

# Female Sexual Objectification and the Castrated Feminine Re-Membering Embodied Intelligence

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## ABSTRACT

Arising out of a deep concern with the prevalence of psychological and physical violence against women, this article brings together theories underscoring a somatic and Jungian approach to understanding female sexual objectification as a cultural complex. It posits the mind–body split within patriarchal cultural and female sexual objectification has caused us to lose contact with our embodied experience and intelligence, and has infused our relationships with self, others, and the environment with traumatogenic effects. Our research illuminates female sexual objectification as a normalized cultural complex, and self-objectification as a strategy for social belonging and security. Research points to body-centered, group inquiry as an effective process for bringing awareness to the effects of female sexual objectification and its normalization and internalization. The spontaneity of an expressive movement and reflective small group process facilitated contact with the somatic unconscious and women's embodied knowing. This included awareness of women's experience and their internalization of female objectification. Further, women accessed and embodied energies of the feminine that promote agency and self-efficacy.

*Keywords:* sexual objectification, archetypal feminine, embodied knowing, cultural unconscious, patriarchal culture, somatic unconscious, post-Jungian cultural complex theory, embodied experience.

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As U.S. culture, institutions, and politics struggle with the continuing proliferation of crimes against females—as clearly evidenced in the #metoo movement and President Trump's response to being accused of rape ("She's not my type," Baker & Vigdor, 2019, para. 1)—it seems to us crucial to address the patriarchal forces that have disempowered the feminine and dispossessed women of their bodies and embodied knowing through sexual objectification. As women who have been affected by female sexual objectification, we undertook research into this phenomenon. In Maryanne Comaroto's (2017) doctoral dissertation research, we found that although women experience and carry sexual objectification as personal trauma, it is also a cultural wound. Thus, our research views female sexual objectification as both a sociocultural and a psychological phenomenon, and women's internalization of sexual objectification as a psychosocial survival strategy. It synthesizes objectification theory with theory from analytical, archetypal, and somatic

psychologies. It explores the thematic and cultural material constellating in the dynamics of female sexual objectification, and its traumatogenic effects toward discovering how it can be ameliorated, bringing the rejected body, embodied knowing, and sacred feminine sexuality out of the shadow and back into consciousness.

Clearly, patriarchal culture has also crippled men and those who identify as neither male nor female. Although this is also a crucial issue, it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as demonstrated at the last women's march, when virtually everyone raised their hand to acknowledge being or knowing a woman who has been sexually abused, sexual objectification has a particular and pernicious effect on women, which arises out of and maintains the hierarchical structures and power dynamics that have privileged white males and valued the masculine at the expense of women, marginalized peoples, and the natural world.

Sexual objectification occurs when a person is treated as a tool for another's purposes; is denied self-determination; is seen as interchangeable with other objects or treated as if she has no right to personal boundaries, or is treated as not having her own experiences and feelings. In sum, objectification happens when a person is perceived as her body, and her body as an exploitable object devoid of mind or spirit (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011). Moreover, the sexual objectification of the female body happens in the simplistic division of human nature into a male–masculine versus female–feminine paradigm. This is a damaging psychological and sociocultural inheritance that has both limited and devalued what it means to be feminine. We suspect that much of the archetypal feminine, and much of our experience of what it is to be female, has sunken into the somatic unconscious, split off from awareness in the divide between the head and the rest of the body. Our intent is to open the portal of the imagination, inviting new and liberated feminine energies and images that emerge from embodied experience and knowing. We define embodied knowing as the perception that arises from how something is experienced in and through one's body. This involves attention to the movement of energy in one's body, sensations, gestures, postures, emotions, images, and intuitions.

From a Jungian viewpoint, the image of life as structured around a masculine and a feminine principle is archetypal. It is seen across cultures and history in the yin/yang of the Tao, and in the king and queen in ancient alchemy. As an archetypal idea, it is a collectively shared inheritance that supersedes the individual and is rooted in the most unconscious layer of the psyche (Jacobi, 1957/1959; Jung, 1954/1969). Jung noted that archetypal potentials are fundamental to human experience and psychological expressions of instinctual life. From this perspective, the perception of human nature as masculine or feminine can be seen as a reflection of the reproductive instincts of biological life. The bare bones of archetypal ideas reside in the collective unconscious as potential ways of structuring experience. As they emerge in cultural material, they are shaped into ideas and images that form an objectified structure that includes values and assumptions about the nature of reality (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). The contents of the cultural unconscious form complexes, or clusters of historically embedded emotions, beliefs, values, and behaviors. These inhabit the cultural unconscious, which lies between the collective and personal unconscious, and is a primary source of group identities, including gender. The interface between group and personal identities makes bringing female sexual objectification to consciousness difficult, as doing so can threaten social status and belonging (Singer, as cited in Singer & Kimbles, 2004, p. 22).

