



ELSEVIER

Women's Studies International Forum 28 (2005) 430–444

WOMEN'S STUDIES
INTERNATIONAL
FORUM

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Vaginal politics: Tensions and possibilities in *The Vagina Monologues*

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Available online 6 July 2005

Synopsis

We are feminists in our 50s who first became activists in the women's health movement when we were in our 20s. In 2002 we performed in *The Vagina Monologues* and participated in the 2002 V-Day College Campaign to end violence against women. We use our experiences “then” in the women's health movement and “now” in the College Campaign as a lens through which to introduce a “worry” about “a culture of vaginas” that the play's author, Eve Ensler does not adequately address. Our focus is the differing ways that the body, and in particular the vagina, has been politicized in these two feminist eras. Our concern relates to what we see as the unproblematized tension between a celebration of the pleasures of the body and the politics that underlie the play and the movement it has spawned. We worry whether or not our sense of disquiet and recognition signals both a recapitulation of 1970s women's health politics and their limitations and a failure to learn from critiques of this form of “globalized” feminism.

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... There are problems with using the female body for feminist ends (Wolff, 2003, p. 415)

Eve Ensler's play, *The Vagina Monologues* (TVM) opens with worries: “I bet you're worried. I was worried. . . I was worried about vaginas. I was worried about what we think about vaginas, and even more worried that we didn't think about them. I was worried about my own vagina. It needed a context of other vaginas—a community, a culture of vaginas” (Ensler, 2001, p. 3). As we performed in 2002 college

productions of the play, we had qualms, too. But they are of a differing sort that speak to our own feminist political histories and the productive tensions we fear are not in the play.

We are feminists in our 50s who first became activists in the women's health movement when we were in our 20s. We had very different experiences in the women's health movement: one of us worked within the self-help movement, the other on questions of political economy. Both of us are senior faculty members at US northeast liberal arts colleges where we each participated in the 2002 V-Day College Campaign and performed in the play, Susan Bell at Bowdoin and Susan Reverby at Wellesley. We have written

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words like Ensler's in analyzing various issues confronting the feminist women's health movements of the 1970s and 1980s. We had spoken the word "vagina" in women's living rooms, in store-front women's centers, in our classrooms, and in other college lecture halls before we said it in Ensler's play.

In this article, we use our experiences "then" in the women's health movement and "now" in our college performances as a lens through which to introduce a worry about "a culture of vaginas" that Ensler does not adequately address. Our focus will be the differing ways that the body, and in particular the vagina, has been politicized in these two differing feminist eras. Our concern relates to what we see as the unproblematic tension between a celebration of the pleasures of the body and the politics that underlie the play and the movement it has spawned.

Even though the play is less than a decade old, it has already been labeled a "feminist 'classic'" (Young, 2004, p. A17). Ensler wrote and began performing TVM in 1996, after interviewing 200 women. The play consists of a series of monologues about women's experiences with their "vaginas" (Ensler's body shorthand for the vagina, cervix, clitoris, labia, and sexual experiences). Since 1998, the play has been performed annually on or near Valentine's Day to raise funds as part of a campaign to end violence against women and girls. "V-Day," as the larger movement is called, is a worldwide political movement "to end violence against women by increasing awareness through events and the media and by raising funds to support organizations working to ensure the safety of women everywhere" (Shalit, 2001, p. 173). As of December 2004, more than US\$25 million had been raised for V-Day in thousands of performances by women across the globe (V-Day, 2004a, 2004b, "About V-Day"). This is a stunning achievement.

These productions—on hundreds of college campuses and in communities worldwide—have become performance vocabularies for a liberatory sexuality and anti-violence activism. Just as our own experiences teaching women to do vaginal self-exams, or to think from our bodies into the body politic did, this performance of vaginal politics seems to have opened up a new generation of women to wonderment and power and connection to women through the body. It builds upon what columnist Katha Pollitt (2001, p. 10) called the "old bones" of "sisterhood-

is-powerful feminism." But at the same time, TVM is, in the words of anthropologist Sea Ling Cheng (2004), a "monologue" controlled from the center, not yet a "dialogue." It fails to acknowledge the problems of a global movement that begins with American voice-overs and interpretations of other women's lives. We worry whether or not our sense of disquiet and recognition signals both a recapitulation of some of the limitations of 1970s women's health politics and a failure to learn from critiques of "globalized" feminism.

We are very cognizant that this is a different historical moment. Feminism in the 21st century builds upon what came before and attempts to create a new politics. Neither of us thinks the 1970s feminism was our own golden moment or should or can be reproduced. We are too mindful of political, historical, and cultural change to think that the forms of political critique and agit prop from one generation can translate to another. Nevertheless, we think there are enough echoes of 1970s women's health politics in the emotional draw of TVM to give us great pause.

The vagina monologues and V-Day: a short history

Feminist performance artists and playwrights have long used interviews with other women to present as many "other women" on stage as possible and looked to "spectacle" to perform feminism (Case, 1990; Gale & Gardner, 2000; Glenn, 2000). Playwrights like Anna Deveare Smith have used methods of documentary or "verbatim theatre" to translate taped and subsequently transcribed interviews into scripts (Paget, 1987; Smith, 1993). By contrast, Ensler (2001, p. xxv) theatricalizes interview material. As she puts it, "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, 2001, p. 7). Although she performs as if she were merely "telling very personal stories that had been generously told" to her, there is not a systematic method to her translation of the interviews into TVM (Ensler, 2001, p. xxv). In TVM, longer monologues on sexual experiences are interspersed with fantastic images of what vaginas wear, say, or smell-like and "vagina facts."

