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"Is this thing on?" : The vagina monologues, muted standpoints, and V-Day

Daniela R. Stevens
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"IS THIS THING ON?": *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*,
MUTED STANDPOINTS, AND V-DAY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Daniela R. Stevens

May 2004

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Deanna L. Fassett", written over a horizontal line.

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Rona T. Halualani", written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

"IS THIS THING ON?": *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*, MUTED STANDPOINTS, AND V-DAY

by Daniela R. Stevens

This study explores *The Vagina Monologues* as a collection of personal narratives that utilizes both standpoint and muted group theories to reach V-Day's mission to end violence against women through awareness. Looking at *The Vagina Monologues* through an autoethnographic lens in combination with voices fostered in focus group interviews contributes to the field of communication studies by examining gender relations, issues of power, and muted standpoints. Many of the thirty-three participants seem to believe *The Vagina Monologues* aids discussion about hegemonic issues in a meaningful, accessible, and healing way. Implications for these moments are vast, with women relating to and understanding that these experiences do not have to be silenced, that even through the pain of exposure they can heal. Men, by learning about women's subjugated experiences, can contribute to the end of oppressive standpoints and behavior. Only together can women and men ultimately end violence against women.

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Writing a thesis is like riding the rapids of life. You put on your helmet, and elbow pads; you wear the appropriate clothes. You set aside your fear and you show up, putting your faith in the universe that you will make it to the end. You must be willing to take on the adventure; it is not for everyone. You have to be able to stop and look around to enjoy the beauty of the moment and steal a breath. Make no mistake; I have come out bruised and breathless and sore, but my position within this document has been supported by many.

My life raft during this whole experience has been the people who have contributed their voices, life, and time to this project. People who participated in the focus groups were kind enough to be involved in a sensitive but important project, and their words and voices have become a part of me. My hope is that I have treated them and their voices with kindness and consideration.

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much, only to find friendship on the other side. Deanna, I have to thank you for being the advisor I needed you to be. You pushed without force and gave me space without forgetting me. Your sensitivity to me as an individual student and being makes you the amazing teacher, advisor, and person that you are. If I had been without these people, I have no doubt that I would have ricocheted off sharper rocks and fallen into the traumatic academic river.

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have allowed me to create and be the person I am today without ever insisting I stay on dry land.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Walking through a stage draped in red and pink fabric.

A black-backed stool.

Clapping. Lights come up.

A woman, dark hair, straight bangs, simple black dress.

Legs crossed, hands clasped on lap.

Microphone.

I bet you're worried. I was worried. That's why I began this piece. I was worried about vaginas. I was worried about what we think about vaginas, and even more worried that we don't think about them. I was worried about my own vagina. It needed a context of other vaginas—a community, a culture of vaginas. There's so much darkness and secrecy surrounding them—like the Bermuda Triangle. Nobody ever reports back from there. (Ensler, 2002)

The Vagina Monologues. Just saying it out loud is a social movement, is difficult, is liberation. And yet, "let's just start with the word 'vagina'" (Ensler, 2001, p. 5). What is so wrong with the word "vagina?" If I explore my reactions to the word, maybe I can uncover how it came to garner that response. If I acknowledge my intrigue in a play called *The Vagina Monologues*, maybe I can ask myself why I am so curious. Like author, Eve Ensler, I was worried. If I had a microphone, a spotlight, a stage, what would I dare to say? What do I stand for?

* * *

I explore *The Vagina Monologues* as a collection of personal narratives that utilizes both standpoint and muted group theories to reach V-Day's mission to

end violence against women first through awareness. By looking at *The Vagina Monologues* through an autoethnographic lens in combination with voices fostered in focus group interviews, I contribute not only to my own liberation and that of others, but of larger groups, cultures, societies, and the world. But first we must understand how V-Day and *The Vagina Monologues* came to be.

In this chapter, I first describe how V-Day made the journey to its present incarnation by also describing how Ensler came to write and perform *The Vagina Monologues*. Then, I present some of the effects V-Day and *The Vagina Monologues* have had on the media and international V-Day efforts while presenting an argument for incorporating a diverse audience in the exploration of this phenomenon. Finally, I contribute my own voice throughout this text in an effort to expose my own personal and academic struggle with and through V-Day and *The Vagina Monologues*.

* * *

The first real memory I have involving them is sharp in my mind. I remember I shifted uncomfortably as I rang the doorbell and eagerly waited for her to answer the door, magazine and books in tow. It was a gorgeous summer day and hot—almost too hot. Having never been to her new home, having never experienced her new life, I was excited to ask her how she was *really* doing. She

opened the door with her son on her hip as we exchanged excited exclamations, high-pitched and beaming. She showed me around her house as she introduced me to her son and her new life. I was impressed with all of the pastels and family-oriented furnishings. Having always been so independent, alive, and vibrant, I never guessed she would settle for a traditional life. My friend had always talked about starting her own theatre company; she even had the letterhead picked out. I took a deep breath but was truly happy for her. It happens to the best of us.

It must have been later on when I realized my friend invited me to her house to play catch-up. Recently she had a baby and gotten married, and I think we were both conscious of the new struggle she was facing: integrating her new roles as wife and mother into her sense of self. I pulled out *BUST* magazine to show her an article about feminism, marriage, and motherhood. Only a short time earlier had I come across feminist perspectives, and I was still eager to share it with others, excited by new forms of information. She was intrigued, and we talked about her efforts at self-renegotiation as her son played quietly on a blanket near us. One of the ways she reconciled this was to actively seek out opportunities to express herself outside of these roles. After all, being a wife and mother is a twenty-four hour job. She invited me to an alumni performance of

The Vagina Monologues at Cal State Hayward. As she showed me a flyer, she began to tell me what it was about. Back then there was only a grassroots following, but I spent the next few weeks looking for someone to go with me. I did not want to drive alone to Hayward but knew if it were closer, my interest would carry me there unaccompanied. Getting ahold of people was not the problem; the problem was finding people who shared my excitement in the subject matter. They were turned off by the title. They did not know what it was about. I hardly knew what it was about, how to explain it, just that I wanted to have this experience. Pleading with my partner to go with me, he told me that he felt uncomfortable with the probable material, with the title. Though he wavered in wanting to support me, ultimately he did not go, and neither did I. I forgot about it.

* * *

"I didn't find V-Day. It found me," says Karen Obel, director of the V-Day College Initiative (Ensler, 2001, p. 129), and despite its synergistic formation, we can track V-Day's development. V-Day was born on Valentine's Day in 1998, at New York City's Hammerstein Ballroom. As a movement, a vision, a vital ongoing process, "it is the mission of V-Day to end violence against women by increasing awareness through events and the media and by raising funds to

support organizations working to ensure the safety of women everywhere” (Ensler, 2001, p. 173). Developing still in 1999, V-Day was celebrated at London’s Old Vic Theatre (Ensler, 2001; V-Day, 2003). V-Day gained strength in 2000 by stretching to Los Angeles, in addition to twelve international cities. In 2001, it touched 150 colleges and brought 18,000 people together at Madison Square Garden in New York City (Ensler, 2001; V-Day, 2003). Then in 2002, V-Day evolved from one day—Valentine’s Day—into a 12-week calendar of events and social action campaigns to be celebrated in 599 cities, including 515 colleges and universities, across 35 countries with over 800 events working for its mission (V-Day, 2003). For 2003, the facilitators of V-Day boasted a new vision, “From V-Day To V-World.” In an effort to keep the movement growing and progressing, they asked people to envision how a world without violence will look and feel (V-Day, 2003). Needless to say, the birth, growth, development, and transformation of V-Day is unprecedented in the worlds of theatre and feminism.

If V-Day is life, then *The Vagina Monologues* is breath. “The greatest miracle, of course, is V-Day: an energy, a movement, a catalyst, a day to end violence toward women—born out of *The Vagina Monologues*” (Ensler, 2001, p. xxxi). Conceived by author Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* is a play based on her over 200 interviews with women about their vaginas (Ensler, 2001).

Hundreds more spoke to Ensler after her performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, primarily sharing the violence they have experienced throughout their lives. It was as if she had opened a Pandora's box of rape, incest, domestic battery, anti-lesbian violence, sexual harassment, terrorism against reproductive freedom, genital mutilation, and repressed sexuality. "The play had somehow freed up their memories, pain, and desire" (Ensler, 2001, p. xxxi). She realized that "nothing was more important than stopping violence toward women" (Ensler, 2001, p. xxxii). So Ensler began working with a group from Feminist.com to create V-Day in order to end violence against women, forgoing all royalties from *The Vagina Monologues* productions to benefit antiviolence initiatives (Baumgardner, 2002). The movement that began in 1997 has grown from a play to a grassroots activist cause to a mainstream phenomenon.

Despite *The Vagina Monologues'* success with V-Day, its creation was organic and spontaneous. Before it was a play, *The Vagina Monologues* was just something Ensler did while she was writing her "real" play (Ensler, 2001). It began as a conversation with an older woman who said condescending things about her own vagina. What Ensler found to be a shocking and revealing experience snowballed into conversations with Ensler's friends and then conversations with women of many backgrounds and experiences discussing

their vaginas. In the play, she tells her audience that she "talked to older women, young women, married women, single women, lesbians, college professors, actors, corporate professionals, sex workers, African American women, Hispanic women, Asian American women, Native American women, Caucasian women, Jewish women" (pp. 4-5). Women talked about self-love, abuse, sacrifice, and pleasure. Ensler found a surprising openness when asking women to talk about their vaginas, possibly because no one had ever asked them before and possibly by way of her experiences with her own vagina. Having been violated sexually and physically by her father, Ensler could empathize with women around the world who experience violence. And perhaps as a result of her background as a vulnerable, empathetic playwright turning interviews into plays, the piece had practically written itself, and she was performing it before she even knew what had happened (Ensler, 2001). One revealing question she asked all of her interviewees was, "If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?"

Although *The Vagina Monologues* started in the theatre, it has transcended the stage. The play started Off Broadway in 1996 (Isherwood, 1999; Village Voice Media, Inc., 2003), and continued for 13 months (Jones, 2000). In 1997, for *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler won a coveted Obie Award in playwriting, an honor given by *The Village Voice* newspaper since 1955 to publicly acknowledge and

encourage the Off Broadway theater movement (Village Voice Media, Inc., 2003). In 1998, V-Day debuted in New York City, and by 1999, its Off Broadway venues were sold out (Dean, 2002). For 2001, the V-Day edition of the play's script was published with a foreword by Gloria Steinham and was distributed in over twenty countries by Villard Books, a division of Random House that attracts attention for its exciting and diverse list of authors and titles (Ensler, 2001; Random House, Inc., 2002). The cable channel HBO took *The Vagina Monologues* to television in 2002 as one of its America Undercover documentaries, releasing it later in the year on DVD with more interviews, behind the scenes footage, commentary, and live performances (Ensler, 2002; Home Box Office, Inc., 2003; Peyser, 2002). *The Vagina Monologues* has become one of the biggest and most widespread theater successes in recent years, infiltrating our culture beyond the traditional theatre experience (Peyser, 2002; Jones, 2000).

* * *

As time passed, the buzz mounted. I felt the tingling interests, the whispers, surround me. I do not remember how I came back in contact with it. All of a sudden, it was just there: the publication of a book and a television special. Remembering a casting call on a local online bulletin board, maybe that is how it was first summoned back to me. I asked for the book as a birthday

present. I began checking out when it would be performed near me so I could actually go this time.

Then finally I got my hands on the book. I was in Atlanta at a conference, curled up in a hotel room chair. I read it cover to cover, so quickly. It was shiny and red. I was so intrigued. There were so many stories, so many voices, that I had never heard before, never expressed myself before. They spoke to me, and I empathized with their struggle, laughed in their joy, and squirmed amidst their delight. I could not believe I was done. I turned the book over, and back to the front, looking for a hidden chapter, like an extra track on a CD. When the special ran on television, I was thrilled that I already had HBO. But I still recorded it. I wanted to catch every minute on tape and take the time to savor it not only when it aired, but when I knew I could watch it free from distractions.

When I sat down to watch it, I had to prepare everything. Making sure the remote was in hand and that I was free from interruptions, I gathered pillows, a blanket, water; I could have been camping. As soon as I began it, I paused it. Was my housemate coming out of her room? She retired for the evening as my eager-to-see-her-off face returned her good-night. Did she see the freeze frame and wonder what I had stopped? Why had I paused it? Normally I wasn't so squeamish about my privacy or about intimate subjects. I turned back

to the television and pressed play. Now I knew I was alone. I watched the interviews; I watched the play. After the first few monologues, I stopped feeling awkward and started enjoying them. Her accents all sounded the same (she was from New York, after all), but her words were like nothing I had ever heard before. My friends and I talked, but we either didn't have these experiences or we didn't tell them to each other. She was funny and revealing. I was thrilled with her bare feet and her simple dress and red everywhere. I remembered the book as the credits rolled, thinking there had to be more. Surely I had read more monologues. But it had ended, and I was just seeing the promotions for the next movie. Why hadn't I gone to see it? Why hadn't I been there with those people, sitting in that welcoming, open, free energy?

The next day I was still high with exhilaration. I wanted to talk to somebody about it, but how would I broach the subject? You just don't walk up to someone and start talking about these sorts of things. It comes after a few glasses of wine and a good meal, an expression of intimacy, or after a lot of give-and-take conversation. But this was pop culture! It was on TV, it was in a book, in magazines, reviews. Certainly the subject must be becoming less taboo. I searched for the regulars, the people I talked to routinely, to whom I was comfortable divulging. Questions began plaguing my mind, as I looked online

for friends and left messages on cell phones for others. Was this about me? Did I want to talk about me and how much what she had said was about me? I didn't think they would want to go that far, but I didn't care. I was bursting at the seams to reveal this experience, reveal its possible implications on my life. It had so much to do with sexuality, imparted so much on my own sexuality; it could mean so many things. Maybe now I could voice my own concerns, fears, desires, and experiences more openly. People called back, and the conversations started out all right, but they always twisted in another direction. Why was no one connecting?

* * *

With V-Day's mission to provoke awareness through *The Vagina Monologues*, publicity is key. Luckily, media coverage of *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day is extensive, ranging in a variety of responses. For example, some journalists look at the responses of women (Wolpert & Brown, 2002), while others report men's and male news reporters' reactions (Haithman, 2002; Kershner, 2002; Nailen, 2002; Salhani, 2002; Young, 2001; Zoglin, 1999). Imitations like the *Penis Dialogues*, *Club Cocktales*, *Talking Cock*, and Li Xie's *Vaginalogues* are evidence of *The Vagina Monologues*'s impact on a variety of audiences, men and international audiences included (Chamberlain, 2002;

Diamond, 2001; Hiller, 2002; Mervis, 2002; Milmo, 2002). Unfortunately the number of men attending V-Day events seems relatively small (Jones, 2000; Proctor, 2002; Salhani, 2002; Wittman, 2002) and a public service announcement (PSA) campaign funded by V-Day targets primarily white, middle class women by advertising in magazines such as *Marie Claire*, *O*, *Redbook*, *Bazaar*, and *ELLE Quebec* (V-Day, 2003). So how can the responses to *The Vagina Monologues* be helpful if the target audience is so narrow?

* * *

Throughout the clamor, there was coverage, good and bad, about the play. I mean, there must have been. I did not pay attention to the judgmental press. So they were doing skits on *MadTV*. At least it was getting coverage, getting the name out there. With all of the celebrities involved it was hard to miss. The press loves sexy topics and this certainly seemed like one.

I was still excited anyway. *The Vagina Monologues* was attempting to bring female stories and voices into mainstream vision. At least, I believed it was. That was how they had gotten into my life, right? How wonderful to do it in a way other than a book, to engage an audience other than the literary, to perform feminism. Not only that, but as the phenomenon grew, colleges were granted rights to do their own interpretations of the screenplay. Celebrities were

performing the monologues, first in London, then in New York. Minds would open. Ensler had interviewed so many women of different ethnicities and ages. People would have to relate to something. This phenomenon, as I was beginning to think of it, was going to have an effect on the way people treat women, and treat sexuality. However, it wouldn't stop there. Soon women would be okay with their weight and their looks as they took comfort and strength in themselves sexually. Lives would change, and this was just the beginning. *The Vagina Monologues* was a springboard for social change and I saw everyone benefiting.

* * *

Beyond being just a fundraiser, V-Day engages in many initiatives, both domestically and abroad. For example, before September 11, 2001, V-Day funds were going to RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, to help educate women in underground schools, document illegal executions, and build a women's movement. In 2002, V-Day concentrated on Afghanistan is Everywhere, giving a percentage of all V-Day proceeds to RAWA. In Kenya, money goes to Tasaru Ntomonok (Safe Motherhood Initiative) to help stop the genital mutilation of young girls. In addition, the Center for Women War Victims in Croatia was able to open their first rape crisis center in the former

Yugoslavia for women from Kosova and Chechnya who were raped and traumatized during the war (Ensler, 2001). Also, people involved with V-Day have worked to put together The Afghan Women's Summit, The Stop Rape Contest, the Indian Country Project, the 1% Campaign, The V-Day World Summit, and the PSA Campaign (V-Day, 2003). With so much to do and so much being done, it is no wonder V-Day was named one of *Worth* magazine's "100 Best Charities" in 2001 (V-Day, 2003).

* * *

I continued my attempts to spread the word. I was always looking for when the show was going to be re-aired to tell people to watch it. I shared my book with others or pointed out passages I thought they would like. Mostly I just wanted to share how this involvement was transformative. Conceiving of my own monologues, I designed my own interview questions for asking people I knew and considered creating a privately published vagina monologues of my own. I was living a liberated world inside my head even as the real world pushed back. For the time being, I was thankful for the vision and insight; I was thankful for *The Vagina Monologues*.

I began to involve myself even more in *The Vagina Monologues*. I read the book over, watched the special again, visited the official website more; I began to

think more critically. The excitement began to wear off. Who was it for? Who was it not for? Why was I so interested in these stories? Why did I relate to them? I kept pushing the questions aside, but my academic self was in fine tune by this point. Few people wanted to talk with me about them. I could nod my head, agreeing, while reading feminist magazines, websites, and books but hardly any others seemed to feel the same way. Having to read a book on feminists in technology, my partner questioned why people believed the world would be peaceful if women ruled. Surely women fight and can be ambitious. I had always bought into the idea, as if nurturing mothers would not allow war to go on when soccer moms dangerously cut me off to make sure their kids get to practice on time. I had to acknowledge my privilege, my connections, and my position of power. I could buy theatre tickets to watch *The Vagina Monologues*, I could read the book, and I could access cable television. My academic standing allowed me to be exposed to *The Vagina Monologues* through college, and I had the ability to find out more information about the phenomenon through the internet. If feminists were to challenge and transform patriarchy by showing that our experiences and perspectives are different then how could we still leave people out?

While *The Vagina Monologues* attempts to communicate these differences to our culture, they are still primarily the voices of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. We do not hear about transgendered, menopausal, young mothers. We don't pay attention to the plight of single fathers. Anyway, if we are trying to acknowledge more truths, more voices, why is it called *The Vagina Monologues* and not *The Vulva Monologues*? The vagina is only a small part of the whole, just as the ability and desire to have orgasms is only a small part of the whole sense of sexuality. The problem is much more than sex, and the problem is much more than patriarchy.

* * *

While the mission of the V-Day movement is to end violence against women by increasing awareness through events like *The Vagina Monologues*, the audience is primarily female (Jones, 2000; Proctor, 2002; Salhani, 2002; Wittman, 2002). The focus is on addressing, challenging, and transforming the ideas, actions, and experiences women have with violence. However, V-Day continues to suggest that women are responsible for their physical and sexual health while not holding men accountable for their role in ending violence against women. Consequently, people, irrespective of sex and gender, adopt theories, causes, and explanations that explain away, excuse, justify, or perpetuate men's violence

(Hearn, 1998). Multiple feminisms seem to essentialize and exclude men, either consciously or unconsciously, as unable or unwilling to participate in fighting for equality of the sexes. Declaring this unacceptable, hooks (1984) says, "feminism defined as a movement to end sexist oppression enables women and men, girls and boys, to participate equally in revolutionary struggle" (p. 68). Men can benefit as much as women in a world where their sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers are not threatened by sexual oppression and violence. In a world without violence against women, men would have experiences and resources that advocate treating women with respect instead of sexual objectification while being able to fight their own limitations of sexual expression. Actress Isabella Rossellini asked, "Is this about feminism really? Violence against women is a feminist issue? I don't think it is" (Douglas, 2001). The connection is clear; the V-Day movement goes beyond being a "feminist" or women's movement, it is a movement for humanity. And men should be involved as well as women.

* * *

I felt cheated. Certainly the hub-bub of *The Vagina Monologues* has brought awareness to me and others. But it is not the best representation of women. *The Vagina Monologues* is a club, and I can be a member because I am white, female, and middle class. I can identify with the feminist plight in the

United States. People excluded by its narrow focus have no interest in the goings-on inside this club. They are used to the false generosity, used to people selfishly fighting in their name, or speaking for them, with the assumption that they have the same interests. I might as well be in high school. But I always feel like I am trying to enlist others in the cause: men, women, young, old, people of other races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, though they have no interest in me. They really have no interest in me and how *The Vagina Monologues* relates to me, why I am interested in them. It is too late to make amends. It is too uncomfortable to talk about, too taboo. I have always seen women expressed in terms of their sexuality, we all have. Though in another voice, not for a male gaze, or ear, *The Vagina Monologues* still points to sex. Women are so much more than that.