The rise of patriarchal culture—with its masculine and male-oriented power structure and values—disenfranchised and diminished the wholeness and power of the archetypal feminine, creating within the cultural unconscious emotionally-charged, belief-laden complexes around what it means to be male or female. The demise of the feminine in patriarchal culture can be witnessed in the transit from ancient mythologies replete with diverse images of feminine power to Christianity, rendering the archetypal feminine, if at all present, in the form of the Virgin Mother; her many other faces mostly lost to the unconscious, her fierceness and relationship with natural forces and death demonized.

In the devaluation of the feminine and women, objectification of female sexuality, and supremacy of the masculine and males, inferiority and shame held in the cultural unconscious were projected onto females. The female body was judged by its appeal to men, and divided into sexual parts—breasts, ass, legs. The biases and assumptions within the cultural unconscious inform the personal unconscious, giving structure and meaning to gender identity, sexuality, self-image, and group belonging.

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Because female sexual objectification is culturally pervasive and normalized, as women we have tended to internalize it as self-objectification. We internalize a male gaze into our relationship with our body, sexuality, and beauty, seeing ourselves from a male point of view and disenfranchising ourselves of our own subjectivity (“Objectification Theory,” 2007, p. 633). The images of the archetypal feminine that largely surround and inform girls in their psychosocial development and self-image have been diminished to the good mother, the terrible mother, the virgin, and the whore.

Take a moment to feel into what arises in your body as you contemplate being called or seeing yourself as one of these. What sensations are aroused? What emotions come? What qualities are held? In real life, women are often distraught, having internalized these images as standards against which we judge ourselves and are judged by others.

Images of the feminine seen from ancient mythology—such as the fierce, sword-carrying Hindu goddess Kali, the overarching Egyptian sky goddess Nut, the enraged Greek Medusa with the eyes to turn men to stone, and the Russian witch Baba Yaga who suffers no fools—express a much fuller and diverse idea of her. In contemporary Western culture, media images divorce the feminine from such powerful spiritual dynamics, and, reflecting a male-centric paradigm, continue to divest women, the feminine, and the female body of their subjectivity, making them objects in service to male desires and power. Indeed, female sexual objectification remains so prevalent and violent that the sexual climate in colleges has been described as a culture of rape (Jordan, 2017, National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2016, “Statistics,” para. 5). Rape, and the possibility of being raped, enforces male psychosocial and physical dominance. As Jungian analyst Lyn Cowan (2013) observed, “One of the root fears of women is of men, and this fear is neither totally irrational nor unrealistic” (p. 3). The cultural complex

related to gender dynamics dangerously and unconsciously perpetuates perceptions of normalcy harmful to women. This is seen, for example, in the phrases “boys will be boys” and “It’s just locker room talk,” as used to excuse President Trump’s sexist remarks (Trump, 2016, paras. 16 & 18).

Female sexual objectification is difficult to combat, both because of this normalization and because it is perpetuated by the mind-body split. In Western culture, since Descartes declared, “I think, therefore I am,” the body has been rejected as inferior to the mind, and less connected to one’s sense of self. The mind-body split conditions us to pay attention to mind as the source of knowing, ignoring the intelligence of the body and its direct, holistic, sensory perception of the world and our experiences in it. The dualistic division of mind and matter causes us to view the body through the objectifying lens of literalism (Moore, 1989), whereas post-Jungian James Hillman (1989), referencing Hegel, argued that the separation of mind from the embodied experience of soul is “itself pathological, an exercise in self-deception” (p. 123).

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When the body is split off from the mind, a woman may cease to know the memories her body holds—including the trauma and pain of being sexually objectified. She may lose contact with her body’s instinctual wisdom and energies, and her desires, pleasures, and dreams. In these losses, she loses touch with the harm done to her and that she does to herself. Experiences, desires, and perspectives that we are unable to process consciously, either because they are too painful and overwhelming, or because the cultural paradigm devalues or invalidates them, remain embedded in the somatic unconscious. This material then tends to plague us as muscle tension, constrictions to posture and movement, disease processes, eating disorders, depression, anxiety disorders, and sexual dysfunction.