For Ensler (Braun & Ensler, 1999, p. 517), “the connection between how women regard their vaginas, and how women feel, and the state of women in the world is deeply connected.” Ensler’s sense of the play’s power grew as she began to perform it, at first alone in the US and worldwide. In 1997, she and other activist women formed the V-Day Benefit Committee. The Committee’s first project was a celebrity benefit performance of TVM on Valentine’s Day 1998 to raise money to stop violence against women globally. With its movie star cast, the benefit raised US\$100,000 and launched the V-Day Movement as an organized effort beyond production of the play to end violence against women and girls (Ensler, 2001, pp. xxxii–xxxiii). A College Initiative followed to encourage college and university students to perform TVM on or near Valentine’s Day to raise money to support local organizations working to stop violence against women (Obel, 2001). In addition to making violence against women visible and raising money to support local organizations, participating in the College Campaign gives students an “opportunity to learn about philanthropy, art, and activism” (Lewis, 2001, Campus Groups, para 2).

The first year, in February 1999, 65 schools in the United States and Canada participated in the College Initiative (Obel, 2001, p. 135). By February 2002, when we performed in TVM, more than 500 colleges in the US and worldwide participated in V-Day. There were more than 2000 events in V-Day (2004a, 2004b), including more than 600 performances of TVM in the College Campaign (Ensler, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Obel, 2001).

Each year, V-Day takes a different focus on violence against women and girls. Monologues are added or subtracted, and new monologues are performed, depending on V-Day’s annual focus. Local performances have some flexibility, but the directors must agree to adhere to the V-Day rules in order to participate in the College Campaign. For example, students participating in the College Campaign must perform specific monologues in a particular order. But the numbers of women in the casts may vary widely: in the Wellesley 2002 production there were more than 35 women, whereas at Bowdoin there were 12. From its inception, V-Day has been “misunderstood as merely glitzy entertainment” by some, challenging its supporters to make its fundraising and conscious-

ness-raising and social change goals explicit and clearly brought into focus for audiences worldwide (Baumgardner, 2002, para 7).

Methodology

This article is a collaborative endeavor. It is based on our experiences in the performances, as teachers of women and health courses, and as feminist activists. When TVM came to our campuses, we both decided to try out for our college’s productions. We wanted to make connections with our students outside of the classroom setting where we were always the “teachers.” We wanted to place ourselves in a more vulnerable position vis-à-vis our students, where our expertise (teaching and writing, not acting) would be of less use. We hoped this would give us insight into how feminist ideas and politics resonated with this generation. We also wanted to see if this new kind of performance would provide a cathartic re-engagement in our feminist work and connection to our students. We performed different monologues: “Because He Liked to Look at It” [Reverby] and “I Was There in the Room” [Bell]. Based on an interview with “a woman who had a good experience with a man,” Susan Reverby performed in the monologue that is, according to the script instructions, meant to be “ironic but male-friendly!” It is about how a woman who hated her vagina began to love it. She met a man named Bob, “the most ordinary man [she] ever met” but who loved vaginas. Bob “looked and looked” at her vagina “for almost an hour, as if he were studying a map, observing the moon, staring into [her] eyes” (Ensler, 2001 p. 57) and when she began to see herself the way he saw her, she “began to feel beautiful and delicious—like a great painting or a waterfall” (p. 57) and to love her vagina. *I chose to audition and perform this because I liked the idea that a women’s studies professor would be in a “male-friendly” monologue. I didn’t want to be typecast in the other monologues that were about an obviously older Jewish woman or about birthing [Reverby].*

The two directors of the Bowdoin production cast Susan Bell in “I Was There in the Room,” the last monologue in the play. In her introduction to the monologue, Ensler (2001, p. 120) writes that “if I was in awe of [vaginas] before the birth of my grand-

daughter, Colette, I am certainly in deep worship now.” The monologue is written as a poem about birthing. It compares the vagina to a “wide red pulsing heart . . . that can ache for us and stretch for us, die for us and bleed and bleed us into this difficult, wondrous world. I was there in the room. I remember” (Enslar, 2001, pp. 124–125). *At first I thought “how boring and predictable.” I was the only mother in the cast, typecast in the monologue about giving birth. Rehearsing the monologue took me back to times I had witnessed the births of others as well as the birth of my daughter. The honor of having been giving the last words, and the memories evoked by my performance, changed my feelings about this part [Bell].*

When we performed in TVM, each of us was the only faculty member in the cast, indeed the only member of the cast who was not a college student. During the time we rehearsed and then performed in the play we talked and corresponded by e-mail frequently about our experiences in the Bowdoin and Wellesley productions. Susan Bell kept a detailed journal beginning in December 2001 after the first meeting of Bowdoin’s cast until after Bowdoin’s last performance in February 2002. Together, we saw Enslar perform TVM in Boston. Susan Reverby, with the assistance of another member of the cast, conducted tape-recorded interviews with several cast members after Wellesley’s production of the play. We asked for and received permission (informed consent) from all members of the Bowdoin and Wellesley casts to base our analysis on the two productions and to use examples from the productions. We have taken care to protect their confidentiality and privacy. Our analysis of the Wellesley and Bowdoin productions of the play and V-Day actions draws from all of these materials.

Body and body politic

On the surface, it appears that Enslar’s play and the movement has inspired and helped to fund have solved what we have called elsewhere the body/body politic problem in women’s health activism (Bell, 1994; Reverby, 2003). That is the play and the movement have seemingly enabled women to connect their individual body concerns with the larger structures of societal oppression. The play draws its audience in with its promise to talk openly about

sexuality and personal desire, travels around the world in its monologues, and provides millions of dollars for women’s anti-violence work. It has managed to transform the romanticism of Valentine’s Day into fundraising and consciousness-raising about violence against women. In the United States, Valentine’s Day, once owned primarily by the greeting card, flower, and chocolate industries, now competes with V-Day standing for victory, valentines, and vaginas, and (in 2004), voting.

