

# Queer Is? Queer Does? *Orgasmology's* Methods

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One reason why orgasm might be, as Annamarie Jagose says, “good to think with” (2013, 36), is that its invitation to train critical attention on actual sex practices reveals the impasses of sexual knowledge. As snapshots of its twentieth-century fortunes unfold in the retrospective album that comprises *Orgasmology*, orgasm is shown to pose problems not only of representation and politics, signification and affect, but of what it means to *know* sex. Far from being the site of truth, of subjective authenticity, of empirical realness, orgasm, in Jagose’s terms, is an “irregular and unpredictable formation” (9) that opens onto the incoherence and obscurity, at once conceptual and visceral, of sex itself. Bringing us resolutely back to what we do not know, and perhaps cannot know, in the history and experiences of sex and sexuality, orgasm is not only a critical object—or, in Jagose’s oft-used phrase, a critical figure—but an epistemological conundrum.

Taking the obscurity of sexual knowledge as axiomatic, I propose that the intractability of orgasm as an object of inquiry can contribute to a consideration of what it might mean to think sex, not only as an issue of and for queer theory—one of Jagose’s manifest concerns—but as a problem of method. Queer studies has a number of strong theories from which practitioners derive their post-humanism and anti-foundationalism, anti-identitarianism and anti-normativity, anti-teleology and anti-sociality, as well as their historicisms and unhistoricisms. This is not to imply that such critical values are universally shared or uncontested, but that they have been obtained from and propounded out of distinct theoretical engagements.<sup>1</sup> The field of queer studies has spent considerably less energy thinking about what it might mean to espouse or enact a queer method.<sup>2</sup> *Orgasmology*, I submit, can help us do just that.

Jagose does not identify a methodological remit to her book, preferring instead to lay “a queer *theoretical* claim to orgasm” in the face of what she argues is “queer theory’s established dismissal of orgasm as a critical figure” (xii; emphasis mine). Neither “method” nor “methodology” appears in the

book's index, suggesting that for her project they do not rise to the level of an organizing "concept."<sup>3</sup> Jagose's only explicit remark on method appears in her Introduction's second sentence where she describes "[t]he global roaming system that has been the nearest thing to a methodology that queer theory has espoused to date, the way its attraction to the abject, the subaltern, the eccentric, and the minoritarian deems no subject so outré as to be altogether out of bounds" (1). Thus identifying the opportunistic, peripheral status of method in queer theory, this observation primarily provides the set-up for her explication of orgasm as the allegedly nugatory thing that queer theory has not thought important enough to theorize.

By focusing on what orgasm enjoins for the more mundane manufacture of *method*, and in using the work-a-day term "manufacture" to describe the labor involved, I propose that there may be analytical traction to be gained in exploring *how* queer studies approaches its research objects, as much as *what* it trains its attention on and *why*. Marking this distinction is by way of positing that, while theory and method may always be in implicit dialogue, queer studies has tended to collapse method into theory, substituting prevailing precepts (e.g., anti-identitarianism, anti-normativity) for a close examination of protocols and procedures. Countless discussions have considered what queer theory is (and is not) and what queer theory does (and should not do); few voices have centered their inquiry on *how* queer theory does what it does. In a field that vacillates between interdisciplinary and anti-disciplinary commitments, this evasion of method has precipitated a default syntax that results in a conflation of what queer is, what its hoped for effects are, and the means by which it achieves them.

In her description of "the dismissal of orgasm as inadequately queer" (2013, 2), Jagose critiques the presumptive knowledge of a field that is overly confident about its ability to assess the radical potential of any object or practice. Skeptical about such claims, she refuses to "resolve orgasm into a critical term, the usability of which will be evidenced by its portability and scalability to other critical contexts" (xvi). Resisting the scaling up entailed in the production of new theories, she announces her intervention as a more modest effort to bring into focus an unlikely object: "sticking with orgasm promises to disrupt the consolidation of what can sometimes feel like queer theoretical complacencies around what objects or events deserve critical attention, around which types of sexual actors or sexual practices most counter normative values and institutions, around what selfhood, community, ethics, and politics look and feel like" (11).