Women’s internalized sexual objectification often becomes entwined with social survival. We craft our bodies and selves to compete in a world of patriarchal standards. It may be true that crafting a socially-pleasing appearance reflects acts of self-empowerment and free choice, because it creates advancement for a woman or reflects her own desire to look a particular way. However, the dilemma that this assertion hides is that such acts of self- and body-crafting also serve the current social, political, and economic hegemony.

Usually, in our culture and in therapy, women’s issues with depression, anxiety, body image, sexuality, and psychosomatic symptoms are seen as the problem—and sometimes the fault—of the individual girl or woman. Post-Jungian cultural complex theory broadens the understanding of self and the personal unconscious to include a framework that recognizes that these symptoms are more than personal. They are the internalization of a cultural paradigm that has objectified and oppressed women and the feminine. Such a post-Jungian approach shifts the psychoanalytic perspective that casts the burden of psychosocial and somatic symptoms onto the individual alone, to one of, as Jungians Thomas Singer and Samuel Kimbles (2004) said, “seeing the continuum . . . of complexes that range from the personal to the cultural to the archetypal” (p. 22).

As a cultural complex, female sexual objectification has dispossessed women of our sexuality, of our embodied knowing, and of the fullness of the archetypal feminine. Beyond this is the cultural and personal loss incurred by the rejection or repression of images and energies arising autonomously and spontaneously from the unconscious because they do not fit in, are invalidated by, or are dangerous to express within the cultural paradigm. Our actions arise out of and presuppose our perceptions, many of which arise from unconscious assumptions about what is desirable, acceptable, or possible. This means that a crucial component to changing female sexual objectification involves women reconnecting with their embodied experience to repair the culturally driven mind–body split, and reclaim their sexuality and embodied knowing.

### **Cooperative Inquiry**

Through the method of cooperative inquiry, Comaroto's (2017) dissertation researches the two of us, together with five other women, to explore the dynamics and traumatogenic effects of female sexual objectification and its internalization by women. Given the objectification of the body and its split from the mind, finding cultural change must include reclamation by women of their sexuality, bodies, and embodied experience and knowing. For us, this raised the question, what images and energies have female sexual objectification and its internalization caused us to shut ourselves off from? It seems clear that the Jungian concept of an archetypal feminine and masculine colludes with the patriarchal binary stereotyping of individuals into male/masculine or female/feminine categories, which does a disservice to human potential, which includes that which is both and neither. Moreover, the oppression and objectification of the feminine and the female body has extended to an objectification of nature itself. As such, we wondered if archetypal images, forms, and energies (potentials fundamental to life, aliveness, and the experience of otherness) might arise from the somatic unconscious. Ironically, might the archetypal feminine, understood as yin—receptive and empathic—break the bounds of male/female and masculine/feminine, showing up as that which is neither and other? If we allow the archetypal feminine to emerge from the unconscious in and through our bodily experience, what might we discover?

As a research process, cooperative inquiry engages participants as co-researchers studying a system of which they are a part to gather information needed to change that system, "or at least explore the need for change" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 129). This carries the implicit assumption "that a system is more likely to change if it gathers its own information about its problems, direction, future" (p. 129). Engaging the co-researcher/participants in cycles of expressive movement, journaling, group dialogue, and art production, the research took "a qualitative, feminist phenomenological, somatically informed approach" (Comaroto, 2017, p. 108). Such an approach is important in studying female sexual objectification as it is aligned with "the need for research to honor women's experience and explore it from the inside, often by the adoption of participative methods" (Barbour, 2004, p. 122).

To facilitate investigation of the somatic unconscious and embodied experience and awareness, we used an inquiry process called Open Floor (Open Floor International, n.d.) as our form of expressive movement. An Open Floor movement cycle includes opening one's attention to whatever is emerging and true in the moment, entering

into a specific sensation, emotion, or image and exploring it with curiosity, deepening and broadening one's attention to embrace what shows up, including that which is compelling, disturbing, or recurring. The cycle ends with releasing the experience and allowing the body to settle. Open Floor was followed by journaling and group dialogue, ending with an art production. As reported by Comaroto (2017), the women's journal entries reflected the factors that facilitated the depth of their inquiry: "the safety being established, the importance of the connection they were beginning to feel with the other women, the personal effects of female sexual objectification they were contacting, and their desire to explore feminine energies within themselves" (p. 166).

