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## Transnational feminism and gender-based violence: Exploring the relationship between feminist theory and V-Day

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TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: EXPLORING THE  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEMINIST THEORY AND V-DAY

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of International Studies

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BY

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction “Turning Pain to Power”<sup>1</sup>**

*“I have traveled to more than 40 countries and met women and men who through various circumstances – war, poverty, racism, multiple forms of violence – have never known security or have had the illusion of security forever devastated...These particular people, rather than turning violent themselves, have gone into the heart of the pain, the loss. They have grieved and died into it and allowed and encouraged this poison to become medicine. These warriors now devote their lives to making sure that whatever terrible thing happened to them does not happen to anyone else. Because the transformation of suffering rather than their own security is the goal, they are in fact creating real safety for others.” (Eve Ensler<sup>2</sup>, 2005)*

*“The fact is simple, you can not help a person if you do not understand how that person manages to exist at all. Change cannot come from above, but from the interaction between compelling impetus of those who will directly benefit from change and those within the structures of power who have to have the capacity to share a wider vision. The relationship between planners and those struggling for change needs to be characterized by co-operative conflict rather than antagonistic and adversary stances.” (Malika Basu, 2000)*

The success of a transnational women’s movement to end violence against women and girls depends on its ability to embrace the rich diversity of perspectives, belief systems, experiences, and goals that emerge from women around the globe and their unique communities. Transnational feminism as a practice, reaches beyond an easily assumed “global sisterhood” and examines the multiple historical and contemporary intersections of race, gender, sexuality, economics, and nationality (among others) on a global scale – analyzing the various layers and lenses that shape both the possibilities and the pitfalls of cross-cultural organizing. In her essay, “Using Millie Thayer’s Making Transnational Feminism to Connect Transnational Feminist Theories to Transnational Feminist Practices,” Camille Sutton-Brown describes how the

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<sup>1</sup> “Turning Pain to Power” was the slogan for V-Day’s 2009 U.S. speaking tour spreading the word about “violence against women in the Congo, and efforts underway to end it.” (<http://www.vday.org/pain-to-power-tour>)

<sup>2</sup> Eve Ensler is a “playwright, performer, and activist, is the author of THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES, translated into over 45 languages and performed in over 130 countries. Her experience performing THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES inspired her to create V-Day, a global movement to stop violence against women and girls.” She has “devoted her life to stopping violence, envisioning a planet in which women and girls will be free to thrive, rather than merely survive. The play is based on Ensler’s interviews with more than 200 women.” (<http://www.vday.org/about/more-about/eveensler>)

transnational lens allows feminists to analyze “power relations from these points of collision” and therefore “situates gender in a tightly interconnected web that also includes sexism, racism, and heterosexism.” (Sutton-Brown, 2010) In an essay entitled “A View from Elsewhere: Locating Difference and the Politics of Representation from a Transnational Feminist Perspective” feminist theorist Radha Hegde emphasizes the importance of developing a feminist practice “that can travel transnationally and confront the challenge of representing marginalized others.” (Hegde, 271, 1998) Importantly, Hedge asks, “How are we equipped theoretically to understand the complex patterns of women’s lives and conditions of subordination and make our transnational representations of these realities more meaningful?” while also suggesting the risk and responsibility transnational feminists have in representations of other women. (Hegde, 1998, 272) For a transnational movement to effectively address the many forms of violence against women and girls while remaining relevant, as well as accessible, across the global spectrum of context and experience, it must be intersectional, collaborative, and self-reflexive.

Described by The Affinity Project, a group of researchers and activists from Queens University who study “the theory and practice of non-hegemonic forms of social organization and social change,” a transnational feminist vision builds “on global networks of communication, which bring about a ‘shifting of borders’” that allow for “the emergence of transnational dialogues between feminists the world over.” (The Affinity Project, 2006) This encompassing vision provides the space and consciousness to foster fluid, honest, and accessible discussions and debates necessary to support a global effort to end gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup> It differs from

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<sup>3</sup> Article 1 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993, describes violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (<http://www.alrc.net/doc/mainfile.php/torture/149>)

international feminist theory in its specific attention to intersectionality<sup>4</sup>, which was first “coined” by Kimberlé Crenshaw and was “intended to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse.” (Crenshaw, 1998) Crenshaw, a civil rights activist, Law Professor, and V-Day activist, insisted “theorists need to take both gender and race on board and show how they interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s experience.” (Crenshaw, 1998) Intersectionality, as it is used in feminist theory, explores what Kathy Davis describes in her essay “Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful,” as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.” (Davis, 2008, 68) Using an intersectional approach helps theorists examine “the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination” making it an essential component within transnational feminist movements connecting local and global communities. (Davis, 67)

Transnational feminism can be cultivated by increasing solidarity with other groups that are working to resist local and/or global oppressions, as well as by feminists acknowledging and

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Specifically, sexual violence includes “any act where sex is used as a weapon; it may involve one or more persons forcing, pressuring, coercing, threatening . . . manipulating another person into sexual acts or activities against his or her will. It may involve unwanted sexual attention, sexual contact or sexual activity.” ([www.vtnetwork.org](http://www.vtnetwork.org)) Finally, the U.S. Department of Justice defines domestic violence as “a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. . . Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions. . . This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone.” (<http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm>)

<sup>4</sup> Crenshaw describes her development of intersectionality as growing “out of trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, ‘Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them.’” (Crenshaw, 2004)

questioning their own situatedness and the ways in which they are implicated and also reproduce power relations. (Lugones and Spelman, 1983) In her essay, “Translating the Global: Effects of Transnational Organizing on Local Feminist Discourses and Practices in Latin America” Sonia Alvarez describes the power and effectiveness of collaborating across groups, writing “engagement with ‘transnationalized’ gender policy advocacy...has provided advocates with new, internationally sanctioned political scripts they can deploy locally” that allow for “greater potential political ‘resonance’ vis-à-vis local policy makers,” which suggests that engaging people transnationally in the movement, could provide the right combination of local and international attention and collaboration, to address and reduce the epidemic levels of gender-based violence around the world. (Alvarez, 2000)

Transnationalism attends to past, present, and future interconnections between global peoples, as well as the shifts in boundaries and borders which has resulted in multiple social, political, cultural and economic impacts around the globe. While international commitments tend to focus on relations between nation-states, transnational relationships occur more collaboratively among individuals and groups regardless of national boundaries and offer what Sutton-Brown describes as a space “where participants share a commitment to negotiate their differences, transforming those differences from acrimonious divisions into sources of collective power.” (Sutton-Brown, 2010) Often, the collaborations in transnational alliances transcend national boundaries and governments are not necessarily involved. A transnational commitment attends to the historical interconnections among diverse groups, countries, and cultures that have both directly and indirectly affected present day political, social and cultural climates and seek to learn from and be accountable to the past. Through this attention to the ways in which diverse histories and peoples are bound, transnationalist groups can establish a shared sense of



commitment, community, and collaboration that stretches beyond the reaches of internationalism. Merging feminist theory with a transnationalist approach to organizing and activism, which analyzes global issues by contextualizing events and people, provides the foundation for a movement, such as V-Day, to effectively, and inclusively, address violence against women and girls globally.

