THE CRITICS

BOOKS

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

Naomi Wolf's "Vagina: A New Biography."

BY ARIEL LEVY

The women's-liberation movement of the late sixties and the seventies—the so-called second wave of feminism—introduced Americans to the notion that their mothers and sisters and daughters ought not to be "objectified": that there was something wrong with reducing female people to boobs, gams, and beaver. "At what age does a girl child begin to review her assets and count her deficient parts?" Susan Brownmiller asked in "Femininity" (1984). "When is she allowed to forget that her anatomy is being monitored by others, that there is a standard of desirable beauty, of individual parts, that she is measured against by boyfriends, loved ones, acquaintances at work, competitors, enemies and strangers?" Or, as Nora Ephron put it in her celebrated 1972 essay "A Few Words About Breasts," "If I had had them, I would have been a completely different person."

Women's libbers told us that this was a problem—that biology need not be destiny. In the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir, they challenged the assumption of an "essentialized" feminine rooted in the corporeal. We had been sold a bill of goods, they said, by everyone from Descartes to Hugh Hefner, who had tried to convince us of a (hierarchical) dualism: men versus women, reason versus emotion, mind versus body. The woman-as-body trope, they argued, had serious and worrisome implications: if a woman is necessarily irrational, hormonal, instinctual, and sensual, you don't want her running your company, let alone your country.

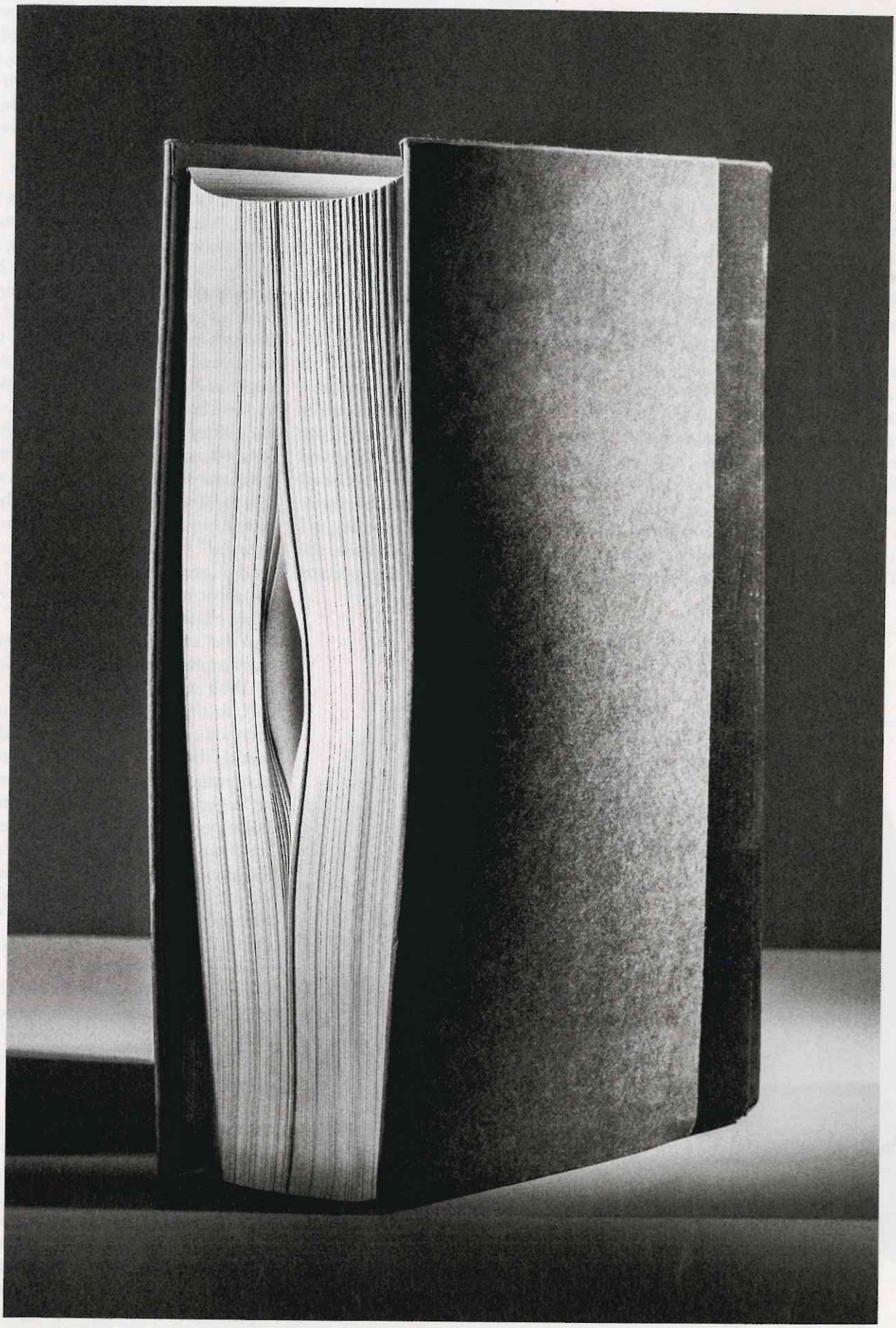
But from that philosophical starting place two factions of the women's movement went in radically different directions. Brownmiller, in league with other eminent feminists—Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich, Gloria Steinem, and Robin Morgan—was convinced that pornography was the quintessential expression of women's oppression in a culture that devalued their intellect and restricted them to sexualized second-class citizenship. It was, in short, the "undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda." Morgan, who coined the phrase "The personal is political," came up with a new slogan: "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice." In "Pornography: Men Possessing Women," Dworkin asserted that the "world's foremost pornographer" was the Marquis de Sade, who both "embodies and defines male sexual values." She went on to work with Catharine MacKinnon on drafting a city ordinance that made pornography a civil-rights violation. The ordinance was signed into law in Indianapolis, in 1984, but was soon ruled unconstitutional by federal courts and overturned.