* * *

While the media coverage of *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day is extensive, I have yet to find critical, scholarly engagement. In response to this gap in research, I continue to describe my own stance within *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day as I render a rationale for exploring women and men's experiences with *The Vagina Monologues*. Then I provide an overview of *The Vagina Monologues* as a personal narrative and discuss the implications for

standpoint and muted group theory in the context of the women's movement.

While using autoethnography as both theory and method, I also engage in focus group interviews to address these specific questions:

How do women and men react to *The Vagina Monologues*?

What does *The Vagina Monologues* communicate to women and men?

How do women and men talk about *The Vagina Monologues*?

It is my hope that by taking this first step to explore these responses and the possible implications for V-Day, we can ultimately know our loved ones and ourselves better and work to eradicate violence against women.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before concentrating on people's responses to *The Vagina Monologues*, we must understand how V-Day, as a movement, uses the play to bolster awareness to achieve its mission to end violence against women. First, I explore *The Vagina Monologues* as a collection of personal narratives. Used in communication studies as a vehicle for voicing experiences, I also look at how personal narratives can work in correlation with standpoint and muted group theories. *The Vagina Monologues* speaks loudly with individual voices about issues affecting at least half the population. By looking at both individual and group positions, we can examine more fully the potential to eradicate violence against women. Then I explore the benefits of sharing personal narratives despite personal risks, and how supporters of *The Vagina Monologues* are taking personal narratives to the public. Finally, I show how the history of feminism, work of feminists, and responses to feminism have affected V-Day and *The Vagina Monologues*. As a result, we will have a better sense of how the play communicates gender-specific standpoints and how they are received by people of different genders to potentially affect change.

Personal Narratives and Vagina Stories

Before they were vagina monologues, they were personal narratives. A personal narrative is a story, a telling or retelling of an experience. As narrative live-ers, we use stories to organize and describe our lives, to reveal ourselves to ourselves (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996). As narrative tellers and performers, we use stories to delight, instruct, and move people. We use them to reflect, to educate, and to change oppressive cultures (Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996). For these reasons, personal narratives are also important for listeners. For listeners, personal narratives are a way of gaining vicarious knowledge without having to live the actual experience. The explosive success of reality television is just one example of our fascination with people's lives and experiences. Park-Fuller (2000) suggests that we are interested in people's stories because in

our mobile society—where we find ourselves cut off from close relationships with relatives and neighbors—we are hungry to know what other ordinary people think, how they cope, how they survive. We need to “bear witness” to their confrontation of trials and losses, in order to cope with our own. Perhaps we are fascinated with personal stories because our legacy of twentieth century civic turmoil and political atrocities has made us suspicious of “official” (i.e., national or professional) stories, and curious about “what really happened.” (p. 21)

These stories are a kind of testimony, used to create, engage, and uncover truths. Using personal experience as evidence produces not only knowledge, but also understanding to facilitate insight, empathy, and caring (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 41). We use personal narratives, as live-ers, tellers, and listeners, to make sense of our and live more fulfilling lives.

Personal narratives have a rich history, beginning in anthropology and extending to fields like communication studies. Walter Fisher (1984, 1987) advanced the narrative paradigm by telling us that personal narratives have "sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (p. 2). A decade later, Peterson and Langellier (1997) took a "narrative turn" to conceptualize, interpret, and critique personal narratives in the communication studies field. By this time, Bochner and Ellis (1992) were already emphasizing the importance of reflexivity, subjectivity, emotional expression, alternative modes of description, and narrativity. They said,

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we *should* value the narrative. (emphasis in original, p. 165)

When we value personal narratives, they have the potential to help us reclaim our voices and selves, reveal the experiences of marginalized people, and thus

develop a more inclusive knowledge base with which to effect social change (Park-Fuller, 2000). In doing so, we must insist that "the goal of understanding and coping with lived experiences should be valued as highly as predicting and controlling it" (Park-Fuller, 2000, p. 21).

In the communication studies community, personal narratives have largely become a vehicle for telling untold stories. By demystifying, personalizing, and humanizing experiences of illness, grief, crime, humiliation, crisis, and victimization, we help draw attention to and break the silence and censorship of the unmentionables, the scandals, and the taboo topics in our society (Park-Fuller, 2000). We expose experiences of racism, homophobia, sexual violence, and other marginalization as testimony to the change we must enact. For example, Park-Fuller (1995) discusses how "persons affected by cancer lack a vocabulary in which to compose their own 'human' narratives" because they are largely perceived as passive victims to the disease (p. 62). The social stigma attached to cancer leaves little room for stories of survival when having cancer is often equated to being permanently marked for death. Also, accounts of sexual harassment in the workplace receive little to no exposure, legitimization, or respect compared with other office tales, and those stories that are exposed oftentimes result in people being blamed for their own victimization

(Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996). Personal narratives of experiences with cancer and sexual harassment, like the stories of sexual oppression and violence found in *The Vagina Monologues*, are foregrounded because they are often otherwise muted, distorted, and sequestered.

Exposing Standpoints in Personal Narratives

People use personal narratives to portray, expose, and understand their individual experiences and positions. Standpoint theory acknowledges that our individual cultures shape our life experiences and interactions with the world (Hartsock, 1987). Our different social, cultural, political, economic, sexual, and other societal positionings, in relation to social hierarchies, affect what we can see and acknowledge (Orbe, 1998; Wood, 1993). Specifically, factors like gender, race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation guide what we know, feel, and do; they direct our understanding of life as a whole (Parker, 2002). In complex ways, factors interact and infringe on every aspect of living. For example, in an organizational structure, “for the women who maintained a heightened awareness of race and gender constraints on interaction, their subjectivity as Black women was an ever-present source for framing the context of interaction”

(Parker, 2002, par. 43). Their standpoint affected everything they did and saw while,

their White male colleagues, unaware of how their own discourses might be perceived as contributing to creating the conflict, were positioned to avoid such self reflection and intellectual work. That is, as part of the dominant culture, they were positioned to see their actions as normative with little reason to challenge the taken-for-granted ways of doing things. (Parker, 2002, par. 48)

In this instance, that Black women are only too aware of their status, while their white male colleagues remain oblivious to their oppressive actions, shows us that our standpoints affect not only what we see, but also what we do not see.

Without awareness of, and sensitivity to, those around us, we limit people's right to humanity. But, more than that, we must acknowledge that, "every being is a unique and necessary part of the pattern of the universe and thus has value" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 4).

In order to respect people as unique, complicated individuals, we must do research starting from the vantage point of marginalized lives. Feminist standpoint theory, specifically, argues that not all women share the same life experiences, cultural practices, and social relations (Buzzanell, 1995). But the experiences and knowledges of women and other marginalized groups can provide greater insights into what separates and connects women and other

marginalized groups. Looking at how we understand and represent our lives, at how we symbolize and give meaning to our experiences and identities, explicates how we engage and defy our oppression individually and systemically (Wood, 1993). Bullis (1993) reminds us that "by focusing on these muted voices as resources for resistance and change, feminist standpoint theory offers a perspective that focuses on both understanding and changing extant practices" with the eventual goal of illuminating acts of resistance to expose and further uncover oppression (p. 12). The problem with this postmodern view of valuing everyone's individual story is the lack of connection and context with what they mean for society. However, entire muted groups can use personal narratives as a form of activism, as a way of connecting with society, to acknowledge that whole clusters of people are silenced.

Personal Narratives Exposing Muted Groups

Muted groups commonly use personal narratives to make their individual, and thereby their collective, stories known. Anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener (1975, 1978) developed muted group theory based on the premise that social conditions privilege some groups of people over others. The ensuing hierarchy has been of interest to communication studies scholars

because it affects the communication practices of both dominant and nondominant group members. Researchers operating with this theory hold that white, middle and upper class men, as members of the dominant group, create and shape language to suit their experiences and communication needs. Not only do they shape and control language and its usage, but they also control its meaning (Abe, 1995). For example, parallel words referring to the same position of a woman and a man, have negative associations for women and positive associations for men (e.g. spinster and bachelor). However beneficial this might seem for dominant social and cultural groups, they simultaneously miss out on diverse experiences and alternative ways of thinking. Then, because not all speakers contribute equally to the formation of language, nondominant groups have to translate their realities and experiences into male-centered, classed, and raced lexicon to approximate their experiences (Turner, 1992). More specifically, people of color, women, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer, and those from a lower socioeconomic background, among others, are marginalized and muted because their life experiences are not represented in dominant structures (Orbe, 1998). An excerpt from one of Orbe's (1996) focus group interviews exemplifies this:

A fifty-three-year-old European American woman recollected an experience in which she was isolated as a newcomer: "I remember when I sat on a [town council] board with all men. They were the "good old boys" and real defensive in their interactions with me at meetings. I felt as if they were leaving me out. They were holding meetings before our board meetings [and] going out for drinks afterward. I felt . . . [short pause] . . . because it was their world." (p. 169)

This woman was first left out and discriminated against, and then she had to deal with the frustration of not being able to aptly name her feelings and situation. Her experience not only points to the lack of representative language, but also to the silencing muted groups suffer. Therefore, muted groups have problems of not only making their experiences known, but also finding the language to describe their life experiences. It follows that if they are not rendered inarticulate, they become simply mute.

Muted groups resist these barriers in a number of ways. One alternative is for muted groups to "explicitly express their discontent with many of the values and actions of the dominant group...by revising, getting around, and resisting the conventional communication system" (Kramarae, 1981, p. 21).

People of muted groups can use metaphors to provide a vague representation of their experiences. For example, I might compare being a woman in an urban area after dark to being a man in prison, with the fear of bodily harm and rape ever present and nagging. By linking a muted world to the dominant world via

metaphor, muted groups can make their experiences more accessible. Also, muted groups can work to utilize a visual language of materials and images from their everyday lives. For example, Freire (2003) used images with the illiterate of Brazil to exemplify their specific vantage points. He can be understood as a muted group theorist because he encouraged giving voice to oppressed people muted in and by the dominant culture. He writes about how

a group of tenement residents discussed a scene showing a drunken man walking on the street and three young men conversing on the corner. The group participants commented that "the only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can't take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and a souse like us." (p. 118)

These people were able to express not only their mutedness but also their unrecognized standpoints by interpreting a picture from their own vantage point. So while people from dominant groups might see something different happening in the scene (including the psychiatrist who initiated the study), other standpoints are just as valid. Another way for muted groups to resist barriers is by reappropriating language. By taking words, phrases, and language structure and altering them, muted groups can begin to name their own lives accurately. As part of the dominant group, Pelias (1999) shares his struggle with the rhetoric African-Americans have made their own as a result of their subjugation:

When their routines are filled with African-American patois, I hear more than nonstandard speech. Even though I am at times jolted by "incorrect" grammar, shut out by language I do not know, or surprised by discourse taboos, I recognize the power of such linguistic play. These strategies help African-Americans in the search for their own identity, their own community. With such strategies, language becomes a tool of resistance rather than a weapon deployed against them. Such strategies allow African-Americans to control language, to establish their own grammar, to name their own desires. (pp. 141-142)

In nurturing Ebonics (or Black English Vernacular), African Americans reshape the oppressor's language, create a more intimate speech, and maintain a culture of resistance. In addition, muted groups can use personal narratives in attempts to share lives and shatter silence. By illuminating the systematic oppression muted groups experience on a daily basis using some of these strategies, they resist being silent.

Despite the benefits of exposing collective mutedness, we have to realize that everyone also has her or his own voice. While muted group theory is useful for "understanding the shared experiences and behaviors of some women [and other muted groups] that result from their status and treatment in a patriarchal culture," it also falsely universalizes their experiences (Dow, 1995, p. 109).

Recognizing, also, unique voices within muted groups helps us better accept the complexities and nuances of being human. By combining the benefits of standpoint and muted group theory, *The Vagina Monologues* uses personal

narratives to expose different individual experiences women have in patriarchal society to expose them collectively as a muted group. Then, as individual muted groups' stories are heard, we can raise the consciousness of our society and, I hope, heal our wounds.

The Healing Power of Telling Your Story

Telling muted standpoints through personal narratives can be healing. As we use stories to organize our lives and responses to our experiences, we can also use them to formulate, articulate, and share our lives in order to heal our oppression. The combined hope and risk of exposing ourselves and acknowledging our oppression Clair, Chapman, and Kunkel (1996) claim, "is often difficult and wrought with past pains and present concerns about what speaking out might *mean*: Will I be believed? What if no one listens? What will others think of my story? How will my life, and the lives of those around me, be forever changed once I speak out?" (emphasis in original, par. 19). Oftentimes there are serious political, social, and personal implications for speaking out, in resisting rather than remaining passive. However, the hope is that by making muted stories known, the process and the narratives can provide awareness, if not closure, to experiences to restore a sense of agency. Ford and Crabtree (2002)

acknowledge, for example, in cases of childhood incest, "adult survivors have been encouraged to tell their stories as a part of their healing" (par. 7). They do so because disclosure is an ongoing part of their personal relations and their healing as they attempt to make sense of their lives and experiences. Also, Valentine (1998) observes that giving women prisoners the opportunity to write and perform their experiences gives them a sense of control over their experience, can provide them with emotional relief, and encourage rehabilitation. The same can be true for the personal narratives expressed in *The Vagina Monologues*. In her interviews with women, Ensler provides unexpected opportunities for voice and healing:

You happy? You made me talk—you got it out of me. You got an old lady to talk about her down-there. You feel better now? [Turns away; turns back.] You know, actually, you're the first person I ever talked to about this, and I feel a little better. (Ensler, 2001, p. 30)

Despite the discomfort, risk, and vulnerability of telling, the results can be far more beneficial not only for individuals and collective muted groups, but for society. The only question now is how do we make stories accessible in order to heal a society, a people full of muted standpoints?

Performing Everyday Life

Taking personal narratives to the public breathes life into them, gives them a name and a face. Without a forum to air these grievances, there is little opportunity for much to happen beyond individual healing. *The Vagina Monologues* would have primarily existed within and through Ensler had she not taken them to the stage. Given her experience as a playwright, it is no wonder she chose to perform the personal narratives she had collected from all sorts of women. Once she unearthed women's muted standpoints on their *own* sexualities, she had to take them to the stage. In the manner of Schechner's (1982) autoperformance, Ensler as "protagonist"-author-director-performer was able to embody "multiple layers of embedded narratives capably woven into a texture of colorful characters, interesting events and latent (or obvious) social themes" (Park-Fuller & Pelias, 1995, p. 127). She personally conducted the interviews, scripted them into monologues, and initially staged them in a one-person format. Ensler's "performer's voice—privileged because it has the opportunity, the training, the credentials required to command a hearing—replaces the voices of those who have one through similar events and may have experienced similar trauma but who cannot speak or who choose not to speak for

themselves" (Park-Fuller, 2000, p. 31). In doing so, she had to ask herself, "Why were certain conversations deemed worthy of the stage? What values are embedded in such decisions?" (Park-Fuller & Pelias, 1995, p. 131). By foregrounding specific agendas, stories, and voices, we have to acknowledge that performance has consequences, Ensler's decisions have consequences. Smythe (1995) agrees that "the focus on performance affords a more direct exploration of the broader social functions associated with telling stories" (p. 246). However, with those choices, performed personal narratives like *The Vagina Monologues* have the potential to influence social change in their ability to reach vast audiences, given the right contexts.

Climate and Conditions

Park-Fuller (2000) observes, "Truth is not known until it is shared within a context" (p. 27). The interactivity and energy of performance and theatre provide a unique context to the telling and listening of *The Vagina Monologues*. First, these sorts of stories are not usually shared even in confidence, let alone to an audience. Also, because performed personal narratives are a "strategic practice of textualizing and contextualizing performance" (Peterson & Langellier, 1997, par. 18), the standpoints of the performers and audience members influence

the telling, receiving, and interconnection between the two. The instantaneous expression of energy and response between performers and audience is a tribute to the diverse context of *The Vagina Monologues*. As a result of V-Day, multiple people perform *The Vagina Monologues* for and from many communities and cultures, affecting not only its message and reception, but also the play itself. Finally, when we tell personal narratives on the stage that have previously been muted, "then the performative speech act of telling calls the taboo into question. Other frames and taboos are often exposed within the tale itself" (Park-Fuller, 2000, p. 28). As performers and audience members, we ask ourselves why these everyday experiences go unnoticed, uncommunicated, only to realize that they have been silenced by our inability to accurately represent them and because they have been muted throughout history by their subjugated locations. And just as all knowledge and discourse is placed, positioned, and situated in the social and historical conditions of the world, so too is *The Vagina Monologues*.

Feminism

It helps to recognize and review the politics of knowledge and identity in which *The Vagina Monologues* unavoidably participates (Peterson & Langellier, 1997). *The Vagina Monologues* inherently works in and amongst women's issues

as V-Day focuses on ending violence against women through awareness of their muted standpoints and oppression. At first, women had very few recognized means of combating patriarchy predating the organized women's movements of the United States that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. LeGates (1996) reminds us that instead they "disguised themselves as men, escaped from fiancés or parents, defied priests, beat or poisoned husbands or masters, became vagabonds, or took to their beds" (p. 142). Dealing as they could, even early on they were strategizing from a muted standpoint. Then, feminism of the mid- to late-nineteenth century emerged from middle and upper class women's restlessness and ability to invest their leisure time in reform movements like abolition and temperance (Freedman, 2002). They could contribute little legally because they could not vote. So, suffrage, too, then became a reform issue white, middle class women contested. With World War I and World War II, feminist goals were shoved aside in the name of patriotism (LeGates, 1996). It was not until the mid to the late 1960s that the second wave of feminism came into effect. Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* opened up white, middle class women's eyes to the reasons why they felt so listless at home in the suburbs. In addition, Margaret Sanger's continual push for sexual freedom with access to birth control celebrated a victory in 1965 when the

Supreme Court made birth control legal for married couples (The Margaret Sanger Papers, 2002). And then, despite contentions that feminism may be dead in the 21st century (Ezzard, 2002; Mancuso, 2002; Zahra, 1998), a new generation of feminists is emerging in the United States to define a third wave. Unlike the first two waves, this recent generation is more aware of diversity in perspectives and experiences, practicality in addition to theory, the growth between the waves, and an undeniable connection between women and men. Even so, the goal of transforming patriarchy remains a challenge of uniting the energy and resources of multiple feminisms.

Types of Feminists

With V-Day's goal to end violence against women through increased awareness, knowing the history of the diverse perspectives of people involved in and against the women's movement is important. First, the women's movement is made up of smaller movements with diverse and sometimes conflicting rhetorical strategies and political and personal goals in regards to gender. Freedman (2002) defines feminism as "a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth" (p. 7). With the second wave of feminism and the Vietnam War came the development of radical feminists (Wood, 2001). New Left

organizations that opposed the war subjugated women to minimal roles despite their intense desires to wholeheartedly contribute. As a result, they formed separate organizations to ensure their own participation and recognition within the anti-war movement. These days, radical feminists continue to protest openly and engage in consciousness-raising groups that are woman-centered despite not having formal organization (Rosser, 1998; Wood, 2001). Liberal feminists, however, believe in and support ideas epitomized by the National Organization of Women's (NOW) official purpose "to take action too bring women into the full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (NOW, 2003). Advocating one of the most prevalent types of feminism, it is no wonder that this organization, started in 1966, is more organized, recognized, and has had more of an effect than some of the other types of feminism.

Beyond some conventional groups of feminists, more specific ethnic groups and economic classes have developed with more particular goals. Because mainstream feminisms have traditionally been tantamount to being white and middle class, they have been slow to integrate the perspectives of oppression and liberation from other situated locations. McClaurin (2001), for example, defines Black feminism as

an embodied, positioned, ideological standpoint perspective that holds Black women's experiences of simultaneous and multiple oppressions as the epistemological and theoretical basis of a 'pragmatic activism' directed at combating those social and personal, individual and structural, and local and global forces that pose harm to Black (in the widest geopolitical sense) women's well-being. (p. 63)

Therefore, Black feminists identify and acknowledge their particular agendas and needs as different from that of mainstream feminism. To further differentiate from exclusionary White, middle-class feminisms, African American women also began identifying as womanists. Their goal is to make others aware of the exclusionary nature of feminism and to acknowledge that, in line with standpoint theory, not all women's experiences are the same (Rosser, 1998; Wood, 2001). Women's experiences are also affected by race, sexual orientation, and economic status.

At the same time, some feminists believe women's and men's social locations do not matter as much as biology. Essentialists believe women's secondary sex characteristics and reproductive systems unite them as a group in oppression and liberation (Rosser, 1998). In this logic, women throughout the world, then, suffer similar, if not the same, oppression as a result of their sex. Socialized variables such as race and class and culture, they believe, have little bearing on the type of oppression women face. Feminist separatists, people who

think women should live independent of men, also believe that women and men are fundamentally different. They have faith only in communities and governments women establish without men. From these perspectives, nature is the justification for women's experiences, not nurture.