Within the context of feminist theory and practice, feminists have highlighted both the possibilities of solidarity using a transnationalist framework, and the risks inherent in attempting to create a shared platform. Speaking at a conference at UCLA on contemporary scholarship in the field of transnational feminism, Nayerah Tohidi, Associate Professor at Cal State Northridge, described transnational feminism as attending to “the significance of coalition building across borders as well as locally and nationally-oriented struggles, beyond ideological differences around specific concrete practical agendas.” (Tohidi, 2005) Some of the issues that challenge transnational feminist practices include weighing the effectiveness of organizing around common *identity* issues versus organizing around common *issues* of oppression, as well as analyzing the gap between transnational theorizing and that of transnational activism and direct experience/service in the global context. Similar to the work of Chicana feminism as described by Aida Hurtado<sup>5</sup>, a transnational movement against gender-based violence must learn to balance and “incorporate diverse issues without losing the centrality of gender in all their battles.” (Hurtado, 2000, 142) For a movement to be recognized as an inclusive and equitable agent of global change, it must practice internally, the non-hierarchical, intersectional, and self-reflexive

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<sup>5</sup> Aida Hurtado borrows from women of color feminists Patricia Hill Collins and Alma Garcia in describing Chicana feminism as being “born out of acts of disruption, especially in the Chicano movement, to create spaces of resistance to patriarchy in general and patriarchy in their own ethnic/racial groups. Disruption...head-on confrontation, is one of the most powerful methods used by Chicana feminists to bring their issues to the political agenda...Chicana feminisms are characterized by finding absences and exclusions and arguing from that standpoint.” (Hurtado, 2000)

qualities it seeks to establish for women, marginalized groups, and all beings in the broader global society. Such a practice offers a critical lens that Kathy Davis suggests “promises an almost universal applicability, useful for understanding and analysing any social practice, any individual or group experience, any structural arrangement, and any cultural configuration” as well as simultaneously attending to “the ‘fundamental and pervasive concern’ of difference and diversity...in such a way that the old feminist ideal of generating theories which can speak to the concerns of all women can be sustained. It coincides with the need to problematize the theoretical hegemony of gender and the exclusions of white Western feminism, and yet it provides a platform for feminist theory as a shared enterprise.” (Davis, 2008, 72) Importantly, intersectionality can “enhance the theorist’s reflexivity by allowing her to incorporate her own intersectional location in the production of self-critical and accountable feminist theory,” therefore making the practice useful for cross-cultural analysis and activism. (Davis, 71)

The critiques from feminist theorists addressing global feminist activism provide a framework for analyzing V-Day<sup>6</sup>, a global movement to end violence against women. One of the immense challenges within global feminist activism, and within V-Day specifically, is simultaneously making space for a diversity of experience, interpretation, and expression while also establishing an accessible and meaningful common ground from which diverse women are able to organize effectively. V-Day seeks to organize and unite women through the body, creating an effective form of “strategic essentialism”<sup>7</sup> that serves to connect diverse women and girls. (Gayatri Spivak) Drawing from post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s concept of

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<sup>6</sup> V-Day is a “global activist movement to stop violence against women and girls...to increase awareness, raise money and revitalize the spirit of existing anti-violence organizations. V-Day generates broader attention...to stop violence...including rape, battery, incest, female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual slavery.” (www.vday.org)

<sup>7</sup> Post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak created “Strategic essentialism” referring to “the ways in which subordinate or marginalized social groups may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements. (Spivak, 1990)

“strategic essentialism,” Professor Adrienne McCormick of the State University of New York, explains how, in her yet unpublished manuscript “Teaching The Vagina Monologues: V-Day and Feminist Studies” strategic essentialism allows us to “look at universalizing discourses closely to see what might be useful in them and then to identify where those discourses ‘meet their limits.’” (McCormick, 2010) In unpacking essentialist discourses with this approach she states, “we are not avoiding essentialism simply to maintain a position that is theoretically sound, and denying women a powerful movement for social change” but rather, we continue to engage with it and recognize where and why the movement creates such a powerful impact, and where it could improve. (McCormick, 2010)

In this manner, my research explores V-Day, which has created what McCormick describes as an arguably “universalized notion,” the female body, that is used “strategically to raise awareness about violence against women” and seeks to understand more deeply the ways in which the movement simultaneously widens the scope of transnational feminist organizing by locating one of its most potent tools for coalition building in the body, and also risks reproducing some of the traditionally narrow limits of feminism in its effort to unite all women under the umbrella of V-Day. (McCormick, 2010) While challenging long-standing systems of oppression and articulating a vision for transnational female solidarity that reaches across borders (both literal and figurative), my research examines how V-Day and its founder Eve Ensler, have responded to and continue to negotiate with criticism. Specifically, I will explore the tensions as well as the breakthroughs that have arisen in V-Day’s articulation of a shared understanding of the female body as a vessel for empowerment.

Through its annual Spotlight Campaigns<sup>8</sup>, its global performances of *The Vagina*

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<sup>8</sup> Annually, V-Day spotlights a “particular group of women who are experiencing violence with the goal of raising awareness and funds to put a worldwide media spotlight on this area and to raise funds to aide groups who

*Monologues*<sup>9</sup> between February and April in over 130 countries across the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, and the Caribbean, and various educational workshops, V-Day creates a transnational sense of community that utilizes local and global experiences to connect the prevalence of gender-based violence occurring at “home” with the oppression, as well as the forms of resistance, shared by women and girls around the world. Starting with issues of violence against women, transnationally oriented activists naturally begin to connect with and develop consciousness about other urgent issues of oppression that are shaped and institutionalized by histories of gender, race, politics, religion and war, among many other things. Speaking in New Orleans at V-Day’s Ten Year anniversary event, “V To the Tenth”<sup>10</sup> Ensler articulated the intersections of various systems of oppression, and the way in which people must come together across differences to create real change:

Everyone is in the house, and everything we fight to change is connected and part of the other. We don’t end violence against women as long as racism prevails and poverty and a military consciousness dominates, and boys are bought up to be men - which means not to be women. And we don’t end violence against women’s bodies as long as it’s permissible to exploit and rape the earth, which is the life’s body. And we don’t end violence against women unless we are willing to admit that the fundamental structures and principles that determine the world are ruled by the power that has the most weapons, the most potential violence. All our so-called freedoms, are hung on the might of that violence. And so our privilege, our consumption, our happiness is contingent on that threat. (Ensler, 2008)

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are addressing it” (<http://www.vday.org/spotlight+history>) Groups and issues that are supported through this “Spotlight Campaign” cross diverse cultural, racial, geographic, political borders. Worldwide, all V-Day benefits must contribute 10% of their proceeds to this pre-determined group.

