“Say Me/See Me/Say It”: Staging Stories and Transforming Communities in The Vagina Monologues

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“Say Me/See Me/Say It”:
Staging Stories and Transforming Communities
in *The Vagina Monologues*

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English Department Honors Thesis
Submitted: April 12, 2010
Acknowledgments

I am indebted to my advisor, Caroline Bicks, whose attention to detail and consistently positive encouragement enabled me to tackle this enormous task. Although I don’t believe any vaginal puns made it to print, this thesis nevertheless bears the mark of her intellectual creativity and clarity. I can only hope that the end result does justice to the quality of her advisement.

Stuart J. Hecht and John Houchin of the Theatre Department provided useful research guidance, as did Andrew Sofer of the English Department. Judith Wilt of the Women’s and Gender Studies Department has been a big fan of my thesis from the beginning; I am especially grateful for her tireless efforts to promote The Vagina Monologues at Boston College, despite the many obstacles that surround its production.

This thesis is dedicated to the men and women at Boston College who lend their scarce time and numerous talents to combat sexual violence both locally and globally. Their devotion, resilience, and fierce love for their fellow students gives me hope that one day—perhaps not too far in the future—rape and assault will be a rarity.
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**Introduction**

Although Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* is widely considered to be the rallying cry of a new feminist generation, the play nevertheless begins at a point of insecurity: “I bet you’re worried. I was worried” (Ensler 2009, 3). Female sexuality is surrounded by “darkness and secrecy;” if women talk about their bodies, they move into unexplored and therefore dangerous territory—“(It’s) like the Bermuda Triangle. Nobody ever reports back from there” (Ensler 2009, 3). This danger taints all questions about female sexuality: Ensler doesn’t just wonder about her vagina, but fears—and fears for—her vagina. Why did she have—and why do generations of American women continue to have—such severe anxiety about their sexual bodies? More importantly, why does this anxiety manifest itself in silence rather than public discourses of confusion, hurt, anger, or even long-suppressed pleasure? What would be the consequences of breaking this silence and verbalizing those hidden discourses?

*The Vagina Monologues* was Ensler’s effort to answer these questions by forming a vocabulary about her own sexual self. Even as an articulate activist, feminist, writer, poet, and playwright, Ensler found it intensely difficult to talk about her own sense of sexuality. She has said that the idea for the play originated in a casual, but nonetheless fraught, conversation with a fellow member of what Gloria Steinem titled the “‘down there’ generation” (Steinem vii). Their brief (and, according to Ensler, “shocking”) exchange of personal narratives about sexuality after menopause led Ensler to ask another friend
about how she viewed her vagina, who directed Ensler to yet another woman with an “amazing story” (Ensler 2004). The text of the play—which consisted of eleven monologues in its original off-Broadway performance format—is distilled from the hundreds of interviews that followed.¹ After several years of collecting interviews and re-writing them into theatrical form, Ensler premiered *The Vagina Monologues* in 1996 at the off-off-Broadway HERE Arts Center.

Although the potential of this play as an activist tool certainly must have crossed Ensler’s mind from its inception, it is absolutely critical to recognize that the central focus of the play is the personal narrative and the problematic, humorous, and deeply moving aspects of the act of storytelling. These true stories emerged purely from the deeply rooted tradition of women sharing personal stories with other women. *The Vagina Monologues* was originally intended to be a patchwork of women’s experiences, a poetic re-working of intimate and clandestine conversations between women that are, more often than not, the only way to talk about sexuality in terms of personal desire, hurt, and pleasure.

¹ Although I will include elements of the original performance text in my analysis, I will mainly utilize the 2010 V-Day script, which contains roughly 12 monologues and 5 pieces intended for group performance. I focus more strongly on this script because it includes all but one of the pieces included in the original production and also contains additional material (notably pieces intended for group performance). The V-Day script has been the text used by thousands of productions on campuses and in communities for the last ten years—because it is the most recent iteration of the play, I read this edition as the most relevant to the issues of community-building and social change that I will discuss later in my thesis.
Obviously, these conversations were happening long before *The Vagina Monologues* arrived on the scene: women utilized birthing groups, mother-daughter relationships, and even quilting circles as closely-knit discursive communities where they could circulate information about the ‘female experience’ without patriarchal censure. Deborah Tolman, in her 1994 study “Doing Desire,” concludes that sharing experiences of desire creates intensely strong interpersonal bonds between women, a space where “the empowerment of women can develop and be nurtured through shared experiences of both oppression and power, in which collectively articulated critiques are carved out and voiced” (339). However, the intentional sharing of sexual experience as an educational tool—without euphemism or shame—was clearly happening far less frequently.

Today, adolescent girls in particular are forced to ignore or suppress their sexual desires discursively as well as physically; even within communities of fellow females, young women find it difficult to talk openly about their budding sexuality. Tolman proposes that “there is a symbiotic interplay between desire

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2 We must recognize that hypersexualized youth culture—as examined so brilliantly by Ariel Levy in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and some of her other writings—is not the kind of dialogue that Tolman is advocating. Making tween sex tapes into major news stories and marketing Playboy thongs to elementary school students is most emphatically not the same as “listening to [a more experienced woman] speak about her own experiences, responding when [the young woman] asked questions about how to masturbate, how to have cunnilingus, what sex is like after marriage” (Tolman 339). The adolescent girls in the study reflect that difference by emphasizing that “no woman had ever talked...about sexual desire and pleasure 'like this’” (339).
and empowerment,” and that a lack of dialogue perpetuates uncritical and unhealthy patterns of acting upon desire (340). This vicious cycle of silence and repression is not unique to young women, either: the “‘down-there’ generation” (to repeat Steinem’s term), still faces the shame of desire and the difficulty of putting their long-repressed feelings and experiences into words. The elderly speaker in the piece entitled “The Flood” exemplifies the blushing, stuttering quality of sexual discourse after a lifetime of repression: she punctuates vignettes from her sexual past with statements like “I can’t tell you this. I can’t do this, talk about down there. You just know it’s there. Like the cellar” (Ensler 2009, 10).

It is possible—and preferable—to remedy the context of non-communication and shame that surrounds sexuality: Tolman points to an earlier study which found that “daughters of women who had talked with them about pleasure and desire told narratives about first intercourse that were informed by pleasure and agency” (339). By presenting conversations about desire in a theatrical format, Ensler’s project embodies as well as prizes these feelings. That Ensler’s discussion of female sexuality takes place in the semi-public arena of the stage means that the surrounding community, in some way, considers its topic worthy of discussion.³ The play also universalizes Tolman’s purpose: it agrees

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³ Although I recognize that traditional theatrical performances can be exclusive in certain ways (for instance, not all people may be able to afford tickets in a certain price bracket and seating is
that adolescent girls “have the right to be informed that gaining pleasure and a strong sense of self and power through their bodies does not make them bad or unworthy,” but also insists that women of any age also have this right (340). We are charmed by the “Six-Year-Old-Girl”’s adorably frank description of her vagina—“Somewhere deep inside it has a really really smart brain”—but we also are able to witness the transformation of the elderly speaker in “The Flood”; by talking openly about her sexuality, she is able to “feel a little better” (Ensler 2009: 12, 33).

Talking about sexuality is transformative on the micro-level of individual speech, but when open dialogue about desire becomes a practice in numerous communities, the potential for changing social and legal policies that shame, restrict, and enact violence on female sexuality is enormous. My goal in writing this thesis is to critically read performances of The Vagina Monologues (rather than the text alone) in order to examine how a monologue-driven play derived from personal stories can serve as an activist tool to encourage social change. I obviously limited within the theater itself), the production of even the most unconventional performances in the smallest venues is representative of the support of members of the theatrical population (producers, actors, directors, and technical staff involved with the production, just to name a few) as well as interest—if not support—within the community in which the play is being produced. The Vagina Monologues’s eventual move to an off-Broadway house (the Westside Theatre) points to national (and even global) community interest; since off-Broadway venues usually mean higher production values—and accordingly, higher ticket prices—than off-off-Broadway and smaller venues, they also represent community support on a significantly elevated financial level. I read the placement of this production in the most elite nucleus of the definitive ‘theatre city’ as an indication that this play, if not status-quo in its subject matter, is accepted as essential to American theatre.
will focus on certain pieces of this play which are particularly successful in raising feminist consciousness in both performers and audience members, and finally, I will propose ways in which the empathetic energy that these pieces create can be channeled into future social change.

There are numerous interpretive steps involved in the translation of the personal narrative into community-based social change: between the interviewed and interviewer, author and source material, ‘fictionalized’ character and actor, actor and audience, and finally, audience and outside community. In order to approach this larger issue, I will examine the play through one lens—or one conversation or one translation—at a time. The quote I have chosen as the title of my thesis—“Say Me/See Me/Say It”—concisely summarizes how I will approach this task. It comes from a piece in which Japanese ‘comfort women,’ after presenting their stories of sexual trauma, appeal directly to their government to simply acknowledge that it happened and apologize to them (Ensler 2009, 1-4). Therefore, these three phrases provide a model for a specific course of action: the characters first ‘say’ their personal stories, then the audience bears witness to the stories by ‘seeing’ the embodied act of storytelling, then finally, the audience finds points of identification and commonality with the staged narratives by ‘saying’: producing their own responses and calling for action by connecting their experiences to a larger

\[4\] I will be exploring this piece in a much deeper sense later in my thesis.
activist framework. I attempt to structure my thesis around these acts of ‘seeing’ and ‘saying.’

In chapter 1, I will examine why telling stories of sexual desire and experience is so critical for women by placing the play in conversation with the rich history of feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Although storytelling can be therapeutic for the storyteller herself, the concrete discursive communities created by feminist activists in this era also provide a useful model for translating female sexual speech into social action. In chapter 2, I will describe some of the limitations of narration within the rhetorical structure of consciousness-raising and how the staged monologue can do similar rhetorical work without such problems.

The stories we hear in The Vagina Monologues were told, in some form or another, by some of the hundreds of women that Ensler interviewed in the mid-1990s. However, there is a somewhat complex interplay between the monologue as performed and the source material: “Some of the monologues are close to verbatim interviews, some are composite interviews, and with some I just began with the seed of an interview and had a good time” (Ensler 1998: 7). Ensler has not addressed the actual process of translating the interview into poetic theatrical-monologue form in concrete terms; she often compares the process of composing the play (and subsequently, creating an extra-theatrical activist movement with the play at its center) as being at the service of a “wave” of “organic momentum and energy” fed by diverse and overlapping narratives
(Ensler 2004). In response to a question specifically about her writing process, she states that she merely followed the instructions of her muses, the “Vagina Queens” (“Eve Ensler” 1). I interpret this question-dodging as Ensler’s effort to downplay her inevitable personal bias in the material and thereby present these stories as raw and authentic. Additionally, by presenting the play as something built by overlapping and shared narratives rather than a single author, she constructs a discursive community from which the text seems to emerge. In chapter 2, I will contend with these issues, as well as other issues that arise in translating the recorded interview into theatrical (monologic) text.

Although the play itself is the central component of my analysis in this thesis, it bears mentioning that as the core of a lucrative, popular, and extremely successful activist movement, the text of The Vagina Monologues has been subject to a number of specific political aims. I must stress, though, that although Ensler was sexually assaulted and raped throughout her childhood, the play was not initially intended to be an activist piece against sexual violence. The play first gained activist import when women started lining up at the stage door after performances to relay stories of horrifying sexual abuse and violence, rather than the tales of “wonderful orgasms and great sex lives” that Ensler expected to hear. Ensler “felt like a war photographer who takes pictures of horrible events, but doesn’t intervene on their behalf” (Ensler 2004). Although safe discursive spaces can “enable women to talk [about their experiences with violence and assault] without fear of punishment or retribution,” Ensler quickly
found that talk does not directly and immediately address the root cause of violence, which is often intimately connected with difficult economic situations (Ensler 1998, xxiii).

In response to this feeling of powerlessness, Ensler founded V-Day two years after The Vagina Monologues premiered (Bourland 1). V-Day, alternately a fundraising group and a direct provider of social services, framed a text that was initially about celebrating the vagina and the beauty of womanhood with very real goals of increasing awareness of sexual violence as well as raising money to directly support existing organizations working to decrease this problem around the world. In response to this new purpose, Ensler re-worked the play as a multi-performer benefit event starring such actresses as Glenn Close, Calista Flockhart, and Susan Sarandon; another star-studded benefit performance took place in London in 1999. The sold-out Madison Square Garden performance in 2001 not only cemented the play in America’s consciousness, but raised over $1 million for V-Day. Since 1998, V-Day has raised over $30 million for local community groups throughout the world; these funds have been used to build safe houses for domestic violence survivors, educate rural communities about the dangers of traditional female genital mutilation (FGM), and hold conferences for global activists, among many other uses (“About V-Day” 1).

Although professional performances brought the play to the national stage—and Ensler recorded a version of the one-woman performance for mass-distribution through HBO in 2002—today, The Vagina Monologues is most
frequently performed by amateur and student actors. Performances of the play have taken place everywhere from Islamabad to Manila and Native American reservations to Zambia, and in 2004 a version featuring transgender performers was produced in Los Angeles. Multi-language performances have been staged throughout the world. Between the College Campaign kickoff in 1999 and the present, the number of colleges producing benefit performances of the play grew from the initial 66 to more than 700 schools. In 2007, community groups in over 400 cities performed the play (“Ten Years of V-Day”).

The evolution of the play from solo to group performance, as well as the shift from professional to amateur actors, is critical from both a theoretical and activist standpoint. Some critics have taken issue with the phenomenon of one white, upper-middle-class American woman embodying the presence and experience of women of varied class and cultural backgrounds; the one-woman show can be read as politically problematic and even indicative of a ‘schizophrenic’ sense of identity. Nonetheless, performing a monologue does effective political work for speakers from marginalized communities: in this play, the female voice is not just featured—it is the uninterrupted central focus. The V-Day edition of the script (the version intended for performance in communities and colleges) synthesizes the beneficial qualities of the monologue and the opportunity for women of different classes, creeds, and colors to speak the words and embody the characters that Ensler somewhat problematically inhabited. One way that Ensler enhances narrative diversity in this version of the
play is by utilizing nontraditional monologic forms (which I will specifically address in chapter 3).⁵

In the final part of this thesis, I will look at not the globally-minded project of V-Day, but the theoretical and actual effects of performing this play in local communities. In the last ten years, *The Vagina Monologues* has made the enormous shift from being performed in a single venue in an elite, expensive production environment to a plethora of low-cost, community-produced performances (which often take place in gymnasiums, cafes, or classrooms and feature performers with very limited acting experience). Although professional actors would certainly draw a larger crowd (and accordingly, a larger donation base) to these performances, V-Day stipulates that any professional actors are required to volunteer their time and skills to performances of the play; this rule has not necessarily discouraged stars of stage and screen from participating in the movement.⁶ The fact that no actor is being compensated puts amateur and professional actors on the same playing field: the acting (activist) talent of one participant isn’t prized above another’s activist (acting) work. The play itself also emphasizes egalitarian relationships between the various monologues that constitute the work—experiences are not framed in hierarchical or exceptional terms.