But is V-Day simply a one-day, feel good event? We worry whether the empowerment that comes from a contemporary “speak-out” using Enslar’s interpretation of other women’s experiences translates into a larger political assault on the structures of oppression throughout the world. We do not wish to underestimate the power of words, especially since the play has been censored for what it says (Kahn, 2004) and shows (Bollag, 2004). But even so, is saying what is still transgressive out loud or showing it in public with hundreds of others also a political act? Does it in the end make the personal political? And whose personal life does it make political?

It is not as if these issues—of women’s relationships to our bodies and the structures of power—are not dealt with anywhere else on US campuses. Many campuses (including our own) have health and sex educators, “safe space” organizations, take back the night groups, women’s centers, etc. There are now hundreds of Women’s Studies programs and departments with courses that focus at least some of the time on the analytic and interpretive dimensions of body politics. But in those courses, we do not show our students how to do a vaginal self-exam or explain how to masturbate. Nor do we share our personal experiences at this level, or ask them to do the same in return. When we do draw from personal experience, it is to help them make connections among their lives, cultures and social structures.

The power of TVM comes from its transgressive and carnivalesque public stance. The play, as with parts of the self-help movement and early consciousness raising groups, performs the personal publicly. It brings private experiences, hidden from others and especially from the self, literally onto a public stage (Haaken, 1998). It turns societally denigrated desire, practices, fantasies and physical body parts into public celebration. As one member of the cast told

us, women “give but do not have” their own bodies.¹ No wonder that the vagina fact—the pleasure giving “8000 nerve fibers” in the clitoris that are “twice . . . twice . . . twice the number in the penis”—is the play’s recurring mantra that the audience is allowed to request repeatedly and out loud and at any point (Enslar, 2001, p. 51). It is, despite disclaimers, competitive with the normative male sexual “performance.” This move can be a crucial part of political action. But it runs the danger of remaining simply a transgressive moment easily reabsorbed and neutralized (Wolff, 2003, p. 418).

The play is a reclamation project, taking back the female body for women, as did the feminist health bible, *Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS)* (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 1971). However, even with its sections on sexuality, OBOS’s reclamation project worked through primarily the language of anatomy and physiology, providing readable information and multiple women’s testimonials. In TVM, the power is in the performance itself, the process of the doing in public rather than the privacy of reading, and the focus is sexuality not anatomical parts. Anatomy does of course get into the performance, but very differently than in OBOS. V-Day actions on our campuses now also include the sale of female genitalia shaped lollipops and cookies and information about sex toys. At the Wellesley performance, a rubber dildo was incorporated as a prop. The positive affirmation of female sexuality makes the “joy of sex” apparent.

The play makes the assumption that knowledge about women’s ability to have and right to know about sexual pleasure has to be at the center of our politics. Enslar herself, in a recent interview has claimed that TVM did this for her. We would never assume that the empowerment that comes from becoming a sexual subject, rather than object, was irrelevant. Yet repeating the “vaginal fact” about the mighty nerve endings of the clitoris, however titillating, has its limitations.

This knowledge does little to explain to women that there is a connection between their failure to know this “fact” and speak about their bodies. We worry whether the continual refrain is for improving individual women’s sex lives or for helping women make the connection between their failure to know and speak about their bodies and the causes of the constructed ignorance about sexual pleasure and vio-

lence. The play itself risks leaving its audience and performers in the exhilaration of the transgressive moment alone.

The limit of this kind of individualized transgression is illustrated by contrasting the play’s monologue, “The Vagina Workshop,” with the real model of the masturbation workshops it builds upon. The workshops, started in the 1970s by feminist Betty Dodson, were set up to teach women how to masturbate and how to find their clitorises. In Enslar’s hands, Dodson’s focus on the clitoris becomes the more euphemistic “vagina.” Betty Dodson’s Bodysex workshops helped women learn about orgasm by explaining the difference between the clitoris and vagina. By contrast, Enslar (Braun & Enslar, 1999, p. 515) uses “vagina” to refer to “the ‘common-sense’ vagina—all the bits ‘down there.’” Ironically, Enslar actually disassembles its original. Using the word “vagina” (as in “The Vagina Workshop”) in a monologue about sexual pleasure and orgasm perpetuates the myth of the vaginal orgasm.

Feminists in the late 1960s, recapitulating insights from Alfred Kinsey, argued against the Freudian claim that the vagina is women’s primary site for “mature” sexual pleasure (Koedt, 1968). Dodson wanted women to find their clitorises, “the real source of our sexual stimulation” (Dodson, n.d.). To be more specific, the play in its discussion of pleasure is really about the clitoris and the vulva as well as the vagina. But after all, how large would the audience be for a play called “The Clitoris or Vulva Monologues?” By using the somewhat vaguer term “vagina,” Enslar literally births a larger audience into sexuality and the world. But in doing so, she undoes the very hard work of second wave feminists who debunked the political, not just “pleasure,” consequences of the myth of the vaginal orgasm.

In addition, in Dodson’s workshops, groups of women shared the experience of learning about orgasm collectively. One after another, “the entire class looked at one person’s vulva at a time” (Dodson, n.d.). This is another key tenet of feminism, connecting women to each other. By contrast, in Enslar’s monologue about this, one woman tells of her experiences, which, like all the others in the room, is individualized. In “The Vagina Workshop,” each woman lies on her own blue mat, looking at and learning about her own vagina and clitoris. This individualizes and pri-

vativizes the experience, undoing a feminist process Dodson and others worked hard to create.

