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Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* as feminist activist ecology

by

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INTRODUCTION: *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES* AS FEMINIST ACTIVIST ECOLOGY

Since Eve Ensler debuted *The Vagina Monologues* (*TVM*) in New York City's HERE theater in 1996, thousands of women have experienced the play and subsequently found a community of feminist activists using literature to reclaim their bodies, share their stories, and integrate discussion of the vagina into public discourse. From across the globe, local grassroots activists participate together in a transnational ecology—a term I use to characterize the context of the performance, including fellow activists, feminists, the non-activist identified public, time, place, performance space, and sociocultural influences and attitudes across geopolitical borders. The central organization, known as V-Day, has made formative strides in changing the conversation on women, women's bodies, and violence against women and girls.

For nearly fifteen years, the movement has taken up the charge of making vaginas “integrated and respected and sacred” in everyday language, but even as recently as June 13, 2012, Michigan state legislator Rep. Lisa Brown was reported as saying a word “so offensive” some fellow representatives argued it should not have been spoken in “mixed company” (*The Vagina Monologues* xxiv; Peralta). In a statement about proposed abortion regulations, Brown remarked, “I’m flattered you’re all so interested in my *vagina*, but no means no;” as a result, she was barred from speaking on the House floor (Peralta). Ironically, Majority Floor Leader Jim Stamas’ attempt to keep the “vagina” out of politics and public forums has only brought the word greater public attention; the media took notice, feminist activists rallied in outrage, and Brown took to the Michigan Capitol steps not only to defend her use of the word *vagina*, but to insistently repeat it—upwards of 128 times—in a highly politicized, public reading of Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*.

While the controversy has yet to be resolved, Brown's performance has already brought reenergized attention to the play and its exigency: breaking the cultural silence imposed on vaginas and women's embodied experiences. Ensler conceived the play as a "place to release the myths, shame, and fear" of the vagina, and *TVM* has since become an international sensation, indeed a space for connecting, healing, and organizing as a community (*The Vagina Monologues* xxv). As the most prominent performance in the extensive V-Day movement, *TVM* is the creative vehicle by which communities worldwide bring forth the call to end violence against women and girls. However, according to the movement, "Performance is just the beginning" (*10th Anniversary Ed.* 171). Thus, my focus in analyzing *TVM* as a vibrant ecology of feminist activists is to examine the interdependent relationships within V-Day—among the texts, contexts, activists, listeners, scholars, publics, and environments—each of which contribute to consciousness of and actions to end violence against women.

V-Day: A Brief Overview

Eve Ensler first performed *The Vagina Monologues* alone on an off-Broadway stage in New York City in 1996. Over the next two years, what began as a critically-acclaimed, one-woman show transformed into an antiviolence movement: V-Day. The script arose from interviews that Ensler conducted with more than 200 women about their vaginas, and following each performance, Ensler was approached by numerous women "who shared their own stories of surviving violence at the hands of relatives, lovers, and strangers" (*10th Anniversary Ed* 169). From these encounters, the vision for a large-scale movement to end violence against women was born. In appropriate fashion, Ensler officially founded V-Day as a 501(c)(3) on February 14, 1998; the V in V-Day stands for "victory", "valentine", and

“vagina,” and the organization immediately began bringing together activists who would stage benefit productions of *TVM* to increase awareness and raise money to stop violence (171). A crew of New York-based volunteers produced the first benefit performance of *TVM*, which featured a celebrity cast of well-known women entertainers and raised approximately \$250,000 for V-Day.

Today, any analysis that separates *TVM* from V-Day is a problem, given that the organization has grown into a massive, worldwide initiative, and has raised more than \$85 million for anti-violence programs (Bell and Reverby; “Donate to V-Day”). This is precisely the issue I seek to reframe in examining the play as an *ecology* rather than an isolated text or performance piece. First and foremost, there are the people involved. A small team of twelve paid staff, called the “V-Core,” manage the non-profit’s infrastructure, and a “V-Board” of 20 women from entertainment, business, and private sectors, including Ensler, “provide vision, leadership, and wisdom” for the organization; however, the majority of the movement are the thousands of activists who have brought V-Day events¹ to six continents, in more than 500 cities, across more than 140 countries, in 45 languages (*2011 Annual Report* 26). Now, in approach of its fifteenth anniversary, V-Day has undertaken its most ambitious campaign yet: to recruit “One Billion Women” to take a stand against sexual and domestic violence on February 14, 2013.

In recruiting activists and promoting education, V-Day uses creative programming, most notably performances of *TVM*, to catalyze grassroots anti-violence activism across the

¹ While I am focusing on *The Vagina Monologues* as V-Day’s primary work of art and activist event, it is important to recognize that within the last five years, V-Day events can include additional activist performance productions (*A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant and a Prayer* and *Any One of Us: Words from Prison*), film screenings (*What I Want My Words to Do To You* and *Until the Violence Stops*), and workshop presentations (Congo Spotlight Teach-In, Haiti Spotlight Teach-In, V-Men workshop and presentation, V-Girls academic curriculum and book club, and “Over It” writing and speaking workshop).

globe. Though the organization's successes largely depend on *TVM*'s "formal status as a work of literature and staged performance text," the play digresses significantly from traditional theatre because of its activist priorities (Hammers 240). In this vein, as a growing, changing movement, V-Day relies on art that also changes; there are numerous editions of the play, more so than one would expect of a formal text that was written less than 20 years ago, in 1994. The most widely available, published circulations are three book editions—*The Vagina Monologues* (1998), *V-Day Edition* (2001), and *10th Anniversary Edition* (2008), each of which can be purchased online or in stores from major booksellers. However, the versions that activists *perform* worldwide—the *Official V-Day Scripts*—are available only through V-Day itself, requiring campuses and communities to register their events, abide by certain guidelines, and report their fundraising proceeds—thus resulting in a closer regulation of the art that is performed in affiliation with V-Day².

Registered V-Day organizers, in return, receive yearly updated scripts to distribute among their casts, as well as access to an archival library through V-Day's online activist portal, *V-Spot*³. Given the 90-minute duration of the performance and the addition of new monologues, *Official V-Day Scripts* may vary significantly from one year to the next or remain quite similar. Some monologues, such as "Reclaiming Cunt" and "The Woman Who Liked to Make Vaginas Happy," have gained cult status and are included in every single production. Other monologues, such as "Smell" and "I Was Twelve. My Mother Slapped Me," have been included some years, but not others. Further still, in later years, official

² There is, however, an *Acting Edition* of the play that is available for purposes of performance unaffiliated with V-Day. This particular edition is available at cost through Dramatists' Play Service.

³ Having never organized a V-Day event, I have limited access to *V-Spot*; for this reason, among other considerations, *V-Spot* discourse is beyond the scope of my analysis at this time. I mention it here only for purposes of outlining how the play circulates within public spheres.

scripts have offered community and campus activists a selection of optional monologues⁴ that they may choose to include or not include at their own discretion. Given the changes and choices V-Day provides to activists each year, as well as the nature of grassroots activism as a shifting, evolving practice, productions may vary significantly from one to the other over time and geopolitical location. Activists and the monologues they read hence construct a network of artistic performances that are diverse and dynamic, but interdependent in their connection to V-Day and dedication to ending violence against women and girls.

Though V-Day activists across the many productions of *TVM* diverge at critical intersections, and may or may not explicitly identify as feminists, the play invokes feminist values of community, collaboration, and shared power. The introductory vignette begins by calling attention to and questioning the paradigm of silence and shame surrounding vaginas, framed as a feeling of “worry”; on stage, a woman reads: “We were worried about our own vaginas. They needed a community, a context, a culture of other vaginas” (*Official Scripts 2012* 1). Immediately, readers present the play’s purpose in ecological terms, as establishing a “community,” and in the social terms of a “culture,” suggesting the female body as needing connection to other female bodies—calling for a public space in which women can discuss their vaginas and the realities of their embodied lives. V-Day activists then construct a public performance that focuses on women’s formerly private experiences, including looking at their vaginas, masturbating, shaving, menstruating, engaging in sexual acts, giving birth, being medically examined, being abused, and being raped. In sharing embodied experiences, *TVM* presents women in interdependent relations with one another, based on the

⁴ Optional monologues are typically “Spotlight Monologues” from previous years. For more on this aspect of *TVM*, see my analysis in Chapter 2: Negotiating Intersectionality, Transnationality, and Representation.

commonalities among their stories—particularly of sexual violence. Sharing common vaginal experience thus fosters a community of more feminist-conscious women, and educates men, as well, so that together they can take collective action.

Furthermore, the performance has created and continues to create a series of public spaces for recognition of violence against women in the global public sphere, where legal, social, and cultural protections are lacking. By publicly reading aloud detailed narratives of women’s subjective, bodily experiences, V-Day activists propose to change the conversation on women’s lives in a way that raises awareness of and subsequently ends the ongoing global violence against women and girls. Thus, there is a striking call for examination on how these events come together, with what knowledge they leave participants, and how that knowledge is agreed upon, but also how the play meets resistance to its representations within public, feminist, and academic spheres.

Problems and Potential: A Review of *TVM* Criticism

Michele Hammers notes that *TVM* is “a richly problematic text for feminist activists and scholars alike,” with a particular emphasis on the rhetorical configurations of the female body (223). Most poignantly, scholars express tensions over the vagina as a metonym for the whole of female consciousness, sexuality, and the core of women’s identities (Cooper 732). Ensler has been quoted in interviews as saying, point-blank, “The story of a woman’s vagina is the story of her life” (Hammers 234). In one light, as a critique of domination, *TVM* offers a way to “reclaim the vagina” as part of subjective experience (234). However, the play’s threat of “reduc[ing] women to nothing more than their vaginas and vagina-related experiences” and of co-optation by “biology-as-destiny” theorists are two major tensions among scholars and feminists (234). For, even if one can celebrate the reunion of the self

with the body, Susan Bell and Susan Reverby raise the problem of using “vagina” as shorthand for vagina, cervix, clitoris, labia, and sexual experiences together—which reinforces a male-centered view of the vagina as a woman’s primary sexual organ (431). Rather than celebrate the play’s reclaiming of the vagina, scholars have drawn on first-wave feminist influences Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as queer theorist Judith Butler, to push for a liberated sexed identity that is discrete from the body (Cooper, Hall). Both Cooper and Kim Hall argue that *TVM* does little to challenge dominant constructions of “woman” as fixed on the vagina. Hall poignantly argues:

The vagina, like the category ‘woman’, is a political category. That is, the vagina is made intelligible to the extent that it perpetuates the notion that the (biological) capacity to give birth is what makes one a woman (Wittig 1992, 10). Thus, within a heteropatriarchal society, having a vagina is what makes one a biological woman. So, to engage in the project of reclaiming the vagina without simultaneously adopting a strategy of disidentification regarding the reality of the vagina does not challenge the social, political, historical, and economic context that imbues the vagina with meaning. (113)

By Hall’s argument then, participants leave *TVM* with a surge of power and pride, a reclaiming of the vagina as part of subjective experience, but as such have further internalized the normative identity of “woman” without conscious contemplation of sex or gender—which, for Hall, is a problem in that it effectively erases queer identity and experience, and for Cooper is a failure of a project that purports to teach feminism.

Similarly, there is little contemplation of nationality, ethnicity, and race as social categories; while neither nationality nor race is erased from the conversation, and although

V-Day promotes diversity throughout its rhetoric, scholars argue that *TVM* does little to critique its own white First World origins. Cooper uses the intertwined tropes of consumerism and colonialism to describe *TVM* in terms of “consumable feminism” (Cooper 727), “missionary feminism” (745), and “marketplace activism” (753), wherein “global feminism” is invoked as primitive, yet fashionable, and consumable while remaining at an inherent distance (Basu). Under this lens, Srimati Basu poignantly asks: “Who is called upon as the recipient and consumer, either of the play or of its attendant products?” (36). In response, one might look at one of the most immediate patterns among the monologues: “Rape is represented directly in the script only in monologues where the speakers are women of color...voices of American whiteness have their vaginas and selves intact” (Cooper 749). In these representations, *TVM* utilizes stereotyped Africanist and Orientalist images while playing to a track of “American voice-overs and interpretations of other women’s lives” (Bell and Reverby 431). Such a nationalist framework ultimately erases the context of specific conflicts and collapses oppressions associated with patriarchy, religion, culture, and politics—overall colonizing the very women it purports to empower (Basu 44). Although these scholars insist that there remain many exciting possibilities for cross-cultural communication and solidarity in *TVM*, they see Ensler’s current representation of Third-World women as antithetical to the overall spirit of global feminism.

For many scholars, however, it is the form of the monologue, as opposed to a dialogue, that promotes Ensler’s perceivably singular vision of the world, as opposed to “calling forth diverse national and ethnic understandings of sex or intimacy” (Bell and Reverby 431; Basu 39). Cooper argues that as an outgrowth of second wave feminism and the traditions of consciousness-raising, the stylized monologues “convert conversations—

questions and answers between two women—into the personal, at times confessional, speech of a solitary female subject,” subsequently reducing speakers to “versions of the same” who are speaking for all women (729). Yet it is this very form of the “confessional” that Cathleen Kaveny argues allows victims to reclaim agency. Kaveny argues, “As with victim-impact statements, the first-person, confessional form of the monologues is inseparable from their message. In a sense, the person is the message” (15). At the same time, they assist the community in formulating and appropriately enforcing its legal and moral norms (14). In this light, the stylized approach of the performance content poses immense possibilities for dialogue and connection, but evokes feminist tensions among those who are skeptical of *TVM*’s potential for colonizing survivors of violence.

In this vein, Cooper raises the point that although *TVM* participants have raised more than \$85 million for antiviolence programs, it is problematically “unclear how, or whether, they connect to the grassroots activists sponsored by their endeavors or even their local communities” (754). While the extent to which V-Day performers engage in other forms of activism is beyond the scope of my analysis at this time, it is in this vein that I focus my scholarly attention on how V-Day activists connect to *one another* within the ecology of *TVM*. I reject the notion that *TVM* as performance activism⁵ is inherently less valuable or less productive in ending violence than the many other organizations that have received funds from V-Day locales⁶. Therefore, I offer a transactional view of *TVM* as an activist ecology as

⁵ Rachel Kutz-Flamenbaum’s broad definition of “performance” applies to a “continuum ranging from highly structured and formal to loosely structured and informal” events that include one or more performative elements, such as costumes, skits, actions, song, dance, and character (90). This is a concept I explore more fully in connection with *TVM* in Chapter 3.

⁶ The list of organizations that benefit from *TVM* Campaigns is published yearly in V-Day’s annual report. However, to my knowledge, no collective analysis of V-Day beneficiaries has been conducted. With that in

a point of entry in understanding how the very act of reading the monologues, as a social practice, fosters a community and thus furthers, in part, the mission of V-Day.

The Vagina Monologues as Ecology

The metaphor of “ecology” has an established place in women’s studies, under the branch of ecofeminism—broadly understood as the interdisciplinary confluence of concerns for women and concerns for the environment, given the sensibility that the two run parallel or perhaps are one and the same with regard to a lack of respect and care for women and ecosystems. Ecofeminists believe that there are important connections between the domination and subjugation of women and the domination and subjugation of the earth. Notable ecofeminist Ynestra King writes, “The ecological crisis is related to the systems of hatred of all that is natural and female by the white, male, Western formulators of philosophy, technology, and death inventions” (qtd. in Warren 76). Given the interdependent nature of women and the earth, the “ecological crisis” King refers to here has implications of equal weight for the “women’s crisis,” and it is from this conceptual framework that I derive my argument of V-Day as an ecology—a term that particularly emphasizes the interdependency of all life forms and the environment, not as two parts of the same system, but together as the system itself. In other words, V-Day activists cannot be analyzed as apart from the context of the performance, including fellow activists, feminists, the non-activist identified public, time, place, performance space, and sociocultural influences and attitudes⁷.

mind, it is particularly presumptuous to assume that V-Day performers’ involvement in these organizations would be any more in line with the values or projects of feminism that Cooper finds missing in *TVM*.

⁷ Much of ecofeminism works to deconstruct the dichotomy between humans/non-humans as part of integrating understandings of women and nature. Admittedly, this component is left unexplored within my current project, given V-Day’s exclusive focus on human women and girls.

What the metaphor of “ecology” also does foremost is assert the interconnectedness of activists. By reading *TVM* as an activist ecology, as opposed to an atomistic text, I open up positive ethical implications largely rooted in Karen J. Warren’s model of “care-sensitive” ethics, which promotes care as a core, essential value with three ethical pillars: (1) the ability to care for oneself and for others is essential to moral reason; (2) we must understand a principle of “situated universalism,” or in other words, that what is universal to humans is relative to a specific sociopolitical context; and (3) the suitability of an ethical principle is determined in part by care (108). In this vein, ecofeminist ethics ask one to assess moral conduct in terms of “care, friendship, and appropriate trust,” rather than in the hierarchical schema of justice—which assesses moral conduct based on rights, duties, and rules (112). Justice asks one to discern right from wrong, good from bad; care asks one specifically to *listen*, to respect, and to build relationships. Though V-Day activists assert women’s rights not to be violated or raped, the play’s rhetoric and processes of negotiation largely engage persuasion by fostering the relationships, trust, and shared empowerment associated more with Warren’s ecofeminist model of care, rather than hegemonic ideologies of justice. Thus, by engaging public discourse under an ethic of care, *TVM* exists as an exciting site of ecofeminist analysis and ought to be evaluated in terms of ecology.

