body image, self-love, meditation, orgasm, breathing, massage, posture, and yoga.

Another image, created roughly at the same time, depicts the same naked, lean Dodson sitting in a lotus pose, but this time on a red cushion. One arm is raised at a right angle, an apple lying in her open palm. The fingers of her other hand, the arm lowered at a right angle and facing outward, are touching in the Gyan Mudra. Around her are five circles framing drawings of different vulvas. A sixth circle around her head frames a mandala and is surrounded by rays of light. Dodson's hair is spikey, almost like little flames, and her tongue is stuck out like that of the Hindu Goddess Kali.[264] In this image, Dodson is combining and

[263] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chap. 32.
[264] "The Goddess | Betty Dodson & Carlin Ross," accessed July 8, 2025, https://www.dodsonandross.com/fineart/goddess.

claiming female figures of two religious traditions: the two most influential Biblical women, the virgin Mary, the bringer and embodiment of all that is good, and Eve, the seductress who was the first human to disobey the patriarchal word of God; and Kali, the tantric Goddess of destruction, time, and death, often depicted wearing a necklace of severed male heads and standing on the flagellated body of her husband Shiva, one of the principal gods of Hinduism. By embodying the two biblical women and the tantric Goddess Kali simultaneously in her naked likeness, surrounded by vulvas with oversized clitorises, Dodson makes an artistic argument for the spiritual powers of pleasure. Furthermore, the Gyan mudra, Gyan being the Sanskrit word for knowledge or wisdom, indicates that Dodson believes sexuality to be a source of wisdom and knowledge.[265]

Dodson was not alone in combining feminism and new-age spirituality. Dell Williams, for example, wrote that the Bodysex workshops allowed women to "connect with the power in [their bodies]: to connect with [their] own sexuality. […] I could feel that kundalini energy moving up my spine to the top of my head and out of the universe."[266] At the end of the workshop, Williams remembers, all the participants had "a divine glow around them."[267] When she founded her feminist sex shop, she decided to call it Eve's Garden, also evoking the image of the naked, rule-breaking seductress.

Dodson's and Williams´ spiritually saturated discursive choices are consistent with broader trends. As Echols explains in *Daring to be Bad*, radical feminism, as an alternative to liberal feminism, moved sex (sexual orientation, sexual violence, and sexual pleasure) into the feminist discourse. By 1975, radical feminism was eclipsed by cultural feminism, which embraced biological essentialism, divine aesthetics, spirituality, and individualist lifestyle

[265] "What Is Gyan Mudra? - Definition from Yogapedia," Yogapedia.Com, accessed October 14, 2025, https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/6444/gyan-mudra.
[266] Dell Williams, "Sexually Speaking," *Sappho´s Isle*, March 1990, link.gale.com/apps/doc/DNRGAC855657422/AHSIu=uvictoria&sid=bookmarkAHSI&pg=4.
[267] Williams, "Sexually Speaking."

feminism. Feminist writers now no longer titled their writings *Off Our Backs*, or *Ain't I a Woman,* but *Amazon Quarterly*, or *Womanspirit.*[268] Art historian Jennie Klein demonstrates that the rise of what she calls "feminist/Goddess spirituality" was, to a significant degree, caused by an increase in (academic) publications on feminist spirituality, ecofeminism, and Goddesses. Amongst them was first and foremost Marija Gimbuta's archaeological research into the Goddesses of Old Europe. Using her (widely criticized) archeomythological methodology, she argued for the existence of a "peaceful, art-loving, matrifocal culture" and a Goddess in "various manifestations - strong and beautiful Virgin, Bear-Mother, and Life-giver and Life-taker."[269] Her scientific evidence (contested as it may have been) offered a spirituality for a new feminism that wanted to create an alternative female realm across all aspects of life. Feminist artists, Klein explains, were excited about the richness of the collection of matriarchal imagery described by Gimbuta and like-minded scholars, as well as the "recognition of the divine in all life forms." It allowed for the body and nature to become mediums as artistic as spiritual. Rituals became performance art, and performance art became rituals.[270]

Klein criticizes the Eurocentrism of Gimbuta's work and feminist/Goddess spirituality, which makes it inaccessible to women with different ethnocultural backgrounds. This is an uncommon critique, as most others tend to call out feminist/Goddess spirituality for "poaching from the past and plundering the world's mythology and rituals for their own purposes."[271] Especially Indigenous practices from Turtle Island have been appropriated by Goddess feminists and other neo-spiritual groups.[272] Alas, attention to Indigenous cultures did

[268] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 284.
[269] Gimbutas quoted in Jennie Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 585.
[270] Klein, "Goddess," 581.
[271] Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess," 144.
[272] Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess," 145.

not lead to widespread support of, for example, the Red Power movement due to a combination of romantic nostalgia and cultural ignorance on the side of many Goddess feminists.