Despite its multiple faces, feminism has still survived as a mindset even if people do not openly self-identify as feminist. Perhaps it is because of all of the different types, or because the backlash has connoted feminism with reproach. Negative associations like "radical," "man-hating," and "bra-burning" are associated with feminism and being feminist (Freedman, 2002). Still, people believe in equal pay, sexual and reproductive choice, parental leave, and political representation, irrespective of the name feminist, including men.

Feminist Studies in Communication Studies

Feminists in communication studies have had an impact on the ways in which women's issues have been researched. For example, they seek to begin research from particular historical and cultural locations, as opposed to looking at the contexts, content, means, or practices of communication (Rakow, 1992). Foss (1989) identifies the purpose of feminist scholarship in communication to be "the discovery of how gender is constructed through communication and how gender informs communication" (p. 1). *The Vagina Monologues*, because it is

“grounded in a concern about, and desire to effect change in, the subjugated status of women,” is ideal for looking at the interaction between women and men as the product of language and socialization (Circksena & Cuklanz, 1996, p. 18). If the play is successful in creating awareness of muted standpoints, it works toward reaching feminist communication studies goals of exploring gender construction, communication, and liberation.

In addition to contributing to specific goals, scholars concerned with feminism in the communication studies field have also furthered feminist theories. As many types of feminism exist, so too exist several different feminist theories. Usually, the feminist perspective researchers adopt defines the feminist theory they use. Nonetheless, the different feminisms reflect the diversity of lenses with which to examine phenomena. Despite all of the possible feminist positions from which to study, each feminist theory has one goal in common: “to understand the origins and continuing nature of women’s nearly universal devaluation in society” (Steeves, 1987, p. 96). The difference is in how each theory does this. Oftentimes factors researchers believe affect women’s status in society (e.g. biology, separatist ideology, individualistic, sociocultural, economic factors) provide a framework for whether they will use radical feminist theory, liberal perspectives, Marxist or socialist theories because these theories are based

on ideological principals. In addition, feminist communication studies scholars can begin to develop theories to explain how women address their subjugated position in society. For example, Flores (1996) examines a rhetoric of difference as a theoretical strategy Chicana feminists use to explore the construction and communication of being both Chicana and feminist. By constructing a space where they can break down conflicting identity constructions of being simultaneously Chicana and feminist, they create a home where they feel comfortable building individual and community identity (Flores, 1996). It is women's personal experiences, then, that become the data for exploring these theories. Foss and Foss (1994) point to personal experience as very important data for examining women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences (Foss & Foss, 1994). Similarly, they contend that personal experience, usually in the form of personal narratives, is insightful to the "impact of the construction of gender on women's lives, their experiences of oppression and of coping with and resisting that oppression, and their perspectives on what is meaningful in their lives" (p. 39). As with standpoint and muted group theories, the collection of personal narratives exposed via *The Vagina Monologues* works to expose how women live in a world that oppresses them. As a result, several specific feminist theories are important for exploring and understanding feminist scholarship

because women's experiences have been silenced in traditional methods and theories at the hands of both female and male researchers. Even so, we must be critical of the theoretical and political values of various feminist theories in order to change women's experiences in society.

Men's Responses

Men have responded in a number of ways to the women's movement through movements of their own. Wood (2001) defines men's movements to "include many men's groups that have specific viewpoints, pursue limited groups, and adopt particular communication practices" (p. 88). They might label themselves as profeminist men's movements or promasculinist men's movements. For example, the oldest pro-feminist men's group in the United States is the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). It promotes gender equality and social justice for everyone through its principles of pro-feminism, gay-affirmation, anti-racism and enhancing men's lives through its two divisions, the Men's Studies Association and the Ending Men's Violence Network (NOMAS, 2003). As one of the organizations made up of so-called "New Age men," "sensitive males," or "New Left men," they follow mainstream liberal feminism in an effort to reform their own sexist attitudes and behavior

(Wood, 2001). In doing so, they support women's battles for equitable treatment in society.

Beyond trying to change sexism, pro-feminist men also focus on themselves and their ability to develop beyond the rigidness of proscribed masculinity. Men's conscious-raising groups explore ways in which men's lives are also distorted by rigid sex stereotyping. In the process, they work to overcome individually, and challenge institutionally, the ways in which women are oppressed (Bradshaw, 1982). "They also encourage men to talk about what our society expects of men and what problems this creates for them" (Wood, 2001, p. 91). Profeminist men seek not only to improve the lives of women but also to improve the lives of men by encouraging the end of men's violence, developing pro-feminist men's studies, and supporting homophobia education. In reacting to the women's movement, men have also been able to identify and resist their own oppression within stringent gender roles.

On the other hand, promasculinist men's movements have also evolved in response to feminism. They fall into several categories like anti-feminists, pro-men's rights, mythopoetic, Free Men, and the conservative-Christian Promise Keepers (NOMAS, 2003; Wood, 2001). Mythopoetics believe that men have been separated from their ideal and historical manhood (MenWeb.com, 2003). It

centers on men needing to build deep, spiritual bonds with their fathers and with each other. They blame feminism for robbing men of self-confidence and strength and replacing it with sensitivity and caring. They contend that one of the ways to return to this ideal state is through nature retreats or men's groups. The National Organization of Men (NOM) is one of the groups working to restore the image of "real men" in the face of feminism. Their purpose and goals are to "protect the family, children, and men's rights, and to prevent the further erosion of men's role in society" (NOM, 2003). While they are concerned with the burden of being seen as the provider and the bias of custody laws in favor of women, their main concern is to return to traditional roles and men's unquestioned supremacy, however contradictory (Wood, 2001). Like the multiple feminisms and branches of the profeminist movement, promasculinist men are also rife with incongruity.

With V-Day's goal to end violence against women through increased awareness, knowing the history and multiple standpoints of women and men involved in and against the women's movement is important. Because V-Day highlights knowledge acquisition as key to ending violence against women, the participation of all genders is necessary. However, not only does social context

play an important role in *The Vagina Monologues*' reception, but so does the immediate context.

Contexts of and Reactions to Performed Personal Narratives

The context of performed personal narratives affects the way audiences react and respond. Because personal narratives often expose muted experiences and groups, people respond in a number of ways. Some may be aloof or detached. Many people are uncomfortable with the human face performed personal narratives give to traumatic events, diseases, or oppression. "It is emotionally painful to hear how others suffer, and many avoid that pain—even at cost to themselves and to the sufferer" (Park-Fuller, 2000, p. 36). Unlike with a book, newspaper, or a script, audience members have a hard time detaching themselves from the stories and voices of personal narratives performed in front of them. To deal with the discomfort, they may respond by disconnecting. Park-Fuller continues by saying

perhaps audience members do not respond critically because they fear association with the victim. Some may be stunned at the suffering or at the disclosure itself. Others may lack confidence in their ability to respond appropriately, or they may misconceive their role in evaluating this kind of performance, and shun the experience without any investigation. (p. 36)

Oftentimes performed personal narratives leave people without the resources to cope with the shock of reality performed, with a name and a face and a voice.

The benefit of V-Day's College Campaign Initiative, and most other V-Day events, however, is that 80% of performance proceeds go to organizations or programs to the community in which they are performed (V-Day, 2003).

Oftentimes organizers publicize who the specific beneficiaries are, giving audience members resources to seek out. In order to prevent audience disengagement *The Vagina Monologues* focuses on being audience-centered rather than performer-centered by providing multiple vantage points and perspectives for people to relate.

Rather than disconnecting, performed personal narratives might also evoke constructive reactions. More than just healing for scores of muted groups, personal narratives have the ability to reach beyond existent values and beliefs to touch even those whom they do not mirror. Stroud (2002) believes that "by enshrining coexisting and conflicting value structures within their narratives, they expose audiences to new values and ideas while not alienating them through extreme novelty" (pp. 370-371). *The Vagina Monologues* has the opportunity to affect, influence, and shape its male and "other" audience members by exposing them to muted voices and alternative standpoints by

working with them and not for, to, or on them. As argued by the presence of ancient and foreign texts such as the Avadhoota Gita and the Devi Gita in the Western world, women can be understood by men, and people can understand unfamiliar viewpoints. Stroud (2002) believes that

Novel material and values can find their way into an auditor from a remote culture through that auditor's activities in trying to understand these two levels of the text; simply put, he or she may have to identify, confront, and combine foreign (new) values with some more familiar ones within the text in order to understand what the narrative is arguing. (p. 378)

If women and men believe they belong to different cultures, they can use personal narratives to understand one another from a personal viewpoint. *The Vagina Monologues* provides an opportunity to not only explore some women's lives and experiences, but also supplies the means through V-Day to affect violence against women. Women and men can explore and confront the harmful expectations presumed for them in relation to gender roles in order to challenge the status quo that dichotomizes their lives.

As performed personal narratives, *The Vagina Monologues* provides expression both to collective and individual voices within the context of feminism and reactions to it. As a collection of complex and distinct experiences, *The Vagina Monologues* complicates notions of feminist, of women and men, to

show that there is no simple answer. As a result of the taboos, topics, and experiences *The Vagina Monologues* covers, standpoint and muted group theories apply not only to the play's content, but also to people's responses to it. Women may respond as a collective muted group and separately as individuals with distinct perspectives. Men may respond as a group muted from feminist discourse, but also with personal standpoints and experiences. *The Vagina Monologues* as a collection of personal narratives will succeed in V-Day's mission if it provokes its audience to "broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). However, to achieve this broad audiences have to attend *The Vagina Monologues*. If evidence "of enlightening the audience members who attended the production but were not performers or members of the group represented" is absent, I believe V-Day will fail (Park-Fuller, 2000, p. 35). For these reasons, I use same-gender and mix-gender focus groups alongside my white, middle-class, feminist-identified voice in order to explore *The Vagina Monologues* as a collection of personal narratives articulating and affecting muted standpoints to end violence against women.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

So I decided to talk to women about their vaginas, to do vagina interviews, which became vagina monologues. I talked with over two hundred women. I talked to older women, young women, married women, single women, lesbians, college professors, actors, corporate professionals, sex workers, African American women, Hispanic women, Asian American women, Native American women, Caucasian women, Jewish women. At first women were reluctant to talk. They were a little shy. But once they got going, you couldn't stop them. Women secretly love to talk about their vaginas. They get very excited, mainly because no one's ever asked them before (Ensler, 2001, pp. 4-5)

I began this study with an interest in how women and men experience and understand *The Vagina Monologues*. While recognizing researchers as the primary research instrument in interpretive and critical work, I also acknowledge my findings as interpreted and subjective (Lindlof, 1995). As part of declaring my positionings, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of the events that give rise to people's opinions, feelings, and actions, my own included (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). By concentrating on women and men's voices through my focus group observations, I attempt to describe them in more natural situations to get in tune with and discover how people see reality (Krueger, 1988).

In this section, I describe how I use focus group interviews and autoethnography to explore *The Vagina Monologues*. I begin with an overview of

focus groups and their use in communication studies research. By revealing their benefits and limitations, I also show how useful they are for exploratory studies. Then, I apply them to my research with *The Vagina Monologues* by reviewing my preparation of the focus group interview guide, what I did in preparation for moderating, and how I met the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board's requirements before beginning my actual research. Finally, I describe the people who were involved in my research and the focus group process, how I analyzed the results of the analysis, and how autoethnography works alongside the focus group data.

Focus Group Interviews

In order to explore the multivocality of attitudes, experiences, viewpoints, beliefs, and opinions of women and men in regards to *The Vagina Monologues*, I had to give rise to an experience for collective human interaction. One method researchers use to develop this kind of data is focus group interviews. Both academics and non-academics think of the term "focus group" in several different ways, however. Krueger (1988) defines a focus group interview as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment"(p. 18). I have

memories of being taken by my father to sit in a focus group with other kids to talk about new toys with the incentive of going home with a new toy of my own. Other people may think of focus groups as involving impersonal rooms with one-way mirrors for unobtrusive, but artificial observation. For the purposes of this research, I believe acknowledging all of these definitions is imperative for understanding how a method influences research and responses. Generally focus groups range from six to twelve participants, and the number of focus groups researchers conduct is based on saturation of ideas and experiences. The army during World War II was one of the first factions to use focus groups. Marketing firms also used focus groups in market research for radio and television; these days, their use is rising in popularity among social science researchers (Morgan, 1997).

Despite paradigm shifts that include interpretive, critical, or naturalistic research, only a few researchers in communication studies are utilizing focus group methodology (e.g. Fassett & Warren, 2004; Jackson, 1999; Johnson, Staton, & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995; McLaurin, 1995; Press, 1991; Press & Cole, 1995; Proctor, Douglas, Garera-Izquierdo, & Wartman, 1994). Where communication researchers do engage focus group methodology, they often use focus groups along with other methodologies, usually as a secondary method and as an

"alternative" data gathering technique (Bradford, Meyers, & Kane, 1999). Thus, the results of focus group research are hardly used on their own (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1994; Ellis & Miller, 1993; Motley & Reeder, 1995; Orbe, 1996; Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1997; Waldron, 1991). Researchers may be using other methods alongside focus groups because they are susceptible to moderator bias, they are difficult to generalize, and because they can be difficult to analyze. Even so, the information focus groups provide is invaluable for particular research studies.

While researchers use focus group interviews in communication studies as supplements with other methods, they can also be used independently to provide co-constructed insights, perceptions, and explanations that other methods cannot access (Fassett & Warren, 2004; Jackson, 1999; Johnson, Staton, & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995). Accordingly, some researchers cite using focus groups as a place their research should go in the future (Ayres, Wilcox, & Ayres, 1995; Higgins, 1991; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994; Saferstein, 1994). Nonetheless, focus groups' lack of strong presence in journals perpetuates their lack of use in our field despite the benefits.

One particular benefit of focus group interviews is the environment researchers can create. Focus groups are a socially situated method that

highlight the construction of meanings and knowledge through interaction.

Focus groups can be like dinner parties where guests know they have something in common, usually the host, but otherwise they are strangers, and strangers will talk for a number of reasons more so than acquaintances or friends. Like when traveling in an airplane, Krueger (1988) notes, "it is not unusual for travelers to strike up a casual conversation where they share information about themselves. In some circumstances, the travelers begin to reveal information—rather personal attitudes and feelings about work, family, or life that they might not share with acquaintances" (p. 25). This is perhaps because of the unlikelihood they will meet again. If researchers set up focus groups where participants are strangers, the possibility of responses being biased by peer pressure and/or a lack of anonymity might be lessened.

Also, focus groups emphasize people's interactions, not researchers'.

People participating in focus groups often disclose more because the perception of power distance with the moderator or moderators is lessened. In focus groups, participants have the opportunity to shift the power distance while taking responsibility for the topic and content of conversation (Wilkinson, 1998). Then they feel empowered because researchers value their views and experiences. "Although it can be argued that there is a potential for power

relations to surface among the participants, these relations, if they arise, are the participants' *own* power relations, in their *own* constructed hierarchies"

(emphasis in original, Madriz, 2000, p. 840). Focus groups also more closely resemble natural human communication. "People have an opportunity to ask questions of, disagree with, and challenge each other" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 117). As a result, there are more opportunities for the people involved to decide the direction and content of the discussion more naturally.

Finally, focus groups work well in areas where relatively little is known or when people may have had little time or opportunity to cultivate opinions, share experiences, or think about the topics brought up in research. Because people are products of their environments and are influenced by the people around them, focus groups work best for delving into human tendencies, attitudes, and perceptions. People do not form opinions in isolation. Many need to listen to the standpoints of others, and hear multiple views before forming their own opinions. Krueger (1988) reveals that, during focus group interviews, people influence each other with their comments and, as a result, personal opinions may shift, providing just the sort of environment we exist in naturally.

Focus Groups and *The Vagina Monologues*

My study begins, like any others, with questions: Why have communication researchers overlooked *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day? The lack of research leaves a gap, a space yet to be explored. What are women's reactions? What are men's reactions? And yet the kinds of questions I ask point to the methodology I need to answer them. At first I considered interviews. The one-on-one environment would be conducive to intimacy and revelation. People would feel free to talk openly and continuously once I established a rapport, and perhaps they would work out their ideas as they went. However, individual interviews would be less effective because, while *The Vagina Monologues* has garnered mainstream media attention, not everyone has seen it. Also, each person would have had to watch *The Vagina Monologues* on her/his own without a context that would remind them of *The Vagina Monologues*'s impact on real people and real lives. I needed the "explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1997, p. 12). The synergy, snowballing, and stimulation of a group environment not only reflects an actual *The Vagina Monologues* viewing environment, but also allowed people to develop their responses in concert and context with one another (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Participant observation was another method I considered. With many V-Day events in the Bay Area to choose from, I could have potentially listened to the conversations of people before, during, and after watching *The Vagina Monologues*. I would not have had any guarantees of usable data, but what is more, the audience would have been mostly those who self-selected to watch the play. Also, when using focus group interviews, researchers are often part observer, melting into the background and thus benefiting from many of the positive aspects of participant observation. With all of the uncertainty, it seemed best for me to use focus group interviews.

Focus groups continued to be the best choice for many reasons. Because they allowed me to show *The Vagina Monologues* DVD in a social context, people were able to develop their ideas to a new stimulus with little interaction from a power-filled researcher. Also, with focus groups I had a better chance of working with a diverse audience of women and men who did not self-select based on topic or title. Finally, with the greater likelihood of usable data (as compared with participant observation), using focus groups meant hearing from people who were consenting and recordable. Once I decided focus group interviews were the most complementary to my research questions and goals, I began to develop my methodology more specifically.

Interview Guide

I began formulating the interview guide only after establishing focus groups as my method. I made sure to take several things into consideration. First of all, I made sure my objectives were clear. Starting with my research questions, I worked from general to specific, using a funnel approach, and introducing the more important questions later in the interview to give people an opportunity to warm up to talking and begin to develop their thoughts (Krueger, 1988). With only nine planned questions, but many anticipated directions, I designed the low-structured focus group interview guide to draw out people's candid responses without leading them to any area too specifically (see Appendix A). I also considered the drawbacks of a more open interview guide when preparing probing questions that might help people articulate their responses better. I knew that asking very general questions might lead to a lack of direction and therefore a lack of response. Also, because *The Vagina Monologues* has the potential to be an emotionally charged topic, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) say focus group interview guides should cover fewer topics and specific questions in order to allow for more responses. I additionally anticipated the likelihood that the focus groups would take on lives of their own, with people answering questions out of order, and bringing up topics and ideas

all their own. Because of this method's exploratory nature, I believe that these diversions were as telling as answers to the prepared questions. The new directions people took the conversation showed where their true interests lie, as opposed to just my interests. Again relating to the flattening of hierarchical research power, focus group interviews allowed people the space to talk about what was really on their minds in relation to the topic area. But while an interview guide is important, the moderators are ultimately the people who make everything work.

Preparing for Moderating

Being a successful moderator is like being the director of a movie; the script really provides the backbone of the entire project, but it is the director's job to help the actors bring the story to life naturally. For the moderator, the goal is to create a nonthreatening and nonevaluative environment where everyone can actively contribute and participate. Like a director, the moderator also keeps the focus group discussion on track and is aware of the group dynamics and general group tendencies to form leaders, similar to the likelihood of leading stars having chemistry on- or off-screen (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). A moderator is different from an interviewer because s/he guides and facilitates compared to a

limited two-way, interview; a thoughtful director might too allow for actor input and improvisation (Krueger, 1988). A skillful moderator will make sure it is unacceptable to make light of the topic and inappropriate to embarrass other group members without quelling participants' awkward attempts at response with respect to a difficult topic. Having responsive nonverbal responses to people, like good eye contact and body posture, can make for a more effective moderator. The qualities of a moderator, like those of a movie director, influence the success of focus groups, and researchers must address them thoughtfully.

Another factor I took into consideration was concerning the moderator's gender. In this instance, I determined the gender of a moderator by the people in the focus groups: one male moderator for the male focus groups, one female moderator for the female focus groups, and both one male and one female for the mixed-gender groups. In the mixed-gender focus groups, I took great care to ensure an acceptable level of interaction. As Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) have observed, "research suggests that the nature of the interaction in and the quality of the data obtained from a focus group will be influenced by the gender composition of the group" (p. 43). Socialized social and cultural differences between women and men can lead to different outcomes and group dynamics than single-sex groups. While I believe women and men are more similar than

dissimilar, socialized gender roles dichotomize women and men. I use the third research question to address possible differences between relatively homogeneous and heterogeneous focus groups. For these reasons, the use of both same-gender and mixed-gender groups resulted in a mix of different but complementary data equally important and telling to the outcome of this research.

After establishing that I wanted both homogenous and heterogeneous gendered focus groups, I knew I needed a male moderator to work with me as the female moderator. I asked someone who had the qualities of a good moderator (e.g. unthreatening, on-task, organized, considerate of and guiding of synergism) if he would like to help me with my research. After he accepted, the preparation was three-part: an orientation to the research, information on the role of moderators, and a discussion of useful techniques. I acclimated him to my study by reviewing the study itself and the background of the topic. Then we examined the interview guide so we would know the introduction, main questions, probing questions, and how to debrief while maintaining eye contact to build trust and maintain comfort with everyone. In addition, we planned some small talk for before the DVD and focus groups because it helps people feel more comfortable with being there and with the people around them, and also

warms them up to speak in the focus groups (Krueger, 1988). To help with my analysis later, we discussed noting themes and patterns, along with internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness, intensity comments, and specificity of responses. Krueger (1988) also suggested we observe changes in the questioning route, people's characteristics, descriptive phrases or words used by people as they discussed the questions, descriptions of participant enthusiasm, consistency between people's comments and their reported behaviors, new avenues of questioning that should be considered in the future, and the overall mood of discussion. I knew that in analyzing the transcripts later, I would have to decide which segments of the transcript were important, develop a categorization system for the topics discussed by the group, select representative statements regarding these topics from the transcript, and develop my interpretation of them (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). We then planned our extension of thanks to people for their participation once the focus groups would end.