I do not mean to be dismissive of Ensler’s writing craft or of the very text of *TVM* as central to the movement; however, I do want to suggest that as part of an ongoing reflection and reevaluation, one ought to account for the agency of multiple activists who enact and attend V-Day events and participate in its ongoing discourse. The surge of V-Day activism, I argue, is arising not because of Ensler’s power as an author/performer-in-authority (though she is well-established as *the* key figure), but rather because of the literary transactions

among V-Day activist-performers, audiences, the local environment, and larger cultural forces. While there is much work to be done with the text, and room for countless analyses of Eve Ensler as a key activist figure, as a scholar, I am focusing less on the ways a playwright's "control" effects persuasion and more on local participants who bring their own experiences to the acts of reading, listening, and interpreting—thereby negotiating meaning through an interdependent network of rhetorical exchanges.

Like much scholarship on *TVM*, my analysis originates from my own encounter with the text in affiliation with V-Day. The first edition I ever read was *The Official Script for the 2009 V-Day Campaigns* when, as a college junior at Drake University, I joined the campus women's activist group and auditioned to be part of the cast. Since then, I have joined this group of women at my alma mater in Des Moines, Iowa, every February to read *TVM*. Thus my perspective of the production and V-Day as a whole is inevitably nuanced by an informal, yet longitudinal, autoethnography of sorts. Most significantly, I have the unapologetic perspective of an activist, and my engagement with the *Official Scripts* is logistically limited to later years, 2006-2012⁸. However, while my scholarship is intricately linked to my activism, my activism is not limited to *TVM* or to V-Day. Further, I argue there is invaluable significance in ongoing self-reflection, as well as commitment to critiquing the intersections of oppression and privilege. Particularly, by putting the movement beneath the intersecting lenses of feminist rhetorical and pedagogical theories, activists can create a space for a more ethical feminism that reasserts the importance of (1) dialogical listening across social and geopolitical boundaries and (2) equitable representation of women both as individuals and in

⁸ A generous thank you to Rachel Gulick, who shared with me her "Vagina Binder," with official scripts and related artifacts from 2006-2007.

relation to one another, to their immediate context, to the global sphere. In hoping to articulate practices of negotiation and working together, I offer feminist modes of rhetoric and ethics as a point of entry for unpacking the underpinnings of *TVM* as V-Day discourse. My scholarly contribution, thus, emerges in a reciprocal relationship with my activism, in that I cannot switch between modes of academic theorizing and activist declaiming, for in my life they are one in the same.

With that said, in arguing for accountability and self-reflection of one's role in V-Day's ecology, I acknowledge that my vision has been both enabled by and constrained by the embodied standpoints from which I see the world. The reading I offer here has certainly been shaped by my privileged position as a white, American, middle-class female; by my current position as a graduate student in a public university with a primarily young, white, and class-privileged student body; by my experiences as a V-Day College Campaign activist in the American Midwest; and by my commitments to social justice, feminism, and anti-racism. Thus, my reading and listening experience is confined to university spaces that are historically rooted in, if not currently participating in, the same First-World nationalist, predominantly white feminist perspectives that I critique in my later chapters. However, my ecofeminist and intersectional influences lead me to engage in a reflective critique of the very privilege that enabled my encounters with *TVM* as a student activist—and ask me to engage in ongoing reflection on my participation in the production. Therefore, the reading I give here is but one of many possible interpretations, and I have no desire to make some kind of definitive statement about *TVM* or the V-Day movement—for certainly to do so would be entirely antithetical to my very proposition. However, I do hope to inspire readers, scholars, and fellow activists to continually reflect on the implications of V-Day work in ending

violence against women and girls, which can help us reimagine what it means to be a feminist activist in a global ecology.

CHAPTER 1: THE SOCIALITY OF READING *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*

The Vagina Monologues, as an evolving script, exists as playwright Eve Ensler's interpretation of the experiences of more than two hundred women, whom she interviewed over the course of years. Ensler and V-Day Campaign organizers insist that performers are *activists*, not *actors*. That said, I argue that activists are furthermore rooted in an interdependent ecology marked by their practices and processes of reading, listening, and negotiating meaning of the script. Each woman engages in an individualized process of reading the text, which can be molded by the guidance of a director and other activists, and is inevitably rooted in a context marked by particular people, place, and influences.

I pose my argument in response to current scholarship that criticizes *TVM* for its "mono-logic," silenced critique, and overall lack of dialogue (Cooper 730). Before doing so, I would, however, like to acknowledge the value in the work of these scholars who have engaged with the production as both activists and viewers, who acknowledge how they connected to the play, and then issue a critique of its pitfalls in order to call, predominantly, for increased discourse. For example, Susan Bell and Susan Reverby published an account of their own experiences as readers in a campus production of *TVM* in which they issued the following statement:

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. (442)

I appreciate these contributions for highlighting the numerous feminist tensions in the play, many of which I build on in later chapters. First, however, in response to the call for participation I have chosen to extend the conversation on *TVM* by looking at (1) feminist rhetorical theory and (2) less recognizable V-Day texts, including Ensler's *Director's Notes*⁹ for the 2012 production and exclusive interviews with V-Day activists from 2011 and 2012 College Campaign productions. In looking at the discourse among grassroots V-Day activists, rather than only Ensler and other prominent feminist figures, I hope that I can offer insight into ongoing discourse, as well as possibilities for extended conversations. I rationalize this project based on the presumption that while certainly the politics of the script, how Ensler has constructed global women's experiences within the monologues, are of the utmost importance, it is more significant to look at how activists actually *engage* with the text. Worldwide, women display fervent dedication to reading the monologues on an annual basis. Clearly, while there are tensions in the script, events, and movement as a whole, there also are points of interconnection stemming from the sociality of reading that contribute to *TVM* as a growing activist ecology.

In promoting an understanding of activism and activist literature that accounts for individuals' multiple locations, intersecting categorizations, and relationships of power between groups, it defies logic to treat either a text or reader as free of that same complex social context in which it was produced. Traditionally, literary and familiar texts, such as speeches and letters, comprise our objects of study, but within an ecological framework, scholars also approach the mundane—newsletters, memos, and the organizational texts by

⁹ I am not, and never have been, a V-Day event organizer. I gained access to this document simply by registering as an activist with *V-Spot* at <http://vday.org> in November 2011. As the 2012 V-Season has now drawn to a close, this document appears to no longer be available. I have retained my copy, which is transferrable upon request.

which a movement sustains itself (Rivers and Weber 196). To focus attention solely on Eve Ensler's crafting of the text, rather than the discursive possibilities of reader/listener "conversations and coalitions" is to effectively limit women's global agency and to haphazardly ignore the play's purpose as a creative catalyst for continued *activism* (Basu 56). Its very mission is to inspire grassroots collectives to come together around a performance event, which then revitalizes existing anti-violence movements and draws in new activists and allies. Therefore, a more holistic understanding of activist rhetoric includes these logistical texts, as well as motivational and informative discourse and strategies for building allies (Rivers and Weber 200). To this effect, an analysis of V-Day's rhetorical approach benefits greatly from an orientation to its activists' process and practices of participation and negotiation in addition to, if not rather than, its products of persuasion.

As a social practice of engagement with a text, *TVM* fosters shared power among readers (typically seen as "performers") and listeners (typically the "audience") who together make meaning of women's testimonies of rape. Because *TVM* is not governed by traditional conventions of theatre, and is instead upheld on the principles of inclusion, diversity, education, and empowerment, engagement with a script becomes an impetus for conversation that is governed not by aesthetics, but by rampant agency. The reader's body on stage is hers alone, never represented as anything or anyone more than the actor herself, neither as raped nor not raped. The reader is not an actor—she is an activist; she does not embody a character in any way. Rather, she uses her voice to construct an interpretation of a narrative. The performance is a public act of reading, serving to create dialogue, heightened by the visible presence of the text before the eyes of the actor. The narrative arises as a social event, situated within a specific context, continuously shaped by both those on the stage and those

seated before it. In this capacity, *TVM* breaks the fourth wall, and blurs the typical power dynamics between (a) s/he who gazes and she who is gazed upon and (b) she who persuades and s/he who is persuaded. Furthermore, in an open community production, there are no regulations on who among women can take the stage and who can attend the performance; any woman has agency to engage with the text as either a reader or a listener. All participants make meaning of *TVM* and subsequently of women's lives, bodies, rape, and violence, based on the ethos of the script as well as significations in myriad interpretations. The reciprocal processes of listening and reading make up the social experience of storytelling, which has the potential for equitable agency and power among all participants.

Transactional Reading and Rhetorical Listening

I base this assertion in part on Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, which is concerned with the dynamics of the relationship between the author, the text, the reader, and the cultural environment. Rosenblatt understands the act of reading a text as an active and self-connective process (174). In this mode, the text is a stimulus that focuses attention on elements of past experience and regulates what should be held in the forefront; therefore, the text as a particular form (e.g., a play, poem) becomes an experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of the text (11). The experience of a poem, therefore, is not an object of study, but a process of engagement between the reader and the text (20). In the same way, texts that are meant to be read aloud or acted must first be read by the author, as well as the director and actors (13). In this way, Rosenblatt relates the text of a play to a musical score, in which "the written page is only an approximation" of the meaning (14). Transactional theory suggests that gaps in meaning are supplemented by the reader's past experiences,

which are called forth and guided by the words on the page, but there is no one specific reading that can be dictated even under the strictest of author intentions.

To this effect, transactional theory takes particular account of myriad interpretations that may exist around a text. Rosenblatt decrees: “In the light of some illusory unspecifiable absolute or ideal reading, all readings are failures. The emphasis should be rather on a creative transaction, a coming-together of a human being...and a text” (143). To imply that readers wait passively for a signal in the text that will create a predetermined meaning or emotional response is a falsehood (103). Cultural and social symbols narrow the scope of available interpretations, and one may pursue interest in authorial intention as one of many justifications for reading; however, there is no burden or unchallenged authority in authorial craft. Rather, the transactional theory takes a relativistic view of literary theory, arguing that “what each reader makes of the text is, indeed, for [her] the poem, in the sense that this is [her] only direct perception of it” (105). It follows, then, that in approaching Eve Ensler’s play, there exist as many *TVM*’s as there are readers and listeners, which may lead us to a richer understanding of not only literature’s uniquely personal character, but also how the play resonates with women around the globe to catalyze activist movements.

Whereas Rosenblatt is concerned with reading as a transactional process, Krista Ratcliffe offers a distinctive theory for considering the needs and processes of listening—for while reading and listening acts share many elements, they are invariably distinct. As both a biological process and a cognitive act of interpretation, listening differs from reading in that each proceeds via different body organs, and the rhetorical tropes enact “different disciplinary and cultural assumptions, and different figures of speech” (203). Where reading and listening converge is that both are historically subordinated beneath more “active”

processes of writing and speaking as means of persuading audiences (199). In response, Ratcliffe offers *rhetorical listening* as a trope that reasserts listening as equal to speaking, writing, and reading processes, particularly as a “code for cross-cultural invention” (196). Rhetorical listening pushes us to consider the needs of the listeners, which creates a space for empowering participants on both sides of the stage.

For example, one of the longest-running monologues in the show is “The Vagina Workshop,” which Ensler included in the original script. The narrative is based upon interviews with nine women who participated in “orgasm workshops” with feminist icon Betty Dodson¹⁰. Unlike the majority of monologues, “The Vagina Workshop” includes a stage direction to be read with an “English accent” (*Official Scripts 2012 12*)¹¹. The stage directions speak to the significance of cultural and social meanings embedded in dialect. The regional differences attributed to “accents” suggest that if a speaker does not sound like me, then she is not like me, and she is not where I am from. If I can recognize what specifically is different about her voice, and if that variation is particular to a group, then I associate her with that group and with what I presume to know about that group—which may or may not be true of the individual in question. In its most harmful form, assumptions about dialect

¹⁰ In the original first edition, Ensler dedicated “The Vagina Workshop” to Betty Dodson herself. The original introduction reads: “Over the course of my interviews I met nine women who had had their first orgasms in the exact same place. They were women in their late thirties and early forties. They had all participated, at different times, in one of the groups run by a brave and extraordinary woman, Betty Dodson. For twenty-five years Betty has been helping women locate, love, and masturbate their vaginas. She has run groups, has worked privately with individual women. She has helped thousands of women reclaim their center. This piece is for her” (41). Following the book’s publication, Dodson negatively critiqued *TVM* for its representation of women’s sexuality. Subsequently, in the 10th Anniversary Edition, Ensler’s introduction is much shorter: “This is based on an interview I did with a woman who had taken the Vagina Workshop,” without any mention of Dodson or contextualization of the Workshop (41). As written in the Official V-Day Script, the monologue is performed without an introduction.

¹¹ The stage direction is slightly different in all book editions, where it reads “a slight English accent” (43).

draw on regionalist attitudes that denigrate collective groups from various places in the world.

In the case of *TVM* as transnationally performed rhetoric, the embedded cultural meanings in an “English accent” will inevitably vary among listeners and contexts. However, Ensler writes in the *Director’s Notes* the meaning of the accent: “The speaker has an accent that reflects that she is extremely proper (upper class) – the last woman on earth that you’d expect to find in a Vagina Workshop!” (5). Ensler’s association of “English” with “proper” and “high class,” as well as both of these terms with a repressive sexual self, is indicative of a particular standpoint. Furthermore, her presumption that listeners will make the same associations—“the last woman on earth that *you’d* expect”—is indicative of whom Ensler envisions as her audience.

However, this is a printed stage direction and thus read in solitude, not aloud in public performance. The directive may be discussed in rehearsal or among readers, but the words “English accent” do not make their way into the transaction between the reader and listeners in the performance production. Therefore, listeners discern and evaluate the embedded cultural meanings of the accent through a different biological process—if the piece is indeed read with a distinctive English accent—which may or may not lead to an interpretation of the speaker’s class and demeanor. However, depending on casting, a reader might be linguistically incapable of reading, or simply choose not to read, the piece with the prescribed regional and class marker. Therefore, how a listener makes meaning of the monologue may vary widely among various contexts, though the interpretation will always be rooted in that specific social engagement with the text.

As evidence, I offer my own experience of listening rhetorically and constructing meaning of “The Vagina Workshop.” I first encountered the monologue in 2010, and I have since listened to four different readers throughout their processes of rehearsing and performing the piece. Three of the four women performed the piece as undergraduate students in their early twenties. None chose to interpret the piece using an English accent, or any other accent apart from their own regional, Midwestern American dialects. I recall meeting with them during cast meetings and rehearsals; I read along with the printed text as they read aloud, and at the time I thought very little of the suggested accent. I did not think it would contribute any sort of meaning; yet, at the same time, the monologue always sounded disconnected and flat. I struggled to make a connection with the narrative, both as I read and listened. I considered how I would interpret the piece, were I to read it aloud, and considering that I am equally incapable of producing a believable English accent, I did not fathom any significant changes to the reading.

Then, just this year, I heard Stacey, a sexual assault victim advocate, reading in a university production this past spring. She appeared in her thirties, had former experience in theatre, and delivered the monologue with a vibrant energy marked by a distinctive English accent. Listening to her read, I thought: “Wow.” The words were the same, but they finally made sense in a way they had not before. As the speaker describes one woman’s vagina as having a “Devonshire pattern,” how to her masturbation “felt Hollywood,” and how she once feared herself to be “one of those constitutionally incapables, one of those dead dry frigid bitter apricot tasting” women—I suddenly felt like I understood what she meant (*The Vagina Monologues* 44-49). The distinctive English inflection of Stacey’s voice finally offered an interpretation that reflected authenticity, natural rhythm, and an overall comfort with the

words that was largely missing from all readings I had heard before. I do not mean to imply judgment about the validity of one reading over the other, but simply to articulate a scenario in which meaning might be discerned from a particular act of listening, because of the biological processes and variations in figures of speech.

That said, in response to the monologue form of the performance, listeners might initially be considered “eavesdroppers” in the way they engage with the readers. Eavesdropping, as defined by Ratcliffe, describes those who choose a place of discomfort, located outside the stage, on the border of knowing and not knowing, in order to listen to learn about another’s experiences. This is a position specific to the individual in the process of making meaning of the text, but Ratcliffe argues it is especially valuable for deconstructing one’s own privilege—particularly privileges of maleness and whiteness (76). As such, prerequisites for rhetorical listening are dependent on the listener’s own willingness to hear and learn from another, a focus which Ratcliffe contends “does not deny the socializing power of discourse on people’s unconscious” but rather “articulates the space within which we may interject our own agencies, albeit partial and complicated, into our own socializations” (207). The agency of such a literacy manifests as both a political and moral issue in anti-rape activism and engaging the public sphere in awareness of women’s experiences.

