

“A Culture of Vaginas”  
Representations of the Vagina in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America

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*With Profound Appreciation and Affection*

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## ABSTRACT

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“A Culture of Vaginas”: Representations of the Vagina in  
21<sup>st</sup>-Century America

In 1996, Eve Ensler opened her acclaimed, off-Broadway performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in New York City with these lines: “I bet you’re worried. I was worried. That’s why I began this piece. I was worried about vaginas.” These lines and Ensler’s monologues as a whole pose a provocative question for the modern woman, one that has been present in feminist dialogue since the late 1960s: Does the vagina have a community in American society? Nearly three decades after the first production of *The Vagina Monologues*, in what is argued to be a “postfeminist” period, scholars, writers, artists, and filmmakers still grapple with this question.

In order to determine successfully the presence and quality of America’s “culture of vaginas,” questions of language, representation, and reception have to be assessed from their appearance in society during the Women’s Movement through present day. Recognizing the lack of discussion and appreciation of female genitalia in relation to their lived experiences, feminist activists associated with the Women’s Health and Liberation Movements of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged women to develop new societal dialogues, often through consciousness raising, to remedy this absence. Feminist groups such as the Boston Women’s Health Collective and the Fresno Feminist Art Movement created spaces in which women could vocalize their concerns regarding their bodies, motherhood, sex, and sexuality. In doing so, these communities equipped women with the tools to develop dialogue on these issues from within institutions of patriarchal society. The result was a variety of cultural materials, literature, film, and art, meant to introduce the vagina into public conversations.

“A Culture of Vaginas”: *Representations of the Vagina in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America* examines academic scholarship, advice literature, and multiple forms of visual media that re-evaluate the

presence of the vagina in social dialogue of the twenty-first century. Like the work of the Women's Health and Liberation Movements, as well as subsequent waves of feminism, the efforts of these scholars, artists, and independent activists have attempted to counter the taboo surrounding female genitalia with unambiguous conversation and representation. What makes twenty-first century efforts different from those forty years earlier is the nature of the societal landscape, which has not only been influenced by the pervasiveness of conservative ideology and divisions within feminist discourse, but also by growing generational dependence on technology. To study the influences of such cultural phenomena on the way students talk about the vagina, "*A Culture of Vaginas*" features an analysis of Union College student responses to a survey on social media and language usage.

Trends among student responses to the survey alongside examination of societal representation of the vagina suggest that non-taboo appearance of female genitalia appear in accessible yet private niche communities. These niche communities, while available to the greater public, also maintain a sense of privacy as they must be sought out on a website, or in a bookstore, gallery exhibition, or film screening. These communities' existence suggests a demand for safe environments in which women and men can address issues related to female genitalia. Such communities' prevalence as well as attempts to maintain anonymity point to the lingering taboo of openly discussing female genitalia, specifically the vagina. Though these topics are relevant to the twenty-first century American woman's experience, analysis shows that women must give themselves permission to participate in the conversation. Until women are able to speak about these issues without such hesitation, the taboo surrounding open discussion of female genitalia will endure

## **Chapter 1: The Vagina Thesis - An Introduction**

“My vagina’s angry. It is. It’s pissed off. My vagina’s furious and it needs to talk. It needs to talk about all this shit. It needs to talk to you.”

– Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 1996

In 1996, Eve Ensler opened her acclaimed, off-Broadway performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in New York City with these lines: “I bet you’re worried. I was worried. That’s why I began this piece. I was worried about vaginas.”<sup>1</sup> The beauty of her opening does not lie solely in her allusion to the purpose of the monologues themselves, but also in her frank way of addressing women’s concerns. By referring to both the audience’s and her own anxieties surrounding the vagina, Ensler clearly attempts to publicize a seemingly individual feeling as one understood by a much greater number of women. Ensler lingers on the feeling of individual experience as isolating, as she continues her in introduction: “It [her vagina] needed a context of other vaginas – a community, a culture of vaginas.”<sup>2</sup> This line prompts thought-provoking questions for the modern woman: Has the vagina ever had a community? Does American society provide context or culture for the half of the population with vaginas?

These are some of the questions this thesis aims to address. In order to successfully determine the presence and/or quality of America’s “culture of vaginas” questions of language, representation, and treatment have to be assessed. How does the vagina come up in conversation? How is it referred to in these conversations? Where do images of the vagina appear within our culture, if any do at all? What expectations does society hold for vaginas and the people who possess them? Some may argue that the Women’s Movement of the 1970s and the Third Wave feminists of the 1990s have solved the dilemma of the vagina, that today’s

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard, 2001), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 3.

American women and men are seen as equals. However, Ensler's comments about the lingering presence of discomfort surrounding the vagina, despite the efforts of activists over the past four decades to dispel this feeling, reveals this is not the case. In answering these questions within the context of major women's movements from the 1970s onwards, one can trace the evolution of society's representation, or lack thereof, of the vagina.

Prior to the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s, the typical American citizen knew little of the vagina. It was not something that was commonly discussed, moreover, when it was discussed, it was done in a medical or reproductive context. To most, women served one purpose, which defined them. French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir captures this attitude: "Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb; an ovary..."<sup>3</sup> Thus, her body appeared to the public merely as a vessel for life. Though the vagina serves a very critical role in the birthing process as the bridge from the uterus to the outside world, it failed to take a leading role in women's discussions with their doctors and more importantly with each other.<sup>4</sup>

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective published the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1970, a detailed collection of information about women's health issues from reproduction to contraception. The book's release marked the beginning of women confronting "...paternalistic, judgmental and non-informative" conversations they had about their bodies.<sup>5</sup> The concept for *Our Bodies, Ourselves* originated during a small discussion group on women's health held at a women's conference in Boston in 1969.<sup>6</sup> As the course became more popular, the collective developed notes, handouts and sheets into a locally distributed pamphlet. The resulting

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<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Boston Women's Health Book Collective, "Preface," in *Our Bodies Ourselves*, (New York: Touchstone, 1972), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Our Bodies Ourselves*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Our Bodies Ourselves*, 11-12.



interest in the pamphlet surpassed expectations and the collective turned the materials into a published book focused on remedying women's disconnection to their bodies. The preface of the second edition (1972) of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* explains, "We are offering a book that can be used in many different ways – individually, in a group, for a course. Our book contains real material about our bodies and our selves that isn't available elsewhere, and we have tried to present in a new way – an honest, human and powerful way..."<sup>7</sup> This honest way of presenting scientific information about women's body was inclusive of the vagina. Unlike the earlier mysterious, vague consultations, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* offered women a piece-by-piece breakdown of each organ and tissue in the female genital makeup. Furthermore, these descriptions were not only framed within a reproductive or medical context, as most information regarding women's bodies had been, but also were included in chapters focusing on female sexuality, sexual partnerships, and sexual psychology.

The discussion of female sexuality in *Our Bodies Ourselves* informs supposedly factual knowledge with the lived experiences of women. This "personal is political" approach was embraced by the Women's Health and Liberation movements of the 70s and rests at the center of women's newly forming understandings of their bodies and sexualities. The process, later known as "consciousness raising," consisted of two tenets. One: women are the experts on their own experience and thus, know what is best for themselves.<sup>8</sup> Two: feminist theory could only develop from women's personal experiences.<sup>9</sup> In this way, consciousness raising became a socially correcting act because it led women, unaware of their own exploitation and discrimination, to

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<sup>7</sup> *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> "New Organizational Forms," in *Dear Sisters*, Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 67.

<sup>9</sup> "New Organizational Forms," 67.

question the gender system.<sup>10</sup> A series of workshop and classes, very similar to the women's health course that inspired *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, developed from this belief. Small group classes centered on the sharing of female experience in order to provide a safe environment where women could "build a collage of similar experience."<sup>11</sup> Pamela Parker Allen, Women's Liberation activist, was the leader of one of these groups. In her piece "Small Group Process," from 1969, she explains the need for consciousness raising, "We [women] know that our most secret, our most private problems are based in the way women are treated, in the way they are taught to act, in the way women are allowed to live...An ideology will develop for a women's movement, but it can and must develop from the people who make up that movement."<sup>12</sup> In this way, the following chapters of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* acted as their own form of consciousness raising, bringing issues once silenced by hegemonic society into public dialogue.

The chapter titled "Sexuality" demonstrates this practice by offering insight into the silenced female sexuality. Like many other texts coming out of the Women's Liberation discourse of the 1970s, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* cites societal expectation as the source of women's alienation from their bodies. The authors write, "Sexually, our roles mirror society's conceptions of male and female: men are to know and we are to learn from them."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the vagina and all of the other female genitals were absent from public dialogue because it was directed by men. Feminist author Anne Koedt addressed this topic further in her revolutionary piece "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" written in 1973. In her essay, she attacks the misconception that women only derive sexual pleasure from penetration. She writes, "Rather than tracing female frigidity to the false assumptions about female anatomy, our 'experts' have declared frigidity a psychological

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<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 81-82.

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Parker Allen, "The Small Group Process," in *Dear Sisters*, Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, ed. (New York: Basic Books), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, "The Small Group Process," 68-69.

<sup>13</sup> *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 30.

problem of women...[a] ‘problem’ – diagnosed generally as a failure to adjust to their role as woman.”<sup>14</sup> Like the Boston Women’s Health Collective, Koedt saw the proliferation of inaccurate accounts of female sexuality as the product of women’s limited knowledge of their own bodies. “Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men,” she continues, “Our own biology has not been properly analyzed. Instead, we are fed the myth of the liberated woman and her vaginal orgasm – an orgasm which in fact does not exist.”<sup>15</sup>

A major part of the Women’s Liberation movement was providing resources and spaces where women could develop this type of ideology. Opening dialogues where women could discover that the feelings they had, the relationships they created, the lack of knowledge about their own anatomy was not something isolated to one woman, but something experienced by a multitude of women across the country. Though the Women’s Liberation movement effectively brought this subject to light and organized much needed programs aimed at informing women, the energy pressing the movement forward lost momentum in the 1980s. Linda Gordon suggests that the policy changes brought about by the Women’s Movement of 1970s created a sense of accomplishment across the community; however, that success became the argument for “anti-feminist rollbacks” proposed by the Reagan administration.<sup>16</sup> The combination of President Reagan’s policy and the American majority’s belief that women’s problems were only solvable through individual action undermined widespread collective feminist efforts.<sup>17</sup>

These were revitalized in the wake of Anita Hill’s sexual harassment testimony against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991.<sup>18</sup> Thomas’ eventual appointment to the

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” in *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 158.

<sup>15</sup> Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” 158.

<sup>16</sup> *Feminism Unfinished*, 75 and 157.

<sup>17</sup> *Feminism Unfinished*, 141-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Feminism Unfinished*, 148. Hill and Tomas had worked at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Hill testified that Thomas used sexually offensive language while at work,

Supreme Court elicited an incensed response from women across the United States. Yale student Rebecca Walker, daughter of feminist and author Alice Walker, vocalized these feelings in an essay addressed to her fellow peers. She states, ““Let Thomas’ confirmation hearings serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman’s experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power.””<sup>19</sup> She closes the essay with a declaration that would later name the continuation of the feminist movement, ““I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.””<sup>20</sup> Increases in membership of feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and creation of new organizations such as the Women’s Action Coalition (WAC) evidenced Walker’s declaration.<sup>21</sup>

The articles and protests produced as a result of this outrage not only created a vehicle for women to critique unequal governmental systems, but also inspired new intersectional conversations within the context of feminist thought. One leading force in the expansion of feminist ideology came from the LGBT community. With the growing involvement of non-heteronormative feminists, the discourse of the Third Wave movement placed a greater emphasis on sexual empowerment. Because the Women’s Health Movement and publications like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, demystified many of the misconceptions surrounding the female body and genitalia, discussions coming out of the ‘90s focused more on the female body outside of the medical field. In this way, the women of the 1990s became the inheritors of Anne Koedt’s ideas and articulated the sensuality of the vagina within public contexts. Women within the feminist community had access to a plethora of articles, essays, illustrations, performance pieces, musical

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discussed his penis size and pubic hairs on a colleague’s beverage, and tried to coerce Hill to go out with him using her employment as a bargaining chip. That both were African American drew additional scrutiny to Hill’s accusations.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” in *The Essential Feminist Reader*, ed. Estelle B. Freedman (New York: The Modern Library, 2007): 400.

<sup>20</sup>“Becoming the Third Wave,” 401.

<sup>21</sup> *Feminism Unfinished*, 157.

numbers, conferences, and small-group discussions to learn about their sexualities and their genitalia. While feminist-based publications and productions were publicly available and offered some women new spaces in which to explore their bodies, a large portion of the American population could not, or did not, access or utilize these materials.

Although the rise of Third Wave feminism also marked the first generation of Americans to grow up alongside feminist-implemented policies, the nation continued to adhere to patriarchal institutional standards. For example, attention given to genitalia for anatomical, let alone sexual information, was limited within schools, as there were no federal policies for compulsory sex education and local school districts could select curricula as they deemed fit.<sup>22</sup> In this way, women's ability to develop unambiguous relationships with their genitalia continued to be restricted by hegemonic concerns. As a result, individual feminists attempted to bring discussions focused on fostering more intimate knowledge of the vagina to the public arena.

Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* aimed to openly communicate the diversity in women's relationships with their vaginas and offer women an alternative opportunity to engage in discussion about their sexuality. Though written in 1996, *The Vagina Monologues* speaks to issues confronted in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and also to dialogues occurring in today's supposedly "post-feminist" society. It highlights this very lack of discourse around vaginas, or any other female genital organ for that matter, by creating a platform through which women have reason to talk about their vaginas in a non-medical context. Ensler's piece originated from over two hundred interviews conducted with women of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and offered an insider view into some of the intimate issues women

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Roemer and John M. Paxman, "Sex Education Laws and Policies," in *Studies in Family Planning* 16, no. 4 (1985): 222.

This decentralization of sexual education not only affected women, it also left male adolescents' with little knowledge about genitalia, both their own and females'. See Linda Gordon, "Birth Control in the Era of Second Wave Feminism," in *The Moral Property of Women: A history of Birth Control Politics in America*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007): 295-356.

were dealing with in connection to their bodies and genitalia. The monologues became even more accessible in 1999 when she published a script for benefit performances.<sup>23</sup> Critiques of the monologues argued that Ensler’s performance essentialized women to the vagina and “encourage[d] college women to be promiscuous.”<sup>24</sup> Some argued that the intellectual property rights prevented women from “localizing” specific issues within in their communities.<sup>25</sup> Despite these criticisms, Eve Ensler’s breakthrough performance of *The Vagina Monologues* inspired a once-silent community of women to explore their vaginas. The frank nature and broad contexts in which *The Vagina Monologues* discuss women’s genitalia and sexuality quickly became the subject of discussion and have inspired following generations to fill in gaps where they feel the monologues fell short. Ensler herself acknowledge one of the limitations of her monologues – transgender vaginas. So she added a monologue of multiple voices in 2004.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, by leaving the dialogue so open ended, Ensler paved the way for future authors to chronicle the vagina in a new historical cannon.

Nearly twenty years since the first performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, women, scholars, and writers continue to grapple with the vagina’s place in American society. An exploration of scholarship on this topic offers analyses of how women’s relationship with their vagina has been shaped by history. Ranging in dates from 1998, immediately after the release of Ensler’s monologues, to 2013, each author considered below attempts to make sense of the web of questions surrounding the vagina. Scholars and authors approach the topic from various disciplines, some from scientific perspectives and others from observations of popular culture,

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<sup>23</sup> Marybeth Marklein, “‘Monologues’ Make Noise: Campuses Embrace Play, but Not without Controversy,” in *USA Today* (3/2/04). Accessed November 14, 2015.

[http://inthenews.unt.edu/sites/default/files/PDF/2004/3/2/03\\_02\\_2004\\_USAT\\_Monologues.pdf](http://inthenews.unt.edu/sites/default/files/PDF/2004/3/2/03_02_2004_USAT_Monologues.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Marklein, “‘Monologues’ Make Noise”.

<sup>25</sup> “Sexualities,” in *Gendered Worlds* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, eds. Judy Root Aulette and Judith Wither (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 99.

<sup>26</sup> Eve Ensler, “Eve Ensler: I Never Defined a Woman as a Person with a Vagina,” *Time*, January 19, 2015, Accessed March 16, 2016, <http://time.com/3672912/eve-ensler-vagina-monologues-mount-holyoke-college/>.

and each author proposes to re-construct, re-think, and/or re-evaluate what we know as the vagina. The topic of language is more prevalent with some Third Wave texts, such as Inga Muscio's 1998 book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, and Emma Rees's recent book *The Vagina*. Catherine Blackledge's *The Story of V* is an outlier in methodology, primarily because her research comes from a background in scientific examination and study. Nevertheless, her text frames a comparison of Jelto Drenth's *The Origin of the World* and Virginia Braun's assorted articles on Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery and their respective discussion of the relationship of the vagina and socio-medical discourse. Despite their differences, each piece attempts to add to previous bodies of work by developing their own interpretation of the balance of personal account and factual knowledge within their writing.

When talking about the vagina, language is something that requires a great deal of consideration because of the connotation the word itself carries, along with the many other euphemisms used in its stead. The question of talking about the vagina, and words used to replace it in "polite" conversation, has been a subject of discussion since the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s. Eve Ensler highlighted the lack of universal language used when speaking about female genitalia in one of her exchanges during *The Vagina Monologues*. In this scene, three women enumerate various euphemisms for vaginas, all of which Ensler recorded during her vagina interviews: "In Westchester they call it a Pooki, in New Jersey a twat. There's a Powderbox, a Poochi, a Poopi, a Peepe, a Poopalu, a Poonani, and a Piche. Toadie, Dee Dee, Nishi, Dignity, Monkey Box. Coochie Snorter, Cooter, Labbe."<sup>27</sup> The list goes on.

In their study "'Snatch,' 'Hole,' or 'Honey-pot'? Semantic Categories and the Problem of Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang (1991)," Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger examine the patterns in language used to discuss both male and female genitalia. Their analysis provides data-

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<sup>27</sup> Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 15.

based evidence pertinent to the problem of language addressed by Ensler. Responses to their survey demonstrate disparity in consistency and frequency in use between male genital terms (MGTs) and female genital terms (FGTs). The study results indicate that when asked to define specific female genital slang, participants fully agreed on the meaning of only 4% of terms, those being beard (pubic hair) and clit (clitoris).<sup>28</sup> Further analysis of study responses showed a large number of interpretations of common slang and demonstrated inconsistencies in knowledge of what certain slang words refer to which specific genitals. For example, the term pussy was defined as vulva, vagina, pubic hair, clitoris, or genital organ, while twat referred to the vulva, vagina, or hymen.<sup>29</sup> When asked to define the genital slang in anatomical terms, like vagina, vulva, clitoris, etc., participants' responses for certain terms only featured other slang terms.<sup>30</sup> The study's authors point out the importance of this double use of slang, given that, "Slang evokes meaning by drawing on the shared cultural knowledge of the users, and slang terms for female genitalia would thus be expected to encode ideas about women's bodies, women's place in the world, and women's place in sex."<sup>31</sup> This idea, however, becomes problematic because not all individuals connect to the "shared cultural knowledge" mentioned in the definition. For some women, their relationships to their vaginas are disconnected or based on cultural euphemism rather than an intimate knowledge of their bodies. Thus, because of these variations, one cannot deduce a homogenized idea of how women feel about their bodies, and their place in the world.

To demonstrate the sense of individuality and distinction informing participant responses, Braun and Kitzinger "coded" their data for FGTs and MGTs into different categories, including

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, "'Snatch,' 'Hole,' or 'Honey-pot'? Semantic Categories and the Problem of Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang," *The Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 2 (2001): 154. JSTOR Accessed November 04, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813705>. For an explanation of Braun and Kitzinger's methodology see pages 147 and 154

<sup>29</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, "Semantic Categories," 154.

<sup>30</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, "Semantic Categories," 154.

<sup>31</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, "Semantic Categories," 147. The definition given is based on Tom McArthur's definition in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992).



*euphemism*. These terms “made vague reference to a general body location,” but MGTs more frequently implied extension or “membership” to the male body with less use of euphemism for men’s genitalia, whereas FGTs remained much more disassociated from the female body through the use of more euphemisms to refer to women’s genitalia.<sup>32</sup> The authors explain, “Euphemistic genital slang is vague to the extreme, with no clear bodily reference point, which implicitly reinforces the idea that we should not talk, or even think, about [female] genitalia explicitly.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, differences in answers from male and female participants support their claim that “despite public debate and discussion about sex and sexuality, the vagina remains a taboo or private topic.”<sup>34</sup>

This observation echoes analyses of several other semantic categories. In the category *receptacle*, terms were subdivided into several groups: potential containers, places to put things in, containers for semen, and containers for the penis/sex.<sup>35</sup> The authors note the correlation of the names given, e.g. box, bucket, gism pot, honey pot, willy warmer, and shagbox, to the feminist argument that, to men, the vagina merely represents a dehumanized absence that they “can or want to fuck.”<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the indistinctness of these names also harks to similar taboos reflected in Braun’s and Kitzinger’s analysis of euphemistic language related to female genitalia.

The diverse range of euphemistic phrases for genitals exhibited in Braun’s and Kitzinger’s study, demonstrate varying levels of comfort with the use of such language. These

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<sup>32</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, “Semantic Categories,” 149-150.

<sup>33</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, “Semantic Categories,” 150.

<sup>34</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, “Semantic Categories,” 146.

<sup>35</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, “Semantic Categories,” 151.

<sup>36</sup> Penelope *Speaking Freely* cited in Braun and Kitzinger, “Semantic Categories,” 151.

The concept of the vagina as an absence or hole is one heavily discussed by feminists throughout history. Mentioned in Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* 1949, amongst other staple feminist scholarship, women have argued that the sexualized and subordinate role they are forced to assume within society reduces their sexual experience leaving them as merely a receptacle for the penis.

same patterns often complicate the publishing process for feminist authors. Author's use of euphemistic language can contrast with a publisher's, who sometimes have different expectations regarding the economic prospects and intended audience that accompany a book. Emma Rees's *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* provides a perfect example of the linguistic intricacies around vagina in print. Though her book itself is titled *The Vagina*, Rees does not use this word but rather "cunt" in the text of the book. She explains, "That the *OED* [Oxford English Dictionary] lists as its first definition of 'cunt': the female *external* genital organs' is problematic for those of us who know that the female genitals are made up of numerous components, both internal and external... 'Cunt' is, the *OED* aside, the most *inclusive* term, referring to the vulva, labia, vagina, and clitoris...If we don't say 'cunt,' then we aren't speaking the truth."<sup>37</sup> Here, Rees establishes and more importantly justifies her use of a word once claimed to be "the 'nigger' of the gender wars."<sup>38</sup>

Such a comparison can be jarring or even impermissible for some as both nigger and cunt are considered to be in-utterable insults, yet Rees commentary reflects existing conversations on reclaiming of hate speech. Judith Butler, gender and feminist theorist and philosopher, discusses the complications of such controversies in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of Performative*. Though she talks more generally on the subject of speech and language as it pertains to injury and agency, Butler's questioning of the power attributed to speech in effect defends Rees' use of the word cunt: "Within the political sphere, performativity can work in precisely such counter-hegemonic ways. That moment in which a speech act without prior authorization in the course of its performance may anticipate and instate altered con-texts for its future recipients."<sup>39</sup> Like Rees' rationalization of the inclusivity of cunt, Butler defends that hate speech, results in

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<sup>37</sup> Emma Rees, *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6-7.

<sup>38</sup> Rees, *The Vagina*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of Performative*, (London: Routledge, 1997): 160.

emotional injury only when one lets it have such an effect. When utilized in a purposeful, rebellious manner, what Butler refers to as “performativity,” hate speech calls into question the systems of hegemonic oppression that attribute to these words injurious agency. In the case of the word cunt, education of the public to its literal definition and use in an inclusive, non-insulting manner strips from it the derogatory power attributed to it within patriarchal society.

Despite her bold assertion in using cunt within the body of *The Vagina*, Rees never directly addresses the discrepancy between her reclaiming of “cunt” and her title *The Vagina* other than alluding to it in her introduction. At one point, Rees expresses hesitation to reveal the true nature of her research to her colleagues. She writes, “...at communal meal-times, when asked what I was working on, coyness shamed me into saying something woolly along the lines of ‘representations of the female form in literature and art...’”<sup>40</sup> Rees’ innate reservations, even amongst her peers, speaks directly to potential influences leading to her modest title. If the notion of talking openly with acquaintances about her research elicits doubt for fear of being inappropriate or deemed “somewhat ridiculous,” then how could she openly put forth a book titled *Cunt*? Furthermore, Rees may also have experienced pressure from her publisher to use a more polite name for the publication. Bloomsbury Academic, a London-based publishing firm with a wide range of clientele, published *The Vagina*. Thus, Rees or her publisher may have selected “vagina” instead of “cunt” to appeal to a broader audience. This is also suggested by blurbs for *The Vagina* used on amazon.com and the Bloomsbury Academic website. The passage, taken from the back cover of the actual book, uses “vagina” instead of “cunt.”

Emma Rees, having finished *The Vagina* in 2013, also lacks an outward confidence and urgency that had immediately followed Ensler’s monologues over 15 years earlier. For a brief period in the early 1990s, feminists and women alike broke down the barriers between public and

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<sup>40</sup> Rees, *The Vagina*, 5.

private conversations surrounding the vagina. Shedding the inhibitions that the female body and female sexuality were not proper topics for “polite” discourse, activists and scholars published articles and books focused solely on these taboo areas. Inga Muscio’s book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, published in 1998 not two years following the first production of *The Vagina Monologues*, unabashedly presents the formerly forbidden language of the vagina. Muscio, a self-proclaimed “self-styled literary magnate who writes books so she doesn’t lose touch with the lower echelons of society,” chooses to use the word “cunt” as a form of protest.<sup>41</sup> Her title *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, stands almost as an antithesis of Rees’ meeker *The Vagina*. Informed by her personal connection to the third wave feminist movement, Muscio presents her text as a separation from a relationship with the vagina swayed by the patriarchy and a step towards women’s reconciliation with their vagina. She feels, somewhere along the way, women became estranged from their vaginas; a fact, she attributes to the language surrounding the topic itself.<sup>42</sup> As a result, Muscio clearly becomes more concerned with the reawakening of this discussion than with appealing to wide audience.

*Cunt*, like *The Vagina*, recognizes women’s bodies and histories as lacking a formal vernacular; they are often referenced using words that improperly fit the situation. Muscio writes, “...the only dimly representational, identifying word that advocates truly authentic recognition for the actual realities of women in this world is ‘feminism.’ This is a relatively youthful word. Our actual realities, on the other hand, are rooted deep...”<sup>43</sup> In these lines, Muscio articulates the absence of a proper vocabulary within women’s realities to explain an authentic experience, one she claims is linked through ownership of female genitalia. She continues, “Womankind is varied and vast. But we all have cunts. While one word maketh not a

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<sup>41</sup> Inga Muscio, *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 1998), 278.

<sup>42</sup> Muscio, *Cunt*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Muscio, *Cunt*, 5.

woman-centered language ‘cunt’ is certainly a mighty potent and versatile contribution. Not to mention how *deliciously satisfying* it is to *totally snag* a reviled word and elevate it to a status which all women should rightfully experience in this society.”<sup>44</sup> Like Rees, Muscio recognizes that cunt has history. She observes that ‘cunt,’ like the words bitch and whore, holds a negative connotation in modern English, but once held positive significance in ancient language.<sup>45</sup> Thus, she claims ‘cunt’ not just as a word, but also as a platform for the re-writing of history. In a way very similar to Eve Ensler’s play, Muscio uses ‘cunt’ to open a dialogue of women’s lived experience. By basing her writing off the re-telling of her history, Muscio aims to inspire women to share their stories in turn, uniting all women. Though Muscio hopes to touch and unite *all* women through her writing, it must be understood that she writes for a niche audience. *Seal Press*, an alternative publishing company “devoted to publishing titles that inform, reveal, engage, delight, and support women of all ages and backgrounds,” published *Cunt*.<sup>46</sup> Seal Press, unlike Bloomsbury, has a reputation for producing books that push the boundaries of acceptable or tasteful literature for mainstream audiences. Thus, it is of no surprise that Muscio stuck with her choice of language and boldly titled her book *Cunt*.