Not everyone, even in the most radical of second wave feminist circles, thought that Dodson's workshops made enough of a connection between our bodies and the body politic. Many of us found her workshops "over the top," even for their time. Generations of feminists have argued that we are more than our bodies, more than a vagina or "the sex." Yet, TVM re-inscribes women's politics in our bodies, indeed in our vaginas alone. In the Wellesley College production, for example, each cast member in the rehearsals was asked "how her vagina was doing that day" and to have her "vagina check-in" to the group as if one key site of women's sexual being could become "ourselves." The very use of this language led us to remember the discomfort we had in the 1980s when artist Judy Chicago, in her installation "The Dinner Party," portrayed powerful women throughout history as a series of dinner plates and tapestries with various vulva shapes (Chicago, 1979).

The endless arguments in feminism over transcendence of the body or life in it are the subtexts here, but they are never acknowledged. Only the body in the play seems to have the upper hand. The real "vagina fact"—that there are and were tensions about how to think about the body/body politic connection—is erased.

Do you need to be happy about your clitoris and/or have sexual pleasure to be politically effective? Can even those whose lives do not include a dildo, a right or left hand, or pleasure-giving partners have meaningful political lives? How much does making political change require each individual woman to love her own body? Alternatively, what does speaking of pleasures and critiquing violence do? Both speaking publicly and finding pleasure are important practices. Do Ensler's play and the V-Day movement allow multiple points of entry into the body politic?

Our monologues, our political selves

Our experiences in women's health movements "situate" our concerns with TVM. Each of us became activists to transform women's health care. Each of us entered women's health activism differently.

Susan Bell: I joined the women's health movement thirty years ago. I worked in women's health centers, organized a range of feminist health education projects, and wrote about women's health concerns. In my political work, I began with women's bodies, and worked out from there. At first, I worked in women's health centers (Feminist Women's Health Center, Oakland California and Women's Community Health Center [WCHC] Cambridge Massachusetts), providing abortion, birth control and "well-woman" health services. Both the women's health centers were founded on the principles of feminist self-help, to share knowledge and skills, to affirm the commonality of women, and to criticize and challenge the medical system. This part of the women's health movement "placed women's sexuality, sexual self-determination, and sexual identity at the center of women's health concerns." (Swenson, 1998, p. 647).

In addition to providing health care, my work at the women's health centers also included developing educational self-help groups to provide a forum in which women could learn about their bodies with other women, be comfortable with their own bodies, learn about their reproductive and sexual anatomies, and break down barriers which keep women apart from each other. Another goal of self-help groups is to demystify the role of experts in providing medical services and expose the experts' role in defining and treating normal female conditions—aging, pregnancy, and childbirth—as "medical" problems. Self-help groups include showing as well as telling about women's bodies. Reciprocal sharing of cervical/vaginal and breast self-examinations was central to the ethic of feminist self-help.

*At the WCHC I met and worked with women from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. OBOS reflects the philosophy of the women's liberation movement that the personal is the political, and draws from women's health experiences to expand, enrich, and criticize textbook views of women's health. One goal of the book is to value women's experiences as a source of knowledge. A second goal is to become an organizing tool, to help women translate their personal concerns about health into matters for social and political change. The Collective invited me to become an author and I*

accepted. I wrote the chapter on birth control for three editions of *OBOS* (1984, 1992, 1998).

As with *self-exam*, the play is a vehicle of personal empowerment for individual women in the company of others. Whereas—to put it most simply—*self-exam* demystifies and demedicalizes the anatomy and physiology of women's reproductive bodies, *TVM* demystifies pleasure and desire. These can be exhilarating experiences for cast members and audiences. Yet at the same time, both *self-exam* and *TVM* seek to translate the joy of personal discovery into a matter of social and political change. To put it slightly differently, the goals and scope of *self-help* go far beyond *self-exam*. *Self-help* entails affirming the commonality of women, criticizing and challenging the medical system, and transforming science and society more broadly in addition to the ability to perform *self-exam* and to “know your body.” *V-Day*, as well, has more far reaching goals than *TVM*. *V-Day* aims to expose and eradicate violence against women in the world in addition to encouraging women to talk about their vaginas. Thus, at the same time as I felt the excitement and possibilities offered in *TVM*, I worried about the difficulties of translating these immediate experiences into viable feminist health activism.

Susan Reverby: I came into the women's health movement only briefly through the body. As with many feminists in New York City, I worked in a legal abortion clinic in 1970 when abortions became legal in the state two and half years before *Roe v. Wade*. I spent about a month at the clinic before I was hired by the Health Policy Advisory Center as a feminist activist. Health PAC, as it was called, was a left liberal think tank that critiqued the politics of the health care system and published a monthly *Bulletin* widely read by activists, professionals and workers in the health care industry.

I wrote and lectured widely on women's health and nursing issues. I continued to do some work as well with two feminist consumer groups that provided access, information, teaching and testimony on women's health issues. I helped write pamphlets on everything from health services to vaginal infections. When I put my body on the line (as with the research

for a pamphlet with the pithy title “How to get thru the System with your Feet in the Stirrups: A Guide to Women's Health Services Below 14th Street”), I did so to make the system's limits appear more transparent and to encourage women to critique it.

Mostly I gave talks on the health care system: the interlocks among industry, government, big hospitals and health priorities. I did this as part of women's “Know your Body” courses taught by activists in storefronts, at a range of women's health conferences and at schools and colleges. While others gave lectures on birth control, sexuality or childbirth, I talked about drug companies and the need for universal health insurance.

When the *self-help* movement provided women with a plastic speculum and told us to find our cervixes, I did spend one evening with a friend doing just that. But I never thought finding my cervix was a moment of empowerment. I worried alone and in print about the limits of looking inward, of how to make women see the link, as I wrote once, between our vaginas and Vietnam. At the time I never thought looking through a plastic speculum was a way to see power.