One of the most prominent examples of “eavesdropping,” which contributes to the ecological activist nature of *TVM* productions, can be found in “They Beat the Girl Out of my Boy... Or So They Tried”¹². This monologue originated from Ensler’s interviews with

¹² Ensler contextualizes the origin of this monologue in the *Director’s Notes* as follows: “This monologue for five transwomen is a composite of the stories told to Eve by over twenty transwomen brought together for three days of discussion and sharing in a secluded Californian cabin. The women were aged from early twenties to

twenty trans-identified women, who live full-time as women and thus “experience the issues of women and [do] not have access to the power position of the male role in today's world” (*Director's Notes* 9). The piece was first performed in Los Angeles, California, in 2004 by a cast of all trans-identified women, under the guidance of a director who is also trans (7). In the years since, she has helped to guide additional V-Day activist directors as they cast and advise the production—and her remarks are rooted in her own unique interpretation of Ensler’s play. In fact, Ensler has adapted this particular woman’s interpretation of the play as a guideline for including transwomen as performers in V-Day productions. The statement is as follows:

My reading of the play and its history led me to believe that it called for actresses who lived in the world of women, experienced the issues of women and who did not have access to the power position of the male role in today's world. Thus I was careful to only cast transwomen who were living full time and who were integrated into the society of women as a whole, facing the same issues of violence but also some unique situations relating to our transition. (9)

It is significant that the unnamed director frames her vision as her own distinct “reading” and that she describes her actions, based on that reading, in terms of “care” and her identification with the trans collective—further speaking to my own interpretation of the play as functioning as a feminist activist ecology.

fifties; they began transition at ages from early teens to forties; they identified as heterosexual, lesbian or bisexual and all of the women lived "full time," meaning 24/7, as themselves (female).”

As stated, Ensler includes this director's suggestions in each year's *Director's Notes*, which in my interpretation are incredibly significant in the way the director (1) recognizes the location of many ciswomen and cismen as outside the understanding of trans identity and issues and (2) highlights the social process of reaching understanding. She writes: "Most transwomen who read these monologues¹³ find at least some elements of commonality in the stories told, so little explanation will be needed as to why and whence for the feelings expressed" (8). Both Ensler and her fellow activist director thus frame trans individuals as having an inherent connection to other transwomen, forming a community whose members innately understand one another, whereas a different mode of rhetorical listening is necessary for non-trans identified individuals to understand trans experience and subsequently improve relations. The director makes note of this difference among listeners and frames her cast directions as follows:

At first, I had the women read the pieces in a group as if they were in a private place, sharing hurts and remembrances with each other in that deeply open way that people can have with others who they know come from the same experience... This was a good start, but ended up feeling more closed off than I wanted. I shifted the focus outward and had the women telling the stories to... someone they wished would understand so that a relationship (of any of the various kinds) could be enriched. (8)

The fact that the director describes "private" remembrances as "closed off," and thus she prioritizes "shift[ing] the focus outwards" towards listeners who do not innately understand,

¹³ Ensler also adds: "All women, trans or not, should be able to perform the piece, although I'm sure that most directors will try their hardest to include transwomen in the performance of this (and hopefully other) monologues."

is emblematic of an ethic of rhetorical listening. The director's choices consider the needs of the listener and value the fostering of relationships, rather than a maintaining of an us/them dichotomy. However, the structure of the group monologue spotlights the sharing of hurt among women of the trans community, thus casting listeners as eavesdroppers of sorts. The structure of the monologue becomes what Ensler calls a "chorus" of "single thoughts spread over several readers." The message is mono-logical, but it has been derived from a community, whom the audience sees embodied on stage. At the same time, as listeners, the audience physically hears the unique resonance of each individual cast member, which might foster more or less understanding depending on how the voices blend, harmonize, or disconnect from one another. Again, the act of interpretive listening is largely rooted in a specific ecology, much like reading, shaped by particular moments, people, and outside contextual influences.

In this vein, the role of the reader, then, is to invite the audience to an experience from a different perspective (such as that of transwomen), which does not devalue the experiences of others but adds to a larger exchange of interdependent worldviews. In order for rhetorical listening to occur, there must be a balance between imagining the listener with agency to act ethically, yet also providing listeners with strategies for acting on their learning—particularly if the trope is to translate into some form of activist engagement (Ratcliffe 76). Such a process of interpretation may invoke what Foss and Griffin call the "wrenching loose of assumptions and uncomfortable questioning of positions," but Ratcliffe among many pedagogues views such resistance as a positive beginning (6). In the most ideal form of engagement, emotion serves as a connective tissue between reader and listener that can lead to a collaborative construction of meaning:

Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, of learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against; through all of this, a ‘we’ is formed, and an attachment is made. This is a feminist attachment and an attachment to feminism and it is moving. (Ahmed 188)

Overall, the reader can posit an interpretation that motivates a listener to take feminist political or ethical action, but neither the desires of the readers nor the desires of the listeners can definitively control how meaning is constructed on the text, nor should they. This is particularly significant for producing *TVM* as a feminist pedagogy, as I will discuss later in Chapter 3.

Therefore, *TVM* exists as a movement because it is rooted within the explicitly social acts of reading and listening. Though readers/performers might traditionally be thought to be putting life to words on a script—as if this could ever be a neutral act—the act of reading in public, or even embodying through memorization, is to offer one’s own individual interpretation, one’s process of engagement with the text, but does not wholly define the piece in any capacity. In this way, readers and listeners alike engage with other readers and listeners, as well as additional texts and influences, to increase insight into their own relationships with a text; the text then becomes a mode of communication belonging exclusively to no one (Rosenblatt 146).

Understanding interpretation as an ecology of this sort requires attention to the role of place and space in the act of reading. The deployment of activist pedagogy in a particular public space must navigate three external conditions characteristic of invitational rhetoric: safety, value, and freedom (Foss and Griffin 10). Especially in constructing knowledge of

accounts of violence, physical and psychological safeties are top concerns—which may or may not be guaranteed depending on the specific ecology of a given reading. The same is true for the collective valuing of perspectives offered and the freedom granted to express those perspectives. Acknowledging that there are myriad experiences of *TVM*, which conceivably exist on a continuum of being more or less invitational in their structural forms, I nevertheless pose accountability and solidarity as guiding principles for reader and listener moves in the transactional exchange.

In arguing this point, I offer two reflective narratives from V-Day activists who each read in V-Day Presents *TVM* 2011 and 2012. First, I look to Jessica, who largely reflects on her personal connections to *TVM* and her two readings of “I Was There In the Room.” Second, I examine the reflections from V-Day activist Cate, who highlights an equally important rhetorical component of activist ecologies: fostering common connections to *TVM*. Specifically, Cate offers interpretations of rhetorical strategies based on her readings of two widely contrasting monologues: humorous anger in “My Angry Vagina” and real anger in the 2012 addition, “Over It.” Together, these activists construct points of entry into understanding reading as a social process within one local V-Day activist ecology—that, while not presented as representative of the movement at large, allows feminists and scholars a few points to reflect on the many processes and practices of negotiating participation in literary activism.

Making Personal Connections: Jessica, 23

Jessica was first asked to read “I Was There in the Room” for Drake University’s 2011 V-Day production. The piece is Ensler’s own testimony of and reflection on witnessing her daughter-in-law give birth, and as such is a primary example of how readers make

meaning not of a text in isolation, but by putting the piece in conversation with their own experiences. Jessica reflected on her first rehearsals of the monologue in 2011. Jessica characterizes the piece as a “difficult monologue” because of its “gruesome” and “descriptive” representations of the vagina in childbirth, but mostly attributes her initial discomfort with the piece to her own previous conceptions of childbirth and how she had been influenced by other women to think of childbirth. Jessica recalls:

The first time I tried to read it, I froze. All I could think was how yes, this was related to vaginas, but that it was a part I didn't want to talk about. I had spent so much time around friends with negative views on motherhood and childbirth that it made me uncomfortable to have an opinion, and it was scary to know that I could shape the opinions of others by performing this piece when I couldn't deal with my own thoughts on the subject. (Shalita)

As Jessica considered the potential impact that her reading might have on the listener, she already projected herself within the V-Day ecology, acknowledging the interdependency of participants in a public reading and the subsequent implications of her activism. Jessica also does not express intent to persuade a reader one way or another, and her anxieties seem to emanate from a lack of control of her own relationship to the text as opposed to a lack of control over the audience's understanding.

However, Jessica's innate aversion to the text and her interpretation of the language as “gruesome” highlights reader agency in ways that others, including Ensler herself, may not have anticipated. Throughout the *Director's Notes*, Ensler describes some of the monologues as “speaking for themselves” with a blatant neglect of reader and listener differences. Specifically, of “I Was There in the Room,” she writes: “The actress should be

encouraged to find a simple, heart-felt delivery. There are no big theatrics needed here as *the beauty and power of the writing does the work for her*. The actress should take her time to paint the images and find the awe and reverence in this everyday miracle that we all take for granted” (6, my emphasis). Within this characterization, Ensler indirectly contradicts Rosenblatt’s transaction theory, by implying that the images in the text will evoke a predetermined meaning and emotional response with little “work” from the reader (Rosenblatt 103). As Jessica recalls, this was simply not the case, and finding a “simple, heart-felt delivery” required her to go *beyond* the script and tap into a wider ecology of other people and influences.

I argue this point, because later in Jessica’s narrative, she further draws attention to V-Day as both an ecology itself and as participating in a larger feminist sphere. In attempting to find connection to “I Was There in the Room,” Jessica reflects that she turned to fellow activists and on that path, found meaning in another literary text, completely unassociated with V-Day. Jessica wrote:

My director noticed that I was having trouble emotionally connecting with the piece and advised me to watch a documentary entitled *The Business of Being Born*... which proved to be the turning point. The words of my monologue suddenly spoke to me and were filled with an array of emotions: awe, power, beauty, strength, and wonder. (Shalita)

It is interesting that Jessica “found that connection” to Ensler’s “I Was There in the Room” through Ricki Lake’s 2008 documentary, which critiques the American health care system and medicalized practices of childbirth. Though I refrain from a thorough analysis of Lake’s documentary in this project, it seems significant that both Ensler and Lake use these texts to

assert women's innate capability of delivering children vaginally. Lake particularly advocates the practices of midwifery and home birth as empowering for women, while critiquing the medical industry as largely disempowering. While, in contrast, Ensler's testimony "I Was There in the Room" is situated in a hospital and the delivery assisted by both a doctor and a "nurse from the Ukraine," the speaker in the monologue focuses mostly on the vagina and its functions¹⁴. The speaker claims, "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 and stretch for us, die for us and bleed and bleed us into this difficult, wondrous world./So can the vagina" (*The Vagina Monologues* 109). Of course, the monologue's essentialized representation of the vagina in childbirth effectively erases the powerful biological functions of the cervix and uterus, but purports to empower women, as symbolically defined by their vaginas in this piece, as givers of life and love—a message echoed in Lake's *The Business of Being Born*. Thus, while I cannot wholly theorize *why* Jessica made meaning of this segment of *TVM* in conversation with Lake's film, and do not mean to suggest that her experience with the monologue is at all common, there is a clear suggestion that in no way could Ensler, *TVM*, or V-Day offer a definitive experience of childbirth even as a published text. V-Day activists construct meaning of the text by going beyond the text into their own lives and by seeking perspectives from other people and texts. The end result is a connection that is uniquely individual, while simultaneously rooted in interdependent literary transactions.

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, Ensler defends the choice of this monologue in her communication with other activists. In the director's notes, she explains: "This monologue is based on Eve's observations of her granddaughter's hospital birth. In this monologue, Eve is in no way endorsing a particular birthing practice. As with all of the monologues, it is not advocating a specific point of view, it is an account of one woman's experience." However, no such statement is ever made to public audiences.

Making Community Connections: Cate, 21

Unlike Jessica, who struggled in trying to make an initial emotional connection to her monologue, Cate describes her engagement with “My Angry Vagina” as follows:

My process began with trying to find the funniest ways to read it, and only later did I begin to connect with some of the real frustration behind the piece...I think a lot of my aim with this piece was to lighten the mood by making fun of the many inconveniences vaginas and women face, and the way I communicated this was primarily through sarcasm because that's all I really know how to do. (O'Donnell)

In reading “My Angry Vagina,” Cate drew on humor as a means of establishing a personal connection with the monologue, but feels that this might have masked her understanding of the “real frustration” women express in the piece. In part, this might be attributed to the tradition of the show; Ensler directs V-Day organizers to encourage humor in the productions, and it would not be atypical for “My Angry Vagina” to garner the biggest laughs in a production. Ensler insists, “The performances need to be brave, fierce and *funny*” (*Director's Notes* 4, original emphasis). About “My Angry Vagina”, she writes: “A fierce energy is appropriate for this very pissed-off piece. Any actress performing this monologue should feel free to “let it rip,” and turn the theater into a rally! So, the note here is that it can never be too angry. This is a woman who is fed up and is ready to speak her mind. Amen!” (5). Ensler’s vision of a speaker’s hyperbolic anger in describing tampons, gynecological exams, thong underwear, and vaginal douche cleansers is meant to be funny—and thus, by default, taken less seriously than many of the other monologues. The striking emphasis on humor is unexpected in that the play holistically aims to raise awareness of violence against

women—subject matter that is not treated nearly so lightly. Subsequently, emotions fluctuate from highs to lows throughout the production, and humor manifests not simply as a “break” from the emotional weight of the monologues, but as a conscious rhetorical strategy to foster interdependency among readers on stage and listeners in the audience.

Specifically within *TVM*, humor becomes one bridge by which readers and listeners draw on past experiences to construct a collective meaning of the text and build a community based on mutual understandings. Stephen Duncombe theorizes that the effectiveness of a joke is contingent upon listeners completing its meaning; over-explanation violates social expectations, whereas “not getting it” casts one out of the linguistic exchange (132). Specifically, jokes provide spaces where the readers and listeners switch places; good performers know to pause for response and listen for laughter or encouraging verbal cues. If the listeners do not provide these cues, the joke has flopped and meaning has not been shared; similarly, if the listener laughs, but the reader does not sustain her own silence until the listener has finished, the reader effectively cuts off the listener, making the joke a one-sided utterance rather than a reciprocal moment of shared communication and shared power. For this reason, activists might enact humor less consciously simply because it is part of the V-Day and theatrical traditions, but the effect is inevitably that *TVM* exists as a more likeable spectacle that fosters a relationship among its participants. As such, *TVM* uses humor to avoid blame and promote community through irony and satire, which adds to the ecofeminist ethos of the V-Day ecology—but at the disadvantage that, like Cate, many readers and listeners may find less connection to the negative reality that inspired the monologue in the first place.

Of course, in contrast with the play's narratives of rape, violence, and torture, a pair of thong underwear is far less call for a riot—implying that for the interdependency that humor can foster, it is worth sacrificing a heart-felt discourse on the discomfort of tampons, speculums, and tight undergarments. This is especially true, given that much of what follows in the show is difficult to hear, accept, and act on. There is a place for real anger in the show, which Cate also experienced in her second year of reading *TVM*. On November 11, 2011—U.S. Veterans Day—Enslar wrote and published a diatribe entitled “Over It” in *The Huffington Post*, in which she argued point-blank: “I am over rape.” In the body of the article, she cites that nearly one billion women on the planet today have been violated in “Bosnia, Burma, Pakistan, South Africa, Guatemalae, Sierra Leone, Haiti, Afghanistan, Libya, you name a place,” including more specific locales such as “ex-gay” clinics in Ecuador, the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, Occupy Wall Street in New York, and within the ranks of the U.S. military. Enslar also invokes the contemporary allegations of sexual harassment against the 2012 U.S. presidential candidate Herman Cain and of pedophilia and child-rape against Penn State University football coach Jerry Sandusky. The overriding message is the need to eradicate rape culture, in which “the privileged with political and physical and economic might, take what and who they want, when they want it, as much as they want, any time they want it.” In February, at the request of V-Day activists, the article was added to the 2012 *TVM* production script as an optional last monologue.

2012 Drake University activists chose to include the piece, and the director cast Cate for the part. In heavy contrast to her engagement with “My Angry Vagina,” Cate describes her experience as follows:

I am in love with [“Over It”] because it ranges from rage, to factual, to vulnerable, to pissed, to funny, to warrior, so it was actually a really easy piece to just do because that encompasses all of my feelings about sexual assault and violence towards women. The parts that were my favorite (and also the most difficult to deliver) were the direct address to the men in the audience. (O’Donnell)

Significant in this account is that the mixing of emotions, with a particular emphasis on anger, offers Cate a greater point of connection not just to the monologue, but specifically to the issue that inspired it: “sexual assault and violence towards women.” However, the tradeoff is that when a reader taps into real anger, as opposed to humorous anger, there is more possibility for breaking connection with listeners—a reality that Cate implies in recalling the “most difficult” lines to read aloud:

I am over the passivity of good men. Where the hell are you? You live with us, make love with us, father us, befriend us, brother us, get nurtured and mothered and eternally supported by us, so why aren’t you standing with us? Why aren’t you driven to the point of madness and action by the rape and humiliation of us? (*Official Script 2012* 48)

In this excerpt, anger manifests towards “good men” in an accusation of guilt, which may rhetorically cause more disconnection among participants. Whereas humorous anger avoids blame and actually promotes community, anger risks alienation. However, the text itself as an object of engagement retains a focus on ecology and interdependency by reminding men of their reciprocal relationships with women—a strategy that, above guilt, promotes a logic of accountability. To acknowledge one’s interdependence and act on the principle of

accountability is to believe “we are indeed all members of the same village, and if for no other reason than that...all people necessarily have a stake in each other’s quality of life” (Ratcliffe 31). I can only infer that this is part of the appeal for Cate and other V-Day readers alike, in deliberately calling on men to remember that they, too, have a stake in the well-being of the women with whom they share life and love.