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Before I could conduct my research, I requested the use of human subjects through San José State University's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HS-IRB). By sharing my research questions and methodology, I secured an

approval letter from the HS-IRB that granted me permission to continue my research on behalf of the university (see Appendix B). To uphold researcher confidentiality in line with HS-IRB guidelines, I also developed an agreement to participate in research form (see Appendix C). Corresponding with this document was my decision to use randomized initials to identify participants in-text as opposed to asking people to derive their own pseudonyms or assign names to them. In part, I did this to focus attention on people's responses instead of their gender and also to make sure that I did not assign people raced, classed, or otherwise marked names. By foregrounding their responses as people instead of as women and men, I subvert readers' desire to compartmentalize and identify with gender similar voices. Then, after deciding how I could, with confidence, protect the people involved in my research, I began my research in earnest.

Participants

Each two-hour focus group I conducted ranged from five to seven people, with the number of people in each group varying as a result of recruitment. I considered the actual size of the focus groups very seriously, ensuring everyone had an opportunity to share insights but also that we could explore everyone's

diverse standpoints. With the combined time of showing the DVD and participating in a focus group, I also wanted to be considerate of people's time. In any event, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) advise that it is better to over-recruit than to cancel a group with too few people. I recruited people from lower and upper required general education classes at San José State University, an urban four-year university, to provide a diverse sample. Because these classes are compulsory, the students in the classes provided for a more random and accurate sampling of the diversity of the campus. A university is a particularly apt participant pool given that V-Day's College Campaign reached over 515 colleges and universities in 2002 (V-Day, 2003). This audience's reactions are particularly important to explore because they are a specific target of V-Day. The number of focus groups I conducted was based on the saturation of ideas and experiences in the focus groups and my ability to recruit. The result was a total of six focus groups. Two focus groups were comprised of men, two focus groups were comprised of women, and two focus groups were of mixed-gender in order to explore all aspects of my research questions.

In order to recruit people, I visited several classes to talk about my research and hand out small surveys to collect contact information (see Appendix E). Afterward, I called or emailed volunteers to confirm times and

dates they could attend. While informing them of the place, the starting time, and the finishing time, I also imparted to the people the significance of arriving early or on time to ensure our prompt start. Contacting people the day before the focus groups as a reminder also helped me ensure their arrival and participation.

On each day of a scheduled focus group, I led people through an initial process. As they came in, I asked people to sign in on a piece of paper and to fill out a questionnaire asking them to self-identify their gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, status as a student, and their major (see Appendix F). They were also invited to partake in the food and beverages I provided to contribute to the comfortable, casual environment. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) insist "the presence of food tends to relax people and it encourages participation by eliminating concerns about meals" (p. 55). Once everyone arrived, I introduced myself and my co-moderator, established an agenda for our time together, and discussed the agreement to participate form (see Appendix D). After allowing some time for general questions, two groups, one of each gender, watched the 76-minute documentary together. The mixed-gender screening group setting served as a reminder of the reality of *The Vagina Monologues*; it provided intertextuality, an energy, and a closer natural experience of a performance of *The*

Vagina Monologues. We watched the DVD in a conference room that provided some intimacy and comfort and a way to show *The Vagina Monologues* in a large format using an LCD projector. Then, we either dispersed the screening group into separate rooms for single-gender focus groups or they were kept together as a mixed-gender focus group to engage in audiotaped focus group interviews for approximately forty-five minutes. Afterwards, my co-moderator or I thanked everyone for coming and for participating and answered any remaining questions.

Overall, seventeen women and fifteen men participated in the focus groups. I had a diverse range of racial and ethnic participants who described themselves as Native American, Jamaican, Filipino, Asian, American, Chinese, white, or as multi-racial, among others. Overwhelmingly, the people who participated in my research appeared to identify as heterosexual, though some of those claims may be based on social desirability. Some chose to use the word "straight," while others described their sexuality as "raging hetero," "male," and "getting mine, so you better get yours." Only one person did not write in anything. Of those who participated, ten people were first year students, with only a few second year and a handful of third year students (between three and six semesters in college). The bulk of people had spent eight or more semesters

in college, evidence of San José State's commuter campus culture. Also, their majors ranged wildly from photo-journalism, meteorology, and criminal justice to communication studies, computer science, psychology, and some undeclareds. For the most part, they were an accurate representation of the demographics at San José State with large Asian, Filipino, and Mexican populations (San Jose State University, 2003). While that might not be true for the country or other universities, it certainly provides rich and complex moments for my research.

Autoethnography

While also providing a breadth of responses, I also use a very specific vantage point from which to explore *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day: my own. I utilize autoethnography as a theory and as a method complementary to personal narratives, used to expose muted standpoints within my positionings. I present my own personal narrative in response to *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day so that I might be self-reflexive in the world that I inhabit along with the people I research. I situate myself within the very phenomenon I study while asking others to think about themselves within it as well. Goodall (2000) suggests a balance of inward reflection and outward representations that I hope I capture in the voices not only of my focus group participants, but in my own

narrative too. Like Ellis and Flaherty (1992), I use my self-conscious, subjective involvement in the creation of this text, and like Tillmann-Healy (1996), "I purposefully told my story *this way*. I wrote a sensual text to pull you away from the abstractions and categories that fill traditional research...and into the *experience*" (emphasis in original, p. 104). I use autoethnography as a method of inquiry that "depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience" (Bochner & Ellis, 1992, p. 166). Without this acknowledgement of myself within *The Vagina Monologues* and *V-Day*, I risk creating "an authoritative, omniscient narrator—a modernist textual god—whose observations we are supposed to trust simply because they appear to be born out of a kind of 'immaculate perception'" (Goodall, 2000, p. 92). Instead I invite readers a chance to ask, "Who is the person collecting the evidence, drawing the inferences, and reaching the conclusions?" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 734). Because my analysis of people's responses is shaped and contained by my own worldview, I include my own narrative to help you know me. However, my experience is no more important or true than yours or the people in the focus groups (Foss & Foss, 1994). It only reflects the knowledge of someone who has been studying the phenomena thoroughly and completely.

Broken down, autoethnography is reflected in its roots: *auto* meaning self, *ethno* meaning folk or people, and *graphy* meaning writing. According to Crawford (1996), autoethnography is “essentially a self-report of personal experiences” (p. 158), but it is also more than that. Researchers use autoethnography to make sense of the often contradictory relationships between self and cultural expression (Lau, 2002). By drawing on personal experiences and creating narratives to understand their cultural traditions and practices, autoethnographers move out from individual exploration to constitute social examination. Initially anthropologists used the term autoethnography to describe how muted groups engage, resist, and cope with their oppressed status. Pratt (1992) refers to autoethnography as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* colonizer’s own terms” (italics in original, p. 7). For example, Andeans often wrote captions for paintings in both their native language and that of their conquerors (Pratt, 1992). As the oppressed, they used the oppressor’s language in order to describe and explain their lives. Their art was not seen as “authentic” self-representations because it showed how they sat on the fence between two cultures, bridging them. However, the struggle with, and tension between, can be an asset for people who switch back and forth amidst two or more cultures. Anzaldúa’s

(1987) autoethnography, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is a modern example, using both English and Spanish to show the oppressor, the oppressed, and the plight in between of trying to live harmoniously in the dichotomies of culture. In this case, Pratt's use of autoethnography describes exactly the dilemma for muted groups: inaccurate descriptions of their lives combined with the challenge of being heard at all. Anthropologists continue to use autoethnography as a way to present themselves alongside the people they observe, to show themselves as the primary research instrument as the "data" exists in and through them.

According to McClaurin (2001), Black feminist anthropologists use autoethnography to "theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourse to levels recognized by both margins and center of the discipline" because while the researcher's place seems apparent, it is not always obvious (p. 56). Oftentimes researchers claim their research speaks for itself objectively without admitting their stance within it, while autoethnography calls such a stance into question.

Along with anthropologists, communication studies researchers have also engaged and enhanced autoethnography. Pelias' (2000) *The Critical Life*, work from Alexander and Warren (2002), Fassett and Warren (2004), and Wood and Fassett (2003) are examples of communication researchers who are examining

their lives in relationship to their work. Trujillo (2002), Tillmann-Healy (1996), and Chvasta and Fassett (2003) explore how family, high beauty expectations and pop culture exist in and through them. Finally, Behar's (1996) *The Vulnerable Observer* and Goodall's (2000) *Writing The New Ethnography* teach us how to "do" autoethnography. The use of autoethnography is expanding as researchers begin to use it not only to present their biases, but also acknowledge themselves in the creation of their research.

As a theory, autoethnography is projected as a way of seeing. If researchers use it at not only their culture, but also how it moves and shapes them, then autoethnography can be seen as a theory built on standpoint knowledge. In regards to theory, Ellis and Flaherty (1992) define autoethnography as "human lived experience and the physical, political, and historical context of that experience" (p. 1). People also use autoethnography as a way to "make sense of the often contradictory relationships between self and culture" (Lau, 2002, p. 244). It is a theory that explores and reveals culture. Dow (1997) recounts,

For example, as a white, middle-class female, I share racial and class privilege with other women in that demographic category. Yet how we experience that privilege, how we interpret it, and what we do with it, differs greatly with regard to our personal histories and our daily,

material circumstances (just as does our experience of being oppressed or marginalized as women). (p. 247)

Autoethnography brings together and illuminates the relationship between identity, scholarship, and knowledge production.

As a method, researchers use autoethnography to describe our interaction with ours and others' cultures. We can explain autoethnography as a combination of personal memories and general cultural descriptions, a combination of autobiography and ethnography. Through conscious, stylistic deployments of language we can use autoethnography "to connect readers to larger patterns of lived experience and cultural meaning" (Goodall, 2000, pp. 41-42). It can function as a repository of cultural memory and cultural mediation. Autoethnography is a particular kind of reflexivity where the self encounters the collective specifically in order to make sense of both.

I use a layered account of the multiple personal narratives contained within *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler's own story enveloping *The Vagina Monologues*, the voices of the people involved in my focus groups, along with my own story, to decenter the importance of any one view. In doing so, I place all of these layers of experience in non-hierarchical relationship to one another. The multivocality provides "a balance between the multiple voices of participants

and researcher, not a suppression of one or the other" (Miller, 1998, p. 68). So alongside the coded themes and patterns from the transcripts, I present my own voice. Collectively, they are like voices in chorus and represent a deviation from the traditional objective standpoint of research (Clair, Chapman & Kunkel, 1996). As a result, our combined stories and voices empower both individuals and groups, contribute to multiple standpoints and knowledges, and support transformative social action.

Method of Analysis

After my moderator and I conducted all of the focus groups, I transcribed them, along with our moderators' notes. The transcriptions of the six focus groups included sentences and phrases, as well as instances of multiple speakers, utterances, and laughter. I did not, in transcribing the focus groups, correct their grammar or augment their sentence structure in keeping with an authentic and accurate representation of their voices. I waited until I had finished transcribing all of the voices in the focus groups before I gave any thought to what was really contained within them. My colleagues began to ask if I had found anything interesting, but I could do little more than shrug my shoulders. After all, what was "interesting"? What was I *looking* for? What kind of answer would they be

content to hear? I avoided the now-printed transcripts for several days, overwhelmed by the task of looking for what was “interesting” about the people I had talked to and their responses to *The Vagina Monologues*. I calmed myself by remembering that this was an exploratory study, a first look at people and their exposure to *The Vagina Monologues*. It was the first step of several that I saw in delving into *The Vagina Monologues*’s and V-Day’s outreach. I could only look for themes and patterns from their combined voices. I see now that much of my procrastination was due to fear. I felt that if I had to care about one thing, I would have to care about everything. I was standing over a cliff, looking over the edge. It was overwhelming. Then, one day, I returned back to my questions:

How do women and men react to *The Vagina Monologues*?

What does *The Vagina Monologues* communicate to women and men?

How do women and men talk about *The Vagina Monologues*?

and I thought of them in the context of the mission of V-Day:

It is the mission of V-Day to end violence against women by increasing awareness through events and the media and by raising funds to support organizations working to ensure the safety of women everywhere. (Ensler, 2001, p. 173)

I wondered if the people I showed *The Vagina Monologues* to would respond in the same particular way, if they would come to the same problems and solutions.

Seeing everything loom larger than life, I could hardly breathe. And so I took a deep breath, and remembered our stories.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter I lay out my findings before discussing in the following chapter how they relate to my research questions. With everyone's voices situated in concert, I arranged and coded them in connection with my interview questions. Also of note is how I organize the voices of my participants alongside my own voice. Without the pretense of objectivity, I show my researcher privilege in both knowledge and power. Nonetheless, I try to let the individual voices speak for themselves by separating them by spaces, and I show the synergy of focus group conversations by placing them together without spaces. Despite marks such as gender, tone, or body language, I am still hoping that their voices are heard.

Is the Word Out There?

In the first place, it's not so easy even to find your vagina. Women go weeks, months, sometimes years without looking at it. I interviewed a high-powered businesswoman who told me she was too busy; she didn't have the time. Looking at your vagina, she said, is a full day's work. You have to get down there on your back in front of a mirror that's standing on its own, full-length preferred. You've got to get in the perfect light, which then is shadowed somehow by the mirror and the angle you're at. You get all twisted up. You're arching your head up, killing your back. You're exhausted by then. She said she didn't have the time for that. She was busy." (Ensler, 2001, p. 26)

V-Day is not the only effort to end violence against women, but it has been unique in its approach, receiving coverage on television, in magazines, books, and even in sketch comedy (MADtv, 2000). Even so, many people have not heard about *The Vagina Monologues* or know little about it. Ultimately, I thought it was important to ask people if they have heard of *The Vagina Monologues*; I thought it was important to ask, "Is the word out there?"

GI: I think it was a few years back, when it first came out, I saw an episode of Jay Leno, and Calista Flockhart was on it. I think she was like starring on one of the shows. I think she did the monologue where the different moans came out, cause she did a little excerpt of her, her monologue, so that's where I first heard about it.

DE: All I knew was a lot of famous actors and actresses did it, whatever the term, you know, female actors started to do it as well.

Celebrity involvement and exposure most likely had a huge impact on *The Vagina Monologues*'s word of mouth success. Celebrities like Gillian Anderson, Kate Winslet, and Donna Hanover (the ex-wife of ex-New York City mayor, Rudy Giuliani), use their status to raise awareness and money for issues that concern them. Also, like myself, many others who spoke in the focus groups had first found out about *The Vagina Monologues* because of V-Day's College Campaign. As students, many had heard about it in their classes. Others saw flyers in classrooms, halls, or dormitories for San José State University's own *The*

Vagina Monologues performances. Others were lucky enough to have friends who were involved to inform them.

FF: I think when they were doing the production here on campus. There was a lot of advertisement for it.

CA: I've seen, like, posters and what not.

GF: Yeah, I've seen posters.

FH: I've seen the posters around the dorms, and I thought it was some like, uh, I guess, cancer and, uhm, like I thought I read it wrong. Then I was like... promote against cancer kind of thing. I thought I read it wrong. Vaginas. I wasn't paying attention.

IC: I first heard about it in my sex and gender roles class.

HA: I heard about it in drama.

The grassroots involvement that happens on college campuses around the world has made a perfect fit with *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day. College campuses are ideal for distributing mass amounts of information, especially if they instigate self-exploration and activism. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Villard published the book; in a more readily accessible medium, the play would become permanent and referable though less contextualized.

GF: I think I like went somewhere and someone had the book and read it to us, like a portion of it.

People in the focus groups had also heard *The Vagina Monologues* was going to be on HBO. Taking *The Vagina Monologues* out of the theatre and bringing it into

living rooms, albeit cable access channel living rooms, represented a significant moment in V-Day's expansion.

FF: I heard about it on HBO, when it was on, but I never watched it.

DE: I've heard about it, like last year. I think uhm I heard that it was on Broadway, or something, and I heard it was on HBO.

In 2002, *The Vagina Monologues* could be found in theatres, on college campuses, in bookstores, and on television worldwide. *The Vagina Monologues* was gaining ground. Nonetheless, not everyone had heard about it.

II: No, I've never heard of *Vagina Monologues*. This is the first time I've seen the movie, heard that there's such a term.

I was surprised to hear that almost everyone, both male and female, had already heard of *The Vagina Monologues*. While I am certain this does not assume an automatic victory for V-Day, it does point to the fact that "the word" is indeed out there, at least about *The Vagina Monologues*, at least at San Jose State University. As one person pointed out,

I'm a big MTV fan, and I was watching the battle of the sexes and during the thing where their big first kind of like thing with guys, the girls all like go and they did a cheer and they scream vagina like fifty times like vagina, vagina, and I was like, so when I saw this immediately I thought that it must be evolving somehow cause people are more open to saying it, you know, and I don't hear people on the street talking about it. (HF)

* * *

I have to wonder how these people's introductions to *The Vagina Monologues* shaped their viewing of the play. Because it has been touted on college campuses, in the classrooms, maybe they thought it was something historical or of the workshop variety. Maybe they thought they were going to learn about sexual technique. Nonetheless, its word of mouth presence gives it some clout. I had been interested because someone I know and trusted told me about it, was involved in the play. Perspectives taken by the media, too, have been hugely responsible for giving *The Vagina Monologues* a public voice. Albeit in different ways, the play has been addressed by the media critically, with support, with humor, with sarcasm, and with hesitation. Nonetheless, I was concerned that the ones who had been exposed to *The Vagina Monologues* seemed to carry the baggage of their introduction around with them.

The Vagina Monologues and The F-Word

Several, like me, after having heard about *The Vagina Monologues* previously, had quickly associated it with feminism. But unlike mine, theirs were unenthusiastic associations, instead of my more celebratory, community-oriented one. While reading and hearing their responses, connections, and assumptions between *The Vagina Monologues* and feminism, I was both offended

and empathetic, resisting the implication that work by and about women is for women only. Moreover, understanding that feminism has traditionally been very narrow and exclusionary gave me perspective when I heard some of the responses people had about *The Vagina Monologues* and the “f-word.”

IC: When I first heard about the play I was like, uh, it’s probably like another feminist thing, so I never really, never paid much attention to it.

DE: I had no idea what it was about. I was just like okay, whatever. I just thought it was one of those weird, uhm, artistic things that some like to do. But then I did hear it had to deal with women issues, and I have to say I thought it was some feminist saying something that was, you know, just kind of like her, her soap box, or whatever, but I never really knew.

CF: I thought it was more feminist type of thing or some kind of education or, but nothing sexual.

GA: I didn’t really know anything about it. I was like, my guess was that it just felt like pro-, pro-feminism.

HA: I thought it was just where girls talk, like dramatic stories, because in the magazines I always heard it was like, guys would go, oh gosh, girls talk about *Vagina Monologues*. I didn’t know what it was about.

IC: Yeah, my, uhm, sex and gender roles teacher was really like, you know, like, says good things about it, and some of the feminist girls in our class are like, yeah, I like that play. I wanted to see it just, like, but when I watched it, it was a lot better than I expected.

As these comments suggest, the connotations people have formed around feminism prevent them from engaging in *The Vagina Monologues*, outside of those that self-identify as such. *The Vagina Monologues* is about women’s stories, and

exposing women's stories explicitly is associated with feminism. Some of them seem to view feminism as a bad thing, as "weird" or "dramatic." And, therefore, if it deals with women's "issues" or stories, there is no value, or not enough value, in it for those who do not identify as feminist. Whether or not the creators of *The Vagina Monologues* market the play as a response to a feminist plight seems to have little to do with the associations people make on their own. Some people in these focus groups assumed or associated feminist audiences with *The Vagina Monologues* and thereby negated themselves as potential audience members. When the supporters of *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day specifically target women who attend plays, go to college, and/or identify as feminist, they limit their effectiveness and potential to reach V-Day's goal. While this strict categorization may be one of the bigger obstacles facing *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day, more exposure to audiences in socially stimulating contexts might begin to challenge this notion.

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I have to wonder: Only a feminist, in their eyes, would study something like this, right? Did I have "feminist" branded on my forehead? And would that be so bad? Did they consider me a feminist because I was researching *The Vagina Monologues*? And if so, what did that mean for me, for my research data? I am

concerned with how that altered their initial responses, at least until they had a chance to think and talk about the play. At the same time, as a work touting awareness in regards to women's previously muted experiences, I considered how the play might change people's notions of feminism. These experiences are real; these issues are valid, and feminists of many varieties are working hard to alter them. After all, why does *another* word associated with women have to be negative?

Context is Everything

Context, or the conditions and environment in which we watched *The Vagina Monologues*, definitely played a role in how people watched, reacted, and responded. Like the historical context in which *The Vagina Monologues* emerged, the physical context too, affects how it is received. Whether the people in the room, the temperature, or research pretext, context affected people.

