

**Why Conversations About the Body Matter: How Goddess Scholars View the Female Body  
and Topics of Embodiment**

by

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## Abstract

In this research paper, I present some representative goddess scholarship in the West. I make the argument that goddess scholarship is profoundly influenced by feminist discourse about the female body. This paper attempts to unravel how goddesses are represented in contemporary culture. Through close examination of the contemporary







looked at concepts such as feminism, gender, and privilege because these topics shape goddess scholarship within the academic study of religion.

The goddess movement is a new religious phenomenon in the West that is a shift from public interest in religion (i.e., where the church ruled in the past) to a personalized model of spirituality. According to Christa Center, a central figure in goddess studies, the goddess movement is a widespread, noncentralized trend in Neopaganism, and therefore carries decentralized tenets of belief. Practices vary widely, from the name and number of goddesses worshipped to the specific rituals and rites used to do so. Some, such as Dianic Wicca, exclusively worship female deities, while others do not. Belief systems range from monotheistic to polytheistic to pantheistic, encompassing a range of theological variety similar to that in the broader Neopagan community. For instance, a self-identified goddess worshiper could theoretically worship any number of different goddesses from cultures all over the world. Goddesses and the female body have been the focus of attention by scholars Starhawk, Carol Christ, and Cynthia Eller, among other scholars where the body is a crucial point of interest.

The goddess movement has a network of members that are difficult to track because there is no common meeting place. It has a decentralized structure and it has no single goddess that its participants worship. Its fluidity and reflexivity make it ripe for critique, a prime postmodern movement.

The goddess movement (and influences its membership

One lens that makes connections between the body and goddess scholarship can be drawn from the goddess movement's emphasis on the female body as a site of power and knowledge.

, Q D G G L W L R Q W R W K H E R G \ | V U R O H L Q O R F D W L Q J L Q G L Y L G X  
to serve as a key index of differential experience and practices; a significant marker of identity; a  
vehicle for longstanding myths and rituals; a means of expression, pleasure, and agency; a target  
for and instrument of power; and a site of desire or vulnerability where violence and seduction  
occur.<sup>4</sup>

& R R O H | Offers 5 Concepts that raise questions that I will apply to some representative  
figures in goddess scholarship in the conclusions of my paper. I use this framework as follows to  
guide my research

- 1) the body as an index of differential experience How does goddess scholarship understand the body as an index of differential experience? Does this change over time?
- 2) a marker of identity How is individual self-expression and personal choice found in goddess scholarship?
- 3) a vehicle for longstanding myths and rituals What is the role of embodiment in















together. The Goddess can be understood as both an immanent and transcendent religious phenomenon:

the human body (male and female). To provide a more concrete example, phallic representations of the male anatomy are rampant in ancient Greek inscriptions where bulls, staffs, trees all represent the strength of the Gods. Yet, in contrast there is also exaggerated iconography of the





ORRN DIWHU RQH V ERG\ DQG WKH JUHDWHU HQYLURQPHQV  
ERG\ LV IXQGDPHQWDO WR IHPLQLVW VSLULWXDOLW\ EHFDX

religious. The personal is political is spiritual, in that everything is connected. The political body and the environmental well-being of nature are metaphors for how well the female body is being treated by the male body.

In the rare occasion that Starhawk comments on her study of goddesses, she makes  
WKH FRPPHQW <sup>3</sup>P\ FRQFHSWLRQ RI WKH \*RGGHV DQG \*RG  
RZQ WKRXJKWV VD\LQJ WKDW VKH VHHV WKHVH GLYLQH ILJ

and more as real personalities that derived from real places, real interactions of plant, animal,

DQG KXPDQ FRPPXQLWLHV UHDO SHRSOH UHDO SHUVRQD  
ERGLHV \$QG ZKLOH VKH GRHV QRW GHILQH ZKDW <sup>3</sup>UHDOLV

scholarship is influenced by real time events.

### The Body as a Site for Desire, Pleasure and Agency

In other respects, Starhawk uses several eloquent approaches to portray the female body  
ZKHUH VKH H[SODLQV WKDW IHPDOH VSLULWXDOLW\ EULQJ  
body:<sup>21</sup> 6KH DOVR FDOOV LW D SODFH ZKHUH <sup>3</sup>ZH WDNH SOHDV

ZKLFK Z<sup>ff</sup> In other words, the female body is a source of everyday empowerment that brings comfort, pleasure, and imitates the landscape (political, social etc.) in which we live in while also providing spiritual support. She continuously references the body and various body parts such as the penis, vaginal passage, breasts, wombs, cunt, mound,

hands, flesh, among numerous other parts of the human body. The number of references to bodily functions and body parts is so systematically representative of the influence of the female body and what it connotes. As a more profound societal concept, it is clear that concepts of gender and how gender is coupled with the body is of particular interest to goddess scholars such as Starhawk.