<sup>9</sup> *The Vagina Monologues* (TVM) were written by Eve Ensler and are based on her interviews with over 200 women about their vaginas. Ensler’s award-winning one-woman show is now global, and the book adapted from the play, explores the stories of many women and girls, seeking to express and transform their relationship with their vaginas.

<sup>10</sup> V to the Tenth took place on April 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008 in New Orleans. “The women of New Orleans and the Gulf South - Katrina Warriors...survived the fall out of global warming, failure of public structures, racism, economic hardship, and domestic abuse” and represented the Spotlight Campaign of 2008. (<http://www.vday.org/anniversary-events>)

Enslers attention to and discussion about gender-based violence includes both local and global expressions, occurrences, and impacts of violence, including her own country, the United States. Out of her deep awareness of how violence against women functions on an individual, personal, and local level, she has drawn broader global connections with women and movements working to resist gender-based violence in other countries and cultures. In an interview with Mother Jones magazine Enslers described violence against women in the United States as having been made “ordinary – it’s been made absolutely acceptable.” (Zeisler, 2004) Enslers argues, “if we are going to end violence against women, the whole story has to change. We have to look at shame and humiliation and poverty and racism and what building an empire on the back of the world does to the people who are bent over. We have to say what happens to women matters to everyone and it matters a lot.” (Enslers, 2007) Individually, and through V-Day events, Enslers emphasizes the necessity to speak honestly and publicly about violence against women, in order to break the global culture of silence that leaves survivors feeling isolated and ashamed. As well, the silence around gender-based violence, minimizes support for the survivor and enables more violence, to which Enslers responds, “Yes, it’s difficult to hear about, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t hear. And I think when you do let yourself hear, then you are moved to do something about it because you’re so appalled and so disturbed and so horrified about it. And I think what we do a lot of times with things is we block things out and we deny things, so we don’t have to be responsible.” (Schnall, 2009) In the same interview, Enslers described actual methods, employed by V-Day, to help prevent and ultimately end violence against women and girls saying “I think it’s education, I think it’s advocacy, I think it’s activism, and then I think it’s pressing for change.” (Schnall, 2009)

V-Day still has room to grow in terms of its ability to incorporate more complex issues of

feminist agency and representation, such as re-framing or broadening its stance on cultural autonomy as it relates to women's rights, into its discussion of female empowerment and agency. As well, V-Day's largely reactive nature of addressing gender-based violence, while hugely successful, could benefit from more systematic prevention efforts. V-Day was initially formed from Ensler's reaction to the outpouring of disclosures from *The Vagina Monologues*, as a tool to confront and respond to the abundance of gender-based violence around the globe. Now, as the movement evolves, and as Ensler gains more experience in the global community, the shift towards increasing intersectionality, as well as prevention education (as seen through engaging men and boys) is already underway and ideally, will continue to grow.

Balancing the positive impact of V-Day's powerful work in supporting women globally, with the tremendous amount of work ahead to end gender-based violence, Ensler says, "I'm insanely hopeful, in spite of an insanely crazy world...I think it comes from the transformation of consciousness. It comes from us all understanding that ending violence is possible. We could actually do it, if we keep going. And that doesn't mean things aren't terrible, because they are. But the more women and the more men who actually begin to change this paradigm and this way of thinking, the more possible it is to actually end the violence." (Goodman, 2006) In the same interview, Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasizes the importance of the service organizations, such as V-Day, provide to the global society by generating awareness about the experiences and events taking place outside of one's immediate community, culture, or country. In doing so, these organizations generate greater consciousness about and compassion for others, while empowering individuals with the information to identify connections among their experiences of oppression with others outside of their immediate community. These connections allow people from a multitude of backgrounds and experiences to then work together in solidarity, and to

support and enhance each other's efforts. Crenshaw states, "We know that the most important ways that movements actually grow is from knowing that what's experienced here, what's happening to me, is not just about me. It's about who I am, and it's related to what's happening to women all over the world. So it takes an organization like V-Day. It also takes organizations...that have the stature, the status, the reach, the clout, the political access across the board to tell these stories." (Goodman, 2006)

Seeking to explore the relationship between V-Day and transnational feminism and to locate concrete transnational feminist "moments" within the movement, as well as "moments" when V-Day fails to align with a transnational commitment, I examine both the movement and feminist theoretical discussion from various lenses. Specifically, the themes I will develop include: clarifying the differences between international and transnational approaches to feminism, the historical tensions among women that emerged out of experiences of privilege and oppression and how contemporary feminists and the movement specifically negotiates difference; the significance of locating the body at the center of both the analysis of gender-based violence as well as the center from which innovative approaches for healing and empowerment can be developed; the impact, effect, and opportunity of creating a survivor-centered movement in terms of accessibility as well as autonomy across cultures, efforts to increase collaboration among both "insiders" and "outsiders" and the valuable insights that each perspective offers along with the opportunity to promote local, grass-roots empowerment within a global movement; and finally, negotiating the convergence of sexuality, violence, and masculinity (along with constraining social norms related to those issues) while inviting and engaging the male voice, perspective, and participation in the work to end gender-based violence. My research places special attention on the way in which V-Day negotiates *difference*

within a movement that seeks to establish the female body as a central location with a shared (although not singular) meaning, as the editors of “Feminism and the Politics of Difference” Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman suggest “there is no question that the ability to deal with difference is at the center of feminism’s survival as a movement for social change.” (Gunew and Yeatman, 1993, xxiv) With this combined exploration of feminist theory and V-Day, a contemporary movement to end gender-based violence, I emphasize the importance of locating healing and empowerment in the body, as a potent and honest resource for both expanding and enhancing the future of transnational feminist solidarity and activism.

Enslar describes how the willingness to cross/shift global borders, both real and imagined, can motivate the increased cross-cultural collaboration necessary to transnational feminism stating, “We are so much a globe at this point that the idea that we are still live as nations seems utterly absurd to me...it’s so clear...that everything is completely interconnected and interdependent.” (Schnall, 2009) This relational way of understanding the global community can serve to establish a shared sense of responsibility to work towards a more equitable, just, and peaceful society for all beings. Amidst the connections, growth, and transformations, as well as the potential for further creative, energetic and political collaborations among the women of the world, there will inherently be critique, conflict, and debate challenging the movement to continue evolving, responding, and expanding its vision. Importantly, in her book Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism author Uma Narayan describes the difficult, and critical, work of global feminist politics and feminist theory stating,

The goal of a feminist politics is seldom merely to come to a refined and sensitive understanding of various points of view held by those immediately affected by an issue. In the broadest sense, feminist political projects involve commitments to normative and political inquiry, which calls for questioning, assessing, analyzing, and criticizing various points of view. Feminist political perspectives suggest alternatives that seem more normatively adequate and politically salient and



attempts redescrptions that confront and challenge some existing points of view in the process of working for social change. (Narayan, 1997, 151)

Integrating Narayan's concept of a commitment to inquiry, redescrptions, and a shared vision for social change and social justice, I remain confident that the goal of a transnational feminist project to end gender-based violence, such as the movement and transformation that V-Day seeks to accomplish, is already within reach.