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⁵ Throughout this paper, I will primarily be referencing the 2009 V-Day edition of the script rather than the version published in 1998.

⁶ See page 9 of this thesis.
The relationship that *The Vagina Monologues* as a whole play may have with the audience is somewhat more complicated, as I will point out in the final chapter. Although Ensler certainly fosters an environment that welcomes the audience warmly into the inner lives of its characters, she also uses the monologue in ways that appear to accuse and alienate its receivers. I will examine how the complex audience-actor relationship that develops within the performance space can translate into life outside the theatre—how the highly reactive emotional states evoked by deeply moving theatrical performances can transcend, in performance theorist Richard Schechner’s terms, the disappointing “cool down” that occurs when the show ends and the lights come up (Dolan 19).

In the introduction to the 1998 publication of the play, Ensler writes that “I say [the word ‘vagina’] because I believe that what we don’t say we don’t see, acknowledge, or remember” (xx). The act of *saying*—not writing, thinking, or soundlessly performing (as in dance or mime)—is absolutely key to remembering experience as well as creating activism from that remembrance. When the show was still in the one-woman, off-Broadway format, Ensler claimed to say the word—not to mention numerous other slang terms and euphemisms—one hundred and twenty-eight times per performance. The word ‘vagina’ certainly has shock value: both opponents and promoters of the show have censored the word itself in major newspapers as well as box-office phone recordings. However, saying the word before an audience in the public arena of the theatre connects it with the body. Embodying personal narrative on the stage,
particularly through the form of the monologue, is a rhetorically powerful tool—
especially for women, who don’t often have the opportunity to speak without
interruption in a theatrical setting.

I will define ‘embodiment’ in this thesis as the simultaneous physical and
vocal presentation of written text that is informed by extra-textual cultural
details and intended to respectfully ritualize lived female experience. To a
certain degree, it is necessary to consider theories of gender performativity
when talking about the act of embodiment. However, I choose not to focus on
Butlerian theory for a number of reasons. Shannon Jackson makes the valid
point that “Butlerian ‘performativity,’ [among others], which develops out of
linguistics, literary theory, and psychoanalysis and which examines the ways in
which social identities cohere in the reiteration of normative conventions, has
little directly to do with stage performance” (Bean 1). Butler’s concept of
performativity doesn’t quite apply to acted characters, even if those characters
are based in the gendered performances of actual people. The actions and
practices embodied by the actor are intended to enact a specific character, not a
generalized performance of gender—and although the actors are certainly
performing their own gender subtextually, the body that the actor inhabits for
the duration of her monologue belongs to someone else. Although it is certainly
problematic to equate sex and gender—and Ensler has been criticized in the past
for ‘vagina essentialism’—Ensler strongly associates the complexities of the
vagina with the complexities of being a woman (Hall 99). The actors don’t need
to perform femininity because the play makes no attempt to obfuscate what Ensler considers to be their essential female-ness (the fact that they possess vaginas). We see beneath the actors’ clothes, in a figurative sense.

Another important aspect of embodiment in *The Vagina Monologues* (and other plays based in the lived experience of marginalized communities) is the re-enactment of the act of storytelling. This is not an exact science: none of the monologues are completely verbatim, and many are amalgamations of several different interviews. However, embodying text mimics the physical presence of the original storyteller(s). Rosalyn Collings Eves’s rhetorical study of African-American women’s cookbooks presents a useful paradigm for understanding physical presence and movement as ritual: “[e]very subsequent act of cooking is...a reenactment of someone else’s movements and a subtle invocation of her memory” (291). Although the women of *The Vagina Monologues* are anonymous, physically portraying the act of telling the story reproduces the circumstances in which the story originated, conjuring the memory of the storyteller. Replicating the physical/verbal ‘stepping-forward’ of the marginalized speaker ritualizes the brave act of performing the original act of telling.

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7 Although V-Day requires that all performers identify and live as females, the organization doesn’t require that actors possess an actual vagina in order to perform in the production; a recent addition to the group of optional monologues is “They Beat the Boy Out of My Girl...Or So They Tried”, a piece about transgender violence. This consideration is interesting in the context of performativity, but as it isn’t central to my argument, I won’t explore it further in this thesis.
There is a strong force at work, especially at Catholic universities like Boston College, that does not want the stories contained within this play to be embodied. The Boston College performances of the play have been tremendously successful in raising funds for local and global organizations working to end sexual violence through ticket sales, often selling over five hundred tickets in a matter of forty-eight hours. This success occurs despite the fact that BC’s chapter of V-Day has been refused official club certification by the university time and time again, that the group is prevented from advertising this production in the same manner as other organizations, and that it is arbitrarily barred from reserving certain spaces on campus for performance.

Although the thesis as a whole will focus on issues of literary theory and personal narrative rather than the complex theological debates surrounding the play (simply because there isn’t enough room in the scope of this thesis to address these debates fully), I offer the following quote from John Houchin’s article “Recent Performance Controversies” as a suggestion of the theological implications of embodiment:

Belief in the incarnate word and the transformative power of sacramental words may help to explain why some Catholics react so vehemently to [The Vagina Monologues] performances. Father Shanley

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8 The point about reserving space is especially interesting in the context of embodiment: ‘academic freedom’ permits the text of the play to be read in a classroom with a crucifix on the wall, but performances cannot take place in Gasson Hall’s Irish Room, a space that is decorated with religious (as well as academic) frescoes and stained glass.
[of Providence College] admitted that he had never seen a performance, thus making a significant distinction between the read word and the embodied word. Clearly, the latter resonated deeply with Father Shanley. Belief in the Incarnation—the word made flesh—is a central tenet of Catholicism and much of Protestant Christianity. (9)

Catholicism is deeply rooted in a performative tradition, the most obvious example being the re-enactment of the Last Supper in the ritual of Communion. Giving voice and motion to the written word ritualizes the text, rendering it deeply—and in the context of Catholicism, spiritually—meaningful.

In my time at Boston College, I have constantly questioned why the modern Catholic tradition is so vehemently opposed to the embodiment of female sexuality present in The Vagina Monologues, yet permits the text of the play to be studied in Catholic classrooms. This collection of actual lived narratives results in angry letters from conservative alumni and cries from a small and vocal minority of students and faculty, but the plays produced through the Theater Department that enact fictional rape scenes have resulted in no such controversy. Female sexual agency, I contend, is terrifyingly powerful when it arises from the page—and even more so when these performed sexual histories are real. When audiences bear witness to the cries of pain of a Bosnian rape-camp survivor or the wide-eyed wonder of a woman who has just seen birth for the first time, the physical presence of the women who have ‘lived’ (embodied)
these experiences is unavoidable. Agency is taken out of the realm of the theoretical and made tangible.

I write this thesis not merely from a critical/theoretical standpoint, but because I feel that directing, acting, coordinating logistics for, and fighting for the continued performance of this play on the Boston College campus for the past three years has been the definitive experience of my college career. While I worked on this thesis over the course of the last academic year, I completed yet another cycle of the show with both new and veteran student performers. I say this in the interest of full disclosure, but more importantly, I believe that the experiences I have had as an activist and artist are relevant to my argument; I have therefore used anecdotes from the casting, rehearsal, and performance processes in the Boston College performances of the play to supplement my arguments. The play itself prizes experience as a form of knowledge, after all.
Chapter I. Body Stories: The Importance of Female Sexual Speech

Although *The Vagina Monologues* has been wildly successful in raising funds to combat sexual violence on a global scale, the play itself is a celebration of individual bodily experience. As I mentioned in the introduction, female audience members were moved to continue the process of telling body stories after witnessing the broad range of individual sexual experience presented by Ensler. The ‘vagina trail’ of oral narratives shared between women led Ensler into unfamiliar and often painful territory and eventually propelled her to organized political action. In this chapter, I return to the beginning of this storytelling trail to argue that the act of voicing personal bodily experience, even without a political context, is an important and politically charged act in itself—especially when these stories are categorized as ‘explicit’, ‘dirty’, or ‘inappropriate’ (as stories about desire and sexual experience often are).

Stating the taboo, uncovering the repressed, and detailing injury and anger caused by dominant and/or violent forces is especially transgressive when the speaker is female and the oppressor is politically dominant (and sexually violent). The magnitude of this transgression is further amplified when the sexual body is the territory that the female speaker attempts to reclaim by the act of speaking—as it is in this particular play. In response to vehement criticism of *The Vagina Monologues* from conservative groups, Ensler points to the play’s basis in reality: “I interviewed women, and I told their stories. I didn’t make them up. People are going to have problems with people's stories” (Bourland 2).
In this section, I will examine how women’s stories about sexuality are constituted in discourse through the act of telling and how Ensler both references and builds upon existing frameworks for female speech about sexuality throughout the play.

An underlying theme of radical feminist belief—which certainly underscores The Vagina Monologues itself—is the idea that bodily experience is a very real and incontrovertible site of knowledge. Rebecca Sachs Norris’s examination of body knowledge in “ritualized bodily practices” like folk dancing is helpful to illustrate how the body itself both internalizes and communicates knowledge—even before words come into play. “The body's intelligence is not based on reason but on direct knowledge of the world,” Norris claims. The body tells the truth because it serves as its own evidence; its history—insofar as the speaking subject fully re-lives his/her past—is accurate. Unlike theoretical arguments, the body is unhampered by contradictions: “its intelligence is polysemic” (115). Body knowledge can encompass multiple incongruous perspectives on a certain experience; both pleasure and pain are sources of knowledge. Since the body itself serves as both primary source and evidentiary artifact, the rhetorical power of the speaking female subject is redoubled when she does not speak through text alone; the embodiment of female sexual speech strengthens its claims.9

9 The German activist-playwright Bertolt Brecht’s emphasized a similar theory for theatrical performance, which he called Gestus. At the risk of oversimplifying his theory, Gestus is the
Explicit discourse about the female sexual body was virtually absent from any mainstream cultural discussion until the 1960s. In his work *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault notes that this was the case for male sexuality as well. It is also important to consider his argument that sexual discourse has never been, and will never be, completely silenced. Although it was clearly socially unacceptable for laypersons to talk about sexuality in an unambiguous way, oblique references to sexuality emerged in a variety of forms throughout the 19th century. Instead, Western societies re-directed discourse about sexuality through alternative, ‘appropriate’ channels like medical discourse (some diagnoses and practices specific to females included ‘hysteria’ and hysterectomy; and clitoridectomy as an antidote to ‘masturbatory melancholia’) as well as religious discourse (which encouraged women and men alike to verbalize their sexual desires and experiences through confession as a means of ‘purging’ such sinfulness) (Studd and Schwenkhagen 1).

Some critics have argued that *The History of Sexuality* is inherently masculinist: Foucault’s analysis of sexual repression and re-direction focuses for the most part on male sexual (especially homosexual) experience. Women are mentioned sparingly (and lesbians even less so). It is perhaps more useful to look at how notable French feminists responded to Foucault’s work. Luce presentation of the self on stage while concurrently speaking—a phenomenon that Deborah Geis likens to “an almost literal seizing of the word” (119). Synthesizing the act of speech and the act of embodiment gives the speaking, embodied subject ownership over both the text and the body.
Irigaray and Helene Cixous in particular argue that “women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves” (Jones 362). Monique Wittig and Julia Kristeva also agree with Irigaray and Cixous that women can resist a masculinist sexual culture by “the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality,” a phenomenon they term *jouissance* (Jones 362). To actively *change* this culture, though, requires that women be able to talk about their own sexuality. A new, feminized vocabulary is necessary to read societal institutions and structures through the lens of a “bedrock female nature” based in their own experiences of pleasure and desire (Jones 361).

Although the American feminist movement was more theoretical than French feminism (which placed the female body itself at the center of its analysis), certain aspects of the movement focused on how women articulated their experiences of sexual desire and disappointment. By voicing her own feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction in her seminal (and controversial) work *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan inspired other housewives similarly frustrated by the thankless work of child-rearing and the puritanical sexual double standards of late-1950s home life to ‘make the personal political’ through the sharing of personal narrative. The second wave of American feminism (that took place from the early 1960s through the early 1970s) gained momentum
through the collective vocalization of stay-at-home mothers’ ‘personal’ (that is, including their sexual) problems.

Feminist discussion groups, which cropped up all over the United States, provided a safe space in which personal narratives of sexual and societal oppression could be vocalized without euphemism or the approval/encouragement of patriarchal organizations. Kathie Sarachild of the New York Radical Women described the then-revolutionary method: “[O]ur starting point for discussion, as well as our test of the accuracy of what any of the [gender-related literature] said, would be the actual experience we had in these areas” (554). She goes on to draw parallels between the intense analysis of personal experience that occurred within consciousness-raising groups and the Enlightenment origins of modern scientific study. For Sarachild, consciousness-raising was a way for the movement to constantly re-consider which feminist issues seemed important and prevalent enough to warrant direct action while including a broad range of feminist viewpoints. Personal narratives, at least in theory, served as a system of checks and balances that regulated the movement and prevented it from taking a narrow-minded—even internally oppressive—view of what a ‘real’ feminist issue should be (Sarachild 554).

Susan Brownmiller (another notable NYRW member) takes a wider view of consciousness-raising’s place in not just that particular feminist era, but in the history of Western womanhood. In addition to diversifying feminist viewpoints, consciousness-raising brought women together; Brownmiller argues that the
practice was “the movement’s most successful form of female bonding” (79). Consciousness-raising groups physically brought women out of their cloistered existence inside the home and united them—to restate Deborah Tolman—“through shared experiences of both oppression and power” (339). The possibility for unity through narrative, I argue, was the most useful and lasting legacy of consciousness-raising.