Both Muscio’s and Rees’s attention to the etymology of the vagina allude to lingering ambiguity surrounding language used to discuss female genitalia. The fact that each author explains and justifies her use of the same word, ‘cunt,’ when referring to the vagina speaks to the diversity in female lived experience. For Rees “cunt” represents the most inclusive way to discuss female genitalia. For Muscio it represents acknowledgement of the universality of women’s experiences and a way to incite change. In both cases, Muscio and Rees feel that their use of “cunt” is fitting to their respective understandings of their bodies. Despite their use of this

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<sup>44</sup> Muscio, *Cunt*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Muscio, *Cunt*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> “About Seal Press,” Seal Press, Accessed November 13, 2015, <http://sealpress.com/about/>.

slang, it is clear that the euphemism does not originate from the same “shared cultural knowledge” *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* references, but rather from personal preference and choice.<sup>47</sup>

Catherine Blackledge’s *The Story of V: A Natural History of Female Sexuality* deals with language differently. Less forward than Rees’s *The Vagina*, Blackledge embraces euphemism and refers to the topic of her book simply as “V.” Though her title shies away from an initial identification of her focus, it does not create as drastic of a schism between her public and private conversation of the vagina. She does not call for reclaiming of the words “pussy” or “cunt” and instead chooses to stick with the anatomical, medically accepted “vagina.” This fits her purpose as *The Story of V* does not attempt to re-claim, re-create, or re-define the vagina, but instead attempts to “...provide as full and frank a picture as possible of female genitalia.”<sup>48</sup> Fueled by personal interest in the scientific perception of women, their bodies, and their relationship with their genitalia, Blackledge wrote *The Story of V* to remedy “an astounding lack of recent decent research [on the vagina].”<sup>49</sup> Unlike many of the books discussed in this chapter, *The Story of V* remains fairly detached from the author’s personal experience. Instead of chronicling an awakening of her sexuality or a discovery of her womanhood, Blackledge’s book strictly focuses on unraveling the web of medical myths surrounding the vagina. Furthermore, she accomplishes this while adding a rich, scientific layer to the existing discourse surrounding the vagina.

In this way, *The Story of V* acts as a bridge between the strictly cultural and historical texts like *Cunt* and *The Vagina* and more psychologically based texts like those of Jelto Drenth and

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<sup>47</sup> Braun and Kitzinger, “Semantic Categories,” 147

<sup>48</sup> Catherine Blackledge, *The Story of V: A Natural History of Female Genitalia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>49</sup> Blackledge, *The Story of V*, 2.

Virginia Braun. Blackledge painstakingly examines the influences that fed into the many of the misconceptions she confronts in *The Story of V* by addressing them at the source of origin. Furthermore, she pairs her critique of the way we have learned about vaginas with exploration of our understanding of the penis. This is different from the other books, even the one authored by a male, and reflects Blackledge's scientific methodology. In order to present a thorough examination of the vagina, one must also examine the penis because the vagina has, for so long, been seen as its converse.<sup>50</sup> Similar to Rees, Blackledge, in order to imbue her objective scientific data with subjective insight, carefully reviews mythological, religious, historical, and anthropological texts. She explains, "My desire is that by revealing female genitalia in terms of structure, function, smell, sexual pleasure, and reproduction, orgasm, art, language, and mythology, the vagina will become and remain valued and known – in all its fascinating arousing, compelling, and beautiful aspects."<sup>51</sup> What is most commendable, is Blackledge's factual framing of her argument. While her book is inspired by a curiosity about female genitalia, she does not romanticize her content, making the book feel more informative than it does opinionated. In this way, Blackledge successfully creates an intriguing and original text that tactfully discusses the vagina in a manner communicable to a wide audience.

The close attention Blackledge pays to the effects of society's fear of visualizing the vagina in a non-sexual manner outside the discourse of birth can also be found in more focused discussions of the effect of women's (mis)perceptions about their genitalia. Both Jelto Drenth's *The Origin of the World* and Virginia Braun's journal articles on Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery reveal how women's lack of familiarity with the anatomy and appearance of the vagina influences particular experiences or decisions in their lives. While Drenth's and Braun's pieces

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<sup>50</sup> Blackledge, *The Story of V*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Blackledge, *The Story of V*, 6.

develop from the same problem, they offer very different focuses and approaches to examining it, influenced by their specific interests and professional experiences.

Drenth, a practicing sexologist in the Netherlands, is the only male author in this literature review. While neither his gender nor sex detracts from the value of his text, they set him apart from other author's writing on the topic.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Drenth holds the unique position of being purely observant. As a male sexologist, he needs to know the vagina, its most sensitive areas, its intricacies, but is challenged because he cannot simply squat with a handheld mirror and explore for himself. It is something he needed to learn through his line of work. His meticulous chronicling of themes seen amongst his clientele is less influenced by his own personal experiences, and relates more to his understanding of the experience of the women with whom he meets.

Drenth utilizes these observations to setup the framework of his book. He begins his discussion with an analysis of how women talk about the vagina, very similarly to how Rees, Muscio, and Blackledge begin their books. He does this, however, not to re-claim the vagina or put the vagina into mainstream knowledge, but to put forth a possible reason for why his clients are sexually troubled. He mentions Lucille Bloom's 20<sup>th</sup> century study in which she asked 68 women of various ages to draw their internal and external genitals.<sup>53</sup> "More than half [of these women] 'forgot' the clitoris, and the younger subjects proved to be even more ignorant about it than the older."<sup>54</sup> Drenth interprets this finding as a result of the subjects' "dearth of appropriate

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<sup>52</sup> While the female authors start their introductions establishing their purpose and language in their research of the vagina, Drenth starts with a justification of writing on this topic as a man. He opens his book, "What do you do when a publisher asks you if you are interested in writing a book about the female sex organs? The first problem, of course, is, do I have enough to say on the subject? And this leads directly to doubts about whether it is fitting for male author to do the job. Wouldn't that be almost sacrilegious?" At first, these lines seem a little arrogant. He mentions how the publisher requested that he write the piece, but Drenth carefully approaches his material from a respectful, almost reverent, perspective. Drenth p.1.

<sup>53</sup> Jelto Drenth, *The Origin of the World: Science and Fiction of the Vagina*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008): 11.

<sup>54</sup> Drenth, *The Origin of the World*, 11.



words” to refer to the vagina,<sup>55</sup> which informs his main assertion: the more women learn about their genitalia, the proper, anatomical names for each part, the way each part looks on a human body and not just on a picture, the less confusion and mystery there will be surrounding the topic. To achieve this, Drenth attempts to ease the discomfort individual women experience when discussing their genitalia, while recognizing that his client’s sexual complications stem from cultural pressures and expectations. Thus, he attempts to improve women’s sexual experiences by helping them cope with such stresses. For this reason, Drenth breaks down the details of the anatomy and physiology of the female genitals, and like Blackledge, peppers his text with textbook drawings and photographs of the material he covers. By applying scientific concepts in these chapters to important processes in which the genitals are utilized during reproduction and sex, Drenth offers clarification of his client’s understandings of their bodies.

Unlike Drenth, Virginia Braun’s analysis of sociocultural expectations for female genitalia and their connection to female genital cosmetic surgery did not derive from personal observations. As a professor of psychology at the University of Auckland in Australia, she lacks the same opportunity for doctor-patient interactions that Drenth has. Instead, she conducted interviews and surveys, cited throughout her articles, as a way of gaining insight into the common practices of women considering female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS). In this way, Braun takes Blackledge’s methods a step further; she combines close analysis of social and cultural influences with experiential understanding of inside dialogues surrounding the issue.

Braun’s articles on FGCS do not discuss women’s obstacles in understanding their sexuality as resulting from vaginal ignorance, but instead describe Western acceptance of FGCS as developing from such ignorance. Braun argues that the phenomenon of women undergoing labiaplasty or G-Spot enhancement occur in “the contexts of women’s ongoing, widespread, and

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<sup>55</sup> Drenth, *The Origin of the World*, 13.

increasingly specific, body dissatisfactions, ongoing negative meanings around women's genitalia and women's engagement in a wide range of body modification practices...to render women's genitalia a viable site for surgical enhancement."<sup>56</sup> She affirms that the obsessive concern with the "normality" of genitalia, something she observes mainly in women, is skewed by what society displays as a "normal" vagina, vulva, labia, etc. She quotes a doctor she interviewed, "a lot of women bring in *Playboy* and show me pictures of vaginas and say 'I want to look like this.'"<sup>57</sup> According to Braun, when women consider genital altering procedures, they lack proper, realistic references to use as comparisons with their own vaginas and instead rely on inaccurate portrayals of the vagina, vulva, and labia in media.<sup>58</sup> In the cases of breast augmentations or nose alterations, women have realistic comparisons in addition to the photo-shopped, airbrushed images in magazines, because they see real women with real breast and real noses everyday.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, women rarely see or take the time to examine real-world female genitalia. Instead, they base their post-surgical ideals on images they see in media based on heterosexual, male oriented pornography.<sup>60</sup>

Braun proposes that the most dangerous aspect of female ignorance of their bodies is the fear of abnormality it imbues in them. Since the rise in FGCS, Braun observed a rise in the medicalization of psychological concerns surrounding the female genitalia and sexuality.<sup>61</sup> Women's embarrassment of "disproportioned," "fat," "ugly" vaginas, vulvas, or labia has become pathologized and cosmetic gynecological surgeons have attempted to "cure" them by

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<sup>56</sup> Virginia Braun, "In Search of (Better) Sexual Pleasure: Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery," in *Sexualities*, 8 no. 4, (2005): 176. Labiaplasty is surgical enhancement or correction of the labia; G-Spot enhancement involves collagen shots to hyper-sensual areas on the external female genitalia.

<sup>57</sup> Braun, "(Better) Sexual Pleasure," 180.

<sup>58</sup> Braun, "(Better) Sexual Pleasure," 180.

<sup>59</sup> Virginia Braun, "The Women are Doing it for Themselves: The Rhetoric of Choice and Agency around Female Genital 'Cosmetic Surgery,'" *Australian Feminist Studies* 24 (2009): 238, accessed November 17, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Braun, "Rhetoric of Choice," 238.

<sup>61</sup> Braun, "Rhetoric of Choice," 242.

means of anatomical alterations. These themes also permeate her interviews with surgeons and patients. She summarizes, “The mind was implicitly constructed as impervious to change without surgery, but then as changing once surgical alteration was completed.”<sup>62</sup> The gravity of women’s misconceptions of “normal” and “acceptable” vaginas relevant to Braun’s argument is very similar to that in Drenth’s study. Unlike Drenth, Braun sees this ignorance as a tenet of the normalization and public acceptance of FGCS. Furthermore, she sees FGCS as a “big picture” problem. While Drenth aims to improve his client’s perceptions of their genitalia through individual consultation, Braun stresses that these issues can only be solved through large-scale processes, meaning that women’s relationship with their genitalia can only progress when societal preconceptions regarding the appearance of female genitalia change. Like Drenth and Blackledge, however, Braun recognizes the need for women’s exposure to real, unaltered images of vaginas whether through self-exploration, media, or other publications. She maintains that these exposures help women to recognize and subvert the harmful affects socio-cultural influences like pornography have on women’s perceptions and alterations of their genitalia.

Despite the differences existing between scholarship on representations of the vagina in language, science, and visual culture, each of the pieces previously discussed develops from some personal encounter with the lack of knowledge or misconceptions of the vagina often in research or professional practice. Braun, Kitzinger, Rees, Muscio, Blackledge, and Drenth each emphasize the widespread lack of language and general knowledge of the vagina to set a stage for the necessity of their focus. Furthermore, the collection of texts remains only a partial investigation of the situation of the vagina, relative to the diverse specialties and interests of each

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<sup>62</sup> Braun, “(Better) Sexual Pleasure,” 183.

author.<sup>63</sup> Though a majority of the texts reviewed effectively bring new insight to the vagina in the fields of history, culture, and science, this study of the vagina will serve as an assessment of the past two decades of attempts to re-construct, re-evaluate, and re-frame scholarship on the vagina in the U.S. and propose, via analysis of popular publications, art works, and performances related to female genitalia, how current and future scholars fit into this dialogue.

### **Methodology**

The words “vagina” and “female genitalia” will be used interchangeably for the purposes of this paper. “Female genitalia,” though dependent on vague terminology, encompasses the extent of the internal and external sex organs of a woman’s body including the clitoris, the clitoral hood, the vulva, the labia majora and minora, and the vaginal canal. Vagina, though literally the anatomical name given to the birth canal, is often used as synecdoche for the entirety of a woman’s sex organs. In some places, specifically the chapter dealing with the vagina as image in art and film, the words vulva, vulvas, and vulvae are used because it is the term used by the artists or directors whose work is discussed. Thus, this study will use the provided terms to avoid redundancy and to maintain consistency with the terminology used in the types of media it analyzes.

In order to understand the prevalence of taboos surrounding the vagina and female genitalia in contemporary culture, “*A Culture of Vaginas*” consists of several chapters, each analyzing the

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<sup>63</sup> Of the authors examined in the literature review for this thesis and authors/creators of the materials addressed in the subsequent chapters of this study, very few represent alternative communities outside of Caucasian, heterosexuality. This exclusion was not the result of a conscious choice, rather a happenstance of the materials collected. “*A Culture of Vaginas*,” because of its connection to interests in examining mainstream culture as communicated to me by my peers at Union College, a heteronormative, white, conservative liberal arts college in upstate New York, most resources included are those able to be found in mainstream culture. Thus, texts rich in discussion of genitalia and its relationship to gender identity, sexuality, and various other specialized theories that are avidly spoken of in transgender and queer communities are not included in this study.

appearance and discussions of the vagina within specific categories of representation. The study consists of four other chapters: “The Vagina in Print,” “The Vagina as Image,” and “More than Just ‘Down There’: Union College, Social Media, and Euphemisms for Genitalia,” and “Conclusion: Assessing a ‘Culture of Vaginas.’” “The Vagina in Print” compares scholastic and pop-culture publications written about female genitalia in order to assess how differences in context affect language associated with the vagina within these societal contexts. Text selections for this chapter were based on topics relating to vagina health advice appearing in popular dialogue on the subject. Pop-culture texts fall into one of three categories: self-help, self-discovery narrative, or women’s magazines. “Self-help” and “self-discovery” books tend to chronicle the “demystification” or “sexual awakening” of women’s bodies through the story of the author’s own personal journey. These types of publications offer further insight into popular discourse on female genitalia because of the authors’ presentation of themselves as authorities in connection with their lived female experiences. Thus, many of the texts examined in this chapter exude an air of scholasticism cloaked by “trendier” or “sexier” titles and sub-texts.

“The Vagina as Image” consists of two sub-chapters: The Vagina as Still Image: An Analysis of the Vagina in Art and The Vagina as Moving Image: An Analysis of the Vagina in Film. Each sub-chapter will be set-up chronologically, beginning with a brief overview of the origins of the vagina in art and film during Women’s movements of the 1960s and 70s as a comparison for contemporary examples. Because of the lack of representation of the vagina within contemporary American art and film, this chapter will also incorporate analysis of international artists and filmmakers. Positing these American art forms alongside European counterparts aids in reflecting on the absence of representations of female genitalia within these films.

“More than Just ‘Down There’: Union College and Euphemisms for Genitalia” discusses current issues the vagina faces within popular culture. It contains two sub-chapters: a discussion of an original survey conducted at Union College and an exploration of present day web presences addressing the topic of female genitalia. Despite the array of perspectives on the vagina and female genitalia reflected in texts previously mentioned, there are only a few studies included on how discussions of these topics affect contemporary understandings of taboos surrounding female genitalia. Though Emma Rees refers to data from sociological studies in her analysis of language and the vagina in *The Vagina*, she is a British author and her data comes from studies collected in the United Kingdom. An earlier study by Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, titled “Semantic Categories and the Problem Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang” featured in the May 2001 edition of the *Journal of Sex Research*, provides important insight on perceptions of the word “vagina” and euphemism and slang related to female genitalia. Though the results of this study are critical to the overall focus of “*A Culture of Vaginas*,” they are somewhat outdated, having been recorded in 2001 towards the end of third wave feminism, and also focus on a non-American study group.

In order to determine the most recent influences of popular culture on perceptions of female genitalia in contemporary American culture, the survey targets a study group based in America that interacts with popular culture on a nearly daily basis. College students, as consumers of numerous types of popular culture through the Internet and social media while simultaneously engaging in high-level education in an academic setting, exist at the intersection of scholarly and cultural influences. Because many of the students at Union College were born in the 1990s and grew up during the early 2000s, what some have called a post-feminist society, they can offer valuable insight as to whether or not taboos surrounding public discourse on the vagina still

exist, and how certain ideas surrounding genitalia proliferate. While “*A Culture of Vaginas*” focuses specifically on female genitalia, the survey included questions on both male and female genitalia to determine if the taboo surrounding discussion of genitalia is targeted at all genitalia or specifically towards the vagina. Furthermore, it was important to understand similarities and differences in conversation of the vagina between male and female students, but to ask males only about female genitalia would be dismissive of their experiences with their own genitalia. Considering that 54% of students currently enrolled at Union College are male, the male perspective plays a significant role to the social dynamics on campus.

The survey created on Zarcia Interactive, was distributed to the entire Union College student body advertised as a “Senior Thesis Survey on Social Media and Language Usage.” The Union College Office of Communications titled the message “Senior Thesis Survey: Survey on Social Media and Language Usage” because representatives were uncomfortable sending out emails with “vagina” or “genitalia” in the subject even though the survey was purely academic in purpose. The title of the survey referred to the senior thesis project in an attempt to obtain more responses as students may be more likely to participate if they knew it would help a peer. Similarly, the body of the email was personalized, mentioning the researcher’s name, explaining the intent and goals of the project, and informing students of the lottery incentive associated with the survey. According to Dr. Suzanne Benack, associate professor of psychology at Union, surveys sent out via email with some form of monetary incentive, i.e. various forms of gift cards, yield an approximate 15-percent response rate; for the survey for “*A Culture of Vaginas*,” this would mean approximately 330 student responses. After a twelve day period, the survey yielded 206 individual responses, equaling a 9.4-percent response rate, a little over 5-percent under the normal rate. The lottery encouraged students to complete the survey offering all participants a

chance to win one of four \$25 gift cards to Blaze Pizza or one of four \$25 gift cards to Amazon.com. If a student submitted a complete survey, a prompt appeared on his/her screen linking him/her to a separate Google form through which he/she can submit an email address, name, and class year.

The survey was active for a period of a week and a half, from January 27, 2016 to February 8, 2016. Two follow-up emails were sent out, one on February 3 and a final reminder on the morning of February 8, in hopes of reminding students of the survey deadline, the incentive, and the goals of the research project. Data from the survey was collected through the Zarca Interactive program, a data collecting website recommended by the Department of Psychology at Union College. The survey contained nineteen original questions written in collaboration with advisors from the Union College Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program and the Department of Psychology. The survey consisted of both open-ended and multiple choice questions regarding demographics, sexual activity, participation in sex education, and euphemisms used to talk about genitalia in various situations. If students felt uncomfortable answering a question or they felt a question was irrelevant to their personal experience, they could leave the question unanswered. Participants in the survey remained completely anonymous with the only differentiating factors being gender, religion, race, and ethnicity.

The data from this survey, alongside analysis of secondary sources and case studies of social media websites featuring discussions of female genitalia, will help determine the prevalence of genitalia within student discourse in both public and private contexts. The data will distinguish between male and female responses and allow for comparison of both genders' answers to the same questions. In observing patterns in setting, enrollment in sexual education, presence of early dialogues on genitalia, and social media usage on the kinds of conversations about genitalia



in which participants engage, the survey will allow the researcher to determine any influences on participants' willingness to discuss genitalia in a privatized, anonymous setting. Additionally, calculating the specific response rate for male and female participants will offer insight into the importance of gender within dialogues on the topic of genitalia.

### **Conclusion**

Whether or not the vagina has found a place within American culture has been an important question within the feminist community for the last forty years. From its first appearance in the 1960s to its re-surfacing in contemporary popular culture, the vagina has undergone a continuous cycle of celebration and silencing. While not the fault of the women, and more recently men, whose work continues the effort to integrate female genitalia into topics of conversation within the public sphere, the taboo surrounding the vagina has been perpetuated by the doctrines of a patriarchal hegemony. Just as the mechanisms through which these doctrines have been disseminated have shifted, for example online media as a result in changes in and increasing use of technology, the ways in which it must be critiqued must also shift. Thus, a thorough assessment of America's "culture of vaginas" must include comparisons of efforts past and present in order to identify persistent ideologies keeping the female genitalia as a taboo subject.

## Chapter 2: The Vagina in Print

“Oh vagina - would that you an easier term to parse. Use it online and you’ll be chastised for ‘intending’ to say vulva. Opt for the kickier ‘vajayjay’ at the risk of further eye rolls.. What is it about the word that’s such a sticking point?”

– Heather Seggel, *Bitch Magazine*, 2015

Heather Seggel, columnist for *Bitch Magazine*, perfectly summarizes the complexities of “proper” language when publicly discussing the female genitals in her review of Emma Rees’ *The Vagina*.<sup>64</sup> While Seggel’s discussion targets the content of *The Vagina* specifically, she iterates the trouble every “feminist” author attempting to write about female genitalia faces: how does one refer to the vagina in printed media? This question plagues writers all around the world, but becomes particularly prevalent in America society due to the selectively conservative nature of popular media.

Before the evolution of the Women’s Health and Liberation movements in the late 60s and early 70s, the use of the word “vagina” in public publications was considered improper. Even in literary discussions on women’s health, though there were not many, women’s bodies were silenced either by lack of language or by dissociation of the female body to the organs being discussed.<sup>65</sup> In a review of the 2005 “After Our Bodies Ourselves” panel hosted by the New York Freudian Society and Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, Baytra R. Monder reflects on panelist Nancy McWilliams’ reason for this absence. “[Up until this point] Women had been conditioned to defer to the authority of the medical profession, which in most

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<sup>64</sup> Heather Seggel, “Book Review: The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History,” *Bitch Magazine* no. 67 (Summer 2015), 62-63.

<sup>65</sup> The Boston Women’s Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1973), 2.

instances meant the male physician ‘who like the 1950s Father, ‘knew best.’”<sup>66</sup> The domination of these philosophies kept women’s experiences with their health and genitalia confined to doctors’ offices, and consequently, to the hierarchical structure of patriarchal oppression. When the Boston Women’s Health Collective published the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1969, they aimed to insert conversation on women’s bodies into public discourse to counter this inequity. Of course, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* includes an overview of many different women’s health issues, not those only related to the vagina, but it is significant in its purposeful reconnection of women’s bodies to their emotional and mental experiences. McWilliams asserts, “The preface of the 1973 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* reflects not only these goals, but also alludes to the lack of available information on women’s bodies: “Our book contains real material about our bodies and ourselves that isn’t available elsewhere, and we have tried to present it in a new way - an honest, humane and powerful way of thinking about ourselves and our lives.”<sup>67</sup> This “honest, humane powerful way of thinking,” was something the group of panelists speaking at the After Our Bodies Ourselves dialogue in 2005 contemplated in one of their discussions nearly four decades later. They concluded that throughout its history, the book reveals:

women’s relationship to their bodies’ appearance, the place that that [the relationship] occupies in women’s psyches, the meanings and behaviors that go along with that as well as the external social and political forces that influence it...are often conceptualized in some sort of gender terms, such as gendered power dynamics, women’s oppression, or the effects of patriarchy.<sup>68</sup>

The evolution of the concept from group-process classes, to a bound, locally distributed pamphlet, and later to a commercially printed book reflected the tremendous response to the collective’s mission, but also a shift from public pronouncement of women’s oppression to a much

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<sup>66</sup> Batya R. Monder, "After Our Bodies Ourselves," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 24, no. 2 (April 2007): 386, *PsycARTICLES*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2016).

<sup>67</sup> The Boston Women’s Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1973), 12

<sup>68</sup> Batya R. Monder, "After Our Bodies Ourselves," 389-390.

more private, individual interaction. Despite this seemingly contradictory transition, the Boston Women's Health Collective decided to commercially publish the materials for their focus groups into *Our Bodies, Ourselves* as a way of expanding public access and bring these crucial conversations and information to women outside of their immediate reach.

In this way, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* served as one of the first self-help books for women's health. Unlike informational brochures provided by doctors, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* provided anatomical diagrams and biological information for women alongside advice for physical and emotional well-being. In the "Anatomy and Physiology of Sexuality and Reproduction" chapter, the authors interspersed statements made by real women amongst the drawings and pictures of the female reproductive organs. One woman states, "Recently, as I became more aware of my body, I realized how I pretended some parts didn't exist, while others now seemed made of smaller parts...Gradually I felt a new kind of unity, wholeness in me, as my mental and physical selves became one self."<sup>69</sup> Another woman discussed her longstanding unfamiliarity with her body, "I used to wonder if my body was abnormal even though I didn't have an reason to believe it was. I had nothing to compare it with until I started to talk with other women. I don't feel any more that I might be a freak and not know it."<sup>70</sup> While these inserted quotes interrupt the flow of the physiological information of the chapter they aid in contextualizing the fears and myths the authors attempt to dismiss. The quotes are meant to add a deeper, emotional layer to the dehumanized medical information being shared. By including personal anecdotes, the authors offer their audience the opportunity to connect with other women and their stories through text. This very important feature of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* validated women across the United States, who, before accessing this resource, felt alienated in their experiences as women.

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<sup>69</sup> *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 25,

<sup>70</sup> *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 25-26.

Despite its immediate success, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* did not completely erase the pandemic discomfort surrounding the topic of female genitalia in the public domain. The comprehensive book has evolved since its first release in 1969 to encompass new identities and new questions from people around the world. As a result, it is currently in its ninth printed edition, which includes excerpts from international editions, passages on more recent debates, and brief biographies of women's health activists.<sup>71</sup> Even after forty years of development, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* continues to build networks through conversations on women's health, and consequently women's genitalia, in print. *Ms. Magazine* blog writer Danielle Roderick summarizes the importance of the books accomplishments:

*OBOS* is a complete resource—or the closest to one that I can imagine—for women's health and activism. Not only does the reader find clear, trustworthy information about her body, but also a thorough introduction to the politics of having that body. When you read *OBOS*, you join a community, one that is growing and changing (as each editions' increasing thickness testifies to) and that provides the resources to start and keep talking.<sup>72</sup>

Roderick's statement reveals several things about current women's publications. One, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, though very thorough, is still an incomplete resource for some and two, women of the twenty-first century still have concerns and questions about their bodies.

One may ask, if there are resources like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* why would confusion surrounding women's bodies still linger? The answer to this question lies not in the presence of such resources, but to what audiences they appeal. While *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is able to provide support to readers of all genders, races, and ages, it still remains a part of a niche feminist community because of its strong ties to the original Women's movements of the 60s and 70s. For this reason, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is not something one happens upon in an everyday

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<sup>71</sup> Danielle Roderick, "Our Bodies, Ourselves is 40 and Fabulous," *Ms. Magazine Blog*, November 3, 2011. Accessed January 17, 2016. <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/11/03/our-bodies-ourselves-is-40-and-fabulous/>

<sup>72</sup> Roderick, "Our Bodies, Ourselves is 40," <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/11/03/our-bodies-ourselves-is-40-and-fabulous/>

context. Rather it is a resource that must be sought out and even when sought out, it is something kept privately to oneself.<sup>73</sup> With the amount of questions women still have regarding their bodies, specifically their genitalia, and the desire to make connections with the lived experiences of other women within the private context of printed media, popular sources have more recently taken on the task of producing “self-help” styled publications for women. The resulting publications can be divided into two general categories: magazine columns and commercially printed books.

“The Vagina in Print” speculates the vagina in a printed, pop-culture context and works with these two types of commercial publications to assess the quality of information presented to the public as an authority on women’s health, albeit ostensibly. The texts incorporated in the analysis include select articles from *Glamour Magazine* and the books *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva* (2011), *V is for Vagina: Your A-to-Z Guide to Periods, Piercings, Pleasures, and so Much More* (2012), and *Vagina* (2012).<sup>74</sup> Reviews, reactions, and other articles from *Bitch* and *Ms. Magazine*, while not assessed in the same manner as the

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<sup>73</sup> This private element associated with the printed *Our Bodies Ourselves* is ironic because the materials featured in the book and the concept for the book itself were derived from group classes. On Amazon.com, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is categorized as a “Women’s Health” book and rather than being grouped with other women’s self-help guides, it is grouped with books on teen sexuality and relationships; for example *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives* and *S.E.X.*, both of which are guides to sexual relationships in high school-aged couples. Other titles on the site labeled as “Women’s Health” include various editions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves, Feminist Therapy, It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*, etc. It is interesting to note the dominance of sexual relationship within the books’ subjects. This speaks to the taboo still existing around the discussion of sex and genitalia between parents and children or educators and children. These books represent an attempt to remedy this lack of conversation by providing a private, individualized way of distributing this information. In the Library of Congress classification system, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is classified under “RA” putting it in the category of “public health.” In Union College’s Schaffer Library, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is classified with the other “RA” books, but is notably surrounded by books on women’s health in relation to exercise and weight loss.