Reflections and Outcomes of Activist Reading

In addition to reflecting on their processes of reading, both Cate and Jessica offer thoughts on the outcomes of their performances, shaped by interactions with listeners following the production. Together, both reflections lend credibility to analyzing *TVM* as an ecology of social literary engagement using Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and Ratcliffe’s trope of rhetorical listening, specifically with regard to how reading and listening contributed to reciprocal expressions of emotion. Jessica recalled: “I was told by performers and audience members alike that it was the first time they’d heard that monologue and been truly moved” (Shalita). Though Jessica uses the traditional language of the theatre to characterize the event, her recollection implies a more emotional connection to fellow V-Day activists and the public based upon social engagement with the text. Second, Jessica implies that she spoke with people who had heard the monologues previously, but found greater meaning in Jessica’s distinctive reading of the narrative.

Cate’s experience with “Over It” echoes this sentiment, although her reading was likely the first time most listeners had heard the piece. Nevertheless, she writes: “The response I got from this one was very, very powerful, and also very challenging. Many of my friends and acquaintances hugged me or cried with me. I had a friend come out to me as a childhood survivor of rape” (O’Donnell). Once again, she speaks of a shared emotional

connection among readers and listeners, including those who know one another well and those who do not. Even more powerful is the idea that by reading a testimony of anger, sadness, and depression from rape, more survivors feel empowered to offer their own stories, even in private, as part of the healing process. Thus, while the form of a monologue might appear to limit the audience's ability to talk back, the permeability and accessibility of V-Day events create an invitational atmosphere where readers can "give of expression to a perspective without advocating its support or seeking its acceptance" and that through this expression, "the offering of personal narrative is, itself, the goal" (Foss and Griffin 7). In that vein, *TVM* offers narratives as both a means and end goal of breaking the culturally-imposed shame and silence on women who have been raped, while providing a specific physical space for readers and listeners alike to share their emotional knowledge with one another. Sara Ahmed's work provides a framework for analyzing how rape narrative contributes to a sociality of emotion within the larger scope of the play.

Ahmed on the Sociality of Pain

The ethics of participating in and negotiating discourse of women's bodies and lives are most critical because "rational" understandings of violence are purely symbolic—given that rhetorical tradition understands public discourse as only that which is abstracted from one's own body and subjectivity (Hammers 239). Given such a limitation, *TVM* challenges what is allowed to be public discourse, particularly by unapologetically proclaiming embodied, subjective emotional knowledge. That said, the epistemological concerns are that the reality of rape, violence, and other bodily experiences remain textual, rather than embodied, experiences of knowledge for all but she who felt them within her own being. In any medium, people relate to real incidents of rape in highly mediated ways. For anyone who

is not directly involved in the crime (as victim, rapist, or immediate witness), rape exists *only* as a text—whether written, visual, or spoken. The relationship between the women who were interviewed for the play and all who read, hear or otherwise experience *TVM* is thus mediated through a chain of telling and retelling their stories. The narrative exists as an interpretation; it seeks to make sense of the behavior, while inevitably limiting understanding in some way and also contributing to a normative understanding of the crime (Sielke 2-3). Rape theories have arisen from such interpretations, though no discourse can equitably theorize rape as wholly knowable (Ramazanoglu and Holland 214). Therefore, what scholars need is an emotional framework, rather than the hegemonic patterns of logic and reason, by which to understand the transactions associated with embodied knowledge.

Ahmed writes:

Responding to pain depends on speaking about pain, and such speech acts are the condition for the formation of a ‘we’, made up of different stories of pain that cannot be reduced to a ground, identity or sameness. Stories of pain can be ‘shared’ only when we assume they are not the same story, even if they are connected, and allow us to make connections. (174)

The interconnectedness among narratives heightens the pervasiveness of rape culture—illustrating the similarities among violence against women on a global scale. However, as Ahmed articulates, there remain differences between how those pains are experienced and subsequently how they are interpreted, which may lead to more or less identification with a given reader or listener. In this process of negotiation and interpretation, sharing narrative leads to rhetorical witnessing, through the acts of reading and listening. Ahmed reasons, “It is the apparent loneliness of pain that requires it to be disclosed to a witness...It is because no

one can know what it feels like to have my pain that I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel...So while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private” (29). The act of witnessing, then, grants one visibility—status, recognition, and overall a place in the public sphere outside the private confines of the body.

The “crisis of witnessing,” as Wendy Hesford adds, however, refers to the risks of representing trauma and violence, which might produce “ruptures in identification, and the impossibility of empathetic merging between witness and testifier” (107). It is this “crisis” that Ahmed articulates in identifying the differences in attachments, which allow one to align with some and not others in response to pain (28). Ahmed argues that it may be impossible to feel the pain of another; however, I add that the accountability logic of interdependency calls on us to navigate the ethics of witnessing, given that we have a stake in one another’s quality of life. Thus, as Ahmed argues, “an ethics of responding to pain involves being open to being affected by that which one cannot feel or know” (30). Subsequently, then, an openness to being affected motivates women’s collective action, in spite of the “uneven” effects of pain on individual women.

As an example, one may look to “My Vagina Was My Village,” the narrative of a woman in Bosnia whom soldiers brutally raped as a tactic of war. The piece may be read aloud by one or two activists, depending on casting, in order to enact the speaker’s disassociation from her previous relationship with her vagina, following the assault. In her former life, she describes her vagina as “chatty,” “singing,” and “clean,” and recalls engaging in sexual pleasure with “sweet boyfriend touching lightly with soft piece of blond straw” (*The Vagina Monologues* 57). The choice of words is distinctly feminine, characterizing the speaker within a romanticized pastoral scene, where she is happy and seemingly carefree. In

contrast, the speaker's emotions are juxtaposed with a traumatized twin self, who relays: "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" (57). The speaker has lost connection to her vagina, for reasons unspoken at first, but significantly, the lack of connection arises from lack of knowing. Whereas the former self found delight in "visit[ing]," or presumably masturbating, the speaker no longer explores her own body following the rape, which has led to a loss in self-knowing. In this interpretation, thus, rape manifests as a means of destroying embodied knowledge of the original self, while inscribing new knowledge of trauma and disconnection.

While the speaker of the monologue transforms within herself, she translates her embodied knowledge of pain into textual constructions through sensory imagery, which are then shared with a reader who, though she does not feel the pain of the rape, may acknowledge the speaker's feeling. The speaker continues: "Not since the soldiers put a long, thick rifle inside me. So cold, the steel rod canceling my heart. Don't know whether they're going to fire it or shove it through my spinning brain. Six of them, monstrous doctors with black masks shoving bottles up me too. There were sticks, and the end of a broom" (58). This particularly gruesome account invites readers to literally see the rape as a violent, dehumanizing, and physically sickening violation. The speaker focuses her description on the objects used—a cold, steel rifle, bottles, sticks, and a broom—none of which are commonly associated with sexual pleasure and all of which are used as instruments of torture. The speaker loses any and all connotations of her vagina being sexually pleasurable in this narrative, as the soldiers repeatedly rape, mutilate, and degrade her. Through the reader's

literary transaction with the visual and tactile imagery in the monologue, subjective experience may manifest as emotional knowledge through the shared experience of pain.

While conceivably an effective strategy for communicating bodily experience, the presence of imagery in the text is potentially problematic. Representing pain is so often tied to horror, which in contemporary ocularcentric culture carries a perishable shock value. As such, consumers are repeatedly inundated with visual images of war and crimes against civilians, especially those “exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings” (Sontag 72). Photographers, for example, pursue greater and greater shock value, which eventually becomes habitual and diminishes pathos, while at the same time making voyeurs of the larger public who either has no ability or no initiative to alleviate the situation (82). When images of suffering are made spectacle, the visual perhaps invites an active response, but if the crafted medium is predominantly steeped in shock value, its production becomes pornography and further violates bodies in pain. Particularly with regard to testimonies of rape, activism must negotiate the politics of fetishization, which has constructed the “wound as a sign of identity...turn[ing] pain into a form of media spectacle, in which pain of others produces laughter and enjoyment, rather than sadness or anger” (Ahmed 32). Whereas performance activism, even as an aesthetic form, diverges significantly from media, they still may literally buy into the commodification of victim identity in a global market for suffering.

However, where visual image shocks, haunts, the narrative purports to make listeners understand (Sontag 89). Representing pain through story-telling in *TVM* largely circumvents many of these ethical implications, while fostering new points of connection among readers and listeners—mostly by focusing minimally on wounds and crafting abstract descriptions of the body throughout its transformations, which amplify the spirit of the self rather than the

shock of the disfigured body. To return to “My Vagina Was My Village,” the speaker consciously relates her vagina to a place, a site of destruction, which poses two heavy implications: (1) the metaphor of place does mitigate reader fixation on the wounded body but perhaps more significantly (2) the metaphor of place emphasizes the interconnections of women with the earth and highlights the ways in which man’s domination and destruction of the land parallels his oppression of and violence towards women. As rape and pillaging have become twin tactics of war, particularly on civilian women and children, the importance of advocating an understanding of humans as part of nature, rather than separate from nature, is of particular interest to the global feminist community.

Conclusions

Within the ecologies of activist reading, writing, listening, and speaking, each member engages in active processes of equal necessity, for without any one of them, the ecology would disintegrate. To acknowledge our interdependence is to act on the principle of accountability that “we are indeed all members of the same village, and if for no other reason than that...all people necessarily have a stake in each other’s quality of life” (Ratcliffe 31). Just as life forms exist with interdependence on biological processes, *quality of life* relies on communicative interdependence to further ongoing processes of social knowledge and collective change. By extension, then, accountability and interdependence lead to solidarity—the “commitment and work” that stems from recognizing that “even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground” (189). Solidarity does not assume the same struggles, emotions, or desires, but it guides action by using emotions as energy sources to propel the collective well-being away from purely subjective interests. It is with this in mind that I conclude my analysis of *TVM* as an

ecological network of literary transactions and look next to the movement's representations of transnational struggle to end violence against women.

CHAPTER 2: NEGOTIATING INTERSECTIONALITY, TRANSNATIONALITY AND REPRESENTATION

Intersectionality is concerned with the ways in which individuals are simultaneously oppressed and privileged in a given context. A term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality initially described the mapping overlaps of racism and sexism, challenging the dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories (Crenshaw 1244). Intersectionality has since emerged as a major research paradigm in women's studies (McCall 1771). Like feminist and antiracist methodologies, an intersectional approach places high value on subjective knowledge by starting from the experiences of marginalized groups, but diverges in (1) developing a collective, integrative analysis of oppressions and (2) engaging activism and the development of multicentered politics for social change (Bell, et. al.) Scholars invested in studying intersectional feminism have relied on analyses of race, gender, and class as primary points of inquiry using three main frameworks of categorization: intercategory complexity, intracategory complexity, and anticategory complexity (McCall 1772). Understanding that symbolic and material inequalities are rooted in relationships defined by social categories (e.g., race, gender, nation), intersectionality begins by analyzing the elements themselves in order to deconstruct assumptions about the hegemonic order (1777). Thus, relationships among groups become the object of study—as opposed to the intersections of social categorizations within a single group—leading to a more holistic analysis of oppressions and privileges.

Patricia Collins argues that social processes of categorization overlap to construct “matrices of oppression” which one cannot wholly understand through feminist or anti-racist analysis alone, or through additive analysis (236). While one category may have salience in a

particular time and place, race, class and gender structure all relationships. Collins' recognizes these categories as interlocking, rather than falling into dichotomous hierarchies. Furthermore, Collins encourages scholars to examine oppressions at the institutional, symbolic, and individual levels, for she argues that we must recognize differences in our own personal power and privilege and resist our own roles as oppressors before we can form a coalition around common causes and build empathy.

Thus, in evaluating complexities of privilege and oppression, V-Day's intersectional core would benefit from a critical self-look at its own representations of colonialism and white First World privilege—the very issues it purports to teach in its spotlight on Haiti (“Haiti Teach-In”). Intersectionality thus offers useful analytical methods, and V-Day's emerging attention to the intersections among race, class, and gender signifies the power of self-critique and feminist evolution; however, in continuously growing and improving, V-Day could further benefit from questioning the role of the nation-state and Western imperial histories in cross-cultural connectivity. As a critical discourse, transnationality creates a reflective space in which V-Day activists can, and should, question what it means to practice feminism within the context of globalization, by integrating particular attention to “nation” within existing intersectional feminist frameworks.

Transnationality refers to “movements of people, goods, and ideas across national borders,” and theorists often use the term to “highlight forms of cultural hybridity and intertextuality” (Hesford and Schell 463). Expanding a view of *TVM* as an activist ecology to a *transnational* activist ecology requires “critical comparativist perspectives” that do not treat geopolitical differences as discrete, but rather as continuously changed by their exchanges

with one another (463). Under methodologies of comparison, contrast, and intercultural¹⁵ inquiry, transnational analysis theorizes how communication across national borders is “already conditioned by complex legacies and histories of capital, power, nationalist discourse, and global interconnectivities,” while examining cross-cultural networks and relations (465). Transnational feminisms, thus, mark my interpretation of *TVM* as ecology, taking account of (1) the originating social and geopolitical locations of activists (2) the ways in which activists move ideas about violence against women across geopolitical borders and (3) how V-Day activists on all fronts are transformed into global citizens by transactional readings of *TVM*. As a focal point in this analysis, I look to the Spotlight Campaigns, which highlight geopolitical contexts perceived to be the most vulnerable.

V-Day Spotlight Campaigns

V-Day’s Worldwide Campaign began in 2001 with the inaugural slogan, “Afghanistan is Everywhere.” In the ten years since, V-Day has particularly addressed women in the following situations: Native American and First Nations Women (2003); The Missing and Murdered Women in Juarez, Mexico (2004); The Women of Iraq, Under Siege (2005); Campaign for Justice to ‘Comfort Women’ (2006); Women in Conflict Zones, Democratic Republic of Congo (2007); the Women of New Orleans and the Gulf South (2008); the Women of the Democratic Republic of Congo (2009-2010); and the Women and Girls of Haiti (2011-2012) (“Spotlight History”). As part of generating creative energy around worldwide locales, Ensler initiated the tradition of writing a distinct “Spotlight Monologue” for each *TVM* production¹⁶. To date, spotlight monologues include: “Under the

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¹⁶ Since 1998, Ensler has also added monologues to the original script that have not debuted as part of the V-Day spotlight campaigns. These monologues include, but are not limited to: “Because He Liked to Look at It”;

Burqa,” written for the women of Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban (2002); “Crooked Braid,” written for women of the Oglala Lakota Nation (2003); “The Memory of Her Face,” written for the women of Islamabad, Pakistan, Baghdad, Iraq¹⁷, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico (2004-2005); “Say It,” written for the women who were forced into Japanese sex slavery as “comfort women” during WWII (2006)¹⁸; “What Happened to Peace?” written for women in conflict zones, specifically the Democratic Republic of Congo (2007); “Hey, Miss Pat,” written for the women of New Orleans, Louisiana, following Hurricane Katrina (2008)¹⁹; “Baptized” and “The Teenage Girl’s Guide to Surviving Sex Slavery,” both written for the women of the Democratic Republic of Congo (2009 and 2010, respectively); “Myriam,” written for the women and girls of Haiti (2011)²⁰; and most recently, “For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans,” written for the women of Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and post-Katrina New Orleans (2012)²¹.

In the 10th Anniversary Edition of *TVM*, Ensler introduced a selection of spotlight monologues as follows: “Each of these monologues was written for a V-Day Spotlight or a situation in the world where women were *totally at risk*, where they had been raped or murdered or dismissed or simply not allowed to be” (127, emphasis added). For example,

“My Angry Vagina”; “The Vulva Club”; “My Short Skirt”; “They Beat the Girl Out of My Boy...Or So They Tried”; and most recently, “What If I Told You I Did Not Have a Vagina” and “Over It.”

¹⁷ “The Memory of Her Face” is structured in three segments. However, Ensler removed the second segment, “Baghdad,” from the monologue in the 10th Anniversary edition of the play, for reasons unknown to the author of this thesis.

¹⁸ Most “comfort women” were originally from Korea and China, though many others also were from Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, and Dutch Colonies. The monologue was inspired by the women who petitioned Japan for public apology (Ensler 2008 176).

¹⁹ The title and subject matter of “Hey Miss Pat” is inspired by Patricia Henry, a Katrina survivor, “whose generosity and good cooking characterizes the spirit of the people of New Orleans and the Gulf South” (“Intro—Hey Miss Pat”).

²⁰ The monologue is inspired by and dedicated to the memory of activist Myriam Merlet, who Ensler credits with bringing *TVM* to Haiti, who died in the 2010 earthquake (“Intro—Myriam”).

²¹ This year’s spotlight *campaign* is “The Women and Girls of Haiti.” However, the spotlight *monologue* itself highlights the commonalities among each of these three contexts (“Intro—For My Sisters”).

“Under the Burqa,” is said to represent “a time when [Afghani] women had no choice” under the regime of the Taliban (*10th Anniversary ed.* 179). However, Ensler’s assessment of risk privileges a First World view of Third World women as needing a savior, while turning a neglectful eye to the ways in which V-Day activists may be complicit in white First World privilege, and thus complicit in the rapes, murders, and dismissal of Third World women. Ensler’s idea that pervasive violence in Third World nations is somehow greater than the sexism and violence that permeate First World nations is also problematic, in that it neglects to take American rape culture seriously. Furthermore, the deployment of Orientalist and Africanist stereotypes (as I will later analyze) relies on colonial appeals, reinforcing the neoliberal view of white Americans as having power to help their less-empowered global counterparts, thus instilling a false sense of global solidarity that is not based on any real change or understanding of Third World women’s lived realities.