A 1971 leaflet from the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union provides sample discussion questions for small groups. Topics include housework, child-rearing, working outside the home, and the definition of femininity, but the CWLU also provides questions that more deeply probe into the realm of the taboo:

What did your parents teach you about sex? How do you feel about menstruation? How did you feel when you had your first period? What was your first sex experience? [...] Do you pretend to have an orgasm? Have you had an abortion? How do you feel about being pregnant?” (CWLU 2)

The new feminist paradigm of experience-as-knowledge meant that these issues, never before discussed explicitly, were now considered important and worthy of dissemination.

Although she has not directly referenced the importance of consciousness-raising groups in her creative process, it’s clear that Eve Ensler alludes to this aspect of American feminist history by asking modern women
similar (or even the same) questions in an intimate interview setting. The interviews that provided the source material for the monologues took the shape of informal conversation rather than strictly organized question-answer sessions; this subjective, impressionistic structure is reflected in Ensler’s use of artistic license (in her words, “having a good time”) in crafting the monologues.

Why was it necessary to re-create consciousness-raising—despite the problematic nature of replicating the process in a theatrical format for public consumption—if it had already been done in the 1970s? I think this question is best considered in the context of Tolman’s work in the 1990s vis-à-vis adolescent girls and dialogue about sexual desire (which I have mentioned above). Tolman and Elizabeth Debold theorized that adolescent girls start to experience their own sense of sexuality through the lens of the male gaze at the very point in their development when they begin to develop frameworks for understanding, communicating, and responding to personal sexual desire (325).

Twenty years after the heyday of consciousness-raising groups, Tolman comes to the same conclusion that spurred the formation of these groups: that safe female spaces are necessary for the production of paradigms of sexual desire that are a) independent from the needs or opinions of others and b) “educated” (not “suppressed” or “silenced”, as female desire tends to be in sex education programs) (325). Tolman repeatedly emphasizes that the theme of violence and

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10 Wittig’s slightly more extreme argument emphasizes that vocalizations of feminine desire and experience must not take men into account in any sense; it “must be focused on women among themselves, rather than on their divergence from men or from men’s views of them” (Jones 362).
self-protection recurs in many of her interviews with adolescent girls, especially interviews that took place in urban environments (326). It isn’t acceptable for women to talk about sexuality in relation to their own desire; therefore, the stories they tell about desire are tied to other people’s experiences of sexuality. Any experiences of personal desire are characterized as ‘embarrassing’ and unworthy of dissemination. Their partners’ desire—which can often manifest itself in physical abuse and social devastation—trumps their own.  

In *The Vagina Monologues*, many adult speakers provide anecdotes from their childhood and teenage years as pretext to the central story or theme of their narrative. Their experiences, both pleasurable and bad, inform their adult desire. The elderly speaker in “The Flood” immediately announces that “I haven’t been down there since 1953”; she eventually reveals how a traumatic teenage date caused her to “[close] the whole store. Locked it, never opened for business again. I dated some after that, but the idea of flooding made me too nervous. I never even got close again” (Ensler 2009, 13). The horrific experiences of the Japanese ‘comfort women’, sexually enslaved by the government as teenagers, leaves them with “hatred of men/No children/No house/A space where a uterus once was/Booze/Smoking/Guilt/Shame” (Ensler 2009, 3). The “Little Coochi Snorcher That Could” uses brief, painful anecdotes

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11 Tolman also makes use of the Listening Guide, a psychological research method that permits polysemous readings of source material as well as more subjective and personal ways of approaching the interviewee. This Guide, I argue, owes much to the legacy of feminist consciousness-raising groups.
from ages 5, 7, 9, 10, and 13 as a prelude to a tremendously positive sexual experience at age sixteen. She concludes in the final line of her story that her lover “transformed [her] sorry-ass Coochi Snorcher [a slang term for vagina] and raised it up into a kind of heaven” (Ensler 2009, 31).

Although the trauma of youth is present in the work, some speakers tell of a positive sexual history. “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy” discovers the power of delayed gratification at age ten, a skill which not only leads to her employment as a dominatrix, but gives her a rich appreciation for her own sexual pleasure (Ensler 2009, 32-34). In “My Vagina Was My Village”, the Bosnian rape-camp survivor foregrounds her tale of horrific abuse with an anecdote of a “sweet boyfriend touching [me] lightly with blonde straw,” a lovely moment that, through contrast, deepens the dreadfulness of what she experienced later in her teenage years (Ensler 2009, 27).

Some speakers in The Vagina Monologues are already aware of how the legacy of second-wave feminism informs and interacts with their personal sense of sexuality. The final speaker, based on Ensler herself, calls upon the audience to recognize the poetic commonalities between the heart and the vagina while also explicitly asserting that her experience as an observer of birth serves as a form of knowledge to validate these comparisons: “I was there in the room. I remember” (Ensler 2009, 37). Ensler also playfully references second-wave feminism in “Because He Liked to Look at It.” The speaker has a clear understanding of feminist ‘political correctness’, but states her discomfort with
the clichéd aspects of second-wave feminism: “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. Pussies Unite. I know all of it” (Ensler 2009, 20). Although the speaker clearly comes from a ‘post-feminist’ era, it is clear that consciousness-raising hasn’t been successful in sexually liberating this particular woman. Although she approaches sex casually, the mere thought of her own vagina horrifies her. When her partner insists on “seeing her” before sex, she protests: “This is awfully intimate...can’t you just do it?” (Ensler 2009, 21). His insistent reverence eventually transforms her relationship with her vagina in a way that the legacy of consciousness-raising cannot; although second-wave feminism advocates that women love their vaginas without regard for the male gaze, the male gaze is instrumental in her learning to see herself as a sexual being.

Other characters only come to their feminist consciousness through the act of telling their stories to Ensler. In “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could”, the speaker states, “I realize later [my female sexual partner] was my surprising, unexpected and politically incorrect salvation;” in “My Angry Vagina,” the speaker travels from a place of intense rage to the realization that she “wants to stop being angry”; and in “The Flood,” the uncomfortable process of talking about “down there” makes the speaker “feel a little better” by the end of her story (Ensler 2009: 14, 26, 31).
Although the act of speaking isn’t always the main component of the characters’ transformation, storytelling itself is important because it places these experiences in a semi-public discursive space. Because someone has borne witness to the telling of these women’s stories, the stories themselves cannot be taken back or erased; they are now part of someone else’s consciousness. In consciousness-raising groups, small clusters of relatively like-minded listeners provided a safe environment for women to commit the personal narrative to collective memory. Although the stories that women shared within these groups influenced political policy in an abstract way, for the most part, their narratives weren’t re-told in the public arena (that is, to audiences other than these groups).12

It is critical to recognize how the storytelling environment influences the form in which stories are shared. Although Ensler gathered her source narratives in an intimate conversational setting similar to small, all-female discussion groups, her theatrical staging of these stories allows a much larger, mixed-gender, and global audience the opportunity to listen in on the candid stories shared in a small, safe space. According to the CWLU, though, it isn’t enough to simply listen in on a consciousness-raising discussion: members of the group must actively participate (2). This raises an interesting issue regarding the voyeuristic tendencies of the play: is the act of telling cheapened or harmed by

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12 The 1969 Redstockings abortion speak-out—in which this particular radical feminist group staged a large-scale consciousness-raising session outside a New York legislative hearing on abortion reform—was a notable exception, which I will examine in further detail in chapter 2.
taking the story out of its conversational context? In other words, does performing the personal narrative do the same political work as the (consciousness-raising) interview itself?

I will attempt to address this complex question in the next two chapters. First, I will examine how the monologic form in particular is suited to reconstituting lived experience for public consumption (performance), with attention to the respective rhetorical structures of consciousness-raising sessions and the theatrical monologue as well as the issues inherent in ‘translating’ verbatim experience (as told by the one who lived it) into heightened, semi-poetic theatrical language. In the next chapter, I will broaden my analysis in order to include choral monologues, dialogic allusion, and other unconventional re-appropriations of the monologic form within the text of the play.
Chapter II. ‘Say Me’: Translating the Personal Narrative into Monologue

In the last chapter, I discussed how storytelling (specifically, the stories exchanged within feminist consciousness-raising groups) can be a subversive act in itself—in this chapter, I will shift the focus of my analysis to examine how a story, once told, can be re-worked into a different form for slightly different purposes. Although personal narratives can be exchanged orally, textually, and even through wordless forms like visual art and dance, I will look specifically at the theatrical monologue as a way in which the oral narrative is modified to create a particular artistic effect. I will also compare the effects of stories told in the monologic form to other narrative modes in which stories are (re)constituted to reach a wider audience.

Storytelling was absolutely central to the feminist consciousness-raising movement—and by prizing experience as knowledge, the movement politicized that act—but complete, individual narratives rarely emerged on the public surface of the feminist movement. The stories themselves weren’t used as specific tools for focused political change. Narratives of lived experience effected social change only within these small discussion groups. Women used the narrative form of consciousness-raising sessions to not only articulate their experiential knowledge, but reflect it off of the experiences and opinions of other women in their groups. Although the rhetorical structure of these reflections endangered—and in some cases, prevented—the expression of a unified personal narrative told on the speaker’s own terms, I cannot overstate
how important it was for women to find commonality with each other in an era when they were intensely isolated.

The unifying work taking place in living rooms and kitchens across America was a tremendously potent tool for feminist empowerment, and as a result, some feminist groups attempted to adapt the (semi-private) consciousness-raising format for a public setting in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of this technique and the political importance of the conversations that were happening behind closed doors. The 1969 Redstockings abortion speak-out demonstrates both the problems and benefits of using the format of feminist discussion groups to tell stories in a performative, public setting. In a pro-abortion demonstration in New York’s West Village, this radical feminist group held a large-scale consciousness-raising session before a crowd of almost 300 people (“Celebrate the Anniversary...” 1). Despite the large size of the crowd, the group utilized the same storytelling structure used in much smaller consciousness-raising sessions: audience members were encouraged to interject with comments—or even verbally interpolate their own narratives—when they found points of commonality between their own stories and those being told by the speaker.

Susan Kalcik classifies the narratives shared in this speak-out as ‘kernel stories’, anecdotes that emerge in response to the stories told by others. Kernel stories are beneficial in that they serve as supports and equalizers for other stories. They are intended to encourage “a tone of harmony in the group”
rather than challenge or criticize the experiences of others (Dubriwny 405). In kernel storytelling, shared experiences all have a discernable common thread; difference is permissible, but dissonant ideas cannot co-exist. Commonality gives structure to the discussion. However, kernel stories are problematic because they often sacrifice narrative fullness and continuity in the name of political cohesion. For example: although a common narrative thread theoretically enabled all participants in the Redstockings speak-out to speak informally and equitably (without the hierarchical confines of the traditional panel discussion), the speakers’ individual stories were often fragmented or interrupted simply because the structure of the discussion didn’t allow for the unchallenged act of telling. The listeners left the speak-out with a generalized concept of pro-choice narratives, but not a sense of the individuals who had lived those experiences; even Dubriwny herself found it difficult to distinguish between speakers in the recording of the speak-out (403-404). Although the speakers in the Redstockings demonstration were connected by a strong belief in the continued legality of abortion in New York, their collective eagerness to share their stories had some of the qualities of confrontational speech. Speakers who didn’t have fully formed thoughts or compelling ways of speaking were often verbally trampled by more articulate and confident participants.

I suggest that the dramatic monologue is a useful form to articulate the personal narrative in public spaces primarily because it enables the teller to articulate the complexities, nuances, and subtext of a crucial event; we
understand the subject as the subject wants us to understand him/her. By sharing these women’s stories as monologues—a theatrical form that can stand alone as well as function as part of a larger piece—Ensler manages to talk about issues raised in consciousness-raising sessions as well as replicate the unifying quality of these discussion groups for public consumption in a more rhetorically comprehensive way than events like the Redstockings speak-out. Ensler raises consciousness with far more nuance by re-framing the act of storytelling in the formally dramatic context of the monologue.

As I have previously stated, the play and this tradition of raising awareness have much in common on the surface, but in this section, I aim to uncover how, despite—and perhaps through—such essential structural differences, Ensler is able to re-create the consciousness-raising experience for public consumption. Using the monologue to transmit a real person’s story is not without its problematic aspects, though; some issues arise in the translation of the personal narrative into another form, especially the problem of poetic conflations and excision. I will also contend with some of these issues in this chapter.13

13 In this chapter, I will consider in depth only the pieces that are performed by one actor. In the multiple versions of the play released by V-Day since the late 1990s, pieces that Ensler performed solo in the original production—including “Worried About Vaginas”, “I Was Twelve. My Mother Slapped Me”, “Six-Year-Old Girl”, and lists of answers to “What Would Your Vagina Wear/Say?” and “What Does It Smell Like”—were later modified by Ensler to accommodate two or more performers. I will address the choral blending of voices—and the unification of voices for a political purpose—in the next chapter.
Some critics read the monologue as simply aggressive—a stylistic tool used to silence and steamroll the opposition—but my perspective on the form more closely adheres to Ensler’s defense of the mode: “I think often women are not listened to, and the monologue forces you to listen. [...] I don’t mean force as in controlling someone. I think the monologue allows one to take up space” (Solomon 1). Simply seeing the female body onstage endows the words that the actor speaks with a gendered cultural context, Jill Dolan argues, and the audacious, rhetorically powerful monologue subverts the context of narrative submission that is typically associated with women both on and off the stage (Geis 117).

Although Ensler has written other plays that dramatize the oral presentation of actual lived experience—including Necessary Targets, a tale of two American therapists who travel to Bosnia to ‘heal’ the psychological wounds of rape-camp survivors, and The Treatment, about an Iraq war veteran with PTSD and a military psychologist—only The Vagina Monologues and The Good Body (often considered to be TVM’s ‘sister play’) are constructed entirely of monologues performed by different characters.

The actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith also synthesizes performance and the interview in her monologic theatrical works—however, the defining characteristic of her performance work is the exactness of her reproductions. Smith argues that verbatim performance is critically important because patterns of speech both influence and reveal the inner self; from 1992’s
Fires in the Mirror to her most recent work, Let Me Down Easy, she has become renowned for her precise imitations of people she has interviewed—personalities both celebrated and anonymous, ranging from male rabbis to sixteen-year-olds dying of cancer. In order to perform such exact reproductions, she repeatedly reviews filmed footage of these interviews until she memorizes each gesture, each inflection, and each pause (Smith 2009 [Aug]). “As a person gives me their words, they’re really giving me a part of themselves,” Smith has stated; for her, “absorbing America” requires that she “walk” in the exact words of Americans (Smith 2005, 2009 [Oct]).

Admittedly, Ensler does portray the mannerisms and accents of the women she has interviewed, and gives specific directions for V-Day performances to characterize them similarly (“Coochi Snorcher” is characterized as “Southern, woman of color,” and “Workshop” is directed to be performed in a British accent). Clearly, something is lost in these two pieces without the inclusion of these imitative character details. Some of the phrases require such copied characterization: a “Devonshire-patterned” platter in “Workshop” carries more meaning for the British woman who describes it than it would for an American, and “December 1965” has special resonance for a southern woman of color (Ensler 2009: 15, 29). Why, then, are the exact words so critical for Smith and not for Ensler? I simplify Smith and Ensler’s numerous differences by exploring instead how each author defines ‘translation’ in the context of the creative process. For the former, “a series of sounds and movements,” the
embodied act of producing thoughts as speech, is what constitutes identity (Smith 2007). Ensler represents the speaker through the general idea of the narrative—often by demonstrating the transformation of the speaker’s perspective or ideology that takes place within the narrative (or through the act of telling the narrative).\textsuperscript{14}

Jill Dolan considers the composing-performing styles of these two artists as categories in which to classify all socially aware monodrama. By so carefully representing the words and mannerisms of her interviewees, Smith “perform[s] presumptive authenticity”; her status as outsider, underlined by the small gap between the actual person who spoke those words and her inevitably (if occasionally) inadequate attempt to represent that person, seems to endow her with the scientific objectivity of an anthropologist encountering a culture for the first time (Dolan 83). Ensler, like monologist Danny Hoch (whose performances Dolan covers in depth), performs “the act of having listened”—in other words, her (subjective) personal impression of the story she has just heard a) acknowledges that she is interested in this story deeply enough to distill its critical and emotional meanings, and b) implicitly requests that the audience listen to this narrative just as carefully and critically (Dolan 79). Although Smith sees herself as an interloper in the “communities in crisis” that she investigates,

\textsuperscript{14} There is also an element of privacy and security to Ensler’s mode of narrative representation. The stories told in consciousness-raising groups, I have mentioned previously, were rarely shared in their entirety outside these ‘safe’ feminist discussion spaces. By not exactly representing her interviewees, Ensler maintains a certain level of protective anonymity.
Ensler considers herself part of the larger community of women who struggle with their legacy of abuse as well as activists who fight the systematic violent oppression of women—groups that may, and often do, overlap (Dolan 83).

Even if the writer has the best intentions in mind, conflating, distilling, and other tactics for transforming an interviewed person’s words into a form intended for public artistic consumption is essentially a manipulative act. Even Smith has admitted that although she does not affix her own writing or otherwise alter the exact turn of phrase of her interviewees, she does excise portions of these interviews for the sake of conciseness and clarity (Dolan 85). Ensler is obviously uncomfortable with the issues of representation and power at play in converting real-life narratives into theatrical pieces; veiling the act of construction and deletion in mystery allows her to focus on the finished product.

If Ensler’s secrecy about her writing process is any indication, we will never be able to compare the transcripts and videotaped interviews to the monologues that arose from this primary material. Although I believe such a comparative analysis would be tremendously beneficial not only to my project, but to feminist scholarship as a whole, it is a virtually impossible task. Instead, I encourage the reader to hold a consistent subtextual acknowledgment that reworking, erasing, and adding to existing text—while certainly problematic—is

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15 Smith, like Ensler, excises herself (as interviewer) from her pieces. Her self-references are not nearly as explicit as Ensler’s; although her characters occasionally reference Smith’s celebrity—like the cowboy in *Let Me Down Easy*—her characters don’t tend to repeat questions and use other artificial linguistic devices that suggest dialogue (Smith 2005).
also an integral part of the creative process. The final product is meant to represent the essence of the original interview rather than the interview itself. Although words are the ‘essence’ of character for Smith, Ensler emphasizes the subjective, emotional aspects of selfhood. Smith believes that her interviewees are what they say; Ensler divines and/or projects an emotional reaction that the interviewee may be prevented from saying directly (whether through societal conditioning, personal discomfort, or psychological trauma).

Ensler honestly describes the experience of failing in the act of translation. In the first published edition of the play, “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy” is followed by a lengthy explanation of her original subject’s dissatisfaction with Ensler’s monologic take on the interview. The subject claimed that Ensler’s essential misunderstanding of what it was like to experience the vagina from a lesbian perspective prevented the author from creating an accurate representation of a lesbian dominatrix; essentially, Ensler’s discomfort and lack of knowledge altered the piece more than any political motive (Ensler 1998, 97-102). It isn’t clear whether she changed the monologue in response to her subject’s criticism; perhaps this editorial note itself serves as a representation of ‘authentic’ lesbian sexual experience.\(^1\) Although I would hope that most of the monologues accurately capture the essence of an interview—or in some cases, the essence that multiple interviews held in common—this is simply not definite.

\(^1\) This editorial note is not performed or read in the V-Day script.
There is a possibility that Ensler’s authorial presence can serve as a link between the narrative as told by the woman who experienced it and the final poetic-theatrical product. Deborah Geis writes that in performance, the authorial voice is ‘displaced’ by the actor embodying his/her words: “[T]he speaker of a monologue supplants the dramatist as storyteller because it is, after all, the speaker who brings the playwright’s words to life” (12). Good actors give the impression that the words they speak originate from their character; at the very least, the audience isn’t consistently aware that the words spoken on stage were written by another (absent) figure. Because the author of the play and the authors of these stories are not the same, the original storyteller is even more distant from the audience than Geis suggests. Additionally, in the V-Day script (and in the HBO recording of the Broadway version), each piece is framed by an introduction that includes character background (“When she finally found her clitoris, she said, she cried”) and/or statistical information (“Twenty to seventy thousand women were raped in the middle of Europe as a systematic tactic of war”) (Ensler 2009: 12, 27). This enclosing structure of factual evidence emphasizes the preeminence of Ensler’s journalistic work over her poetic re-working of the narrative.

Clearly, the monologue conveys meaning in a way that is particularly affecting to modern audiences, or Ensler would not have gone through the trouble of re-working the narrative into dramatic form; Paul Taylor writes that monologue plays are part of a “much-in-vogue mode,” although he also states
that popularity of the form isn’t enough to justify its use (1). Taylor also
emphasizes that the monologue is “a means of making the hidden a potent
presence” (3). In *The Vagina Monologues*, the hidden and marginal are
unavoidable; with nothing else to capture an audience’s attention but an actor
*sans* major props or costumes, we are unable to look elsewhere. The sole voice
is uninterrupted and unchallenged by other (perhaps more dominant) voices.
The monologue does important work by giving voice to alienated, silenced, or
marginalized experience (Byron 100). In *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler uses the
rhetorical space created by the monologue to share stories that challenge
existing generalizations about women’s experiences. As a set of diverse
monologic narratives, the play doesn’t promote one specific set of political
beliefs, but rather provides a framework for the audience member to encounter
various social, political, and even religious modes of female sexuality.

Although scholars cannot seem to agree on a concise definition of the
monologue, I will attempt to create a working definition of the form. First, it is
critical to distinguish between monologue and soliloquy. As Geis usefully points
out, soliloquy is a subcategory of monologue, but not all monologues are
soliloquies. Soliloquy is an intrinsically meta-theatrical device—it supposes that
the audience to which it is delivered is nonexistent or inanimate. The type of
monologue I will be discussing is addressed to a ‘present’ audience; in other
words, it is told to another person—either a character on stage or the audience
itself—in order to achieve some sort of dramatic purpose (Quinn 201). Although
many contemporary monologues tell stories of past dilemmas or experiences (often with the intention of providing subtext for past or future staged action), characters soliloquize in order to present emotions, thoughts, and plans that are not obvious to the audience. Therefore, the soliloquy necessarily requires a context of outside action (e.g. the play surrounding it); it cannot stand alone (Geis 9-10). The monologue, rather, can not only stand alone, but has been consistently performed by solo actors like Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray, Anna Deavere Smith, Vanessa Redgrave, Danny Hoch, and Lynn Redgrave (to name just a few) since the late 1970s. Show-length monologues—a theatrical category which Jill Dolan calls “monodrama”—have taken the shape of autobiography, biographical impersonation, and fictional character studies (67).

With the monologue comes the necessary subtext of dramatic intent. However real the story may be, performing the story for public consumption elevates the speech used to tell that story into the theatrical realm—it occupies a space where the listener can suspend his/her disbelief. The stories told in living rooms and kitchens during consciousness-raising sessions, however, were not told in formally theatrical language. The experiences themselves were not meant to stand on their own as rhetorical tools; rather, narratives (and pieces of narratives) were utilized by activists to compose a larger, generalized narrative about the lives of women in the 1960s and 1970s. Even in cases like the Redstockings speak-out, where consciousness-raising was performed in a vastly more public (and intentionally theatrical) context, feminist activists presented
their individual stories to the public as part of a framework dedicated to accomplishing specific political goals: to fight for equal rights under the Constitution, to justify that women could function as ‘productive’ members of society outside the home, and to ensure that women had access to safe and legal means of birth control (among many others).  

The narrative structure of The Vagina Monologues, however, enables all speakers—whether they’re as sexually and verbally confident as the dominatrix in “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy” or as repressed, shamed, and verbally tentative as the older woman in “The Flood”—to share their stories in their full complexity and completeness. The audience gains more information about the characters’ lives by not interrupting with their own stories; the speakers’ thoughtful pauses enable new aspects of their sexual and personal histories to emerge. This arrangement also portrays each story as somehow exceptional: stories told in the monologic form appear both integral to and slightly more important than the text surrounding it.

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17 The Vagina Monologues, however, was not initially grounded in such specific political aims. Ensler was obviously aware that the play would carry some controversy with it simply by virtue of the subjects addressed by the narratives, but numerous interviews reveal that during the writing process—and for the first two years that she performed the play—the political potential of the piece took a back seat to the stories themselves and the way in which Ensler was ‘organically’ led from woman to woman (a phenomenon she calls the “vagina trail”). Ensler didn’t impose meaning, but rather distilled it from these narratives—a similar phenomenon to the use of stories told in consciousness-raising groups as a means of (re)directing the course of second-wave feminism from the bottom up.
Heightened dramatic status enables monologues to create “narrative space” without the aid of sets or costumes. Because the speaker establishes the spatial and temporal context, s/he can jump between different times and places without disrupting the continuity of the story itself (Geis 138). Although there are no indications that characters move between different times and places within their monologues, speakers often completely immerse themselves in the emotional context of past experiences in order to present a narrative that is more immediate and relevant. Examples of emotional narrative space include highly visceral memories of sexual torture in “My Vagina Was My Village,” specific memories of pain and pleasure at different ages in “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could,” and drifting off into the specific remembrance of being “asked out for a date in [Andy Leftkov’s] car” in “The Flood” (Ensler 2009: 12-14, 27-29). The monologue is both “‘factual solitude’” (in Ken Frieden’s words) and a “vehicle for extraordinary discourse;” in other words, we believe these speakers implicitly because of the simple fact of their storytelling, but the heightened (dramatic) speech of the monologue allows us to continue believing in the honesty and immediacy of the speakers’ arousal, embarrassment, or pain—even if those feelings happened decades before this particular instance of telling (Geis 10, my emphasis).

In this particular play, there isn’t any subtext for the monologue to explicate and transcend—the monologues serve as each other’s context, and Ensler absolutely does not imply a hierarchy of importance between them. We
must also resist reading the source material as connected: Ensler inherently decontextualizes them through her authorial manipulation (for instance, placing these monologues in a certain order), and there wasn’t much shared context to begin with because the women who originally told the stories didn’t have implicit commonality. As a story, each monologue is an individual, self-contained entity; it is only within the world of the play that these women can ‘speak’ to each other.

For this reason and because the monologue enables uncontested dissemination of personal experience, Deborah Geis argues that it is an essentially postmodern form: the monologue lacks “a responding ‘other’, [refuses] to relinquish the ‘floor’, [and] ‘devia[tes]’ from interpersonal discourse” (2). The postmodern speaking subject is not concerned with reflecting his/her experiences off of others’ because s/he is aware that the world around him/her is just as subjective as his/her own narrative. The speaker’s reality is impersonal and isolated; the experience and perspective of the teller is the sole indicator of temporal and spatial context surrounding the monologue. Although the monologic form is generally classified as intense, transcendent dramatic speech, it is somewhat problematic to classify the pieces in The Vagina Monologues as heightened speech because the play does not provide a context of ‘average’ dramatic speech in relation. Although the play could certainly be read as set of dramatic ‘isolation chambers,’ I believe that it deserves a more complex reading: when Ensler groups a series of diverse monologues together, they interact and
inform each other in ways that they didn’t in their original (isolated) act of telling.

The monologue can be a radically independent form—it doesn’t require the input of others to stand on its own, and it eschews a predetermined, overarching political context in favor of its speaker’s individual agenda. However, I argue that the monologue requires a context of pre-existing politico-social convictions—literalized in the theater itself by the audience to which the speaker addresses his/her thoughts or narrative—in order to dismantle these convictions and create rhetorical space for a new agenda to be realized.

The monologue, which appears to arise from one (subjective) authorial source, exists in a discursive space that transcends political binaries and social norms; it problematizes political correctness, generalization, and oversimplification. Monologues can therefore be read as “confrontative, non-adjustive strategies designed to ‘violate [the audience’s] reality structure’”; rather than creating an intentional or cohesive political statement, a group of diverse monologic narratives deconstructs pre-existing political and social beliefs in the play’s receivers (Dubrwny 398). By presenting a wide range of female sexual experience with no discernible common thread, the play’s form precludes a definition of ‘essential’ femininity and thereby opens up other possibilities for female sexuality.

\[18\] Parallels can be drawn between the sole subjective author’s sense of truth and the truth of ‘body knowledge” (page 19 of this thesis).
In the 1960s and 1970s, activists constructed a new feminine ideal using bits and pieces of consciousness-raising narratives. As a collective narrative entity, these stories proved that women had different desires and possibilities than those of the mid-century housewife. While the use of these stories as supports for a unified political vision was revolutionary, the fragmented, ‘kernel’ presentation of the stories that contributed to this vision impedes consciousness-raising’s potential to reflect diversity. (As I have described above, ideological consistency often comes at the expense of nuance and narrative completion.) The movement generalized varied stories about individual female experience into one essential female experience for political aims; however, in a world accustomed to postmodernity, the notion that there can be one definition of womanhood feels (to put it bluntly) outdated. By re-framing the act of storytelling in the formally dramatic context of the monologue, I argue, Ensler transmits the ideas shared in consciousness-raising sessions while allowing for far more narrative nuance than other performative re-appropriations of these discussion groups.