My worry came because no matter how often I talked about the bigger picture, women seemed to focus only on their own bodies. If I talked about health insurance, I was asked about cures for breast cancer. If I spoke about needing to attack physician power, I was told often about a woman's vaginal infection. I was too focused on the body politic; my audience often on their bodies. I realized that women were so hungry for information that they would ask anyone who seemed sympathetic and knew something. I had not yet figured a way to move from the larger politics to the body; and the women I spoke to couldn't hear about power when they still didn't live in their own bodies. I continued to try and understand how these differences could be resolved.

Years later when, through the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's recommendation, I became the consumer representative on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's OB-GYN Devices Expert Panel, I worried anew about the link between personal body experiences and politics. I saw in a different format

how women's focus upon their bodies could easily become a site of manipulation from drug companies (Reverby, 1997). For me, the body could be an impediment to empowerment, not a way out.

The experience of going through the process of having a vagina check-in at rehearsals, of hearing our students speak about their reasons for performing, of listening to students from a wide range of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds discuss the meaning of the play and whether they could invite their families and friends, reminded us again of the power of body talk to bond diverse women together. The sense of energy and excitement was palpable as guards were let down, individual stories exchanged, personal moments of joy and pain shared. It was indeed like consciousness-raising of 1970s feminism all over again. Our hopes of learning about their lives were fulfilled. We saw how performing the differing parts taught them to see themselves anew and to see from the position of others. In rehearsals, we were challenged to re-interpret individual monologues and to talk about their meanings. As performances were critiqued during rehearsals, we all learned to see the complexity of the various roles and positions of the women whose words (however filtered by Ensler) we were to speak.

We were, however, always self-conscious and self-aware that we were not just “one of the girls.” One of the entries in Susan Bell’s journal exemplifies what we both experienced:

We started [rehearsal] by doing warm-ups. I am completely at sea here, not having done any acting at all and not having ever taken an acting course, even a one-shot, one-afternoon session with a visiting what, dignitary? We stood in a circle and then [the director] hemmed and hawed and tried out different exercises that we might do, and others piped in, and I stood silent, feeling, well, older, and awkward, and worried that I couldn't do this. My boots felt heavy. I was the only person there wearing boots, not sneakers or clogs . . . But really I guess the feelings I had were all about feeling like the odd person out—the professor, the mother, the menopausal woman, the non-acting woman. You name it (Jan. 30, 2002).

We are as old, if not older, than our students’ mothers. We were, after all, either their professors or

colleagues of their professors or professors of their friends. We were privy to backstage information that most professors, even in women’s studies, don’t hear. We carefully acknowledged this with cast members, promising that anything said would not leave the rehearsal space. Susan Reverby intentionally skipped a rehearsal when very personal information about sexual experiences and feelings was to be exchanged (the Bowdoin group did not have one rehearsal with this focus). At other times, our age and experiences made us the source of information and advice. We found ourselves explaining what a Grace Slick moan might sound like when they didn’t know about the 1960s rock group Jefferson Airplane; we brought in a speculum to use as a prop that we had from our 1970s feminist health activism; we even were asked to help coach cast members in the performance of “authentic” orgasmic moments. We talked about college matters when they asked. In sum, we were both “one of them” and not.

The limits of transgressive performances

The nights of the performances too were emotional highs for both the audiences and the actors. The students and community members, men and women, cheered us on, got into the mantras, laughed and wept at the various moments. But what both of us wondered is: What comes next? Will this be a point of longer-term engagement in a political process or just a rite of passage in a 21st century woman’s college years, a chance to think of her body differently? One of the students interviewed said she had decided not to audition for the next year’s performance of TVM because she wanted “to give others a chance,” that is to give them the bonding experience of being in the cast.² Having seen women take this kind of message from the women’s health movement, we knew there was no guarantee that the momentary transformations would become political engagement. Would the women perhaps have better sex lives (just as some of us learned to), or would they learn the need to question the structures of oppression and their roles in it, just as some of us did?

We had seen some of this before and wrestled with these concerns. Although in her characteristic humor, political commentator Molly Ivins (2001) has

claimed, “this is not your mother’s feminism” in many ways TVM was just that. When the self-help movement swept through women’s health groups in the early 1970s, thousands of women learned to look at their own cervixes, to study their cervical mucus to determine their monthly cycles, or to even consider doing menstrual extractions to rid their bodies of blood. Women like Lolly and Jeanne Hirsch, a mother–daughter team on the East Coast, and Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman on the West Coast, “performed” in front of hundreds of women’s groups (Morgen, 2002; Weisman, 1998). The plastic speculum, in contrast to the metal ones used by gynecologists, became the transparent symbol of the new power, in which this physician’s tool was used by women in combination with a mirror and light to be able to see for themselves (Bell & Apfel, 1995).

[The first time we read through the script] I found myself laughing particularly uncontrollably during My Angry Vagina. The reader . . . was excellent, and the monologue tickled me. I don’t know why, maybe because some of the lines were so close to the jokes we used to tell at the FWHC [Feminist Women’s Health Center] about vaginal (self) exams, the clowning around behind the scenes we used to do. Or perhaps in part because the criticisms were so apt, so biting, so reminiscent of the criticisms I used to make during self-help presentations. . . (Bell journal, Jan. 28, 2002).

“Cold duck lips,” the descriptive lines in the play that make fun of the metal speculum seemed especially riotous to me as I recalled pretending to have vaginal infections so I could investigate the treatment women received in New York’s public health clinics. I laughed, too, thinking about how ludicrous and frightening that instrument can be. I brought a metal speculum I used for talks and classes to a rehearsal and it became a prop in Wellesley’s production. It was hilarious for me to watch it get whipped out of a woman’s back jean pocket and waved at the audience. It reminded me of the demands we made on our ob-gyns to take away the paper drapes in the exams, to put oven mitts on the stirrups to keep our feet warmer, and to require that we be talked to before we got undressed and were lying there in wait for the “duck lips.” I remembered how putting up with all those

unnecessary exams had led me, along with other activist women, to a confrontation with a clinic director and eventual changes in their insensitive practices (Reverby).