Research participants' reflections exemplified the transformative nature of the body-oriented, cooperative inquiry process as it related to the mind-body split. One participant realized that she "popped out of her body" when experiences triggered past traumas, but that now, when she became frightened, she would call herself back to her body. Other women commented: "It has been a long journey to come back to the body, my body"; I have been "geared toward the second body"—the objectified body rather than the self—and am now "working on the first body"—one's own embodied self (Comaroto, 2017, p. 154). Comments also reflected the power of the body-oriented, cooperative inquiry process to illuminate and support the participants in differentiating from sexual objectification and its internalization as a survival mechanism:

- I want to be open, but I feel too vulnerable . . . too much scar tissue. (Comaroto, 2017, p. 164)
- I am safe with women without the male gaze; my sensuality when with men is in service to them. When I am with women, I feel mirrored; my sensuality is for me. I notice in my body that I can get bigger or smaller depending on who I am around. If it's men, I puff out my chest, I pretend I am one of them, and I will prove myself until I am tired in my bones. Because this is a man's world. With women it's different. There's armor, but not as thick. It's a pushing away—I can't let you in—I am supposed to want men, need men, and if I have you [women], I won't need them anymore. I am in service to you man, Lord of this world. My parents did not teach me to serve men or objectify women, but society did. . . . My dance teachers would tell me to work harder and I would beat her [my body] into submission with the façade that it was pleasurable, that I liked it, that it was for me. But was it really? Or was it all for the men who would watch me? There's a deep way that women move me, only hidden under dark, thick armor . . . shutting down sexuality and beauty. (pp. 164-165)
- I think I used sex to get love. During the movement I stayed in my head. When we partnered, I started to get more into my body, felt young, connected with the young part of me. Felt sensual, more mature. How do I feel about my internalized objectification: I love you, I want you, my boobs were too big, so I hid them forever [referring to her breast reduction], legs too skinny—ostrich legs. I connect better in pairs. What happened in between the teen and the adult? (p. 161)
- Wanting to disappear, walking in life contracted. My voice trapped inside. I dance angry trying to tear away stitches. I can't! I want to cry. I dance with other women. They are beautiful, I feel beautiful, sensual, erotic, particularly feminine. It's not about sex. There's safety to open to the feminine. (p. 162)

- I want to find a balance. I was hiding. I was someone who wanted to show that I was a good girl, athlete. I am on a good path to celebrate my own beauty. Nourish it. My oath previous to this one was to show off because of someone else, to feel accepted. Today I want to nourish this goddess. My wish is to stay in my fluidity, femininity, sensuality, also to have fire, focus and warrior—an embodied lioness. (p. 162)
- Something happened with my cousin that was inappropriate when I was like eight. It felt like I had to change, not be girlish and excited in life. [I thought I had] “worked through all that; it’s still there.” [I hope I can be] “my true self”—[at least] “I’m here for this moment.” (p. 168)
- I realize I walk through life contracted and then I felt this thing around my voice and the words “female vocal mutilation” came to me. As I’m dancing, I feel a fabric tightly drawn, stitched closed, sewn to my bones, only a small slit left through which my voice can escape, it hurts inside to fight against it, it pulls, contracts won’t let me out. I am my voice trapped inside me. I am accommodating, peace-making, trying to tear away the stitches, rip the fabric but I can’t. I want to go away, I want help, I want to be left alone. (p. 169)
- When am I going to be able to be with [myself]? (p. 169)
- I would love to have a daughter someday. I would take care not to objectify my daughter, to celebrate her beauty, her femininity. . . . I want to get there and not be shy. I want to be my beauty, and not feel objectified and not shut down. (p. 170)

One participant shared about a warrior image coming to her. She spoke to finding a balance between the masculine idea of this and her own ideas about power, strength, and focus:

- I’ve been for many years something between [a boy and girl]. I spent a lot of years contracting my body and still feel it. I was raised in a culture where there were wars all the time, and I was with two brothers where we played wars games, boy games, man games. I needed to survive. This is how I needed to be strong and then to be safe in this strong man energy. I cut my hair very short, almost bald so I could be really strong. I had a history of sexual harassment, so I was feeling not safe to be female, to be my sexuality. I was overwhelmed with this harassment growing up and keeping it a secret. So, I was contracting, thinking I am doing—have done—something wrong. Then I was going through puberty with boys all around me and really wanted to cut off this part of me, and I did it for many years. Now to be here, to nourish and be proud of my femininity. (p. 169)