Creating a collection of monologues drawn from the stories of a marginalized group, as Ensler has done in The Vagina Monologues, subverts traditional notions of what an ‘important’ voice should sound (or look) like. I have already argued that the singular, unchallenged monologic voice allows the speaker’s narrative (however problematic or ‘politically incorrect’) to unfold organically without being interrupted, confrontationally shouted down, or
otherwise altered by the presence of an opposing voice. This is especially important in this play because all of these speakers, by virtue of their gender, tell stories informed by oppression—emphatically so in the case of speakers of color and storytellers with unconventional sexualities.  

The play approaches the same topics covered in consciousness-raising sessions, but takes into account the aforementioned criticism of the ‘kernel’ structure used to broadcast these narratives in a performative/public way (as in the Redstockings demonstration). Each account, by virtue of the length, pace, and relative amount of detail its speaker uses to tell it, is a complete re-telling of a certain experience as knowledge. Grouping complete stories about vastly different aspects of sexuality told by completely different women enables a variety of experiential viewpoints to interact with apparently ‘unchallenged’ voices on equally nuanced (and non-confrontational) ground. These interactions may appear problematic because the values and opinions of one speaker are often indirectly challenged by other monologues. For example, the 72-year-old former Eisenhower supporter in “The Flood” continually protests

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19 However hard that second-wave feminists tried to emphasize diversity in their discussion groups, many feminists—especially feminists of color—found that their voices and concerns were repeatedly overlooked in favor of the white, upper-middle-class majority’s opinions. Although much of the criticism regarding this problematic aspect of feminism was published in the late 1960s and early 1970s (notably by Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks), many feminists continue to claim that ‘mainstream’ feminism regularly overlooks issues of race, class, age, and disability.  

20 V-Day has always required that all performances of The Vagina Monologues occur exactly as scripted. No addition, erasure, or switching of the monologues’ order is permitted.
against talking about sexuality (and notably, sexual pleasure) in the public sphere, but the sex worker of “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy” insists that vocalizing sexual desire and pleasure is the only way to live.

Kernel narratives preserve the continuity of the narrative, but do so through excision and interruption; conversely, by enabling speakers to present their whole stories, Ensler simultaneously opens up the possibility that they can contradict each other. Dubriwny doesn’t see this as a risk; rather, she writes that it is possible for a multitude of individual experiences to function as a singular—but nevertheless polysemous—rhetorical entity:

Persuasion functions in a collective manner through the articulation of the lived experiences of many individuals [...] Persuasion is in this sense not simply the altering of opinions, but rather the creation of situations in which the telling of individual experiences makes possible a reframing of one's understanding of the world. (396)

By presenting different (and even contradictory) experiences and statements within the same rhetorical text, Dubriwny argues, the viewer is forced to “remoralize” his/her preconceptions and ideologies (398). I argue that when a variety of complete (yet isolated) narratives are able to interact within a single theatrical work, these interactions have a broadening rather than a challenging or negating effect. *The Vagina Monologues*, by presenting incongruous experiences and opinions under the umbrella of the same theatrical piece, compels the audience to re-examine (or simply construct) their beliefs on the
basis of lived experience. Instead of arguing for specific policy issues, the play
generally calls for action that takes every woman’s story into account.

Despite the narrative diversity fostered by the structure of the play, there
are problematic aspects of the monologue form. In consciousness-raising
groups, “the similarities in [women’s] stories became visible because each story
emerged in part as a reaction to earlier narratives” (Dubriwny 406). Although
the monologue allows for a wide range of diverse narratives to emerge, the
question of making similarity visible in *The Vagina Monologues* is more
complicated. Although Ensler often interviewed women who were connected by
friendship, family, class, race, or ethnicity, the only definite tie between the
characters in this play is that their narratives emerged from the same
framework: a one-on-one dialogue with Ensler (Ensler 2002).

This relative isolation is reflected in the text of the play; with the
exception of the group monologues, each speaker is in her own ‘world’.
Although she is aware that her story is one of many stories that Ensler has heard
and recorded—note the use of the plural in “The Flood” when the speaker quips,
“What’s a smart girl like you going around talking to old ladies about their down-
theres for?”—the storyteller is not necessarily aware of the topics or opinions
that other interviewees have manifested in their narratives (Ensler 2009, 12).
Participants in the Redstockings speak-out were connected by a common topic
(personal experiences with abortion) as well as a common interest in preserving
abortion rights, but speakers in this play are only connected by their willingness to verbalize their experience on an individual basis.

Such narrative isolation enables a broad range of topics to appear. “The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy” never would have performed her outrageously humorous re-enacted moans in a ‘kernel’ narrative led by the young Bosnian rape survivor of “My Vagina Was My Village.” They tell their stories for completely different reasons: “Happy” is an evanglist of female pleasure, a woman so enraptured by the power of orgasm that she dedicates her life to it (“I became obsessed with making women happy [...] It was my art”); “Village”, who once saw her vagina as a lush and pleasurable “hometown”, has been so physically and emotionally brutalized that she has completely abandoned her vagina (Ensler 2009: 29, 36).

Despite their different ages, origins, ethnicities, and experiences, though, these women hold certain central tenets in common. Rhetorically speaking, both women have performed transgressive acts by simply talking: “Happy”’s speech encourages other women to perform the subversive act of fully inhabiting their sexual selves, and “Village” accuses the patriarchal military of horrifying (and largely unpunished) crimes. Additionally, both women discovered their sexual selves at a relatively young age: “Happy” states explicitly that she was highly invested in the (re)production of moaning before age 10, and “Village” speaks of her first, pleasurable moments of sexual awareness: “sweet
boyfriend touching lightly with soft piece of blond straw [...] My vagina singing all

For both women—and, it could be argued, for many women in the text,
including the speakers of “The Vagina Workshop,” “My Angry Vagina,” and
“Reclaiming Cunt”—the vagina is their home, their locus, a place of great power
and wonder. It is something to be treasured and protected, and the threat of
injuring or insulting the vagina fills these women with fury, sorrow, or even
“headaches and stress-related disorders” (Ensler 2009, 35). The tacit agreement
that the vagina itself is so vastly important to all their experiences—sexual or
otherwise—informs the joyous humor or deep tragedy of all their stories. The
inherent special-ness of the vagina raises the stakes.

Although a main goal of Ensler’s project (like consciousness-raising) is to
demonstrate what a diverse group of unrelated women hold in common,
performing a postmodern reading of some parts of the play (in the most
fragmentary, isolationist sense) nevertheless sheds some additional light on the
meaning of these stories. Because all these stories are subject to Ensler’s
authorial subjectivity, the form in which the speaker (actor) relates her story is
crafted to produce a certain effect on the audience; form reflects and reinforces
the opinion that that particular speaker has of her vagina and her sexual history.

“My Vagina Was My Village” is one of the most formally complex pieces
in the play and lends itself well to a postmodern reading. Ensler writes the piece
in couplets, which emphasize the stark contrast between the young woman’s
perspective on her vagina before and after the extended period of sexual torture that she endured; her vagina is both figurative (a stand-in for desire) and literal (a physical organ that has been brutalized):

My vagina was green, water soft pink fields, cow mooing sun resting
sweet boyfriend touching lightly with soft piece of blonde straw.

There is something between my legs. I do not know what it is. I do not know where it is. I do not touch. Not now. Not anymore. Not since.

(Ensler 2009, 27)

In performance Ensler plays the fragmentation of this woman to the hilt. She speaks the ‘before’ portions directly towards the audience, a faint smile playing upon her lips at the recollection of the life—and the pleasurable, budding sexuality—that this woman once had. Ensler turns her head to the side, enveloping her head in shadow, and deepens her vocal timbre in the ‘after’ portions. 21 Only at the end of the monologue does the horror and pain of this character’s recent memory integrate with her peaceful past:

My vagina a live wet water village.

They invaded it. Butchered it and burned it down.

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21 I have also heard of instances in which two actresses have played this part, one reading the ‘before’ portions and one answering with the italicized ‘after’s. Stylistically, I believe that it serves the play better in performance when the actor presents both sides of her character’s history as part of the same conversation, the same narrative. I have directed performers accordingly.
I do not touch now. (28)²²

The traumatic penetration of this character has split not only her physical vagina (“A piece of my vagina came off in my hand”), but deconstructed her sense of self (28). She is no longer a cohesive subject; she only exists in terms of ‘before’ and ‘after’. Even when she attempts to re-construct the self by speaking of both ‘halves’ in the same stanza, she only reinforces her groundlessness, even her non-existence: “Do not visit./I live someplace else now./I don’t know where that is” (28). She does not have a certain physical place. Her fragmented language reinforces her own broken-ness.

In the majority of my post-performance conversations with audience members, this monologue is often named as the most disturbing and traumatic piece. Looking beyond the horror of the narrative itself, I argue that this phenomenon is also due to the uncomfortable conflation of postmodern linguistic fragmentation and the presence of the unified speaking subject. As readers, we see the words and not the speaker—the strict demarcation between good and evil memory can be read as two completely different histories. In the performance of “Village”, a woman’s linguistically fractured tale of being “butchered”, “burned”, and “invaded” must co-exist with her enduring physical presence on the stage. We are presented with the living, breathing image of a woman, but must simultaneously acknowledge that she is no longer a woman.

²² Ensler uses italics to further emphasize the before/after dichotomy. For most of the monologue, italics symbolize the period of sexual torture she endured; in the final stanza of the piece, I read Ensler’s abandonment of italics as the integration of past and present.
We gaze upon a shell of a human; the speaker explicitly states that she is dead inside, a once-living “river” now filled with “poison and pus” (28).

In addition, “Village” is the only monologue that isn’t goal-oriented and doesn’t demonstrate any progression or redemption through the act of telling.23 (In fact, she is the only character whose categorization as a ‘survivor’ I question; trauma has completely incapacitated her ability to love, to feel pleasure, and even to continue existing.) Her non-linear sense of time and ambiguous sense of place distinguish her narrative from women who place their stories firmly within the realm of real time and locatable space: “December 1965, five years old” (“Coochi Snorcher”), “I haven’t been down there since 1953” (“The Flood”), “a little gas station in Louisiana” (“The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy”), and “the surprise had been gone for two years” (“The Vagina Workshop”), to name only a few. The Bosnian woman’s age, location, sense of community, and numerous other factors that tie her to the spatial and temporal world have been reduced to ‘before’ and ‘after.’

Although this character’s experiences, both pleasant and scarring, may have indeed happened to one woman, it is entirely possible that Ensler utilized elements of numerous interviews with Bosnian rape-camp survivors to write this piece. As I have stated before, Ensler has never talked openly about the process she employs to translate verbatim interviews into monologues (or monologues

23 Here, I refer to monologues spoken by specific characters. I exclude monologues that simply present facts, including the introductions to the specific pieces, “Happy Fact”, “Not-So-Happy Fact”, and any other pieces rooted in data rather than personal narrative.
She has stated that some of the monologues are amalgamations of numerous stories with common threads, but also claimed that others, like “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could” are “exactly how [the interviewee] told it” (Ensler 2009, 28). Ensler certainly takes some liberty with the definition of ‘exact’ retelling, though; “Coochi Snorcher” is embellished with interjected headings representing the passage of time (“Memory: nine years old”) (30).

The forms in which narratives are (re)presented for the general public are encoded with political significance. Julia Kristeva writes that female sexual speech is marginalized, ‘outsider’ speech: the “semiotic style [of women] is likely to involve repetitive, spasmodic separations from the dominating discourse, which, more often, they are forced to imitate” (Jones 363). Essentially, Ensler reframes the female storytelling (speaking) subjects in The Vagina Monologues through the traditional theatrical monologue—but upon a closer reading, we see deviations and expansions of this traditional structure, pushing the boundaries of the form itself and simultaneously challenging its definition. As Kristeva posits, Ensler thereby poses challenges to existing discourse without completely separating her narrative voices from these discursive communities. The play subverts a piece of mainstream theatrical tradition while still remaining close enough to recognizable tropes to warrant its occupation of the physical space reserved for ‘traditional’ theatrical performance: this play does its radical work under the radar. In the next chapter, I will talk specifically about the major forms
Ensler utilizes to push the boundaries of monologue—specifically, dialogic allusion and choral (group) monologue.
Chapter III. ‘See Me’: Pushing the Boundaries of Monologue

Ken Frieden writes that “‘[m]onologue may be understood as either a static opposition to communicative dialogue or as a dynamic swerve away from prior conventions of discourse’;” in The Vagina Monologues, Ensler pushes the boundaries of conventional discourse by stylistically challenging how we define the theatrical monologue (Geis 10). First, in almost all performances of the show following her one-woman off-Broadway run, certain pieces are performed (and, it should be noted, are intended for performance) by multiple actors. As evidenced by the title and the passages that introduce many of the pieces, Ensler continues to classify the play, if passively, as a collection of monologues. I will examine how—or even if—these pieces can be called monologues by reading them as an adaptation of the theatrical chorus and examining how the choral voice changes not only how monologues are performed, but also how they are potentially received by an audience. Although the choral monologue isn’t central to my argument, it is yet another way that Ensler translates real-life narratives into performed pieces. Therefore, it deserves some attention.

Secondly, I affirm that the play is in no way ‘statically opposed’ to dialogic discourse; Ensler alludes to dialogue throughout by utilizing unconventional speech forms within the ‘traditional’ monologue and even explicitly re-enacting the interview format that inspired the pieces. By continually reminding both performer and audience member of the play’s origin in dialogue, she re-affirms
the play’s origins in real, lived experience and also provides a model for (potential) new dialogue.