Williams, Dodson, and Lonnie Barbach belong to the radical feminist effort to foreground sex early on. But when cultural feminism quickened, Williams and Dodson were swept along by the feminist current. Dodson's philosophy, discernible in her art as much as in her writings, combined sex with spiritual traditions such as yoga, Hinduism, and many undefined and likely mythical tribal spiritualities. Sex was something one does for its own sake as much as for personal and spiritual growth. It was only done well by those who were sexually liberated, but a liberating force in and of itself. If one looks closely, the feminists whom Dodson disliked, like the women at NOW whom she called "a bunch of unhappy crabby housewives," were more often than not those who did not shift into cultural feminism.[273]

Her dislike was not one-sided. Feminists from all corners of the movement criticized her work, much of it aligning with what people thought about Barbach's work. In 1975, for example, *Women's Press* published a review of *Liberating Masturbation*. Its author, Marva, believed that while the book may have saved her "a lot of time and pain" ten years earlier, she was now weary of Dodson's hetero and middle-class point of view. Dodson assumed, she lamented, that any woman could design her bedroom "for sex and body tripping," which Marva found inaccessible for those without the needed disposable income to make the necessary changes. Furthermore, Marva complained that Dodson's sexual encounters with women seemed emotionless. Women, she criticized, were not much more than "sexual buddies" for Dodson, which proved a lack of true romantic love. For Marva, the promise of

[273] *Grassroots of Feminism*, produced by Dodsonandross, 2007, 05:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHtDwu4hCiw.

freedom from "the crippling romantic ideal of love" was not more than a threat of "depersonalized sexual function — stimulation, orgasm, success."[274]

Similar concerns were voiced by Judith A. Stein, who discussed *Liberating Masturbation* in the magazine *Sister Courage*.[275] Sexual pressure, said Stein, had moved from "the 'purity' pressure of the past to the 'orgasm' pressure of the present." Once again, after the ministers and doctors of the nineteenth century, the Freudian psychology of the early twentieth century, and the sexual revolution of the mid-twentieth century, women were told how to have sex. Dodson's solution was too simplistic, so Stein. Knowing how to masturbate and orgasm would not solve centuries of inequality. Additionally, Stein had a problem with the use of the vibrator:

> It encourages us, as women, to refrain from touching our genitals, from feeling and smelling and tasting ourselves. Maintaining a distance between us and our genitals, a vibrator does nothing to help us overcome the taboos that lead us to believe that our crotches are dirty, nasty, or smelly, or that handling ourselves is perverted. By promoting the use of a vibrator, Dodson encourages women to spend money on sexual toys invented by men for women. […] Liberat*ing Masturbation* does nothing to confront the system and its institutions, which led to and encourage repression.[276]

Stein's critique of Dodson is rather unsubstantiated. In the chapter "Becoming Cunt Positive," for example, Dodson stresses the importance of becoming comfortable with one's body and explains how to masturbate using one's hands.[277] And while Stein claims that "the

[274] Marva, "Review," *Women's Press*, 1975, 14, link.gale.com/apps/doc/USYRJN532635687/AHSI?u=uvictoria&sid=bookmark-AHSI.
[275] Judith A. Stein, "Thoughts on Sexuality & Dodson's Book," *Sister Courage*, August 1976.
[276] Stein, "Thoughts on Sexuality & Dodson's Book," 6.
[277] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love*, 37.

book is almost exclusively oriented towards the use of a vibrator," the word vibrator is only mentioned twenty-five times over *Liberating Masturbation's* fifty-nine pages.[278]

Nevertheless, Stein's critique of vibrators was shared widely. Writing for *Goodbye to All That*, Cynthia and Renee observed a similar unease about vibrators at the 1972 Associated Women Students conference in San Diego. When the attendees of a masturbation workshop were shown a video in which a woman masturbated with vibrators, they all agreed it was too phallic to be a feminist tool for pleasure. They, too, believed vibrators alienated women further from their own bodies and perpetuated the myth of the vaginal orgasm.