<sup>74</sup> I selected *Glamour Magazine* because it is one example of popular women’s beauty/fashion magazines that openly advertises sex advice columns on its front cover. Because I lacked access to an archive of physical magazines I browsed and searched through online databases available on a magazine’s website. Of the several that I looked through, including *Cosmo, People, Vogue, Glamour,* and *Marie Claire, Glamour* was the only magazine that offered a substantial amount of sex advice columns on their website. The remaining magazines either did not contain sex columns or offered a poor selection of articles to properly reflect content of this nature in their magazine. For this reason, I felt that *Glamour* provided the most material to work with and was a popular enough option to use for my analysis and comparison.

previously listed texts, are included as comparisons to the analysis in the understanding that they offer a feminist-focused counterpoint. In considering these texts as a group, their similarities indicate similar places of origin, similar goals, and most notably, similar audiences, which are cisgendered, heterosexual women. While all the texts presented a similar treatment of language characterized by a tone of casual, “hip” conversation amongst women, think *Sex in the City*, all the texts, excluding Naomi Wolf’s *Vagina* adhere to a specific layout typical to the format of a magazine column. Thus, this examination will not only address the issue of language, but also how that language is marketed in the article or in/on the book.

Aside from its employment of “mainstreamed” vagina jargon and tone of self-proclaimed sexual expertise, *Vagina: A New Biography* is an outlier to the other texts examined in “The Vagina in Print.” Described in the inside cover blurb as “a brilliant and nuanced synthesis of physiology, history, and cultural criticism,” *Vagina* asserts the vagina’s connection to the intrinsic operations of the female brain, and in turn, the female self.<sup>75</sup> Wolf delivers her research, incorporating of scientific evidence of the vagina’s connection to the brain’s operation, studies on “feminist chemicals in the female brain,” and interviews with OB/GYNS and vagina professionals including the “Yoni Masseuse.” This research is interspersed with a recounting of her own personal vaginal awakening as she searches to find the source of her “de-sensitized” orgasms.<sup>76</sup>

In her explanation of her inspiration for writing *Vagina*, Wolf precludes her description of this “medical crisis” with an account of her orgasmic capability. She coyly boasts of her ability to experience multiple kinds of orgasm. She reveals “...in my thirties I had also learned to have what would probably be called ‘blended’ or clitoral/vaginal orgasms, which added what seemed

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<sup>75</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012)

<sup>76</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina*, 12, 55.

to be another psychological dimension to the experience.”<sup>77</sup> Through her persistent doctoral consultations in a desperate scramble to get her orgasm back, she discovered that the dulling of her coital climaxes was due to pinched pelvic nerve and was able to undergo a surgery that restored her “lost states of [orgasmic] consciousness....”<sup>78</sup> Throughout her entire discussion of the process, Wolf maintains an unshakable narcissistic tone that posits her and her un-paralleled sexual enlightenment in a self-declared elevated status above her readers. She uses the same tone when she finally states the reason she chose to write the book:

This particular kind of neural compression, though not unheard of, is seldom written about outside medical journals, and I am a walking control group for the study of the effect of impulses from the pelvic nerve on the female brain. Because of how scant information is on this subject, I feel I owe it to women to put down on paper what happened next.<sup>79</sup>

The “what happened next” Wolf refers to was her intellectual and spiritual journey of finding her orgasm and enlightening other women about the connection between their sexual stimulation and their nervous system through a self-centered lens. While Wolf’s *Vagina* may appeal to some women in its periodic moments of sympathy for women unable to reach “high” orgasm and attempt to guide women through a potential medical issue preventing them from doing so, many women feel that it exudes an exclusivity that is deterring to readers. Kelsey Wallace states in her article for *Bitch Media* “*Read This*” that *Vagina* is:

essentialist (only women with vaginas who have orgasms that come from sexual partners can be creative or experience feminine joy), privileged (Wolf recounts looking out from her “little cottage upstate,” contemplating her vadge next to a “cold iron wood stove,” and *she is getting paid to write a book about it*), prescriptive (ladies, if you want a partner who treats your vagina right that person

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<sup>77</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina*, 13.

<sup>78</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina*, 21.

<sup>79</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina*, 21.



best be familiar with "the Goddess Array"), cringe-worthy (see: "yoni massage") tone...<sup>80</sup>

Wallace's point are repeated in at least two other reviews, one by Ariel Levy for *The New Yorker* and the other by Lisa Mundy for *The Washington Post*. In her review, Levy reiterates the essentialist tones of the book arguing that Wolf's discussion communicates to readers that "...sex is the solution to every problem and the source of everything worth anything."<sup>81</sup> Levy asserts that Wolf's correlation of sexually unattended vaginas to emotional frustration within women in a way places women under the assumption that "biology is destiny."<sup>82</sup> Lisa Mundy elaborates on privilege and prescriptiveness within *Vagina*. She calls Wolf's ability to make the life-changing journey into question quipping "she put more labor into journeying than writing," and that the constant doctor appointments, research travel, and private interviews she conducted are experiences inaccessible to economically challenged women.<sup>83</sup> More importantly, however, Mundy addresses Wolf's singular, heteronormative consideration of the vagina. She maintains:

There is little talk about the lesbian vagina or whether women as lovers of women are models of tender attentiveness or have shortcomings of their own. Her takeaway is this: When men are nice to women, and woo them, even well into a relationship, much good tends to come of it.<sup>84</sup>

Mundy's argument is important in the decision to distinguish *Vagina* from the other examples of popular media and advice literature featured in "The Vagina in Print." Throughout *Vagina*, Naomi Wolf clearly attempts to present her research as women's blueprint for sex within a

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<sup>80</sup> Kelsey Wallace, "Read This: Ariel Levy on Naomi Wolf's 'Vagina,'" *Bitch Media*, September 5, 2012, Accessed March 02, 2016, <https://bitchmedia.org/post/read-this-ariel-levy-on-naomi-wolfs-vagina-new-biography-feminist-magazine-sex-book-reviews>.

<sup>81</sup> Ariel Levy, "The Space in Between, Naomi Wolf's 'Vagina: A New Biography,'" *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2012, Accessed March 04, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/09/10/the-space-in-between>.

<sup>82</sup> Ariel Levy, "The Space in Between."

<sup>83</sup> Lisa Mundy, "'Vagina: A New Biography' by Naomi Wolf," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2012, Accessed March 01, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/vagina-a-new-biography-by-naomi-wolf/2012/10/27/e860ba3c-118e-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/vagina-a-new-biography-by-naomi-wolf/2012/10/27/e860ba3c-118e-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_story.html)

<sup>84</sup> Lisa Mundy, "Vagina."

heterosexual relationship. Each chapter offers another explanation for unlocking one's inner vaginal consciousness with the end goal being entrance to "the transcendental state that takes the female brain into 'high' orgasm," something Wolf states she has already attained.<sup>85</sup> Unlike *Our Bodies, Ourselves* or any of the other advice literature book or magazine columns discussed in this chapter, Wolf's *Vagina* excludes more women than it helps. Wolf's framework for her research as her journey to reclaim her sexual capabilities is incredibly heteronormative. Although she claims to provide information that could aid in awakening female orgasm, her suggestions only pertain to women in heterosexual relationships. Her chapter "Radical Pleasure, Radical Awakening: The Vagina as Liberator," is basically a guide book for heterosexual men who are failing to appreciate "The Goddess Array," an assortment of female qualities that feed into her ultimate, and primarily sexual, subconscious. Wolf describes the origins of this concept as rooted in 1970s feminism; however, she paints the female liberation from heteronormative restriction in a negative light. She writes:

The [Betty] Dodson model of empowered female did a great deal of good, but also caused some harm. The good is that feminism of that era had to break the association of heterosexual female sexual awakening with dependency on a man. The harm is that the feminism of this era successfully broke the association of heterosexual female sexual awakening with dependency on a man.<sup>86</sup>

According to Wolf, the ability of a female to experience sexual pleasure outside of a heterosexual relationship infringes upon her ability to achieve the highest sexual pleasure with man. Wolf's distaste for the female independence during the 70s is prevalent throughout the book. It seems she painstakingly emphasizes the heterosexuality as way to counter this "tragic" detachment. Though Wolf claims to offer her book as an exploration of female sexuality, it only appeals to women's whose sexuality reflects her own. Absent from *Vagina* is a more open

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<sup>85</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina*, 31.

<sup>86</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Vagina*, 238.

discussion of sexuality found in *Read My Lips* and *V is For Vagina*. Where Herbenick and Schick and Dweck and Westen address these topics through use of gender-neutral terms such as “partner,” Wolf strictly adheres to her understanding of sexual relationships as heterosexual. In this way, *Vagina* must be set apart from the other texts included in “The Vagina in Print” because it is too exclusive to be considered advice-literature. In her attempt to christen an enlightened understanding of the vagina through her “new biography,” Wolf has provided women with yet another publication to shame their vaginas into submission.

Addressing the topic of language, the most noticeable similarities in the group of texts are the styles of the titles. The *Glamour* articles offer a mixture of clipped and lengthy titles, but are almost always quirky and upbeat. For example, an article on the *Glamour* blog *Smitten* bemoans, “Your Vagina is Not What You Think it is. Can We Make a Pact to Call Our Lady Parts by the Right Name, Pretty Please?”<sup>87</sup> Another article on *Glamour Health* reads, “Women’s Health: Everything You Don’t Know About Your Ladyparts...But Should!”<sup>88</sup> Even before the readers have a chance to peruse the content of the article, they are struck with euphemistic references to the vagina. The title that includes the word vagina, while placing it earlier in the sentence, detracts from the impact of its presence by contradicting its own demand. The author asks readers, “Can We Make a Pact to Call Our Lady Parts by the Right Name,” in a planned attack on euphemistic language, the article discusses the use of the word “vagina” rather than “vulva,” yet uses “lady parts” instead of vagina. The other article, though clearly meant to be an

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<sup>87</sup> Ariane Marder “Your Vagina is Not What You Think it is. Can We Make a Pact to Call Our Lady Parts by the Right Name, Pretty Please?” *Glamor Smitten* Blog, April 18, 2012, Accessed January 15, 2016.

<http://www.glamour.com/sex-love-life/blogs/smitten/2012/04/your-vagina-is-not-what-you-th-1>

<sup>88</sup> Shaun Dreisbach, “Women’s Health: Everything You Don’t Know About Your Ladyparts...But Should!” *Glamour Health*, August 9, 2011, Accessed January 16, 2016. <http://www.glamour.com/health-fitness/2011/08/womens-health-everything-you-dont-know-about-your-ladyparts-but-should>

informative source on women's health, shies away from the explicit vagina and opts for the trendier, and arguably more immature, "ladyparts."

These titles, like many others featured on the *Glamour* website, possess a trendy, sexy tone. Because of the content of articles, however, the writers must draw a line between silly and serious. Clearly, the writers are attempting to relate to their audiences in some way, as 2015 demographic statistics show *Glamour's* average online reader was a college-educated woman between the age of eighteen and forty-nine.<sup>89</sup> Though there is a large age range represented in the online readers of *Glamour*, the title of these articles specifically reflect two potential trends. Firstly, despite the differences in age amongst the readers, women are still uncomfortable with talking about their genitalia and consequently must be convinced to engage with articles on "taboo" or colloquially "weird" topics. Secondly, despite their initial hesitance, women still have questions about their vaginas that they hope to seek answers discretely. As a result, magazine columns such as the ones featured in *Glamour* may be more appealing to a popular audience than *Our Bodies, Ourselves* because of the magazine's broader focus. For women, reading *Glamour* is an almost expected act whereas reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves* could be connected to the long history of feminist activism from which the book originated.

*Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva* by Debby Herbernich and Vanessa Schick and *V is for Vagina: Your A-to-Z Guide to Periods, Piercings, Pleasures, and so Much More* by Alyssa Dweck and Robin Westen are both commercially published "self-help" books on women's health, aka the vagina.<sup>90</sup> Like the articles selected from *Glamor*, the titles of

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<sup>89</sup> "Glamour Media Kit: Web: Demographics," *Condé Nast*, 2016, Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.condenast.com/brands/glamour/media-kit/web>

<sup>90</sup> I chose these books through references and search histories linked to Emma Rees's book *The Vagina*. When researching the book on popular shopping websites like Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble's, both *Read My Lips* and *V is for Vagina* came up under "related books" or "recommended for you." On these websites, these two books appeared as the most popular, though there were some other "self-help" type books available (many of which were less focused on the vagina, vulva, or other female genitalia and more on transitioning into menopause). Thus, for the

Herbernick's and Schick's book and of Dweck's and Westen's book reflect the same light, almost flirtatious tone. At first glance, "read my lips" comes across idiomatically, but the pairing of the phrase with the sub-title "a complete guide to the vagina a vulva" shifts its meaning to innuendo where lips clearly refer to the lips, or labia, of the female genital area. "V is for Vagina" is much more straightforward, depending on the literal use of vagina as opposed to simple innuendo, but is made more lighthearted by the "abecedarium"-like spin on the subject material.<sup>91</sup> Naomi Wolf's book *Vagina*, though it is not as based in clinical knowledge as *Read My Lips* or *V is for Vagina*, is also incorporated because of the nature of her story. She aims to inspire women to reconnect with their vaginas and spark their own sexual revelations, for this reason, may have selected the shorter, edgier title *Vagina*. Like *Read My Lips* and *V is for Vagina*, Wolf's book, encourages its audience towards a self-inspired, self-empowered "awakening" through rediscovery of the vagina and vulva. The experience centric nature of *Vagina* comes across more frequently and strongly than in *Read My Lips*, *V is For Vagina*, and the majority of the *Glamour* articles. For this reason, *Vagina* can also be categorized as a "self-help" book, though Wolf's approach connects more towards community building through communicating her own story than the broader, informative approach taken by Herbernick and Schick and Dweck and Westen in their books.

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purposes of an examination of the vagina in twenty-first century American culture, I chose these two "self-help" books.

<sup>91</sup> *Abecedarium* literally translates into alphabet, but is more commonly used to refer to a text or text on an object that lists the alphabet in some context. Though most popular on archaeological pieces, such as dishes or vases from the Classical period of art, *abecedarium* were also included in literary primary books. In this case, Dweck's and Westen's use of "V is for Vagina" paired with the idea of an "A-to-Z guide" is most similar to the way an abecedarium would have been used to teach children the alphabet in a primary book. For more information on the *abecedarium* see M Lang, *The Athenian Agora: Results of excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Volume XXI: Graffiti and Dipinti*, (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1976), 6.

Despite the similarities between all three books, *Read My Lips* and *V is For Vagina* present an especially interesting glimpse into the printed culture of the twenty-first century vagina through their origin and composition. Both *Read My Lips* and *V is For Vagina* are co-authored, and more interestingly, both books are co-authored by at least one academic or medical authority and one current or former magazine columnist. *Read My Lips*, the more academically driven text of the two books, is written by scholars, researchers, authors, and self-proclaimed vulva fanatics Debby Herbenick and Vanessa Schick. While Herbenick and Schick both teach at universities in the United States, Herbenick's specialties expand outside the classroom to the world of publications as a sex advice columnist. Though the overall tone of the guide is quirky and playful, probably to engage the audience by turning an uncomfortable topic like the vulva and vagina into a fun, comfortable conversation, their framework relies heavily on their academic experience. In their introduction, Herbenick and Schick reference their ties to classic feminist texts such as Muscio's *Cunt* and more authoritative medical guides such as Dr. Elizabeth G. Stewart's *The V Book: A Doctor's Guide to Complete Vulvovaginal Health*, establishing their scholastic credibility.<sup>92</sup> They continue to tell readers that *Read My Lips* will be a journey of "... the unusual combination of empirical scientific research, quirky humor, and vulva crafts."<sup>93</sup> Herbenick and Schick claim that *Read My Lips* is intended for men and women and even advertised of the release of their book on the *Men's Health* web page.<sup>94</sup> The article, because it was written by Herbenick, touches upon the material about the vulva and vagina but through reference to sex. She lists some of the topics covered "The G spot? Check. Clitoris? Yes. Health info? Absolutely. Sex info? Yes, yes, yes. That includes sex toys...and ideas for things to

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<sup>92</sup> Debby Herbenick and Vanessa Schick, *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham), xiii.

<sup>93</sup> Herbenick and Schick, *Read My Lips*, xiv.

<sup>94</sup> Debby Herbenick, "My New Book, *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva*," *Sex & Women, Men's Health*, October 18, 2011, Accessed January 18, 2016. <http://www.menshealth.com/sex-women/my-new-book-read-my-lips-a-complete-guide-to-the-vagina-and-vulva>

do with your fingers, tongue, lips, penis, and even your toes (you'll see)."<sup>95</sup> Despite a man's potential attraction to Herbenick's and Schick's tips and tricks on how to sexually please a woman, it is apparent that the more in depth topics of discussion in their book, including vulva, health issues, sexual health, pubic hairstyles, and periods, are more woman-centric.

*Vis For Vagina* is also authored by a team of vagina experts, though in this case the expertise feels more self-proclaimed than with *Read My Lips*. At first glance, the book seems misleadingly factual. On the cover, Alyssa Dweck's name is followed by a slew of qualifying titles: MS, MD, FACOG.<sup>96</sup> Just as Herbenick and Schick establish credibility within the introduction of *Read My Lips*, Dweck opens the introduction of *Vis For Vagina* establishing her expertise. She proclaims, "Vaginas. I've seen thousands of them. As a full time practicing OB/GYN for almost two decades, I've learned women have a complex relationship with their V's."<sup>97</sup> She continues, "V is for Vagina [is] a humorous yet informative guide to the sometimes mysterious but always fascinating and amazing VAGINA. Some the chapters ahead are more 'medical' while others are chatty and lighthearted...please be assured that all of the information is solid and stems from the experience I've been fortunate enough to share with patients over the years."<sup>98</sup> Within the first few pages of the book, Dweck seems to justify her qualifications as an authority on the vagina compulsively, and she openly anticipates potential criticisms about the presentation of this content. Dweck's assertions not only appear on the inside of *Vis for Vagina*, but also on the back cover of the book. The blurb contains phrases such as "Breaking the mold

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<sup>95</sup> Debby Herbenick, "My New Book."

<sup>96</sup> FACOG is an acronym used to indicate one's status as a Fellow of the American Congress of Obstetrics and Gynecology. This means that the practicing physician received certification from the Congress Board and is permitted to apply for membership within the society. The society and its members work towards making advancements in the field of women's health. For more information see "Member Services: Fellows," *American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*, 2016, accessed March 19, 2016, <http://www.acog.org/About-ACOG/ACOG-Departments/Membership-Services/Fellow>.

<sup>97</sup> Alyssa Dweck and Robin Westen, *Vis for Vagina: Your A-to-Z Guide to Periods, Piercings, Pleasures, and So Much More*, (Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>98</sup> Dweck and Westen, *Vis for Vagina*, 11-12.

on women's health guides, *V is for Vagina* tells you the good, bad, and time-for-a-trip-to-the-pharmacy truths honestly and intelligently...this frank and funny guide will help every woman keep her lady flower happy and healthy.”<sup>99</sup> These claims are further affirmed in the blurb's proclamation that *V is for Vagina* features, “the absolutely most up-to-date, medically sound views on every issue related to the vagina...”<sup>100</sup>

The presence of such qualifying statements early on in the two books reveals the authors' understanding of the questionability of their publications. This acknowledgment addresses three present issues: one, as scholars and professionals in the area of women's health, Dweck, Westen, Herbenick, and Schick recognize that the legitimacy and necessity of women's health is constantly faced with scrutiny; two, as female scholars and professionals, their own judgment, work, and research is under constant scrutiny; three; there exists a fine line between appealing presentation of the information and coming off as producing a scholastically “immature” publication. The latter applies not only to *Read My Lips* and *V is for Vagina*, but also the sex and health articles from *Glamour* and Naomi Wolf's *Vagina*, amongst many other vagina-centric texts not examined here. The style and composition of magazine articles and these popular culture women's self-help books become increasingly important when one considers the number of women turning to popular culture or advice literature to answer their questions about their genitalia. Desperate for clarity and reassurance that their bodies are “normal,” women turn to these resources looking for answers. The question that arises when examining these texts are *does the information being presented in these articles or guides properly address these concerns and how do repeating themes and topics within these texts reflect the status of the twenty-first century culture of vaginas?*

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<sup>99</sup> Dweck and Westen, *Read My Lips*, Back Cover.

<sup>100</sup> Dweck and Westen, *Read My Lips*, Back Cover.



Starting the examination of these questions with the *Glamour* articles, as they have the largest audience and are the most accessible form of the texts, one can immediately identify recurring themes within topics discussed and the nature in which they are written. The archived articles that openly discuss the vagina on the *Glamour* website appeared in one of two blogs: *Glamour Health* or *Glamour Smitten*. Though *Glamour* offered the greatest variety of vagina-related articles, the majority of the topics were related to sex positions and new sex toys for women. Furthermore, the organization of the two blogs includes organizational tags meant to redirect web page visitors to articles of specific topics. The *Health* blog offers three options, “Healthy Recipes,” “Workouts,” and “Weightloss,” and the *Smitten* blog offers six, “What Men Think,” “Sex Tips,” “Dating,” “Breakups,” “Relationships,” and “Quizzes.” The appearance these pre-tagged topics within the women’s health and *Smitten* blogs reveal *Glamour’s* assumptions on what is important about women’s health and what it means to be “smitten.” In this case, health means watching one’s weight (and maintaining a skinny figure) while being smitten entails an assortment of possibilities from being in a relationship, wondering what goes on in the mind of the other gender, or looking for sex advice.

In order to find articles that actually mention the vagina, outside of merely being a receptacle for the penis during sex, one must actively type the word “vagina” into the search bar. The results include a spattering of social media related articles, vaginas in celebrity culture, and reviews of products created for vaginas, most recently a sex toy that can notify a woman’s partner via app that she climaxed. Of the two pages of search results, approximately twenty-eight unique search results appear. Of these results only eight of the articles seriously discuss the vagina in some health related manner. The search results date from 2009 to 2016. The earlier results more often focus on the vagina as it relates to health and reader concerns and more often

used the “vagina” in the title than more recently published articles. For instance, the earliest article “One Brave Woman Raises Her Hand and Asks: ‘Is My Vagina...Smelly?’” published in August of 2009, addresses the concern of vaginal odors.<sup>101</sup> While the subject itself reflects a persistent concern among women, as the topic of vaginal odor was also a topic touched upon in *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the opening sentences of the publication reveal the same anticipated discomfort as Dweck and Westen and Herbenick and Schick address in their introductions. The article writer, Sarah Jio, begins by comforting her readers. “It’s OK if you’re cringing a little right now. When I read a post over on Yahoo Shine on vaginal odors (oh that phrase just hits you the wrong way doesn’t it?), I cringed a teeny bit too. But why? It’s a perfectly reasonable thing to discuss among us, gals right?”<sup>102</sup> This establishing paragraph attempts and achieves several things. First, Sarah Jio validates her readers concerns and discomforts. Her first line subtly reassures, yes, it is okay if talking about your vagina is uncomfortable, we live in a culture in which any discussion of the vagina is taboo. Secondly, she identifies herself not only as a fellow woman, but also as an ally. By revealing her own discomfort, “I cringed a teeny bit too,” she places herself on the same level as her readers, rather than assume a condescending tone.<sup>103</sup> Lastly, she offers her article as a place of community and confidentiality. She states that vaginal odor, the topic of her article, “...is a perfectly reasonable thing to discuss among us gals.” In this line she once again reassures her audience that it is okay to question and be concerned about these things, especially because scent undeniably identifies the vagina as something that exists

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<sup>101</sup> Sarah Jio, ““One Brave Woman Raises Her Hand and Asks: ‘Is My Vagina...Smelly?’” *Glamour Health*, August 25, 2009, Accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.glamour.com/health-fitness/blogs/vitamin-g/2009/08/one-brave-woman-raises-her-han>

<sup>102</sup> Sarah Jio, “One Brave Woman,” August 25, 2009.

<sup>103</sup> Sarah Jio, “One Brave Woman,” August, 2009.

and cannot be and ignored, and alludes to the fact that she and her readers are women connected by these concerns.<sup>104</sup>

The presence of this establishing paragraph is something typical to other *Glamour* articles. Of the eight vagina-related articles in the search queue, six of them featured similar introductions. These types of introductions quickly pull the reader in, concretely re-state the subject of the article, and relate the author to her audience. In many cases, this small section of text bears the greatest weight in the whole article because it serves as the entry point for readers into the (sometimes) more technical body of the article and genitalia as part of the body. In more recent articles, the introductory paragraph is crucial to telling readers exactly what the article is about because as the articles become more recent, their titles are more likely to have a euphemism or slang-term to replace a scientifically specific reference to genitalia. For instance, in the title of her article about pubic hair grooming practices published in January of 2011, Melissa Melms uses the word “vagina” in a quote, but specifically refers to her genitalia as her “hoo-ha.”<sup>105</sup> In the following paragraph, she establishes why she refuses to get her pubic hair waxed for a “vaca” or vacation with “J” her partner, but only uses the word vagina twice.<sup>106</sup> Once as “a blue-collar vagina” in reference to her to economic frugality when paying to have a Brazilian wax done and once in recounting the “mortifying” story of her friend who was told by the woman waxing her that she had a “beautiful vagina.”<sup>107</sup> Melm’s article, though much less formal than Jio’s offers a casual tone most similar to many other pieces found in *Glamour*. Melm’s use of language is meant to connect with the magazine’s readers and as a result, assumes a lighter, humorous tone.

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<sup>104</sup> Sarah Jio, “One Brave Woman,” August, 2009.

<sup>105</sup> Melissa Melms, “My You Have a Beautiful Vagina: And 5 Other Reasons I am Boycotting Getting My Hoo-Ha Waxed,” January 26, 2012, Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.glamour.com/sex-love-life/blogs/smitten/2012/01/my-you-have-a-beautiful-vagina>

<sup>106</sup> Melissa Melms, “My You Have a Beautiful Vagina,” January 26, 2012.

<sup>107</sup> Melissa Melms, “My You Have a Beautiful Vagina,” January 26, 2012.

The same type of language is consistently employed in all eight of the website's "vagina" search results and reflects the casual nature of the writing style. In Ariane Marder's article "Your Vagina is Not What You Think It Is" from 2012, for instance, she opens with a rhetorical, sarcastic question for her readers, "I'd love to know when we decided to call our lady parts by the wrong name."<sup>108</sup> She continues with a short anecdote of her grandmother mispronouncing her name to bridge into the content of her piece: women's confusion of the vagina for the vulva. While this section of the article is quite informative, Marder employs similar tactics as her colleague Jio to ease her readers into the franker parts of her argument. During the big reveal of the mis-labeling of female genitalia Marder harks back to her own naivete. She confesses, "Did you know that our vagina as we know it is, in most cases, not really our vagina? It's our vulva. The vulva, for those who don't know (like me until recently), is the whole shebang—the pubic area, labia, clitoris *and* vagina."<sup>109</sup> Marder's use of the personal aside as well as use of "we" and "ours" communicates with the audience in a more casual manner making the information more relatable and comfortable rather than explanatory. The author's concerns with separating their writing from more formal, specialized texts is also reflected in the length of the pieces. Marder's and Jio's word counts are under three hundred and fifty words. The longest *Glamour* articles were approximately fifteen hundred words and either included a dialogue with a health professional or contained a lengthy backstory to frame the article's argument. The articles' lengths correlate because they were written as blog entries, however it is also important to recognize that these articles in their associations with women's magazines are advertised to the mainstream woman as authorities on these issues. Thus, one must approach these sources with a

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<sup>108</sup> Ariane Marder, "Your Vagina is Not What You Think It Is," April 18, 2012.

<sup>109</sup> Ariane Marder, "Your Vagina is Not What You Think It Is," April 18, 2012.

critical eye when considering women's use of euphemism to refer to genitalia and the proliferation of misconceptions regarding the vagina.