Another purpose of this chapter is to shift the focus of this study from the solo actor speaking to the possibilities of embodied speech when produced in front of (and perhaps concurrently with) an audience. As a result, I will be focusing more directly on how speech (the ability to speak, the form in which stories are told) could affect an audience rather than how speech alters the storyteller and/or the narrative itself.

In the previous chapter, I read the monologue as a useful vehicle for a marginalized storyteller because it enables a particular character’s story to be told without the obstacles of interruption and conflation that occur in ‘kernel’ stories. This form of storytelling makes a stark, powerful claim to narrative ownership that can be both isolating and therapeutic for the teller. Solo speakers can’t easily and/or actively find commonality with each other, as women were able to do through the ‘kernel’ storytelling format of consciousness-raising sessions. However, the act of telling itself is essentially empowering; the monologue frames the story itself as somehow exceptional and asserts the ability of the narrator to carve out narrative space.

The form is used in *The Vagina Monologues* to alternately facilitate and problematize relationships between the actors onstage and the audience. The audience is addressed directly in several pieces, including the introduction to the play (“I bet you’re worried”) and “Hair” (“You can’t pick the parts you want”) (3,
6). Although I affirm that the play advocates sexual self-determination and independence, I also agree with Geis’s claim that the monologue’s audience assumes the position of a dialogic partner (even if the members of the audience must remain silent in order to maintain the ‘dramatic frame’) (14). The speaking subject doesn’t necessarily address the members of the audience, but nevertheless, the audience as a whole is “given a privileged or pseudoprivileged status as the character’s confidants” (Geis 14).

Admittedly, this confidant/character relationship lacks some of the benefits of dialogue. Although the elderly woman of “The Flood” speaks to the audience as she presumably spoke to Ensler—reacting to (implied, silent) questions and reprimanding Ensler for her youthful audacity—the audience cannot interact with this woman. It cannot comfort her when she flails awkwardly around the story of her teenage humiliation, and thereby, its members are reminded that their individual presence isn’t actively working towards female empowerment. However, the speaker’s admission at the end of the monologue that the act of telling has made her “feel a little better” is inclusive of the audience: as listeners, they have participated in her transformation (14). Geis likens this phenomenon to the agon of Greek tragedy, defined simplistically as dialogue between a single actor (often the protagonist) and the chorus. The chorus is able “to react and to feel, not to act”, but their presence as emotional receptors “prompt[s]” the protagonist’s final judgment (Geis 16).
The point of *The Vagina Monologues* isn’t to make the audience intensely self-conscious (although some postmodernist playwrights, like Peter Handke, have indeed attempted to do just that) but the monologic form renders the audience unable to redirect or evade even the most ‘taboo’ (or painfully personal) subject matter (Geis 14). When audience members are addressed directly and not permitted the opportunity to react—whether by answering the questions that have been addressed to them (as in “The Flood” or “My Angry Vagina”) or by justifying/repudiating the traits that have been ascribed to them by the speaker—they, too, play an important role in the work. By speaking directly to the silent audience, the solo performer reverses the respective roles of watcher and watched; the audience members, now held accountable by the rhetorically powerful onstage speaker, are encouraged to become more conscious of their own mannerisms and beliefs as a result. Although there is no certain way to know that this phenomenon is actually occurring, I argue that this hyper-consciousness is more possible within the monologic audience-actor relationship than in other theatrical forms.

Utilizing the audience as a partner is one way to frame the piece as a representation of a lived dialogue. Since Ensler’s actual body cannot possibly be on stage at each V-Day production, implied dialogue serves as a substitute. *The Vagina Monologues* consistently refers to the dialogic interview process within the monologic form; it may be subtle (as when the speaking subjects react to an invisible interviewer in “My Angry Vagina” and “The Flood”) or explicit (as in
multiple-actor pieces like “Six-Year-Old Girl” and “Lists,” where a performer portrays Ensler herself. In this play, dialogue asserts the presence of the author/interviewer, but Ensler writes dialogue in a way that portrays herself as a mostly passive participant in a flood of monologic speech: her purpose is to be an invisible vehicle to facilitate the telling of rich, self-justified narrative. She only appears in a dialogic position, and a silent one at that: the play says nothing of the process of translation, and her questions are rarely, if ever vocalized or embodied (with the exceptions of “Lists” and “Six-Year-Old Girl”, in which Ensler not only asks questions, but is embodied in the act of interviewing by another actor).

Although the uninterrupted voice can be extremely effective, Ensler also alters the monologic format in other pieces by giving the audience room to respond. In “My Angry Vagina,” Ensler directly addresses the audience to first introduce a sense of dialogue (“[My vagina] needs to talk to you”) and then cultivates a sense of unity through shared suffering (“All this shit they’re constantly trying to shove up us, clean us up, stuff us up, make it go away”) (24). Ensler approaches this monologue in particular with a sense of play, deviating from the monologue as scripted in both the original published book and the V-Day script. Like the oft-parodied stand-up comic’s jokes about airplane food and long lines at the bank, the speaker’s rhetorical questions—like “Don’t you hate that?”, “What the hell is that?” and “What’s that?”—appeal to the audience’s own frustration and outrage (24-25). The speaker calls for empathetic
reactions, which usually take the form of laughter or other verbal signals; in performance, Ensler changes the placement of these rhetorical interjections in response to murmurs or laughter from the audience.24

“Reclaiming Cunt” not only enables, but encourages the audience to respond to the experiences and ideas that have been embodied before them. The speaker demands that the audience pay attention to this uncomfortable, “pejorative” term—“Listen to it”—before she proceeds to dismantle the word into syllables and letters: “‘Cunt.’ C C, Ca Ca. Cavern, cackle, clit cute, come—closed c—closed inside, inside ca—then u [...]” (32). When she re-assembles the word at the end of the piece, she calls upon the audience to say (or even yell) the word with her: “tell me, tell me ‘Cunt cunt,’ say it, tell me ‘Cunt.’ ‘Cunt.’”25 As Ensler states in her introduction to the piece, the performer “reconceive[s]” the word—and when this act of reconception is performed, the audience is invited to participate (32).

Although the majority of the play is comprised of such unconventionally formed monologues performed by solo actors, at least four pieces within the V-Day script are intended to be performed by two or more performers.26 Within three of these pieces, Ensler uses choral blending—which I read as a respectful

24 When I refer to Ensler’s performance of the play, I am referring specifically to her performance recorded in the HBO version.
25 In the three V-Day performances that I have seen, the performer continues to repeat the word, with increasing degrees of verbal and physical intensity, until she elicits a resounding echo from the audience.
nod to the ‘kernel’ structure of consciousness-raising discussion groups.
Cohesive ideas are broken into phrases performed by different actors:

    WOMAN 1: I bet you’re worried.
    WOMAN 2: We were worried.
    WOMAN 3: We were worried about vaginas. (Ensler 2009: 3)

Here, “we” alludes to the multiple voices that served as the primary material for Ensler’s work. Such synecdoche creates “a context [...] a community, a culture of vaginas” (3). Interestingly, Ensler chooses to introduce the V-Day edition by physically representing this ‘vaginal community’; although the play is known for its solo pieces, a single voice is not the first thing the audience sees. In the above passage, the women on stage demonstrate that “worry” exists on both sides of the audience/actor divide. Once that starting point is established, “we” encompasses everyone in the room. These women serve as an extension of the audience, mirroring the audience’s discomfort by voicing their own disgust, fear, and discomfort: “There’s so much darkness and secrecy surrounding [vaginas],” “it’s not so easy to even find your vagina”, and “it sounds like an infection at best [...] it’s a totally ridiculous, completely unsexy word” (3).

The choral aspect of this monologue is absolutely critical in the next portion of the monologue, in which the three speakers name a number of absurd, groan-inducing, and ultimately hilarious regional names for the vagina, among them “Gladys Seagelman,” “Nappy Dugout,” and “Pajama” (4).

Importantly, one of the speakers frames this litany with an actual narrative: “In
Great Neck [New York], they call it Pussycat. A woman there said that her mother used to tell her “Don’t wear panties underneath your pajamas, dear, you need to air out your Pussycat” (4). By sharing this particular narrative, this speaker models how sensitive, awkward stories can be put to use—and this story is indeed useful, as sharing it leads to a veritable explosion of words (at least 36 different terms are listed). By shifting from the uninterrupted narrator (a brief monologue) to a choral response, Ensler implies that when this character shared her own story, other women were moved to share theirs. “Women secretly love to talk about their vaginas,” states one of the speakers, the implication being that it only takes one person’s narrative bravery to incite a flood of new meanings (3).

In “Say It”, two to four actors play elderly ‘comfort women’: women who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese government for the benefit of its soldiers during WWII.27 Each woman’s personal experience—

“Cursed/Spanked/Twisted/ Tore bloody inside
out/Sterilized/Drugged/Slapped/Punched,” “So many men I couldn’t walk/I couldn’t stretch my legs/I couldn’t bend/I couldn’t”—is also universalized with the plural pronoun: “What we were promised,” “What we were forced to do,” “What we were fed” (Ensler 2009 1-3, my emphasis). These ‘comfort women’ are politically motivated to blend their voices (and thereby risk losing their

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27 The group monologues are generally scripted for three performers, but the number of performers in these pieces can be altered depending upon the amount of available actors in that particular V-Day group.
individual narratives): as representatives of the already tiny living percentage of
the thousands of women who were forced into sexual slavery during WWII, the
speakers combine their experiences in order to gain a single apology from the
Japanese government. Solo performance means that there isn’t necessarily a
specific political purpose for the telling of that story; the intentional blending of
voices in “Say It” is goal-oriented and explicitly political.

In her introduction to “I was 12. My Mother Slapped Me” (another piece
re-worked for two or more performers), Ensler writes that after interviewing
numerous women about menstruation “a choral thing began to occur. Women
echoed each other. Their voices bled into one another” (Ensler 1998, 33).
Although there isn’t much direct repetition within the piece, themes like shame,
parental involvement, mystery, and ‘dirtiness’ surface and re-surface
throughout. The general structure of the piece is either a one- or two-line
encapsulation of a woman’s first period. The two-line stories are generally
interpolated by other stories, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

_I was so afraid. I started putting the used pads in brown paper bags in the
dark storage places under the roof._

Eighth grade. My mother said, “Oh, that’s nice.”

_In junior high---brown drips before it came. Coincided with a little hair
under my arms, which grew unevenly: one armpit had hair, the other
didn’t._

_I was sixteen, sort of scared._
My mother gave me codeine. We had bunk beds. I went down and lay there. My mother was so uncomfortable.

*One night, I came home late and snuck into bed without turning on any lights. My mother had found the used pads and put them between the sheets of my bed.* (Ensler 1998, 36, my emphasis)

It should be noted that Ensler has no commentary on whether these fragments are actually parts of the same story, although the same actress often speaks both ‘related’ halves. Textually, the piece lacks coherence; it is difficult to establish common threads between these varied and fragmented phrases. It is only when these words are *embodied*—when the audience witnesses one performing body among many giving both voice and presence to these fragments—that the piece can be read as a collection of self-contained narratives. In other words, when one actor performs a number of these incomplete phrases (a theatrical device that Michael Peterson calls a “monopolylogue”), her body serves as the common thread that synthesizes them into one narrative (Dolan 66).28

“Lists,” another group piece, uses the multiple-actor choral format in a slightly different way: the actors embody a multitude of unconnected fragments, embodying disconnect rather than unity. Each of the three performers provides multiple answers to Ensler’s query “What would [your vagina] wear?” As I

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28 Perhaps this experimental narrative strategy didn’t quite translate to the audience; although this piece was part of the V-Day script from 1998 to 2007, it has not been included in in more recent editions of the play.
pointed out in my analysis of “I Was 12…,” this device can read as slightly disjointed; one actor can play five or six different women in a few consecutive phrases. For instance, Woman 4 responds to the ‘what would it wear’ question with several phrases—“a male tuxedo/jeans/something form fitting”—only to add more answers to the mix a few lines later: “high heels/lace and combat boots/purple feathers twigs and shells/cotton” (Ensler 2009, 8-9). This schizophrenia of embodiment is amplified by the lack of a narrative through-line; although the performers can approach each phrase with a subtextual narrative through-line, these phrases don’t offer much opportunity to create stories. They are simply answers, each one (presumably) representing the experience of a different woman. The voices of the women represented this piece don’t necessarily blend together; they have little in common. The same actor responds to the ‘what would it say’ question with “thank you/bonjour/too hard/don’t give up” (11). This array of answers demonstrates not only the variety of pleasure (or lack thereof) derived from sex, but even shows how women locate their sexual self within the timeline of an individual sexual encounter—whether they connect more deeply with sexual initiation (“bonjour”), continuation (“don’t give up”), or completion (“thank you”).

Ntozake Shange, author of the Obie-winning play for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, also evokes the experiences of several women within each character. She “draws upon the performative qualities of monologue to allow her actors to take on multiple roles and
therefore to foreground narrative itself, the act of storytelling, in her work” (Geis 136). Essentially, the fact that the monologue is heightened dramatic speech—and therefore requires the audience to suspend its disbelief to a certain degree—means that when a limited amount of bodies on stage perform a much wider range of roles, it makes a metaphorical statement about telling stories. Like the explosion of nicknames for the vagina in the introduction to the play, this fairly large collection of answers is meant to represent the much larger group of possible answers that are left unspoken. “Lists” focuses more on narrative quantity than quality—it is even reminiscent of the kernel narrative.

The introduction to the monologues puts forth (and other group monologues echo) the idea that speakers can potentially stand for a wide variety of experience, whether this experience is inherently shared (by virtue of being a woman) or a result of cultural or generational traits. Although each actor in “Say It” may stand in for several speakers with similar experiences, the real power of this piece lies in its specific and very real political purpose. It can be read, therefore, as simultaneously metaphorical (these speakers’ stories stand in for the unspoken stories of other comfort women) and literal (by virtue of their old age and physical deterioration, these speakers may very well be the last ‘comfort women’ left to carry this narrative torch).