Sticking with orgasm enjoins Jagose to train her sights on contradictions and impasses.<sup>4</sup> The organizing thesis of *Orgasmology* concerns "the various ways orgasm might be understood . . . as a *complexly contradictory formation*" (xiii) as well as the purchase this "discursive ambivalence" (28) provides for disrupting "the sedimenting critical frameworks by which we have grown accustomed to apprehending sexuality" (xiii).<sup>5</sup> According to Jagose, as a critical figure orgasm

“is biological and cultural, representable and unrepresentable,” “personal and impersonal,” “worldly and out of this world” (34). It “is also innate and acquired; voluntary and involuntary; mechanistic and psychological; literal and figurative; trivial and precious; social and asocial; modern and postmodern; liberating and regulatory; an index for autonomy and self-actualization as well as for interpersonal and communal attachment; the epitome and the extinction of erotic pleasure; and indifferent and intrinsic to taxonomic categories of sexual difference and sexual orientation” (34). This contradictory status is not strictly formal, but historical and epistemological. Orgasm’s “contradictory charge,” she asserts, derives “from the historic processes whereby sexuality has come to constitute a framework of intelligibility for sex” (34). The incongruous imperatives that impart to orgasm its conceptual difficulty stem from the way sex is caught within the double binds of a distinctively modern system of knowing sex: “Orgasm’s structuring contradictions . . . are evidence of their intrinsic intimacy with the epistemological contours of modern sexuality” (34).<sup>6</sup>

It is here, where Jagose’s historicizing argument veers toward the epistemological,<sup>7</sup> that it begins to gesture toward methodological protocols. When characterizing the contradictions animating orgasm as something that “cannot be explained away or even decisively arbitrated” (34), she signals that interpretation must come to a temporary halt, must submit to being deferred and even subordinated to the less sexy mode of “simple” description. Such postponement responds to the recognition that the impasses she ponders are not subject to resolution—although the space they open may be generative of new formations. As she puts it, “Thinking the thingness of orgasm holds open a dialectic space for conceptual trade between the literal and the figural, the concrete and the ephemeral, the immanent and the transcendent. . . . Thus orgasm might be dialectically understood to figure simultaneously a number of apparently contradictory states or conditions that, far from being ordered by the neat logics of succession or even the clear-cut animosities of opposition, continue to play off of each other, intersecting with and counterinforming each other, taking on each other’s coloration in sometimes unexpected ways” (215). Chapter 1, for instance, reads “the contradictory temporalities of always and not yet” (71). Chapter 2 hones in on the “personalizing and impersonalizing effects of sex since modernity” (xiii). These effects, born of two contradictory regimes of “recognition” (104), are summoned by the incommensurate figures of the straight woman and the gay man, who are asymmetrically positioned via the frustrations of an all-too-privatized “female anorgasmia” and the sex-positive celebrations of “queer public sex culture” (xiv). Sticking with the double bind enacted by these incompatible figures directs the eye toward what they diacritically reveal about each other as well the fact that there is no viable *choice* between them. A gay male public culture of impersonal sex is no more the poster-child for queer world-making than is the woman who personalizes sex but never comes—or, as chapter 5 would have it, who fakes it.

Jagose's method, then, involves attending to the thingness of orgasm, suspending interpretation and judgment in favor of description, and using orgasm's historicity to excavate the problems it poses for knowledge production. She approaches her critical object as an interpretative crux, but rather than attempting to unlock its hermeneutic secrets or explain its difficulties away, she uses its irresolvability as a critical resource.<sup>8</sup> A consideration of her methods could lead us to various disciplinary fields and subfields: sociology, historicism, literary criticism, thing theory. Rather than trace these methods back to their origins or to their destinations in Jagose's book, I wish to emphasize that her investment in working contradictions is a response to the problem of confronting the unknowable in sex. It may seem obvious, but it is surprisingly little noted that the production of knowledge is generated, directed, and circumscribed by its objects of inquiry. If those objects are resistant to analysis, they necessarily confer onto the methods directed toward them certain priorities and parameters; the object, we might say, magnetizes the methods used to analyze it. Whereas some analytic strategies may transit across disciplines (just as concepts do) and be transferable to disparate objects, they are not infinitely mobile; it thus is worth scrutinizing when and where they hit up against limits, are stymied, or fall apart.