The authors' maintenance of their articles' conversational tones depend upon usage of colloquialized language, playful writing style, and choice of relatable subject material. In closely examining the content of *Read My Lips* and *V is For Vagina*, it is clear that there was a very close mimicry of these techniques in the stylistic choices and compositional balance of the books. Though *Read My Lips* offers a more formal presentation of information than *V is For Vagina*, both sets of authors use similar quirky, sexy titles and playful writing styles used in magazine articles. In *Read My Lips*, Herbenick and Schick give chapters whimsical titles, including "Vulvalicious: Vulvas and Vaginas in Bed," "Spraying, Dyeing, and Douching...Oh My!" or "The Hair Down There." The titles include certain references to cultural icons or classics, for instance, "vulvalicious" taken from the song "Fergalicious" by Fergie or the famous line "lions and tigers and bears, oh my" from *The Wizard of Oz*. In *V is For Vagina*, the chapter titles reflect a similarly spirited tone. Unlike *Read My Lips*, however, the chapter titles in *V is For Vagina* are alphabetized and meant to mimic the concept of an abecedarium, hence its identification as an "a-z guide" to anything having to do with female genitalia. Chapter titles include, "B: Ooh Baby, Baby," "C: Coming Clean: The Dirty Secret About Our Obsession with V Hygiene," "G: Get Down with Your Gyno," "I: Inside Info on Intercourse Snafus," "K: Killer Exercises and V Infection," "V: Va-Va-Vooming, Piercing, Dyeing, Vajazzling, and Vattooing," and "Y: Why Your V Skin? Because It's *Everywhere!*"<sup>110</sup> Like the articles in *Glamour*, Herbenick's, Schick's, Dweck's and Westen's books cater to their idea of the typical, mainstream woman: youthful, sexually curious, and culturally in-tune. While there is nothing wrong with this, their intention to reach men and women alike fall short. Furthermore, by

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<sup>110</sup> Dweck and Westen, *V is for Vagina*, 7-9.

presenting their research in this manner, Herbenick and Schick expose themselves to criticisms surrounding the seriousness of research on the vagina and vulva. As a result, *Read My Lips* seems to lie on the border between “feminist” pop-culture publications and respectable scholarship.

*V is for Vagina* does not feel like the “medically sound” text it claims to be. Though it features anatomical drawings of the vagina, medical jargon, and discussions of a broad range of medical conditions and procedures related to female genitalia, *V is for Vagina* is most similarly formatted to a magazine spread than a book. Dweck never clearly states how this choice came to be; whether it was of her own accord or accepted through the advice of co-author Robin Westen, sex advice columnist for *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Nevertheless, flipping through the pages, one can notice the similarities. For example, blocks of text are interjected with quotes and fun-facts about the vagina. While they are informative, these awkwardly placed blurbs interrupt the flow of the main body of text and detract from its message unlike blurbs in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Additionally, their use of language is riddled with euphemism and sexualizing of unisexual actions or ideas. For an informative book on the intimate details of the lived female sexual experience, it is surprising how often Dweck uses “V” instead of using vagina. This seems to align with the representation of the vagina in popular culture where it is referred to using hip slang rather than the taboo, “dated” vagina.

Another factor influencing a reader’s perception of the articles and books are the visuals included in the body or content. The articles, because they are mainly archived on the magazine’s online blog, are sprinkled with suggestive, feminine photographs. Mainly used to break up larger chunks of text, these photographs are clearly staged and purposefully adhere to the typical beauty standards maintained throughout the other material in the magazine. For

example, Shaun Dreisbach's article "Women's Health: Everything You Don't Know About Your Lady Parts...But Should" begins with an image of the torso and upper legs of a nude, white woman, taken by New York based beauty photographer Philippe Salomon (fig. 1). The woman holds a blossoming pink rose delicately over her, presumably, hairless groin area. Her hands hold the flower at an angle suggestive of a "V" and together with the flower create a small shadow right where her thighs touch. In all, a simultaneously modest and sexualized image, which at the same time, upholds longstanding societal comparisons of female sexuality or sexual potential as a "flower." A nearly identical image appears in another *Glamour* article published over a year after Dreisbach's. Ariane Marder's article "Your Vagina is Not What You Think It Is. Can We Make a Pact to Start Calling Our Lady Parts By the Right Name, Pretty Please?" opens with a close-up photograph of another white woman's slight navel and upper legs (fig. 2).<sup>111</sup> Unlike Salomon's photograph, the woman has a pair of bright pink panties covering her groin.<sup>112</sup> Her thumb is slipped suggestively into the top of the panties, as if she is about to remove them, and unsurprisingly there is a blossoming, pink flower held between the woman's thighs right in front of the crotch. Once again, the visual of femininity, seduction, and modesty are repeated themes within the feature photograph.

The same motifs appear separately on the covers of all three books. The cover art of *Read My Lips* continues the theme of flowers and femininity (fig. 3). "Read My Lips" appears in a

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<sup>111</sup> Ariane Marder, "Your Vagina is Not What You Think It Is," <http://www.glamour.com/sex-love-life/blogs/smitten/2012/04/your-vagina-is-not-what-you-th-1>

<sup>112</sup> It is important to note that this photograph is taken from Thinkstock, a stock photograph sharer sponsored by Getty Images. Stock photography is meant to offer simplistic, universal images, almost like real-life clip art, for public or commercial access depending on the company. For this reason, stock photos generally represent popular generalizations of specific events, expressions, or identities. In this case, the stock photo provided is associated with the intimate parts of the female body. There are visual connections made to repeated images of the female body within art, for example the modest hand covering the crotch or groin as made popular in Classical sculpture, as well as associations with symbols of female sexuality, for example the flower and its common association with female virginity. The usage of these visual associations within stock photography indicate their prevalence within American visual culture and point to a very particular understanding of the female body within context of modestly sexualized. See *Thinkstock by Getty Images*, 2016, Accessed March 19, 2016, <http://www.thinkstockphotos.com/>.

flourished, pink cursive and just below the cover features an image of a green bud with a small slit revealing delicate pink petals inside. Once again, this image is a play on the representation of a vagina, a slit or space, and the artistic trope of the female as a flower. The enclosure of the buds around the petals evoke the presence of the “lips” making reference to the title.

Furthermore, the small hairs emphasized on the bud beaded with large droplets of water mimic the appearance of pubic hair and wetness that are also associated with female genitalia and its many parts.

The association of the representation of the vagina with nature is also evoked in the image on Wolf’s *Vagina* (fig. 4). The book is completely black with the exception of a full body image of a woman, almost certainly a picture of Eve potentially meant to reference the history of the mother-whore dichotomy. She is clearly painted, with pale skin and dark, curly hair flowing down to her hips. Her torso, like the pictures used within the *Glamour* articles, is tilted in a bit of a slouched posture used to emphasize the line of her hand, which gently and seductively holds a branch of an apple tree, another reference to Eve. Once again, the leaf is placed right where her groin and thighs connect, at the base of the crotch area. Despite the detailed cover image, the designer chose to place a blank dust cover with a small circular opening at Eve’s crotch over the full image. Though reducing the full body portrait of Eve to her crotch, hand, and leaf universalizes the image, this does not seem to be the main reason for the cover. Its presence piques the curiosity of the readers and beckons them to expose what lies underneath. In this way, the readers have something tangible to uncover or discover and after doing so, are taken back to the origin of the biography of the vagina: Eve. Unlike, *Read My Lips* the cover of *Vagina* is less of a play on the title and rather a reflection of the content of the book. Eve is the biblical representation of the origin of woman, their sexuality, and their sin (arguably the latter two are



seen as being connected) just as the story Wolf shares through *Vagina* is the origin of her womanhood as she discovers a potential starting point for other women to discover their own womanhood.

Alyssa Dweck and Robin Westen's *V is for Vagina* breaks the nature trend, but continues the theme of seductive modesty (fig. 5). Like part of Eve's portrait on *Vagina* and the image in Dreisbach's and Marder's articles, *V is for Vagina* features a picture of a unidentified female's torso and upper leg area. In this case, the light pink body exists on its own with no hands to guide the reader's eye to the crotch area. The legs are crossed to create hourglass curves on the body and the expected flower or leaf in front of the groin is replaced with a big "V." Clearly, the cover is much less subtle than the other two, but the rudimentarily drawn female body fits with the book's attempt at boldness, sexiness through the discussion of the taboo topic of the vagina.

The attention given to the marketability of the topic of women's health through the cover designs for *Read My Lips*, *V is for Vagina*, and *Vagina* serves as a projection of the authors' efforts to make the content of the books marketable to popular audiences. In so doing, these books and their covers homogenize women, whereas *Our Bodies, Ourselves'* cover emphasizes the diversity of women. Instead of focusing on playful, feminine visual tropes, the cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (2011) the only images that appear on the cover are a series of women's headshots (fig.6). Each headshot features a different woman, offering an array of ages and races, contained within a small circle. There are smaller dots dispersed amongst the photos that are the meeting points for various series of webs joining the headshots. In this context, the women represent *Our Bodies, Ourselves'* target audience and the dots represent the topics of women's health featured within the book. The dots, in this way, connect the women just as their lived experiences in female bodies connect them.

The other content highlighted on the cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is purely textual and informative. Just above the web of women is a quote by Gloria Steinem that reads, “Within these pages, you will find the voice of a women’s health movement that is based on shared experience. Listen to it - and add your own.”<sup>113</sup> Steinem’s quote, like the photographs, imparts upon the readers a sense of community validated not only by the stories shared in the book, but also by feminist icons, like Steinem herself. The cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* also emphasizes the prevalence of the book in noting the history of its success, which is manifested as an introductory statement for the title declaring the book, “The bestselling classic, informing and inspiring women across generations.”<sup>114</sup> The use of “generations” within the statement alludes to the book’s target audience, referred to in the introduction as women exploring sexuality and reproductive health “from the first gynecological exam to sexual health in [their] later years.”<sup>115</sup> The addition of this text reaffirms the mission of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective in producing *Our Bodies, Ourselves* while simultaneously reminding readers of the successful history the collective had in fulfilling their mission. The differences between the cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and those of *Read My Lips*, *V is for Vagina*, and *Vagina* correlate with their contrasting texts. Whereas *Our Bodies, Ourselves* offers straightforward, informative of female anatomy and physiology, *Read My Lips*, *V is for Vagina*, and *Vagina*’s cursory presentation of trendier vagina facts cater more to the interests of mainstream women, much like the audiences reading *Glamour*. Thus, the images appearing on the covers of these three publications attempt to draw readers in with suggestive, playful imagery.

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<sup>113</sup> Gloria Steinem quoted on the cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011)

<sup>114</sup> The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), cover.

<sup>115</sup> The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, Introduction to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), xi.

Do the edgy, yet whimsical writing styles of these texts jeopardize the important messages being communicated? Are the formats, layouts, images, and quizzes incorporated into the writing distracting for the reader? Though it would be easy to say “no” in belief that these seemingly superfluous details contribute to these texts’ mass appeal to popular audiences, the sacrifices made are too great to ignore. In contrast the Boston Women’s Collective published *Our Bodies, Ourselves* during the height of the Women’s Health movement; the book was unpredictably successful even without being stylistically similar to magazines or sex columns. After more than forty years in print, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* remains a staple guide for the many experiences women have with their bodies without jeopardizing the delivery of its information to marketability – you just have to know where to find it.

### Chapter 3: The Vagina as Image

“In the first place, it’s not so easy to even find your vagina. Women go weeks, months, sometimes years without looking at it. I interviewed a high-powered businesswoman who told me she was too busy; she didn’t have the time. Looking at your vagina, she said, is a full day’s work.”

– Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*

Just as the word “vagina” is feared by polite society, the image of a vagina is something forbidden, hidden, or ignored. There is no way to determine whether the societal taboo of discussing female genitalia led to women’s hesitance to engage with and acknowledge their vaginas, or vice versa. Whichever influenced the other, the effect remained the same – women were uncomfortable looking at their own vaginas and because society lacked non-pornographic images of vaginas, many women lived never having seen one. Despite the attempts made by feminist activists during the 1960s and 70s to bring the vagina into popular discourse and media, there remains an unspoken timidity around visually explicit representations of the vagina in the twenty-first century. Deciphering this “view” of the vagina requires an acknowledgment that female genitalia have for so long, been connected to hyper-sexualization of the female body, something that counters popular ideologies of the vagina as vessel for motherhood.<sup>116</sup> Though in childbirth female genitalia serve in a disassociated, anatomical capacity, cultural influences like pornography have sexualized such interpretations of the female body through images of the vagina defined by sexual exploitation and objectification. As a result, American society has made the vagina virtually invisible, which serves as an effective mechanism to control female sexuality.

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<sup>116</sup> Cynthia Ozick, “The Hole: Birth Catalogue,” *Ms. Magazine* (Spring, 2002), originally printed in *Ms. Magazine* (October, 1972): 15-16.

Such a lack of attention has generated a fear of seeing the vagina, of acknowledging the presence of the vagina, of overcoming the hesitation of going “down there.” This is one of the reoccurring themes Ensler addresses in *The Vagina Monologues*. One monologue shares the story of a woman attending a vagina workshop and through this, offers insight into women’s perceptions of their own vaginas. In describing her experiences during the workshop, the woman confesses:

I did not think of my vagina in practical or biological terms. I did not, for example, see it as something attached to me...I must tell you that up until this point everything I knew about my vagina was based on hearsay and invention. I had never really seen the thing. It had never occurred to me to look at it.<sup>117</sup>

Though this monologue represents the story of one woman, the disassociation and lack of awareness of her vagina that she addresses prevails amongst many different women in society. These problems have compromised women’s relationships with their genitalia in a non-sexual context, something made more severe by the utter lack of discussion or representation of the vagina within the public sphere. When the vagina does appear, mainly in pornography, it is altered photographically and physically. Virginia Braun addresses these issues in her various writings on the rise of labiaplasty among Western women stating that these consumer-based, sexually exploitative image of female genitalia are perceived by women representations of “normal” vaginas.<sup>118</sup> In order to counter the psychological and consequently physical effects of the proliferated feelings of “pudendal disgust,” Braun calls for the dissemination of images showcasing vaginas in their natural, un-altered states.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Eve Ensler, “The Vagina Workshop,” *The Vagina Monologues*, 45.

<sup>118</sup> Virginia Braun, “Rhetoric of Choice,” 239-242. See also, Virginia Braun, “In Search of (Better) Sexual Pleasure,” and Virginia Braun, “Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery: A Critical Review of Current Knowledge and Contemporary Debates,” in *Journal of Women’s Health* 19, no. 7 (2010), 1393-1407.

<sup>119</sup> Virginia Braun, “Rhetoric of Choice,” 242.

“The Vagina as Image” focuses on the efforts of artists and filmmakers to insert, or in some cases re-insert, images of the “natural” vagina into society through art and film and assesses the contexts in which such representations appear. Taking into account the current lack of representation of the vagina in mainstream culture, “The Vagina as Image” explores a selection of niche, artistic communities where the vagina does appear either as a visual or through dialogue. The material discussed in “The Vagina as Image” specifically looks for female genitalia displayed or talked about outside the context of pornography for two reasons. Firstly, the porn industry, since its origin, is one dominated by patriarchal hegemony and profit driven primarily on exploitation of the female body. Secondly, the porn industry is very prolific and resultantly includes a wide range of different sub-categories of pornographic productions.<sup>120</sup> Thus, to attempt to focus on the visual treatment of the vagina in porn would be require more time and space in research and writing than this thesis allows. The choice to contemplate the vagina outside the realm of pornography also serves to establish an understanding of the images of female genitalia in a non-sexualized manner. The analysis of non-pornographic vaginal or vulvar imagery is divided into two categories, the vagina in still image and the vagina in moving image; this distinction makes it possible to properly address the specific art and film communities working with representations of the vagina and the histories these representations reflect or develop from.

### **The Vagina in Still Image: An Analysis of the Vagina in Art**

The founding of the Women’s Art or Feminist Art Movement during the early 1970s represented the application of newly formed techniques, such as consciousness raising,

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<sup>120</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 62. For more information on the economics of the international porn industry see Chapter 3 “The International Political Economy of Pornography,” in *The Industrial Vagina* 62-85.

developed by the Women's Liberation and Health Movements to issues of gender inequality in the art world. While feminist art activists fought for equal representation of women in everyday political and medical practices of American life, they realized that the institution of artistic production and spectatorship monopolized images depicting the female body as object of desire. The severe lack of women artists' works throughout the art historical cannon amplified the sexualization of the female body within art by communicating to the public that a woman's worth lay in her body. Art featuring the female body displayed it in a way that offered it as something to be taken, conquered, won, or gazed upon. In her essay for the *New Feminist Art Criticism* anthology, Hilary Robinson, scholar of feminist theory and art history, exposes the persistence of these traditions within art history through a discussion of psychoanalytical concepts. She asserts:

The body of woman is pervasive in the lexicon and poetics of Western visual language...the body of woman connotes to-be-looked-at-ness...from religious icon to pornographic photo, the desire for novelty, the desire to possess the woman/image, the desire for power over the object - and ultimately the desire to fantasize desire....<sup>121</sup>

Robinson continues, offering the classical Western visual trope of woman as something meant to "...provoke appropriate responses," implicative of sexual arousal.<sup>122</sup> This female nude Robinson references generally appeared as a manifestation of male desire with breasts uncovered and groin carefully hidden by the suggestive placement of a hand or supple drapery, a pose exhibited in *The Venus of Urbino* by the Renaissance master Titian. When the female body appeared in more confrontational poses, take for example Gustav Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1866) or Egon Schiele's *Reclining Female Nude* (1910), offering full-frontal depictions of the vulva, the individuality of the female was completely removed from the scene. In the case of *L'Origine du*

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<sup>121</sup> Hilary Robinson, "Border Crossings: Womanliness, Body, Representation," *New Feminist Art Criticism*, Katy Deepwell ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 140.

<sup>122</sup> Hilary Robinson, "Border Crossings," 140.

*Monde*, the model's lower body entirely consumes the frame.<sup>123</sup> Her naked body is positioned at an angle that emphasizes exposure; her legs are spread revealing the entirety of her vulva and at the same time her torso is lifted also placing her breasts in the audience's line of sight. While the painter makes an effort to show the body up to the model's shoulders, there is no effort to connect these beautifully rendered parts to an individual identity. While not sexualized by the placement of a hand near the genitalia, the model's lack of identity strips her of agency and leaves her an anonymous object for the audience to examine.

If the woman of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is womb, the woman of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* is vulva, a powerless spectacle. Just as Robinson suggested, the mechanisms chosen in illustrating the female form draw upon the image of heterosexual male desire. Though these works by male artists show the vagina, the lack of female agency and voice within their interpretations posits them as products of and for the male gaze. Woman, and vagina by association, is object of man. Thus, the proliferation of this motif appealed to Western patriarchal hegemony and became indoctrinated within societal visual vocabulary. In solely affirming this contrived portrayal of women as a product of the (male) artistic visionary; the experiences, expertise, and gendered realities of women within the art world were silenced.

The work of the coalitions of female artists during the Feminist Art Movement (1970-1980) meant to counter and dismantle the dominance of the patriarchal standards and objectification within the art world through the dissemination of a new artistic style focused on the female sensibility. Faith Wilding, participating artist in the Feminist Art, or as she refers to it Cunt Art, Movement outlines this focus further:

Although we did not fully theorize our attraction to cunt imagery at the time, we knew it was a catalyst for thinking about our bodies and about female

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<sup>123</sup> The owner of the infamous vulva was rumored to be Courbet's favorite model and secret lover Joanna Hiffernan, who was also rumored to be the mistress of yet another famous 19<sup>th</sup> century artist John Singer Sargent.



representation [...] *Cunt Art*, made for the female gaze, aimed to reverse the negative connotations of a dirty word with a defiant challenge to traditional depictions of submissive female sexuality.<sup>124</sup>

The discrepancy of the titles of these movements in public memory, as the Feminist Art Movement versus the Cunt Art Movement, diminishes the art's challenging of sociopolitical systems of oppression. According to artists working within the movement like Faith Wilding, Cunt Art fit the goals and intentions of its female creators and was incredibly important to the statement that the artists were making about the autonomy of their own bodies. Hillary Robinson points out that the emerging work of the foundational feminist artists, for example Judy Chicago, Faith Wilding, Carolee Schneemann, and Judith Bernstein, dealt with the concept of the body from several interpretations: the body of the audience, the body of the artist, the body of the artwork, the representation of the body within an artwork.<sup>125</sup> The consideration of each literal or metaphorical "body" within feminist art practice was something developed through collaboration and group process, just as the doctrines of the Women's Movement itself had previously been. Thus, the shift from the essentialism of the female as sexual allegory under the male gaze, to an informed, educated, and personal female gaze, what scholars of feminist art offer as "anti-essentialism," was one driven by conscious efforts to develop a new artistic language by and about women.

Eventually anti-essentialist rejections of the body as object and its celebration of women as powerful subjects and authors within their own narratives became the crucial connection between the discourse of the Women's Movement and the Feminist Art Movement.<sup>126</sup> In her

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<sup>124</sup> Faith Wilding quoted in Emma Rees's *The Vagina*, originally in Laura Meyer with Faith Wilding, 'Collaboration and Conflict in the Fresno Feminist Art Program: An Experiment in Feminist Pedagogy', *N.Paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, 26 (July 2010), 46.

<sup>125</sup> Hilary Robinson, "Border Crossings," 138.

<sup>126</sup> Jill Fields, "Frontiers in Feminist Art History," *A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 2, (2012), 5. JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.2.0001>.

article “How the West was Won” Faith Wilding explains that many feminist artworks featured images of the vulva and vagina because the participating artists were “...inventing a new form [of] language radiating a female power which cannot be conveyed in any other way at this time.”<sup>127</sup> Wilding and her colleagues did not consider their insertion of vulvar and vaginal imagery as a continuation of the scopophilic traditions of art before, but rather an embracing of and communicating their gendered bodily experience. While this assertion of a woman-created femininity incorporated images of the female body, re-claiming images of the female genitalia in art represented to the feminist artists a vocalization of intervention through introspection, a making visible of the previously invisible celebration of the body from a female governed narrative. Robinson elaborates, “Therefore while the experiencing of the feminine is the experience of the body, at the same time the feminine is not essentially of the body; it is mediated through the body and through representation.”<sup>128</sup> The mediation that Robinson mentions was something revolutionary to the art world and developed through the founding of Feminist Art, or Cunt Art, in the 1970s. The discourse emerging from this mediation incorporated practices of consciousness raising and coalition building from the Women’s Movement and also redefined the role of artist within American society to reposition art herstory within the canon.

In her foundational years as an artist during the early 70s, feminist art icon Judy Chicago strove to prove to her male peers that “art [had] no gender.”<sup>129</sup> Judy Chicago’s Fresno Feminist Art Program, from which the Feminist Art Movement Emerged, originated from criticism of the

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<sup>127</sup> Faith Wilding quoted in Emma Rees’s *The Vagina*, originally in Faith Wilding, “How the West Was Won: Feminist Art in California,” *Women Artists News*, 6.2&3 (Summer 1980), 15.

<sup>128</sup> Hilary Robinson, “Border Crossings,” 137.

<sup>129</sup> Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Female Artist*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), quoted in Laura Meyer, “Judy Chicago, Feminist Artist and Educator,” *Women & Therapy* 17 (no. 1, 1995): 127. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/216239671/fulltextPDF/625E1D6DD374261PQ/1?accountid=14637>. Accessed February 02, 2016.

masculinized, patriarchal structure that lived an uninterrupted existence within the art world and higher art education system until the 1970s. Before Chicago founded of the program, art education favored detached, modernist aesthetics seen as masculinized and void of personal, emotional inspirations. Furthermore, male artists dominated the upper echelons of artistic knowledge and practice, thus female artists' absence from the art historical cannon continued. Chicago's inspiration for the Fresno Feminist Art Program came out of her own experiences as a female student of art and was further influenced by tenets of the emerging Women's Liberation Movement and feminist discourses of the late 1960s. The development of the art program at Fresno State College was a conscious decision on Chicago's part because of its isolation from the profit driven art market and as a result, the masculine doctrines of the art world. Such isolation became important for Chicago and the students she worked with because it allowed them space to cultivate a methodology and artistic practice for Feminist or Cunt Art.<sup>130</sup>

Chicago worked alongside her students and envisioned an artistic collective meant "...to challenge every type of cultural limitation placed on women artists - from low expectations for female achievement to traditional definitions for the subject matter of art."<sup>131</sup> Chicago and fifteen female students, including Faith Wilding, reflected these goals and re-configured their projects as various installations of a larger, collective body of work. Because the work of the Fresno Feminist Art Program and of the Feminist movement as a whole sought to give a voice to female experience within a society that constantly met such experience and artistic work with belligerence and apathy, Chicago pushed her students to adopt atypical art making processes.

Materials often included items used for "craft," art forms deemed inferior and feminine, whereas

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<sup>130</sup> Judy Chicago, "Introduction: The Joy of Creating," *The Dinner Party*, (London: Merrell, 2007), 10-12.

"Judy Chicago's Cunt Cheerleaders," video, interview with *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/judy-chicagos-cunt-cheerleaders/>. Accessed March 13, 2016.

<sup>131</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago, Feminist Artist and Educator," *Women & Therapy* 17 (no. 1, 1995): 127. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/216239671/fulltextPDF/625E1D6DD374261PQ/1?accountid=14637>. Accessed February 02, 2016.

for some artists, including Lacy, the experience itself became the medium and performance art or dance communicated the message.<sup>132</sup>

The Fresno Feminist Art Program relied on early methods from the Women's Liberation and Health Movements, and much like the Boston Women's Health Collective, centered their work on the concept of "consciousness raising."<sup>133</sup> Consciousness-raising encouraged women to re-connect with their own experiences through group discussion in order to re-interpret these personal experiences as politicized.<sup>134</sup> Making "the personal political" addressed the "socially constructed female experience" and the oppression women faced on the fronts of politics, economics, sexuality, bodily perceptions, labor, and motherhood.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, the influence of consciousness-raising on much of the art produced in the Fresno Feminist Art Program gave women artists a platform to reclaim the image of the female body. By connecting the art making process to their lives, feminist artists could produce detailed, explicit images celebrating their genitalia as a symbol for their experiences or as celebration of their self-governed sexuality. As a result, the coalition of students and teachers who made up the Feminist Art Movement brought awareness to previously invisible or ignored issues through the synthesis of the shared experiences of their peers', of women's, or of other oppressed social identities.

In her essay "The Body Through Women's Eyes," feminist artist and scholar Joanna Frueh shares her reflections on the movement:

In the 1970s, feminist artists, wanting to reclaim the female body for women, asserted women's ability to create their own aesthetic pleasure by representing women's bodies and women's bodily experiences. The resulting positive images of the female body are a critical part of feminist aesthetics of the 1970s...[In presenting the body in this way] Feminist artists affirmed not only the authenticity

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<sup>132</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago," 131.

<sup>133</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago," 128.

<sup>134</sup> Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*: Feminist Activist Performance Art as "Expanded Public Pedagogy," *NWSA Journal* 19 (no. 1, 2007): 24-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317229>. Accessed January 27, 2016.

<sup>135</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago," 130-131.

of their own experiences that informed their art, but also the beauty and sexual and spiritual power of the female body as correctives to idealizations....<sup>136</sup>

Though not solely discussing the genitalia, but rather the body as a whole, Frueh captures the energy that engulfed the artists of the movement. The “cunt positive” works of the 70s are still very prevalent sources of inspirations for artists today. The constant repetition of theme, form, and methodological artistic practice in terms of female genitalia in art, or cunt art as many of the founding mothers of feminist art would call it, makes necessary an examination of both time periods within art. Many of the contemporary pieces of vagina art that appear in galleries or, more rarely, in museums today, pay homage to feminist art icons like Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann, and Hannah Wilke. Some early feminist artists, such as Judith Bernstein, continue to produce their works today, drawing on the same vulvar themes present in the 70s, but from a modern perspective.

Even today, Judy Chicago’s installation *The Dinner Party*, remains one of the most widely known feminist artworks to come out of the Feminist Art Movement (fig. 4). A thoughtful and profound example from the feminist artworks, Chicago and a team of female artists started the installation in 1971 and finished it in 1979. *The Dinner Party* represents the celebration of nearly every doctrine established by the Feminist Art Movement, and most importantly, clear, visual assertion of historic women through vulvar portraiture. *The Dinner Party* is a collaborative construction of a massive banquet scene with three tables arranged in an equilateral triangle atop the “Heritage Floor,” a series of 2304 luster-dusted porcelain tiles containing 999 women important to history. Each table holds thirteen place settings for the

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<sup>136</sup> Joanna Frueh, “The Body Through Women’s Eyes,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 190.

forgotten “goddess[es], historical figure[s], and important women” of history.<sup>137</sup> Chicago states that this comprehensive presentation of women in Western civilization is meant to recall the image of the Last Supper “...from the point of view of those who have done the cooking throughout history; hence, a “dinner party.”<sup>138</sup> Each woman assigned a seat at the table has a table setting with an embroidered cloth, silver service, goblet, and hand-crafted porcelain “plate.” The materials of each place setting draw upon skills, such as weaving, embroidery, and porcelain painting, seen as “craft,” because they are practices traditionally dominated by women. The cloth and plate are meant to reflect the contributions and character of each woman featured, and thus, are individually designed.