## ***Chapter 2: Contextualizing Eve Ensler and V-Day***

*"It's so much bigger than a women's movement now...It's about speaking about all the darkness and violence in neighborhoods that doesn't get expressed...She's found a way to make this accessible, entertaining and moving." (Felicia Lee, 2006)*

*“Women line up to tell me their stories. They come into the interview numb, distant, glazed over, dead. They leave alive, grateful, empowered. I begin to understand that the deepest wound for them is the sense that they have been forgotten, that they are invisible and that their suffering has no meaning. The simple act of listening to them has enormous impact. The slightest touch or kindness restores their faith and energy. The strength of these women is remarkable, as is their unparalleled resiliency.” (Eve Ensler, 2007)*

Eve Ensler founded V-Day “a global movement to end violence against women and girls” which, as described on their website, supports organizations for women and girls around the globe by promoting “creative events to increase awareness, raise money and re-vitalize the spirit of existing anti-violence organizations.” Annual global performances of Ensler’s play, *The Vagina Monologues*, which, through a series of personal monologues that Ensler wrote based on interviews with women, explores the vagina and female sexuality as a tool for empowerment, and serves to educate communities about the complex experiences of sexuality and violence in the lives of women and girls. Global productions of *The Vagina Monologues*, numbering in the thousands, raise money to fund V-Day projects empowering women and girls around the world. In conjunction with *The Vagina Monologues* performances, other artistic, educational, and interactive events related to acknowledging and ending sexual violence take place to generate funding for V-Day’s annually rotating “Spotlight Campaign,” as well as providing funding for local anti-violence organizations. While V-Day is the focus of my research, it is relevant to address its connection to *The Vagina Monologues* since the play not only generates funding for V-Day, but its impact on women in the audience also served as the inspiration for the movement. Focusing on the V-Day movement, and the activism and philosophy it promotes for ending global violence against women and girls, allows me to trace the possibilities and challenges in building a transnational movement. The scope of V-Day’s work, philosophy, and practice, has expanded the conversation about violence against women and girls, as well as female sexuality,

to the extent that V-Day addresses and critiques violence and oppression at a macro level as it relates to and impacts all life on the planet, through harmful social practices, local and global politics, policies, and agendas.

“Working at the intersection of art, social action and politics,” V-Day’s website details their presence in over 130 countries around the globe and has raised over \$70 million dollars in its first ten years, to support the funding of grassroots local, national and international anti-violence education campaigns, to enhance the provision and accessibility of direct supportive services for women and girls, and to increase opportunities for emotional, physical, and spiritual healing through creative collaborations with survivors and their communities. In fact, according to their website, in 2009 alone, “over 5,200 V-Day benefit events took place produced by volunteer activists in the U.S. and around the world, educating millions of people about the reality of violence against women and girls.” In 2010, V-Day’s calendar of events taking place between February 1<sup>st</sup> and April 1<sup>st</sup> showed that “over 1500 colleges and communities will host V-Day benefit events raising funds and awareness locally and spotlighting the women of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Events center around Ensler’s ground-breaking play *The Vagina Monologues*, but include readings of V-Day’s anthology *A Memory, Monologue, A Rant, and a Prayer* and *Any One of Us: Words from Prison*, film screenings of the documentary *V-Day: Until The Violence Stops* and *What I Want My Words To Do To You*. In addition to community-based educational workshops, creative arts workshops, and awareness/fundraising house parties, in 2010 “each event will highlight the Congo, shining a global spotlight on the atrocities women and girls in Congo experience, and V-Day’s campaign to end the violence.” (V-Day Press Release January 25, 2010) Ensler’s goal with V-Day was “to make violence against women the foremost thing on people’s minds” and recognizing that “there was a way to

use the play to not only raise consciousness but raise a lot of money,” for the past decade, V-Day has been able to invest in and empower women and girls around the planet to create meaningful, sustainable change for women, girls, and their communities. (Lewis, 2001)

While Ensler has traveled the planet addressing gender-based violence, she has had the opportunity to explore more deeply her own location as a white, Western, middle-class woman in a grossly unequal world. Her self-inquiry about her identity, simultaneously combined with her abundant experiences connecting with women from cultural backgrounds outside of her own, informs her belief in the possibility of global women’s organizing. She describes her initial struggle to investigate and confront her identity in order to recognize her privilege, release fears, and become more present in an interview with Ode Magazine, “In my life I have defined myself at one time or another as a Feminist, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Vegetarian, an Anti-Nuclear Activist, a Bisexual, a Playwright. I wanted to be included, to be a part of something, to be approved of. I wanted to locate myself, not be lost, avoid messiness, avoid death. All of these identities have protected me from my shadow, my darkness, my sexist/racist impulse, my meat eater, my violence.” (Ensler, 2005) Ensler has found self-acceptance and empowerment by exploring and working with the parts of her self that needed to grow, learn, and evolve, as well as working consciously to expand her own understanding of the intersecting issues that affect women and girls globally, witnessed through her direct collaborations with global women. By connecting with diverse women around the globe through their shared experience of surviving violence, Ensler’s sense of herself appears self-reflexive and receptive. This fluidity creates an opportunity for engaging and connecting with others by minimizing the barriers humans create between one another by understanding difference as an insurmountable obstacle instead of recognizing it as an opportunity for growth, insight, and compassion.

Enslar has described the violence in the global society as “ordinary,” which has been criticized by conservative feminists who position Western culture as superior and more advanced than other cultures/regions and deny the abundance of gender-based violence and inequality that impact Western societies. At the same time, liberal feminists rooted in anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and Third-World feminisms, raise suspicions about the way Enslar “speaks for” other women, and risks silencing their authentic voices of resistance, as well as her “location” as a white, middle-class, Westerner. In addition, pro-sex feminists disapprove of the way in which Enslar has linked the themes of violence and sexuality, as well as, many critique linking the vagina and empowerment, with much of the weight of V-Day’s work focused directly on the physical body. Enslar responded to a critique of V-Day in a letter to her supporters entitled “The Struggle is the Change” in which she wrote “as the energy, message, and power of this V-Day revolution reaches and grows, so of course does the resistance to it. This is the indicator of its success and impact.” (Enslar, 2005) Enslar remains clear that her commitment to end gender-based violence outweighs the burden of criticism, saying, “It’s crazy to fight for change and then want people to like you. Now that I’m in my 50s, I know who I am. I’m desperately concerned with stopping violence against women, stopping wars and stopping the destruction of the environment. I don’t care if people love me for it or not.” (Miranda, 2006) It is admirable that Enslar is not in the movement for the notoriety or self-aggrandizement that comes with her global presence, but for the future of the movement and in order to stay relevant in a dynamic globe, Enslar must listen to and consider critique. It is possible that some of her best partners and teachers moving forward will be the women who, perhaps inspired by Enslar, find the courage to challenge V-Day’s flaws or the ways in which it misses their voices and their experiences, which ultimately, can only serve to make it stronger.