Several aspects of Jagose's way of working contradictions to contend with the obduracy of orgasm are particularly striking. First, while her method is recognizably deconstructive, in its focus on impediments to legibility it offers concrete signposts and organizing principles useful for identifying significant research objects and generating good questions about them. She pursues not only internal dynamics, but also diacritical relations. And she does so by considering both synchronic and diachronic timeframes. Second, Jagose is unusually candid about the affective weight that her choice of method bears. Not only did she feel that in honing in on orgasm she was asking a "simple question"—one that carried the risk of "seeming naïve, even backward, about queer scholarly knowledges or codes of critical inquiry" (10)—but the longer she stuck with orgasm, "the lengthy period of *sticking with* sometimes felt less tenaciously, more traumatically, like *being stuck*" (xvii). A willingness to appear stupid, simple, and stuck is an intellectual disposition worth pondering, not only for its intrepid determination, but because it contravenes the affective and rhetorical conventions of a field enamored of conceptual mastery and eager to issue reprimands whenever its participants venture out of bounds.

Jagose's intellectual courage is mirrored by the boldness of her argument, which radically challenges the dominant boundaries of queer theory itself. Pre-eminent among orgasm's contradictions is that it is both materially embodied—a biological, physiological "event"—and cultural, representational, and ephemeral. Jagose is fully cognizant that "[t]he definition of orgasm as a bodily event . . . is often intended as a ground-clearing gesture that naturalizes orgasm by lodging it in the material reality of the body" (21). But if one desists from such

naturalization, recognition of orgasm's materiality can enable rethinking "the relationship between sex as a set of bodily practices or techniques and sexuality as a field, both psychic and regulatory" (15). This ontological duality has heavyweight implications, for the reorientation it demands necessitates "thinking the biological with, rather than against, the cultural" (28). "[T]here is no reason to presume that the cultural and the biological must be at loggerheads," Jagose argues, "nor that an emphasis on the cultural will lend itself to the open-ended possibilities of transformation while an emphasis on the biological will as inevitably become bogged down in the inertia of the status quo" (28).<sup>9</sup>

Meaning, Jagose asserts, is "an effect of relationality, a recursive looping through systems that might well include the biochemical" (25). With the material and the cultural thus looping through one another, Jagose activates a more-interdisciplinary-than-usual queer archive, one that is extraordinary to the degree that it gestures toward the social and natural sciences.<sup>10</sup> Its most sustained excursion into the natural sciences is its appreciative uptake of the work of Helen O'Connell, a neurologist whose anatomical studies of the clitoris and urethra demonstrate that the clitoris is far more complex, extensive, and neurologically replete than biologists previously assumed. Specifically, the clitoris is "a substantial three-dimensional structure extending across the perineal region; . . . it is closely connected to the urethra and distal vagina; . . . the cavernous bulbs previously associated with the vagina are more properly part of the clitoral complex; and . . . the clitoris has a large and complex neurovascular supply" (Jagose 2013, 27). Jagose interprets O'Connell's findings as suggesting "that the clitoris's biological intimacies with not just the vagina but the urethra . . . might enable a full-scale abandonment of the psychomorphology that has, since classical and early modern medical mappings of the body, persistently divided female erotic capacities against themselves" (27). Desensitizing the allergy toward biology that has long dominated the humanities, she asserts that "a new biological model might facilitate altered cultural understandings" (28). More specifically, a

better grasp of the anatomical affinities and neurological relays among female genital organs might model new ways of intervening in the complex circuitry of sexual knowledges that underpins both dominant and resistant cultural and historical narratives about relations between the clitoris and the vagina and those further relations—between, for example, the civilized and the primitive, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals—that those organs have been taken to license. (28)

