Cultural Daily

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Naomi Wolf: On Pleasure and Creativity

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, October 18th, 2012

I spoke to Naomi Wolf from her home in New York, the day after she made Stephen Colbert blush while being interviewed about her newest book Vagina: A New Biography. The book has garnered decidedly mixed reactions, with some praising its frank discussion and scientific observations about female sexuality and creativity, and others criticizing it for essentializing women through biology. Wolf is no stranger to controversy – her earlier books, including The Beauty Myth and The End of America also spurred heated discussions – so we began by taking a look at how different people are reacting to her latest work.



Adam Leipzig: Have you noticed an age gap in reactions to your book?
Naomi Wolf: While I don't want to generalize, I do think older women in their '60s and '70s are very supportive of the idea that new insights into sexual pleasure are part of the feminist project. They they remember Shere Hite and *The Dinner Party* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Younger women in their twenties are also very comfortable with the idea that women are entitled to know about pleasure. But the middle generation seems particularly resistant – that was the generation influenced by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, by the academic retreat of feminism into language theory.
AL: How to you describe the link between sexuality and creativity?
NW: There isn't a substance called "creativity" that gets unleashed by orgasm or arousal, but this is what does happen: When a woman is supported by herself, by her culture, by her lover, in anticipating pleasurable sex, it boosts dopamine in her brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that boosts drive, focus, motivation, energy, and assertiveness. When a woman has an orgasm, it boosts opioids, which elevate a feeling of transcendence. The part of the brain in women that relates to self-consciousness and self-regulation goes quiet during orgasm.
These are things we know take place in the female brain. It's my interpretation, as a writer, that these are powerful potential mind states, and powerful sources for creativity.
For my dopamine hypothesis, I interviewed women who had had heightened creativity experiences after orgasm, or a period of heightened creativity during a sexual awakening, and that was highly suggestive to me.
AL: I wonder if there is an artistic gender gap, though. You say that women experience creative liberation through their sexuality. But many male artists, like Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, had their greatest creativity due to sexual repression, not sexual expression, didn't they?
NW: I'm not contradicting you, but I'd tweak what you're asking. Wilde and Whitman were at their most glorious when they were pushing against the repression of their sexuality.

In the nineteenth century, Whitman especially represented a kind of holistic, integrated, acceptance of what had been a marginalized sexuality. There was a whole lineage of gay male writers from Whitman to John Addington Symonds to Oscar Wilde. They associated sexual expression with suppressed forms of creativity. For example, John Addington Symonds was a much better poet in his uncensored, private writing about sexuality than he was in his published writing, in which he edited out any homosexual references.

AL: In your book, you write that "cultural concepts become embedded in a woman's body and in her brain perceptually."

NW: It's true of men too, and it's what we know about the plasticity of the brain. In Marcia Beauchamp's doctoral thesis, which surveys the literature of linguistics and neuroscience, she presents the evidence that language constructs neural patterns in the brain. Concepts construct pathways in the brain. That's why, if you want to change a habit, it takes a while to lay down new neural pathways. I documented the brain-uterus connection in my book *Misconception,* and now I'm writing about the brain-vagina connection.

But quite separate from that, if a woman lives in a culture in which she experiences a disgusting, mocking, crass, violent, and pornographic framing of her sexuality, that will affect how she thinks about her sexuality. However, if she lives in a culture in which her vagina is talked about as the *golden lotus,* or the *jade gate,* or the *beautiful peony,* that will become part of her consciousness.

Photo of Naomi Wolf by Andre Lambertson.

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