In contrast to the normalization of violence against women in our global society, V-Day asks society to both imagine a world without violence and to grapple with the question of what it will take to end violence so that girls and women can live without its daily threat. During V-Season (February through April) thousands of events take place around the globe and according to V-Day's website, "Performance is just the beginning. V-Day stages large-scale benefits and produces innovative gatherings, films and campaigns to educate and change social attitudes towards violence against women." In fact, the outpouring of disclosures in response to *The Vagina Monologues* performances, catalyzed the V-Day movement to a global scale, validating Ensler's belief that theater and language have a "sacred nature" and an "ability to explode trauma, create public discourse, empower people on the deepest political and spiritual levels, and ultimately move them to action." (Ensler, 2006) Ensler describes her choice to use the word and the concept of the "vagina" as a tool for empowerment stating, "When I started doing *The Vagina Monologues*, I realized how impossible it was for women to say the word. I would see the disgust, the shame, the embarrassment. The vagina is smack in the center of our bodies, yet it is a place that most women felt ashamed of talking about. What did that say about the center of our beings? There's something in the uttering of the word that reattaches you to it. It's empowering." (Miranda, 2006) In a separate interview with Women.com, Ensler describes her experience with *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day, and how her professional involvement with the movement ultimately has generated even more strength and empowerment for her personally, "I'm in my life. I'm in my seat. I'm in my core. I'm in my power. I don't feel apologetic about anything anymore. I don't feel ambivalent about things anymore. I feel a determination I've never felt before in my life. And the possibility of really, really impacting and changing things -- that, in fact, we could create a world where women could live safely and freely without being

abused or raped. Talking about vaginas all the time has really given me that confidence and strength.” (Enslar, 2000)

The funds and the awareness generated through V-Day events serve, as described on their website, to “support survivors of violence and help organizations around the world revolutionize (their) universal lexicon to make rape, abuse, incest, sex slavery and female genital mutilation language of the past.” V-Day describes its fundraising and allocation of resources as “empowerment philanthropy” in which women and men are invited “to use art and performance to raise funds and awareness in their own communities”. (V-Day Press Release, May 18, 2006) V-Day distributes resources globally to existing programs by providing local anti-violence movements and groups the tools - financial, physical, material and more, to meet the needs of its group or community. V-Day’s mission, as stated on its website, is direct, comprehensive and engaging of the broader global community:

V-Day is an organized response against violence toward women. V-Day is a vision: We see a world where women live safely and freely. V-Day is a demand: Rape, incest, battery, genital mutilation and sexual slavery must end now. V-Day is a spirit: We believe women should spend their lives creating and thriving rather than surviving or recovering from terrible atrocities. V-Day is a catalyst: By raising money and consciousness, it will unify and strengthen existing anti-violence efforts. Triggering far-reaching awareness, it will lay the groundwork for new educational, protective, and legislative endeavors throughout the world. V-Day is a process: We will work as long as it takes. We will not stop until the violence stops. V-Day is a day. We proclaim Valentine's Day as V-Day, to celebrate women and end the violence. V-Day is a fierce, wild, unstoppable movement and community. Join us! ([www.vday.org](http://www.vday.org))

Locating her activism and analysis in the female bodily experience of both sexuality and violence, has been a starting point for Enslar who now shines a broader lens on local and global culture, politics, and events.<sup>11</sup> Enslar’s view that global women can identify with one another and

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<sup>11</sup> Other works by Eve Enslar include the plays *The Good Body* and *Necessary Targets*, books *Insecure at Last: Losing It in Our Security Obsessed World*; *A Memory*, *A Monologue*, *A Rant and A Prayer*, and *I Am An*

organize across difference against violence against women is based on her location as a survivor of violence and through her direct experience working with other survivors. She explains her own experience and the struggle she faced with little support, “As a survivor, I can attest to the fact that rape forever changes your life, robbing you of dignity, self-worth, agency over your body, and comfortability with intimacy and trust, while also escalating a pervasive sense of isolation and shame.” (Enslar, September 30, 2009) Combined with her direct experience in the field, Enslar sees that her struggle to cope, heal and transform the trauma of violence is not unlike that of women in other countries and cultures, “After 11 years of traveling the world and meeting with rape survivors across the planet I can say that the long-term consequences are multiple and far-reaching, ranging from homelessness, drug abuse, and eating disorders, to imprisonment, suicide, and early death.” (Enslar, September 30, 2009) For Enslar, the violence women and girls experience across the globe has a common quality about it that must not be understated, and rather out of that recognition of the global connection among women, change can take place. She describes her understanding of the common experience for women stating, “I think that the oppression of women is universal. I think we are bonded in every single place of the world. I think the nature of the oppression--whether it’s acid burning in one country, or female genital mutilation in another, or gang rapes in the parking lots in high schools of the suburbs - it’s the same idea...The systematic global oppression of women is completely across the globe.” (Enslar, 2003)

V-Day can honestly recognize the complexity of its understanding to organize a global movement of women, and call on experts in other fields to help implement an approach that would create deeper connections as well as support frameworks and structures within the

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Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World (2010), and films Until the Violence Stops (2003) and What I Want My Words to Do to You: Voices From Inside a Women’s Maximum Security Prison (2003)



organization that can respond to women's diverse interpretation of rights, culture and feminisms. The intimacy of V-Day's content, which allows for connecting deeply and for recognizing women's suffering, as well as their possibility for healing, binds survivors from many backgrounds and allows for collective action. V-Day must trust that it can tolerate and negotiate dissent and difference within its own movement – and still create opportunities for healing and collective action. Crystal Kile, who directs programming at the Newcomb Center for Research on Women, discussed her partnership with V-Day in New Orleans saying, “The whole mechanism of V-Day...is that you go the first time, and you hear a story that resonates with you somehow. And you're motivated to get in touch with your own story, and figure out how that ties in with all the other stories.” (Fensterstock, 2008) Perhaps by broadening and complicating the lens through which the stories are told or framed, V-Day's reach would be even more expansive.