In a summary of her process in the introduction for *The Dinner Party*, Chicago discusses the evolution of the designs, she writes:

I also worked steadily in my studio, trying to develop an iconography that meshed my abstract aesthetic language, specific historical information about women of interest to me...By 1974 [the year the project moved into the actual production stage], I was deeply engrossed in...a vulval or vaginal form, not because I wanted to ‘reduce’ women to their genital parts...but because I wanted to universalize from this form, transforming the physically defining characteristic of women into an aesthetic and metaphysical exploration of what it has meant to be a woman - historically, experientially, and philosophically.<sup>139</sup>

Chicago’s shift from butterfly image, what she saw a symbol of freedom and also a popular image of girlhood or femininity, to the vulva speaks to the centrality of female genitalia to the Feminist Art Movement. Asserting the vulva as the universal imagery of woman, while slightly problematic in execution, allowed Chicago to connect her interpretation of women’s history to the lives of every woman who engages with the work. The vulva dish, the centerpiece and focal

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<sup>137</sup> Judy Chicago, “Journal Entry, March 8, 1971, Fresno, California,” in “Introduction: The Joy of Creating,” *The Dinner Party*, (London: Merrell, 2007), 10.

<sup>138</sup> Judy Chicago, “Journal Entry, March 8, 1971,” 11-12.

<sup>139</sup> Judy Chicago, “Introduction: The Joy of Creating,” 12.

point for each woman represented, communicates the shared history among every woman audience member, artist, or historic figure. Furthermore, in using the distinct image of female genitalia to replace the butterfly, Chicago also created a political system. Because the butterfly was initially meant to represent women's freedom, the explicit reference to the vulva is symbolic of women's new-found artistic freedom. Chicago alludes to this in her journal, "...I wanted to challenge the prevalence of phallic forms in our society, which are so common that no one even notices them."<sup>140</sup>

It is clear that Chicago's intention of using the vulva as a universalizing element within *The Dinner Party* was meant to celebrate the female form and acknowledge their self-governed sexuality. The plates, unlike many other representations of female genitalia sanctioned within the art historical cannon, offered more than just a fleshy hole posed provocatively between two legs. The separation of the vulva from the body, while deemed essentialist by feminist critics from its first exhibition, allowed the vulva and the defining characteristics of the woman being portrayed to speak in harmony. Chicago's individualized treatment of each woman's centerpiece paid special attention to the layers created within the piece transforming the ceramics from 2-D, planar holes, more akin to the patriarchal representations of space or absence as the vagina, to the complete, elegant plate of Emily Dickinson, for example. The lacey edges meant to mimic the folds and layers of the labia minora and majora simultaneously evoke the delicacy and propriety expected of women in the Victorian era and the introverted, secret tenderness of the poet herself.<sup>141</sup> Many critics, both male and female, however, felt that the use of this imagery was

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<sup>140</sup> Judy Chicago, "Journal Entry, March 8, 1971," 12.

<sup>141</sup> "Emily Dickinson at the Dinner Party," *Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art*, Accessed February 17, 2016. [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/place\\_settings/emily\\_dickinson](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/emily_dickinson).

unnecessarily vulgar or possessing a “relentless concentration on the pudenda.”<sup>142</sup> The prominence of the “vulviform images,” as art critic Hilton Kramer referred to them, shocked the public. Politician Robert K. Dornan called the piece “ceramic 3-D pornography” because of its “relentless” use of female genitalia.<sup>143</sup> Feminists of the time also opposed the cunt imagery dominating *The Dinner Party* tables. New York art critic and feminist Cindy Nemser felt that the piece, as well as many other examples of “cunt art” produced during the same period, “reduces the work of women artists to a simplistic biologic form.”<sup>144</sup> In her article for *Art World Follies*, author and critic Clara Weyergraf criticizes *The Dinner Party* for its vulgarity and its failure to achieve “artistic radicalism” by relying heavily on “trivial symbolism and knick knacks” that sell well to a populist feminist audience.<sup>145</sup>

At the same time, the differences between the centerpieces, intended to honor the diversity of women’s history from creation to present day within the place settings, also proved a point of contention within the feminist community. Vocalized most publically in the writings of Alice Walker and Estelle Chacon, *The Dinner Party* offers a white-washed (middle-class) celebration of feminine sexuality. In an article written for *Ms. Magazine*, Walker evidences her argument against *The Dinner Party* with a visual analysis of Sojourner Truth’s plate. Not only is

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<sup>142</sup> Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party,” *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 409. The international criticism surrounding *The Dinner Party* was not focused solely on its close connections to female sexuality and “vulgar” use of female genitalia. Art critics, most notable Hilton Kramer, criticized the piece because of its “popularity” and “commercial” or “kitsch” aesthetic. Kramer, like some other critics, felt that the combination of cartoonish vulvas and crafted table cloths represented the decline of the artistic taste in the 70s and early 80s and that the positive commentary surrounding the diverse use of medium, for example embroidering and porcelain painting, represented a fall in artistic standard. Kramer saw the celebration of the piece as an insult to fine and skilled artistry. Many feminists in favor of *The Dinner Party*, such as Jones herself, see critics’ disdain for the piece as indicative of the threat it posed to the formerly unquestioned modernist aesthetic dominating the American and International art market at this time. *The Dinner Party* has also received criticism for being exploitative. Some critics believe that because the creation of *The Dinner Party* was a collaborative between Chicago and other female artists, ceramicists, embroiderers, etc. it should not be completely credited to Chicago as it has been in the past.

<sup>143</sup> Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party,” 414.

<sup>144</sup> Amelia Jones, “The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party,” 415.

<sup>145</sup> Clara Weyergraf, “The Holy Alliance: Populism and Feminism,” *October* (16,) The MIT Press, 1981: doi:10.2307/778372: 30-31.



Truth's plate one of the only representations of black women within *The Dinner Party*, the plate is the only centerpiece lacking a three dimensional articulation of a vulva (fig. 7). Instead it features two amorphous faces pushed to the outer circumference of the composition and interrupted by a stark, geometric mask. Furthermore, the faces are rendered in an almost caricatured manner with dramatic, glob-like features stereotypically associated with "primitive" art. Walker explains, "All of the other plates are creatively imagined vaginas...It occurred to me that white women feminists, no less than white women generally, can not imagine black women have vaginas."<sup>146</sup> This valid critique reveals how, Chicago's work falls victim to the same essentialization she so consciously avoided in her plans for representing the vulva.

Though Walker's criticism deals specifically with the treatment of black, female sexuality within *The Dinner Party*, it reflects a major issue affecting the understanding of the appearance of the vagina within art both in the past and in the present. Because the doctrines of cunt art, feminist art, or any other works coming out of the Feminist Art Movement very closely interact with the lived experience, questions of "who has the right to produce images of female genitalia in art" and "what does it mean when someone without female identity produces these works" arise. As Walker noted in her article, when white feminists, such as Chicago, attempted to create a "universal" female language, experience, etc. within the movements of the 60s and 70s, they silenced the voices of women who identified with other intersectional communities. These questions, while very pertinent to discussion of foundational artists within the Feminist Art Movement, also apply to contemporary artists engaging in vulvar, clitoral, labial, or vaginal imagery within their art.

It is nearly impossible to find a piece of art featuring female genitalia without finding some connection, either in composition, inspiration, or ultimate purpose, to one of the artists

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<sup>146</sup> Alice Walker quoted in Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of the Dinner Party," 421.

within the Feminist Art Movement. This is mainly because the vernacular for featuring vulvar imagery in art was created by these women, but also because many of these women continue to produce art in contemporary markets. Nevertheless, women make up a great majority of artists reclaiming the image of the vulva and vagina within art. In 2001, male British artist Jamie McCartney sought not only enter this artistic dialogue, but also “change the female body through art,” with his controversial piece *The Great Wall of Vagina* (fig. 8). Made up of ten panels of white plaster renderings of women’s vulvae, this polyptych features four hundred unique vaginas from women all over the world. Inspired to create the massive piece following his awareness after he learned about the rapidly growing market for labial, vaginal, and clitoral surgical alterations, McCartney aimed to assert the individuality and beauty of every woman’s vagina much like Chicago attempted to achieve in the vulva plates of *The Dinner Party*. McCartney labored to communicate the diversity in vulvae, arguing that men have the ability to compare the sizes and shapes of their own genitalia in conversation while society tells women that such interaction with their own genitalia is taboo. McCartney’s argument, meant to validate his authority as a man to create artistic commentary on female genitalia, also reveals larger issues of genitalia and visibility. Men have the ability to compare and examine their penises because their genitalia is mostly external and visually accessible, women’s genitalia is more obscured by the nature of female anatomy. Thus, as McCartney claims in his description of the piece, women fail to see that “[v]ulvas and labia are as different as faces.”<sup>147</sup>

To capture this, McCartney plaster-casted the vulvas of women around the world, ages 18-76, at various stages of genital development. On his website and in his book *The Great Wall of Vagina* (2001), McCartney pulls out specific examples of vaginas in particular stages, for

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<sup>147</sup> “Changing the Female Body Through Art,” *The Great Wall of Vagina*, Accessed February 18, 2016. <http://www.greatwallofvagina.co.uk/about>

example pre- and post-natal vaginas, vaginas of identical twins, and female-to-male and male-to-female genitalia. In an interview featured in the *Marie Claire* article “How Do You Feel About Yours,” a 27-year old model for *The Great Wall of Vagina* shared her experience. She explains that until she met a man who appreciated her body, she had always been uncomfortable with the way her vagina looked. After seeing an advertisement for Jamie McCartney’s piece, she decided she would try modeling for him as a way of coming to terms with her own body: “I’d never been comfortable with the way I look down there...The experience was amazing. It didn’t feel sordid or dirty. It felt like Jamie was creating something beautiful and I was a part of it. It allowed me to see what I looked like, and I was fine.”<sup>148</sup> This woman’s account, like those of many other women participating in the project or seeing the works in an exhibition specifically, expresses the celebratory and empowering nature of the piece.

Furthermore, McCartney asserts that this piece was more impactful because of his strict volunteer policy. He states, “They’re all volunteers. It was really important that nobody got paid to model for me. That might be really unfair but a man who pays 400 women to get their vagina out is not nearly as interesting as 400 women endorsing the project and believing in it enough to do it.”<sup>149</sup> McCartney’s statement focuses on the shock-factor of his piece and at the same time addresses the transformative experience he wants to invoke within the participants. With women volunteers for his casting, McCartney avoids coercion in the process. The interest is genuine and ultimately strengthens the message of his story.

When asked about his choice to create the piece, McCartney replied, “For many women their genital appearance is a source of anxiety and I was in a unique position to do something

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<sup>148</sup> Lucy Cavendish, “How Do You Feel About Yours,” *Mary Claire*, February 2012.

<sup>149</sup> Jamie McCartney quoted in Daisy Wyatt, “Artist Jamie McCartney: How The Great Wall of Vagina is a stand against 'body fascism'” *Independent*, Sunday August 2, 2012. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/artist-jamie-mccartney-how-the-great-wall-of-vagina-is-a-stand-against-body-fascism-10433603.html>.

about that.”<sup>150</sup> This statement expresses, when paired with knowledge of Jamie McCartney’s extensive research and understanding of the rise in female genital cosmetic surgery, an indication of the artist’s desire to confront the taboos of vaginal appreciation still prolific in society. At the same time, his statement is problematic. In acknowledging his “...unique position to do something,” about women’s vaginal anxiety, McCartney speaks from his ability as an artist to present issues to society through his work. McCartney also indirectly acknowledges his male privilege to, one, make the statement about women’s vaginas or anxieties in relation to their genitalia, and two, validate female appreciation for their bodies. Resultantly, many women became conflicted with whether McCartney had the authority to offer such commentary on female genitalia. Because he was a man, did he have some unique perspective on vulvae that women failed to possess? Was the construction of the piece an artistic manifestation of “mansplaining,” an issue that has existed within the public sphere since the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s? Frances Hatherly, a female blogger from England, recorded her response to the *The Great Wall of Vaginas* on her blog “The Red Deeps” after visiting an exhibition at the Hay Hill Gallery in London in 2012:

Exhibiting 400 vaginas is one way of expressing the polymorphousness of female genitalia, but the claims this show is making and its assumptions about its audience are misguided and expose McCartney’s and the Gallery’s assumption about gender and sexuality itself...The lack of coherent meaning in this work, suggests that it is due to McCartney having as they say “no skin in the game”, not because he does not possess a vagina but because he clearly does not know how to think about one in a way that doesn’t conform to the conditions of the very system he thinks he is subverting, and is in fact clearly a part of.<sup>151</sup>

The “claims” Hatherly refers to include McCartney’s statement that he, as a male and artist, can offer to women a new, celebratory perspective on the beauty of their genitalia. Hatherly’s

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<sup>150</sup> “Changing the Female Body Through Art,” *The Great Wall of Vagina*.

<sup>151</sup> Frances Hatherly, “No Skin in the Game - ‘The Great Wall of Vagina’ by Jamie McCartney at the ‘Skin Deep’ Exhibition,” *The Red Deeps*, May 31, 2012. <http://thereddeeps.blogspot.com/2012/05/no-skin-in-game-great-wall-of-vagina-by.html>

argument expresses concern that McCartney's piece, and the gallery's accompanying plaques and materials, assumes female audiences are unfamiliar with their genitalia and that somehow McCartney, though not having a vulva, knows more about female genitalia than these women. Like Alice Walker's criticism of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, Hatherly argues McCartney's piece makes overarching assumptions directly related to his failure to identify with the group about whom he is making the statement. As a man lacking possession of a vagina, what right does he have to universalize the experience of women with their genitalia in this manner?<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, Hatherly's critique also calls into question the profundity of McCartney's assertion on female genitalia from a male perspective. Upon first consideration, *The Great Wall of Vaginas* appears as a triumph of feminist calls for asexualized representation and celebration of the vagina. McCartney explains that *The Great Wall*, "...is about grabbing the attention, using humour and spectacle, and then educating people about what normal women really look like."<sup>153</sup> As Hatherly points out, *The Great Wall* does achieve this in some ways, however, does this education mean more when it comes from a man?

Conversely, can women artists represent, depict, or inform their audiences about male genitalia? Penises, as well as vaginas, appeared in the work of feminist artists in the 70s and 80s, Judith Bernstein, for example, though known for her graffiti renderings of bright, floral vaginas, is better known for her work with phallic imagery as statements on political corruption. In works like *The Fun Gun* (1967) or *Screw in the Box* (1969), Bernstein embraces the image of the phallus, not to educate men on issues related to their genitalia, but as a mechanism of visual communication. More recently, McCartney also has pieces, including *The Spices of Life* (2006) and *O-Limp-Pricks* (2012), which also feature male genitalia, though the latter is the only piece

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<sup>152</sup> Frances Hatherly, "No Skin in the Game."

<sup>153</sup> "Changing the Female Body Through Art," *The Great Wall of Vagina*.

of the two that exclusively employs the penis. His work is charged with similar commentaries on corrupt political systems, for example the economic controversies surrounding the Olympics, exhibited in Bernstein's work. McCartney's artistic statement steps beyond such criticism in *The Spices of Life* specifically, which communicates a desire to universalize the human body through frontal, "normative" exposition of genitalia.

While the approaches of Bernstein and McCartney have some similarity, McCartney's work with female genitalia cannot be interpreted in the same manner. Though Bernstein lacks possession of a penis, she uses it a symbol for social commentary rather than using it to claim a position of expertise on issues surround male genitalia. McCartney, while attempting to raise awareness on the rise of women undergoing female genital surgery, assumes an almost condescending tone in his assumption of women's ignorance on vaginas. Furthermore, McCartney's failure to explicitly acknowledge his male privilege in his commentary on *The Great Wall of Vaginas* is dismissive of the challenges women face and have faced in addressing the representation of the vagina within art. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the *The Great Wall of Vaginas'* contribution to continuing the conversation about vaginal, vulvar, or cunt art started in during the Feminist Art Movement.

The coalescing of over thirty years of scholarship and critique on vulvar art has resulted in the emergence of a rich expression of vaginal curiosity in certain pockets of the contemporary art world. The appearance of vagina imagery in this body of work has taken on two forms: continuation of holistic explorations of representation established as part of the Feminist Art Movement and specialization of representation through focuses on unexplored parts of the vulva. Mickalene Thomas, a black, lesbian artist, exemplifies the former in her celebration of the vulva through her insertion of her racial and sexual identity into the dialogue of the female body in art

historical canon.<sup>154</sup> Her show *Origin of the Universe* (2012) at the Brooklyn Museum of Art reclaims the frontal depiction of the vulva in its recreation of Courbet's *L'Origin du Monde* within the contexts of a black, lesbian identity. Her contemporary handling of previously patriarchal, heteronormative, white depictions of female genitalia offer new perspectives on the continuing dialogue about the vagina as image.

Sophia Wallace similarly offers new material to contemplate the representation of unexplored parts of female genitalia. Her campaign "Cliteracy" adopts a simplified yet anatomically accurate image of the clitoris including both internal and external parts. She aims to create cliteracy through decorating spaces by pairing her trademark clitoral image with facts addressing female sexuality. Wallace's work focuses on representation through public and private installation and performance as a form of building visual literacy, curiosity and presence of female genital form and function in American society.<sup>155</sup> Her messages become extremely poignant within the contexts of her gallery installations as she simultaneously addresses the taboo of female sexual pleasure in American society as well as the patriarchal hierarchy that exists within the private art market. Like the work of Mickalene Thomas, the impact of Wallace's work is contingent upon pre-existing narratives of female genitalia created by the founders of the Feminist Art Movement. The continuation of this narrative over the past four decades, however, demonstrates a desire to engage with female genitalia outside of conversation and move societal experimentation into a visual and visible realm. At the same time, artists dealing with the vagina must still make extra efforts to bring their work to the mainstream public because this type of art is sought out primarily by niche audiences.

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<sup>154</sup> For more information on Mickalene Thomas's body of work see her personal website: <http://mickalenethomas.com/>.

<sup>155</sup> For more information about the *Cliteracy* series see Sophia Wallace's personal website: <http://www.sophiawallace.com/>.

### **The Vagina as Moving Image: An Analysis of the Vagina in Film**

Author Emma Rees opens her discussion of the vagina as moving image in “Revealing the Vagina on Film and TV,” the sixth chapter of *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History*, with a brief description of the archetype of the *vagina dentata*, or the toothed vagina.<sup>156</sup> Through her comparative analysis of a description of Pieter Brughel the Elder’s painting *Dulle Grite* in Caryl Churchill’s play *Top Girl* to the representation of female’s internal and external genitalia on screen, Rees concludes that many mainstream representations disassociate women from their genitalia, as demonstrated in the myth of the *vagina dentata*. She claims:

Many film-makers have experimented in one way or another with the ideas of disjointed female identity, and more importantly, with how the fissure relates to, or originates in, women’s sexual organs. This fracture is manifested on film and TV in female characters’ strange - hellish - relationships not only with other characters, but with their own *anatomies*, too.<sup>157</sup>

Rees’ discussion of the appearance of the vagina in various films and television shows offers a close analysis of the same troubled relationships between women and their sexuality, relationships clearly embodied in the fear or disassociation from their genitals that were addressed by many of the feminist artists discussed in the last section.

Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey identifies the influence of the patriarchal hegemony as the reason for the proliferation of this concept within American film. She writes: “The magic of

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<sup>156</sup> The 2014 edition of the online *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines the *vagina dentata* as “a fantasy of a toothed vagina, a legendary hazard associated with sexual intercourse” first identified by the Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank in 1924. This concept of the “toothed vagina” was further popularized by Sigmund Freud in its pairing with castration anxiety. The *vagina dentata* appears in many classical renderings of hellish myths, for example the Gorgon or demons and beasts in medieval or renaissance-era depictions of hell, though it was not explicitly referred to as such until after the codification of the term. The pairing of the myth of the *vagina dentata* with pervasive societal fears of the mystery or unknown-ness of the vulva, both external and internal female genitalia, often posit the concept as a film trope. Andrew M. Coleman, “vagina dentata,” In *A Dictionary of Psychology*: Oxford University Press, 2008. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199534067.001.0001/acref-9780199534067-e-8716>. Accessed March 19, 2016.

<sup>157</sup> Emma Rees, *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 222.



the Hollywood style at its best (and all of the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual culture. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.”<sup>158</sup> As Mulvey suggests, the patriarchal influences on film limits the ways female sexuality is portrayed within film. Under the constrictions of the male cinematic gaze woman’s sexuality is solely represented in connection to the male’s castration fears, thus explaining the persistence and repetition of the *vagina dentata* as film trope.<sup>159</sup> “The Vagina as Moving Image” focuses on the contrasts between the treatment of the vagina in two independently produced American films *Chatterbox* (1977) and *Teeth* (2007). While not the only non-pornographic films that address the vagina, they are representative of a pool of very few American films addressing the topic of female genitalia in any context.<sup>160</sup> More avant-garde, European films such as Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* (1999) and Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) feature explicit representation of the vagina. The appearance of the vagina in both these films does occur in sexual contexts, but in both Breillat’s and von Trier’s the vagina appears as a device to communicate a greater message on female sexuality or the darkness of human nature. Inspired by the lack of taboo surrounding the appearance of female genitalia within these two films, this study pays particular attention to the absence of the vagina within *Chatterbox* and

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<sup>158</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” ... 59. (<http://www.asu.edu/courses/fms504/total-readings/mulvey-visualpleasure.pdf>)

<sup>159</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 59.

<sup>160</sup> In my research I came across several other films addressing female sexuality in their treatment of the vagina on screen. The reason these films are not featured in “The Vagina as Moving Image” is due to the inconsistency in camera shots of the vagina, the relation the genitals play to the meaning of the film, and the treatment of the vagina in comparison to the treatment of the penis. For example, I contemplated using the independently produced film *9 Songs*, released by Michael Winterbottom in 2004, but hesitated because of its “erotic” classification (I avoided using pornography in this chapter to keep a narrower focus on my research and to study movies/films that appealed to broader audiences) and its rather passé handling of the vagina. The other films I looked at were foreign and tended to be undistinguished. Like *9 Songs*, the films clearly walked the line of being erotic and pornographic, though not as lewdly as American pornography tends to be, and offered little in insightful treatment of the vagina. Rather it is treated exactly like any other appendage of the body, like the penis, finger, arm, or leg. While this is interesting in and of itself, the lack of importance the vagina plays in these contexts in addition the films’ foreign productions, leave them less relevant to the focus of this chapter.

*Teeth* as an analysis of American mainstream cinema. Part of this chapter draws upon Emma Rees's discussion of the vagina on screen, though it attempts to fill in gaps in her analysis. While her contemplation of the vagina and vulva in this section is thorough, Rees' analysis is very broad as she analyzes the appearance of the vagina in film linguistically, symbolically, and visually. As a result, her studies of some of the films, specifically *Chatterbox* and *Teeth*, lack a detailed consideration of the representation of female genitalia as moving image. Because of the importance the vagina plays to the plots and character arcs of *Chatterbox* and *Teeth*, each director's choice to omit physical representations of vaginas is important to examine.

*Chatterbox*, a low-budget film described by Rees as a "...Sexploitation movie," tells the story of Penelope, a woman whose vagina (whimsically named Virginia) miraculously develops the ability to talk.<sup>161</sup> The movie chronicles the capricious relationship between Penelope, a beautiful, blonde-haired woman looking for romance and the unseen Virginia, looking for sex, fame and notoriety as hoards of agents, usually men, look to profit from Virginia's ability. Rees's analysis recognizes the significance of this film as it directly confronts Freudian notions of abjection and suppression and manipulation of the id while concurrently representing the conflicting ideologies of "reticent domestic femininity" characterized within Penelope and sexual liberation characterized within Virginia.<sup>162</sup>

Despite her observation of such themes present in *Chatterbox*, Rees fails to remark upon the visual treatment of the female body during the movie. Virginia, arguably the dominant co-star of the movie itself, is never seen. Camera shots remain suggestive; a clip of Penelope walking down a street with the shot focused on only her clothed crotch and torso; Penelope sitting, while clothed, her legs spread slightly showing slight shadows between her thighs.

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<sup>161</sup> Rees, *The Vagina*, 229.

<sup>162</sup> Rees, *The Vagina*, 229.

Though this could be interpreted as Tom DeSimone's concern that an on-screen depiction of a talking vagina would most likely come across as caricatured and absurd, one must also consider his decision alongside his choice to depict Penelope's breasts.<sup>163</sup> In these scenes, Penelope is literally on display as part of a touring "freak show;" Curious to see the "talents" of the talking, singing Virginia, (mostly) men and women pay see Penelope and Virginia featured as a theatrical production. The result is similar to the scene in Thomas *Eakins The Gross Clinic*: Penelope's body is laid out against a raised table illuminated by a single spotlight; she is standing nude like a specimen to be dissected. As Virginia performs for the crowd, singing songs including "Wang Dang Doodle" and "Cock a Doodle Doo" all euphemistic implications of her broadcasted sexual prowess, Penelope looks away in shame.<sup>164</sup> Instead of focusing on her face to capture her disgraced expression, however, the camera is panned down to include a perfect profile of her breasts. The image of her breasts is very sexual almost to the point of being distracting: her nipples erect and bosoms full and lifted. Perhaps this choice represents the schism between the sexualization projected onto Penelope's female body and the reality of her inability to act upon sexual urges alluded to through Virginia's unabashed, even crude promiscuity. Perhaps Virginia's vocalization of her desires juxtaposed with absence of explicit vaginal imagery is meant to symbolize the contrast between women's sexual reality and societal taboos of female sexuality. Regardless of DeSimone's intentions, the omission of the vagina from the visual narrative of *Chatterbox* raises questions of the importance of the visibility and of invisibility of female genitalia. The absence of the vagina conveys the same types of myths,

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<sup>163</sup> It is also notable that Tom DeSimone's other works at this time consisted of porn movies and other films focused on exploitative/pornographic themes, much like *Chatterbox* itself. In consideration of his filmography at this time, the absence of the actual appearance of the vagina within *Chatterbox* could also be DeSimone's way of separating himself from the directly explicit content of the porn industry. Res, *The Vagina*, 230.

<sup>164</sup> Rees, *The Vagina*, 231.

taboos, or social prescriptions of female genitalia maintained under patriarchal standards for culture, art, and cinema.

In examining Mitchell Lichtenstein's independent movie *Teeth* from the same perspective, the vagina appears, once again, as the main focus of the storyline without ever appearing on screen. Released in 2007, thirty years after DeSimone's *Chatterbox*, *Teeth* tells the story of Dawn O'Keefe, a young woman whose violent sexual liberation develops from the discovery she possesses a *vagina dentata*. Like Virginia in *Chatterbox*, Lichtenstein posits Dawn's toothed vagina as autonomous from her own present consciousness. Until the reveal of her abnormality, Dawn appears as a relatively normal young woman. She has blond hair and blue eyes; she takes care of her ailing mother; she accepts the love of her doting step-father; she is the antithesis of her highly sexual, pot smoking, morally unbalanced step-brother Brad. Dawn's single forwardly present abnormality is her borderline obsessive devotion to purity. In fact, one of the audience's first interactions with Dawn is during a talk she delivers to members of "O," a cult-like organization pledging purity until marriage. She holds up her hand and shows the audience her purity ring, a red piece of plastic in the same "O" shape as the group's logo. She then instructs her audience, an array of pre-teens and teenagers, about the significance of the "O" ring: "the way it [the ring] wraps around your finger that's to remind you to keep your gift wrapped until the day you trade it in for that other ring, that gold ring..."<sup>165</sup>

Dawn's pledge, at first, appears fairly normal; however as she interacts outside the safe confines of her social group, it is clear that her pursuit of purity is compulsory. As she arrives for school, she is fully garbed, not an inch of her skin aside from her hands, neck and face showing. Her peers mock and laugh at her and her friends from the purity group as they walk to class. Two students come up to them making sexual innuendos. They jeer, "What kind of soda do you guys

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<sup>165</sup> Mitchell Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.

got huh?” “We got cherry!” “Let’s pop that cherry!”<sup>166</sup> In health class, a teacher lectures on the topic of sexual health. The camera focuses on a black and white anatomical drawing of the penis. The audience hears the teacher, “That’s it, then, for the penis,” he turns the page, “Let’s move on to the...to the ahem...uh the next page, the female...privates.”<sup>167</sup> The camera pans over to Dawn sitting at her desk, textbook open to a page covered by a large, golden sticker. The class, surprised by the presence of the sticker immediately begins to question what it is hiding, as if it could not be determined by process of elimination. The teacher explains that the state board ordered the sticker to be placed over the diagram in every textbook, once again avoiding use of any direct reference to the existence of the organs underneath.<sup>168</sup> The students are offended. Ryan, a boy earlier identified as crushing on Dawn shouts, “Oh my god! That’s fucked up...They showed the penis picture!”<sup>169</sup> The teacher immediately counters, “That’s different.”<sup>170</sup> Dawn raises her hand with resolute conviction. “I think I can tell you how it’s different. Girls have a natural modesty, it’s built into our nature and so depicting – ”<sup>171</sup> She is quickly cut off by her classmates’ teasing.