Ensler adds: “It is my hope that in the telling of these stories where women suffered, they will *be healed*, in seeing what erased them, they will *be made* forever visible, honored, and protected” (127, emphasis added). There are two rhetorical moves in this statement that are particularly problematic for a transnational ecology. The first is the dualism between Ensler as the speaker, who frames the significance of the spotlight monologues in terms of her own singular vision of “me” and “my hope,” which is juxtaposed with an ambiguous group of women, “they.” The use of the third-person plural sets up an “us/them” dichotomy that emphasizes the view that Ensler wrote these monologues on behalf of a homogenous collective of “Other women” with whom she does not identify. The second rhetorical move, however, is even more problematic: Ensler uses passive language to mark the ambiguous “they.” The women will not *heal*, but will *be healed*. They will not *make* themselves visible,

honored, and protected, but will *be made* these qualities. Linguistically and symbolically, “they” as women are disempowered as objects to be acted upon rather than subjects empowered to act.

However, what is perhaps redemptive, but mostly troublesome, in this framework is that no subject is clearly identified. While Ensler sets up a distinction between herself and women in the spotlight, her use of language evades her own role in the production. Ensler writes, “In *the* telling of these stories,” which makes no suggestion as to who might do the telling, thus leaving the critical reader to question, “Who exactly will be healing these women? Who will be recognizing, honoring, and protecting their struggle?” The implicit answer is, quite obviously, V-Day activists who read in each *TVM* productions—who could be among any women in the 150 countries where *TVM* has been performed. This is the ideal vision of diversity among the V-Day movement, anyway. However, given the facts that (1) V-Day activist identity is only implied, rather than rooted in any particular standpoints and that (2) Eve Ensler is by far the most visible V-Day activist, with her own embodied standpoints of white, American, and second-wave feminist privilege—when left to unspoken assumption, the largely invisible “taken-for-granted” is that V-Day activists are largely white, college-educated, English-speaking, First-World feminists who have taken it upon themselves to reach out to non-white, poor, non-English speaking, Third World women. Given the role of *TVM* in moving ideas about women’s lives across geopolitical boundaries, V-Day needs a critical model of feminism that holds activists accountable for how they represent themselves and all other women in relation with one another.

Three-Dimensional Feminism

Nancy Fraser theorizes that because geographical boundaries are blended by global mass media, cyberspace, and transnational public opinions, feminists justify transnational moves with the claim that women's lives are equally affected by the decisions made within their territorial states as those outside them (Fraser 2005, 304). Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional concept of feminism outlines distribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser 2005). Distribution refers to the androcentric economic distribution of goods and services; recognition refers to the status order of society that subordinates women; and representation refers to the manner of reframing disputes about gender justice that cannot be properly contained within established polities (305). Fraser argues that transnational justice cannot exist unless one accounts for all three dimensions. In the third wave of feminism, however, women see beyond territorial borders and address international concerns, as well as their own local practice of patriarchy. In this way, feminists critique state-territorial frames that are put on transnational sources of injustice—including homogenous views of the East. However, transnational borders consistently overlooked are the ambiguous lines that mark Native American reservations as distinct from the present-day United States of America. Thus, I begin my critical reading by examining the second annual *TVM* spotlight campaign on the Oglala Lakota women of Pine Ridge.

***TVM* Spotlight on Oglala Lakota Nation**

Enslar based "Crooked Braid" upon interviews with women of the Oglala Lakota Nation on the Pine Ridge Reservation, located in South Dakota. First read in V-Day Presents *TVM* in 2003 as part of the "Native American and First Nations Women" Spotlight Campaign, the monologue presents four periods in the life of one Oglala Lakota woman whose husband is a domestic abuser. Readers are asked to "allow for the passion, sorrow,

irony and humor” that characterize the woman’s experiences (*Director’s Notes* 7). While scholars have previously noted tensions in the imagery, little discussion has occurred on the integration of Native women’s experiences into *TVM* as a particular issue of nation, not just race, and thus falling subject to transnational analysis.

TVM is not the first time feminism has “Red power” movements, a phrase first coined in 1966, focus less on integration and more on cultural integrity, empowering the tribe over individuals, based on a history of forced assimilation (Langston 115). Donna Hightower Langston, in a critical analysis of Native women’s activism throughout the 1960s-70s, notes the ways in which “tribalism” historically competed with, and trumped, “feminism” in shaping Native women’s activist organizing (128). For example, the women of Oglala Lakota who organized the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 against the practices of tribal chair Dick Wilson’s corrupt administration, reached out to white feminists to assist in funding the legal battles that ensued following the arrest and charging of 85 Native women (127). In return, white feminists offered monetary support on the condition that Lakota women hold Native men more accountable regarding sexism. Langston notes that second-wave White feminists overall demonstrated very little awareness of Native women’s issues, assuming superiority in their way of thinking and doing things. She writes: “White women expected that Indian women with a gender consciousness would automatically lend their support to issues which white women prioritized, but they seldom expressed an interest in a reciprocal relationship” (128). For example, white feminists demanded Native men be held accountable for their sexism, yet said nothing about the seldom prosecution of white men who raped Native women and attacked Native men in border towns (125). Shifting feminist movements towards reciprocal solidarity with tribalist activists would mean turning a critical lens on how

white feminists have been largely complicit in the racism and U.S. imperial legacies that affect Native women's lives.

In neglecting to address their own privileged standpoints as white Americans, the majority of feminists have failed to understand the nationalist priorities of Native women's activism. Lakota woman Bea Medicine says, "Indian women do not need liberation, they have always been liberated within their tribal structure" in ways that are not understood by white Americans (128). In this vein, Lakota women activists raised different issues that most of the white feminist movement failed to recognize, which included sterilization abuse of Native women, the legacy of assimilation schools²², the high incidence of forced removal of children from Native homes (and subsequent placement in foster care and/or adoption), high infant mortality rates, high school dropout rates, and struggles over land and resources (129). In turn, Lakota women refused to assimilate their cause to white feminist demands, and legal costs subsequently bankrupted the American Indian Movement (127). As a result, the feminist movement of the 1960s-70s failed to foster effective transnational communication among white American feminists and the women of the Oglala Lakota Nation—the same women Ensler purports to spotlight in the 2003 Spotlight Monologue, "Crooked Braid."

Tara Williamson notes that images in "Crooked Braid" present the Native man as "exotic and savage," long-haired, and abusive, while constructing the indigenous woman as "helpless, isolated, and without resources" (Williamson 70). With these stereotyped and problematic representations, Ensler constructs "indigenoussness as "unfree" (slaves to sexual desire, addictions, and violence) and "intolerant" (misogynistic)", whereas "whiteness becomes sketched as "virtuous and free," and tolerant" (73). As a result, the play has the

²² See Sandy Grande's *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (2004).

potential to “empower the white person to control the lives of non-white people in the name of tolerance,” while remaining uncritical of white complicity in colonialism (73).

As a result, Williamson, a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, recalls that when she read “Crooked Braid” in a production of *TVM*, she made a significant change to the script: she changed the words in the introduction from "living in isolation and without resources" to "living with the effects of colonization and racism" (75). Although prohibited by V-Day guidelines, Williamson’s rhetorical move demonstrates the power of reader-activist agency to both resist *TVM* as a unilateral discourse through active reading and participation. One could argue that by changing the words of the text, Williamson misrepresented Ensler’s work as playwright; however, particularly given that she changed the *introduction* to the monologue, rather than the narrative itself, I argue that what Williamson did was offer a reinterpretation of the piece based on her own reading of the monologue’s racist and tribalist implications. Thus, while the material reality of the speaker’s situation might include isolation and lack of victim resources, Williamson addresses the context as the immediate result of European colonization and ubiquitous racism.

That said, while Williamson’s reflection serves as an example of the discursive possibilities of V-Day activist agency, Williamson does not feel that *TVM* as a whole invites this kind of critical rethinking. As one of two indigenous women in her particular production of *TVM*, Williamson characterizes the event as follows:

It was a stressful experience, to say the least. While other women were receiving flowers backstage and hugging and talking about the solidarity of sisterhood, I was on-stage debating with the director about racism and stereotypes and the image of the Indian. I find solace in knowing that

performing with those repetitions - the victimized and "cultural" Indian - would have been just as stressful...By not conforming, I was able to validate my own existence and perform with most of my integrity still intact. (75)

Significantly, Williamson's experience as a V-Day activist is not something she regrets, and she did find her role in the performance to be personally empowering, but she attributes this to her *resistance* to the text as opposed to her reenactment of the text as Ensler perhaps intended it to be read. The "stress" she recalls feeling during the production is certainly not what V-Day, as an organization, or Ensler wishes for its activists, given the emphasis on the director's role in making the play "a positive experience for all" (*Director's Notes* 1). That said, given that the stress has arisen from the tensions surrounding "Crooked Braid" as appropriating racist significations to appease white audiences, I argue this more negative experience is far more productive than any positive, yet uncritical, reception of the piece is. For it is within these unstructured moments of discourse and disagreement among V-Day participants that the real potential for intersectional and transnational analysis, as well as ethical redress, emerges.

Homogenized "Third-World" victims and First-World accountability

Transnational analysis has also accounted for the ways in which the play collapses oppressions without contextual distinction, whether they are rooted in patriarchy, religion, cultural traditions, or political regimes (Basu 44). Christine Cooper argues in her reading of "My Vagina was My Village" that the juxtaposition of the woman's voices pre-rape and post-rape creates an "orientalist aesthetic" of fantasy and nostalgia (747). The vagina is synecdoche for the village at large, and through rape, both are transformed into a disfigured body. Yet, Cooper argues that Ensler's text itself is a colonizing force, which makes both the

woman and her village anonymous, erasing the context of the conflict (748). Susan Bell and Susan Reverby echo her concern, calling the monologues “American voice-overs and interpretations of other women’s lives” because they oversimplify diverse nations and cultures as homogenous, uniform, and in accord with stereotyped images (431). Similarly, Srimati Basu criticized Ensler for her orientalist fetishization of the burqa, which puts the same dissonance between the developed West and primitive East. The result is an othered, homogenous, female of color who has no other identity markers except perhaps the name of a homeland, which is eventually rendered arbitrary, anyway.

Predominantly this is true in how Ensler frames female genital mutilation in Africa as primitive, affirming that the last clitoridectomy in the U.S. was more than sixty years ago, in 1948 (Chiwengo 91). While no feminist critic would argue that genital mutilation ought be promoted as an acceptable difference of culture, Chiwengo does protest the way Ensler uses genital mutilation to establish an “evolutionary difference affirming the ethical development and superiority of the West” (91). Additionally, V-Day largely addresses FGM without critical analysis of its implications for women in the reality of their socioeconomic lives. Fraser argues that transnational justice cannot exist unless one accounts for all three dimensions—distribution, recognition, and representation—pointing specifically to female genital mutilation. Violence against women as a whole is a form of status-subordination, yet Fraser accounts that that the crusade to end female genital mutilation is often focused on recognition alone without realizing that without the procedure, a woman may be labeled “unmarriageable.” Subsequently, if she cannot marry, she is cut off from financial support and left with a much different problem: her genitals are intact, but her economic stability is not (Fraser 2007, 33). In this way, recognition and representation alone, without

redistribution of resources, is subject to cause further harm and remain a merely symbolic representation of gender justice, while actual women continue to struggle with inequities. Feminism requires us to address both the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition.

In the 2012 V-Day production, Ensler constructs truth about rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where rape and sexual torture are systematic tactics of war. The monologues are informed by Ensler's interviews with women and her campaign work in the Congo, where in 2011 V-Day opened City of Joy, a refuge in Bukavu for survivors of sexual violence. Within the two monologues, "What If" and "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans," the political converges with the personal to illustrate the devastating impacts of rape. In the latter, Ensler argues that rape is also compounded by histories of racism, slavery, colonization, and poverty—not just in the Congo, but in Haiti and New Orleans, as well. Yet how ethically does *TVM* amplify the reality of rape and war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)?

I argue that in "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans," Ensler has misrepresented the sexual violence in Haiti, Congo, and New Orleans as uniform. There is too great a focus on the political commonalities, the unjust cultural logics, of these three distinct places and not enough account of the personal claims. While I will not dispute that the personal is political (and vice versa), for a text to reject its nationalist origins and empower the individuals it purports to represent, the audience must be able to hear the distinctions from the survivors themselves. Yet, only with equitable representation will feminists be able to crusade for gender justice of redistribution and recognition.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The 2012 monologue, “What If I Told You I Did Not Have a Vagina,” signifies the displacement of the vagina as the synechdocal displacement of the self, yet concludes with the restoration of the spirit through community and connection to the land, which in turn restores the vagina. Ensler contextualizes the monologue within its introduction as a dedication to the women who live in City of Joy in Bukavu in Eastern Congo, a refuge for women who have survived sexual assault in the midst of a regional war. Ensler accounts that hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been “raped and sexually tortured,” and the monologue is framed within the voice of one, who speaks on behalf of a collective.

The speaker begins with detachment from the vagina, which is not named but implied through the objective “it.” She says: “It is gone/It is hard to describe what is there/It is not an organ exactly/It is something the doctor made,/something he put there when I was asleep” (*Official Scripts 2012 29*). The vagina is a “thing,” yet “gone,” and “hard to describe.” The speaker reveals that the vagina has been recreated through medical intervention, presumably following horrific torture, and thus not part of the speaker’s subjectivity. The woman creates dissonance between the vagina and her whole self through the repetition of the phrase “It is” at the beginning of each line—a rhetorical figure known as *anaphora*—which places particular emphasis on her detachment from her own body. She says, “You would not recognize it,” thereby invoking the universality of vaginas as similar to one another and familiar, recognizable, to the audience (29). However, the speaker’s vagina cannot be recognized as such because “it is an outcome” of rape, of war, of medicine. The vagina becomes a consequence—though of what? The vagina is the “mad look in their eyes,” “their thrusting and tearing,” “my daughter and husband/Being forced to watch” (29). The vagina is presented through synechdoche as the entire rape and all involved—which is more than the

speaker and the men who raped her, but through amplification, the entire village. The vagina is not part of an individual subjectivity, but a representative of “what they stole from our mines,” or as Enslar contextualizes in the introduction, the minerals over which the war in Congo has been fought. Significantly, the woman stakes claim over the land, over the mines, but as part of an unnamed collective, and as she is part of the community who has been robbed, the village is part of her vagina that has been destroyed. The speaker dissolves the distinction between the body and land, those who inhabit the land—which is not the same as casting the body as community property.

However, through the progression of the narrative, the monologue serves to reverse and transform the *objectified* vagina, nature, and community into a *subjective* community, nature, and vagina. In other words, the flow of the imagery progresses as follows. First, the speaker begins with the abjected vagina, as described in the paragraph above, in the first two stanzas. In the third stanza, the speaker amplifies the vagina so that it stands with the abjected community. The line reads, “There are many of us./Thousands mutilated, closed/cast out” (30). The women of Congo are linguistically cast as objects through the construction, “There are many of us;” “there are” indicates “us” as the object of the sentence, without making “we” the subject. This enables the speaker to maintain distance between her subjective self and the abjected bodies, although she aligns herself with these mutilated women. At this turn in the script, the speaker reincorporates the community into her collective self and makes them the subject of her monologue. The fourth stanza begins with a notable shift in tone, as the speaker says: “But in the forests/we found each other” (30). The subjective pronoun “we” indicates that the restoration of subjectivity, of community, and the lands are all intersectional in this pinnacle moment. Destruction of the mines destroys its inhabitants; life

within the forest brings life back, so that the speaker takes authority of her people to claim, “We are gathering now/We are preparing” (30). The linguistic construction is once again significant, through the present participles “gathering” and “preparing” which differ from the static present tense “it *is*.” The speaker’s mutilated vagina is no longer a static, foreign presence, but the women of Congo are together a progressive, active, engaged force.

The progressive aspect gives way to the future tense, still in the fourth stanza, and the speaker directly addresses the listener; she says, “*You* will be surprised/what lives here now/underneath/our brightly colored pagnes/between our legs” (30, my emphasis). In these lines, the vagina remains objectified as a “what,” but it lives. Then, in the next lines, the vagina becomes not only part of the self, but the whole of everything: “Our vaginas know how to prepare/our vaginas know how to dance/our vaginas know strategies/our vaginas have nothing to lose/We are coming soon” (30). Two rhetorical figures are worth noting: the first is, again, the use of *anaphora*; each line begins with the words “Our vaginas,” which emphasizes the collective possession of the vagina. In this sense, the linguistic marker blurs whether or not each woman alone possesses her individual vagina or if the women collectively possess their vaginas together. However, in either case, vaginas are reclaimed as part of the subjective self. The second is synecdoche in the last line, in which the subjective “we” does not distinctly refer to women, to vaginas, or to all as a collective whole. The distinction between woman, vagina, and community all but dissolves, but what is left is that the vagina is made the representative of all: raped women, rapists, Congo, the war, the mines, the forests, and the spirit. The vagina is no longer something to possess, but something to be. Thus, the speaker’s question, “What if I told you I didn’t have a vagina,” becomes implicitly

answered *I am my vagina*. The vagina as synecdoche connects women's bodies and spirits to Ensler's overall thesis in the play: in spite of sexual violence, women are carrying on.