Enslar describes the level of her passion for her work in an interview from the Chronicle of Philanthropy, emphasizing that her goal “is to make violence against women the foremost thing on people's minds” as she believes that despite the prevalence of gender-based violence, it remains “the issue that people get to later, when they're done with the other issues.” (Lewis, 2001) As well, she states that the work to end violence against women must go beyond raising money, building shelters, and writing laws – it must take root as a new cultural norm and practice. She states that ending violence against women requires “being willing to struggle to be a different kind of human being. It means not accepting force as a method of coercion and oppression. Ending violence against women means opening to the great power of women, the mystery of women, the heart of women, the wild unending sexuality and creativity of women, and not being afraid.” (Enslar, 2008) The challenge will be to forge an alliance linking women in their local contexts that are experiencing and/or confronting gender-based oppressions, with

activist women's groups around the globe that have access to the political, material, and economic resources in order to collaborate against gender-based oppression while recognizing and negotiating with diverse voices, perspectives, and analyses.

### ***Chapter 3: Locating Transnational Feminist Theories and Practices***

*“No discussion of the feminist international perspective is complete unless it rests on a lucid analysis of one's own national roots, of one's own inscription in the network of power and*

*signification that make up one's culture...Feminists cannot avoid confrontation with our own national ties, our location within a specific national framework. Unless this kind of feminist analysis gets elaborated, women run the risk of waving the international flag as an empty rhetorical gesture, slipping into a fantasy world...a no (wo)man's land. Proposing an international perspective without critical scrutiny of our roles in our cultural, national contexts would be only a form of supranationalism, that is, ultimately, a form of planetary exile." (Rosi Braidotti, 1992)*

Transnational feminist theory is rooted in a commitment to explore intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and geo-political location in an attempt to identify the myriad oppressions of women that will allow for contextualizing, complicating, and ultimately strengthening the lens of critical analysis. According to research done by the members of the Affinity Project, transnational women's rights activists collaborate across diversity based on a commitment to a kind of "groundless solidarity...that is based on extending support for activist struggles that occur outside of the supporters' own immediate realm of interest." (The Affinity Project, 2006) In this sense, this practice lets go of dualistic approaches to organizing, while difference does not have to be erased in an effort to create connections and solidarity. Still, bound up in the feminist commitment to solidarity and evident in theoretical critiques of global feminism, is the inherent and historical risk of insisting on a universal category of "woman" which, as Kelly Oliver writes in her discussion on American feminism, "paradoxically as soon as feminism defines 'woman' it excludes all sorts of women." (Oliver, 1993, 98)

In order to negotiate differences among women, transnational feminist theorists and activists must balance Catherine MacKinnon's insightful concept suggesting that "women in different social positions may experience sexism differently does not entail that they have nothing in common—they still suffer from sexism" while simultaneously attending to the complexity of women's diverse lives as described by Audre Lorde, "the oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those

boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries, either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference. For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism.” (Lorde, 1984) This balance of both connections and differences is contained within the practice of intersectionality, which rather than being what Sally Haslanger calls a “basis for dissolving the category ‘woman,’” instead transnational feminist solidarity “may be accommodated through a structural analysis of gender that allows for racialized and otherwise particularized modes of sexist oppression.” (Haslanger, 2002) Uma Narayan articulates the manner in which an egalitarian and empowering approach to global feminist organizing might be created:

I am suggesting that what Western and Third-World feminists might hope to have in common may be other than ‘shared interests qua women’ or ‘common forms of patriarchal oppression that cut across national boundaries.’ They may hope to have a shared and collaborative political understanding of colonial history, its continuing impact on contemporary economic and political agendas within both Western and Third-World contexts, and its effects on the overall relationship between Western and Third-World nations and communities. This requires, of course, willingness on the part of Western feminists to struggle for ‘horizontal comradeship’ and to let the ‘Oppressed Third-World Woman as Object of Rescue’ yield to the Third-World feminist as intellectual collaborator and political ally on a wide range of issues that mark our common and fractured world. (Narayan, 1997, 80)

V-Day’s 2009 Annual Report states that the organization operates with three “core beliefs” which emphasize “art has the power to reach, transform, and inspire people to act,” as well as “empowered women are unstoppable leaders and lasting cultural and social change is spread through their experience” and finally, “you cannot end violence against women without looking at the intersection of poverty, racism, the environment, and war.” The range of V-Day events allow for a diversity of participants and approaches to activism that reflect the interests, creativity and skills of the group, as well as providing the educational tools and workshop formats with leaders in the field of anti-violence work, where the various layers of difference that

shape women's experiences of violence can be addressed. Creativity and context are then coupled with a specific approach to empower survivors through the recognition and celebration of their emotional, mental, physical and spiritual resilience through V-Day's embodied approaches to healing and activism. Out of the philosophy and practice of these three core beliefs V-Day has been received with both enthusiasm and critique, yet most importantly, the movement has generated a global dialogue about the reality of violence against women and girls, bringing a global voice to this historically silenced epidemic. The impact of Ensler's work with V-Day, while traveling the globe and meeting individuals and communities that struggle with and work to reduce violence, has allowed her to move beyond what she perceives as the confines of individuality, identity, and country. She describes this shift saying:

Something happened when I began to travel. I got lost. I became uprooted in time and space. I became a permanently displaced person. At first it was terrifying, not knowing who I was or where I was. Then I realized that we are all essentially displaced people, all of us are refugees, we came from somewhere – and we are hopefully traveling all the time (even if we never leave our rooms), moving toward a new place. Freedom means I may not be identified as part of any one group, but that I can visit and find myself in every group. Freedom does not mean I don't have values or beliefs. But it does mean I am not hardened around them. I do not use them as weapons. Freedom means not being owned, not occupied, not bought. Freedom means finding the place in me that connects with every person I meet rather than thinking of myself as different, better or on top... Freedom is not knowing where you are but being deeply there. Not waiting for someone to save or rescue you or heal your terrible past but doing that for yourself. (Ensler, Ode Magazine, 2005)

Critiques about Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* from which V-Day was born and from which significant V-Day funding and public awareness is generated, include a concern that its portrayal of women in the play contribute to "colonialist conceptions of non-Western women" and simultaneously reflect "premature white feminist assumptions and celebrations of a global 'sisterhood.'" (Hall, 2005) Yet, in much of her work Ensler has emphasizes and gives credit to

the strength and insight of the women with whom V-Day collaborates, and requests accountability from the West, from political elite, and from privileged women, to recognize their connection to the violence that happens around the globe. Specifically important to working with a transnational lens is to make connections between present day issues, conflicts and violence, and the moments in history from which unequal dynamics and access to political power, economic welfare, societal instability and suffering began to emerge historically. Speaking about the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and V-Day's work to draw global attention to the gender-based violence through the 2009 and 2010 Spotlight Campaign and "Turning Pain to Power" tour with Dr. Denis Mukwege, who operates a hospital in the Congo that responds to sexual violence survivors, she states:

I hope that at the end of this tour, people are moved and see the connections between all of us here in the U.S. and the people in the Congo. Much of our coltan for our cell phones and playstations comes from the Congo - so many resources get plundered and taken from the Congo for the West. It is essentially an economic war fought on the bodies of women. And we're all culpable and connected. There isn't any product you use in this world which isn't connected to somebody's struggle somewhere in the world. So hopefully people will be engaged by Dr. Mukwege and feel compassion for Dr. Mukwege and understand that this is their struggle. (Enslar, 2009)

Drawing connections between the luxuries enjoyed by privileged communities and nations of the world, and the reality of the context and climate from where many of the world's resources are extracted, is essential to bridging the gaps between the local and global community.