This dismissal of Dodson's work was a foreshadowing of the feminist sex wars that would become central to cultural feminism. Dodson, with her affinity for group sex, pornography, and S/M, clearly belonged to the group now referred to as "pro-sex feminists." Her reciprocated feelings of disdain for the "anti-pornography" feminist establishment are an excellent example of the conflict between the two groups. Furthermore, Dodson's partial blindness to economic factors affecting one's sex life, as pointed out by Marva, is another reason why she serves as a great case study for the positive and negative aspects of white "pro-sex" feminism. Her fetishization of Black men (exemplified by her description of one Black lover's "exquisite ebony" skin that felt like velvet, and the "big black glistening dick" of another), her consistent marking of Black people she met in life as such without ethnically marking anyone else, as well as her comparison of the oppression of Black people and women's subjugation in a conversation to a Black lover, further shows how she "ignored the significance of racial stereotypes and fails to understand how American prudishness was created in contrast to Black and Asian women's sexual availability."[279] The Black feminist

[278] Stein, "Thoughts on Sexuality & Dodson's Book," 6.
[279] Dodson, *Sex by Design*, chaps. 8, 27; Davis, *Fierce Desires*, 271.

Toni Cade Bambara pointed out that it was ironic how a new field of white and female experts replaced "the old field of (white, male) psychiatrists." She encouraged Black feminists to create their own definitions and theories regarding sex.[280] Even though Dodson believed her philosophy to be universally applicable, its hyperfocus on the orgasm as a cure-all was no use to feminists of colour.

Betty Dodson liked to position herself as an outsider, the personified sexual Avant Garde, and a liberator of women and sex. In parts, she was all of those things. She was one of the first feminists to speak so openly and unapologetically about female pleasure. Consequently, many feminists questioned, disliked, and criticized her. Throughout her life, she helped thousands of women see and touch themselves in ways they had never before, certainly helping many of them to feel more liberated from patriarchal sexual expectations. Yet, Dodson was also very much a product of her time. When radical feminists moved sex to the center of the feminist conversation, so did Dodson. And when cultural feminists reframed sex, and life in general, in spiritual (Goddess) terms, so did she. Her conflict with other feminists is representative of the feminist sex wars, rather than a story of the sole warrior fighting the ever-powerful mainstream. Furthermore, Dodson was not the only feminist who understood sex to be an *ars erotica*. As language about sex shifted into the spiritual, a scientific understanding of it became less popular. Nevertheless, it seems like she was the first feminist who brought a bunch of naked women together, made them look at their vulvas, and encouraged them to masturbate simultaneously. Where Dodson diverged from any feminism the most, and which caused most of the opposition she experienced, was her

[280] Haynes, *Riotous Flesh*, 3–4.

insistence that love was a tool of the patriarchy and that the truly liberated woman should have unromantic sex with friends rather than lovers.

Dodson's legacy, usually excluding her aversion to romance, lives on in many different workshops inspired directly or indirectly by her work. Together with her business partner Carlin Ross, who became the CEO of the Dodson Foundation after Dodson died in 2020, Dodson trained many Bodysex coaches who are now teaching across the world. "Pleasure coaches" like Isabella Frappier, who was featured in the Goop Lab episode on Betty Dodson and who promises "a realm where desire shapes your destiny and sensuality becomes your sacred birthright," continue the path that Dodson began when she told the women in her first consciousness-raising group how to unleash the powers of the female orgasm.[281]

[281] "Isabella Frappier," Isabella Frappier, accessed October 16, 2025, https://isabellafrappier.com/.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have highlighted Masters and Johnson, Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson as important contributors to the development of somatic sex education. The four are often described as trailblazers or pioneers, but as I have shown throughout these chapters, their influential work did not constitute as much of a radical break with the status quo. Instead, they built their work on that of those who came before them. Consequently, they actively participated in the discursive reproduction of the traditions of *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. Yet, those categories are slippery, and if applied too forcefully, they oversimplify the complexities of discourse. It would be wrong to assume that any of the people discussed in this thesis were participants of only one discourse. Instead, they were productive members of several discourses which shaped their values, beliefs, and motivations. William Masters, for example, also moved within the discourses of the episcopalian church and the republican party, which likely formed his opinion of the importance of the American family.