After describing the experiences of these women in chilling detail, the speakers re-enact their weekly demand for an apology from their government. The audience may have strong, visceral emotional reactions to the suffering of
these women, but when the speakers face the audience as a united front and address them as they address the lawmakers from their post “outside the Japanese Embassy every Wednesday”—

Woman 1: Japanese Government

ALL: Say it

Woman 2: We are sorry, Comfort Women

Woman 4: Say it to me

Woman 1: We are sorry to me

Woman 3: We are sorry to me

Woman 2: To me

Woman 4: To me

Woman 1: To me

ALL: Say it. (Ensler 2009, 4)

—they accuse the audience of own inaction, not only as individual audience members but as citizens of a global political system that has gravely mistreated these women. The audience members have witnessed the desperate pleas of these women and may certainly feel the individual impulse to apologize, but by virtue of their accepted silent role, they are unable to respond.

“Say It” provides a direct challenge to the audience-as-agon theme implied by the inclusive, empathetic group of speakers that introduces the play; when the actors shift from listing the harms that have been perpetrated upon them to directing their fury and hostility towards the audience, they draw a
distinct line between stage and seat. The audience and actors were united in their discomfort in the introductory choral piece, but by establishing this ‘us’/‘them’ dichotomy in “Say It,” Ensler implies that simply listening to narrative is not enough to effect change. Immense political potential lies in this difficult gap between feeling and ability (a contention that I will more thoroughly examine in the next chapter).

The processes that enable groups of diverse individuals to present a specific viewpoint—as we clearly see in the shared purpose of the “Say It” women—are categorized as “collaborative creation of narratives, irony and humor, and symbolic reversals” or “the strategic juxtaposition of incongruous ideas” (Dubriwny 396-397). The women interviewed in The Vagina Monologues are not clones of each other: even consciousness-raisers in the 1970s were united only by an interest in feminism (the degree of each woman’s involvement varied widely), and the women embodied (if partially and/or poetically) by different actors onstage in The Vagina Monologues were a diverse group from around the world who shared only a common interviewer (Ensler) and a willingness to talk about “down there”. As a result, the play is chock-full of apparent contradictions. This ‘incongruous’ grouping of meaning is even more starkly seen when different—even opposing—perspectives are brought to life in the same body.

In “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could”, a woman’s memory of being raped by a family friend at age ten is prelude to the positive memory of being
seduced by an older neighbor at age sixteen. (Ensler 2009, 31-32) The piece’s original final line—“If it was rape, it was a good rape”—drew criticism from both the left and right. Critics questioned how a piece that claims to battle sexual violence could possibly condone rape of any kind. In every published and recorded version of the play that I could find, Ensler is careful to note that “Coochi Snorcher” is performed exactly as it was related to her. Sexual contradictions do exist within women, and in the case of the woman in that particular piece, living in ‘politically incorrect’ contradictions can have transformative results.

The one-woman version of The Vagina Monologues consistently calls upon the audience to gain what Kenneth Burke calls “perspective by incongruity” (Dubriwny 397). In the original Broadway production (which I saw in the version filmed by HBO), Ensler performs all the pieces in the same all-black costume and static physical position. Sitting limits the ability to which she is able to physically inhabit the character; therefore, she utilizes facial expressions, gestures, and vocal quality to establish the different women she embodies. Ensler served as the common thread uniting her subjects during the interview process; in performance, her body is the sole point of connection between these re-worked narratives. It serves as physical proof that these stories were spoken.

However, some feminist scholars have taken issue with the fact that the body doing this cross-cultural connective work is a white, middle-aged, upper-middle-class, healthy female body. Some critics have read Ensler’s performance
of different races, ethnicities, ages, and classes as a deeply problematic issue of channeling the ‘other’ through a white lens; Bell and Reverby go so far as to say that the play “fails to acknowledge the problems of a global movement that begins with American voice-overs and interpretations of other women's lives” (431). V-Day suggests that directors should take ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual diversity into consideration when casting their production, but I would argue that this is a holistic directive (rather than specifically referring to the pieces spoken by women of color). Throughout my involvement with the V-Day College Campaign, I have seen the narrator of “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could”—described in staging notes as “Southern, woman of color”—played by white and Asian-American as well as African-American actors. Although these actors performed the exact same story (down to the literal word), I believe the presence of different ethnicities onstage results in a different audience reading.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, although the characters in the play are ‘blank slates’ relative to the richly developed characters of modern drama, actors are still given some specific textual details (including class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality) that shape the development of their character. This device ensures that the text will—at least partially—stay true to the original

29 Also see Tara Williamson, “I’m All of Everything That I Am”: Constituting the Indigenous Woman, the White Woman and the Audience in Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues
30 This argument could also be applied to many V-Day productions—because it is simply not possible to integrate a desire for ethnically and racially diverse performers with the casting needs of the show, it often happens that women who are not of a particular socioeconomic sector play women from that sector.
story and/or intent of the speaker, but may also reduce the available opportunities for inclusivity (if not alienate some audience members altogether). For example, a young, poor woman may struggle with the same anatomical issues as the speaker in “The Vagina Workshop,” but the character’s tony British accent and anecdotes of Cape Cod vacations and emerald jewelry may create distance through class difference.

In the next chapter, I will attempt to shift my focus from integrating form and function to simply how these monologues function—that is, as transmitters of change-causing energy, as microcosms of local communities, and as what Jill Dolan terms “utopian performatives.” I will do so by first performing (projected) readings of how audiences interact with the embodied material that has been set before them and then suggesting ways in which those interactions can be utilized to effect social change.
Chapter IV. ‘Say It’: Expanding the Audience to Create Community

It is impossible to think of the monologue in a vacuum. Because the monologue is intended for a recipient (either onstage or in the audience), the experience of the audience is integral to the story it tells. In the last chapter, I attempt to shift the focus of my analysis towards the effects—or, more accurately, the projected effects—that the telling of a story in monologic form can produce within its audience members (Geis 7). My final chapter will collectivize the audience members’ individual experiences into a communal experience united by a staged performance. Through uniting as a community within the theater, the audience takes an active role in performance; they are “co-creators of meaning” with the actors on stage (Dolan 66).

At one point or another, Jill Dolan writes, every theatergoer has experienced a staged moment that leaves him/her breathless, that fills us with inarticulate emotion and can even seem to suspend time (8). She attributes this temporary transcendence to the community in which it occurs: the audience

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31 Although I have tried to present my readings of audience reaction as objective projections, it should be noted that it is tremendously difficult to keep my experiences as an individual audience member from representing the experience of the audience as a whole. Dolan, too, has a tendency to universalize her personal interactions with performance: in response to a moment in Peggy Shaw’s piece Menopausal Gentleman, she claims that she “felt the audience wanting to take care, to extend our presence to [Shaw] as she had hers to us” (59). The very idea of creating community within the audience is dependent on a certain degree of conjecture; we cannot know definitively whether those audience members actually felt protective of Shaw in this moment, and generally, whether audience members feel as though they are “interpolated into or invited to identify or affiliate with performance texts” (65). It is still a critical component of feminist theatre criticism, and thus, readings of the audience are formally grouped as ‘reception studies’.
members communally experience this theatrical piece and are thereby
transformed into a community (whether temporary or “ongoing”) through that
shared experience (26). Her fine book *Utopia in Performance* focuses on such
intense communal moments, which she calls ‘utopian performatives’:

small, but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of
the audience in a way that lifts *everyone* slightly above the present, into a
hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our
lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking,
and intersubjectively intense. (5, my emphasis)

In this chapter, I will read *The Vagina Monologues* as a utopian performative,
first considering how the play projects a utopian concept of nonviolence and
sexual freedom and secondly, projecting how we can extend the intense
communal experience of the viewing community to communities outside the
theater’s walls.

Dolan defines utopia as “that boundless ‘no place’ where the social
scourges that currently plague us [...] might be ameliorated, cured, redressed,
solved, never to haunt us again” (37). It can be difficult to read *The Vagina
Monologues* as a utopian performative because it focuses so strongly on
problems—whether they’re enormous and systematic (the hundreds of
thousands of rapes perpetrated on women each year) or relatively small and
comical (“Like tampons. What the hell is that?”) (24). As Dolan writes,
“performative moments of loss, despair, grieving, and absence”—instances that
shake our cores to the point of destruction—“might, in fact, herald the new” (58). The play is continually punctuated by glimpses of the beautiful world that could potentially exist if women possess sexual agency without the imminent threat of violence.

The moans of the lesbian dominatrix in “The Woman Who Loved...” are able to arouse our sexual and humorous sides, but also intersect these elements with intellectual exploration: the piece asks us to consider what a world that didn’t call unabashedly sexual women “too intense” or “insane” would look like. The narrator’s experiences with women towards the end of her monologue reveal experiences of freedom and pleasure outside the status quo of “quiet and polite[ness]” (35). The speaker in “Village” initially presents her vagina—and somewhat symbiotically, the environment around it—as a fertile, pleasurable utopia. Although she quickly reveals that her home and her vagina were destroyed by a patriarchal will to power, the utopian quality of her youthful sense of sexuality remains something to be admired. This monologue also realizes a communal utopia, or at the very least, a utopian state that is partially realized by other people: she was once touched gently by a “sweet boyfriend” and permitted to be “chatty” and sing without consequences. She sees herself as a collective entity, a “village”—clearly, the speaker came of age in an environment of communal love and support.

“My Angry Vagina” represents a different approach to the utopian performative. The speaker sarcastically describes a dream visit to the
gynecologist (including “fur-covered stirrups” and a “delicious piece of purple velvet” as a replacement for the paper examination gown) and frames a utopian vision of “energized, not taking shit, hot happy vaginas” in impossibility: “No, of course they wouldn’t do that. [...] They wouldn’t be able to stand it” (24-26). By the end of her rant, though, her emotionally charged demands for pleasure and respect take the shape of a clear set of steps to achieve happiness: “It wants to go deeper. It’s hungry for depth. It wants kindness. It wants change. It wants silence and freedom and gentle kisses and warm liquids and deep touch. It wants chocolate” (26). That this woman can articulate her needs so concretely proves the attainability of those needs.

I read the act of giving birth—as chronicled in “I Was There in the Room”—as its own utopian performance. By bearing witness to the act, Ensler is able to see the tremendous power of the vagina despite the gore and pain, the “blood like perspiration [...] the yellow, white liquid, the shit, the clots/pushing out all the holes” (38). Ensler’s reaction to her daughter-in-law’s “mutilated, swollen, and torn” vagina, written entirely in metaphor, can only be described as transcendent:

I stood and her vagina suddenly
became a wide, red, pulsing heart.
The heart is capable of sacrifice.
So is the vagina.
The heart is able to forgive and repair.
It can change its shape to let us in.
It can expand to let us out.
So can the vagina.
It can ache for us, stretch for us, die for us,
and bleed and bleed us into this difficult, wondrous world. (39)
The deep suffering and righteous anger that have poured out of the performers earlier in the show are here converted into obstacles that the vagina can likely surmount. In birth, we see the potential for a new system of human relations based on ‘vaginal values’ of sacrifice, adaptability, and fierce love. The piece also leaves us with the tremendous possibility of the new life this vagina has brought into existence: having emerged from the powerful (and polysemous) vagina, the baby “swim[s] quickly into our weeping arms” (38). In a literal sense, these arms belong to the multi-generational and mixed-gender group—the father and grandmothers—who “looked into her” as she prepared to give her final push and found that they were overwhelmed with awe; they “couldn’t get [their] eyes out of that place” (38). In another sense, though, the audience is asked to be the tightly knit, loving, and sensitive community into which this new life is welcomed. Bearing witness to the act of giving birth has humbled and changed these three viewers, and by describing the graphic pain as well as the tearful joy of this process, Ensler invites us to join their ranks.

Even within the ‘bubble’ of Boston College’s relatively small, friendly liberal-arts campus, there is a tremendous need to engage audience members
and work towards enacting these utopian audience communities in the world outside the theater. The staggering statistics of sexual assault on American college campuses certainly speak to the necessity of creating an accepting, mutually protective community; however, backlash from the conservative Catholic element at Boston College reached a new low this year with the anonymous publication of a deeply misogynistic cartoon in *The Observer*, BC’s independent far-right student missive:

![Cartoon](image)

“The end of the women’s rights movement at BC”

The cartoon lewdly depicts a member of the cast (who dressed as a cheerleader to perform the recurring “Happy Fact” monologue). Although the anonymous cartoonist didn’t have the ideological stamina to take credit for his/her drawing, clearly, the *Observer*’s editorial board (the majority of whom chose to publish the image) also overlooked the profound irony of objectifying the body of a fellow community member while condemning the play itself as provocative and
demeaning (Bindernagel 1). Backlash against the cartoon and the editorial articles that accompanied it took the form of a “barrage of comments” on the Observer’s website (as well as an article lampooning the newspaper in BC’s unofficial satirical circular, The New England Classic, which claimed that “The Observer vehemently prohibits the freedoms of minorities, theater majors and vaginas” (“The Role of the Newspaper” 1, “The Observer...” 1).

Although this strong community response to blatant misogyny is heartening, a new framework is needed to respond to problematic issues within a community. How can Boston College students assert their collective unwillingness to tolerate sexism in an active way (i.e. a way that doesn’t involve responding to sexist incidents that have already occurred)? How can all students respond to controversial theatrical material—whether they agree with it or not—without reverting to the same tired arguments? The work of building a (campus) community that is open to more creative patterns of dialogue starts within the theater itself.

The Vagina Monologues occupies a space somewhere between “the ‘traditional Western monologic view of public speaking . . . [that] limits audience participation to laughter, applause, jeers, and the like’” and “a theory of collective rhetoric [which] transforms audiences into active participants” (Dubriwny 398-399). The best evidence of interplay between the active and passive elements of audience response is the evolution of the play’s text over the last ten years. Ensler (as author) serves as the mediator between the
viewing public’s interests and responses to the play and the text of the play itself—at least to a certain degree. The numerous green-room conversations about personal sexual experience that Ensler had with audience members moved her to political action, but didn’t have an effect on the actual text of the play; with the notable exception of the “good rape” line in “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could”, the play remained virtually unchanged throughout its off-Broadway run.