From the beginning of the film, Lichtenstein uses these exchanges as opportunities to further exhibit the gap between Dawn and her peers. In this particular scene, Dawn’s purity-focused disposition aligns hers with the teacher, who even as a grown man cannot utter the word vulva or vagina. Like Penelope in *Chatterbox*, Dawn, in these moments, is meant to represent a demure, composed ideal of femininity. However, unlike Penelope, Dawn is completely unaware

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<sup>166</sup> Mitchell Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.

<sup>167</sup> Mitchell Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.

<sup>168</sup> It is interesting to note that Lichtenstein fails to reference any specific town, city, or state in the movie. Establishing shots reveal that Dawn and her family live in a fairly rural, yet populated, town. There are numerous pans to two large nuclear stacks, seemingly out of place, looming behind Dawn’s family home. The presence of the nuclear stacks suggest reason for Dawn’s “abnormality” and perhaps are meant to reassure the audience that her condition is rare and not naturally occurring, but rather caused by manmade contaminants in her proximity.

<sup>169</sup> Mitchell Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.

<sup>170</sup> Mitchell Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Mitchell Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.

of her own body. As part of her vow of purity, she abstains from any and all contact with her own genitalia, even within the contexts of her own subconscious. When Toby, a young man in her purity group, displays interest in her, she begins to have “impure” thoughts. She is shown lying in her bed, eyes closed, thoughts of her and Toby standing side by side as bride and groom. The scene cuts between images of Dawn’s own thoughts and shots of Dawn lying in her bed hands sliding down towards her thighs and crotch. As she slides her hands into her panties and envisions a shirtless Toby, the scene is interrupted by a loud scream and a black and white rendering of a pincered scorpion, clearly Dawn’s subconscious alerting her of the presence of the *vagina dentata*. Claire Henry, author of *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, contemplates this scene in her discussion of *Teeth* and the myth of the *vagina dentata*. She suggests Dawn is “...coded as sitting on an uncomfortable border between the innocence of childhood...and the powerful and dangerous female sexuality developed in adolescence.”<sup>172</sup> Here, the image of the scorpion appears as a subconscious deterrent, however the power and danger of Dawn’s sexuality is convoluted. The presence of the *vagina dentata* represents both an untapped, sexual power and an uncontrolled, autonomous danger rooted in her sexual awakening.

Dawn’s crossing over from her childhood ignorance to the sexualized reality of adolescence manifests itself in her first coital interaction. Toby invites her to “the cave,” a spot where local teenagers go to have sex.<sup>173</sup> Once there, he attempts to persuade Dawn to have sex with him. When she refuses, Toby becomes manic. He forces her down and holds his hand over her mouth. As he presses down, Dawn, unable to scream, faints and Toby rapes her. In this semi-

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<sup>172</sup> Claire Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillian, 2014), 57.

<sup>173</sup> Emma Rees suggests the cave is posited as a dual symbol. Surrounded by lush vegetation and falling water, the cave is very secluded, evoking imagery of the Garden of Eden and the bible’s story of the fall of man, a story which is later referenced by the leader of the abstinence group as evidence as to why women should refrain from sexual intercourse. Emma Rees, *The Vagina*, 237.

conscious state Dawn appears helpless. It is amidst such high tensions and emotion that Dawn's *vagina dentata* is triggered, severing Toby's penis within her. Both begin to scream and as Toby pulls away the camera zooms out revealing what is left of his penis: a small stub of flesh gushing blood. As Dawn looks horrified from Toby to the ground, the audience is confronted with a shot of the severed shaft and head of Toby's limp penis. Lichtenstein takes advantage of this moment to concretely establish the castration anxiety associated in the myth of the *vagina dentata*.<sup>174</sup> Whereas the fear of the loss of the penis remains silently present within societal contexts, in *Teeth* it becomes a reality. The mutual expressions of panic between both Toby and Dawn are meant to communicate fear to the audience while the tension is heightened by employment of blood and penile prosthetics.<sup>175</sup> This momentary exchange also establishes Dawn's first encounter with her *vagina dentata*, symbolic of her first encounter with her "powerful and dangerous" adolescent sexuality.<sup>176</sup>

Following the attack, Dawn throws her purity ring into the lake, another indication of her sexual transformation. She goes home, where she rips the stickered page out of her anatomy book and removes the sticker to reveal the anatomical drawing of the female reproductive system. Unsatisfied by the drawing, Dawn turns to an internet search of female genital "abnormalities" and "mutations" and stumbles upon the myth of the *vagina dentata*. The next day, fearing the presence of the abnormality within herself, Dawn visits the gynecologist. Once again, Dawn finds herself the victim to a sexual predator. The doctor patronizes her when directing her foot to the stirrup, which he refers to as "Mr. Sockie," and assuring her, "Don't worry. I'm not going to bite you." Without fully explaining to her what he is doing, he opens her

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<sup>174</sup> Clair Henry, "Revision Rape-Revenge," 61.

<sup>175</sup> Clair Henry, "Revision Rape-Revenge," 61.

At the same time the over-exaggerated use of blood and gore in this scene reassure the audience of the horror fantasy. Realistically, the penis, because it does not contain a major artery, would not spurt blood in the same manner as depicted in the film.

<sup>176</sup> Clair Henry, "Revision Rape-Revenge," 57.

legs, removes his gloves, and inserts his fingers into her vagina to test for “flexibility.”<sup>177</sup> During the examination, the audience views the scene from Dawn’s perspective looking at the doctor forcing his fingers between her legs. She grimaces in pain and the doctor impatiently instructs her to breathe and stop resisting, disinterestedly telling her that something is obstructing his entry into her vagina. As Dawn’s physical and mental discomfort intensifies, the camera pans to her face. She looks terrified. The doctor’s complete disregard for her suffering forces the audience to experience the same uneasiness present in the first rape scene. Suddenly, Dawn’s worried face contorts and the doctor lets out a huge scream. The following seconds show the doctor jerking his arm, stuck between Dawn’s legs. Lichtenstein purposefully draws a parallel between this scene and the former rape scene. This time, the allusion to castration anxiety is more explicit as the doctor explicitly references the myth shouting, “It’s true! Vagina Dentata! Vagina Dentata!” In this case, the doctor’s fingers represent the penis. Erect and forceful, they are the appendage used to violate Dawn. The visceral drama of the first rape is repeated as the doctor breaks free, revealing that his fingers have been replaced with four fleshy, blood-spewing nubs. Each resembles Toby’s severed penis in their incompleteness and gore. Dawn gets off the table and the fingers fall to the floor between her body and the doctor, just as Toby’s penis appeared following the rape. Here, like in the rape scene, Dawn’s *vagina dentata* act, induced by fear. Though not separated from her morality, as the severing of these vaginal intruders continues to protect her body and its “natural modesty,” the clamping of her teeth still exists as an autonomous act.

Dawn leaves the gynecologist's office in a frenzy. She is guilty and panicked. Her lack of understanding of her sexuality and her vagina has led to pain and dismemberment. Recalling the article she read online, she realizes that the myth of the *vagina dentata* ends with a hero conquering the woman sexually by removing the teeth. She seeks out her classmate Ryan to be

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<sup>177</sup> Mitchel Lichtenstein, *Teeth*, 2007.



the hero to conquer her *vagina dentata*. Ryan gives Dawn sleeping pills and champagne, caresses her with a vibrator, and they begin to have sex, though no genitals are shown in the entirety of the scene. This is a pivotal moment in *Teeth's* plot as Lichtenstein completely reverses the expected outcome. The next morning, Ryan reveals to Dawn mid-coitus that he slept with her on a bet. As a frown comes over her face, Ryan screams. Dawn looks at him and simply says, "Oh shit." Ryan becomes the third castration.<sup>178</sup> Unsurprised that Ryan's penis was severed, Dawn dismounts and returns home. Suddenly astute to her sexual capability, Dawn plots revenge on her step-brother Brad, whose neglectful actions lead to her sick mother's death. Aware of and finally embracing her sexuality, Dawn enters Brad's room, allows him to penetrate her, and as he begins to thrust Dawn smiles. Once again, we see the same castration sequence: shrieks and the nub of a penis left on Brad's profusely bleeding groin. This time, however, Dawn acts as *femme fatale* climbing out of the bed, standing erect before Brad, and dropping the penis from between her legs.<sup>179</sup> Although the most triumphant of Dawn's encounters with the *vagina dentata*, the scene retains only a suggestion of her vagina's presence. Rather than a visual confrontation of Dawn's toothed vagina, the audience is left with a shot of Dawn's legs as Brad's penis is consumed by his Rottweiler, Mother.<sup>180</sup>

In an interview with Aaron Hills, writer for IFC Films website, Lichtenstein describes his intentions with this turn of events:

I wanted to both use and expose this myth...I thought the best horror movies deal with a deep-seated primal fear, and this is pretty primal. I also knew that in the end, I didn't want to perpetuate the gynophobia, so I'd turn it on its [ear]. The

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<sup>178</sup> It would be inappropriate to label Ryan or any of the other castrated men "victim" because it would be dismissive of Dawn's abuse. Claire Henry contends that even Ryan, the first male to give Dawn a pleasurable sexual experience, is a predator as his sexual advances on Dawn were made after he provided her with champagne and sleeping pills, both suggestive of date rape. Furthermore, his desire to have sex with her to win a bet, rather than out of love, does not technically depict a rape but makes Dawn a targeted vagina. Claire Henry, *Revision Rape-Revenge*, 65.

<sup>179</sup> Claire Henry, *Revision Rape-Revenge*, 64.

<sup>180</sup> The name "Mother" intentionally references the connection of castration anxiety with fear of the mother.

myth always has the hero conquering the woman, and destroying the teeth. I knew the woman would always be the hero and should never be conquered.<sup>181</sup>

Lichtenstein successfully frames Dawn in this heroic light in the final sequences of the movie. Unlike Penelope in *Chatterbox*, Dawn overcomes her initial estrangement from her vagina and its abilities for the betterment of her own self and other unsuspecting women. This idea is clearly alluded to following the rectification of her suffering with Brad's castration. Her actions in that moment simultaneously symbolize her vengeance on all males who abused her throughout the film and an embracing of her own sexuality. As a final act of severance, Dawn leaves her home. She accepts a ride with an older man and when they stop at a gas station and Dawn tries to open her door, the man locks the door an indication of his true intentions.<sup>182</sup> Yet again, Dawn is faced with a sexual predator. Dawn looks at him horrified, but within seconds, a smirk crosses her lips. She leans in towards him and the screen goes black. These last few moments are Lichtenstein's full affirmation of Dawn as protagonist. "Empowered" by her sexuality and control, she leaves the audience not as a saved damsel, but as sexual vigilante. Claire Henry describes the scene as indicative of films of "Raunch Culture," a term coined by Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, that describes women being encouraged to embrace society's hyper-sexualization of their body's and proliferate such treatment in their interactions with others as sign of empowerment.<sup>183</sup> In the final scene of *Teeth*, Dawn appears "empowered" because she has gained control of her *vagina dentata*, reflective of her coming to terms with her sexuality. However, this empowerment is limited because it is defined solely within the context

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<sup>181</sup> Aaron Hills, "Mitchell Lichtenstein on 'Teeth,'" *Did You Read*, IFC, January 14, 2008. Accessed February 14, 2016. <http://www.ifc.com/2008/01/mitchell-lichtenstein-on-teeth>

<sup>182</sup> Emma Rees refers to this scene as "an archetypal teen 'slasher' movie set-up," in her analysis (Rees, 240).

<sup>183</sup> Claire Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge*, 58. For more information on raunch culture and the tension it has created between Second and Third wave Feminists see: Benjamin Halligan "'({})": Raunch Culture, Third Wave Feminism and the Vagina Monologues." *Theory & Event* 17 (1): <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1517881810?accountid=14637>.

of Dawn's sexualization. She can only gain control of herself and of her life through "revenge" sex. Though sex is no longer her enemy, it becomes the only way Dawn can claim ownership over her *vagina dentata*. While *Chatterbox's* ending suggests a compliance and acceptance of the mutual existence of conflicting ideologies on female sexuality, *Teeth* promotes female "sexual liberation" as the sole pathway to empowerment.

Despite the vagina's clear contribution to this liberation, it exists only in dialogue and visual allusion. Furthermore, the visual of the vagina that appear in the film perpetuates stereotypical themes of female genitalia as dark, mysterious, and unknown. Like *Chatterbox*, *Teeth* contains character arcs and interactions centered exclusively on the vagina yet fails to explicitly depict the vagina even once. While *Teeth* goes one step beyond *Chatterbox* in depicting, very briefly, the anatomical drawing of the entire female reproductive system, the cross-sectional drawing fails to make any form of visual impact. It is also interesting to consider that the appearance of the anatomical diagram was a conscious statement Lichtenstein made on the unequal censorship of sexual organs and genitals in textbooks. In his interview with Aaron Hills he states:

"[S]ee the sticker — which did happen in at least one school, where the female anatomy was covered but not the male — in a way, that attitude created the *vagina dentata*, that attitude of whether it's maintaining mystery about women or subjugation. That's the same kind of fear that would come up with such a myth...there is a connection between that and this ridiculous invention that presumably men invented about women's anatomy."<sup>184</sup>

Even with the intentional insertion of the drawing as an act of censorial defiance, Lichtenstein's decision to avoid the vagina in *Teeth* still feels peculiar. Writer Alex Billington addresses this absence in an interview with Lichtenstein for the Sundance Film Festival. In the interview, Billington asks Lichtenstein, "How do you go about conveying the idea that she has *vagina*

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<sup>184</sup> Aaron Hills, "Mitchell Lichtenstein on 'Teeth,'" *Did You Read*.

*dentata* without actually going down the pornographic realm of showing a 'snarling vagina?'”<sup>185</sup> Even before receiving Lichtenstein’s response, Billington presents an answer to his own question. In connecting the image of the vagina immediately to “the pornographic realm,” Billington essentializes the appearance of the vagina as too sexualize for the screen, ultimately excusing its absence. In her critique of the vagina’s absence in *Teeth*, Claire Henry states that he quality of “not-to-be-looked-at-ness” Lichtenstein posits on the vagina is an action that perpetuates society’s fear of female genitalia.<sup>186</sup>

The visuals left for the audience to analyze instead offer themselves to the notions of the vagina as dangerous, dark, and unknown. In her discussion of *Teeth* in *The Vagina*, Emma Rees points out that one of the large, craggy trees in the foreground of the cave scene has a knot shaped very similarly to a vulva.<sup>187</sup> Approaching the topic from a Freudian perspective, the cave itself also serves as a symbol for the vagina. More specifically within the context of Dawn’s lived experience, the dark, jagged cave further enforces the fear and uncertainty Dawn experiences when confronting her own relationship with her body, her vagina, and her sexuality. In his interview with Alex Billington, Lichtenstein talks about the dental stalagmites of the cave as visual allegory stating, “...it seemed so perfect as a way to show without showing this *vagina dentata* in nature, because that thing is formed by nature, it's a cave, it's a toothed lip.”<sup>188</sup> At one point before she and Toby enter the cave following an awkward exchange about their romantic attraction to one another, she refers to it as “dangerous.” This recalls Henry’s idea of Dawn’s sexuality, as allegorically represented in *Teeth* as the cave, as dangerous. Lichtenstein’s failure to ease the audience’s fear of the monstrous toothed vagina, fear of castration, and overarching fear

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<sup>185</sup> Alex Billington, “Sundance Interview with *Teeth* Director Mitchell Lichtenstein,” *First Showing*, January 15, 2008. Accessed February 15, 2016. <http://www.firstshowing.net/2008/sundance-interview-with-teeth-director-mitchell-lichtenstein/>

<sup>186</sup> Claire Henry, *Revision Rape-Revenge*, 66.

<sup>187</sup> Emma Rees, *The Vagina*, 237.

<sup>188</sup> Alex Billington, “Sundance Interview,” *First Showing*.

of female genitalia in general causes *Teeth* to be more detrimental to the female sexual psyche than it is empowering. Had Lichtenstein offered an actual visual of the vagina, rather than simply alluding to it, as a solution for these fears, *Teeth* would have offered society a piece of mainstream culture to counter the exploitation of the vagina in Raunch culture.

### **Conclusion**

The presence and absence of visual representation of the vagina within mainstream contemporary culture must be examined because of the influence it has on societal perceptions of the female genitalia in general. The images of the “ideal” or “unreal” vagina that are currently proliferated through American society via pornography cannot exist solely. Currently, appearance of the vagina in mainstream cultural, for example movies like Lichtenstein’s *Teeth*, remains exploitative. Using the vagina as a means of creating an edgy, thrilling movie without showing the vagina in any context enforces pre-existing fears surrounding female genitalia. When artists, like Chicago, McCartney, Thomas, and Wallace, create vagina-friendly images it occurs in smaller sections of society that have less predominant voices. By generating conversation about representations of the vagina in a positive context alongside critiques of misrepresentation, or complete lack of such, in mainstream culture in order to counter the societal fear of the seeing and discussing female genitalia. Thus, studies of the communities producing positive vagina visuals, like “The Vagina as Image,” are necessary to bring alert the public to their presence.

## **Chapter 4: More than Just “Down There” – Union College, Social Media, and Euphemisms for Genitalia**

“Let’s just start with the word vagina. It sounds like an infection at best, maybe a medical instrument: ‘Hurry nurse, bring me the vagina.’ Vagina. Vagina. Doesn’t matter how many times you say it, it never sounds like a word you want to say.”

– Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 1996

Amidst this discussion of pockets of society where the vagina, vulva, cunt find refuge, women are confronted continuously with the question of what to call *it* and how to talk about *it*? As this study has shown thus far, texts like Inga Muscio’s *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, Virginia Braun’s writings on labiaplasty, or articles in a *Glamour* attempt to posit the vagina into contemporary social dialogue. Whether discussing the vagina and female genitalia in a scholarly or casual context, these authors’ contributions continue to vocalize the complexities of societal relationships with the vagina begun during the Women’s Movements of the 1970s. In order to fully assess the impact such texts have on the status of the vagina, or the subject of genitalia as a whole, within society, one must study the impact that they have on the conversational habits of individuals on a daily basis. Thus, a thorough observation of such influences within American culture of the twenty-first century must include a study of behaviors within an American demographic group that frequently interacting with both popular and academic materials.

For these reason, research for “*A Culture of Vaginas*” incorporated a survey focused on assessing correlations between use of genital euphemism in conversation and discussion of genitalia on various social media sites.<sup>189</sup> The aim of this survey was to identify the frequency of conversation surrounding male and female genitals, the contexts for such conversations,

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<sup>189</sup> For the methodology used for this research, see Chapter 1.

frequently used euphemism for male and female genitals, and sources of social media that offer articles, posts, or dialogue on genitalia. For this reason, participants of the survey were prompted with questions on language usage in relation to their own genitals and the genitals of the other sex. In thinking about responses in this way, the survey employs results related to male genitalia as a point of reference for assessing the contexts in which conversations about the vagina appear. This component of the survey took inspiration from Virginia Braun's and Celia Kitzinger's study titled "Semantic Categories and the Problem Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang," in the *Journal of Sex Research* (May 2001). Like Braun's and Kitzinger's study, this survey focused on the topic of genitalia holistically because thoughts on "proper" ways to discuss female genitalia call into question discussion of male genitalia and how they are received in society.

While the Braun and Kitzinger study yielded unique responses, the Union College participant pool offered surprisingly few unique female and male genital terms. The gender breakdown of survey respondents was 141 females, 48 males, 6 identifying as "other," 1 identifying as "transgender," and 6 unanswered.<sup>190</sup> While females made up a majority of participants, 68.44-percent, they generated only 49 unique female genital terms when referring to themselves. "Vagina" was the most popular term used in reference to female genitalia, listed by 115 or 82-percent of the female participants. Second and third to vagina are "pussy" with 29 responses and "vag" with 23 responses. In contrast, male respondents, making up 23.30-percent of participants, generated 80 unique male genital terms when referring to themselves. For male participants, "dick" was the most popular male genital term, listed by 46 or 96-percent of

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<sup>190</sup> This is significant because Union College's general gender demographic, according to Union College's website updated in 2016, is 53% male and 47% female. Based on these breakdowns, it would be anticipated that more men would respond to the survey because there are more of them on campus. Clearly this wasn't the case. This could be for a number of reasons, one mainly being that I am a woman and men may feel less comfortable talking about their genitals with a female stranger than if I had been a male stranger. Conversely, women may have felt more comfortable with sharing personal information through the survey because I am also a woman. Union is relatively homogenous in race-ethnicity, socio-economic class, geographic concentration of students. The website gives glimmers of this but nothing substantive enough to support.

individuals. “Penis” and “cock” came in second and third with 38 and 27 listings respectively. Both male and female students listed “mine,” “it,” “thing,” “me,” “pee-pee,” “private,” and “private parts” as terms they would use to describe their own genitalia.<sup>191</sup>

When asked to list terms or euphemism used to describe or talk about the genitalia of another gender, the results once again favored unique male genital terms. Female participants provided 63 unique male genital terms, while males only provided 34 unique female genital terms. “Dick,” “penis,” and “cock” were the top three male genital terms provided by female students with 119, 112, and 40 listings respectively. The most popular terms generated by male participants include “pussy” (41), “vagina” (37), and “vag” (10). Both dick and pussy are considered derogatory terms; however, pussy carries a much greater taboo in society, and thus, its popularity calls for deeper analysis. Interestingly, female participants named more terms to describe male genitalia than they produced terms to describe their own genitals. The only terms used by both male and females in this section were: “thing,” “it,” “privates,” and “private parts.”

Lastly, participants were asked to list the terms they used to describe their own genitalia with sexual partners and terms used to describe their sexual partners’ genitalia. 73-percent of all participants stated that they are sexually active. Specifically, 108 or 76-percent of female participants stated they are sexually active and 37 or 77-percent of male participants indicating they are sexually active. Thus, a majority of participants listed genitalia in this question. When asked to list terms for their own genitals with a sexual partner, women generated 21 unique responses. Of the 108 women stating they are sexually active, the most popular responses

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<sup>191</sup> Often, both male and females listed breasts and slang for breasts, such as “tits”, as female genitals. I speculate that the appearance of breasts alongside terms for genitalia is a conflation of breasts as sexualized body parts associated with sexualized genitals. When movies, TV shows, or advertisements show sexualized female bodies, they rely on the breasts, as they cannot show any other genitals. Thus, the appearance of breasts, albeit in specific contexts, signifies sex. This is reinforced by the way young women learn about their bodies following puberty. The term “private parts” in reference to the female body is about breasts as much as it is about the vagina. Thus the simultaneous sexualization and compulsive need to “hide” or “protect” the breasts in order to maintain purity posits them in the public’s mind as genitals.



included vagina (68), and pussy (40). For the 37 men stating they are sexually active, the most popular terms included dick (31) and penis (19). Conversely, when women were asked to list terms they used to describe their partners' genitalia they generated 24 unique responses with penis (69) and dick (54) being the top listed terms. When men were asked to list terms they used to describe their partners' genitalia they generated 19 unique responses with pussy (24), and vagina (20), as the most used terms. Both men and women listed "it" as a term used to describe their sexual partners' genitalia.

In each context, women were more likely to produce a greater amount of unique genital terms for male genitalia, in both a casual context and a sexual context. Braun's and Kitzinger's study showed a similar pattern amongst their subjects, males and females ages 16-50 living in Northern England.<sup>192</sup> In their study, Braun and Kitzinger assess the use of euphemism versus the use of anatomical language in subjects' discussion of genitalia. Unlike Braun's and Kitzinger's study, participants in this survey were less likely to use euphemism to refer to either female or male genitalia. Subjects used slang more frequently than euphemism. Across all questions, the terms "vagina," "pussy," "penis," and "dick," were used most often by participants of all genders. In some ways, one can interpret "vagina" as a euphemism because when used in these contexts it is meant to refer to the vulva, the complete "package" of female genital organs including the vagina, labia, clitoris, etc.

When examined alongside response patterns, that reflected 90 male participants, the use of euphemism, or lack thereof in the survey, reveals persistent reservation amongst Union students to discuss genitalia in public or private conversation. The fewer responses may be attributed to two factors. One, and potentially the most influential, is the subject matter of the

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<sup>192</sup> For more information and statistics see: Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, "'Snatch,' 'Hole,' or 'Honey-pot'? Semantic Categories and the Problem of Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang," in *The Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 2 (2001). JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813705>. Accessed November 04, 2015.

survey. Though offered an incentive, a chance to win one of eight twenty-five dollar gift cards to local stores, the survey asked participants to divulge information on their own speaking habits about their genitalia. The survey was distributed online and ensured anonymity to participants; only those who chose to enter the lottery for the gift cards provided identifying information, and this was kept separate from survey responses.<sup>193</sup> Nevertheless, respondents might have felt uncomfortable answering questions, thinking about their genitals when prompted with questions on the survey, or fearful of being identified in their responses. Such fears are demonstrated by a discrepancy between survey responses and entries for the lottery. Of the 206 survey participants, only 150 students entered the lottery. While this reflects that approximately 73-percent of the participant pool felt comfortable identifying themselves as general participants in the study, 17-percent of participants chose to withhold this information. In some cases, this may indicate an individual's reluctance to provide identifying information in response to the "embarrassing" subject of the questionnaire.<sup>194</sup> If this is the case, these participants' behaviors point to the persistence of societal messages communicating that discussion of genitalia, outside of necessary medical conversation, is something that should be hidden or considered taboo.

The responses to the survey itself also offer perspective on the discomfort associated with discussion of genitalia amongst college students. The survey consisted of nineteen questions, fifteen of which were open-ended, text-response questions. The majority of the questions were designed in this format to allow students a space in which to think and thoughtfully discuss their

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<sup>193</sup> In order to keep the survey data separate from the lottery entries, students were provided with a link to a Google form upon completion of the survey. The Google form was private and required a Union College login. Students were then asked to submit name, email address, and class year.