Plenty of feminists agreed with the courts, feeling that the anti-porn faction was veering from the larger goal of freedom. If theirs was a liberation movement, why were feminists trying to patrol the erotic imagination? Women of that ideological persuasion called themselves "pro-sex" feminists. In a memoir published years later, Brownmiller described the dissenting responses to the anti-porn campaign: "Sometimes they were emotional defenses of free speech, but to our bewilderment, we also saw that some women identified their sexuality with the s/m pictures we found degrading. Porn turned them on. . . . They claimed we were condemning their minds and behavior, and I guess we were." The pro-sex feminists believed that their former allies had fallen into the age-old patriarchal habit of trying to control female sexual power and dictate its parameters—they didn't want men defining their sexuality, and they didn't want other women doing it, either. They had a point, but there were problems with the pro-sex position, too—things could get a little zipless and g-spotty. Like their cohorts in the sexual revolution, many of the pro-sex feminists fell prey to the alluring but dubious conflation of fornication and emancipation. Orgasms are swell, but they are not the remedy to every injustice.

Of course, feminists on both sides of the porn war considered themselves to be "pro-sex." The anti-porn crusaders thought that they could rid society of a regressive vision of sexuality that devalued women's pleasure and degraded their humanity, and put in its place something more enlightened. As Steinem put it in *Ms.*, in 1978, erotica is as different from pornography "as love is from rape, as dignity is from humiliation, as partnership is from slavery, as pleasure is from pain." Her opponents wondered why on earth she thought she was entitled to decide which was which. Everyone in the movement agreed that there is much more to ourselves than our bodies, but the disagreements within feminism about the sexual body, and how it ought to be used and represented, were left unresolved. "Ironically, the anti-porn initiative constituted the last gasp of radical feminism," Brown-

ABOVE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER; OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANT CORNETT

CONSTRUCTION BY STEPHEN DOYLE



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miller wrote in her memoir. "No issue of comparable passion has arisen to take its place."