The V-Day-organized community productions of the play, however, allow for some freedom: directors can choose to add one of six optional pieces (which address specific topics like transgender violence and recovery in post-Katrina New Orleans as well as the Japanese ‘comfort women’ mentioned above), and Ensler writes a new ‘spotlight’ piece each year highlighting the struggles and/or victories of a specific region or group of women. Additionally, at the end of 2009, V-Day announced that in the upcoming Vagina Monologues performance season, it would sponsor teach-ins and discussions specifically tailored for male audience members. The responses of ‘V-Men’ to the play, with special regard to sexual violence in communities and on college campuses, will purportedly serve as material for a new piece written by Ensler. It is as of yet unclear whether the

32 For the past two V-Seasons (2009 and 2010), Ensler has written a piece relating to human rights violations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The 2009 piece, “Baptized”, is written from her perspective (as a witness to the severe violence perpetrated upon young girls in the country) and the 2010 piece, “A Teenage Girl’s Guide to Surviving Sex Slavery”, is excerpted from her new book I Am an Emotional Creature (a collection of stories told by young women that Ensler interviewed all over the world).
piece will be integrated into future V-Day *Vagina Monologues* scripts or stand alone as a separate work.

Ensler’s willingness to alter the text in order to increase the diversity of experience represented in the play (and thereby continually expand the viewing audience) occasionally threatens her authorial autonomy. Notoriously, she altered certain details of “The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could” in response to strong criticism of the piece (which came from conservative think tanks as well as feminist anti-rape groups) by making the speaker sixteen years old (rather than the initial thirteen) at the time of her transformative seduction by an older woman as well as removing the highly controversial “if it was rape, it was good rape” line. Although Ensler clearly believes in the importance of staying true to the narrative, even when the story is painful or politically incorrect, she has altered even *factual* details in order to maintain her base of audience support.

Although interactions between the actor and the audience as a whole can be transformative, there are certain limitations to this relationship. When we consider *The Vagina Monologues* in the context of feminist consciousness-raising, the involvement between actor and audience seems essentially voyeuristic: the audience member observes the re-enactment of storytelling (which took place in an intimate, informal interview setting) without having to contribute his/her own story to the narrative pool. Though it must be recognized that the play manages to display a diverse and occasionally incongruous range of experiences, the monologic form requires that the
audience only communicate through traditional (that is, somewhat passive) patterns of response. Dubriwny makes the interesting point, though, that in collective rhetorical texts comprised of diverse viewpoints, “the roles of speaker and listener, orator and audience, are collapsed to elucidate the ways in which rhetoric can be collaborative” (396). In other words, the message of the play is as much determined by the audience as it is by the actors. By attentively viewing and finding ways to respond to the play after the curtain closes, the audience becomes an active participant in the rhetorical text of the staged play.

Ann Elizabeth Armstrong insists that it is absolutely necessary to interactively examine community response to a play: “Only by seeing theatrical work in relationship to its community will activist theater educators be able to sustain the vitality of our art and measure the efficacy of our work” (202). Jill Dolan goes even farther, touting the act of reading program notes or staying past the performance for talk-backs as the way for audience members to “demonstrat[e] their appreciation or respect for the play” (16). Although these two authors respond to site-specific walking tours, contemporary performance art, and other more unconventionally interactive forms of theater, I believe that *The Vagina Monologues* requires the same sort of critical analysis and response—involving both audience and performers—in order to do activist work. The play includes certain moments where audience response can occur within a prescribed framework, but I believe that a more open-ended participatory discussion format should occur in tandem with performances. In
this section, I will suggest some creative, democratic ways for audiences and communities to respond to this play.

The Observer responded to the February 2010 production of the play with claims that the play “[violently imposes] one group’s understanding of human sexuality upon a group of onlookers with no opportunity for meaningful debate” (Bindernagel “An Editor Responds” 2). When challenged with evidence that four post-play discussions (in formats ranging from interdisciplinary faculty presentations to informal round-table chats) had indeed occurred on campus, the author of the initial editorial claimed that “the dialogue that does happen occurs within certain confines” (Bindernagel “An Editor Responds...Again” 2). In the discussion that he attended, he “was handed a copy of the left-leaning student paper and listened to a few left-leaning professors belittle critics of the play and conservatism in general [...] I was welcomed with the sense that certain opinions are not welcome” (2). Although I was surprised that this student and I emerged from the same discussion with such different impressions, his statement nonetheless reveals the problematic aspects of traditional discussion formats. Just as ‘kernel stories’ in consciousness-raising groups weren’t quite adequate to convey the complexities of individual experience, the discussion opportunities organized by pro-Vagina Monologues community members may emphasize only certain readings of the play in order to create a positive, unified feeling of communitas.
Dolan posits two possibilities for community-building in the context of performance. Some observers, like the men and women who organize post-play discussions on the Boston College campus, are drawn to certain theatrical pieces through their relationship to (or more accurately, their membership in) the community that produces, sponsors, and performs the works; a previously established community frames their experiences within the theater. For others, membership in the play’s audience is a way to experience a new type of community, if only for a fleeting moment: “the performance provides an excuse for social congress, to be seen at or to participate in an event” (Dolan 16). V-Day encourages organizers of the Monologues to surround the performances with a festival-like series of events for the benefit of the community in which the piece is performed. In Dolan’s terms, such an arrangement covers all the bases for community involvement. Publicizing a concentrated program of panels, forums, demonstrations, and other forms of feminist activism outside the theater demonstrates that this play is part of a larger activist framework. Even those who don’t necessarily consider themselves part of the activist community are invited to expand their sense of community from their fellow audience members to an “ongoing community” of people who fight sexual violence in other ways (Dolan 26).

Conservative communities and campuses actively resist such a visible, extra-theatrical atmosphere of communitas; although numerous V-Day productions on college campuses and in community centers surround their
performances with days of anti-violence demonstrations, sexual health workshops, the unfurling of pro-vagina banners, and the sale of vagina-shaped candies to raise money for charity (a prospect which conservative columnist Christina Hoff Sommers speaks of regularly and with much disdain), the prospect of these events occurring at Boston College—or any such religiously affiliated venue—seems unlikely at best. ‘Academic freedom’ clauses (which, interestingly enough, require the ideologically ‘confining’ panel dialogue that the aforementioned conservative columnist so detests) are the only thing that permits the play to be performed at all.\(^{33}\)

In my examination of anti-*Vagina Monologues* campaign materials published by the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute (a conservative leadership-development program for young women) and the Cardinal Newman Society (a group dedicated “to help renew and strengthen Catholic identity in Catholic higher education”), I found that the theme of moral invasion or infection is central to each campaign (“About Us” 1). CBLPI claims that conservative women find it difficult to escape the rapidly expanding “pornographic filth” of feminist activism: “Even if you haven’t personally seen it performed on your campus, chances are, you have witnessed the *graphic and humiliating* promotional

\(^{33}\) For at least the last four years, every performance of *The Vagina Monologues* on the Boston College campus has sold out and the play has been co-sponsored by at least twelve academic departments. Clearly, there is tremendous support for the play in not only academic, but social circles.
materials and ads surrounding V-Day at your school” (“To ‘V’…” 1, “V-Day Exposed!” 5, my emphasis).

The theme of extermination (through banning and silencing) is a common thread through the Cardinal Newman Society’s press releases: CNS president and founder Patrick O’Reilly claims that the increased secularization of Jesuit colleges is “endangering the souls of tens of thousands of students” (“CNS Urges Jesuits...” 1). The statement suggests that these souls are balancing on a precipice, dangerously close to utter destruction. Bishop John D’Arcy, who formerly governed the Catholic diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, IN (the University of Notre Dame’s home diocese) has called the play and the aims of V-Day entirely, intrinsically evil; “spiritually harmful;” and calls for its banning:

“If it is performed, it should be denounced. Otherwise, the university appears to endorse it as in some way good [...] This method places faith in a defensive position and on the margin and is unacceptable at a Catholic university. (“CNS Thanks...” 3). 34

In both of these cases, containment of the play and its publicity materials—if not their complete extermination—is suggested as a solution. At previous post-play panel discussions at Boston College, the vast majority of conservative students and faculty members who call for an end to the play’s

34 Catholicism, as I mentioned in my introduction, is deeply rooted in the physical performance of ritual—especially the act of consecration—but women are not permitted to participate in this performance. We never see women on the altar. Women only have agency outside of the Mass, specifically as nuns and chaste laywomen who teach and provide social services to the poor.
performance on campus have never seen the play. Although I would hope that this thesis (which merely touches on some highlights of what communities learn in the context of the play’s performance) underlines the absurdity of such self-censorship, they nevertheless utilize their own refusal to join either the audience community or the activist network outside the theater as evidence that these communities do not exist. Their actions imply the logic that if this play is not unilaterally supported by every member of a community, it does not have community support—a statement that is deeply untrue for even the most marginal performances.

These considerations lead me to reiterate the question I posed in my introduction: why is the creation of community—both inside and outside of the theater—so dangerous? More specifically, I question why this play is the particular target of these two organizations. Both groups have demonstrated other activist interests—for example, a division of CNS called “Campus Speaker Watch” condemns Catholic institutions which have bestowed honors or praise on notable figures like Nancy Pelosi (pro-choice) and activist Elizabeth Birch (a lesbian)—but opposition to the play and strategies for reducing or obliterating the presence of the play on college campuses make up the vast majority of the topics and materials available on their web site. Clearly, translating the experience of communitas achieved inside the theater to the outside world does an incredibly powerful—and threatening—form of political work.
Although these groups treat the expansion of the ‘culture of vaginas’ as swift and cancerous, the movement of performed community to community action outside the theater is much more slow and subtle. Bert States writes that “the return from the play world is like the awakening from the dream: it is always an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of exile” (Dolan 18). Emerging from the community of the audience into the fragmented community of the outside world can be tremendously disorienting; the strong, sweeping feelings of possibility and belonging that we felt while watching the performance are suddenly ephemeral. Like the play itself, *communitas* endures in memory. (Dolan 5)

Plays and theatrical performances are not necessarily specific, concrete agendas for social action, Dolan argues, because they are “most effective as a feeling” (19, author’s emphasis). The feelings of “connection and commonality” that these brief, emotionally intense instances instill in us affect us in generalized and subtle ways over an extended period of time—utopian moments don’t cause us to leap out of our seats and immediately organize (Dolan 20). These brief instances of collective emotional affect, although powerful, are ephemeral and cannot persist after the lights go down. We feel the potential for a better world, Dolan posits, through the absence of these moments in our daily lives. Though we recognize that this utopia is not (or at least, not yet) in existence, we nevertheless long for these powerful emotional connections in a very real way.
The critical component in translating utopian performatives into the outside world is to bridge temporary communities (audiences) and “ongoing communities” (activists outside the theater). This bridging occurs most successfully when audience members are immediately welcomed into extra-theatrical communities through talk-backs and other discussion formats. Although BC’s performance is usually followed by two or three faculty-mediated panel discussions, I worked with other student activists and faculty members this spring to put together the first ever round-table discussion on masculinity in the context of the play. Although it was somewhat traditional (in that it featured faculty members and was mediated by one student), this discussion did the nontraditional work of connecting the female experiences that the audience community witnessed on stage with the day-to-day experiences of male students and faculty members outside the theater. Conversation started with the question of what constitutes an act of violence and eventually transformed into a discussion of the uses of violence; although the play continually references violence against women, it simply does not have the scale to engage with such complicated definitional-philosophical questions. The discussion group also became a safe space where men came forward to share unconventional narratives about masculinity. One participant bravely shared his own experience as a springboard for a conversation about the societal equation of impotence with emasculation. Although writers like Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, and even a cartoonist on the Observer’s staff have portrayed The
*Vagina Monologues* as gender-exclusive and man-hating, extra-theatrical forums like this discussion have been able to build coalitions between diverse and unlikely communities.

I recently had the opportunity to work with John O’Neal, founder of the Free Southern Theatre (the first racially integrated theatre company in the southern United States), member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and pioneer of the ‘story circle’ community-building technique. He found that when story circles were used by progressive groups to build community among their members in the 1960s and 1970s, they were too ‘touchy-feely’ to do any real political work. (These groups, like the feminist discussion groups I discussed earlier, privileged narrative and political unity over individual response/experience.)

O’Neal found that the traditional question-answer format of post-performance talk-backs often led to questions and statements that were unproductive in the sense that they didn’t invite further comment (like “Do you know Sidney Poitier?” and “That show was really good”). Because audience members were expected to respond to what they saw through questions, their own unquestionable experiences—emotions that they felt, personal experiences that they were reminded of by the staged action—weren’t often voiced. O’Neal adapted the story circle as a way for audiences to respond to the Free Southern Theatre’s often controversial performances. In the story circle format, each participant (including both audience members and actors) is allowed a three-
minute block of time in which they can tell any story they want to share, whether it pertains directly to the staged action they just witnessed or not.

Although many stories addressed the theatrical piece in some way, O’Neal found that many participants also shared stories that responded (whether directly or abstractly) to thematics found in the other stories shared before them. O’Neal’s story circles provide an environment where audience members can do the community-building work of linking their stories and experiences to those of other members of the audience and the outside community, but story circles also provide the option to deviate from the topic or opinion at hand (thereby broadening and diversifying the possible meanings of that community). He also noted that the narratives of opinion and experience gathered in story circles have also served as primary source material for later productions that took place through the Free Southern Theatre (and its successor, Junebug Productions).

In this thesis, I have demonstrated how the “Say Me/See Me/Say It” cycle—‘saying’ another person’s words, ‘seeing’ the performer of those words, and finally, internalizing (and even re-appropriating) those words—moves one person’s story from the body to text, from text to stage, and from stage to community. It appears that the best way for experiences that occur within the theater to have an effect on the outside world is by continuing the chain of storytelling. By responding to The Vagina Monologues with their own narratives—stories that critically synthesize the women’s experiences that they
have witnessed on stage with their own extra-theatrical experiences and observations—audience members become active participants in the making of a new community: a community that is aware that utopia can be reached and whose members collectively possess the desire to attain that better world.

Therefore, I conclude with a call for activists to recognize that the simple act of sharing their own stories is just as effective in creating a better global community as protesting, blogging, researching, and volunteering. Regardless of their race, class, or gender, anyone dedicated to improving social conditions has experienced something that demonstrates the possibility of a better world. Eve Ensler has written that “If you can’t say it, then you can’t own it. If you can’t own it, then you can’t protect it” (V-Day “2008 Annual Report” 16). Although she directly references the use of the word ‘vagina’ in this particular quote, I argue that it can easily be paraphrased to address the importance of narrative in activism. If we cannot frame larger social issues within our lived personal experiences, the immediacy of making social change is lost. Through the act of ‘saying’ our laughter, our joy, and our pain, we humanize our communities.
**Works Cited**


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