Colonialism, Racism, and Commonalities of Violence

The 2012 production concludes with the spotlight on Congo, and the last monologue, titled "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans," articulates the assumption that the underlying commonalities of violence against these women in these parts are systemic "racism, poverty, slavery, colonialism and war" (*Official Scripts 2012* 44). Ensler's final monologue in the 2012 V-Day production is a *dedication* to victims of violence, which establishes a dissonance between the speaker and the subjects of the monologue. The text presents the commonalities of violence as largely male-oriented and a result of First World colonization; however, Ensler seemingly ignores how her own text colonizes the women of Port au Prince, Bukavu, and New Orleans as largely homogenous, echoing the "stereotyped, uniform images" of women of color (Bell and Reverby 440). The lack of context for these three distinct world crises contributes to a lack of dialogue and distills culture-specific violence through a white, North American voice over.

Though, framing the last monologue as a dedication also attempts a connection based on gender solidarity. Titled "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans," these three words underscore the simplest purpose of *TVM* as a whole, which is unity among women worldwide to end violence. That said, this year's spotlight is arguably the most obvious piece of missionary feminism. Unlike the preceding monologues, "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans" articulates violence against women in a third person narrative. The speaker is singular, individualized, and, arguably, Ensler herself. Embodiment by any performer throughout the upcoming V-Season will not erase the speaker's position as

a white, North American feminist—or at the very least, one not afflicted by blatantly white colonization of women in Haiti, the Congo, and New Orleans, distinctly through the amplification of racist commonalities and war-torn bodies. The monologue generalizes four common forces among three distinct regions: (1) the parallelism between war-torn lands and torn feminine bodies (2) the corrupt, masculine, First World politic (3) the well-intended missionary and last (4) the women not destroyed, but living, through war.

Repetitive phrasing creates a rushing surge of images throughout the entire monologue, which is stylized as a single stanza in twenty-five lines. Unlike many of the other monologues, such as “What If I Told You I Did Not Have a Vagina,” there are fewer obvious breaks in speech—although, keep in mind, much of the effect depends on how a specific reader interprets the monologue and chooses to perform it. In my reading, however, the block of text, absence of punctuation, and rhetorical figures in the opening lines create an onslaught of images that provide very little space to pause, to process, and to adapt to what is being heard. The first five lines of the monologue read:

What broken earthquaked bombed out worn down worn over levee-flooded
 what bright yellow green speckled mango sitting dust light bare footed pig
 walking
 goat crossing garbage piled high cement broken hot daylight hungry history
 shackled
 hands missing rubber cutting boy running girl bleeding displaced evacuee
 exiled water coming
 earth cracking houses falling vaginas splitting (44)

In these lines, Enslar uses a distinctive two-word phrase structure—beginning with “pig walking” and repeated in “goat crossing,” “hands missing,” “rubber cutting,” “boy running,” “girl bleeding,” “water coming,” “earth cracking,” “houses falling,” and “vaginas splitting” (44). Each of these clauses is of equal length and parallel structure, which creates a rhetorical figure *isocolon*; as a form of parallelism, *isocolon* contributes a distinctive beat to the lines and engages the reader/listener in pattern-recognition. Subsequently, the lines harmonize through their repetitive structures, lending power to the words and emphasizing modes of destruction. Specifically, Enslar imagines the destroyed feminine: Mother Earth, home, and the youth of boys and girls, although the boy actively runs as the girl involuntarily bleeds.

In addition to *isocolon*, Enslar uses another rhetorical figure *asyndeton* to inundate readers with powerful imagery. *Asyndeton* is the absence of conjunctive words and phrases, which has the effect of increasing the line’s speed and urgency. Note that the lines above are stylized essentially as one lengthy run-on sentence, without any mark of punctuation or indicated stop. Speakers may read each line break as a brief pause, but there is a deliberate lack of connective tissue between the strings of words and phrases. The result is a rushing surge, a building sense of pressure in the harmony of the clauses, which culminate in a return to the play’s core symbol: the vagina. The *asyndeton* in these lines situate the monologue once again within the synecdoche of the vagina; “vaginas splitting” becomes the mirror for “earth cracking,” which is further emphasized by the abrupt breaking of the fifth line.

What comes next is connected through *anaphora*—the repetition of the lines’ opening word, “what”—but sets off lines 6-10 as having more emphasis on the cold, masculine, and harsh:

what UN peacekeepers U.S. guards guns pointing

what red yellow green X no body markings

what cold company men buying warm dead bodied land out from under

what money promised 9 billion 29 billion many billion never arriving billion

what ex presidents missing presidents corrupt presidents (44)

Again, the use of *asyndeton* creates a rush, but more importantly it begins to blur the distinction between the world's peacekeeping body and the U.S. troops, a deliberate juxtaposition as both become subjects aiming fire at homogeneous, unidentified bodies.

These lines continue to harmonize, but the shift in tone focuses less on images of destruction and more on images of the *destroyers*. Unlike Ensler's representation of the Congo in "What If I Told You I Did Not Have a Vagina," where rape is a tactic of civil war but the culprits are men on the front-lines who rape and mutilate the speaker, "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans" accuses the men behind the lines in power. Ensler represents the culture of U.S. colonialism and political corruption as underlying causes of this destruction of the feminine, and company men and presidents are among those to blame. Complicit are world leaders in male wars' theft of woman's "warm dead bodied land," left with "red yellow green X no body markings," the color signifying dress and life, now not only lifeless but anonymous. "Company men," too, are anonymous, and to a degree, so are presidents. In the onslaught of harmonizing clauses, victims and victimizers together become a sea of faceless groups, which relies on the audience's prior knowledge and connections to make meaning of contemporary conflicts and contexts.

In the next lines, 11-15, Ensler returns to images of destruction—specifically rape—but continues to juxtapose representations of victims with victimizers. She writes:

what 4 year old 6 year old 18 year old raped open in super-dome camp

burning village

what outside well intended saving and rending powerless victims made

victims victims

what melting penetrable tents skin soul

what world

what people having everything keep going while garbage swallows boys

digging children sinking mothers dying birthing (44)

On the outside of it all, Enslar questions she who is “well intended saving” but “rendering powerless” (44). Here, the figure of the missionary comes to mind, and intentions are crucial. There is a clear separation between the “well intended” missionary and the corrupt politic, but in the *asyndeton* of these lines, both groups harmonize as dual forces in perpetuating victimhood and depriving war-ridden colonies of power. Further, as these images build to the shortest line in the monologue—“what world”—what follows is the accusation that both groups simply “keep going” in spite of the destruction they have caused, or at the very least complied with. This line may invoke reflection among readers and listeners, with regard to one’s own role in the cycle of violence and disempowerment; however, the implicit attitude is that V-Day is *not* part of this cycle—even as its performance blurs war zones into “super-dome camp burning village” (44).

Turning attention from politicians, missionaries, and “people having everything,” the monologue shifts to a representation of the spirit of Congolese, Haitian, and New Orleans women in lines 16-19:

what women carrying charcoal sacks potato sacks carrying mini knives

mace under bright colored pagne skirts carrying babies on breasts backs
 carrying songs

dances churches fields abuse centers carrying possibility bellies beings words
 what women carrying on outshining filth outshining odds (44-45)

At this rhetorical turn, Ensler twins the phrases “keep going” and “carrying on,” but not in a way that they become synonymous. The world in power keeps going, in the post haste sense of forward motion, whereas the women of Port au Prince, Bukavu, and New Orleans must carry on—that is, carry the weight of political destruction of their bodies and lands, struggle and persevere. The significance of what they carry suggests resistance through knives and mace, while also a celebrating modes of traditional feminine expression and work through sacks, babies, and songs. Significantly, their weapons suggest preparation for defense, rather than an offensive attack, and most of their strength culminates in “possibility” and “words”—emphasizing V-Day’s overall claim that the spoken words of *TVM* are a catalyst for real change and a better world. However, while this is dreamily progressive and paints a picture of strong, empowered women who rise above the attacks against them, one must continue to question whose words exactly construct this possibility for V-Day readers and listeners.

Here, the answer lies in the very text, in the concluding lines of the monologue. Having delivered an onslaught of violent images, accusations against the world’s most powerful, critiques of those who do nothing or not enough, and visions of hope among women in war, it is surprising that how Ensler closes the play is not by addressing her immediate readers, but by calling on the women in Congo, Haiti, and New Orleans:

what happens now New Orleans Haiti Congo women
 now or never

women claiming what they carry claiming carrying
 now women colored brightly carrying everything everything
 carrying on I tell you
 carrying on. (45)

First of all, although the monologue is stylized as a single stanza, these lines set themselves apart because here Ensler abruptly changes her rhetorical structure. These lines are much shorter, which contributes a series of more punctuated breaks to the rhythm of the piece and emphasizes the exigency of the “now” moment. War, rape, destruction, and corruption have been ongoing, but here—“now or never”—it can stop. Unfortunately, this moment is swept up again in the repetition of women carrying on once more, and sadly, in the single moment that the speaker does address her immediate audience, she actually provides a means of escape from accountability. Ensler writes, “carrying on I tell you/carrying on,” which serves to remind us that Ensler is providing us a picture of places we have not been, but also seems to reassure readers that in spite of the “common history of racism, poverty, slavery, colonialism, and war” that V-Day purports to spotlight in this monologue, women are carrying on with their lives (45). Specifically the evocation of colorful dress among desolation paints a bold North American picture of Congo, Haiti, and New Orleans as simultaneously desolate and thriving.

Implications: Politics of Privilege

The monologue, “For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans” is rooted in the commonalities of racism and colonialism across transnational bounds, but problematically blurs the distinctions among women’s lives in Congo, Haiti, and post-Katrina Louisiana. The problem with glossing over geopolitical differences is first, that it

might perpetuate the erroneous assumption that there are no differences among people of color or of Third-World nations. My concern is that Ensler's introduction to the monologue only contextualizes the piece in order to justify the blending of the cultures as each illuminating an "endless cycle of violence and disempowerment" and highlighting V-Day's commitment to eradicating violence from parts of the world where "women and girls are the most vulnerable." While in a global ecology, all nations are connected and ought be concerned with one another's well-being, ethical representation remains critical to cross-cultural dialogue and mutual humanization.

Second, neglecting to acknowledge the context of a specific environment makes one's relationship and accountability to that environment very unclear. In order to change cultural attitudes away from racism and colonialism, V-Day must invoke the audience's accountability to their own roles in specific cycles of disempowerment across racial and national divides. The reader needs to recognize herself as part of the chain of events in order to feel compelled and empowered to intervene. In this sense, we do need to recognize Congo as connected to Haiti as connected to the United States—but not in a way that presents racism, colonialism, and poverty as only belonging to those parts of the world. Yet this year's spotlight on "Other" violence largely underscores what scholars have criticized: within Ensler's play, women of color become homogenized and framed as victims of sexual violence, while white women's vaginas and lives are left intact. Is this inherently problematic? Arguably yes, on both accounts, because though the play represents a range of vagina-related and otherwise human experiences, there is an evident racial divide. While the speaker in "For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans" begins to call out white, First-World, and political privileges, readers and listeners must recognize their own location

to these privileges in order to resist them in the same way that they resist modes of oppression.

The result is a balancing act between recognizing one's own privileges and avoiding missionary attitudes that are ultimately oppressive in their own right. The missionary spirit of third wave transnational feminism wields power as a privileged First World, white, colonizing force that seems to speak for rather than with the oppressed—a problem Wendy S. Hesford has noted throughout a range of responses to spectacles of suffering. Through the mediation of a testimony, a speaker “situat[es] oneself as an authenticating presence,” (107) but this ultimately decenters the original voice. Previous critiques of *TVM* have read Ensler as buying into this kind of unethical colonization of women's narratives. For example, Ngwarsungu Chiwengo argued in 2008 that “it is Ensler's Western female subject and cultural position, not the point of view of the raped third-world women, that orient the reading,” and unfortunately, I argue this is still true of “For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans” today in 2012 (900).

This is not to say that Ensler deliberately calls on readers as missionaries; she does not. What *V-Day* promotes in lieu of missionary spirit is fervent *activist* spirit in which we are not rescuing victims, but resisting forces of violence. The play promotes the idea that the women in Congo, Haiti, and New Orleans are not in need, or want, of rescuing. This is largely a feminist claim, and it serves the interest of women everywhere to treat ourselves as capable of not only surviving, but thriving, in spite of a culture that seeks to destroy us. However, part of being an *activist* is having a dual sense of accountability to a group of which one is part and then taking action. Readers should not be recruited to “save” the women of New Orleans, but in learning about how racism and colonialism contributes to

violence, the more activist approach is to recognize that the wellbeing of New Orleans matters, that one is connected to the people who live there, and one can take responsibility for and change behaviors that perpetuate violence in that part of the world. Right now, readers may leave the play with an increased awareness of racism, colonialism, and war as cultural forces of violence, but to what degree do we feel accountable or moved to intervene?

At this time, there is no quantifiable answer to this question; however, I worry that as the monologue's thesis gives way to culture, a nebulous faction of life, this heightened state of awareness of racism, colonialism, rape, and war ironically make these cycles overwhelmingly difficult to approach as problems that can actually be solved. For activists, too, the means of addressing racial and national tensions within the representations of the text become difficult to strategize and give way to an equally nebulous faction of life—*discourse*. Keeping in mind the importance of representation as a dimension of feminism, I propose that activists can begin a series of conversations among themselves and among their communities that actively integrate race and nation within understandings of gender-based violence.

Conclusions

It is my overarching hope that any V-Day activist can use *TVM* to ethically engage another in conversation about disempowerment and violence against women—but in doing so, one has to take stock of her own process of reading, her own prior knowledge, and of others' knowledge. There is much to be gained from working in isolated critique with the text—as I have largely done in this chapter—but to remain transfixed on the individual experience is to disengage from the activist component of *TVM*, which requires that we go beyond our reading, beyond our event, and really connect to those around us in order to change our cultures and our cycles of violence. Further, while the play projects North

American feminism as beyond issues of nation, activists can assert racial and national representations at the forefront of our conversations. We can integrate race and nation so tightly within our discussions of gender oppression that we stop seeing them as discrete factions of our identities. Although Tara Williamson concludes her analysis of *TVM* with a cynical view that the play “fails to account for whole people” and thus “reinscribes the power differentials it claims to be challenging,” V-Day activists and scholars *do account* for whole people and have the agency needed to evaluate their complex relationships to privilege and power (76). After all, Ensler and her play may have *sparked* the movement, but it is we as readers and listeners who *are* the movement.

CHAPTER 3: PERFORMANCE, PEDAGOGY, AND POLITICAL CHANGE

In my experience as a performance activist in five productions of *TVM*, the primary goal of V-Day has been to coordinate a powerful performance and raise a respectable amount of money to advance the work of anti-violence work. While these are certainly the focuses of a benefit production, the context of preparing for the performance offers more opportunity for activist engagement, reflection, and action off-stage, with regard to understanding women's lives. Thus, in this chapter, I focus on the ways by which *TVM* as a *spectacle* enacts a progressive vision of ending violence against women.

As a mode of performance activism, *TVM* events function primarily to (1) raise funds for local antiviolence organizations and (2) educate the public on issues of sexual and domestic violence—operating under an assumption that awareness will lead to action. Though one might disagree about the extent to which V-Day emphasizes monetary donation and charity over truly empowering women, Ensler writes most emphatically of the need for cultural change, which will not come from fundraising. In introducing the *10th Anniversary Edition*, she writes the following:

Even raising money to stop violence against women makes it something other, something separate from the human condition, from every moment in our daily lives. It creates a strange fragmentation and an even more bizarre fiction. We will give three million dollars to stop rape. We concretize what is abstract and integral because we need to raise money and people feel better giving money to things: a safe house in Africa, a workshop in Jordan, a hospital for women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And so we have constructed an antiviolence movement that has created shelters and hotlines and places for

women to run to be safe. And although these places are crucial for ensuring women's safety, they keep the focus on things or places rather than the issue, on rescue rather than transformation. It is culture that has to change—the beliefs, the underlying story and behavior of the culture. Ending violence against women is not a form of altruism or something you do as a charitable act. It is not something you can even legislate, although laws help to protect women and change thinking and behavior. (*The Vagina Monologues* xxi-xxii)

It is with this understanding, that ending violence means changing beliefs and behavior, that V-Day activists bring women's experiences of violence into public discourse, in pursuit of a truly gender-equitable culture free of the threat of violence. In calling for public discourse on the vagina, V-Day activists express explicit belief that women's testimonies, specifically about the experience of rape, are crucial to gaining recognized status as full partners in social interaction. Through the sociality of narrative, feminist subjects and feminist collectives are born, which are then in position to resist the cultural paradigm of violence against women; sharing stories as an act, itself, becomes a "political and ethical demand for reparation and redress" (Ahmed 172). The visibility of women's experiences—the reclaiming of subjective knowledge, experienced through emotion and the body, in the public sphere—thus becomes necessary for gender justice on a global scale. V-Day's public visibility constructs a new collective identity of empowerment, thereby deconstructing dominant, androcentric ideologies of women's embodied lives, healing subjective selves, and publicly demanding respect and esteem for women at large.