Naomi Wolf came to prominence in 1991, with the publication of "The Beauty Myth," her first book. In it, she revisited the ideas that Brownmiller had explored half a decade earlier, in "Femininity," and argued that things were getting worse. "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us," Wolf wrote. She started her career (and, some have argued, another wave of feminism) with a fresh iteration of an old idea: that our culture had reduced women to their bodies. Many feminists, then, may be perplexed to find Wolf, in her eighth book, situating the essence of the female being right back where it started: in the body, in one particular place.

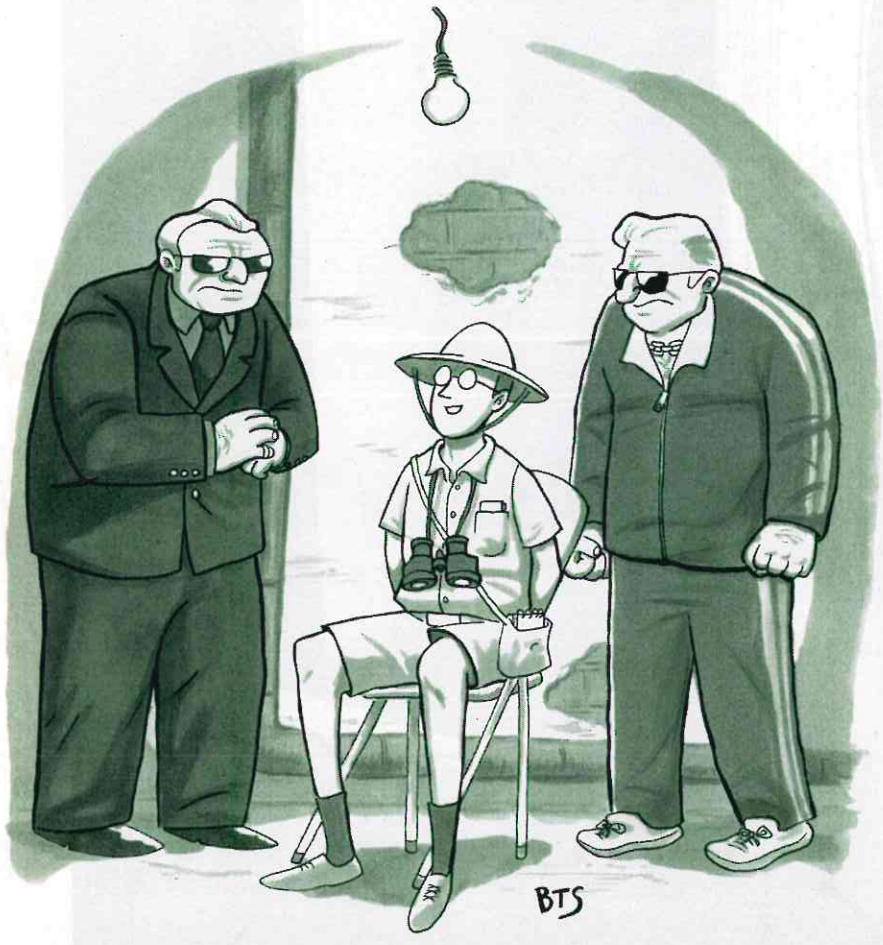
"To understand the vagina properly is to realize that it is not only coextensive with the female brain but also is part of the female soul—it is a gateway to, and medium of, female self-knowledge," Wolf writes in "Vagina: A New Biography" (Ecco). She refers throughout the book to a "profound brain-vagina connection" but sometimes suggests that the vagina is, or ought to be, the rightful site of mission control.

