

Resurrecting the Goddess: Exploring Powerful (Re)presentations of Women's Bodies

By Ava Vivian Gonzales

The historic assigning of value to women's bodies according to culturally imposed physical standards is an expression of power relations, with many of the traits seen across centuries as "beautiful" largely symbolising certain female behaviour that males deem desirable.

Cultural Inscriptions of a "Feminine Ideal"

One of the earliest examples of the above concept this is the tradition of foot-binding once done to Chinese women. Scholars are uncertain about the custom's exact origins and are intrigued by the fact that it permeated so deeply into all social and economic classes of Chinese society, with only the Manchu conquerors, the Hakka Chinese migrant groups, and social outcasts avoiding it completely. During the one thousand years it was practiced, approximately one billion women had their feet bound (Crites, 1995). Foot-binding was usually done when Chinese girls were between the ages of four and seven. Girls from poor families had their feet bound when they were older because many lower-class families could not afford the loss of labour a daughter with bound feet would inflict on the family. Nevertheless, the girl's feet were bound with the belief that it would help her marry into wealth.

Feet were bound in a way so that the women's toes, with the exception of the big toe, were twisted permanently under the arches of their feet. The lotus-shaped feet considered attractive in Chinese women limited their movements, making them more docile and "doll-like." Women with bound feet were believed to have walked in a way that strengthened the vagina and made it narrower, which was why Chinese men during that era simply would not marry women with unbound feet.

Sixteenth century European women, on the other hand, bound themselves with whalebone corsets that had a strip of metal or wood running down its front to flatten their breasts and abdomen. Although they could no longer bend or breathe, some women also took to using additional iron bands to attain the ideal waist measurement of 13 inches.



Such practices, aside from illustrating the demands placed on women to conform to ideals of beauty, also show how parts of the female body may be objectified. That the pursuit of feminine beauty involves varying degrees of bodily disfigurement, through rites of passage (female genital mutilation) or cosmetic surgical procedures (breast implants), suggests how, in Helene Cixous' words (Cixous, 1986 as cited in Young, 1990), "the (political) economy of the masculine and of the feminine is organised by different requirements and constraints, which, when socialised and metaphorised, produce signs, relationships of power, relationships of production and reproduction, an entire immense system of cultural inscription readable as masculine and feminine."

Humans have practised bodily beautification and adornment throughout the centuries regardless of their sex, race, social status, or creed. Although what is considered beautiful has been proven to vary across cultures and change over time, a dichotomy for women's bodies, along with beauty standards which that rest on varying assumptions of "natural" womanhood on one hand and of moral "perversity" on the other, was somehow established. What this duality downplays is that precisely because Mary Magdalene shares enough in bodily appearance with Mary the Virgin, the "feminine" is doubly deceptive and



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dangerous. This essay attempts to (re)present ways the female body is (re)presented as both object and subject for the deployment of power in an effort to expand and explode the historical notion of beauty through (re)reading (re)presentations of the goddess. One thing that the notion of the “goddess” offers women is a potent image of beauty permitting uncorseted movement on unbound feet, empowering women to set and achieve unrestricted goals for themselves.

Ancient Representations of the Goddess(es)

Many beauty and modeling contests today worship the female body as a decorative object, perhaps in exchange for the recognition of women as human beings, a reversal of the way the female body was regarded in ancient times. The rituals for worship of goddesses in early Meso-Sumerian civilisations make explicit parallels between the female body and the earth. Much of the imagery contained in prayers to the Goddess Inanna/Ishtar in early Sumerian texts is directly sexual—of vulvas being plowed and breasts pouring out fields of grain. As the goddess representing the lust allowing sexual union, Inanna/Ishtar represents “the anatomical aspect of cosmic renewal.” Such fertility rituals and prayers, Tikva Frymer-

Kensky (1992) writes, “decreased anxieties about harvests, motivated people for agricultural labor, and enabled them to express awe and gratification at the existence of a stable agricultural surplus and the benefits that it brought.” Far from being a passive decorative object, the female body was thus regarded as a powerful symbol necessary in restoring and maintaining cosmic order.