Jagose takes further steps toward the empirical sciences when examining the impulse to visualize orgasm in the mid-century sexology of Kinsey (for whom "orgasm makes sex countable" [29]) and Masters and Johnson (who famously charted human sexual response), as well as in contemporary medical imaging technology. Her analysis of how these forms of knowledge "grapple

with concerns about the authenticity of their representations” (161) does not so much contravene what humanists typically find objectionable about the quantification or schematization of sex,<sup>11</sup> but instead demonstrates the surprising affinities of sexology and medicine with the conventions of film and porn: when it comes to sex, each of these discourses enacts an abiding ambivalence about the possibility of visibilizing the invisible.<sup>12</sup> This leveling of sexual knowledges across incommensurate domains takes a more risky turn when Jagose gleans in the protocols of mid-century homophobic behavioral modification programs an understanding of orgasmic reconditioning that unexpectedly reveals a “queer trace” (106): behaviorism’s recognition that erotic fantasy cannot be directly correlated to erotic practice and that sex is “a behavior unindexed to any broader characterological system” (134).

In identifying such similarities, no less than in using biological science as a basis from which to assess orgasm’s theoretical potential, Jagose steps beyond the conflicts between social scientists and humanists which, as described by Heather Love, “turn on the question of whether the empirical study of sexuality should be understood as social recognition or as epistemological violence” (2015, 76–77). In her book’s final sentence, Jagose affirms that “our understandings of twentieth-century orgasm, no less our fleshly experiences of it, are equally strung on the warp of figuration as the weft of literality” (215). The weft of literality, that is, provides half the raw material from which queer deconstructions of figuration, representation, and politics emerge.

Jagose’s effort to move beyond a reactive hostility to empiricism implicitly registers that what we call “queer theory” has been defined by means of certain disciplinary-specific conventions. This is not merely to say that important voices are often excluded from the field’s charmed circle, but that some foundational work is regularly misrecognized as less empirically grounded than it actually is.<sup>13</sup> Given this, the methodological rapprochement of *Orgasmology* could be extended even further to invite a more reciprocal cross-disciplinary conversation. What, for instance, would the scholarship of queer, feminist psychologists who investigate, often through hybrid qualitative and quantitative methods, the relation of orgasm to concepts of sexual satisfaction (as well as the metrics by which such satisfaction is appraised) add to the theoretical questions broached by Jagose?<sup>14</sup> In the work of such psychologists, orgasm, it seems, has for a while been “substantialized . . . as a node of critical attention” (9) in ways it has not been in queer theory; moreover, these psychologists do not, as queer theory has, “transubstantiate” “sex into matter deemed more immediately or more recognizably political” (13). In seeking to explore the varied definitions of “sex” available in contemporary culture, their concern is to do justice to its lability, heterogeneity, and multi-dimensionality, which often means its incoherence and illegibility. Indeed, they have been on the forefront of asking what “having sex” means, and they have faced the ensuing chaos with remarkable equanimity, using it to reconsider what extreme variability and contradiction means

for the way they conduct their research—in other words, how it might impact their methods.<sup>15</sup> How, then, might these queer feminist researchers affirm, nuance, or challenge the ways in which orgasm is historicized, anatomized, and appropriated on behalf of queer theory?

By raising this question, I do not fault Jagose for the selectivity of her archive or for the fact that assessment of what counts as an improbable research object may itself be subject to disciplinary norms; rather, I would maintain that disciplinarity prejudicially informs the very meaning of what can be perceived or adduced as a queer theoretical intervention. Nor do I contend that the natural and social sciences could not learn much from Jagose's achievement in showcasing orgasm's opacity, recalcitrance, and resistance to conceptual closure. Far from it. The epistemological stakes are especially keen in Jagose's analysis of fake orgasm. Arguing that this practice, indexically associated with heterosexual women, emerged historically out of the incongruity between the sexual incompatibility of the heterosexual couple and increased pressure for them to achieve relations of parity and reciprocity, she reads fake orgasm as, simultaneously, a signifier of heterosexuality's failure, a historically specific strategy by which it is endlessly renewed, and a counterdisciplinary "disposition" (205)—that is, a "sexual innovation" that "strategically refuse[s] the regulatory system of sexuality" (188). Jagose frames her reassessment of fake orgasm in terms of "a queer theoretical approach that testifies to the potential of the unintelligible, the unproductive, and the wasteful" (xv). This emphasis would find common cause not with the goals of queer or feminist psychology (which seek to maximize human flourishing) but with their often-disavowed progenitor, psychoanalysis, which assumes as a matter of course the tendency of knowledge to fall short, hit a wall, and fail.<sup>16</sup>