All that emphasis on mucus, on visualizing the hidden, was as transgressive and shocking in the 1970s as the play’s repetition of the one word “vagina” is today. Activists who did this kind of self-exam work had to defend its political implications to others even at the time. Feminists in the 1970s worried that this form of personal transgression could become a political dead-end. In 1972, political columnist Ellen Frankfort (1972, p. 239) asked whether “women’s body courses, by offering instant rewards, may be the way of triggering the less-gratifying long-range work” or not. Indeed her book on *Vaginal Politics* focused as much on the political economy that structured women’s experiences as it did on those experiences themselves.

But at the same time, some of the monologues are counter-narratives of pleasure and desire (Taylor, 2002). Psychologist Jill Taylor (2002) argues that monologues like “The Flood,” contest both standard narratives about women and other narratives within the play of violence and repression. “The Flood” is told by an older woman who, like other women Ensler interviewed between the ages of 65 and 75, “had very little conscious relationship to their vaginas.” (Ensler, 2001, p. 23). The monologue ends with, “You know, actually, you’re the first person I ever talked to about this, and I feel better” (Ensler, 2001, p. 30). Thus, even in itself, the play might accomplish something by helping to rewrite narratives of desire, pleasure, and community among those performing and attending its performances. We are reminded again of how “pride and advocacy can replace shame” (Huizenga, 2005 p. 2).

Looking at these moments through our experiences in the women’s health movement, we know that the performance of TVM could move beyond the immediate sense of empowerment that comes from transgression if it is a starting point and not an end point for action. More knowledge does not always lead to more power. The women’s health movement in the 1970s was often co-opted by “solutions” when providers in commercial health centers for women handed you a mirror, or told you to use yogurt for your vaginal infection, or provided a birthing room, but

did not give up control over decision making or expand their services. Performances of TVM also risk this kind of cooptation and commercialization.

Whose bodies, whose cultures?

The power of TVM and the subsequent V-Day movement has been its appeal worldwide. The play portrays the experiences of many groups of women. It contains monologues from women in Bosnia and Afghanistan, from the southern US to Great Britain. It engages with a range of emotions, images and stories. It is about both sexuality and violence, the Janus-like constructions of “pleasure and danger” that haunt women’s experiences (Vance, 1984). TVM’s humor comes in part from its naming of various words for female genitalia from differing groups of women; its pathos from its making visible the pain and sexual violence that has been visited upon individual girls and women in times of peace and war.

Those producing the college shows are encouraged to make sure the cast reflects as wide a diversity of women as possible, seemingly to make the very words in the play embodied on the stage. The directors of the college productions attend meetings with Enslar to assure that certain rules and strategies for the play and fundraising are employed. In the time leading up to the performance of TVM, students are encouraged to provide information about violence against women, organize events and “rape free zones” on campuses and in communities and generally to make vaginal politics visible. At the performances, audiences can sign up for anti-violence work, see exhibitions of survivors of violence art, and pick up pamphlets on topics ranging from domestic violence to abortion rights.

The V-Day movement has made a strategic decision in its attempt use TVM as a catalyst for raising money and awareness. It connects women’s groups around the world, names the problems in particular countries, and funds women who are working for social change (Lewis, 2001). Each year, V-Day highlights one anti-violence campaign. The 2002 V-Day events shone a “Spotlight on Afghan Women,” in 2003, the campaign was titled “Afghanistan is Everywhere: A Spotlight on Native American and First Nations Women,” and in 2004, the “Spotlight” was

on “Missing and Murdered Women in Juarez, Mexico.” Ten percent of all funds raised during V-Day events are designated for women working to reduce violence in these spotlighted communities.³ The rest of the money goes to local nonprofit organizations working to end violence or providing services for women and girls who have survived such violence. As one of the recipients of money from the V-Day effort noted, “many people who come to see TVM would never attend a conference organized by a non-profit organization.” TVM has “helped [to] breath new life into ...efforts to end violence against women” by non-profit organizations, according to some charity officials (Lewis, 2001, ‘Power of an Artist,’ para 2).

In a way, TVM and V-Day embody what bell hooks has called “yearning,” across racial, sexual and class lines that allows for “the recognition of common commitments and serve[s] as a base for solidarity and coalition” (Hooks, 1990, p. 27). But the yearning that it invokes, after years of criticism of western white feminism, seems at best romantic. According to many critics, “this version of feminism with its belief in universal sisterhood, its celebration of individuality, and its embeddedness in modernist paradigms of social action” is too narrow to contain the multiple experiences and actions of women across the world (Davis, 2002, p. 226). Having taught these critiques in our classes, had our scholarship informed by them, and lived through the arguments in various feminist organizations to which we belonged, we could not help but bring these concerns with us when we participated in the college productions.

Yet here was the “yearning” without the critique. The monologues were not just about one group of women. But the starting point, the very core of the play, is the United States. The monologues that focus upon women outside US boundaries uniformly represent those women, as sociologist Kathy Davis has written in another context, “as oppressed victims of a despotic patriarchy in need of support and salvation by their more emancipated sisters in the West” (Davis, 2002, p. 227).

One of the short “vagina facts” that serves as the play’s connective tissue between the longer monologues illustrates this problem. It starts with the lines “genital mutilation has been inflicted upon 80 (million) to 100 million girls and young women. In

countries where it is practiced, mostly African. . .” (Enslar, 2001, p. 67). The use of the term mutilation is done without any acknowledgment of its problematic history and the ways in which many women’s groups in different African and Middle Eastern countries have turned to the word “cutting” instead of “genital mutilation” to signify the problem. The unproblematized use of the word mutilation effaces the political struggle between western and various African women’s groups over even the terminology to explain this practice (James & Robertson, 2002).