The ancient Greeks have repeatedly taken the motif of the battlefield to illustrate the unique ways women exercise power over men. In Aristophanes’ “Lysistrata,” the women of Greece unite in chastity against their husbands and lovers in order to end the Peloponnesian War. Sappho’s “Call to Aphrodite” invokes the goddess to come down to earth as she has in the past to transform the girl who flees into the one who pursues, she who receives gifts into the one who offers them. The women that Sappho celebrates with song are not the good wives or the pretty young objects of exchange. She did not write about women as fields to be plowed or tablets to be inscribed, but as persons with their own passions capable of pleasures of their own making. This assertion was in itself powerful, as literary critic Page Dubois (1991) writes: “Setting themselves against the warrior culture of Homer, against the values of labor and reproduction emerging in the nascent city states of the Greek world, Sappho’s fragmentary, broken lines celebrate pleasure and women’s bodies...Sappho, the only woman whose poetry has come down to us from antiquity, sings not of work and war, not of the instrumentalising of the body, but of the individual and her subjective body, of ‘the most beautiful,’ of erotic desire, of yearning.”

WOMEN IN ACTION NO. 3-2004

Gloria Anzaldúa, meanwhile, sees the rediscovery of the goddess as central to the recovery of her own self as a *mestiza* woman poet. She traces the genealogy of Mexico's patroness Virgin of Guadalupe to the Aztec goddess Coatlatlopeuh, who descends, in turn, from Coatlicue or "serpent skirt" an even earlier Mesoamerican fertility goddess. Anzaldúa believes that the male-dominated Aztec culture that silenced Coatlatlopeuh and negated Coatlicue enthroned in their place the deity Tonantsi or "good mother." Today, the duality between the chaste protective mother and the serpentine sexually charged goddess continues to exist, with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* representing the former and Coatlicue, representing *la puta*. Giving voice to women for Gloria Anzaldúa entails erasing this dichotomy and resurrecting the goddess in her entirety. Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa, 1987 as cited in Hollock, 2002) writes: "I see *oposicion e insurreccion*. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing *la Coatlicue*. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'—just ours, mine...I will overcome the tradition of silence."

Coatlicue, the Mistress of Life and Death, has black skin with disheveled, dirt-covered hair, and a body with an unearthly aroma. Her chest is a vest of flayed human skin, and a garland of human hands and hearts hangs about her neck. She wears a skirt of serpents. She is frighteningly beautiful and gave birth to 400 offspring who plotted to kill her, save for her daughter Coyolxauhqui. With cheeks the color of polished copper bells, Coyolxauhqui raced ahead of the army of her 400 siblings to warn her mother. She refused to take part in killing, destruction, and war. Her brother Huitzilopochtli, weapons in hand, eyes bright and far-seeing, saw the army of four hundred approaching. He saw his sister Coyolxauhqui at its head. When she stepped before him, hand raised in warning, cheeks shining like polished



Coatlicue, the Mistress of Life and Death

copper, he lifted his sword and sliced her neck. Her head fell, rolled across the ground, and blood mixed with dirt. When Huitzilopochtli learned of Coyolxauhqui's true intentions, he threw his sister's head high into the sky and Coyolxauhqui's cheeks began to glow, turning into the moon that brightened the night.

One, however, does not need to be a poet, or even Mexican, to reclaim the power of these goddesses. Coyolxauhqui manifests herself in every woman who is willing to raise a hand in warning or her voice in dissent against war. Coatlicue is reclaimed by women beyond Mexico's borders who "take matters into their own hands" and "take dominion over their bodies" to protest destructive practices that bring their communities closer to annihilation or at the center of nuclear hostilities. Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui are invoked when women use their bodies as an expression of women's implicit Otherness in order to articulate their resistance to warfare.