<sup>194</sup> Participants accessed the survey through a public URL provided to them in a campus-wide email to the Union College student body. Because the URL was public, students had the ability to share the survey with members outside the Union College community via email or other forms of message sending. For this reason, some of the fifty-six participants that did not submit a Google form response may not have done so because they were not members of the Union College community. There is currently no way of discerning whether a student withheld this information for reasons concerning embarrassment or anonymity or because that student does not attend Union.

perspectives on each experience or phenomenon outlined in the question. Because of the format of the questions, longer, multi-sentence responses were expected. Instead, the bulk of answers received consisted of lists of words and responses composed of two or less sentences. While such responses provided full answers to the questions being asked, they provided little detail to analyze various influences on participants' experiences. On average, between six and twelve of the two-hundred and six responses were more than two sentences and they never exceeded seventy-five words, the equivalent of approximately four or five sentences.<sup>195</sup> In constructing the survey, there was an expectation that students would offer more complex answers, so the trend of brevity observed throughout a larger portion of responses was unexpected. This pattern, like the pattern of students submitting survey but not lottery responses, can also be interpreted as reflecting a discomfort amongst participants. While the list-like, fragmented responses may result from student desire to complete the survey expediently or from a desire to have something to submit in order to be eligible for the gift card lottery, such patterns also communicate a hesitance to share this kind of "private" information with a stranger. A fuller response to a question includes personal introspection on one's experiences with the material being addressed in a question, whereas the typical response offers what the participant believes is the minimal amount of information necessary for the study. Take the answers to the following prompt, for

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<sup>195</sup> The only response that exceeded more than 75 words was one submitted by an anonymous "tri-gendered pyrofox." Clearly a being that does not identify as human, this fox's survey answer had to be disregarded not only for being from a non-human participant (as this study only focuses on humans and their relationship with genitalia), but also because the response was consciously intended as a joke as it recounts a dramatically unrealistic instance in a crude and violent manner. If such an instance actually occurred, the "tri-gendered pyrofox" would not only be a sexual assailant and a murderer, but also be unable to attend Union and respond to this survey. Though the answers given by this participant fail to provide explicitly useful information for the study discussed in this chapter, the immature, fictitious nature of the response reflects a negative effect of the genital/sexual taboo in American culture. Lack of exposure and educational discussion of genitals foster a collective sense of discomfort around these and similar topics within society. Thus, when prompted to talk about these subjects, even in the private context of online surveys, some individuals feel uncomfortable to the point in which they deflect their own discomfort with inappropriate humor. Fortunately, this was the only participant to respond in this way. One other student "completed" the survey with single letters submitted in each box, which were completely irrelevant to the questions being asked.

instance: “please briefly describe conversations you have had with your parent(s) or legal guardian(s) about genitalia.” Of the 206 participants, 58 stated they never had a discussion on genitalia, or anything having to do with genitalia, with their parents. Generally, these responses were answered with one word “none” or “n/a.” Of the 148 participants who stated they had a conversation with their parents about genitalia, only 10 participants provided a response of over 60 words. In one of these responses, a female student reflects:

[These conversations were] Pretty awkward for me, parents (mainly father) were very direct and comfortable about the subject, I wasn't comfortable talking to them about it, almost all conversations were spontaneous they just decided it might be a good teaching moment right then and there, they did all the talking, I just half listened, parents made it a priority that I were to be educated about sexual topics, conversation about genetalia [sic] was mostly connected to broader conversation about sex and sexuality, never specifically about genetalia.<sup>196</sup>

This answer exemplifies the thoughtfulness hoped for in responses to the survey. It demonstrates introspectiveness, as the student shares her discomfort with talking to her parents about genitalia, and at the same time, demonstrates honesty, as she reveals that her parents were “comfortable about the subject,” only discussing it with her at times that they deemed beneficial.

On the other hand, the majority of answers were short and frank, leaving little opportunity to analyze the answer. For example, a male student wrote that his conversations with his parents regarding genitalia were “factual & pedantic.” Another student described them as “extremely minimal.” A different male student recounts, “I was told at some point to aim and shoot, and that’s pretty much it.” This question specifically asked students to think back on prior experiences, often requiring them to reflect on the early years of their teenage lives when issues like sex, puberty, and menstruation came into their lives.

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<sup>196</sup> The spelling of genitalia as “genetalia” appeared in the response.

For women, whose responses made up the majority of the survey results at a 68.44-percent response rate, answers more often touched upon menstruation and pregnancy rather than sexual health specifically. One female student recalls, “We [she and her parents] didn't really talk about it [genitalia [sic]]. The most ‘adult’ talk we had was my mom explaining what pads were for when I was like 16. I guess they just assumed I would find out on my own.” Another student stated that she and her parents had “health related conversations.” Similarly another said that the only mention of genitalia that came up between her and her parents was “just about my period.” Interestingly, women’s responses were more likely to mention the specific parent with whom they had the conversation. Of the parents mentioned, 52 individual responses contained mention of the mother while only 11 individual responses mentioned the father. Of those 11 responses, 3 female students specified that their fathers were involved in their discussions of genitalia while 5 other female students mentioned their fathers as not being involved. Only 3 male students revealed that they had conversations with their fathers. A male student said his conversation with his dad failed to offer any viable information: “My dad still tells me at this age that he bought me with his 25% discount in God's magical baby store.” More than half of the 148 students that stated they have had conversations with their parents about genitalia, or more commonly situations involving use of their genitalia like sex or menstruation, described, brief one-time dialogues. This could partially explain the brevity in student answers as many of them had little to nothing to talk about on this topic.

The survey contained two other questions intended to assess student exposure to conversations about genitalia. The purpose of these questions was to look for correlations between student exposure to conversations on genitalia, both their own and that of members of the other sexes, and euphemism used in referring to genitals. The first of these questions

prompted students to describe their experiences with health or sex education and the language used by teachers in the contexts of those courses. Of the 206 participants, only 24 students, about 12-percent of respondents, received no health class or sex education prior to taking the survey. Several attribute this to their school's curriculum. One student answered, "No," because "I attended a Catholic school and there were no programs for this discussion." Another student stated that she never received sex education because she was homeschooled. Furthermore, she also never received "the talk" from her parents. The remaining 182 students described experiences in health and sex education courses spanning from the 4th grade through high school. Only 4 participants recalled having taken a sex-ed or health class more than once during their elementary, middle, or high school careers. The 4 students whose schools taught health education more than once stated that sexual education was a small component of their various courses beginning in the 5th grade and ending in different points in high school. Each of them also described that it was something continuously discussed in more detail as the years progressed. In contrast, students who only went through one class varied in their recollection of curriculum. Many stated that first mention of genitalia in school occurred during puberty talks, mainly amongst women. These discussions of genitalia, however, were a part of sexual education courses in Middle School leaving their content difficult to recall for many participants.

The last question prompting students to reflect on alternative contexts in which they have seen genitalia asked:

Have you ever looked at genitalia outside of the context of your own body or the body of your sexual partner(s)? If so, please briefly describe the context of this experience (for example, did you see genitalia in a biology or anatomy class? A pornographic magazine? A movie? An Internet article? Etc.)

Twenty-seven participants responded that they had not looked at genitalia outside of the context of their own body or that of their sexual partner.<sup>197</sup> Of the 179 male and female respondents that stated they had looked at genitalia in another context offered a variety of reflections on the subject, though only 12 of the responses were longer than 60 words. 86 mentioned seeing genitalia in some form or pornography, either still images in magazines, Internet ads, or online video. One respondent described his experience interacting with genitalia outside the context of his own or that of a sexual partner as a commonplace part of his daily routine. He shared, “I don’t think I’ve gone more than a day without seeing some genitalia, mostly in pornographic material.” Many of the answers that mentioned pornography described accidental encounters with such media. These types of encounters included spam email, pop-up advertisements, or pornographic images turning up in search results on the Internet.<sup>198</sup>

One hundred twenty-two students mentioned seeing images of genitalia in the context of a class either in a textbook, diagram, or movie. 67 of these responses specifically listed biology courses while the remaining 55 listed health or anatomy classes in their answers. A female student reflects on her experiences with genitalia. She explains:

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<sup>197</sup> The study did not ask students if they have ever consciously looked at their own genitalia. It would have been an interesting question to ask considering 72.64% of the participant pool is sexually active. Furthermore, it would have been telling to see whether females were more likely to avoid contact with their vaginas than men were with their penises.

<sup>198</sup> Author and writer for *New York Times*, Peggy Orenstein recently released a revised essay from her book *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* for *The New York Times* Sunday Review. In “When did Porn Become Sex Ed,” Orenstein addresses the taboo of embracing female sexuality and the effects it has on sexual education in America. In doing so, Orenstein also brings the taboo of talking about the vagina into conversation: “It starts, whether intentionally or not, with parents. When my daughter was a baby, I remember reading somewhere that while labeling infants’ body parts (“here’s your nose,” “here are your toes”), parents often include a boy’s genitals but not a girl’s. Leaving something unnamed, of course, makes it quite literally unspeakable.” As a result, Orenstein states that the both boys and girls turn to pornography to learn about sexual relationships. The results of the survey demonstrate similar patterns of silence in regards to female sexuality and sexual organs during parental talks about genitalia. However, while Orenstein discusses silence in relation to teaching young girls about their genitalia, the survey demonstrates that such silence is extended as both male and female participants stated never having received “the talk” from their parents. Peggy Orenstein, “When Did Porn Become Sex Ed?” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2016, [http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/opinion/sunday/when-did-porn-become-sex-ed.html?\\_r=0](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/opinion/sunday/when-did-porn-become-sex-ed.html?_r=0). Accessed March 20, 2016.

I have seen genitalia in biological textbooks and didn't mind, but I don't like the idea of seeing another person's genitalia in person or in movies. To me it is very revealing and makes me almost feel as if I am betraying my partner, or seeing an intimate side of a person I don't know, and makes me feel uncomfortable.

Participants proved to be reflective in their answers offering brief descriptions of why they viewed genitalia within a certain context. In some cases, student responses seemed defensive, as if fearing they would be judged for looking at genitalia. A female student, for example, stated, “I've seen pictures in textbooks but that's the extent to which I've seen other people genitalia that was not mine or my partners.”<sup>199</sup> The same student also mentioned that she refrains from talking about her own genitalia during sex because “it's an uncomfortable topic.” A male student reflects on his experiences seeing genitalia and includes introspection on his interactions with pornography:

I have seen genitalia in a scientific context through health class, TED Talks, and Sex + videos. In these videos I have learned about specific parts of both the penis and vagina, both in how they work and how they are stimulated. I have also seen porn. This is usually a conflict between this arouses me but it is fake and I morally object.

Based on responses to this question, students interact with images of genitalia, both male and female, quite frequently despite many expressing their discomfort. Of the 179 students that stated they saw genitalia outside of the context of their body, 30-percent of students listed movies as the sources of genital imagery while 25-percent specifically listed “the Internet” as a source of these images. In considering this data, one must also note the access students have to the Internet. The 86 students who included porn in their lists, making up nearly 50-percent of the participants viewing genitalia outside of the contexts of their or their sexual partners' bodies, admitted accessing this material over the internet. Of the males taking the survey, 23.30-percent

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<sup>199</sup> The participant's use of the word “partners” with no apostrophe leaves her response ambiguous as there is not determination of how many partners she to which she refers.



of participants, 71-percent stated they consumed porn through the Internet. In contrast, of the females taking the survey, 68.44-percent of participants, only 31-percent admitted to accessing porn. All six students identifying their gender as “Other” listed porn as a source to view images of genitalia. The only student identifying as “Transgender” did not report watching porn.<sup>200</sup>

Anticipating the Internet’s influence on student access to porn, this study also evaluated use of social media, through internet on a computer or mobile device, in order to examine any correlations between participants’ language usage and language usage on social media.<sup>201</sup> When prompted to list social media accessed on a regular basis, 192 students listed social media sites including: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, BuzzFeed, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and Pinterest.<sup>202</sup> Of the social media sites identified, 173 students stated they used Facebook, 121 Instagram, 54 BuzzFeed, 48 Snapchat, 34 Twitter, 33 Tumblr, 26 Reddit, and four Pinterest. On average, students spent between a half hour and an hour on each social media website they listed. Students generally listed between two and three websites or apps. Following the question about social media usage, students were asked to list terms or euphemisms commonly used on these websites and the contexts in which they appeared. In their responses, very few students described the forms of media in which these terms were present. The participants that did offered very vague contexts such as online “articles” or “videos.” Language usage observed by students on these sites correlated that language survey participants listed in referring to their and/or their

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<sup>200</sup> The study did not ask students their sexuality. Including this question on the survey may have show correlations between sexuality and language usage relating to genitalia.

<sup>201</sup> A 2015 report written by PEWResearch Center analyst Andrew Perrin outlines social media trends from 2005-2015. Perrin reports on surveys conducted over the past decade by PEWResearch stating that over 65% of adults use social media sites and 90% of young adults (ages 18-29) are users of social media sites. Perrin identifies the young adult demographic as most likely to use social media sites. I selected my survey demographic, all Union College students, because they fall into this age range (18-22). Perrin’s article states that men and women are equally likely to use social media as 68% of women and 62% of men identifying as accessing these types of sites. See Andrew Perrin, “Social Media Usage: 2005-2015,” *PEWResearch Center*, October 8 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>202</sup> Five students stated that they did not use social media and nine students left this question blank.

sexual partners' genitalia. These included dick (81), pussy (74), vagina (50), penis (46), cock (35), and cunt (13). A large number of students mentioned that on websites like Facebook, the word "dick" appeared generally in reference to a person as an insult rather than in direct reference to the penis. One student pointed out, "if its a personal post its usually dick or pussy, if its an article penis and vagina."

In order to examine the contexts in which such terms appear and reflect on Internet communities using these terms, an assessment of online, social media sites was conducted. The intent of this was to identify which social media sites offer a platform for the discussion of genitalia, specifically the vagina as "*A Culture of Vaginas*" focuses on representations of vaginas, and how discussion of genitalia is treated. The websites chosen for this analysis include Buzzfeed, Reddit, and Tumblr. Although Facebook was the most popularly used form of social media listed on the survey, media consumption on Facebook depends heavily on individual factors, i.e. what articles or statuses friends are posting, what pages each individual "likes," and cookies on an individual's computer. Furthermore, Facebook, and often serves as a platform through which articles or videos posted on other sites, like Buzzfeed, Reddit, or Tumblr, are shared.<sup>203</sup> Buzzfeed, Reddit, and Tumblr, in contrast, offer users different forms of content sharing and community. Finally, the sharing of information through Facebook serves as a mediation of communication, a sharing on behalf of the person who published or posted a piece. In this way, and specifically in relation to posts related to "questionable" or taboo topics like the

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<sup>203</sup> A 2014 report written by PEWResearch Center analyst Aaron Smith outlines Facebook usage among the American public. Smith reports on surveys conducted in 2013 by PEWResearch naming Facebook the most popular form of social media, as 57% of American adults access the site. Smith's article considers new trends in users' "likes" and "dislikes" when using the website. He states that both men and women, 46% of the survey participant pool, cite the "ability to share with many people at once" as a major reason for using Facebook. Aaron Smith, "6 New Facts about Facebook," *PEWResearch Center*, February 3, 2014, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/03/6-new-facts-about-facebook/>.

vagina, people can share ideas and articles without directly associating themselves with stereotypes, like feminism and lesbianism, most commonly associated with such subject matter.

Of the three sites examined BuzzFeed is the outlier, serving as a “cross-platform, global network for news and entertainment that...creates and distributes content for a global audience and utilizes proprietary technology to continuously test, learn and optimize.”<sup>204</sup> BuzzFeed operates similarly to the online archives and blogs popular on *Cosmopolitan* with contributors posting articles on various “categories” within the website. Unlike the *Cosmopolitan* blogs, however, BuzzFeed allows site visitors to create accounts and submit posts to the BuzzFeed *Community*. The BuzzFeed staff states this portion of the website allows users “...to share humor, cool stuff you've found, insights into identity and fandom, personality and trivia quizzes...” This ultimately creates a blog-like space for contributors to interact<sup>205</sup> Reddit and Tumblr serve in a similar capacity in providing their users with the ability to post, comment, find, and create communities individualistically. Reddit describes itself as “...a source for what's new and popular on the web,” allowing “[u]sers like you [to] provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what's good and what's junk.”<sup>206</sup> The site features sections called “sub-reddits,” which focus threaded discussion on a particular topic ranging from cute animal pictures to women’s health. Similarly, Tumblr advertises, “Tumblr lets you effortlessly share anything,” including “...text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos.”<sup>207</sup> In this way, users can create their own blogs, share media, and populate the sites with community-specific content. Both Reddit and Tumblr have been described as online bulletin boards, allowing users to personalize their experiences on the site by following particular sub-boards or pages or through posting their own

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<sup>204</sup> “About BuzzFeed,” *Buzzfeed*, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/about>.

<sup>205</sup> “About BuzzFeed Community,” *Buzzfeed*, Accessed February 28, 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/community/about>.

<sup>206</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Reddit*, Accessed February 28, 2016, <https://www.reddit.com/wiki/faq#Whatdoesthenameredditmean>.

<sup>207</sup> “About Tumblr,” *Tumblr*, Accessed February 28, 2016, <https://www.tumblr.com/about>.

content. In allowing users to dictate the content of the sites, pages, or discussions, BuzzFeed, Reddit, and Tumblr have allowed people from all over the country and world to connect based on shared interests. In recent years, there has been a notable rise in discussion of the vagina in media on these websites, and as a result, communities centered around female genitalia in the context of health, sex and sexuality, and appreciation.

### **The Vagina on BuzzFeed**

As a company that focuses on “social news and entertainment” BuzzFeed combines traditional media consumption, such as news articles, with new forms of social media and culture-sharing through humorous lists, surveys, polls, videos, and quizzes.<sup>208</sup> The website offers the opportunity to examine the content consumed by mainstream Internet users as 54-percent of BuzzFeed’s audience is 18-34, a demographic that includes the participants in the survey.<sup>209</sup> Posts on the main site are organized into one of thirty-two thematic categories. Based on several searches on the website, BuzzFeed has been producing and posting vagina-centric articles since 2007, only one year after the company’s creation in 2006. The first vagina post to populate the BuzzFeed feed was posted in November of 2007 titled “The Vulva Puppet.”<sup>210</sup> Though the article appears in the search results, it is no longer accessible. The link takes users to the page featuring the title and a brief description of the article’s content: “Segment on the *Tyra Banks Show* features a vulva puppet, which is an actual educational tool you can buy. Just in time for

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<sup>208</sup> Summer Sulieman, “How BuzzFeed is Disrupting the Media and Changing the Way We Think About Content,” *The Distillery*, January 15, 2016, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://blog.noew.org/distillery/2016/01/15/buzzfeed-disrupting-media-changing-way-think-content/>.

<sup>209</sup> David Pierson, “NBC Universal Chases a Younger Audience with BuzzFeed Deal,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 18 2015, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-nbcuniversal-buzzfeed-20150819-story.html>,

<sup>210</sup> “The Vulva Puppet,” *Buzzfeed*, November 7, 2007, accessed February 29, 2016, [http://www.buzzfeed.com/buzz/The\\_Vulva\\_Puppet#.gnq7Y5PMY](http://www.buzzfeed.com/buzz/The_Vulva_Puppet#.gnq7Y5PMY)

Christmas! We have nightmares about getting eaten by one of these.”<sup>211</sup> Underneath these lines is a disclaimer from the BuzzFeed team stating that because the article had been part of *Buzzfeed Classic*, the original posts on the website, it “may not represent BuzzFeed’s current editorial standards.”<sup>212</sup> There is no way to know why the article was removed; however, continuous publishing of vagina-positive articles, videos, and quizzes on BuzzFeed from 2007 to the present suggests that it was not due to questionable content. Because of the eclectic nature of media posted by BuzzFeed, from news articles to zodiac quizzes, the pieces dealing with the vagina range widely in format and in tone. Some of the articles are very similar in content and format to the *Smitten* blogs on *Cosmopolitan* discussed in Chapter 2.

An article titled, “9 Sex Tips that Anyone With a Vagina Should Try,” combines the same quirky subject material with playful delivery of information as the *Cosmo* articles. Like sex columns on the *Smitten* blog, BuzzFeed article authors incorporate research and commentary from outside experts to substantiate their points, arguments, and claims. For example, Casey Gueren, author of “9 Sex Tips that Anyone With a Vagina Should Try,” reports on a survey conducted for OMGyes.com, an emerging subscription website for exploring sex techniques through non-pornographic video tutorials.<sup>213</sup> Her article reports on nine of the most popular and successful sex tips amongst American women in a manner typical of BuzzFeed’s online articles; facts, statistics, and interviews with gynecologists, sexologists, or vagina experts appear

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<sup>211</sup> “The Vulva Puppet.”

<sup>212</sup> “The Vulva Puppet.”

<sup>213</sup> Casey Gueren, “9 Sex Tips that Anyone With a Vagina Should Try,” *Buzzfeed Life*, February 6, 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/caseygueren/sex-tips-for-vaginas#.xtGAogX1>.

Casey Gueren is the “sex expert” who authors a majority of BuzzFeed’s “scholarly” vagina articles. She is constantly referenced on other social media websites including Reddit and Tumblr.

The survey referenced in Gueren’s article was based on interviews of 1000 cisgendered women and the opinions on the most successful sexual techniques. Researchers Lydia Daniller and Rob Perkins conducted the interviews and then sex researcher Debby Herbenick used the responses to create a survey to sent to a participant pool of 1000 women across the United States (Debby Herbenick is one of the co-authors of *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and the Vulva*).

alongside Internet memes and photographs of vulva-shaped objects. Gueren breaks each of the nine sex tips down for her readers, offering statistical data from the survey, quotes from sex expert and co-author of *Read My Lips* Debby Herbenick, and her own commentary. BuzzFeed posts also interact with their readers by tracking reactions in bar graph tracker at the bottom of the article. The options include: love (or heart </3 ), win, yaaass, lol, omg, fail, ew, hate ( or broken heart </3 ), cute, and WTF. Gueren's article received 187 loves and 76 wins, with only eight fails, three ews, two hates, and one WTF.<sup>214</sup> The article as a whole was very well received as the majority of comments left by readers elaborated upon the sex tips Gueren listed, reflecting on their own successes during sexual experiences.

In a reaction to a negative comment complaining about the complexities of gender identity and calling for a return to “the old days” when “people kept these things [gender] to themselves, one female user manages to summarize the community BuzzFeed has created for its users: “Welcome to BuzzFeed. If you're society's old definition of ‘normal’, you are not welcome here.”<sup>215</sup> Though this comment is aggressive in telling the other user she is not welcome because of her views, it does capture the “non-normative” nature of BuzzFeed as a platform of pop-culture and popular media.<sup>216</sup> Unlike other popular websites, like Facebook, BuzzFeed's articles, videos, and quizzes with the word “vagina” in the title, appear openly on the homepage in small thumbnails towards the top of the screen rather than the main headline sections; they are not something that need to be specifically sought after through individual searches.

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<sup>214</sup> Casey Gueren, “9 Sex Tips.”

<sup>215</sup> Comment written by Heathernormanb on February 2016; Response written by Incivism on February 2016; Casey Gueren, “9 Sex Tips.”

<sup>216</sup> The gender of the commenter is determined from her user name and profile photograph.

Aside from health or sex related articles, which vary greatly in format from the formality of Gueren's article to more list like formats seen in Julia Reinstein's 2015 article "Let Your Vagina Breathe, Says Scientist," BuzzFeed offers posts focused on content sharing.<sup>217</sup> Many of these content sharing posts, such as Christina Lan's "17 Products That'll Make Your Vagina Love You More," are composed of links to vagina friendly products featured on other websites. Lan's article, for instance, features an eclectic list of alternative menstrual products, jewelry, comfortable and breathable undergarments, and vagina-related decorations available on independent websites like Etsy.<sup>218</sup> Quizzes like "How Should You Decorate Your Vagina," provide users with the latest trend in "pubic hair fashion" and "vajazzling," both of which are topics addressed in vagina self-help guides like *Read My Lips* and *V is for Vagina*. Instead of writing short articles about each trend, however, quiz developers Reme Patil and Sian Butcher inform women, men, and anyone else taking the quiz what trend would best fit their (real or figurative) vagina based on their answers to personality questions like preferred pubic hair length, favorite singer, and signature clothing style. While the quizzes, videos, and articles seem silly, they do not juvenilize language or essentialize the vagina to its sexual capacities.

As a whole, media discussing the vagina that appears on BuzzFeed treats the vagina as part of the body, much like Lars von Trier or Catherine Breillat treat female genitalia in their films discussed in Chapter 3. Various posts give special attention to the vagina, not to create spectacle or taboo, but rather to insert it back into popular dialogue. In an interview with

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<sup>217</sup> To see this style of post see Julia Reinstein's article "Let Your Vagina Breathe, Says Science," *Buzzfeed*, July 18, 2015, Accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/juliareinstein/no-panties-no-problems#.icoW7a8VA>.

<sup>218</sup> Underneath the title, Lan expands on vagina, recognizing the euphemistic nature of the word in her title, and adds "and the vulva, Viva La Vulva!"

Etsy is website that features artist shops on which artists can sell a variety of vintage, second-hand, or hand-crafted objects. Etsy has developed a very prevalent community for vagina art, crafts, jewelry, etc. While Etsy doesn't offer a community in the same sense of story telling, consciousness raising, and group discussion, it does celebrate the beauty of the vagina and vulva in a non-sexual way. For these reasons, many of the products featured on Etsy often appear on BuzzFeed posts like Reinstein's.

Summer Suleiman, editor of *The Distillery*, BuzzFeed creator Jonah Peretti stated that the mission of BuzzFeed was to create content with impact. Suleiman quotes Peretti:

If you have a big impact on a large number of people – that should be the ultimate goal. But it's harder to measure impact, it's actually people's lives. It's not just something that's on a phone or a computer. We look at does our news or reporting help change laws or change powerful institutions...with our entertainment content, we look to see if people share with others in their lives as a way to laugh with them, and engage with them, and connect with other people.<sup>219</sup>

With more than 200 million unique visitors to the BuzzFeed website and nearly 6 billion monthly global content views, the website possesses great potential to generate the impact that Peretti discusses. By including various representations of female genitalia in the content, the vagina and the vulva are given a voice within in the Internet community and in turn, in society.

### **The Vagina on Reddit**

Reddit, like BuzzFeed, is a content sharing website. Unlike BuzzFeed, however, it is composed of a series of threaded discussions known as subreddits. Individuals can create accounts and upload posts to Reddit threads or specific subreddits, but one does not need an account to access the discussions. Posts appear on the main page, but in order to access a specific subreddit it must be entered into the URL, almost like a secret code to access the private community of the discussion.<sup>220</sup> In this way, Reddit can be considered more privatized and specialized, creating small safe communities through which members can ask questions or converse on specific issues, or limited, as one must know of a particular subreddit in order to engage in the discussion. For more sensitive or taboo issues like female genitalia, the subreddit system offers a safer space to talk about women's health, sex and sexuality, and general habits

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<sup>219</sup> Summer Suleiman, "A Look at the Man Behind BuzzFeed," *The Distillery*, January 11, 2016, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://blog.noew.org/distillery/2016/01/11/look-man-behind-buzzfeed/>.

<sup>220</sup> To find a subreddit online one would have to type reddit.com/r/(nameofthesubreddit) into the URL bar.



related to the vagina. Reddit is, for the most part, an unmonitored website, meaning that hateful, bigoted subreddits can appear because anyone with an account on Reddit can create a subreddit.<sup>221</sup> For this reason, it is very easy to find the antithesis of a “vagina culture” on the website. Furthermore, a 2013 report from Pew Research Center states that of the young adult demographic, more men use Reddit than women.<sup>222</sup> Thus, much of the user-posted content Take for example searching the word “vagina” on the main page search bar, the first several results includes pornographic content such as “Wet Vaginas” or user-written erotica like “TIFU By Being a Grill and Having a lot of Sex with my Vagina and Butthole.”<sup>223</sup>

Despite the questionable content found through a general search for “vagina”, the topic of female genitalia comes up frequently in subreddits in both positive and negative contexts. Some of the most popular subreddits touching upon these topics include /r/twoxchromosomes, /r/askwomen, /r/thegirlsurvivalguide, /r/twoxsex, and /r/badwomensanatomy. These subreddits, though not explicitly about the vagina, represent communities of both women and men that answer questions and demystify misconceptions around women’s sexuality and bodies. Three subreddits, /r/twoxchromosomes, /r/askwomen, and /r/twoxsex, deal with questions on the vagina and women’s genitalia because they consist of medical/biological and sexual topics than /r/thegirlsurvivalguide and /r/badwomensanatomy, though the topic of vaginas comes up often on /r/badwomensanatomy. This thread features misconceptions of female bodily functions posted on other websites, media, or Reddit posts on the Internet. The subreddit /r/askwomen is a very

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<sup>221</sup> Like Buzzfeed, there is system of “liking” and “disliking” posts. However, on Reddit these “upvotes” and “downvotes” determine where on a page the posts appear. If a post receives too many down votes, then it is removed from the site. If it receives many upvotes it moves up to the top of the page.

<sup>222</sup> Maave Duggan and Aaron Smith, “6% of Online Adults are Reddit Users,” *Pew Research Center*, July 3, 2013, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/07/03/6-of-online-adults-are-reddit-users/>.

<sup>223</sup> “Reddit Search Results: Vagina,” *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/search?q=vagina&sort=relevance&t=all>. TIFU is an abbreviation for “Today I Fucked Up,” meaning that the title would really read “Today I fucked Up By Being a Grill and Having a lot of Sex with My Vagina and Butthole. This post is also an example of the inappropriate or vulgar posts that appear on Reddit.

interesting because of the question and answer nature of the user conversations. The mission of the “Ask Women” appears on the main page. It states, “Our mission is to provide a place where all women can comfortably and candidly present their viewpoints for community discussion in a non-judgmental space.”<sup>224</sup> Users are prompted to “...ask women questions about behavior, anatomy, habits or anything else that might baffle you.” The result is a combination of serious, well-meaning questions meant to make clear misconceptions surrounding the vagina and a few less serious, unnecessarily sexualized inquiries. Nevertheless, the subreddit offers women and men from around the world a non-judgmental space through which to educate themselves.