EC: Well, obviously I came in late so I didn't get the initial reaction to when it was first put on the screen. But, um, my first thought, my first reaction was to look across the room and see who I was watching this with. I always tend to think about what other people may be thinking, and I don't know. One guy was laughing, and it doesn't matter, it's cool, I don't know you guys. But that was my first thought, to look around the room and notice that I wasn't watching this with my normal group of friends.

Many people, when asked if they would see *The Vagina Monologues* if they had an opportunity, said they would go with a group of friends. Being with people of like mind might influence your comfort level. More specifically, while being with strangers was one thing, the demographics of those strangers were another. Some women in the focus groups, for example, were concerned about men being in the room watching *The Vagina Monologues* as well.

GF: I was like, oh, god, there's guys in the room. I almost felt like, I don't know, just, I think I would have reacted different if there weren't guys, like, yeah, I don't know well. I think it just felt different. I was like, I hope they split us up for the discussion.

IF: Uhm, I was little timid, I guess, with the guys in the room cause, but she was talking about my vagina or like, I have it. I wonder if theirs are like that. I was it was just a little bit shy.

HF: My initial reaction was, there's guys in the room so how are they going to feel?

FD: Yeah, at first I thought it was going to be really weird, like, watching it with guys right next to me, but I was just like, oh my gosh.

DE: I think I was more like, there are guys in here. I think I'll be okay, but there are guys in here. So I think that was my first response, just kind of surprised and just kind of like okay, where are we going with this?... I kind of felt the same apprehension into it just kind of like, "Where are you going exactly, and you know, how far is this going to go? I mean, my gosh, and then once again, I was like, there are guys in here I don't want to get uncomfortable about talking about these kind of issues.

Not only did some women seem affected by the presence of men, but in one case, someone was alert to the non-verbal responses of other people during the film. This person recounted disappointed observations of some in the room while the group was watching *The Vagina Monologues*.

CA: I think, well, you know, from looking around the room there were two guys who were attentive and then two of them who weren't. So one of them was sleeping, the other one was looking around.

The experience of watching *The Vagina Monologues* might have been different for this person had the context been different. With the implied occasion of exploring both women and men's standpoints, women as a traditionally muted group seem to feel apprehensive at having their stories revealed. Men, on the other hand, revealed little in the way of apprehension about watching *The Vagina Monologues* with women.

So while the relationships, gender, and actions of the participants played a part in the context of watching *The Vagina Monologues*, so too did the experiences of the participants. Some people had already seen various forms of *The Vagina Monologues* live. These people remarked on the difference between the DVD/documentary and the live versions, contributing the idea that this might not be all there is to *The Vagina Monologues*.

DA: I was just excited to see it. I've seen it before, and I've seen it in performance and heard about it. My best friend did them, and she was all into it and was passing out all the information, and we all had to wear red nails and the toes, and yeah, it was pretty exciting. So, I was excited to see, I have never seen Eve Ensler doing it, um, and I heard of the HBO special but never seen that, so I was just excited to see how she, her portrayal of it. And it was interesting to hear the background.

FD: Well, I watched it when it came to school, and uhm, I guess it was with, I don't know who was in it, thought it much better. I thought it was even funnier to watch it.... She went on way longer she went through like Christian moans. (laughter)

HF: I saw, uhm, I saw, I think, a different show. It wasn't as intimate as this one. I saw a different piece that, uhm, with my brother. Him and I have different views on it.

CJ: My homegirl was performing in it, told me, yeah, she wanted me to come to show her support here. You can tell, and uh, felt kind of intimidated you could tell some women were into that whole women power thing, kind of intimidating, but it was a cool show.... I just didn't like on the video, and stuff, cause maybe that's it. When I went to the live show, just crazy. You've got massive crowd participation, like, and when they were doing the different kinds of moans, and everything, I had to go, like, do this one... Yeah, you just get this totally different vibe opposed to just like sitting here and kind of watching and you just sit there and not even analyze it, just experiencing it.

Specifically, this person brought up how the motivation, drive, and standpoints from which we watch *The Vagina Monologues* also affect our reactions to it, not just the physical environment. Several people were sensitive to being in a research environment to the point where they censored, apologized, and even questioned my methods as a researcher.

CF: I was going to make a comment, but I don't want to sound so sexist, so...

HD: One of the things that I noticed on this, is that when I was saying before about finding a voice, in that, where the men are alone, I think we're kind of calm right now because that tape recorder's on, but turn that tape recorder off, any conversation could get real raw and, and because we know that at some point women are going to be listening to this.

GE: Oh, I'm not, I apologize to Daniela because I used some coarse language, but I am trying not to use it anymore. But I just, I really, I don't know. I really didn't like, I really don't know.

DJ: When I saw the way the group was split up, I really didn't, I don't know, I hope it's good for whatever purpose this serves, but I really don't like, ah, the gender disparity, like, the splitting up. It's a problem.

In moments where I hoped that participants were expressing their true feelings and reactions, I had to admit that they knew they were being watched and documented, that they were under the proverbial microscope. In fact, one person in Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* struggles with this idea of audience, and people in the focus groups noticed it too:

I have a feeling that, um, some of what they might be talking about is their personal embarrassment, ah, and their personal reservations in talking about this on camera. I have a feeling that's some of what they're talking about because I've thought about that as I was watching some of those women on camera. You're right. They're gonna be on national television, or theatres, or whatever all over the world. And, um, um, the one woman said, no, she's not going to say "cunt" cause her mother's gonna be watching. (HD)

For these reasons, it is again important to acknowledge the lack of objectivity research can provide when of course, the very act of being researched influences responses, albeit to different degrees in regards to surveys, interviews, or ethnographies. It affected the people who were interviewed and subsequently put in front of the public in *The Vagina Monologues*, and it affects the people I researched who knew their voices would be translated into my thesis.

Regardless of the multiple contexts and ways in which people can experience *The Vagina Monologues*, a few people pointed out that not all women would be comfortable with or want to hear about the stories and ideas presented in *The Vagina Monologues*, even though it is about women's experiences.

DA: My roommate in college that I went to go see the plays with... She would be what I describe as a truly feminine girl. She wears skirts in 30 below, and she always looks very nice. It's just the family that she comes from. She's very well to do, so she just has a lot of things. Anyways, she was very uncomfortable through the whole entire thing, and very closed-minded. So even, I think, women could go to it and feel that they can't relate. She really didn't like it at all. The whole time I was really, and she was like, no.

AD: I think I've been trying to convince my one friend to watch, and every time I say the word "vagina," she freaks out. So I don't know, like, I really want her to watch it, so I think it's so taboo, and she'd be, I don't think, I don't know. Some would react, well, maybe surprising, really love it, just because like, but wouldn't push it though.

Like people who believe women and men should occupy their own roles and spaces in life, *The Vagina Monologues* may present itself as too extreme. Muted groups' individual standpoints are often hard to hear when they have been silenced for so long.

Obviously the context of watching *The Vagina Monologues* plays a role in how people react and respond to it. The historical and social conditions of feminism, alongside the exposure to *The Vagina Monologues* (whether on DVD, live, or in a book) affect people's standpoints on this text. Certainly the context of watching *The Vagina Monologues* for research puts a damper on the mood of the experience. People often check their emotions and responses and analyze more than if they were just there to experience *The Vagina Monologues*. I gave rise to some of that by having women and men watch *The Vagina Monologues* together, but they would have had an altogether different experience had they seen it in separated gender groups, live at a college, or even performed by Ensler herself.

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I have to wonder what their reactions would be like if they watched the play at home or at a friend's house. What kind of an impact would casual viewing have on their perceptions of *The Vagina Monologues*? If I could scoop up

a random group of college students, and take them to a live performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, I would. They are right; it's completely different in a theatre, surrounded by other people. The context has certainly been important to my reception of the play. I watched it alone, I watched it in San Francisco with my mom when Ensler did it, a million more times on DVD, and finally on-campus at San Jose State University, put on by students and faculty alike. Each time something completely unique struck me.

I have to wonder what was going through their minds. It was evident they were thinking about their responses in terms of the research agenda. What kind of person do my participants think I am? Some people looked at me while others were laughing during the DVD to see what my response might be. Did they look to me because they found the laughter inappropriate? Maybe they wanted me to know that this environment was affecting the way in which they were able to watch and think about the play, and they wanted to make sure I knew it. To be sure, I kept in mind the context of their exposure as I listened to their responses and reactions to *The Vagina Monologues*.

Responses and Reactions to *The Vagina Monologues*

How does it feel to be talking about it?

Very strange.

I think it's a little it's liberating but it's kind of funny too.

Anxious, kind of nervous, not really sure what I'm going to say.

I really thought it was going to be like uncomfortable, but it's not because you make it kind of easy. (Ensler, 2002)

One of the benefits of using focus groups was my ability to gather reactions relatively unaffected by familiar people and surroundings. However, a drawback might have been the same feeling, that they would be judged by strangers alike. I was hoping for honest, gut reactions. I was happy to find that when I asked them for their initial responses when they found out they would be watching it, or when they began watching *The Vagina Monologues*, their answers ran the gamut and appeared sincere.

IF: I was excited cause I'd heard so much about it, but I'd never see it.

DE: I didn't know what to expect cause I didn't know what it was about. Kind of like, uhm, I don't know. Oh, this is interesting. I'm kind of curious about what the heck this is. Wow. Is it a story or is it, I didn't know what it was, so when she first started talking, you know, she's talking about

loving your vagina, or whatever, I was just like, what? What in the world? Where is this going?

CF: Well, I thought it was going to be kind of boring cause I thought she was going to tell stories, you know, all these experiences, and I thought, I couldn't believe she could spend seventy minutes talking about one body part.

II: I thought it's going to be, you know, probably just heterosexual relationships, you know, what guys think about women.

BB: I was just like, oh, for real? Vaginas. Let me check it out, know what I'm saying, see what it's all about. It was cool, you know, I mean, you know, got a little porn to a certain extent, but it was very, seeing it for the first time, you know, I never knew that, you know, womens look at themselves that way, like they care what's down there, and uh, females just, uh, was ashamed of themselves, like, that, so it was just cool to find out, you know, things that you didn't know, you never experience.

GG: My reaction when it first came on was kind of like well, okay, you know, I'll watch it because I've been meaning to watch it at some point, because I've had friends tell me it's very good, but I really had no reaction really. I don't know. I didn't have any preconceptions on what it was about.

For the most part, the first time participants found out they were going to be watching *The Vagina Monologues* was when they read the agreement to participate form. I was concerned that some of them may have felt tricked and others excited or curious, but no one left. Once they had finished watching it, they had several more responses to add that rounded out their general reactions and responses in regards to what they had seen.

FF: It was really shocking to me, I think, cause it was just soooooo open, you know, you don't get that very often, you know. And some people are like that by nature, you know, and they do talk about it. This was something that, you know, has been touring and on, like, TV and stuff. It's just, surprised, kind of shocking.... It was a bit too explicit at times for me, personally. I was just like, whoa, there.

GA: I thought it was pretty cool, uhm, like seeing it from a guy's perspective, like how, like...nah, I mean, say like, you see it from the like, girl's point of view, but it's kind of like, inside info, like, not supposed to know, but it's like, that's cool.

They also had these kinds of reactions:

II: It's very practical and very realistic the way they set up the theme.... I'm very surprised in a sense. You see real people in a movie, right? You see real people talking about their feelings, and you see, especially when she begins to, uhm, you know, take on people's voices and people's roles, you know, I feel you know a lot of real feelings and real voices through her. That was my initial response, that it's very articulate, very real.

DA: It was interesting. I felt, I felt tons of emotions. I was laughing, I was laughing out loud, I was laughing to myself, I was on the verge of tears a couple of times. Um, in the pissed off one I was pissed off, but I was also laughing. It was amazing how in the seventy minutes, I went through like, four different emotions.

Reactions ran all around the compass from one person to the next, and sometimes within one person:

GE: I don't know, I just found it silly. I just, that, that if they made one about the penis that would be equally silly.... I thought it was silly, and it was immature, and I thought a lot of things she was talking about, well, some of it I thought was good.

IC: Some of them, some of the monologues she did I just wasn't interested in.... So yeah, like kind of like, like there's a couple other ones, okay, is it going to be over? But a lot some of them, oh, wow, really touching.

HA: Well yeah, to go with that, I felt uncomfortable, at times. I'm all, oh no, what's this going to be, like, the whole time, you know, but I'm all like, it quickly went away.

Their variety of reactions from shock, and interest, to emotional and practical, to silly and uncomfortable provides a more holistic and expansive understanding of *The Vagina Monologues*. And while reactions seemed to be mostly open-minded, people in the focus groups were also quick to point out the particular monologues to which they were impelled or repelled. Responses to "The Angry Vagina," "Reclaiming Cunt," and "My Vagina was My Village," among others, began to tease out what was important for different people.

"The Angry One": Confronting Oppression with Humor

Scene marker.

Close up of woman.

Firmly set jaw.

Stern eyes.

Loud voice.

My vagina's angry. It is. It's pissed off. My vagina's furious and it needs to talk. It needs to talk about all this shit. It needs to talk to you. I mean, what's the deal? An army of people out there thinking up ways to torture my poor-ass, gentle, loving vagina.... Spending their days constructing psycho products and nasty ideas to undermine my pussy. Vagina motherfuckers.

All this shit they're constantly trying to shove up us, clean us up, stuff us up, make it go away. Well, my vagina's not going away. It's pissed off and it's staying right here. (Ensler, 2002)

One monologue that particularly stood out was "the angry one" (IF). It inspired conversations about thongs and smell and, even though it was "angry," it was also funny. I believe because it was accessible in this way, it was able to address some of the modern day aspects of being female in a way that made it easier for people to talk about them in the focus groups and, I hope, outside of them.

IF: That one was funny. That one made me laugh...the part where she was saying everything plug it and make it so it's not there and to make it uncomfortable. I was just laughing, uhm. I thought how she, smell like a garden or rain, she said, so I want it to smell like fish because I ordered fish, or something, cause it's funny. I like that part.

GD: I thought the joke was funny, man, about the blind man passed the fish market and said good morning, ladies. That was kind of funny. In some situations females, you know, I don't know, you know. Man, what I was told, my uncle always told me, man, like, before I had sex, he said, man, once you get it, once you get a whiff of that pussy, you're never gonna stop. Ever since then, you know, I've been thinking about it, you know. It's only smell, like they do, pussy, but at the same time sometimes, like, they may have that distinct smell, and you be like, what's going on with that, but that may just kill their self confidence, you know what I'm saying. Looking at that, you know what I'm saying hurting self confidence as a matter of fact, so if she say it to me, just take it in stride.

CJ: So me and my friends just chillin' over there, like, group of girls, like, y'all smell hella fine, just the airways covered in their scent. I had a couple of situations like that though. I remember one time this lady, I was like, she

was like, cool with the family, and stuff, and one day I was in her garage, and uh, I went over there to get some supplies, and I got in the car first, so I'm sitting in the car, and then she gets in the car and sits down. It's like, I get a whole whiff, you know what I'm saying. It's like you can't say nothing. It's like, you know, what's the deal. So, I mean, I don't know, kinda, whole deal.

Both women and men talked about smell and their experiences in relation to smell brought on by this monologue. I was surprised they were willing to acknowledge and initiate further conversation. They were willing to reflect on and reveal their own experiences despite the taboo subject matter. But while both could comment on smell, pap smears were less accessible. In this particular mixed-gender focus group, women were able to relate to aspects of the pap smear experience vocalized in the monologue, while men might have been exposed to the experience for the first time.

IC: I thought another interesting thing was, uh, the pap smear monologue. I don't know, it just, you know, feels like, at eighteen you have to get one every year, and it's very uncomfortable.

GG: I can't really comment too much because I've never had a pap smear. I can't, I felt that kind of detracted a little bit from the overall message. I mean it's important in that it's probably an uncomfortable experience, but I didn't really find the connect there.

FH: But didn't it lead us to how you need to do foreplay and all that stuff to get comfortable before the shove?

IC: And also like every day life like, you know, women get their periods like every, you know, month. It's an important part of female life, you know. A lot of people don't really understand. All they really understand is, oh, she's probably PMSing. That's why she's so cranky. They don't really

understand the physical part as well. I mean either tampons or pads, and they're both very uncomfortable.

GG: Well, my point is I felt like when I was watching that part, I felt like it was almost a Jerry Seinfeld routine, like in the sense that oh, can't you warm that up, really totally, sarcastic like. Uhm, I don't know it's

IC: If you experienced it, you wouldn't find it to be sarcastic. (laughter)

GG: Well, no, I'm not talking about the experience. I'm talking about the way it was presented. It felt like, uhm, it felt like it was being presented for laughs. And I know things that are painful are always, you know, presented for laughs, show, but I felt that's what it was used for or I felt that it wasn't presented in a way that was, like, educational. I'm presenting this cause it's kind of funny even though it's not.

The question of purpose, delivery, and audience seemed at odds for one person.

He had a hard time identifying with the dehumanized standpoint of women's

experiences because he thought the delivery undermined the message. The

women who interacted with him did not mind the delivery because they related

to the experience. On a larger scale, it is possible the women were so relieved to

have these issues addressed that they did not care how they were being

addressed. The man, being educated about the discomforts women go through,

might have wanted to take it more seriously despite Ensler's tone. And like the

man struggling, I believe the means might not always justify the aim.

Beyond just a question of relating to or educating people, *The Vagina*

Monologues also shapes agreement and disagreement. While some may be just

soaking it all in, others perceive the play as debatable opinion. So in the previous

instance, the difference is between women and men's experiences; however, the next example shows divergences in an all female focus group.

- CA: I think it was the thongs. When she said the thong. Like hey, I wear thongs, okay. You know, I don't have a problem with them, but apparently she does so that was inaccurate.
- FF: But it's okay.
- IF: I have a huge problem with thongs, so I loved it. It's very uncomfortable.
- FF: Really?
- IF: Yes, they're like butt floss. I can't wear them.
- FF: I can't feel them at all.
- CA: No. Not at all. They don't move. Regular underwear you feel when...
- CA/FF: Wedgies.
- CA: Those are the worst.
- IF: Thongs are like all day long wedgies.
- CA: No way, you can't even feel them. Yeah. Go to Victoria's Secret for sure.
- IF: I tried it once, and I did not like it. I will not convert. (laughter)

As evidence of this conversation, people both agreed and disagreed with Ensler's portrayal of the undergarment. Their subsequent interaction would not have been possible without the forefronted topic from *The Vagina Monologues* and the synergy of the focus groups. Whether people were talking about smell, pap smears, or thongs, this monologue seemed to bring out the most interactive responses between the focus group members. It initiated conversation about relating and adjusting to experiences women encounter, whether individually or systematically. This monologue seemed to inspire editorial, vagina commentary. "If my vagina could talk it would talk about itself like me" (Ensler, 2002). Key to

Ensler's piece is the connection between self and sexuality, vocalizing the experiences that both mind and body confront and face. For instance she asks, "If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?" in attempts to reconnect our mind/body split (Ensler, 2002, p. 15).

* * *

I have to wonder with all of this knowledge and education, does it translate into practical use in my own life? My own socialization into hegemonic practices like wearing thongs, wearing heels, wearing skirts, and using tampons has been so cemented in my life and expected from women and men alike, the ability to change seems insurmountable. But it is possible in small, courageous steps backed by more knowledge to move forward. What I find so interesting is how women in the focus groups were more likely to support hegemonic practices than the men. This all-female group's interaction about thongs epitomized the very reason I began this research in the first place: hegemony works in such a way that women feel compelled to continue doing things that are uncomfortable, unnecessary, and/or that belittle them because society expects it. *V-Day* and *The Vagina Monologues* seem to do the same thing; they make women responsible for knowing about how to protect themselves, what areas of town to avoid, and what not to wear, while men are let off the hook. But it

suddenly become clear to me why women are as important of an audience as men in regards to *The Vagina Monologues*: we are still under patriarchy's hegemonic spell.

Cunt Hate and Reclaiming Phonetics

Lights up.
Full face of a woman.
Relaxed and open.
Precise enunciation.
Embellished facial expressions.

I call it cunt. I've reclaimed it, 'cunt.' I really like it. 'Cunt.' Listen to it. 'Cunt.' C C, Ca Ca. Cavern, cackle, clit, cute, come—closed c—closed inside, inside ca—then u—then cu—then curvy, inviting sharkskin u—uniform, under, up, urge, ugh, ugh, u—then n then cun—snug letters fitting perfectly together—n—nest, now, nexus, nice, nice, always depth, always round in uppercase, cun, cun—n a jagged wicked electrical pulse—n [high-pitched noise] then soft n—warm n—cun, cun, then t—then sharp certain tangy t—texture, take, tent, tight, tantalizing, tensing, taste, tendrils, time, tactile, tell me, tell me 'Cunt cunt,' say it, tell me, 'cunt.' 'Cunt.' (Ensler, 2002)

On the choice occasions popes and politicians directly refer to female genitalia, the term "vagina" is discreetly engaged.

If you will be so kind, say "vagina" out loud a few times. Strip away the meaning and listen solely to the phonetic sound. It resonates from the roof of your mouth.

A "vagina" could be an economy car:

"That's right, Wanda! Come within five hundred dollars of the actual sticker price, and you'll win this! A brand new *Chrysler Vagina!*"

Or a rodent:

"Next on *Prairie Safari*, you'll see a wily little silver-tailed vagina outwit a voracious pair of ospreys."