Consequently, the work that made Masters and Johnson known across the nation was shaped by traditional beliefs in the importance of heterosexual marriage for the American nation, the centrality of the orgasm to heterosexual sex, and the importance of the couple and their relationship to the experience of sexual pleasure. Even though it is often suggested, the fame they acquired for their physiological findings and treatment of sexual dysfunction was not due to their work's radical newness. Other scientists had already used scientific methods to try to understand and even treat human sexuality. Nevertheless, the size and, for many, scandalous nature of the research project, combined with a certain business sense on the part of Masters and Johnson, positioned the team as two of the most important sexologists in the young history of the discipline.

Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson offered alternatives to Masters and Johnson's and psychoanalytical approaches. Adapting altered versions of Masters and Johnson's as well as Lobitz and LoPiccolo's methods, Barbach created a distinctly feminist approach to help "preorgasmic" women with their sexuality. Moving away from a purely medical model, Barbach's workshops moved within a more humanistic framework, focusing on physiological as well as social and emotional realities, and understood female pleasure as a path towards personal growth. Nevertheless, rooting her work in rational and scientific knowledge, she never entirely left the discourse of *scientia sexualis*.

Betty Dodson, on the other hand, created a non-scientific alternative. An artist, rather than a scientist, Dodson understood sexuality and sex as something spiritually powerful and a skill that could be passed on from a master to an apprentice in a "learning by doing" approach. For Dodson, the root of all worldly evil lay in the (religious) suppression of people's sexual desire, and if everyone were sexually liberated, world peace was near. While she felt in opposition to mainstream feminism her whole life, radical and cultural feminism shaped her philosophy and work.

This research shows that pro-sex feminism was not only a practice and philosophy but also a pedagogy. Current scholarship on pro-sex feminists of the second wave focuses on their writings and arguments or their lived sexualities. They are often discussed in a dialectic relationship to anti-sex or anti-porn feminists to mark the rift within white second-wave feminism. We find that there is an entirely different lens through which we can observe pro-sex and maybe even anti-sex feminisms. Who else taught women how to have sex? What were their methods? Did anti-sex feminists teach other women how to have "the right kind" of sex? Did other Women of Colour than the sex therapist June Dobbs Butts teach somatic sex education to their peers? How was it different from or the same as Barbach and Dodson?

There are many other exciting avenues of research that I was unable to follow due to the scope of this thesis: Were lesbian, bisexual, and trans women really as removed from Dodson, Barbach, and their colleagues as it seems? Who is Don Chamberlain, and how did he influence women and feminism in the Bay Area? How much did sex workers shape today's expert sexual knowledge and therapy methods? And, lastly, what were the experiences of those who participated in Dodson's and Barbach's workshops in their own words?

This, and hopefully future research, not only helps us understand second-wave feminism better but also helps us consider today's sexual discourse in more complex ways. It lets us see that today's notion of sexuality is polysemous and was created by people throughout history. Some consider sexuality an innate force that motivates all our actions. Others understand it as a learned behaviour that can be adjusted using certain techniques. And no matter if they subscribe to one or the other, many believe that one's sexuality, if discovered and mastered, holds the key to a happy, sometimes even liberated, life.

But while usually framed as feminist, (somatic) sex education has the potential to reinstate old understandings of sex and gender. Countless women (and men) enjoy a better sex life because of some helpful guidance by a podcast host, magazine article, or workshop facilitator. However, many of these teachings are interwoven with essentialist and often spiritual notions of female as opposed to male hormones or essence, the divine masculine and feminine, and authentic sexuality. It is easy to buy into these arguments. They promise empowerment, ecstasy, and even liberation. But they also reconnect gender, which feminists have fought to reframe as a social construct, with biological sex. And while, already in 1990, Judith Butler had shown us that the notion of biological sex is also socially constructed, neo-spiritual teachings of male and female essence further establish sex as a prediscursive

identity.[282] When we know when and how these discourses were created, we can appreciate the effectiveness of (somatic) sex education without falling for the essentializations some of these teachings rely on.

The work of Barbach and Dodson echoes throughout books, podcasts, magazines, TikToks, YouTube videos, and, of course, all sorts of therapy sessions and workshops. However, as I have shown, it is not only their voices we can discern, but also those of all the sexologists and feminists who shaped their ideas and practices. Nevertheless, when *Sex Education*'s Aimee Gibbs gets prescribed "a wank" and nosily masturbates in all corners of her room, it is much more due to the legacies of Lonnie Barbach and Betty Dodson than most other feminists of their time.

[282] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1990), 3.

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