This epiphany was prompted by a "medical crisis," Wolf explains, after which she "had a thought-provoking, revelatory experience that suggested a possible crucial relationship of the vagina to female consciousness itself." It came at a time when she felt "emotionally and sexually happy, intellectually excited, and newly in love," and yet she "started to realize that something was becoming terribly wrong." Her "clitoral orgasms were as strong and pleasurable as ever," and yet "I realized one day, as I gazed out on the treetops outside the bedroom of our little cottage upstate, that the usual postcoital rush of a sense of vitality infusing the world, of delight with myself and with all around me, and of creative energy rushing through everything alive, was no longer following the physical pleasure." This may sound like a high-class problem to you. For Wolf, it was "like a horror movie."

Things became so bleak that late one night, "sitting by the cold iron woodstove alone, frantic with questions, and feeling hopeless, I began literally bargaining with the universe, as one does in times of great crisis." Wolf found the strength to visit her gynecologist, who suggested that spinal compression might be compromising her pelvic nerve and sent her off to a specialist for X-rays and, ultimately, corrective surgery on some damaged vertebrae. The operation was a success, and Wolf recovered well: "As my lost pelvic sensation slowly returned, *my lost states of consciousness also returned.*" (Italics, which Wolf is very fond of, are hers.) Wolf concluded that the pelvic nerve "is the secret to everything related to femininity itself" and that the "vagina is a gateway to a woman's happiness and to her creative life."

Wolf explicitly tries to distance herself, in this book, from her feminist foremothers. She accuses them of denigrating the vagina as something "retro, housewifey and passé" in their attempts at "reglamorizing the clitoris," and of failing to grasp that women's sexual functioning actually involves a virtual kingdom of pleasure, internal and external duchies all working together. Worse, the feminists of yore were soulless. "The post-1970's 'reclamation' of female sexuality is quite mechanical," Wolf says. "It is not about the spirit. It is much debased." But, in returning to the sexual body, the site of radical feminism's last internal battle, Wolf ends up marshalling the worst arguments from both sides of the porn wars.

In a chapter about "the pornographic vagina" (adapted from a *New York* article that Wolf wrote in 2003, entitled "The Porn Myth"), Wolf makes the old anti-porn-feminist mistake of assuming that what is off-putting to her is off-putting to everyone. "Female masturbation to porn *can desensitize women themselves to their own vaginas*," she writes. Though she promises that "recent studies" support her claim, the only evidence



"Shall I sing like the wild Atlantic canary or the domesticated yellow canary?"

she cites is readers' posts from Web sites and testimonials from acquaintances.

Anti-porn feminists were always accused by their pro-sex counterparts of being ideologically in league with a patriarchy that was frightened by unbridled female sexuality. (Dworkin and MacKinnon notoriously worked with a conservative city council and the Republican mayor of Indianapolis to pass their city ordinance.) Wolf herself lent support to this suspicion when she concluded "The Porn Myth" with an anecdote about visiting an Orthodox Jewish friend at a settlement in Jerusalem, who "had abandoned her jeans and T-shirts for long skirts and a head scarf." Wolf was dazzled by her friend's new life style: " 'Only my husband,' she said with a calm sexual confidence, 'gets to see my hair,' " Wolf writes. "She must feel, I thought, so hot." In opposing porn, then, Wolf found herself drawn to purdah—to the traditional view of women as sexual creatures who need to be covered up to protect the social order and their own welfare. To feel beautiful, it seems, a woman requires the protection of a husband and a head scarf.

And yet Wolf adopts the pro-sex-feminist position that sex is the solution to every problem and the source of everything worth anything. She is convinced that "the vagina delivers to women the feelings that lead them to want to create." Men have been making that claim for some time, to the great frustration of female artists. In 1919, Georgia O'Keeffe's lover and gallerist, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, wrote that "the woman receives the World through her Womb. That is the seat of her deepest feeling. Mind comes second." O'Keeffe married him five years later, but she spent the rest of her life debunking that claim, arguing that a work of art comes from a woman's vision, not her vagina. (As Clare Boothe Luce put it, "If God had wanted us to think with our wombs, why did He give us a brain?") Wolf, though, seems to think that Stieglitz had it about right. As evidence, she quotes a young woman who told her that, after a positive sexual experience, "creatively, it was like I had melted into everything. . . . I have been writing stories about the Goddess Persephone."