Modern Reincarnations of the Goddess

The goddess/(es) is/(are) everywhere. The beautiful dark-skinned women of the Niger Delta, were described as being "armed only with food and their voices." They were protesting Chevron Texaco operations in their region. In July 2002, the women successfully halted Chevron Texaco operations in the Niger Delta for nearly two weeks. Their peaceful mass action began as a single demonstration by about 150 women from villages surrounding Chevron Texaco's Escravos oil terminal, and grew to over 3,000 women joining in a non-violent direct occupation of four other Chevron Texaco facilities in the Delta. The women demanded jobs, education services, health services, and economic investment in their communities. Occupying the terminal for eleven days, they barricaded a storage depot, blocked docks, helicopter pads, and an airstrip, which were the facility's only entry points. Their presence prevented 700 (largely male) employees from working, and they returned to work only when the company agreed to certain conditions.

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There are many Goddesses, just as there is one Goddess. Women's fight for political and economic justice has sparked the return of the notion of goddesses, as women struggling with today's patriarchal institutions and individuals unearth and reinterpret images of women as restorers of social order, sometimes summoning centuries-old worship/awe of the female body to do so.

At the Escravos flow station alone, the company agreed to hire 25 villagers over five years and to help build clinics, schools, and fish and chicken farms. The women also non-violently occupied the Abiteye, Makaraba/Otunana, Dibi, and Olero Creek flow stations, costing Chevron Texaco an estimated 110,000 barrels per day of oil production. Josephine Ogoba, a 48-year-old mother of four, one of the leaders of the protesting women, voiced out:

"We are demonstrating here peacefully, not armed with anything, except leaves. We are peaceful. We are occupying this facility because we are angry. We are angry, because since 1970, when the company came here, we have nothing to show for the pollution of our rivers and creeks, destruction of our forests and mangroves, and the noise, and the gas flaring. We have complained and protested. All our complaints and protests fell on Chevron's deaf ears. We have nothing to show for this. Look at my village from Warri to here, for an uninterrupted engine boat drive of about two hours, and we don't have a clinic, no good drinking water, no road, no electricity and other necessities of life. Here, we have married women, unmarried women,

and small girls. We have old women, young and small ones here demonstrating. Nobody mobilises us to do what we are doing. We are angry. We sleep here day and night. We are denied our rights as a people to employment, good environment, and so on. We will be here till Chevron answers our demands."

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The peace camp at Greenham Common outside the United States air base where 96 cruise missiles were sited was the aftermath of a 1981 peace march by a group of women, men, and children from South Wales. There were 250 women who first blockaded the base in 1982. When the women protestors blockaded the main gate of the base on August 9, 1984 in commemoration of Nagasaki Day, they stripped themselves naked and covered themselves with ash. Horrified at the sight/site, the (again, largely male) army personnel tasked with their removal donned protective clothing because they were reluctant to touch any of the women. Alison Young (1990) writes of the spectacle:

"The immediate, most obvious connection was with the victims and survivors of the bombing of Nagasaki, but the women were also presenting a challenge to the stereotype of the naked woman (that of pornography) in which the woman is conventionally attractive to men, disposable, and powerless. These horrifying yet naked and vulnerable women were stating a right to self-determination and self-definition at the same time



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as they demonstrated the effects of nuclear warfare...in their recuperation of their repressed body, and specifically, in their redefinition of the meaning of the female body, the Greenham protesters have found a form of political protest which is truly transformative.”

The corporeal beauty of the goddess is feared, and (male) authority is the social force used to tame, control and channel this pure female power. Whatever notion one considers the goddess to be—a living entity, a manifestation of an All, a psychological archetype, or model of feminine potential—is irrelevant. What matters is that women allow her to re-enter their lives, using her vitality, anger, power, sensuality, charisma, wisdom, and beauty to summon their own. Surely there is something about the Niger Delta women, armed with nothing but food and leaves, and the women of Greenham Common, naked and covered with ash—all are women capable of simultaneously assuring yet threatening the social order, modern-day Mistresses of Life and Death. It is women like them who succeed in effacing the duality between the chaste protective mother and sexually charged goddess, thereby reconstructing the cultural inscription of feminine beauty. They shine in the heat of their anger, rebellion, and hope, shine as brightly as Coyolxauhqui with a hand held up to avert war. Their demands for peace

make them dangerous and fearsome, yet, at the same time, as appealing and attractive as goddesses of old. ♪

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