Contemplating the implications of our shared connections serves to remind the global community, not only about their role in a global cycle of oppression and resource depletion, but also helps them realize both the power and responsibility they have as citizens and consumers, to break that cycle, to make thoughtful choices, and to find ways to take new action.

In her book The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice, feminist theorist Caren Kaplan describes the possibility for diverse groups of women to come together around a single issue, such as V-Day does with gender-based violence, saying “as a practice of affiliation, a politics of location identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances.” (Kaplan, 1994, 139) Guided by Ensler’s vision of interconnectedness, V-Day’s work around the globe incorporates a plurality of voices by engaging local leaders in their communities (evident in their Spotlight Campaign partnerships where local women lead and steer the direction of the movement) and therefore, V-Day can maintain both an expansive and inclusive vision of global female solidarity. In 2001, Ensler described her concept of feminism as “the inclusion and empowerment of everyone” and continues by talking about the future of feminism, “I feel honored to be called a feminist...I would hope young women really examine what the word means. To throw out the word itself would be to dishonor all the women who have gone before us. We need to reclaim, invigorate and update the word. If I have learned anything from all the great feminists before me, it’s that this is a chain and we just keep widening the circle.” (Ivins, 2001) Ensler also emphasizes that women are girls are essential leaders to changing the culture of violence, “I feel that women have to mobilize now more than they ever have in the history of the world, and that they absolutely hold the keys to the future. There is nobody who is going to change the world right now but women, and it affects us on every front.” (Fu, 2003) Despite the challenges to global organizing and the intensity of working across differences, Ensler believes that global unity among women organized around a mission to end gender-based violence can be created and exercised in a way

that is meaningful and empowering for women and girls, as well as men, boys and communities, around the world.

Enslar suggests the larger transnational possibilities that V-Day's style of organizing holds, stating, "For me, it's been a great model of what a global party could be like. I've seen how decentralized community-built organizing could really work. If we could agree with certain basics: That all human beings are entitled to food, shelter and education, and that could be a tenet, we could take that and go with that. Ending violence is the most essential thing, we could work on that. Where do we all come together?" (Brown, 2001) Enslar emphasizes the connections among diverse women that can be accessed in coming together to end gender-based violence, as well as a willingness to be open, vulnerable, and receptive. V-Day's 2008 Annual Report articulates a belief that women around the world are struggling against a similar epidemic of gender-based violence:

Although sources of violence may seem diverse, women's responses sound tragically similar. Besides the pain and strength you will hear in their survival stories, the themes that resound across cultures and geographies are of the indifference of authorities, the familial instinct of denial, and the lack of public outrage about the violence that millions of women experience every day. V-Day was born of the belief that until these themes are addressed, these violations named and taken up by whole communities...the violence will continue. V-Day's activities start by attacking the silence – public and private – that allows violence against women to occur and to continue. (V-Day 2008 Annual Report)

Recognizing that the institutions that allow gender-based violence to occur without much consequence must be changed, V-Day has importantly and effectively reached out to local, national and global politicians and political groups, to ensure more informed leadership and policy making. In 2009, Enslar spoke in front of the U.S. Senate Committee on Rape and Violence against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, describing the impact of her experiences in the DRC and her understanding of the epidemic of sexual violence. In her



testimony she appealed to the strength, and the responsibility, of the U.S. government to collaborate as leaders in the effort to end these atrocities, “I am here because you—the United States government—are the most powerful government in the world. You have great influence in the Great Lakes region of Africa. It can be your legacy to inspire and provoke the world community to put an end to the worst femicide on the planet.” She also honestly expressed the magnitude of the violence, “I am here today to tell you that nothing I have heard or seen compares with what is going on in the Democratic Republic of Congo. When I returned from my first trip there nearly 2 years ago, I was shattered. I had crossed over to another zone in my psyche. I am not sure I will ever get back.” (Enslar, May 13, 2009) After detailing the level of violence threatening women and girls in the DRC, as well as the ways the local women are already working together to initiate change and end violence in their communities, Enslar makes a plea to the government to provide the necessary support to see these women through the violence, and to communicate a message to the world that gender-based violence will no longer be tolerated:

Where is the United States? I implore you - lead the world. Take action. Make this your mission. Let the Congo be where we ended femicide, the trend that is madly eviscerating this planet—from the floggings in Pakistan, the new rape laws in Afghanistan, the ongoing rapes in Haiti, Darfur, Zimbabwe, the daily battering, incest, harassing, trafficking, enslaving, genital cutting and honor killing. Let the Congo be the place where women were finally cherished and life affirmed, where the humiliation and subjugation ended, where women took their rightful agency over their bodies and land. Where the US led the world in standing against rape and femicide, where the US stood for women. (Enslar, 2009)

In partnership with Kavita Ramdas (President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women) and Zainab Salbi (Founder and CEO of Women for Women International) who, like Enslar, work as “policy makers, activists, researchers and grant-makers” advancing women’s rights, the women collaborated to draft an appeal to U.S. President Barack Obama which emphasized the

interconnectedness of war, violence, poverty, and geopolitical domination with gender-based violence. The appeal urged the Administration to recognize and take action to end violence against women and girls, and emphasized women's roles in creating positive global change through leadership roles:

We represent a historic movement for change: millions of women across the globe with innovative ideas, influential constituencies and collaborative solutions. We are calling on you to ensure that women are equally represented in everything, from your administration's infrastructure to its decision-making and solution building. We are calling on you to exercise leadership in dismantling the structures that perpetuate gender inequality, impede women's full participation in society and thwart real progress for people around the world. As war rages in Gaza, it is clear that the time has come to dismantle militarism as the dominant ideology in world politics. We must ensure that women take the lead in building lasting peace in the Middle East, ending genocide in Darfur, stopping femicide in the Democratic Republic of Congo, fighting the War on Terror in Afghanistan, and ending the war in Iraq. Though the select-few women who hold leadership positions in this country's political system inspire us; women represent more than 50% of the population and deserve more than marginal representation. We believe that in order for your vision of change to succeed, women must be in positions of power. While US women gained the right to vote 100 years ago, to date only 14% of the US Congress are women. This must change. The major economic, security, governance and environmental challenges of our times cannot be solved without the equal participation of women at all levels of society -- from the home to institutions of national and global governance. Women's voices must be central in all major discussions including the economic crisis, overhauling our education system. Long-term investments in women's education, health and leadership development are equally critical. Economic structures continue to marginalize women. Consider this: women represent two-thirds of the world's labor yet we own less than 1% of the world's assets. (Ensler, Ramdas and Salbi, 2009)