For a woman to be truly productive, Wolf argues, a sexual partner must ply her vagina with what she refers to as "the Goddess Array"—namely, "a whole set of words, actions, and gestures that women cannot do without." The alternative is grim. "Straight men would do well to ask themselves: 'Do I want to be married to a Goddess—or a bitch?' Unfortunately, there is not, physiologically, much middle ground available for women," Wolf writes. "Either they are extremely well treated sexually, or else they become physically uncomfortable and emotionally irritable." The vagina is no longer an orifice within a woman; the woman is now a support mechanism for the vagina. Anger the vagina and the woman will have no choice but to become a harpy. Biology is destiny once again.

Watch what you say around the vagina. Over time, if a woman's "vagina is targeted verbally, her heart rate, blood pressure, circulation, and many other systems will suffer chronically," Wolf writes. Thus, if you "bully a woman by insulting her vagina," you are committing an act of physical violence. Wolf claims that vaginal slander—referring to the vagina by its "awful" feline moniker, for instance—"*apparently affects the very tissue of the vagina.*" She bases this conclusion on a study of female rats whose vaginal tissue showed signs of change after periods of stress. The experiment did not, however, entail researchers yelling "Rat pussy!" at the animals; stress was manufactured physically. Wolf's interpretation of the science is, as usual, rather free.

Vaginas are not only careful listeners, in Wolf's schema; they are also assertive conversationalists. "The vaginal pulse," she says, "seems to be a way for the vagina continually to inform the woman about herself on many other levels." The vagina knows best. "As my friends and I now sometimes joke—or half joke—to one another, when narrating a romantic adventure, 'But what did the *yoni* have to say?' " Your yoni (Sanskrit for "vagina") is your connection to "the Goddess," Wolf believes, and "when women realize the spark of the Goddess in themselves, healthier, more self-respecting sexual behavior follows."

But Wolf forgets that the vagina, like her good friend the penis, is not a team player. The vagina wants what she wants when she wants it, for her own mysterious reasons, and if you let her run the show you may find yourself consorting

with people who are unsuitable in the many arenas of life about which the vagina knows nothing. A pathological liar? A relentless narcissist? Really not that smart? The vagina couldn't care less.

Well, *my* vagina. Wolf's vagina is apparently a virtuous and enlightened entity that steers her host toward a higher plane of being. Like many a spiritual seeker from an earlier generation of feminists, Wolf looks eastward in her quest. She is charmed by the names given to the vagina in the "rich tradition of erotic literature" of Islam, such as *el cheukk*, or "the chink," though she thinks the Western term "slit" is "violent-sounding." A similar kind of Orientalism infuses her reverential account of a Tantric workshop at a hotel in midtown Manhattan, at which a group of total strangers pair off for genital massage.

Wolf is taken with the miraculous powers of a sexual healer named Mike Lousada, a former investment banker who now specializes in "yoni massage" and "yoni-tapping," which he sometimes administers naked, to "address the trauma stored in the genitals," as Wolf puts it. ("I don't generally have intercourse with my clients unless it is extremely therapeutic," he says.) Lousada tells her that he "actually had an experience of seeing the Divine within the vagina—an image came to me of the Virgin Mary." Wolf begins to think of him as "my resident adviser for all things yoni," and is impressed by his approach. "When Lousada was gazing deeply into a client's eyes, he was stimulating the neurobiological response prepared in women by eye gazing," she writes. "When he said, 'Welcome, Goddess,' he was de-stressing her, reassuring her on the level of her autonomic nervous system (ANS) that she was sexually safe—respected and valued, and seen as uniquely lovely by a potential partner." Wolf forgets that vaginas—like their handmaidens, women—have distinct personalities and preferences. If my vagina heard a potential partner murmur, "Welcome, Goddess," she would turn to me and say, "Get us out of here *now*."