## Chapter 2









PHQVWUXDQWV ELUWK JLYHUV DQG WKRVH ZKR KDYH WUD

demonstrate how the glorification of the female body is pertinent to the study of religion.<sup>33</sup>

In her reflection on *Why Women, Men and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later*, she responds to the earlier article mentioned in this paper, *Why Women Need the Goddess*, and she expands on criticisms of her work surrounding the female body. Such criticisms, made by some Christian feminist theologians, as she puts it, are usually quick to target, for example the Goddess movement as a group of privileged women who meet in private, which she promptly asserts is a caricature that is wrong on several counts. She underscores how the distortion of Goddess on the part of white women erases the participation of non-white and non-privileged women (wrongly!) that non-white and non-privileged women have made.



this interpretation is therefore associated with religious taboos as opposed to positive imagery of the female body.

*God's Body & Goddess Bodies as an Instrument of Power*

It is in this same reflection that she reiterates how <sup>36</sup> traditionally constructed as a male father figure who rules over humankind, while <sup>37</sup> his body is displayed as distinctly masculine. <sup>38</sup> By placing goddesses on the same level of importance as gods within the study of religion, Christ therefore acknowledges the importance of studying goddesses alongside traditional gods studied within the contexts of religion, anthropology, gender studies, many other disciplines.

A reverse valuation, as Christ writes, of these opposite bodies—god vs. goddess—within the study of religion pairing (i.e., as polar opposites) meant to complement male divinity. Christ comes full circle by point where we can say that women, men, and all living things no longer need the <sup>38</sup> question that underpins her entire research premise! Needless to say, Christ

<sup>36</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 89.  
<sup>37</sup> Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, 89.  
<sup>38</sup> &KULVW <sup>3</sup>:K\ :RPHQ 0HQ DQG 2WKHU /LYLQJ 7KLQJV 6WLOO 1HHG WKH <HDUV /DWHU ´



### Chapter 3: Cynthia Eller: The Divine World Reflects Human World

#### The Problematization of Pornographic Bodies in Popular Culture

Cynthia Eller stands in stark contrast to Christ, as her work, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* and her publication, *Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality* offers another way into the study of Goddess religion. That is, she wishes to identify where female bodies appear in the everyday and how they are perhaps a reaction to eroticised bodies in the media and culture. This kind of question asked by Eller *where* bodies appear explicitly questions where the promotion and veneration of goddess bodies can be found.

In her article *Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality* Eller proposes that female goddess iconography (e.g., images of historic goddesses such as Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Asherah, or Hindu goddesses Lakshmi or Saravati among many others who are iconic figures) are now found on billboards, sprawled across television dramas, and found in popular movies which depict women as heroines. She

J R H V V R I D U D V W R V X J J H V W W K D W ³ R Q H K D U G O \ Q H H G V W F  
E R G L H V R Q G L V S O D \ ´ P D N L Q J W K H N H H Q R E V H

specifically, resistance against objectifying female bodies as mere works of modern art to be ogled.

Next, she provides an example of how nudes' in traditional art have been classically reenvisioned on several occasions throughout history as either tasteful or taboo:

D G H I L D Q W D F W R I H [ R U F L V P « W R I U I N E D Z P R O G R A P H Y U R P R E W K H E R Q  
7 B P H O E D E N W K H I U C P 7 Q S E P O N T W e Y K K m o n e e a r t i s t a c t i v e i n t h e  
1960s and 1970s my gloss was challenging the traditional use of the female nude in western art.<sup>43</sup>

And yet again, to provide a third example, she refers to an even more explicit and specific

and women as a source of empowerment <sup>45</sup> to recast the gaze back onto the female body by turning it into a source of power <sup>46</sup> as opposed to a subject of mere objectification.

Likewise, in her book, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, Eller remarks that associations between women and the body can be traced back though Western history for millennia. To dig deeper, she astutely mentions that when looking at evidence of historical goddesses we must consider the historicity of myth. In that, we must consider <sup>47</sup> who is creating knowledge and what political or personal motivations X Q G H U S L Q W K H L U U H V H D U F K 6 K H R E V H U Y E V N H E C K S D A I L Y <sup>3</sup> D P \ W K be believed to be true <sup>48</sup> W R E H S R Z H U I X O « Z Y K E W P D W W R O G « L Y H P L Q L V W V feminist bodies <sup>49</sup> [my emphasis] of the latter half of the twentieth century are not the first to find the myth of the matriarchal <sup>50</sup> P K L V W R U \ D P D Q L I H V W R I R U I H P L Q L V W V R F L potent reminder that goddess <sup>51</sup> scholarship has its own set of biases and problematics <sup>45</sup> For example, Eller characterizes goddess bodies as having many <sup>52</sup> female characteristics and being associated with nature, animals, and even geometric shapes where she writes that:

If religions can be characterized as either iconoclastic (abhorring images of the divine) or iconophilic (relishing images of the divine), feminist spirituality is a clear example of the O D W W H U « W K L V R Q J R L Q J K X Q J H U I R U I H P D O H V \ P E R O R J \ > U H human animal images, trees, stars, and geometric shapes. <sup>46</sup>

Eller then raises another question about bodies by questioning <sup>53</sup> goddess symbols can now be found in nonreligious venues and mainstream culture, what <sup>54</sup> differentiates goddess studies from the study of women in culture? <sup>47</sup> What is more, what then stops goddess scholars from using <sup>55</sup> any and all iconographic representations of women <sup>56</sup> willily-nilly <sup>47</sup> to justify their claims in

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<sup>45</sup> Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007-58.

<sup>46</sup> Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* 24.

<sup>47</sup> Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* 24.

respect to the current feminist discourse. She makes the argument that goddess spirituality

<sup>3</sup> WUDYHOV JOREDOO \ ' DQG<sup>48</sup> Goddess Symbolism, Spirituality, and WR GHILQ

imagery is inseparable from culture.

Because goddesses can be found everywhere, proposes Eller, goddess religion has the potential to empower many women and men. This shift in perspective observed by Eller and other goddess scholars before her, now inclusive of female bodies, male bodies, and other bodies as participants, which is not surprising, nor is it unexpected because as the definition of feminism has changed drastically over the last fifty years. It has changed in the sense that the word 'feminism' has grown to be more inclusive of all kinds of bodies, men, women, children and all those who do not fall into any particular category can now label themselves as feminist. How is feminism linked to goddess religion? The ever-changing definition of feminism, is closely related to the way people have worshipped goddesses as well, because goddess religion is meant to empower those in the margins of society, argues Eller. Goddesses are eroticized and depicted as fashionable, artistic, grotesque, beautiful bodies to suit the needs of popular

toting a headdress that looks like a halo.<sup>49</sup> The Goddess figures through a modern perspective.<sup>50</sup> Markedly, this spiritual shift includes cultural goddess images which continue to re-shape the Goddess movement where the goddesses of the past are now joined by a plethora of modern goddess representations found in everyday iconography where women could have god-like superpowers (e.g., female heroes such as Wonder Woman, Medusa, Black Widow) who are considered the Mother Goddess of all as they serve to fill a role as a divine protector of the human world.



Moreover, if we look at the Goddess Subculture, goddess stone figurines, goddess games, jewelry, and tarot decks, as well as admittance to goddess themed festivals, for example, any indication of how the Goddess movement is able to cross national boundaries, then one might turn to the *Journal of Goddesses and Empowered female iconography used in artwork, in advertisements and even on television could mean that goddess spirituality is popular cross-culturally. According to Eller, these examples are indicative of a larger culture which supports empowered images of the female. She returns to the idea that images of goddesses can provide spiritual*





Stahawk suggests that the body is a means of sexual expression that can be seen in



That is, images of goddesses found in goddess religion(s) are no longer limited by biological determinants like maidenhood, motherhood, or cronehood.<sup>56</sup>

Lastly, Eller takes a slightly different stand on how female bodies are targeted as either sacred or profane images to be objectified in popular culture. She approaches topics of 'Female Bodies in Modern Art' and 'Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality'. She comments on the image of naked women as a totem for feminist spirituality in the modern art movement and prompts her readers to reconsider using the naked body as an emblem for selling spirituality. Women, she suggests, have been 'targets' of the male gaze. To refer back to 'Targeting Bodies' I would therefore propose that Eller is perhaps suggesting how 'nudes' in traditional art have been classically envisioned on several occasions throughout history as either tasteful or taboo (e.g., Carole Schneemann establishing her body as 'visual art'). Correspondingly, Eller mentions other forms of art such as television and Hollywood that

women with an opportunity to create, shape, mold an image of the female body that empowers women within patriarchal traditions of religion.

I would like to add to the investigation by suggesting that religious patterns and trends are important to track when studying goddess religion. It becomes even more important to

consider how feminist spirituality might offer a new method for the critical study of religion. But,

MXVW DV ZRPHQ TV H[SHULHQFHV ZLWK WKHLU ERGLHV DUH

many approaches are needed to untangle goddess scholarship. What is more traditional

UHOLJLRQV KDYH LJQRUHG KDOI RI WKH KXPDQ H[SHULHQF

then it is important to consider feminist questions in conversations about religion where top ET Q 70M3.





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