Feminist rhetors have noted, however, that while narratives of violence can become points of authenticity or evidence of proof, and henceforth sites of change and agency, they

can also exploit survivors in the name of “empowerment” (Hesford 119). Rebecca Dingo understands “empowerment” as a term that “has deep roots in feminist grassroots organizing and, as such, signals a pro-woman ideology whereby a group of ‘enlightened’ and already ‘empowered’ people reveal, mainly through consciousness-raising, how empowerment might be found from within individual people and communities” (175). As such, empowerment is supposed to lead to feminist actions—which, in the exigency of V-Day rhetoric, are those intended to change beliefs and behaviors that enable violence against women.

The problem with this kind of empowerment rhetoric is the too-common “privileged speaking *for* rather than *with* the oppressed, thereby situating oneself as an authenticating presence,” a problem that scholars have indeed noted in *TVM* (Hesford 107). In the Haiti and Congo spotlight monologues, *TVM* indeed exercises First World privilege in its homogenous depictions of Third World victims—which is at best a point of tension worthy of further debate and negotiation, at worst a blatant abuse of Ensler’s rhetorical power. Given the context of the spotlight monologues within the large ecology of V-Day, and operating under my own feminist ethic of care, I do not believe that Ensler intended to promote an ideology of nationalist privilege in writing “For My Sisters in PortAuPrinceBukavuNewOrleans” or any other monologue. However, I do believe that given the potential for this kind of reading, V-Day activists have the ethical responsibility to reflect on the consequences of the knowledge they produce, the social relations they legitimate, and the ideologies they offer.

What, then, does it mean for V-Day activists to produce *TVM* as a practice of not only participating in, but *teaching* cultural change? It is this essential question that I attempt to answer in this final chapter, and I locate my analysis at the theoretical intersections of pedagogy and performance ethics. The result is a vision of *TVM* as an “ethical spectacle,”

adapted from Stephen Duncombe's *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*.

***TVM* as Pedagogical Performance**

Critical pedagogy is based on the premise that “men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (McLaren). In the mainstream view of education, schools are intended to provide students with skills and attitudes for becoming patriotic, industrious, and responsible citizens, which conceivably leads to the reproduction of existing social hierarchies and inequalities. As a growing field, critical pedagogy exists to interrupt education as a process of reinforcing dominant and subordinate social groups. Scholars recognize that knowledge is a social construction and therefore that societal problems are not isolated events of deficient individuals, but are part of their interactions and context within society. Ideally, school not only permits, but encourages, the examinations of underlying political, social, and economic foundations for larger society, in pursuit of answering the question: “What are the social functions of knowledge?” Under this theoretical lens, which Peter McLaren calls “dialectical theory,” schools become cultural terrain for student empowerment and self-transformation rather than indoctrination into hierarchical strata.

As pedagogy of feminist resistance, *TVM* resists the interests of oppressors by challenging the hegemony of dominant rape culture. By sharing stories that hold rapists, rather than survivors, accountable; that construct rape as an institutionalized practice of oppression, rather than a collection of isolated incidents; that construct survivors as having power to change the global paradigm of rape for women and girls everywhere; and that construct humanity as accountable to the quality of one another's lives, on the grounds that

we coexist in an ecology, V-Day changes the global discourse on pervasive sexual violence. The messages embodied within the play run counter to images in the media, political discourse, and other cultural forces that perpetuate rape culture; though V-Day notes success along the way, *TVM* persists as a dynamic, relevant performance because cultural change is largely a process, not a destination. In this vein, Ensler publicly writes the vision yet to be realized:

We have changed the landscape of the dialogue, we have reclaimed our stories and our voices, but have not yet unraveled or deconstructed the inherent cultural underpinnings and causes of violence. We have not penetrated the mindset that, somewhere in every single culture, gives permission to violence, expects violence, waits for violence, and instigates violence. (*10th Anniversary Ed.* xix).

Ensler's words speak to the very heart of critical pedagogy: participation in dialogue to deconstruct the social relations that foster inequality and injustice. Her choice of the word "penetrate" to describe *TVM*'s rhetorical impact is particularly interesting, given its patriarchal phallic connotations and associations with rape. However, in more private discourse with V-Day activists, Ensler counterbalances this rhetoric of force by emphasizing the play's "unique ability to enlighten the audience without preaching to them" (*Director's Notes* 4). Her choice of the word "enlighten," is also interesting, when juxtaposed with "preach" and "penetrate." In this framework, both "enlighten" and "preach" connote a "banking" concept of knowledge—that is, someone who is more knowing gives knowledge to someone who is less—but "enlighten" takes a softer approach in performance. Penetrate, on the other hand, does not describe how readers enact persuasion on the stage, but how the

play as a whole purports to change the cultural climate of violence. As a result, one might read *TVM* as forceful in its approach and thus to a degree enacting, rather than eradicating, the very attitudes that underpin the cultural violence.

That said, as I have argued, even a vision for more forceful rhetoric does not annul readers' and listeners' transactional agency in making meaning of the text, or in accepting it as valid. Thus, in contrast to the banking model, the play also can be read as enacting what Paulo Freire called a *problem-posing model*—that which focuses on an ongoing dialogue among students and teachers, rather than forceful giving of knowledge. Under the problem-posing model, so-called “teachers” centralize acts of cognition and dialogical relations to critically understand the ways in which we exist in the world. To this effect, critical pedagogical practices treat reality as an ongoing process and aim for mutual humanization. Both of these characteristics feature prominently in *TVM*, adding to the complexity of the play that presents an unapologetic reclaiming of women's voices and embodied experiences, but inevitably connects to audiences by invoking community and shared power.

Although pedagogy as a discourse originated in (and still predominantly refers to) more traditional classroom spaces, scholars have extended its critical methods and conceptual frameworks to public spheres—which make it a relevant area of analysis within *TVM*. There are five conceptual uses of *public pedagogy* in scholarly literature, which together broadly signify “education for the public good”: (1) educational literature, which describes citizenship education within and beyond school, (2) popular culture and everyday life, (3) informal institutions, (4) dominant cultural discourses, and (5) public intellectualism (Sandlin et. al 342). Across these spaces, understandings of public pedagogy diverge, but converge on the point that, as a critical body of work, public pedagogy is defined more by its end

objective—that is, “the production of a public aligned in terms of values and collective identity”—than by the physical space of the learning event (342). In this way, public pedagogy can exist to reinforce or to challenge the underlying power relationships among social groups within the larger culture. Given *TVM*'s mission to change public beliefs and behaviors that enable violence against women, the play is easily read as a site of public pedagogy—thus making the V-Day movement ethically responsible for the consequences of the knowledge it produces. Alas, there is no definitive model by which to assess the ethics of any text; however, given *TVM*'s location as performance activism and its participation in feminist discourse, I propose Stephen Duncombe's “ethical spectacle” as offering a point of entry into *TVM*'s complex rhetorical strategies.

Negotiating an Ethical Spectacle

In recognizing that no universal standard of ethics exists, Stephen Duncombe negotiates his framework for an “ethical spectacle” in alignment with progressive beliefs in interdependence, democracy, breaking down hierarchies, fostering diversity, and engaging current reality while pursuing a vision for new reality (126). Thus, for a spectacle to be progressively ethical, it first must deconstruct the hierarchy between those who perform and those who observe the event. The public must have an active role in constructing the spectacle, whether that is in planning stages or connection to the event at smaller, more intimate levels or both (128). The ethical spectacle, then, is starkly contrasted with commercial spectacle, in which the audience participates passively from the outside, and as such, from the bottom of a hierarchy (133). The commercial spectacle promotes nonintervention and binaries between those who lead and direct the initiative in power over those who follow and consume. Duncombe argues that while progressive spectacles still need

leaders and a clear, coherent direction towards a political goal, such leadership takes a different form based on progressive principles to foster community and interdependency. In Duncombe's vision, the director's mission is twofold: she first guides the overall look of spectacle, including the desires being expressed and the outcome hoped for, but second, she must make popular participation the locus of the spectacle (129). Thus, the progressive ethical spectacle becomes less a show to be seen and more an experience to be lived.

Given the transactional ecology of V-Day (articulated in Chapter 1), public participation is not only the locus of, but is the entire *TVM* spectacle. Though Ensler first performed the play as a solo production, since V-Day's inception in 1998, the spectacle manifests through global grassroots participation. There is no room for passivity among readers, and even listeners who may appear passive take an ongoing, active role in constructing meaning of the text for themselves and for the others with whom they experience the play. While there is an existing hierarchy of organization, I argue that the role of local directors fits Duncombe's vision of ethics in that they guide the overall "look," but in a way that is centered on popular participation. Thus, while V-Day performances of *TVM* are directed towards a political goal of ending violence, and are given guidelines that shape each production under a "coherent brand" of activism, these commonalities do not diminish public agency or the progressive nature of *TVM* spectacles (135).

That said, *TVM* is subject to complex, ethical strategies and representations, which may be more fully analyzed given Duncombe's four primary characteristics of ethical spectacle: openness, transparency, reality, and dream.

Openness

Duncombe first uses “openness” in reference to interpretation, to meaning, which in a progressive spectacle is meant to change with context (136). Given the sociality of performing *TVM* that draws on modes of transactional reading and rhetorical listening, the possibility for countless interpretations and connections fosters interdependency but also indeterminacy (136). The V-Day scripts serve as the generative text; the *Director’s Notes* serve as guidelines. The range of V-Day’s cyber-presence and other communication enables Ensler to plan, guide, and artfully create each V-Day production in accord with the campaign’s values, but in a way that leaves the performance open to regional modification and different performance interpretations. Furthermore, given the modifications to the scripts, as well as revisions to V-Day’s artistic vision and beliefs as an organization, *TVM* finds meaning in motion—much like the open spectacle Duncombe advocates.

TVM’s open ethics are largely rooted in feminist and ecofeminist values: fluidity, understanding, inclusiveness, and tolerance (*Director’s Notes* 1). As activism first, and art second, *TVM* does not uphold conventional practices of theatre; rather, V-Day prioritizes sharing power and promoting a positive experience for any and all who wish to join the movement. In this vein, V-Day requires that any woman²³ who auditions must be invited to participate in the production; that casts should actively seek diversity within their casts; and that casts must have at least five performers (*Director’s Notes* 2). Thus, the narrative arises as a series of contextualized events that can be generalized to a degree, but invariably modify meaning within each specific context. The spectacle, thus, is continuously shaped by those on

²³ People who lead their lives as women are eligible to perform in the production. This includes people who are born as women as well as transgendered individuals

the stage and those seated around it, as reciprocal processes of listening and reading invite all to make collective meaning of the text.

Though V-Day regulates all campus and community productions performed during “V-Season” (February-April of each year), founder Eve Ensler attributes the success of the movement to its flexibility. In the preface to the *10th Anniversary Edition*, she writes:

The trick has been to lay a certain groundwork--i.e., the play, the intention of the movement--and then to trust individuals and groups to bring their own vision, culture, and creativity to the experience” whether those performance spaces are college campuses, community theatres, homes, places of worship, stadiums across the world, in small rural village, large metropolitan cities and everything in between. (*The Vagina Monologues* xiii)

The key word in this passage, which is most telling of the play’s feminist and ecofeminist values, is *trust*. Trust is reciprocal; participants trust one another, trust the text, the playwright, the vision, and the good intentions of the thousands of people involved worldwide, who though socially, culturally, geopolitically, and linguistically diverse have each committed to ending violence against women. In this respect, *TVM* as a script is Eve Ensler’s work; it came from her collaborations with an unspecified group of diverse women, but the imagery, language, and representations are hers. That said, the interpretations of that script belong to everyone else, and the V-Day, as a movement, is the collective work of everyone who has ever dared to speak or hear about vaginas in a 90-minute spectacle. Ensler notes the diversity of places and spaces where *TVM* has been performed, from which one can only imagine the countless ways each monologue has manifested—each united by a mission

and trust that all creative visions will not compromise the integrity of that mission to end violence.

This is not to say that V-Day's vision is static, and an examination of the organization's changing core beliefs over the last five years is telling of its ongoing reflections. When V-Day celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2008, it advanced three beliefs that remain integral to the movement, but have been continually revised. V-Day believes that (1) "art has the power to transform thinking and inspire people to act," (2) "lasting social and cultural change is spread by ordinary people doing extraordinary things," and (3) "local women know what their communities need and can become unstoppable leaders" (*10th Anniversary Ed.* 170). The first of these beliefs has remained constant; however, the second belief has been articulated as "Lasting social and cultural change is spread through the *lived experience* of ordinary people who do extraordinary things and the third belief as "*empowered women are unstoppable leaders*" (*2008 Annual Report* 12, my emphasis). Then, in 2009, these two beliefs were combined into a single statement, and a new belief was added: "You cannot end violence against women without looking at the intersection of poverty, racism, the environment, and war" (*2009 Annual Report* 19). This addition is most significant, based on widespread critiques of the play's privilege in issues of race and national representation. Today, in V-Day's most updated materials, these same ideas have been broken into four core beliefs, conceivably to appropriately emphasize each as integral to the activist mission (*2010 Annual Report* 33).

Transparency

The transparent quality of spectacle reveals its own workings as an obvious artifice; through a variety of strategies, transparency functions to motivate people to change the

world, not escape from it (Duncombe 147). Unlike a traditional play, an ethical spectacle reminds audience that what they are seeing is a performance, and thus a “symbol, not simulation” of something else (151). As such, audiences enjoy the spectacle, but also recognize how it has been constructed. Within *TVM*, creative energy manifests as activism before art, and thus transparency is overtly constructed by enacting the performance through the visible reading of cue cards, minimal dramatization, and explicit statements of purpose. Together, these strategies contribute to structured display of obvious performance activism.

Formerly applying to manifestations of performance within feminist anti-war protest events, Rachel Kutz-Flamenbaum’s broad definition of “performance activism” applies to a “continuum ranging from highly structured and formal to loosely structured and informal” events that include one or more performative elements, such as costumes, skits, actions, song, dance, and character (90). As a scripted, rehearsed—though not memorized—production, *TVM* falls on the structured end of such a spectrum, but it fits well within such a continuum. First and foremost, activists are instructed to read from the script, not memorize any of the monologues. Ensler explains this facet of the spectacle in the *Director’s Notes*: “This convention is used in all the professional productions of the play and serves to remind the audience that these are real women’s stories.” While the visible scripts certainly do maintain an obvious performative artifice, so that an activist is not perceived to be telling her own story, Ensler’s framing of the scripts as “real women’s stories” is perhaps a bit misleading. Each of the monologues’ introductions contextualizes it as *based on* one or more interviews with real women, but the *stories*—that is, the scripts women read from—are all authored by Ensler. Thus, the performance activists are most transparent in that they are reading the work

of a playwright, but Ensler's practices of interpreting her interviews for the play is a bit less evident; thus, accepting the scripts as "real stories" relies more on trust than on transparency.

Other spectacular elements vary among *TVM* productions, which may contribute to more or less of a structured environment. Performers are advised to keep the presentation simple, with minimal sets, staging, costumes, and acting. The *Director's Notes* suggest, "Think simplicity! Think vaginally!" and emphasize that the monologues "are not meant to be dramatic interpretations" but should nonetheless add to a spirit of celebration, invoking "honesty, simplicity, and humor" (6). Overall, most significantly, the aesthetics of *TVM* are meant as conscious rhetorical strategy *to effect political change*, thereby underscoring the activist purpose of the production; performance elements might constitute the message—costumes or bodies might even *be* the message—but performance is not for performance sake. Rather as performance activism, *TVM* manifests as a transparent call to end violence against women and girls by joining the V-Day movement. Within its very mission, V-Day's use of performance as an activist strategy is explicit: as a catalyst movement, V-Day aims to use "creative events to increase awareness, raise money, and revitalize the spirit of existing anti-violence organizations" (VDay.org). Thus, as a site of performance activism, *TVM* uses the transparency of their creative force to call on participants to move beyond the play as an isolated event and take up real anti-violence activism in their communities.

Reality

In approaching *TVM* as both spectacle and pedagogy, a critical project of ethical analysis is concerned with the origin and validity of the production's knowledge, which also intersects with epistemological and empirical approaches to feminism. Epistemological approaches seek to theorize understandings of knowledge—specifically, whose knowledge is considered

and valued. Mainstream Western pedagogy devalues the subjective experience, associated with emotions, associated with feminine, and associated with women. What has been constructed as “rational” concerns itself with technical knowledge—that which is measured and quantified, though by methods and standards that are also socially constructed (McLaren 180). Technical knowledge becomes associated with the masculine, on which logical reasoning is based. By perpetuating the false dichotomy that men are more rational, women more emotional, and placing substantially more value on the former, dominant culture perpetuates a belief that men are intuitively superior to women. Thereby, social constructions of “rational thought” in public discourse become tools of oppressive systems, under which men have much more power and visibility in social, legal, and political spheres.

One approach to correcting the gender imbalance in public discourse is to deconstruct women as inherently more emotional than men and build evidence that they are equally rational as men. A second, more revolutionary approach is to deconstruct the social construction of knowledge in the first place, to reassert emotions as valuable *forms of* knowledge rather than *barriers to* knowledge (Ahmed 182). *TVM*, in its project of teaching awareness, has adapted the latter, placing high value on subjective experience, operating to decenter dominant configurations of gendered power and knowledge. Therefore, while Western attitudes toward knowledge highlight objectivity and rational thought, *TVM* as a feminist form of pedagogy argues that multiple perspectives should be included from “the bottom” of the hierarchy.