Of course, TVM is a play not a political tract or a feminist scholarly article. But its movement across the boundary of entertainment into agit prop and feminist political change requires it to at least acknowledge the implications of its dualistic and potentially disempowering terminology. It need not be the feminist equivalent of Soviet era didactic theater nor boringly reductive. Theatricality, however, does not mean that the complexity of a political question must be lost.

There are to be sure powerful monologues in the play that focus on the problems of a diverse group of American women and girls. But these problems appear both individualistic and shaped by culture. As anthropologist Uma Narayan has argued about the ways “dowry murders” are presented in the West, no one discusses domestic violence in the United States as “murder by culture” yet implies this continually for women in the third world (Narayan, 1997, pp. 81–118). In the play, the lives of women in Africa (read as one country not a continent with more language groups and diverse cultural practices than any other continent in the world), Bosnia, and Afghanistan are articulated as uniform. At the same time these women’s stories are performed as personal narratives in individual life circumstances, they replicate stereotyped images. The monologues do not present what has been done to overcome the problems or provide enough clues to imagining their lives differently. This is left to the action of the V-Day funding, but is not part of the play’s message itself. Thus the play separates out the political analysis and action from its other feminist messages.

In order for there to be a feminist practice that crosses international borders, there has to be a sophisticated understanding of how coalitions can be formed. While V-Day itself may allow for very culturally (politically) specific organizational structures—

for example its support of work in Kenya—the play itself in the way it engaged our college audiences did not provide evidence of such variety, subtlety, or self-determination.⁴ In fact, the rules given to the directors of the college productions prohibited revisions such as rewording, reorganization of the monologues, or insertion of more explanatory text into the play itself.

However, Enslar has added and subtracted monologues from the play. The year after we performed in it, a new monologue about Native American women was added, as were two site-specific monologues (one by women students and one by men students). This way of revising the play places power to establish the feminist practice of border crossing mostly (if not exclusively) in the hands of Eve Enslar. It discourages student and community involvement in the practice of translation and adaptation (Cheng, 2004; Davis, 2002).

The risk that worries us is that the play will remain the only connection that its audience and performers have with women anywhere else in the world. While the money raised may easily be exchanged across borders for local currency, American women’s consciousness may remain rooted in nativist soil. When performed by women outside the United States, or by women in the United States whose “identities” are depicted in TVM, the monologues still reflect images that Enslar has created. If the play is not going to recreate this view of the world from the “core out to the periphery,” more will have to happen than the addition of more monologues about more women and girls from more cultures in the world. The very universality, which makes the play so powerful for North American audiences, will have to be undermined. A new and different basis for connection will have to be created.

The V-Day movement may provide the evidence for such connections and even the language for new monologues themselves. And if it does whether this changed trope will be as wildly successful as the play has been to date is also uncertain.

Danger, pleasure, and power

Enslar is not the first feminist, of course, struggling to find a balance between celebrating sexuality’s potential for pleasure and acknowledging its use as a

weapon of power. As a survivor of sexual violence herself, Ensler is determined to keep her audiences ever mindful but not mired in violence's consequences for women. She writes, "*in order for the human race to continue, women must be safe and empowered*" (Ensler, 2001, p. xxxvi).

Betty Dodson, more focused on sexuality's pleasure principles, criticizes Ensler for linking pleasure and violence in TVM. In her view, the main problem is that "women end up celebrating sexual violence and not the creative or regenerative pleasures of erotic love" (Dodson, n.d.). We disagree with her. Ensler did not tilt the monologues this way (Sheiner, n.d.). In the play, no one in the audience is asked to say "no more domestic violence, no more rape as a tactic of war, no more unnecessary caesarian sections" over and over as a mantra. If the play did this, the result would not be the exhilaration that comes from remembering or learning what the clitoris can do. Instead of seeing women's bodies as the sites of pleasure, it would be the constant reminder of violence and danger.

Ensler's way out of the danger/pleasure dilemma is to include several monologues on the psychic and physical costs of the violence and to put the play's money toward ending such violence. At the end of the Bowdoin performances, audience and cast members who had experienced violence or who knew women who had were asked to stand. Seeing approximately two thirds of the people in the room standing together was a powerful reminder of the reality of violence in women's lives. However, the assumption that all violence is the same (which is implied by the action of standing together), or that state controlled rape and domestic abuse are equal, does not provide women or men with a way to consider the sources of these very different kinds of violence and can give them a false sense of connection.

Separating the body and the body politic, TVM from V-Day, is a problem. When Susan Bell wrote about birth control for OBOS, she struggled to incorporate political analysis with "the facts" (Bell, 1994). When Susan Reverby lectured about the political economy of American health care or listened to women testify at FDA hearings, she tried to find ways to connect their body talk to political power (Reverby, 1997). We want and expect TVM to do this too. Transgression and speaking out loud about

what has been silenced are powerful tools, as we learned in the 1970s and as the play clearly demonstrates. Its ability to shock its audience into recognition can become merely the ability to shock.

A recent critique of the 2004 V-Day march in Juarez, Mexico also points to the problems we seen inherent in the play. According to performance artist and Columbia University professor, Coco Fusco, an organization of mothers of the murdered women in Juarez, Mexico does not see their daughters' serial killer or killers and rapists as the perpetrators of domestic violence. Rather, they have argued this is about the protection of powerful men by the authorities. They were angered by V-Day and Amnesty International's linking of the play to their own "rituals of public mourning" and what Fusco writes was the failure of the march organizers to incorporate these mothers in the planning of the demonstration. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address in detail the politics of the V-Day movement itself, this critique from Juarez suggests the difficulties we have been raising about violence, power, and representation in TVM (Fusco, 2004).