Say "cunt" out loud, again stripping away the meaning. The word resonates from the depths of your gut. It *sounds* like something you definitely don't want to tangle with in a drunken brawl in a dark alley.

A "cunt" could be a serious weather condition:

"Next on *Nightline*, an exclusive report on the devastation in Kansas when last night's thunder cunt, with winds exceeding 122 miles an hour, ripped through the state."

Or a monster truck:

"The City Arena is proud to present the Coors Crush 'Em Demolition Round-Up competition, where Randy's Sam's *Beast of Burden* will challenge Mike Price's undefeated *Raging Cunt* in the 666 barrel jump."

Moving from phonetics to etymology, "vagina" originates from a word meaning sheath for a sword.

Ain't got no vagina. (emphasis in original, Muscio, 2002, pp. 3-4)

Many people responded in an assortment of ways to the monologue

"Reclaiming Cunt." While a pejorative term, "cunt" is still not the most frequently used slang. When used and understood, however, it certainly is a word that carries a lot of power. That said, a number of people reacted very strongly to the monologue, some had a hard time identifying its place with *The Vagina Monologues*, and some had no idea.

IF: I didn't like the cunt one. I didn't like how she was saying it, making it sound like a bad word almost. Kinda is, I guess, but I don't know, just don't like it.

GA: Isn't cunt like a derogatory thing? Kinda like, you know, to say to somebody, and they're, yeah, I don't know. I don't think, like, they really needed that one.... Isn't that just like they're trying to, like, putting, like, that word, they're trying, like, keep that word, but like in a positive way.

But people, like, I don't think they're going to change the way people think. It's always going to have that kind of negative, uhm, word.

IF: It's an ugly word.

DE: Yeah, it's very harsh, and I just don't like that, but that's just my own opinion.

So while *The Vagina Monologues* is a potentially powerful collection of personal narratives to be used by muted groups to affect their oppression, it is the phonetics of a word and the delivery of its sounds that makes it into the play.

Muscio (2002), while also concentrating on the sound of both "vagina" and "cunt," goes one step further in identifying the importance to these words' usage. By explaining the importance of reclaiming a pejorative term, she shows that a rose by any other name would in fact smell as sweet, but might not be as revered. One person in particular was concerned with the implications of cunt's usage in *The Vagina Monologues*, even in the sense of trying to change its connotation.

CA: When she got to the part where she was talking about cunt, yeah, to me it just made it seem a bit little disrespectful, and you know, to me it's something because men were in the room, and they were watching as well. I think it gave them this permission for them, feel that we want them to use words like that towards us, and I didn't appreciate that very much.... It's something men, it's something sailors would use, you know, to describe women.... When they hear words like cunt and things like that, it gives them more, they feel like they have more authority to use that type of language towards us, and they're not really paying attention to what she's really saying.

This person pinpoints the problem in trying to change the connotations of words; their continued usage is a problem if the ears that hear them are not re-informed on their new status or definitions. Bringing up a number of relevant points, this response revealed limitations in Ensler's attempts to affect language and women's muted status. She does not seem to have a clear message in regards to the word, and by performing it in a variety of contexts, the threat is that the message is lost, especially on men.

For some, it was exactly this monologue's performance that bothered them. Ensler enacted the letters and sounds of the word, used alliteration in attempts to connect us to it. However, it was this delivery of "Reclaiming Cunt" that evoked a response and the lack of connection to anything overtly meaningful.

GC: I would say, I guess, the part where she's talking about like cunt, the name, you know, and like, it was soooo dramatic, going through every letter, like "c" or you know, or descriptive. I was like, okay, don't know. I don't know if that term could ever be like totally reclaimed like a good thing calling it that, but you know it was over dramatic for me.

FD: When she would make her face all, just like, really dramatic, like that. I was just like, calm down. (laughter)

FH: Like a lot of it was

IC: It was just fake.

FH: I didn't like her facial expressions.

IC: Yeah. It was over exaggerating, and it was just horrible, and it was like
FH: Just stop.

This piece appeared to be mostly a vocal and facial performance, with perhaps only an implied significance. Many seemed to come away from this particular monologue more confused than educated or inspired. So while a few had some tentative responses and others invigorating ones, others just did not have a clue because they were not familiar with the word or its meaning.

II: The other part about cunt, you know, where she went on and on about cunt. I mean that was, I think, if I hadn't asked my husband like, um, just a couple of weeks ago because back in Singapore we follow the British system, and I don't say, "I can do this," and Americans would say "I can't," right? But I would "I cunt" because it's "can" and "cunt," and then he would say, no. No, don't use cunt, you know. It's a bad word. What does it mean? It means vagina, you know. Americans pronounce "c-u-n-t," and I just looked at him, and said, oh, no. That means I've been saying cunt to all my classmates all this time, and nobody told me anything about it because people have difficulty understanding sometimes the way I say can't and cunt and can't, so I don't have to, you know, make the switch in intonation, and I think but that...but you know the audience was laughing, you know, and when she started saying that she reclaimed her vagina, and she starts talking about cunt, cunt, cunt and I was like, you know, sooo? (laughter) Because, I mean, that vocabulary does not exist in my vocabulary. Cunt. You know, so what, you can't say cunt, but it's a big deal to her.

DE: I had no idea about the cunt thing either. I was like, I have no, I've got to find out, I have no idea what that means cause when she kept saying it I was like, what is the big deal. I didn't even know that word existed, in all honestly.... I had no idea. I have no idea what that means. I was like looking around. Everyone seemed to understand what that was. And I was like hmmm. I don't even, I never heard of it. Never in my life! So I

made a mental note, going to go look that up. No idea what that is. I feel like I'm missing something, especially when she went on and on and on about each and every letter. And I was like, but not, in all honestly I think vagina sounds much better. Cunt just sounds really vulgar and not respectful.

IC: Well, where I'm from, well, uhm, San Francisco, we don't really like cunt, doesn't really like, don't think of it as anything, so it's like oh, no, oh.... Yeah, if someone called me a cunt I'd be like, oh, okay (laughter) but if they called me, like, another word, I don't know. It's just another word I grew up, heard it was offensive. I don't find it offensive cause I was never brought up cause people never said it around me.

So while a fair number of people reacted very strongly to this visceral dissection and delivery, someone else believed that perhaps this monologue optimized what Ensler was going for in doing *The Vagina Monologues* in the first place:

The Cunt. Probably from the beginning of that piece to the end of that piece, I think my reaction to it changed dramatically. I think I was very, uh, viscerally, kind of, had this reaction, of this is not a, this, this word hurts my ears, and um, it's not something that I want to hear, and the dissection of the word that she did just made it not. I don't think I embrace it as a word that I love, but she does, but I don't think it hurts my ears, or hurts me, like it did when the piece first started. (GH)

The diverse and numerous responses to "Reclaiming Cunt" made it an obvious conversation piece. However, the purely auditory sense in which it is related seems to bring little to the table in terms of content for discussion and progress.

The people in my focus groups struggled with this, as I imagine people viewing or reading *The Vagina Monologues* in other contexts might, despite its potential.

* * *

I have to wonder how I would have responded to this monologue if I had not been positively exposed to “cunt” before. Again, another friend I trusted and respected introduced me to the book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (Muscio, 2002), and so to my mind “cunt” is a word shared in a community of women as an expression of love, power, and transformation. Before it was that to me, it was a secret word, a word like “snatch,” that only men used when they were with other men to talk about women in a derogatory way, relating to the same contextual way black or African American people use “nigger.” The power of language for both oppressive and transformative means is only useful in as far as we are aware of it.

On a Global Scale: Rape Education

Off stage.

Candid.

Black and white photos.

Sorrow and anguish.

In 1993, I was walking down a street in Manhattan when I passed a newsstand and was suddenly struck by a deeply disturbing photograph on the front page of *Newsday*. It was a picture of a group of six young women who had just been returned from a rape camp in Bosnia. Their faces revealed shock and despair, but more disturbing was a sense that something sweet, something pure, had been forever destroyed in each of their lives. I read on. Inside the newspaper was another photograph of

the young women, recently reunited with their mothers and standing in a semicircle in a gymnasium. There was a very large group and not one of them, mother or daughter, was able to look at the camera....

When I returned to New York after my first trip, I was in a state of outrage. Outraged that 20,000 to 70,000 women were being raped in the middle of Europe in 1993, as a systematic tactic of war, and no one was doing anything to stop it. I couldn't understand it. A friend asked me why I was surprised. She said that over 500,000 women were raped every year in this country, and in theory we were not at war. (Ensler, 2001, p. 60)

In every single focus group, rape was a topic of discussion. Given that the center of the V-Day movement is ending the violence that *The Vagina Monologues* encouraged discussion about, I wondered if my groups would latch on to that as well. However, it did not dominate most of the conversations. Rape came up in many forms. The Bosnian story touched their ignorance, the number of people raped in the United States stirred their memories, and the connection to relationships shook their spirits.

HF: I think the most disturbing one was about the whole rape part, especially the pictures because I didn't know that there was rape camps.

GI: The stories, the Bosnian story, all that, it's just so, so sad, and um, violent, that you sort of look at it.

DA: It's amazing. I don't think that I was aware actually, I wasn't aware, about the camps. That, like, the whole background part isn't discussed during the plays, um, so there was actually a lot of stuff that I really was surprised, and that whole section, I was, I was in awe. I had no idea.

HF: I mean, I know people who have been raped so you know to me it's like a crime, and it happens on the street, it's everywhere, but just to know that there's this group of women during the war, and that's all that they were doing, you know. And then her monologue about it when she goes into graphic detail about it. I mean, she hasn't, she wasn't even looking at the audience. It was like, very, totally disconnect form which I think kind of drew me in more.

DE: Probably for me the Yugoslavian one that she even gives that, that monologue herself. I don't know. Bad. I just felt for the women. I don't know by experience but just, just thinking how what, what would, number one, how awkward that would have been in the moment, the experience. How, uh, I don't even want to think about how they felt, uhm, but then now how do they move on? How do they forgive? Could you have an intimate relationship with a man? I mean, I'm sure women have, but how could you? Cause there's no respect. There was no respect for you when that happened. I just felt for them, and I was just, uh, I don't know. I was devastated when I heard that, is the saddest thing I ever heard. I don't know if you could ever, I don't think you could fully heal from that, and what kind of scars would that be? I mean, I bet these women in their relationships with men, like, if they found someone and they have a great relationship, I wonder how much it would scar that relationship, though, just don't, in every aspect of it. And I mean that's something that they have to carry, and I think that one hit me the most.

While the monologue on the Bosnian rape camps captured many people's attention, people also caught the stories of rape among other monologues and in the interviews. Part of the hook was the way in which Ensler performed these women's stories. The point she was making about going into other countries when 700,000 people are raped each year in the U.S. stood out in concert with these stories. With that affecting relationships so personally, as these people

note, it goes above and beyond just affecting one person; a whole society is wounded by rape.

GD: She was talking about rape, and stuff. She kind of opened my eyes, but like, there were so many ladies that she was interviewing, and uh, you know, and had encounters with rape some kind of way. Date rape, you know, uh, somebody's, the father's friend, you know, dad, people. It's just surprising how many, you know, are so like, I don't know, that type of stuff. I didn't know that that many women raped in a year, you know, 700,000 that means rape in the course of a year is more killed than at war. That's kind of, that's kind of wrong, like, you know. I grew up in a gang household full of women. That kind of touched me because I know that if anybody came at my, my, my sister like that, my cousin or my girlfriend, I'd be like, you know, I would be ready to kill someone. That kind of touched me, you know, like, that's kind of cold to have that, you know, for a woman, change her whole life.... For a long time a woman was raped when she was younger but she finds a man that she's really in love, you know, they take a long time, you know, to consummate with male. She lets him know why takes her so long. It could affect him too, so it's a long road process, have sex for so long. It's like more, more as possible with the reason why it takes her so long. It could affect him too.

GE: One of the parts was actually, uhm, was good was the part when she was talking about uhm the 14 year old girl and how her vagina had become the source of, um, pain and blood cause she got raped and how, you know, it just totally affected, like, all her relationships, and she was only, like, 16 years old, and that's how she felt, and after that, like, it made me, kinda made me think I was in her shoes, you know, even though I'm not. It kinda made me more sympathetic to her, you know.

II: When she gave that different angle when she talked to rape victims, I realized that, you know, that we begin, I begin to see the vagina in a different way and how it so defines women, and I begin to understand, uhm, and I begin to understand the rape victims more so that was what I got out of it.

Even as some were taking heart in new international knowledge and others were pointing to the seriousness of rape in this country and its effects, one man thought Ensler was still going about it in the wrong way.

DJ: She talks about how it's serious and how it's sad and how she wanted to see these women because they were raped and these rape camps, and it caused her to do something, and I think rape is a really horrible thing, and it's a really bad thing that happens to anybody it happens to, and it really does do a lot of things she says it does, but if you're gonna talk about rape and if you're gonna do, be, make a serious difference, which is what you should do if you are going to throw out statistics, and if you're gonna go interview people, if you're gonna find something out about it, and you need to, you should be willing, or able, or choose to be, choose to have a serious message, not just like, oh, this 5 minutes of my monologue I'm gonna talk about how women are raped, and the 5 minutes before I'm gonna talk about a coochi snatcher and lesbianism, and the 5 minutes after I'm gonna talk about the southern moan.

For this person, the topics Ensler tackles are too important to be belittled by her selection. So in many senses it is not only the content that matters but also the style and context in which it is presented. Again, men's privileged position seemed to allow them to be hypercritical to the whole package as opposed to celebrating the sharing of women's muted experiences.

While rape came up in every focus group, it was not the overwhelming response of men or women, as the "natural" flow from *The Vagina Monologues* into V-Day might suggest. Interestingly enough, participants see *The Vagina Monologues* as pointing out several other problems within society along with

rape. While rape may be a universal tie for women, they are not just oppressed physically. They suffer other consequences that affect their sexuality and identity, consequences that, without these stories, we might never acknowledge.

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I have to wonder: How many times have I seen this DVD, this version of *The Vagina Monologues*? And yet during one of the focus groups a shiver ran down and into my shoulders during the rape monologue and section of the DVD. I cannot help but remember *S.: A Novel About the Balkans* (2000), a book I read about Kosovo and rape camps before I had even heard of *The Vagina Monologues*. I knew what had happened. A man leaves at the beginning of the rape monologue. I wonder if he is uncomfortable, if he knows someone. I wonder if I am reading into it, and he just does not want to confront heavy issues. He is gone for sometime, and I wonder if the DVD has scared him off. But he comes back in and stays until the focus groups are over, only he was once again diverted by text messaging on his cellphone. Have I pushed them too far? I have to wonder why this has never occurred to me before. Now, I know Ensler's birth monologue was an afterthought, but abortion certainly needs to be addressed as well. Maybe this is not a self-proclaimed feminist piece, but it

certainly is addressing women's health and violence against women. I consider restricting women's decisions in regards to their physical health as violent.

Sexuality and *The Vagina Monologues*

If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?

If your vagina could talk, what would it say, in two words?

A beret.
A leather jacket.
Silk stocking.
Mink.
A pink boa.
A male tuxedo.
Jeans.
Something formfitting.
Emeralds.
An evening gown.
Sequins.
A tutu.
See-through black underwear.
Something machine washable.
Costume eye mask.
Purple velvet pajamas.
A red bow.
A large hat full of flowers.
A leopard hat.
A silk kimono.
Glasses.
Sweatpants.
A tattoo.
An electrical shock device to keep
unwanted strangers away.
High heels.
Lace and combat boots.
Purple feathers and twigs and shells.
Cotton.
A bikini.
A slicker

Slow down.
Is that you?
Feed me.
I want.
Yum, yum.
Oh, yeah.
Start again.
No, over there.
Lick me.
Stay home.
More, please.
Let's play.
Don't stop.
More, more.
Remember me?
Come inside.
Not yet.
Whoah, Mama.
Rock me.
Enter at your own risk.
Oh, God.
Thank God.
I'm here.
Let's go.
Thank you.
Bonjour.
Too hard.
Don't give up.
Where's Brian?
That's better.
Yes, there. There.

(Ensler, 2001, pp. 15-21)

After people described how specific monologues affected them, they also talked about larger notions introduced in and relating to *The Vagina Monologues*. While people discussed rape the most in the focus group interviews, *The Vagina Monologues* also imparted/illuminated/engaged related problems like sexual oppression, questions of power, hegemony, and ideas of shame, blame, and responsibility.

Vagina is Me, Woe is Me

When watching *The Vagina Monologues*, people began to see the vagina as symbolic for several things. The idea of asking, "What would it wear?" and "What would it say?" certainly outlined the connection vaginas have to a sense of identity. People's experiences have a direct effect on their perceptions of their vaginas, and their vaginas' experiences have a direct effect on how they felt about themselves. As a result of our sexual oppression, as both women and men, it is not surprising to find that conflicting ideas about our identity and self-esteem are wrapped up in our sexual organs and sexual expression.

DE: What I like about what Eve was saying was that she kind of held that in high regard, that the vagina is kind of a symbol of the women's sexuality.

HD: Cause, I mean, for me I was just trying to look at the vagina, was just trying to represent a symbol for something. But then she kinda did turn it

into a bunch of other stuff, like what it really meant, what it really was physically. But then she was trying to mix it in some kind of symbolic meaning behind it.

HG: I kinda interpreted the vagina as like, the woman, or like power to the woman...but what it represents is the woman, the power, her soul.

DJ: Yeah, but like he said, they trans-, she changes it from an actual physical entity to it actually being yourself, right? And that's where it's different, right? We could never know what it's like to have a vagina, but we do know what it's like to have a sexual identity, or an identity, or some sort of internal, like, feeling that is caused by your sexuality.

GG: Yeah. When I looked at it, it was kinda like it almost didn't seem like *The Vagina Monologues*. It seemed like the story, like, of these women. Uhm, it almost seemed the vagina was an extension of, that, that seems weird to put it that way but, uhm, that's how I say is, is that, you know, people got this uncomfortable subject and came up with these very uncomfortable topics that were things that have affected them very deeply, and so I kind of saw it as, more as, like at first I didn't see it that way. At first I kinda thought, but as it went on more I got this connection. They're no longer talking about, you know, vaginas. They're talking about women, and these women, so I also got that it was kind of symbol of sexuality, obviously, and sexism. And a lot of people forget true statement what we express through this symbol.

So not only was Ensler talking concretely about vaginas, what they can do, what can be done to them, but she also talked about how this body part interacts with the world and affects every aspect of a woman's life. It is as if vaginas are also a muted group, that they have their own standpoints, from which we have kept them from expressing. The mind/body duality allows us to cubbyhole our feelings in regards to our sexuality despite the effects on our identity. Ensler

shows us this by giving women's stories a voice, but also by giving a voice to vaginas. "My vagina's angry. It is. It's pissed off. My vagina's furious and it needs to talk. It needs to talk about all this shit. It needs to talk to you" (Ensler, 2001, p. 69). We express things like love through acts of sex, through vaginas, without speaking about vaginas' experiences. But with sexual oppression, with coercion and date rape and marital rape, maybe we need to start talking about the vagina's experiences.

By viewing *The Vagina Monologues*, several people were able to incorporate *The Vagina Monologues* into their own experiences for self-liberation. It began by changing their notions of identity. Women and men were able to see how sexual experiences affect our notions of self.

CA: I think that it displayed, I mean, gave a good representation of how, like, the vagina is connected to women, women are their vaginas and, you know, it's like when she had it talking how angry it was trying to show how women feel.... I think it's also sacred, it defines us as women so it's not something to be played with, you know, in a sense, it's serious, that's what I think.

GI: I think what I got from it was, like, a connection between 'vagina' and identity and not being able to divorce the two, and, you know, like, discarding that whole ugliness that somehow shadows 'vagina', you know, how it's more than just your body part, and to relate that with who you are as a person and identity, and all of that, I think, was the most interesting.

GH: I think the sense of self that comes out of it is kind of the point. She starts with kind of a basic cosmetic things that, our outward appearance, and kind of culturally defined, and then sort of moves into the emotional and personal, and then sort of that 'vagina is self' is kind of it; you know, it is you, its not really a part, it really is a reflection and goes to who you are.

GA: I think, like, uhm, the most important thing pointed out to me was like, uhm, kind of, made the idea, like, the vagina is not a thing, it's who you are.

DE: I was just thinking how it defines so many women in all of the monologues, like, who they were. Like that one woman who didn't even like it. She didn't think it was, she thought it was ugly until that guy came into her life and uh, changed her perspective on it, because all of sudden it was beautiful, and it changed her view of herself and then how it defined that young girl who was raped, I think that was that one or whatever.... Yeah, coochi snoorcher. I mean that defined who she was as a person eventually. Uhm, not that it doesn't have, I'm not saying defining moment in her life. I just think it influences how you perceive yourself and how you live your life, whether it empowers you or whether you, something whether it liberates you.

II: Yeah, I'm surprised that a vagina plays such an important role in defining a woman. I mean, just talk about like, you know, having the right clothing and all these verbal, observable traits for ourselves, and I never thought about the vagina, you know, defining, like you said, defining, having such an important role.

Not only do sexual experiences affect how we see ourselves, but they also affect the way others see us. By realizing the relationship between our bodies and minds, we can reconnect how we feel about ourselves and how we express ourselves physically.