An example of an educative post, for instance, dates from February 12, 2016 in which a woman asked, “Growing up we all had different names for our vaginas, vajayjays, pockets, what’s yours?” The post received 67 individual responses, each offering a woman’s reflection on the name for her own vagina. One woman wrote, “I used to call mine my penis. I think it was because I grew up in a house of all boys.”<sup>225</sup> Another woman stated that she did not have a word for it because she “...was a child in the '70s, so if you simply *had* to refer to it, it was usually done by whispering “down there,” a euphemism that frequently appeared in *The Vagina Monologues*.<sup>226</sup> Much like the Boston Women’s Health Collective in the 1970s, the subreddits associated with women’s bodies, and in turn the vagina, provide individuals a space through which to voice concerns or ask questions on material they hope to learn more about or feel they are confused by.

On the /r/twoxchromosomes subreddit, discussions are less formatted, allowing for women to post personal experiences or self-titled “rants” about positive or negatives encounters

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<sup>224</sup> “Ask Women,” /r/askwomen, *Reddit*, accessed March 1, 2016,

<https://www.reddit.com/r/AskWomen/search?q=vagina&sort=relevance&t=all>.

<sup>225</sup> Comment posted by Sand\_Dargon, “Growing Up We All Had Different Names For Our Vaginas, Vajayjays, Pockets, what’s yours?” /r/askwomen, *Reddit*, February 12, 2016, accessed March 1, 2016,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskWomen/comments/45gts2/growing\\_up\\_we\\_all\\_have\\_a\\_different\\_word\\_for\\_our/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskWomen/comments/45gts2/growing_up_we_all_have_a_different_word_for_our/).

<sup>226</sup> Comment posted by DmKrispin, “Growing Up We All Had Different Names for Our Vaginas.”

they have as women. For example, in a post from July 08, 2015 called “Apparently, My Vagina is ‘Childish,’” a woman fervently explains that other women on Internet communities, she did not specify which, have attacked her through their exclusive appreciation of vulva and labia of all sizes. She points out that in the process of celebrating these larger, normal genitalia, that her naturally small vulva and labia are being shamed. She writes:

I'm seeing this influx of rude assessments about vaginas that look like mine. Apparently mine is "childish" and isn't what a "real woman" looks like down there...I am SO tired of hearing that I have a "little girl vagina."...Why do we act like my crotch only exists in porn and sets unrealistic expectations!? That's just what it looks like and I can't help it. Tearing other women down is not how to go about promoting body positivity, FYI.<sup>227</sup>

While the woman publishing the post clearly intended to raise counter-awareness to the “body positivity” posts, she also brings the topic of labiaplasty and societal expectations for vaginal appearance based on pornography into this internet forum, though clearly she was not the first to do so. This is reflected in the top comment (the comment with the most “likes” or “upvotes”) on the post. It reads, “So, I had no idea that anyone cared how big someone's labia is until right now. I just thought vaginas looked like vaginas...” This could be interpreted as “who cares what a vagina looks,” or as a lack of awareness that women have bodily anxiety associated with the sizes of their vulva and labia. The latter seems more likely because the comment inspired a thread of replies addressing the lack of awareness towards female genital cosmetic surgery, a theme often discussed in the writings of Virginia Braun.

The anonymity of the internet can also be concerning in relation to the treatment of the vagina on Reddit, for as many of vagina-positive posts there are, there are subreddits like /r/theredpill or /r/MGTOW that offer male-dominated environments for breeding misogynistic

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<sup>227</sup> Reddit User icebitch, “Apparently, My Vagina is ‘Childish,’” /r/twoxchromosomes, *Reddit*, July 08. 2015, accessed March 01, 2016, [https://www.reddit.com/r/TwoXChromosomes/comments/3cihya/apparently\\_my\\_vagina\\_is\\_childish/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TwoXChromosomes/comments/3cihya/apparently_my_vagina_is_childish/).

culture. The complications presented by the lack of filtering on the main site are remedied here as the subreddits work to ensure order through a moderator system. The creators of each subreddit develop specific rules for interactions and dialogues within the forum and designate content moderators to monitor users' content. If a moderator feels that a user is violating the rules of the subreddit, the post is removed and captioned on a removal page with reasons as to why the content was removed. In certain circumstances, moderators will remove a comment because he/she feels that the comment or post would be better answered on another subreddit. The benefit of having the moderator system is that it prevents censorship of language. Where on Buzzfeed the use of cunt would be deemed inappropriate, the use of cunt in a non-offensive or derogatory manner is acceptable because the subreddit moderators watch the discussion and remove the objectionable content. So, for instance, if one were to refer to their vagina as a cunt or mention that another person called them a cunt, it would be appropriate. If someone told a member of the thread that s/he was a cunt it would be considered a verbal attack and would be removed. This becomes very important for discussions of female genitalia because of its relation to feminist dialogue, which has been a consistent point of contention on the Internet. In this way, the Reddit moderators ensure that the subreddits specifically intended to create a safe haven through which women, and men, can build dialogues and communities.

### **The Vagina on Tumblr**

Of the three websites listed as a social media source, Tumblr is most similar to Facebook in that a user's experience is completely tailored to their personal interests. Though not as popular as Facebook, Tumblr is more popular than Reddit with 10-percent of all Internet users

accessing the site.<sup>228</sup> Tumblr users create individual blogs through which they can post website links, articles, photographs, music, and other media content. Because of the format of the website, Tumblr is best described as a series of niche communities with each blog representing the interests of the individual who creates it. In the same way as Reddit creates communities for women within specific subreddits, Tumblr offers a series of smaller, independent communities for women through the blogs. For this reason the representation of vagina, vulva, labia, clitoris, etc. on Tumblr is not as forward as on BuzzFeed or even Reddit. When one types the word “vagina” into a search on the Tumblr homepage, it yields no results. Instead, individuals browsing the website must stumble upon a particular blog by clicking on shared media to link them to the page or by knowing the blog’s unique URL. Like Reddit, Tumblr can be a dangerous option for browsers attempting to find a vagina-friendly Internet experience because of the fine line between blogs encouraging vagina empowerment and pornography-themed blogs deceptively advertised as such. Tumblr, like Reddit, allows account holders to ask questions on user blogs. In the case of the vagina-positive blogs, users can converse with the blog owner if they are interested in a particular topic or have a question. While this expands the capacity in which an individual can interact with the content, for example many sex-positive, vagina-positive, and female genital health oriented blogs receive questions relating to labial appearance or overall gynecological health, the community experiences shaming more insidious than misogynistic negative criticism and commentary.<sup>229</sup>

Nevertheless, Tumblr successfully provides women and men with a platform through which they can explore and celebrate female genitalia. One of the most popular representations

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<sup>228</sup> Maeve Duggan, “Mobile Messaging and Social Media 2015,” *Pew Research Center*, August 19, 2015, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/19/mobile-messaging-and-social-media-2015/>.

<sup>229</sup> This often manifests itself in shaming within the community. One member, one who has placed him- or herself in a position of authority shames or attempts to ostracize another member because they are not a “true” feminist etc. This is seen in the post mentioned in the discussion of Reddit where users attempting to promote body positivity instead began to shame women who did not fit into the category they were attempting to “protect” or celebrate.

of the vagina on Tumblr is less focused on text, though many health blogs exist, but rather features blog formats based on photo media. The content of these blogs come is meant to celebrate self-love related to the vagina, labia, and vulva. By re-inserting photographs of “real,” “natural” vaginas onto the Internet these blogs attempt to re-assure women that their seemingly abnormal genitalia is normal, much like Jamie McCartney’s *The Great Wall of Vagina* discussed in Chapter 3. On a blog called “The Beauty of Vaginas,” the 24 year-old female writer states: “It’s not meant to be a porn blog, but rather a body-positive, empowering, vulva appreciation blog. I’m here to appreciate and show the immense beauty that all vulvas possess. No two are the same, each one being unique, and all of them are beautiful, without exception.”<sup>230</sup> The blog contains numerous pages of photographs of “real women’s vulvae” from every angle. Some images are full-frontal, while others show the vulva between closed legs.<sup>231</sup><sup>232</sup> Of the “vagina love” blogs, “The Beauty of Vaginas” is a very positive environment. Women can submit images of their favorite vulvae and leave comments on the feed. Many times these are stories of young women, ranging in ages 17 to late 20s, self conscious of their vulva and looking for community and support. Another blog titled “Your Vagina Inspector” takes a similar approach to the “Beauty of the Vagina” in depicting non-edited photos of the vagina.<sup>233</sup> This blog takes it a step

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<sup>230</sup> “The Beauty of Vaginas,” *Tumblr*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://beautyofvaginas.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>231</sup> The distinction “real women’s vulvae,” is made because some Tumblr blogs are pornographic or feature images of popular porn star’s genitalia. As studies, interviews, or discussions in articles by psychologists Virginia Braun, C Moran, and C Lee suggest, porn stars are more likely to have cosmetically modified or “unreal” vulvae meant to pass as “normal” or “real.” Tumblr bloggers posting about vagina, vulva, or labia positivity consciously assert these differentiations in order to call into question pornography’s misrepresentation of women. In many bloggers’ beliefs, to operate a page without noting porn’s misconstrued notions of what constitutes a “normal” vagina would be to perpetuate such forms of genital-based oppression. For more information on trends between body perception, pornography, and female genital cosmetic surgery see Braun, “(Better) Sexual Pleasure,” Braun, “Rhetoric of Choice,” and C Moran and C Lee, “What’s Normal? Influencing Women’s Perceptions of Normal Genitalia: An Experiment Involving Exposure to Modified and Non Modified Images,” in *BJOG*, 2014, 761-766.

<sup>232</sup> Though this blog did not identify the pictured vaginas as being cisgendered or transgendered, there are other blogs on Tumblr that offer communities for these identities.

<sup>233</sup> “Your Vagina Inspected,” *Tumblr*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://yourvaginainspector.tumblr.com/page/3>. This blog is a little more questionable because it contains a hybrid of natural vagina images, including the ones juxtaposed with images of women’s faces, and images of what appears to be gynecological porn.

further, however, by showing the vagina opened by a speculum allowing the camera to peer into the cervix. The blog post also echoes the comparison Jamie McCartney makes to vulvae labia looking like faces as it features diptych images juxtaposing a woman's face with her vulva.

Aside from the photo blogs, which are very important for validation and assurance of women's vaginal normalcy, Tumblr also provides a plethora of sex education blogs focused on vaginal, vulvar, and reproductive health. These are primarily text-based blogs, often grouping together trustworthy sites for accurate information on sex and genital health. One of the best examples of these types of blogs is "The Sex Uneducated" run by CulturalCritique. The blog is austere and offers visitors pages of information organized into several categories: history, sex education, LGBTQ, feminist, HSV, and HSV+. <sup>234</sup> Thus, "The Sex Uneducated" becomes a type of online textbook for those looking for information on female genital hygiene, safe sex methods, living with sexually transmitted diseases, and many other topics generally covered in a thorough sexual education class. The text blogs, while addressing the vagina in online media in a less visual way than the photo-blogs, aids women in locating important resources, some of which they may have restricted access to in their daily lives, and compiling them into one easily navigable website. In this way, *Tumblr* serves as both a source of visual celebration and re-entry of the vagina into contemporary culture and also a community of support and knowledge for women searching for answers and reassurance about their bodies.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the Union College survey on social media usage and language in relation to genitalia and the treatment of the vagina on BuzzFeed, Reddit, and Tumblr exposes consistent patterns of thought and behavior that suggest the presence of communities for vaginas in smaller,

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<sup>234</sup> "The Sex Uneducated," *Tumblr*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://thesexuneducated.tumblr.com/>. HSV is an acronym for Herpes Simplex Virus, know more commonly as "herpes."

semi-private pockets of society, or at least in semi-moderate web spaces. Throughout the nearly two weeks the survey was being distributed, various female students and several male students personally shared their stories, knowing that the survey was connected to “*A Culture of Vaginas*.” Fully aware that their answers already summarized their experiences and listed the social media sources engaging in the vagina dialogue, these students insisted on sending emails or Facebook posts sharing vagina related materials, posts, and quizzes they found on the internet. In person, they would recall the names they used to refer to their genitalia and reflect on their early interactions, or lack thereof, with discussing their genitalia in school or with their parents. One female student in her third year admitted, “It wasn’t until I took your survey that I realized I had never spoken with my parents about genitalia, let alone my own. I thought I just never remembered the conversation, but in actuality, it didn’t happen.” This student was not alone. A significant number of students did not recall having conversations about genitalia with their parents and instead learned about their bodies through sexual education, health, or other classes.

Limited understanding of genitalia linked to a lack of casual conversation about genitalia stems from sexual education classes, a majority of students as a majority of students stated that teachers referred to the female genitalia in these classes solely as the “vagina.” For many, this represents the only contexts in which mention of genitalia arose, thus leaving the use of “vagina” within those classes as the only point of reference. At the same time, few students recalled that these classes were thorough, suggesting a potential connection between curiosity about genitalia and the presence of this information on the Internet. In *Why Internet Porn Matters*, philosopher and scholar of gender and sexuality Margret Grebowicz expresses a longstanding concern about the Internet and its affect on porn consumption. She writes:

One significant change inaugurated by Internet distribution is unprecedented anxiety about the capacity of porn to function didactically, to teach young people...about sex. As



long ago as 1999, a Time/CNN poll of teenagers states that of the teenagers who had used the internet (82%), almost half had seen x-rated content.<sup>235</sup>

Grebowicz continues her text, questioning the actual didacticity of pornography in terms of sex education. Instead she suggests that pornography may do less harm in the capacity of teaching young consumers about the act of sex, and instead, perpetuates the hegemonic system that pervaded the sexual acts appearing within the pornographic screens.<sup>236</sup> Patterns of anxiety linked to the “non-real” or cosmetically modified vulvae being addressed by vagina-positive communities on Reddit and Tumblr and studies on labiaplasty, porn, and body image conducted by psychologist like Virginia Braun, C Moran, and C Lee, support Grebowicz’s interpretation.<sup>237</sup>

Ultimately, the survey and studies of the vagina’s presence on social media reveal that the Internet has provided communities for the discussion of female genitalia in a non-sexualized manner. Just as the first *Our Bodies, Ourselves* featured research-based information from “everyday” women, the material often appearing on these sites is based on individual research. For this reason, the question of accreditation comes into question. Users searching sites like Tumblr or Reddit for information may be misled or misinformed because it is difficult to validate identity on these websites.<sup>238</sup> The appearance of vagina-positive articles on BuzzFeed could be linked to a rising comfort with discussing female genitalia in mainstream culture. Forum and blog-based websites like Reddit and Tumblr offer sanctuary for women seeking welcoming environments in which to discuss and develop appreciation for their vaginas. However, because of the unregulated nature of the Internet these spaces can be infiltrated.

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<sup>235</sup> Margaret Grebowicz, *Why Internet Porn Matters*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 115. The Time/CNN study Grebowicz cites comes from: D. Orkent, “Raising Our Kids Online,” *Time*, (May 10, 1999), 34-39.

<sup>236</sup> Margaret Grebowicz, *Why Internet Porn Matters*, 119-120.

<sup>237</sup> See Virginia Braun, “Rhetoric of Choice,” Virginia Braun, “(Better) Sexual Politics,” Virginia Braun, “Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery,” and C. Moran and C. Lee “What’s Normal.”

<sup>238</sup> Reddit has certain “tags” that appear next to a user’s name if s/he has received accreditation from the Reddit site for something. Generally these identifying tags are only given after a user passes a test distributed by forum moderators. These tags identify the user as an “expert” in whatever area s/he applied for accreditation in.

Internet users, commonly referred to as “trolls,” interrupt discussion with inappropriate banter, violent remarks, or other upsetting content meant to offend members of the community. Thus, while the Internet can offer safe havens to grow vagina-positive communities, it can also be a place where such safety is threatened.

## Conclusion: Assessing a “Culture of Vaginas”<sup>239</sup>

“OK. At first women were reluctant to talk. They were a little shy. But once they got going you couldn’t stop them. Women secretly love to talk about their vaginas. They get very excited, mainly because no one’s ever asked them before.”

– Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 1996

Eve Ensler’s “culture of vaginas” is not something one can easily stumble upon. It exists within all women, it has existed in them persistently, but its vocalization depends upon a specific societal environment. The first emergence of a “culture of vaginas” came out of the Women’s Health and Liberation movements in the 1960s and 70s. Fostered alongside a strong spirit of national activism, fueled by the Civil Rights Movement and Anti-Vietnam War protests, the Women’s Movement called into question the patriarchal oppression and societal manipulation of the female body. Communities of women all across the country joined forces to give a voice to these issues and inserted the vagina into public discussion for addressing of female sexuality, sexual health, and motherhood. Whether through protest, speech, text, or art, the women of the movement laid a foundation for future women by carving a space for these kinds of dialogues to flourish. The first reconsideration of the Women’s Movement occurred in the 1990s with the rise of Third Wave Feminism. Conversations surrounding women’s issues, particularly those about the sexuality and genital health, contained new theoretical considerations this time focusing more on the intersectionality of the female experience within American society. *The Vagina*

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<sup>239</sup> This conclusion represents a reflection on the findings of “A Culture of Vaginas” and for this reason assumes a first person tone.

*Monologues*, though criticized for whitewashing the topic of female sexuality and the vagina, rose from the spirit of the movement demanding “a context of other vaginas.”<sup>240</sup>

To label twenty-first century America as a “culture of vaginas” would be a fallacy. What exists can be more accurately described as sub-cultures or hidden communities of vaginas.<sup>241</sup> Close analysis of contemporary artwork, advice literature, magazine articles, and social media reveal a consistent resurfacing of the vagina and communicate a desire to make female genitalia an acceptable topic of conversation. Such curiosity for the vagina has yet to command attention within the public sphere because it lacks the same spirited support as it held during Women’s Movements of the 60s and 70s and Third Wave Feminism of the 90s. Even within feminist communities, women in favor of tangible, policy-based change, for example passage of the Equal Pay Act or Equal Rights Amendment, may not see the ability to talk freely and publically about the vagina as an important initiative to support. In matters of the self, having the freedom to converse about one’s body freely is of the utmost importance. By being unable to recognize and acknowledge the presence of part of her body because she is woman, woman cannot be fully human as man can have ownership over his body. Furthermore, in silencing the vagina in conversations of sexual education leaves women and girls defenseless against the growing hyper-sexualization of popular culture. The rise of Raunch culture and pornography offers the female body as sexual object to the male gaze, but societal taboos leave women without a language to re-claim their bodies. Thus, no matter what gains women make in society, until women have to ability to control the way they are represented in the media, they serve as pretense of equality.

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<sup>240</sup> Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, 3.

<sup>241</sup> This is true particularly of transsexual vaginas. This study has not focused on the vagina’s sexual function so has not discussed or distinguished lesbian-specific language about female genitalia from heterosexuals’ vocabulary of the vagina.

Without taking the time to deconstruct the taboo of discussing the vagina, women will have limited agency over their bodies within American society.

The idea for “*A Culture of Vaginas*” developed from my experiences as a liberal, white, lower-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual female feminist at Union College, an institution where conservative, white, upper-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual males dominate the student demographic. The study emerged from a culmination of interactions I had at Union during my nearly four years as a student. Arriving as a first-year student having already declared a major in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies (GSWS) and openly identifying as an (outspoken) feminist, I openly sought female communities at Union, as I hoped to share in a network of support with other women on campus. I joined Women’s Union, a co-ed feminist coalition started in the 70s that deals with issues of gender equality, and from its five other members, three of whom were first-year students as well, learned that feminism was not a popular position on campus. Women’s Union or my GSWS courses provided me with the networks I had wanted, with groups of like-minded students and faculty from whom I could learn. In the larger population on campus, however, I often found that the body positive feminist dialogues I was having in these groups were otherwise absent.

The first time I saw a stray from this attitude was during my first production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Being both an actor and a producer, I had an opportunity to engage with the other actresses on every level. The community-driven atmosphere created during the production of the monologues was exactly the type of feminist space I was looking for. The normal social tensions present on campus seemed to dissolve. There were women of every class year, multiple majors, and everyone was excited about the show. Pussy and cunt appeared in casual conversation. During the performance of the monologues “Reclaiming Cunt” and “Because He

Liked to Look at It” the actresses created a vagina-chorus, so to speak, shouting “cunt” and “pussies unite” when prompted by the actresses.

Because I loved *The Vagina Monologues* and the transformative experience it produced, I took charge of some part of its production every year of my college career. Having the opportunity to reflect on the prior year’s performance, each year I noticed that the same patterns of liberation occurred. The actresses bonded very quickly by making jokes about their vaginas or telling each other what their vaginas would say and wear. The actresses, without instruction, always formed the vagina-chorus during “Reclaiming Cunt” and “Because He Like to Look at It.” *The Vagina Monologues* awakened in these women, curiosities they did not even realize they had.

The distribution of my survey presented the second stray from Union’s conservative, homogenized discussions. Prior to the survey’s release, my advisor, Professor Andrea Foroughi, and I were worried that it would receive very little responses due to the nature of the survey. We were not convinced that several gift cards could convince the student body, generally apathetic to issues of sexuality and gender, to talk to a stranger about their genitalia. Though the survey did not receive the 330 participants we had hoped for, the number of responses we received greatly surpassed our expectations. Furthermore, the majority of responses to the survey were serious and appropriate to the questions at hand. The amount of participants, however, was not the most surprising component of the survey. During the period the survey was open, numerous students sought me out to inform me that they took my survey. When this happened I generally responded with a “thank you for helping me out,” and almost immediately, the student would reflect on his/her experience taking my survey in front of me. Even when a student was nervous, one shyly asked me how to spell “hoo-ha” while she was taking the survey, he/she genuinely wanted to

converse with me. Students would approach me and ask if I could tell which responses were theirs or to share with me some of the euphemisms they listed.

In this way, the survey exceeded any expectations I previously held. These interactions proved to me that when prompted, even in the smallest of ways, there are many members of mainstream society that want to converse about their genitalia. At the same time, this desire is preceded by a careful analysis of the type of space the conversation will occur within. While American society currently lacks an organized feminist movement to champion these conversations to the greater public, smaller communities are constantly working to educate and empower women to embrace their vaginas through speech, visual representations, and performance. These communities provide women with the assurance and validation they need to feel comfortable participating in conversation about female genitalia. If we considered this pattern in the example of my survey, I represent that non-judgmental space. I am a GSWS major. I am president of Women's Union. I am very openly writing a thesis about vaginas. I sent out a survey to the entire student body asking my peers to discuss their genitals. By presenting myself in this way, I offer a space in which conversations about vaginas, or any genitals, can occur. Unfortunately, the perception of an environment as safe depends on personal preference. Take, for instance, the other 2,000 students that attend Union but did not respond to the survey. There was some reason they chose not to participate. Perhaps they are embarrassed. Perhaps they do not care to talk about penises or vaginas. While we may never know the answers to such questions, the intent I had while writing "*A Culture of Vaginas*" was to offer to those interested a resource to guide them to these non-judgmental spaces.

There are people of all genders that want to further develop pre-existing niche communities and fully engage in a "culture of vaginas." If this is the case, and has been the case

since the 60s and 70s as “*A Culture of Vaginas*” has argued, then why do the sub-cultures of vaginas remain stunted? Because the people who want to see the vagina in public discourse communicate not in person as the feminists of the Women’s Movement did, but instead connect primarily through Internet forums. As a result, these communities remained scattered across various sections of society and lack the same physical connection that aided in disseminating the teachings of the Women’s movements of the 60s and 70s. In the twenty-first century this is something we will have to work on from the outside in. The cultural examination in “*A Culture of Vaginas*” is meant to bring the hidden communities and coalitions surrounding positive, celebratory representations of the vagina into public consideration. In this way, “*A Culture of Vaginas*” as a whole is meant to encourage the population to engage in a pro-vagina culture and to promote an atmosphere of acceptance so people of all genders can give themselves permission to thrive in the culture of vaginas they want to create.



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Figure 1: Philippe Salomon, Untitled for “Women’s Health: Everything You Don’t Know About Your Ladyparts...But Should,” 2011, Source: *Glamour Health*, <http://www.glamour.com/health-fitness/2011/08/womens-health-everything-you-dont-know-about-your-ladyparts-but-should>



Figure 2: Photograph found on Thinkstock, Source: *Glamour Smitten*, <http://www.glamour.com/sex-love-life/blogs/smitten/2012/04/your-vagina-is-not-what-you-th-1>

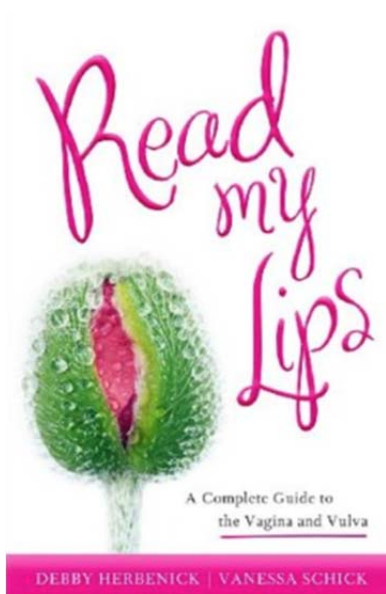


Figure 3: Cover to *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva*, Source: <http://readmylipsthebook.tumblr.com/post/7596283710/our-new-book-read-my-lips-a-complete-guide-to>

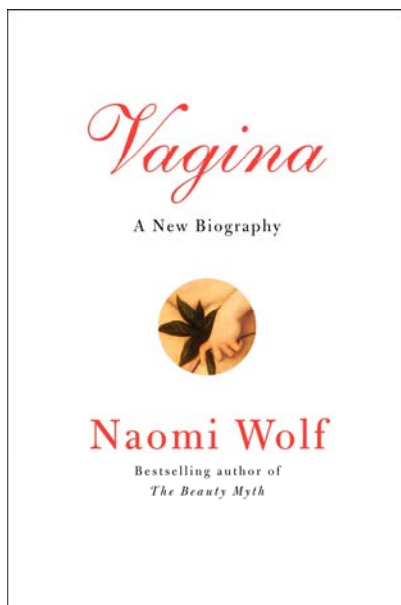


Figure 4: Cover of *Vagina: A New Biography*, Source: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/vagina-a-new-biography-by-naomi-wolf/2012/10/27/e860ba3c-118e-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/vagina-a-new-biography-by-naomi-wolf/2012/10/27/e860ba3c-118e-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_story.html)



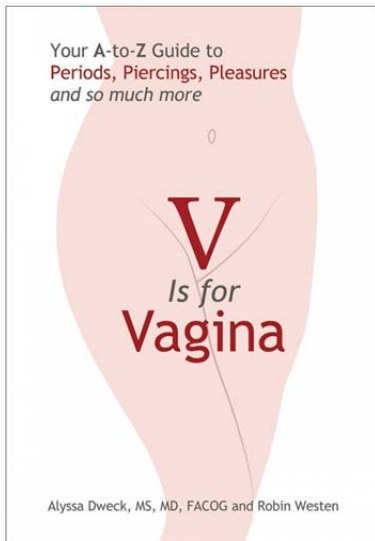


Figure 5: Cover of *V is for Vagina: Your A-to-Z Guide to Periods, Piercings, Pleasures and so Much More*, Source: <https://medamour.com/v-is-for-vagina>

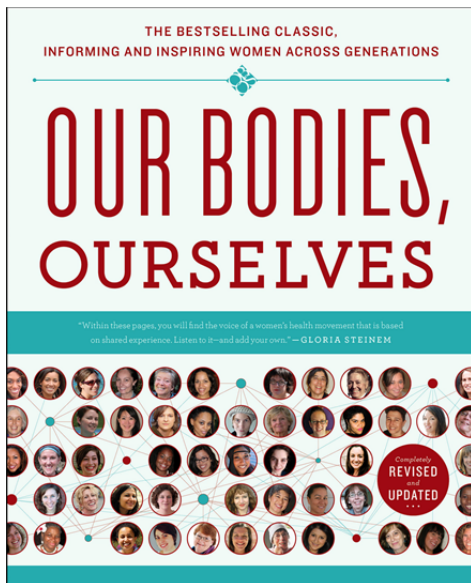


Figure 6: Cover of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 2011, Source: <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/cms/assets/uploads/2014/05/Our-Bodies-Ourselves-2011-cover.jpg>