Crucially, the potential benefits of a methodological dialogue between psychologists, psychoanalytic scholars, and queer theorists would accrue not only to those disciplines that aspire to the status of science. Indeed, Jagose implies that something important is at stake for queer theory in reconsidering its "near-axiomatic understandings of what constitutes, politically speaking, good sex and bad" (177). As she notes, "[W]hat we want from sex is never, it seems, fake orgasm . . . [which] has many practitioners but few champions" (178). To the extent that fake orgasm is a matter of "making do" (194), it fosters awareness of the fact that sex, for some people, is a matter of disappointment and displeasure. Irrespective of political claims on behalf of any sexual practice, queer theory might further exploit the conceptual payoff of *bad sex* by including within its sphere of attention sex that is frustrating, dissatisfying, even aversive (the domain more often relegated to psychology and psychotherapy)—for it is out of these affective states, and the quotidian adjustments they require, that queer worlds also emerge.<sup>17</sup>

Jagose is circumspect in her claims for orgasmology, whose very coinage as a term is, as she puts it, "implausible" (37). Noting at the onset "the absence of a

field of anything like orgasm studies,” she does not “bemoan the absence of such a field nor still less” does she “propose to inaugurate one” (xii): “I’m not calling for orgasm as the grounding figure for a new political, theoretical schema or a new way of inhabiting the world. . . . I’m not offering it as yet another critical figure around which we can rally differently than the last figure we rallied differently around” (xvi). Much as I appreciate her disinclination to make a grandiose gesture, I would counter that orgasmology—the study of orgasm as an intractable object at once biological, material, cultural, affective, ephemeral, and political—could facilitate future consideration of what queer method is and what it does. The point is not necessarily to determine which strategies *are* particularly queer—such definitional pursuits, prone as they are to descending into territorial disputes, may have limited use-value—but rather what it might mean to *claim* them as queer. What kinds of analytical, affective, and political work do such claims entail? And how might these claims be validated substantively rather than simply promulgated rhetorically? Despite queer studies’ tendency to set itself apart from and in opposition to the disciplines, its methods may share much in common with those that comfortably reside within disciplinary homes.

The interdisciplinarity that informs *Orgasmology* takes its bearings not only from the improbabilities of its obdurate object, but from the incommensurabilities that attend the conjuncture of different disciplinary fields as they wrestle, together and apart, with the impossibilities of sexual knowledge. In this, the book offers a model for revisiting the principled anti-disciplinarity and correlative suspicion of expertise that has long characterized queer theory—something that, as others have argued, can serve as a screen for territorial rivalries between the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>18</sup> *Orgasmology* helps us see that an interdisciplinary practice well informed about, but not submissive to, scientific expertise can offer new bases for engagement around sex, including enhanced ability to ascertain which questions are worth asking. This is not to excuse or condone the manifold problems with positivism; it is to suggest that in light of post-positivist revisions by feminist and queer social scientists, a knee-jerk dismissal of empiricism is beside the point. In her embrace of description and her patient regard for orgasm as a critical object, Jagose performs one of the distinctive values of the social sciences while making vividly clear that sticking with an object’s recalcitrance may lead to something far more interesting than epistemological capture—indeed, it may lead to something quite queer.

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## Notes

1. Debates about anti-sociality are well known and debates about historicism and unhistoricism increasingly so. For the most recent debate regarding normativity and antinormativity, see Wiegman and Wilson 2015. Their turn to statistics is relevant to the argument below.

2. For more on the productive differences between theory and method as well as on the intractability of sexual knowledge, see Traub 2015. Interest in method is beginning to be noted. See the special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44:3–4 (2016) co-edited by Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani on “Queer Method”; the CFP for this issue, which sought contributions across the humanities and social sciences, confidently begins, “Queer Studies is experiencing a methodological renaissance”; see <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/61540>.