The politics of vaginas

There is much to value in the performance of TVM, beginning with the personal experiences of cast members and audiences. Our own is illustrative. We had a great time rehearsing for and performing in the play. Each of us successfully crossed the boundary between professor and student. Our lack of acting skills demystified our power in the face of our more experienced and talented students. We managed to become cast members, not merely cast mothers, although we did nurture and support them. We learned from them and crossed the multiple barriers that have separated our generation from theirs. Interviews with some of the cast members afterwards indicate that the performance had a powerful effect at the time and continued long afterwards. Not only were they educated about pleasure and desire in their own bodies in a "culture of vaginas," but at the same time their consciousnesses were raised about violence against women and girls.

Students at Wellesley and Bowdoin have continued to participate in the College Campaign, led by some of

the students who were in the casts with us. Anti-violence groups that received V-Day funds from these performances have benefited, as have their clients and communities. We have seen that individual empowerment can lead to wider political action, and that the experience of political collective movements can change one's sense of self. While Ensler, and the movement her work has spurred, clearly sees "vaginas" as metaphors, we know from our feminist practices that such metaphors do not always become apparent as political actions. A better sex life and sense of self are well worth having, but recreating a false sense of connection among women is not.

The play makes no effort to explain how women's ignorance *itself* is constructed. We worry about whether the cast members and the audience could see connections between the monologues about the lack of self-awareness and knowledge about pleasure and violence and why this lack occurs. There seems to be no way to look critically at each monologue itself, to question its accuracy and representativeness within the play. Identification on the most essential grounds, rather than complexity, along with humor and pathos became the only possible responses. Realistically, we can acknowledge the limits of any performance to do everything we would want. But we worry still about the simplicity of this approach and whether in this case "less" is *not* "more." To put it simply, we would like to see explicit recognition of the tension between the body and the body politic.

Furthermore, we are not convinced that the play enables cast members or the audience to become self-reflexive about "difference." In the joy of the seeming knowability that the play makes possible, the audience and performers can imagine they have shared the "real experiences" of women whose lives are different from their own. The problem cannot be solved just by adding more monologues, as Ensler has done. If the framework remains the same, the strategy will be just "add women from (fill in the country or the latest visible form of violence) and stir," and each addition will do nothing to address problems in the framework. The play itself needs to find ways to use its humor and connection by perhaps changing the introductions to the monologues, finding ways to show how collective action has transformed the stories, not just introducing women to better sexual lives or telling them to become part of V-Day.

The play underlines the difficulties of "crossing the border" with another person's story (Behar, 1993). Ensler tries to deal with this problem by requiring actresses to read their monologues (even if they have memorized the lines) holding index cards to indicate the presence of another. Appearing to represent the experiences of another, without any focus on how their subjectivity and location have been created, is a theoretical dilemma feminist scholars have been debating for a generation (Chandler, Davidson, & Harootunian, 1991; Stone-Mediatore, 2003). But holding the index cards as if speaking for another does not adequately acknowledge or alleviate any of these tensions.

We realize the play cannot be a classroom, nor do we want it to become one. That would be redundant. For us, as Ensler intended, the process of putting together the performance and the V-Day activities was just as critical as being on the stage in front of the audience. We and our students could not have had this kind of dialogue in the classroom. Rehearsing and then performing in the play gave us an opportunity to do feminist political work differently. We do not want this to get lost in the exhilaration of transgressive performance and simple knowability of the other. We want the tensions that are in the play, both spoken and unspoken, to be used as a framework for dialogues across generational as well as other differences. Addressing these tensions requires more than revisions in the script; it demands participation in the performance itself as well as the rehearsals and conversations surrounding the performance.

The possibilities of performance and engagement can be a link between the body and body politic in a new way. Despite our worries about the limitations we believe in an advocate engagement with TVM and V-Day actions. For three decades we have been part of complicated, and at times heated disputes, among feminists about the tensions between the body and the body politic and the need to be cognizant of the essentializing discourses that have appeared in western feminisms. There is much to be hopeful about forms of political engagement engendered by connecting TVM with V-Day. But unacknowledged tensions that the play hides and does not problematize ultimately are much to worry about.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the cast members of the 2002 Bowdoin and Wellesley College productions for their talent, spirit and openness to us, and the permission they granted us to use their and our experiences for this paper. We are grateful to the members of the Wellesley College cast who spoke to SR or were interviewed by Erin Judge, Wellesley College 2002. SB thanks Clare Forstie, Bowdoin College 2002 and SR thanks Erin Judge for their research assistance. We thank Roberta Apfel, Kathy Davis, Clare Forstie, and Barbara Condliffe for reading earlier drafts, and Gretchen Berg for helping us to understand feminist performance. Susan Bell's work on this project was supported by a Bowdoin Faculty Leave Fellowship. We are particularly grateful to our families who came to watch us perform.

Endnotes

¹ Susan M. Reverby, Interview with Wellesley College student in 2002 production, April, 2002.

² Erin Judge interview with Wellesley College cast members, May 2002.

³ V-Day website, <http://www.vday.org/contents/vcampaigms/indiancountry>. Retrieved February 9, 2004.

⁴ Agnes Pareyio provides education about "cutting" to young Maasi girls and a safe house for those girls who choose not to be cut. The safe house is a space not only of protection but of replication, where girls spend 5 days in seclusion, learning from an older woman in much the same way they would have learned from their own mothers if their genitals had been cut. Pareyio reports that "Eve and V-DAY started by donating a jeep that has enabled me to reach my people—the Maasi—who are deeply rooted by their traditional cultures and who still hold their beliefs that girls cannot be a woman without the cut. With the opening of the Safe House, girls who have escaped the cut can undergo an alternative ritual which I hope my people will grow to understand and adopt." <http://www.vday.org/contents/vday/press/release/020405>.

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