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I have to wonder how I would respond to questions about what my vagina would say and wear. I am so close to the play and the movement, so critical of its implications that my own vagina has become a political message. Would I struggle with the most is knowing my own oppression but trying to resist my socialized, hegemonic, knee-jerk reactions. I have to retrain my mind and body to react responsibly, sensibly, and conscientiously. It is just a relief to see that people in the focus groups were making the connection as well. The personal really is political.

Unseen, but Heard

Part of what affected the way women and men in these focus groups spoke was the way in which *The Vagina Monologues* represented women, men, and sexuality. As a feminist text, *The Vagina Monologues* obviously foregrounded women and their experiences to contradict, challenge, and give voice to their muted group position. This reversal in the status quo had an interesting effect on what people learn from *The Vagina Monologues*. At the same time, the presence of several homosexual experiences in the play challenges the status quo and incites more conversation.

CF: I thought that the one story about that homeless, uhm, you know how she was talking about all those homeless females, and she was telling her this

one girl who was sexually abused when she was young and then later on, uhm, discovered that you know her vagina in fact was, you know, good through the lesbian experience. I don't know. (laughter) I thought that was kind, in my opinion, kind of fake. I don't know, I mean, it's probably real, but it just, I don't know. It sounds like something from a porno movie or something (laughter).

HF: One question I was surprised she didn't ask was, I mean, she said, like, what would your vagina wear but what would they actually say when they meet, like what do they say to it, like what would the vagina say to the penis?

GG: Hi.

HF: Yeah.

GG: What do you want?

GC: Don't come here.

HF: No, that was one thing. She had all these conversations, you know, indirect conversations, like that talked about penetration, all that stuff, but never really what, she never asked that question. That's kind of like the more piece that would go into it so

GC: So it was always like the independent talking. It was never like

HF: Yeah, it is kind of hard, kind of, to think of, you know, where's the other thing? That kind of, cause I think the two, like, they go together.

GC: But then not really cause she was talking about lesbian relationships too.

HF: Yeah.

AI: She may have intentionally left it out.

HF: But she did never talked about them too. Vagina to a vagina. What would they say? She could have a whole, you know

GC: Maybe she was leaving, kind of, I don't know that she was talking about sex.

HF: Yeah, but she never went that in detail.

GC: Yeah, she talked about more a women's perspective on

HJ: I don't remember it, but she talked about her and the two girls, like that hot girl in the apartment, but uh, what about, like, its time with a guy, like, where's time with

HF: Yeah, she made it more negative with the man.

- GC: Yeah, but then she was talking about like, you know, when they were screaming, you know, her screaming moans and everything, maybe. I don't, she wasn't talking about in a bad sense like
- HF: Yeah, but that was, I took that as being a female sex worker with another female.
- GC: Oh, that's right.
- HF: And the only time she ever said something positive about a guy with a girl was when the guy, the one that wanted to look at it all of the time, and you know, other than that, it's like everything else was like lesbian.
- GC: Women understand women more.
- HF: It makes 'em angry and like, damn so it's like, yeah. I just got a more negative sense of men when, after watching it, but uh, yeah, she, I don't know.

The spontaneity of a focus group environment, with the synergy of the moment and the unique characteristics of a particular group, invigorated interactions like these. This focus group discussion and comments made by individuals in other focus groups pointed out how shaking up the status quo subtly affects the way people think and react. So effective is it that people get messages and meanings from *The Vagina Monologues* that it does not outwardly vocalize, the most noticeable of which was not in line with heterosexist assumptions. The idea of lesbians and of heterosexual women standing on their own with their vaginas, without the "counterpart," seemed wholly unfeasible. For another person, resistance to anti-heterosexism was more obvious.

- DJ: On the sex thing, I wasn't offended but I was like, she kinda was talking how a girl who has had a bad experience with a guy, well, first because she was raped, then because she didn't understand it, and then some girl

came along, and understood what she want. And then all of the sudden the woman can only understand what the woman wants. Yet, there is exceptions like a Bob. One out of, the way she made it sound, like one out of every country, you know, like, you'll never find a Bob.... It left me wondering, like, why can't I, why, like, why can't I, like, she talked about Bob, and then the other male characters are like the guy who raped the girl, and you know, how, the rape camp men, like the majority of male portrayals in the whole thing was men rape women. And men do things to hurt vaginas. And like, how is that supposed to make me feel, when I like, I like vaginas, too, they're pretty good.... Who is causing your problem, and it's society, and specifically the patriarchal society that is ran by men, who use their penises to rape you and to beat you and to do horrible things to.... They were not painted as, like gun-toting rapist. And we were. Like, not we, but our gender was.

Having an entire play, an entire DVD, an entire conversation about women and sexuality seemed threatening to participants so used to the dominant culture of men and heterosexual expressions. As a result, they perceived the play as depicting aspects of the status quo negatively. Some found it to be anti-male and anti-heterosexual, and therefore uncomfortable or unreal. Social constructions of "lesbian," "feminist," and "man-hater" affect reactions to *The Vagina Monologues*. The heterosexist assumptions of our society most likely had never been challenged before, and without this play to question their status quo, they might never have questioned it.

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I have to wonder what some people are so afraid of. Why can lesbian experiences not be presented as normal? Why can the play not focus on women without men? Men have been seen as powerful without women for centuries. And yet because the play does not specifically mimic heterosexual expectations of sexual expressions, they want to nullify its entire meaning and message. And then, as I have seen in the past, women, and men in particular, lock on to the only representation they see of their gender, and if it does not reflect their own visions of themselves, they get angry. Why? I want to ask. What is making you so upset? Can you stop being so ethnocentric for a minute to understand that not everyone is like you? There is such beauty in diversity, and yet some were only able to connect a woman being with another women to pornography. I am angry, angry that we are so locked into one way of thinking that we cannot stop for a moment to open our eyes to take a look at the narrow world we have created.

The Mute Button: Gaining Control of the Remote

In response to rape and several of the issues *The Vagina Monologues* raises, many people in the focus groups were quick to pinpoint "society" as disregarding and belittling important issues like rape and sexual oppression.

They saw our collective muted group status in regards to sexuality and specifically voicing vagina stories as a systemic problem, one almost insurmountable.

DE: There's a, like you said, it's like a taboo even though I consider myself pretty, I'm conservative, at the same time pretty open if you want to talk about stuff, I'll talk about it.

CJ: It's kind of weird though cause you kind of expect it cause, you know, taboo, like everyone's supposed to be all like proper, and sex is taboo, you know. It's human nature. It's not something that like, is out of reach.

HD: I first realized how kinda taboo the word vagina is, um, that kinda holds different meaning. Like when we heard, when she would say the word cunt, we all kinda giggled, just because we are probably used to using different words.

II: I think from this taboo at issues that we don't talk about it and like, ask if, like, our vagina is there to serve you know, uhm, basically males, right? And then she brings it up by talking about it and bringing in different perspectives on how getting other people to talk about it makes me feel, like, you know, that it's not a sacred thing. It's okay to talk about it. That it's okay to disagree with things, and basically it doesn't serve the sexual function of just satisfying males or other people, but also it should, you know, empower you and not just in reproductive but also in sexual functions, and I think emotionally as well, and I think all these different perspectives that she brings to the movie gives me a clear understanding of, you know, how the vagina functions in my mind.

People are brought up with these taboo notions, and so we have a confusing and limited education about our bodies. When and if students are presented with

such notions in an educational setting, it is very dry and without much real life application.

IC: I mean you have to live with your body parts every day so, and it's like many people were brought up, taught, you know, about it. They were just kind of left, you know, to wonder oh, is this right, is this wrong. I think she's trying to shed light on many years of people like, avoiding it.

FH: I don't know about the guys. The girls knew about it, you know, how like how they talk about it like, how about them giving birth. You see the videos in like bio or something and you see it but like, she really describes every single detail and other parts throughout the, I thought it was interesting to hear it in words. You see it and then you never think about it.

We are taught, and therefore led to believe, that communication about vaginas and sexuality is taboo. As a continuation of the separation of mind and body, we have become ignorant of our whole selves. In response to this predicament, some identified through *The Vagina Monologues* that it is simply a question of power in society.

HA: What I got from it, she didn't really like specifically say it, I guess, but like the purpose of it, that like, in our culture, like our American culture, and throughout, we focus so much on the guy's part, and like that so mentioned and so easily talked about as such a topic of discussion whereas this isn't, and then she's giving the voice.

EC: It also has to do with who holds the power in society. Since men hold the power, women want a piece of it.... It's very easy for us to sit here and be very short sided about the subject. But also, globally, men have power so it's easy for us to be downtrodden on women, not only women but

minorities. When somebody rises up and makes a documentary, or a minority gets into office, it's easy for us to say, look, we did a good job.

DJ: Who is causing your problem, and it's society, and specifically the patriarchal society that is ran by men, who use their penises to rape you and to beat you and to do horrible things to you and you need to discover your womanhood because they're forcing you to keep it from you, when it's something within yourself that nobody can keep from you if you choose to accept it.

The problems seeming so insurmountable, I was surprised to hear the participants come away from *The Vagina Monologues* with a process to begin deconstructing the oppression that both women and men suffer at the hands of begin poorly socialized sexually. In watching *The Vagina Monologues*, participants reflected that through education and awareness, we can slowly learn to heal the relationships we have with our bodies, our sexualities, and with each other.

* * *

I have to wonder how it is possible to get so many different reactions from people. People were quick to say it is "society" without pinpointing people specific in their lives, pointing to themselves as culprits of continuing these destructive actions. What responsibility can we take in our own lives to deconstruct this oppressive society? Because the DVD said nothing of V-Day, said nothing of its missions, its means, and its resources, people from my focus

groups left without a clear idea of what to do. They had more knowledge, but what would they do with it?

Women and Men, On Earth Together

Profile of a woman.

Hands up in acceptance.

Conceding.

This is how I came to love my vagina. It's embarrassing, because it's not politically correct. I mean, I know it should have happened in a bath with salt grains from the Dead Sea, Enya playing, me loving my woman self. I know the story. Vaginas are beautiful. Our self-hatred is only the internalized repression and hatred of the patriarchal culture. It isn't real. Pussys unite. I know all of it. Like, if we'd grown up in a culture where we were taught that fat thighs were beautiful, we'd all be pounding down milkshakes and cookies, lying on our back, spending our days thigh-expanding. But we didn't grow up in that culture. I hated my thighs, and I hated my vagina even more. I thought it was incredibly ugly. I was one of those women who had looked at it and, from that moment on, wished I hadn't. It made me sick. I pitied anyone who had to go down there. (Ensler, 2002)

It was all too obvious to the participants that they were in mix-gendered company while watching *The Vagina Monologues*. Though it was a research situation, it was also a context that several people were uncomfortable with, at least initially. Even though I alternately separated and kept together different genders, I asked each group, "How do you think other genders would respond

The Vagina Monologues?" Some women thought men would have a sexual response:

CA: I think they'd be turned on. Personally I think they'd be turned on.

FF: For me I think the reason I thought that guys would be turned on by it, just uhm, for a sense, I think, something like this, they like girls who embrace who they are, you know, so this type of topic, any type of topic, they've been, you know, pretty turned on, like, they like discussing it, you know, because they like a girl who is willing to talk about it, you know, cause, you know, they don't have that part so they want to know everything about it.

CF: I'm pretty sure there's probably some guys when they saw *Vagina Monologues* they probably thought it was probably something sexual.

Others believed men might be interested in the play:

FF: How I look at the group of friends I have and the guys in it, you know, and I know there's some of them that would watch it, you know, feel a little bit better about themselves when they left, you know, that they knew something about it, knew what was going on, you know, because they don't have, they don't know what's going on, and there's other guys that would like, yeah, it's just another girl talking about raising women power.

HA: Like just out of knowing that college-age guys are, I don't what to say, somewhat experienced, but like very curious, and like, would like to hear, well, not necessarily would like to hear about it, but would be curious or laugh or maybe would be able to relate to it, in the sense of girls. I hate to say that, but I think there are some things they can relate to or stories that they have with girlfriends that they've been close with, and they know about that and they could go, oh yeah. Maybe. Maybe they could relate to it.

Still others thought men would disconnect from the experience of watching *The*

Vagina Monologues or engage it:

GH: I suspect that the first reaction is when they are told what they're going to see today. I think most of them would say, oh my god, what did I get myself into? Um, and they might have that reaction to maybe two-thirds of it, because it might not be something that they personally can relate to. Like, why am I watching this? What's the point of, you know, I think they would get something from the stories, obviously, but they might come into it from the beginning thinking that this is not directed to them, that this is not something for them that they could get much out of.

GC: I would think that guys would disconnect when they watch that because they get to, uhm, I don't know, hear about something that's not talked about and, uhm, on the flip side is always kind of interesting to hear how women think or feel about things, give their own opinions, different sides, you get to understand each other better that way.

IF: I think they'd probably have like the two extremes. Either they'd like, appreciate it or just disregard it completely and feel like they'd hear the first word and be like, this isn't for me or like or they'd completely embrace it. I think, I don't think there's like an inbetween.

Female participants came up with a variety of ways in which the male participants might react from being turned on, relating to the topics, and learning from them to resisting and disconnecting from them. It was insightful to learn that many women believed men could approach *The Vagina Monologues* from so many standpoints. A clear idea of how women thought men would react to *The Vagina Monologues* did not emerge across one group or all of the groups.

At the same time, men also did not seem to agree on how they felt women would respond, and they oddly enough answered the question, "How do you think other genders would respond *The Vagina Monologues*?" primarily with one-word answers. A group of male participants vocalized their beliefs that the concurrent female group might think they were talking about "penis envy" and "sex," while "they're thinking they're going to start a revolution, take over the world-type stuff" (male group 1). Another male group said the female group might be talking about the "same thing" or "evil dicks" (male group 2). It seems the men thought women were talking primarily about them and doing so in a negative light. This may reflect back to men's reactions to feminism in which some believe it is purely anti-male sentiment.

Even though some groups were mix-gendered, it was difficult to understand if any of their ideas about the other gender were accurate compared with everyone's verbal contributions. In this case, their differing response length (whether long and explanatory, or brief, one-word answers) seems telling, although I am not sure of what exactly. Again, it is possible that, because of the research capacity in which the women and men were watching and talking about *The Vagina Monologues*, they foregrounded perceivably acceptable reactions and remarks as opposed to their true feelings. This information, however, is just as

telling, with its implications for what participants want to reveal in research situations.

* * *

I have to wonder at how women and men uphold specific constructions of one another. It is like they need to hold onto and believe these shallow representations of other genders in order to know their own place in the world. Nonetheless, I cannot escape the ways in which women gave men considerable credit for their responses, when men would not do the same for them. But it makes sense to me that men would fear women suddenly becoming alert to their suppression and women suddenly becoming aware of their oppression, their participation in hegemony, and threatening their pornography, their jobs, their expectations for relationships. That is why I feel they have relegated lesbian experiences to a sexually objectified position in order to not take them seriously, for example. But these harmful constructions cannot last forever; women and progressive men cannot let them.

Ideas of Gender Communication

The Vagina Monologues exposed ways in which women and men communicate separately and together. *The Vagina Monologues* inspired

conversations about gender communication, ways in which women and men are often thought to speak both in regards to the play and to everyday talk. People in the focus groups had specific ideas as to what women and men talk about, how they talk, and what is acceptable and what is taboo for each gender. They also spoke about the positives and negatives of these communication rules and perceptions. For example, in regards to masculine speak, participants pointed to men's ability to vocalize being proud about their sexuality and their ability to be "raw" in conversation.

GC: I think guys have always uhm kind of been taught to be proud of that you know.

DJ: Guys have we, there's a lot of things that guys don't talk about, but like you said, we are more raw in our conversation, the whole locker room talk, like, and women, I guess, don't, I don't know, I've never been a woman.

HD: I think women are trying to find that same raw voice. They see it as a power position of being able to, being able to have that conversation, of being able to say "cunt" and "pussy" and things like. And, uh, men have been, have had that kinda raw conversation for centuries and uh, the locker room type conversation and uh, uh, and this is just women's desire to, to come out of that male closet so to speak.

These also seem to be traits they point to as admirable for women to aim for in expanding their gendered communication practices. However, participants also

pointed to some communication characteristics upon which masculine communication practices could improve.

GE: Women are different than men, cause you won't see a man doing a penis monologues.

HJ: I think never been in a conversation where it's serious, you know. It's always see something like that if you were to ask a guy, what, he'd be like, you're gay. Why you wanna know, you know.

GG: Society pretty much says it's not appropriate for guys to put themselves out there and to talk about what they're feeling at the moment cause that shows that they're weak or that shows that they're not a, you know, manly man.... For guys, not all guys, but for some guys, especially if they're conservative, so it's, it'd be much more difficult to get a wide range of male opinion. You might get all of one type just because some guys may not be willing to open up. I think it'd be extremely difficult task.

CA: I'm not saying this for all guys but I just think they're very left-brained, you know. They have to be visually stimulated. You have to give them something that they can cling on to. They're not very much for words. I mean, this is men in general, you know, not all, but they're, they're not wordy people. You can't get, you've got to put pictures in front of them, you know, of women who are raped, or something, for them to understand the impact of what she was saying and because she didn't have that, and it was all words, they was like, what is she talking about. I don't get it.

Qualities like remaining silent in regards to sensitive or emotional issues, being unable to talk seriously about sexuality, and being solely left-brained seem to be harmful in the minds of women and men. While oftentimes considered a

dominant group, it is possible that men, too, are mute where sexuality is concerned.

In the same respect, some concerns about female communication also emerged. People in the focus groups commented on how women do not communicate about some of these important issues regarding sexuality.

However, the challenges they spoke of seemed to arrive from the pressures and expectations imparted by socialization.

GC: I don't know, like experienced women, women are encouraged, encouraged more, you know, to be good and not do those kind of things and sit her reputation and all that, so women don't talk about their as much although that is changing more and more but still.

FF: She explained in the beginning was the fact that most women she talked to never thought about it, and if you even wanted to talk for hours and hours is because no one had ever asked them, and so I respect her for that, you know, for that fact that she took something and uhm, she hear people's opinions or whatever.

DJ: But, if you're not gonna speak, but, she didn't speak up about it, but yet, and most women don't speak up about it, I would assume, yeah, and they, they don't speak up about it, and then, so when they get these surveys in like, *Cosmo* or whatever, or whatever magazine, you know, like *Women's Health*, all these magazines, when they get the survey, they are willing to completely dog out their men.

II: She's talking about very real practical issues that we face and we deal with but we don't come out and talk about it openly.

IF: I was thinking, kind of thinking, that I think she's trying to make people see, you know, she was saying the things that are in a woman's head, in

the mind, and you know, you never actually say that kind of stuff out loud or nobody talks about it, and you're not supposed to talk about it and the fact that she's put it all out there.

The Vagina Monologues seemed to thus open doors that provide women with the opportunities to engage and talk about their sexualities in ways that are both prideful and "raw." Also, despite their muted status, women involved with *The Vagina Monologues* and its personal narratives seemed to be commended by participants for their ability to "put it all out there." The observations of gendered communication practices by the women and men in the focus groups were certainly telling through the lens of *The Vagina Monologues*.

Now that we have looked at how the focus group participants felt women and men are affected by their gendered communication practices, it is important to look at a few examples of how the women and men in the focus groups operated together. In this instance, the genders have different ideas and perspectives about their communication practices and they are able to have a conversation about them in a mixed-gender focus group.

- HJ: Girls are more open probably.
HF: That's funny that you say that they're more open cause I thought in society women should be more passive so it's, but it's kind of shocking to see this kind of stuff.
FD: But it's just like girls can talk about it with girls.
CB: Yeah they like
HJ: Oh

FD: But guys, well they can talk about it, but you how like, it's kind of like, girls can like girls but like

GC: We can talk more serious about it than they can.

FD: Yeah.

HJ: Yeah. We're just joking we're not like

FD: Be more serious

HF: So you guys would be comfortable then if a female then did like a penis monologues?

BI: I don't think it matters who is doing it.

HF: It's just

GC: Serious things that people said if they like, there's things that, issues that guys don't talk about that could be talked about it.

HJ: I don't know. I don't know, well, if there's any, I don't know any issues I wouldn't talk about them but it's like, like how in high school, there even in like, gym, girls like, change in front of each other and guys are like

GC: Oh, I think you have a different, I think you think differently than what it really is.

While this might not be a gender communication breakthrough, it does point to how simple it is to think incorrectly about one another. In the same respect, an all male group ran across a similar issue, although they had no one to provide another perspective.

DJ: But, I mean, we, she is coming from like any old standpoint or I think it's outdated in my opinion because I feel women have more power than I think she is willing to admit they have over themselves and over their sexuality. Like, if a guy wants to have sex with a woman he has to like buy her dinner, he has to do all those wonderful things. All a woman has to do to get sex from a man is say yes. That's all she has to say.

HD: At some point, around 13 or 14, a girl learns that power is spelled p-u-s-s-y and, ah, so, you know, the power of the cunt is a controlling factor.

GE: And she doesn't spin it like that. She does not spin it like that.

DJ: She victimizes the vagina, and I say the vagina is the most powerful thing I've ever seen. It's made me do a lot of things that I really regret.