Yet Wolf may have the Zeitgeist on her side. At least, that's the sense you get when you turn from her book to the erotic blockbuster "Fifty Shades of Grey" and its two sequels. The trilogy's wild success—the books have occupied the top three positions on the *Times* best-seller list for the past five months—has been interpreted by many as a kind of S & M referendum on feminism, inconvenient evidence that what women really want is to be dominated and hurt. "The awkwardly un-PC fact, it seems, is that when the lights are out, ascendant career women are getting bored with respectful partners," Tina Brown has written. Barbara Walters told the ladies of "The View," "Women, especially women like us, who work, and who argue, and who this and that, when you go home you want the guy to be in charge." But the "Fifty Shades" series is less about a man being in charge of a woman than it is about a man worshipping a woman. The trilogy's hero, Christian Grey, is the full-blown Wolfian ideal—a born yoni-tapper who focusses his masterly Goddess Array on our passionate narrator, Anastasia Steele, to the point that, as she puts it, he "has a direct hotline to my inner goddess."

When we first meet Anastasia, she is a twenty-one-year-old college student who has never had sex or been drunk. She employs wholesome expletives like "holy cow" and "double crap" and "jeez"—as in "*Jeez, this is hot*"—when she interacts with the "enigmatic" billionaire Grey, a twenty-seven-year-old captain of industry. Like Bella, the young heroine of the "Twilight" series (which inspired E. L. James to start writing "Fifty Shades" as "fan fiction"), Anastasia is just a humble innocent who wears sneakers and jeans and has no idea how desirable she is.

It takes Christian, with his "panty-busting smile," to awaken her sexuality, and, once he does, her "inner goddess is jumping up and down, clapping her hands." True, Grey used to be into whips and chains, but only because of a "need in me that wasn't met in my formative years," he explains. "Whoa, a bucket load of information to process," Anastasia says, reeling, but she heals him in no time with her radiant heart. This isn't exactly "Story of O": the morning after Anastasia loses her virginity to Christian, he introduces her to his mother.

But that's the least of it. He says her name "like it's a litany or a prayer." He likes to give her candlelit bubble baths. He stares at his beloved "with adoring wonder," satisfying Wolf's requirement for eye-gazing. He is forever kissing and stroking her hair, which Wolf says is crucial. He talks and talks about his feelings and listens and listens to hers. He doesn't call her vagina any of the bad names that make it angry. "To enter the transcendental state that takes the female brain into 'high' orgasm," Wolf writes, a woman must feel "safe in the sense of knowing you are entering a trance state in the presence of someone who will protect you if necessary at the very least, and ideally, in the presence of someone who values you and who cherishes you." Christian Grey is that someone. He provides Anastasia with security guards and turns up whenever she's in danger—"My life's mission," he says after they are wed, "is to spoil you, Mrs. Grey. And keep you safe because I love you." The yoni could not be in better hands.

Is it going too far to say that Wolf's book, which clearly belongs to the same realm of the erotic imagination as the Grey trilogy, is itself a kind of pornography? Wolf conjures a fevered, enchanted world where female consciousness is situated not between the ears but between the legs, where investment bankers see the Divine inside the yoni like Jesus in a piece of toast, and where "vaginas are now everywhere in the culture, like wallpaper." (Breasts, sure. But genitals?)

Of course, Wolf would not be the first person to replicate what she means to castigate. In "Pornography" (1979), Andrea Dworkin catalogued the goings on in dirty magazines and movies in so much lewd detail that the reader never quite knew whether she ought to be getting mad or getting off. Porn's defining demerit, Steinem maintained, was that "much of the tension and drama comes from the clear idea that one person is dominating another." To skeptics, those who presumed to police the erotic were merely taking up the whip themselves, and trying to assume a position of domination. Naomi Wolf has done her feminist forebears one better. She has found a mistress we must please, serve, and honor. Resistance is futile, and escape is impossible. There is a new dominatrix in town. And her name is Vagina. ♦

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A conversation with Ariel Levy.