Second, the empirical approach to ecofeminism focuses on the collection and interpretation of data on rampant forms of violence against women. *V-Day*, though largely stylized, draws on empirical data to emphasize the weight of its claims. Typically, most

“factual” information included in V-Day productions of *TVM* are framed as such –“Vagina Facts.” For example, in most recent years, a reader cites that “Genital mutilation has been inflicted on approximately 130 million²⁴ girls and young women...mostly in Africa” (41). The reader attributes the data to UNICEF, who published the numbers in a 2005 report, “Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting: A Statistical Exploration” (41). In addition, the very premise of Ensler’s monologues is based on empirical data; that Ensler interviewed more than 200 women for the play is presented as a means of lending credibility to each testimony. Thus, while the play asserts the validity of emotional knowledge and subjective experience in public discourse, V-Day nevertheless incorporates statistical data as a means of analyzing and acknowledging the pervasiveness of violence against women, thereby increasing the urgency of V-Day activist exigencies.

The play’s relationship to reality is most critical because Ensler frames the remaining monologues not as “facts” in themselves, but as having a foundation in real women’s narratives of vagina-related experiences. In this vein, Duncombe’s frame of the “real spectacle” has three properties by which one can analyze Ensler’s monologues: the spectacle (1) amplifies reality through its production, (2) guides participants towards real results, and (3) addresses the real desires of its participants (158). In other words, “something is what it claims to be and that something exists” (153). At its heart, *TVM* claims to be women’s stories of their vaginas, which are posed to (1) amplify the reality of women’s lives (2) guide participants towards reclaiming their own embodied experiences and (3) address women’s “real desires” and concerns about their vaginas. For example, V-Day productions have

²⁴ In the 10th Anniversary edition of the play, Ensler cites this fact as 80 to 100 million girls and young women without referencing the 2005 UNICEF report. The origin of this data is unknown.

previously included “I Was Twelve. My Mother Slapped Me,” which recounts countless women’s experiences of menarche. Throughout the monologue, speakers focus most on the social aspect of menarche, in that menstrual periods become a semi-public marker of girls’ maturation into womanhood. In opposition to public insistence on cleanliness and discretion regarding menstruation, Ensler deliberately pushes the conversation of menarche beyond symbolism by invoking real imagery of the bodily production.

Thus, as a “real spectacle,” readers in “I Was Twelve” describe menarche in its many facets. They speak of the colored—red or brown—and textured substance—such as “drops” and “gunk.” They acknowledge menarche’s public components: bleeding through clothing, telling parents and teachers, and navigating social judgments that arise from one’s supposedly private rite of maturation. They describe using pads, wads of cotton, and tampons, which one woman says “are for bad girls.” They describe the complexity of emotions that comes from growing up, such as feeling “afraid,” “scared,” and “guilty” on one hand and sentiments of warmth and celebration on the other. Whereas mass media advertising distorts menstruation by using “blue liquid” and encourages girls and women to keep “that time of the month” hidden at all costs, (literally by packaging more expensive tampons and maxi pads in smaller, candy-like wrappers), *TVM* reminds readers of the very real experience of bleeding and how that feels for a girl.

As both an ethic and a political goal, V-Day activists use reality to subvert the body politic; that is to say, they deploy the reality of “private experiences” in order to deconstruct the binary in which women are centered in the body, which is private and “of special interest” whereas men are centered in the mind, which is public and of general concern to all (Hammers 224). By making private reality a public reality, with regard to all functions of

women's vaginas, *TVM* breaks the cultural silence around stigmatized experiences, particularly sexual violence. The underpinning logic is that violence against women goes largely unacknowledged and unaddressed because the female body is pervasively degraded; women are sexualized, but not sexual, and their subjective experience is silenced. Thus, because rape is one convergence of male power and violence used to subordinate women (as well as physically hurt their bodies), Ensler's play speaks reality to literally break the silence that permits women's bodies to be violated in every culture.

Of course, the effectiveness of reality as a rhetorical strategy and ethic is that the public must accept it as such. While the presence of women readers lends a discernible *ethos* to the text, identifying as woman is not moral authority to decide for any other woman what her experiences are; neither is feminist identity any greater authority to speak "reality" of women's lives (Ramazanoglu and Holland 213). That said, feminist schools of thought have theorized women's experiences in ways that are granted more authority—such as the "basic feminist argument about rape: that it is about the social relations between men and women" (214). This is not to say that rape is a fixed experience, or that any experience of rape is even knowable to anyone but the survivor. Rape narratives may seem to make meaning of the behavior, but it is important to realize that texts themselves are interpretations that "relate to real rape incidents in highly mediated ways" and oftentimes limit our understandings of sexual violence while producing norms of sexuality in the process (Sielke 2).

That said, in evaluating "feminist truth claims," Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland argue: "It is perfectly possible to insist that valid knowledge of rape should be informed by accounts of experience without insisting either that experience simply tells the truth, or that theory dictates what experience is. Yet we can claim feminist theories of rape as

political violence to be better than patriarchal theories of women's natural propensity to be raped" (214). In this light, rape cannot be declaimed as any definitive Truth, but survivors' multiple truths can construct a socially agreed-upon (thus accepted as valid) reality, in accord with moral and ethical values, and such a reality can manifest as part of *TVM*'s ethical spectacle.

Last, the invoking of reality is meant to contribute to reality, and while there is much work to be done to realize V-Day's dream of ending violence, real change is happening on the ground among grassroots activists, in both their individual lives and in their communities. Though activists' experience with *TVM* inevitably vary, in returning to Jessica and Cate's reflective narratives, I encounter activists who have found greater connection to feminism as a source of personal empowerment, as well as a political influence. In Jessica's experience of reading "I Was There in the Room" and its account of childbirth, she found connection to issues of motherhood as a source of political and personal power. Recall that Jessica initially described her struggle to connect with the emotions in the piece, but following her first reading in 2011, she realized: "I've always wanted to be a mother, I think that I inherently always knew this, but my experience [reading "I Was There in the Room"] brought it to consciousness. I found my true feminism and empowerment within this experience" (Shalita). One year later, in 2012, Jessica requested to read the monologue again. In the same production, Cate reflected on her reading of "Over It," and in Ensler's words, she related to her own anger, which she now says propels her activism, while intersecting with her personal life. Cate writes, "My experience interacting with 'Over It' has forced me to reconcile a lot with the people in my life who do not stand up against rape. It has made me more of an activist, and it's a constant reminder, every time I think about it, that there is still so much

more work to be done” (O’Donnell). Though these individual accounts are not meant to be representative of V-Day activists as a whole, they illuminate just a few of the ethical possibilities for lived realities that may arise from staged realities in a progressive spectacle.

Dreams

In the last facet of Duncombe’s ethical spectacle, the unrealized possibilities for progressive change are what give life to the spectacle in the first place, manifesting as dream. Duncombe writes that progressive spectacles must “cast a dream as something eminently possible to give it a chance of becoming a reality” (160). The dream is a balance of negotiations; on one end, the very definition of a dream is something “never meant to be realized,” but the inherent danger in too lofty expectations are that having the dream then “can absolve one from the responsibility of ever having to make anything happen” (169; 168). Thus, for an activist spectacle, like *TVM*, dreams manifest in tangible goals that provide immediate relief for survivors, but are guided by a vision that “like a poem [is] not meant to be read literally” (170). The V-Day mission to end violence against women and girls, thus, has a literal meaning and a vision that all would surely *like* to see come to fruition. The extent to which activists fervently believe this to be a realistic goal is uncertain, though likely not widespread. In this way, the organization remains rooted in an ongoing, interdependent process, with less focus on product. However, by spreading feminist healing from and empowerment against the effects of violence, the movement realizes its dream every day, one participant at a time.

Advancing Ethics: Rhetorical Listening and the Rehearsal Space

As an ecology in motion, *TVM* invokes openness, transparency, and reality, while at the same time promoting a vision for a better future, largely contributing to the ethical nature of

the spectacle. However, given the racial and transnational tensions present in the text, there is an impetus to expand and question the play's pedagogy beyond the performance itself. Here, I draw on my own experience as a performance activist in five productions of *TVM*, to suggest that rehearsals become a space for increased dialogue and collective learning. Given that rehearsals predominantly have been what fostered cohesion among V-Day activists, in my past productions, they seem the most practical means of engaging women in ongoing discussions of the play's meanings and ethics.

As they are, however, the primary goal of V-Day rehearsals are to coordinate a good performance and keep track of fundraising. While these are certainly the focuses of a benefit production, the context of preparing for the performance offers more opportunity for activist engagement, reflection, and action off-stage. Based on my experiences, I will thus offer a proposal for how the rehearsal space can become central to discussions of political change, specifically with regard to race and transnationality. My arguments are based solely on my own observations as a performer on two campuses over the last four years. I in no way attempt to generalize my discussion to any other campus, nor to speak for anyone else involved with any V-Day event; however, I predict that what I would advise for fellow activists in my own community hold possibility for equally productive discourse elsewhere.

At Drake University, the process of reading *TVM* begins each year with open auditions, held late in the fall semester. These events are relatively informal, and can be scheduled one-on-one to accommodate varying schedules; however, for the majority of participants, auditions happen as a group either midday or in the evening. Students learn of auditions by word of mouth, posters around campus, and announcements on Facebook. Some participants come to auditions for the second, third, or up to eleventh consecutive year.

Others may not have ever read or seen the production; overall, there are varying degrees of familiarity with the text. Regardless, everyone is welcome; auditions are held on campus, but in a space known as CAYA (Come As You Are) House, for student organizations. The house provides a comfortable, invitational, safe space for the women to gather. Then, in a process lasting up to two hours, participants introduce themselves, the director(s) talk about the show, and then each woman takes a turn reading a monologue of her choosing.

By the start of the spring term, the directing team will notify all performers via email of their parts and then begin attending weekly rehearsals up through performance week. The meetings are typically business-oriented. During the first rehearsal, lasting approximately an hour, activists receive their scripts, introduce themselves, and listen to an overview of the rehearsal/performance schedule. They then break into committees, which are given responsibilities for various facets of fundraising. In the weeks that follow, directors will hold two weekly rehearsals lasting approximately two hours each, and performers will attend one each week. During these rehearsals, participants gather in a small lecture hall, take turns reading aloud from the front of the room, and then receive feedback in private from the directing team. If a participant needs to leave early, she may, but otherwise most participants stay to listen to everyone present that night. The last rehearsal, during performance week, typically lasts longer and includes the entire cast. Directors may still provide some feedback, but mostly the goal is to adjust to reading in the actual performance space.

As they are, the goal of Drake V-Day rehearsals are to coordinate a good performance and keep track of fundraising; time is managed closely given that participants typically have busy schedules and prefer to use their evenings for schoolwork. However, given the call to and rising interest in activism, I see these weekly interactions as potential and arguably

necessary spaces for discussion *about* the text, rather than strictly performative readings *of* the text—particularly in university spaces with less diversity and more social privilege. At Drake, in each of the last four productions, the cast has been predominantly white, female college students under the age of 25. While the play presents an explicit curriculum of global community (claiming to represent the experiences of a diverse group of more than 200 women), one cannot ethically ignore the actual embodiment of the performers on stage who are standing in for the interviewed women. Race, class, and age are factors’ in performers’ cultural capital, which shapes their relationships with the text, as well as with one another and with the audience. At Drake, *TVM* performances are distinctly marked by social, economic, and racial privilege—regardless of whether or not one intends it to be there. Thus, activists must be particularly accountable to these forms of privilege and proactive in integrating discussion on anti-racism, anti-poverty, and transnationality into how they make meaning of the play.

Considering that activism is much more of an ongoing process than a concrete goal, but still requires practical actions towards improvement, I first offer Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening as a framework for discussion. Broadly defined, rhetorical listening is “a trope for interpretive invention and code for cross-cultural conduct” (1), but as a mode of anti-racism means to challenge ourselves to (1) see how all our lives are implicated within cultural diversity (2) acknowledge that we all have a responsibility to address implication and (3) understand that what is dominant and not dominant are socially constructed and fluid in ways that influence all our lives (29). Dominant culture assumes mythical norms of whiteness, thinness, maleness, youth, heterosexuality, Christianity, and financial security. Activists resist the presumed superiority of these identities and take action to secure a more equitable

distribution of social justice, but we can only do so by acknowledging our social positions and resisting privilege and oppression.

Thus, within Ratcliffe's trope of rhetorical listening are four moves: (1) promoting understanding of the self and the other (2) proceeding within a logic of accountability—meaning all people have a stake in each other's quality of life (3) locating identifications across both commonalities and differences and (4) analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which the claims function (26). To this effect, the act of listening is given priority, which subverts the long history of male-dominated Western rhetoric focused on speaking and writing as means of persuasion, subordinating listening in a way analogous to how women are made subordinate to men (21). However, it is by *listening* that one is able to hear harmony and discord—a process that is not equitable to reading, for while they are intertwined, they remain distinct.

Thus, rhetorical listening emerges in an exigency of natural dialogue and questioning, based on realities and lived experiences of participants. In rehearsals and performance, rhetorical listening will intersect with critical reading, as activists work to interpret, analyze, and extend what they have read in the play and construct meaning primarily not by speaking, but by listening to one another. While more time-consuming, I propose that V-Season include more than the performance event; whether structured as part of rehearsal, as a teach-in, or as an informal discussion group, I propose that activists make space for conversations in which they seek to accomplish the following, prior to performance: (1) locating oneself within matrices of racism, colonialism, slavery, poverty, and war (2) identifying one's current conceptions and understandings of others in these matrices, specifically women of color who live in Congo, Haiti, and New Orleans (3) evaluating how one's knowledge is

being influenced by the words in *TVM* (4) evaluating how *TVM* may (mis)represent the lives of women who are not present in the production or community to represent themselves and then (5) taking the most ethical courses of action possible within one's locale. While the climate of the discussion is of course determined by the actual participants, and cannot be proscribed in advance, director ethos and authority should be invoked to create and maintain a safe space to the greatest extent possible. This involves rejecting hierarchy, encouraging intimacy, and mentoring one another outside of the performance space.

Now, given that Drake has a predominantly white, college-educated strata of typical reader-performers, listening solely to one another may provide a more narrow exchange of cultural logics than is desirable. Expanding the conversation might require, then, that V-Day activists seek out other groups in their community. Thus, one strategy is for activists to directly extend invitations to international student groups and coalitions of students of color, or to organizations that work specifically with women of color and immigrant populations in Des Moines. Activists might invite these community members to informal discussions of the play prior to or following the performance. Ideally, such an invitation would lead to a lasting partnership among the organizations, who can together address issues of representation and extend understandings of what racism and colonialism mean for women in various parts of the world.

Conclusions

As a formal literary text and spectacle of performance activism, V-Day cannot be distinguished from the consequences of its content, nor would it want to be. Though widely acknowledged for its role in the public sphere, additional insights into *TVM*'s rhetorical strategies lie in its intersections with public pedagogy—which call explicit attention to what

knowledge is produced and how. Thus, as a feminist mode of pedagogy, V-Day serves to question the dominance of patriarchal discourse, to challenge the silence around women's emotions and lives, and to assert the power in reclaiming one's embodied identity and experiences. As an ecology in motion, *TVM* invokes openness, transparency, and reality, while at the same time promoting a vision for a better future, largely contributing to the ethical nature of the spectacle.

CONCLUSION

In a broken, unjust world, even the most progressive of activist organizations will have its limitations and pitfalls, which cannot, and should not, devalue its merits. However, by critiquing our own locations within the transnational economy, we can better evaluate (1) what and who we inherently value most with our activism, (2) what unequal power relations we (un)knowingly have perpetuated, and (3) what changes we can make to our approach so that our methods align with our core values of fluidity, understanding, inclusiveness, and tolerance. Clearly, *TVM's* misrepresentations of women of color and women of Third World nations have raised tensions among feminist academics and activists; as of the 2012 V-Day script, the text is still perpetuating homogenous Orientalist and Africanist images from a First-World privileged perspective. However, this thesis has arisen not in response to calls to shut down the play for its pitfalls, but to calls for increased dialogue surrounding the perceived singular discourse of the play.

First and foremost, I have addressed *TVM* within its larger activist context of V-Day, with particular emphasis on the roles of activists in constructing meaning of the text, fostering a global community of readers, and teaching cultural change through spectacle. Using the particularly ecofeminist metaphor of ecology, I have advanced a proposition for acknowledging reading and listening as reciprocal, active processes of interpretation, as well as expanding critiques of transnational intersections, and analyzing the ethics of the play as a public performance. From here, V-Day activism can only benefit from reflecting on its practices, privileges, and outcomes: performance activism and creativity as a means of teaching; the power dynamics among the cast and community; assumptions about rape culture; representations of the lives of “Other” women; practical goals that extend beyond

fundraising and serve the needs of the community; activist gatherings outside the performance, particularly those that engage listeners in an ongoing dialogue; and performance ethos of openness towards a diversity of lived experiences while retaining V-Day's core values and mission.

Together, when V-Day activists become increasingly self-aware of their role in a transnational ecology and expand their understandings of women around the globe, they increase the ethicality of their performance activism and the interdependence of activists in global, yet interconnected, communities. Though beautiful and powerful, Eve Ensler's words on the page cannot and will not define a single reading of *The Vagina Monologues*, if activists will continually come together to read, to listen, to learn from one another across all social, cultural, and national boundaries. Given the agency, the accountability, and the activist fervor of communities everywhere, I have no doubt that when one billion women rise on February 14, 2013, the landscape of V-Day discourse and global cultures will change for the betterment of our transnational ecologies.

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