3. My use of “concept” is indebted to Mieke Bal (2002).

4. Whereas this method derives from Jagose’s apprehension of orgasm’s status as incoherent, it also describes the method employed in *Inconsequence* (2002), where she “stuck with” the figure of the lesbian, working with and through the tensions between gender and sexuality, gay men and lesbians, visibility and invisibility, and consequence and inconsequence.

5. In this, Jagose seems heir to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 2003), who often focused her deconstructive lens on the mutually constitutive dynamics between two key concepts: not just the hetero and the homo rubrics of sexual definition, but the homosexual and homosocial, the minoritizing and universalizing, the gender transitive and gender intransitive, and in later work, the paranoid and reparative.

6. Jagose’s recourse to periodization serves more as a convenient demarcation than a rigorously argued comparison. Earlier regimes of sex, not caught within the tentacles of subjective desire or sexual identity, also pose their own difficulties for knowledge and require similar epistemological attention.

7. Jagose distances her method from that of cultural history: “Far from producing a cultural history of orgasm in the twentieth-century . . . I am interested in the ways twentieth-century orgasm cannot be persuaded to pull itself together in a single authorizing narrative” (34). Although *Orgasmology* is not rigorously contextualizing or comprehensive according to the protocols of cultural history, I would suggest that not all cultural history is intent on producing “a single authorizing narrative.”

8. For similar strategies, see Masten 2016.

9. To Jagose’s citation of Elizabeth Wilson, I would add Elizabeth Grosz (2004), who makes feminist alliance with Darwin; Vernon Rosario (2009, 268), who argues “for an analytics of gender and sexuality that takes the social and the biological seriously by acknowledging the complexity and depth of both influences”; Sari van Anders (2015), who presents a new theory of sexual orientation that aims to bridge the gulf between neuroendocrinology and queer politics; and Tobin Siebers (2009), who insists on complicating the social construction of disability by confrontation with the material facticity of the body.

10. Wiegman and Wilson correctly observe that “queer inquiry has been far less interested in exploring the disciplinary orientations that craft its conceptual use of norms and normativity than in positing the disciplines themselves as institutionalized forces of normalization. Instead, a critique of the disciplines tout court has become central to the field’s antinormative self-description, generating the now pervasive claim that interdisciplinarity is itself among the field’s most valued antinormative transgressions” (2015, 6). My point, however, is that the specific forms that queer interdisciplinarity can take have been defensively circumscribed in what increasingly looks like a proleptic guarding, in the manner of Sedgwick’s paranoid reading, against surprise.

11. See Mary Poovey’s influential critique of the sex survey (1998). For thoughtful analyses of empirical methods from the standpoint of queer sociology, see Steven Epstein (2006, 2011).

12. The analysis of orgasm’s resistance to visibilization has affinities with Jagose (2002) on the analytical and political limits of lesbian visibility.

13. See Gayle Rubin’s defense of empiricism, especially in terms of history, sexology, and the sociology of deviance (2011).

14. See McClelland (2010, 2011, 2014). On queer theory’s impact on qualitative social science, see Gamson 2000. In its recognition that methods are a crucial aspect of knowledge production and that they vary based on the research question, social science offers queer studies a protocol of self-reflexivity from which it could usefully draw.

15. See Sanders and Reinisch 1999; and Sanders et al. 2010.

16. Knowledge in psychoanalysis is understood as developing through anxiety, resistance, refusal, dependence, disavowal, hate, frustration, and abjection, as well as by identification, desire, attachment, gratitude, fantasy, pleasure, and love. In the words of Deborah Britzman, “[P]sychoanalysis reminds one of the failure of knowledge, the work of forgetting, the elusiveness of significance, the incidental, the coincident, the bungled action, and the psychic creativity of selves” (1998, 10).

17. On affective adjustment, see Berlant 2011.

18. As Love notes, “While queer studies has understood itself alternatively as interdisciplinary and as antidisciplinary, frequent dismissals of social science methodologies and epistemologies undermine such claims—and show up the radicalism of the queer break with academic norms as a familiar form of disciplinary rivalry” (2015, 77).

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