Other images arose during the Open Floor movement cycles that, as embodied and described by the women, broke the bounds of the masculine–feminine duality. These energies and images often revealed the shape shifting quality of what they were experiencing as their feminine nature:

- Ocean, Tree, Bird, Woman, Goddess; she has strong roots, she flies and dissolves. Her shapes continue [in] nature and its life force. Beauty of change. Glowing, contracting, strong and quiet, Mother–Warrior: It’s all okay, dancing with the change. There is a bridge between your power and your sensuality. (p. 175)

- Superwoman, Wild Woman flying—broad and strong arms, softened, softened, flying, twirling, soaring strength—and Witch Woman, cackling laughter, loose and free and expressive, slightly magical, less contained, misunderstood. Whirling Dervish. Held to the earth by wings; all the controversy, glorious personifications. Dichotomies. Challenges. I am all of it and more. Creating my own archetype. What is missing? What is hidden? (p. 176)
- Lioness rage. Organic tears weeping for the world. Red lion, golden eyes on fire, claw tearing away to the vulnerable heart; rising-up ocean; bringer of death. The objectifying self-awareness brings self-consciousness, split from my body's revelation. I am the ocean. I am the rock, sometimes the ocean breaking on myself. I hold so many, who holds me? I long to let myself be held but long ago lost the ability, now I am a rock in my aloneness. Even amidst my energy, my play, my good body, I am become old. (p. 177)
- Everyone knows who superwoman is, but the magical wild witch woman has a dark side with negativity attached to it. I was interested in morphing the two into this magical, more whimsical, slightly unpredictable wild woman who wants to engage. (p. 179)
- Some creature, a combination of female and nature, blossoming in spring. In winter she doesn't care that she loses her flowers and leaves, she is still grounded and powerful, even when change comes. As a tree she can fly, the branches have wings, she can dance with the ocean. It's really a powerful creature. . . . this creature accepts whatever comes, whatever comes is a partner. (p. 180)
- Usually I am strong but weakness in my body can bring me to another place—melting, dissolving—bringing me out of the warrior part to self-mothering and the little girl part. (p. 180)
- I was hoping for Divine Femininity, sensuality in the dance awakened that part—butterflies on my eyelashes, violet perfume for my exhale, red fringe for my elbows, aquamarine fingernails—that kind of magical creature, that can do it all and be it all. Mother, Sphynx, temptress, poet, they all seem to be the breath of my eternal body: the good, the bad, creator, destroyer; being the same person and having that be okay. (p. 181)

As we researched together, it became evident that patriarchy and female sexual objectification have profoundly limited our collective understanding of the power, complexity, and multiplicity of what has been repressed and oppressed with the categorical objectification of the feminine and the female body.

Our cooperative research revealed female sexual objectification as a normalized cultural complex that shapes women's self-image, their interpersonal and workplace relationships, their relationship with their bodies and sexuality, their sense of safety worldwide, and their strategies for social belonging and security. At least in part because female sexual objectification has been normalized, along with its internalization as a survival mechanism, little research—especially of the sort that empowers women to engage with their embodied experience and knowing—has been done on this topic.

Marianne Comaroto is continuing her research with one-day intensives offered to female college athletes and formulated around body-centered, group inquiry (see [www.corr.education](http://www.corr.education)). Outcome measurements for the intensive focus on students' self-reports related to the following two areas: (a) increases in their awareness of their embodied experience and intelligence as well as unconscious patterns in navigating relationships and social pressure, and (b) improvements in their sense of self and self-efficacy in relationship to their body and sexuality and to addressing social issues that concern them.

In the midst of what some are calling a cultural "epistemic collapse" (Barratt, 2010, p. 23), we believe this ongoing inquiry and research not only supports ending psychological and physical violence against women, it helps women free their relationship with their selves, bodies, and sexuality from internalized objectification, increasing their attunement to their embodied experience and knowing, and working together to make visible and end female sexual objectification. As such, we see it as crucial that women gather to gain the skills of embodied inquiry, to move into the somatic and break free of the patriarchal cultural trance. In small groups, women can find the safety, freedom, and collaborative creativity to reimagine the feminine at both personal and cultural levels. In evidence of this belief, we have witnessed that when women come together to explore their embodied experience and the ways in which they have internalized female sexual objectification it heals the split between mind and body and opens new possibilities for our relationships to ourselves, to our experience, and to our world in an emerging, non-patriarchal paradigm.



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