While someone female like me might have a “knee-jerk reaction” to this conversation, it stands between these three men as a solid perspective. Without the voices of other women to clarify other standpoints, the problem of ethnocentrism clearly affects how women and men communicate with and understand each other. *The Vagina Monologues* helped express the problems of communicating without seeking to understand one another. Nonetheless, the play also helps by providing a forum for women’s experiences; the next step is challenging the genders to communicate about them.

During the focus groups and in chatting afterward, I was surprised at how interested each gender was in the other gender’s responses and experiences in regards to *The Vagina Monologues*. In the case of the mixed groups, they were interested in hearing even more about the conversations that took place in other focus groups to see how they compared with their own discussions.

GI: I don’t think I would have been affected that much. I think I would have been more interested in what the guys thought about it in the end during the discussion.

AD: Just have some questions if, uh, think about asking. I wish I was in the female room right now listening to them. I’m curious about their perspective. Experience that I don’t know, like that experiences overshadowed conversations and ask questions I don’t know.

HJ: I was curious how girls think about it.

A few people had mentioned having watched or wanting to watch *The Vagina Monologues* with a person of the opposite sex, people they knew, but they wanted a broader sense of reaction. Their interest above and beyond the research and focus group experience told me just how important it is for research on *The Vagina Monologues* to continue.

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I did not have to wonder if they were concerned about other genders' responses to the play; they were asking about one another! Women and men asked me afterwards what others had said in the focus groups. I could not have hoped for a better response in regards to gender. But I see that the women laugh during some times, and the men during others. Are women laughing because they can relate? Because they identify with the discomfort? Are men trying to be respectful of women's experiences? Are they hyperconscious of the women in the room? When they laugh, what is it in response to? Maybe we should not show this to men, share our secrets and lives. Yes, let us eliminate conversation altogether. Men can retreat into John Gray's (1992) proverbial cave, and women can let them, never to have an adult conversation again. And yet in these focus

groups women and men were able to have conversations that left doors open to one another. Hope is out there, we just have to create it.

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The many themes and patterns and conflicts expressed all contribute to rich and complex discussion during the focus groups interviews and to the collective conversation embodied by my research. By looking at many of the possible answers to my research questions

How do women and men react to *The Vagina Monologues*?

What does *The Vagina Monologues* communicate to women and men?

How do women and men talk about *The Vagina Monologues*?

we learn not only about *The Vagina Monologues*, but about how it can, and does, function to aid V-Day in its mission to end violence against women, despite its flaws.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

As performed personal narratives, *The Vagina Monologues* has the ability to reach a wide audience in order to reflect, educate, and change oppressive cultures. By asking women and men about the purpose of *The Vagina Monologues*, I was able to see how gender affects how people respond to and talk about *The Vagina Monologues*. The people in the focus groups were provoked by *The Vagina Monologues* to reconsider their own experiences in light of the play's content. Many people learned more about women's everyday muted experiences and some heard distinct personal stories. And finally, their interest went beyond *The Vagina Monologues* DVD as they asked about Eve Ensler, my own interest and involvement in *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day, and reactions in other focus groups.

Do First Impressions Mean Anything?

While I did not ask everyone in the focus groups outright, nearly everyone responded that they had heard of *The Vagina Monologues*. Those who were informed about its existence had found out about it from a variety of sources, such as friends, late night TV shows, magazines, the book, HBO commercials, flyers at school, teachers in the classroom, or had already seen it

live. However obscurely people had exposure to it, they seemed curious and interested in watching it. Nonetheless, the immediate connection to feminism seemed to damage *The Vagina Monologues*'s standing with people who do not self-identify as feminist. Even so, I am reminded of how positively people have responded despite their initial associations. Also, I expected some withdrawal from people who might have felt "tricked" into watching a feminist documentary. Although everyone stayed, sometimes their reactions in the focus group emerged as possible subtle resistant forms of non-verbal communication: people dozed off, text-messaged on cellphones, and left the room for short periods of time. While it is presumptuous to infer significance of these gestures, and impossible to guess what others' silence means, it is important to note. Verbally they expressed *The Vagina Monologues* as exciting, open, interesting, shocking, explicit, real, "wow," and uncomfortable. Some of their reactions and comments point to how they believe *The Vagina Monologues* is not for everyone. Also, when we asked them if they would see *The Vagina Monologues* live, enthusiasm was low. Perhaps they were judging the reactions of others in the focus group; while some replied in the affirmative, some said they would go if it were free, and others referred to company and context as contributing to a positive decision to attend a live *The Vagina Monologues*.

Taking Something From *The Vagina Monologues*

What does *The Vagina Monologues* communicate to women and men? It is such a vague question to ask in the first place. Even though it is an exploratory study, I find myself stumped in answering this question. Everyone's responses that contribute to the answer are important and relevant, and yet I am charged with relating what is interesting, important, and provocative about their words. For the most part, I could group their responses into two forms, informative and persuasive. For example, for men, viewing *The Vagina Monologues* was primarily an educational experience, hearing voices and stories that they had not heard before. For women, it was more an element of relating to and agreeing or disagreeing with *The Vagina Monologues*. Men, too, acknowledged this as a downfall of being exposed to these standpoints for the first time. One man (GG) said,

I also think there's like probably a certain percentage of women out there who agree 100% with what they just saw and another percentage completely disagree. Maybe they relate but maybe disagree with what's being stated, and then there's a whole bunch of people who are in the middle somewhere, who agree with parts of it, and disagree with other parts uhm... Like in each story there seems to be some kind of conclusion or some kind of thing that is stated, and agree, I guess, morally or, uhm, agree with the conclusion that she stated, so uhm if it's just a moral decision they may agree or disagree about that.

While I struggled with this a little bit, asking, "What do you mean 'agree'? Agree that these stories are true?", I did acknowledge that Ensler had an agenda in mind, and not one with which everyone agrees. And while I agree that not everyone has to change his/her minds about such things as hair and thongs, I do think that opening up the conversation to alternatives opens our minds to evicting prejudice.

People in the focus groups were also able to make a connection between education and awareness from systemic injustices. For example, the preconceived notions many had about *The Vagina Monologues* as a feminist-text seemed to be set aside after having watched the play. One person revealed, "Yeah my, uhm, sex and gender roles teacher was really like, you know, like, says good things about it and some of the feminist girls in our class are like, yeah, I like that play. I wanted to see it just like, but when I watched it, it was a lot better than I expected" (IC). Unfortunately, it also worked in the opposite direction. I felt some people who expected it to be feminist, and therefore anti-male, found that in *The Vagina Monologues* as well. Ensler raises this issue on the DVD, "I'm always surprised how many people are appalled at the lack of stories about heterosexual sex" (Ensler, 2002). Again, the lack of conformity to the status quo implied to some that they play was anti- and male anti-heterosexist by

simply presenting women in a positive light and sharing homosexual experiences. So more so than anything else, people took from *The Vagina Monologues* what they wanted.

Talking Together about *The Vagina Monologues*

While I expected a divergence in the responses between the mixed- and same-gender groups, I was thrilled to find that they conformed less to stereotypes than I had anticipated. So while in the mixed groups, women and men were more likely to take turns and ensure everyone's participation, men shortened or cut short their own responses several times in the mixed groups, presumably in discomfort. "I was going to make a comment but I don't want to sound so sexist, sooo...(CF). Perhaps in the context of a perceived feminist text, men were able to decipher "politically correct" and "incorrect" sexist language and responses. Pelias (1999) also sheds some light on why men might have chosen to silence some of their thoughts in this environment: "So why are white folks afraid? Quite simply, white folks live in fear of the minorities they oppress" (p. 137). When people in power are confronted with the oppression and frustration of a non-dominant people, the built up anger and resentment of that people can be intimidating. With women's voices as the focal point,

repercussions for some men's actions against women might have muted other men.

Like men's censorship as a result of women's presence in the focus groups, women also may have been affected by another gender's attendance. Some women were initially timid about men being in the room while they watched *The Vagina Monologues*. Although women and men were not interacting directly during the screening, this preliminary discomfort could have affected their responses. I initially expected more personal narratives, responses in the form of people's own experiences. Perhaps because of the sensitive topics, they might have felt too uncomfortable with both the gender mix and presence of strangers in the room. Nonetheless, a few people shared personal experiences or knowledge on par with *The Vagina Monologues*. So despite deterrence in sharing in the focus groups, ultimately women and men were able to talk meaningfully about sensitive topics, taboo issues, and muted standpoints that *The Vagina Monologues* engaged.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The Vagina Monologues seems to expand people's knowledge and provoke them to think seriously about their own and others' experiences in the world. As

a personal narrative, *The Vagina Monologues* has succeeded in vocalizing problems like sexual oppression, hegemony, and ideas of shame, blame, and responsibility. "We all kinda understand that, I kinda felt in the room that we just kinda overlooked what her message was, maybe she's trying to get a message to people that don't understand" (HD). Many people were hearing about issues and experiences from voices they might not have heard or thought about much before. The men expressed most fully their sense that they learned from the experience.

GE: I was like, hey, yeah. Seems pretty cool. So, you know, maybe I'll learn something.

CF: I think the females, you know, can actually relate to it. You know, guys just find it more as information like, you know.... Like, you know, females can go, you know, yeah, I've probably experienced it. Yeah, you know, my friend experienced it, so you have things like that. Whereas guys is, oh, I never knew that. That's pretty interesting.

IF: A guy or a male see this and you know, kinda grasp the concept and have a better understanding of us, that would be the preferred outcome out of this. Appreciate us more.

EC: But she's doing is that, you can't, I stayed here and listened, and I learned something. I don't know about you guys, but I learned something. That gets me one step closer to closing that gap. If I understand the vagina completely, then I close that gap. I respect it.

DJ: It's meant for women, and it shouldn't be because men need to know as much about the vagina as women do. Maybe more. We need to understand each other.

From the perspective of several people involved in the focus groups, *The Vagina Monologues* helps women and men understand one another; it aids discussion about hegemonic issues, and it does so in a way that is meaningful and accessible. Also, they seemed to acknowledge the healing effects of exposing these personal narratives. As a result, they were able to develop their own sense of implications that *The Vagina Monologues* has on audiences.

GF: I just, kind of, all of it. Just how, just like, like yeah, you know, like, can... I just identify the woman spirit I guess, I don't know kinda liberating but I think that's too strong of a word.

II: Liberate women? Empowerment?

HD: I agree she's trying to find a voice, she's trying to empower, and she's trying to highlight something that needs to be highlighted.

GH: So, I think what you experienced might have been like part of the goal of the whole thing, so the word 'cunt' to you doesn't sting your ears as much anymore. And even like you know in the beginning, she was like, 'vagina', 'vagina' we don't say the word enough. And there's all the bad things that come with vaginas: the hair, and flooding, and the word 'cunt' and all that, and so I think like what she said, dissecting all that, and you know, bringing it out in the open I guess, to make it a more comfortable place.

BB: Well what I saw today is the lady influencing people to open up and realize what they have down there and uhm, just, I don't know, feel good about themselves and what they have and what they look best with instead of being ashamed about it, you know. Just uh, you know, be blessed with what you got.

Despite their struggles with *The Vagina Monologues*' feminist connection and their many contentions about "cunt," many people in the focus groups came away from the experience with positive messages. The implications for these learning moments are vast, with women relating to and understanding that these experiences do not have to be silenced, that even through the pain of exposure they can heal. Men, by learning about women's subjugated experiences, can contribute to the end of oppressive standpoints and behavior and ultimately, to the end of violence against women.

This look into people's reactions and responses to *The Vagina Monologues* is the very first step before moving on to what to do with this information. Ultimately it is important to know whether or not *The Vagina Monologues* helps or hinders V-Day's goal of ending violence against women. Should I, or others, look to extending this conversation, another possibility would be to conduct focus group interviews in a relatively public setting with a group of friends as Press (1991) has done. Focus groups with friends might conjure up an entirely different set of reactions and responses depending on the dynamic between them. Then, I believe the next step in this process is to talk to people who have had time to digest and talk about *The Vagina Monologues* with friends and family, to see how they explore and develop responses to the play over time instead of

immediately after. As with McLaurin's (1995) research, "because the students had rarely if ever discussed these subjects, they were more interested in using the opportunity to question each other and gauge their peers' reactions" (paragraph 41). Although they were given an opportunity to hear a variety of responses in the focus groups, I believe that people would really develop their opinions in response to discussions with people they trust over an extended period of time. Finding out how *The Vagina Monologues* works in and through people will contribute more thoroughly to our understanding of how awareness fosters change. Then, we can begin to affect not only future viewers of the play, but also the people involved with V-Day who have a hand in ending violence against women.

After examining *The Vagina Monologues* in detail, replicating this study with a documentary that is all about the V-Day movement instead of just *The Vagina Monologues* might enlighten the conversation. In February 2004, Lifetime Television will release another documentary called, *Until the Violence Stops* (V-Day, 2003). Without any of the activist connection, the movie that I showed said nothing of V-Day and all of the involvement surrounding *The Vagina Monologues*. The connection is unclear between *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day to casual viewers. It was difficult for me to moderate focus groups, to hold back, while

presenting such a limited understanding of the phenomenon, especially when I heard a response like this one:

I think that she's trying to make some money, I think, this woman, Eva, Eve, I think that's her name. I think that she is just trying to make some money, and this is an easy way to make money. I think she came on to some crazy idea for a stand-up because obviously she's going at it from a comical point of view, comic, and she'll go back and forth between being a comedian and being serious point of view. I just don't buy it. (GE)

Some people in the focus groups drew conclusions based simply on what they saw, without any other information, and in the context of this research, it makes sense. It was beyond me to interrupt and mention that Ensler does not receive any money for her performances, royalties from her book, or DVD. But as an exploratory study, I thought it was important to examine *The Vagina Monologues* on its own, to determine if as V-Day's vehicle for awareness, it could affect audiences in regards to violence against women. Nonetheless, just as the V-Day movement is evolving, so must the discussion surrounding it, and I look forward to the next step.

* * *

I did not always know this. I learned this in the vagina workshop. I learned this from a woman who runs the vagina workshop, a woman who believes in vaginas, who really sees vaginas, who helps women see their own vaginas by seeing other's women's vaginas. (Ensler, 2001, p. 44)

I am in recovery now. Certainly they still hold some truth for me. I still, for instance, have conversations with my partner about “hair,” and when, and if, we shave, we do so thoughtfully. I don’t regret the time and energy I spent watching and reading and talking about them, introducing them into people’s lives. We are all influenced by forces surrounding us, whether or not we want to be; *The Vagina Monologues* has simply become a part of that. I no longer look at them as the savior for sexism or heterosexism, and I no longer think of them as relatable to everyone. Some of my friends still will not watch the play. Lots of women do not have those experiences or fit those molds, so a part of me dislikes how much optimism I put into white, middle-class, heterosexual feminism. I want to be so much more inclusive and diverse than that, want feminism to be more far-reaching. But another part of me realizes how much effort Ensler put into voicing a number of standpoints and experiences that, all the while, still cannot be universalized. But that is my reality, and *The Vagina Monologues*, for good or bad, speaks to me in a way I have not been able to uncover on my own in quite the same way. I feel as though it is a step, hopefully not too far in the wrong direction, but a step nonetheless, towards opening more doors for expressing the standpoints of those who have stood silent for too long.

So, when violence against women ends, I will be able to look at my grandfather and not think about how he hit my mother when she was growing up. When violence against women ends, my partner will not be falsely accused of molesting children. When violence against women ends, I will not have to consider myself lucky for not having experienced physical violence. In the spirit of V-Day and its transformation into V-World, when violence against women ends, I will be able to turn the microphone off and live free.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Briefing

1. A thank you to the participants
2. Review of the agenda
3. A reminder that the participants may leave or choose to refuse any question or part of the process at any time without penalty or ill will

Agenda

1. Please fill out a demographics survey without including your name.
2. Establish focus group ground rules.
3. The movie will take approximately 72 minutes and the focus group will last about an hour.
4. Then overview and discuss the informed consent form.
5. Then watch the screening and carry out the focus group interviews.
6. Finally, debrief and give information about the study.

Focus Group Questions

1. If you had heard of *The Vagina Monologues* before, please describe your introduction to the play.
2. If you had seen *The Vagina Monologues* in person or on television before, please describe your experience.
3. What was your initial response when you found out you would be watching *The Vagina Monologues*?
4. What were your thoughts while watching *The Vagina Monologues*? How did you feel about *The Vagina Monologues*?
5. What was the monologue that you remember the most? What features made you remember it the most?

6. What was the most important/relevant part about *The Vagina Monologues*?
7. What did you enjoy? What about it did you like? What features did you enjoy?
8. What didn't you enjoy? What about it did you not like? What features did you not enjoy?
9. How do you think other genders would respond to *The Vagina Monologues*? How do you feel about that?
10. Based on this discussion, do you think you would see *The Vagina Monologues* in the future?
11. If you were to create a monologue on the same or a similar theme, what would it be about?

Probing Questions

Tell me more.

I don't quite understand. Can you explain what you mean?

Does anyone have an example of that?

Is this anyone else's experience?

Does anyone else have a similar or different perspective?

Tell me what it is like.

Does anyone see it differently?

Are there any other points of view?

Would you explain further?

Would you give me an example of what you mean?

Would you say more?

Is there anything else?

Please describe what you mean.

Closing Up Questions

Do you have any additional thoughts?

Is there anything missing from our conversation?

Note the Following Things During the Focus Group

Where changes in the questioning route occur

Participants' characteristics

Descriptive phrases or words used by participants as they discussed the key questions?

Themes in the responses to the key questions

Subthemes indicating a point of view held by participants with common characteristics

Descriptions of participant enthusiasm

Consistency between participants' comments and their reported behaviors

New avenues of questioning that should be considered in the future

Overall mood of discussion

Debriefing

1. A thank you to the participants
2. A reminder of the stated purpose of the research
3. A sense of the study's findings and their treatment
4. Answer any further questions

APPENDIX B: HS-IRB APPROVAL LETTER

San José State
UNIVERSITY

**Office of the Academic
Vice President**

**Academic Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research**

One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0025
Voice: 408-283-7500
Fax: 408-924-2477
E-mail: gradstudies@sjsu.edu
<http://www.sjsu.edu>

To: Daniela R. Stevens
4804 Rue Loiret
San Jose, CA 95136

From: Pam Stacks
Interim AVP, Graduate Studies & Research

Date: November 1, 2003

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

"Exploring 'The Vagina Monologues' and V-Day: Men and Women's Narrative Responses."

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Nabil Ibrahim, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subjects portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond November 1, 2004 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico,
Fresno, Fullerton, Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Merced, Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San Jose, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

APPENDIX C: AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**San José State
UNIVERSITY**

**Office of the Academic
Vice President**

**Academic Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research**

One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0025
Voice: 408-283-7500
Fax: 408-924-2477
E-mail: gradstudies@sjsu.edu
http://www.sjsu.edu

Agreement to Participate in Research

Responsible Investigator: Daniela Stevens

Title of Research Project: "Exploring *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day: Men's and Women's Narrative Responses"

I consent to serve as a participant in the research investigation entitled: "Exploring *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day: Men and Women's Narrative Responses." The nature and purpose of the study have been explained to me by Daniela Stevens from the Department of Communication Studies at San Jose State University.

I understand that the purpose of this research is to explore the interpretations of what men and women think about *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day. I also understand that the research procedures involve watching a 72-minute documentary after which I will be asked to participate in an hour-long, audiotaped focus group.

I understand that one of the potential benefits of participating in this project is that I will have an opportunity to explore how I feel about *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day while interacting with other participants. I understand as well that this opportunity may include the risk that I might feel uncomfortable talking to others and/or hearing others' responses.

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that all my information is confidential, and my name and factors that can be grouped in a way that outright identify me or other participants will not be revealed. I acknowledge, however, that although pseudonyms will be used, it is possible that my identity could be discerned by others. I agree to be audiotaped during a focus group interview with Daniela Stevens and approximately 6-12 other participants. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation in this project at any time, without prejudice to my relations at San Jose State University.

I understand that I may direct my questions about this research to Daniela Stevens, Department of Communication Studies, at (408) 924-5388. I may direct any complaints I have about this research to Dr. Deanna Fassett, Department of Communication Studies, at (408) 924-5511. Moreover, I may direct any questions about my rights as a research subject or any research-related injury to Dr. Nabil Ibrahim, Associate Vice President for Graduate Studies and Research, at (408) 924-2480.

- My signature on this document indicates my agreement to participate in this study.
- The signature of the researcher indicates her agreement to include me in the research and attests that I have been fully informed of my rights.
- I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico,
Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton,
Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sanoma, Stanislaus

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Hi! My name is Daniela Stevens, and I am a graduate student working on my thesis in the Communication Studies department. I would like to invite you to share your thoughts on a movie/documentary. Your participation in the screening and focus group will take approximately two hours. We will provide food and drinks for your comfort and contributions in this research, and you will gain the satisfaction in contributing to your community here at San José State.

Name: _____

Phone number: _____ Email: _____

APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

Hi! Thank you for your participation tonight. A little more information about you will help me develop a general profile to go along with tonight's interview. Please answer the following:

I am: _____ male _____ female

I would describe my race/ethnicity as: _____

I would describe my sexuality as: _____

I have been a college/university student for _____ semesters.

My major is _____.