V-Day's approach to activism that creates networks and alliances among diverse women embodies what bell hooks has called a "'yearning' across racial, sexual and class lines that allows for 'the recognition of common commitments and serve[s] as a base for solidarity and coalition.'" (hooks 1990, 27) Critic and V-Day college campaign participant, Alyssa Reiser, charges that "the concept of 'universal women's experiences,' while highly problematic, is palatable to people who want a feel-good, watered down feminism; who want to believe in a

global sisterhood and are naïve enough to think that differences are erased by the label ‘woman.’” (Reiser, 2010) Yet, considering the level of international V-Day events and cross-cultural feminist participation with V-Day in ending violence against women, it could be argued that a new form of “global sisterhood.” This “sisterhood” importantly incorporates and celebrates difference and grows out of the global education, creative activism, and alliances across cultures that V-Day supports. Instead of erasing difference to form a “sisterhood” or establish solidarity, Ensler emphasizes the importance of diversity, of recognizing and valuing difference as a means to creating understanding, sensitivity, and promoting the human dignity of all people. Her critique of former U.S. President George W. Bush and the war in Iraq begun under his administration showed a mindset of embracing diversity, and a commitment to create more global understanding through collaboration stating, “I believe your war indicates a desire to dominate, rather than transform, heal, improve, or build relationships. I do not think you understand that the United States is one country and one culture and not the only country and culture. That the spirit of domination threatens the world’s diversity and difference - the very forces that are most magical and essential to the human experience.” (Ensler, 2003) This critique of the way in which her country’s political policies and tactics harm the global community, while seeking to serve only U.S. interests, represents a transnational approach that emphasizes a more collaborative, egalitarian, and globally sustainable model of international political affairs that sees not only our past and present, but also, our futures, as inextricably connected.

Working transnationally towards a common goal (such as the goal to end violence against women) with diverse women and perspectives requires flexibility (intellectual and emotional), a willingness to “work” on oneself, and a commitment to listen, embrace, and integrate thoughtful critique, as well as a willingness to implement the changes necessary to enhancing the

movement, however difficult. Most importantly, when women work cross-culturally, it is imperative that they are educated in the various historical, political, and cultural contexts from which other women speak, work, and mobilize, which clear and honest communication can help foster. Without creating monolithic labels or assumptions about “other” women, a transnational feminist approach cultivates greater awareness and appreciation of women from various backgrounds and makes a commitment to uphold the individuality and the voices of all women. According to Uma Narayan “a historically informed and anti-essentialist feminist vision requires that we learn to see cultures as less rigid and more suffused by change than they are often depicted” thereby allowing greater intercultural collaboration among diverse women and refusing the labels that have plagued intercultural and global women’s movements in the past. (Narayan, 1998, 88)

Both the historical and contemporary layers of the tensions and the connections in feminisms impact and shape the current possibilities for global solidarity among women to end gender-based violence. Since “there is no pure undifferentiated essence of ‘womanhood’ on which a universal ethic of feminism can be based,” how is it possible to trans-nationally align women under the commitment of ending violence against women? (Kalev, 345) What are the challenges, the risks, and the possibilities in organizing across cultures? How does one unpack and analyze the layers and critiques to a transnational movement in the “attempt to defend global goals” and “make univocal universal demands” while still holding open the possibility that there is no easy or single perspective? (Kalev, 345) The value of bringing every woman to the conversation, with her unique history, with her specific perspective based on the life she has led - is the revolutionary strength of a transnational women’s movement. Not only is it enough to bring diverse women into the conversation, but the work, the goals, and the outcomes of female

empowerment must be meaningful and accessible to the women and the worlds in which they live, work, grow and love. Women working transnationally must explore issues of representation in their organizing, which may expose power inequalities among the group, as well as the risks of subordinating women, and have an approach for how they will respond to and reduce those inequities. In a transnational feminist environment, “participants share a commitment to negotiate their differences, transforming those differences from acrimonious divisions into sources of collective power.” (Sutton-Brown, 164) The diversity of perspectives emerging out of the global feminist community shakes up and challenges any easy assumptions about the definition, mission, and possibilities for women’s rights, gender equality, and feminism. Today, women around the world recognize the plurality of this movement by referring to feminisms as a fluid, dynamic philosophy whose definition and approach is uniquely located within specific historical, political, and cultural contexts.

## **Chapter 4: Intersectionality and Integrating Difference**

*“Incorporating diversity, if it is going to be successful, will require a great deal more of active listening, instead of passive hearing. It is going to require more active discussion instead of turn-taking, space-given talking. It’s going to mean expressing disagreements, asking for clarifications and incorporating our differences in creating a shared vision together. A ‘sisterhood’ that I want to belong to allows me to be different and still be able to work together. To this sisterhood, I will bring my individual history, listen to others’ stories and know that we are building a foundation together.” (Lynett Uttal, 1990)*

*“Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program.” (Susan James, 2000)*

Born out of the feminist activism and organizing of the 1960s and early 1970s, feminist theory initially served as “the site for critical interrogation and re-imagining of sexist gender roles,” described by bell hooks in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of her 1984 book Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. Hooks shows how early feminisms would “provide a revolutionary blueprint for the movement - one that when followed would lead us in the direction of transforming patriarchal culture,” yet that would not be where feminist theory would end. (hooks, 2000) While the First Wave of feminism addressed structural inequalities and discrepancies between men and women, such as the right to vote, education, work opportunities and health care, the Second Wave of feminism addressed the unofficial inequalities between genders. The Second Wave located women’s personal lives in a political framework demonstrating the sexism inherent in societal structures of power, and its impact included both personal and political outcomes such as the legalization of abortion, equality in pay at the workplace, as well as more equal access to education.

However, both the First and Second Wave of feminism failed to recognize, incorporate, and politicize the intersecting issues of gender, race, sexuality, socio-economic status and other

locations of identity along which inequalities are constructed and that shape women's experiences of oppression, differently. (Butler 1990, Flax 1990, Spelman 1988) These theories did not represent the experiences of women of color, working class women, lesbians, and other groups or individual women that did not identify as white and middle-class. Simultaneously, on the global scale, Western feminists attempted to universalize women's rights commitments and goals, often speaking (without permission) for women in other countries and speaking without an understanding of their cultural, historical, political, religious, and other social contexts – practicing a form of cultural imperialism that essentialized “Other” women. Determined to create a platform of gender equality and women's rights that more completely represented women's issues, Hazel V. Carby describes in her essay, “On the Threshold of Women's Era: Lynching, Empire and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory” how women of color in the United States contested the limits of Second Wave inceptions of feminism, and developed theories that defined their own “political parameters of gender, race and patriarchal authority.” (Carby, 1987, 97)

During the 1970s in the United States, women of color and working class women strongly criticized Second Wave<sup>12</sup> feminism's reproduction of oppression in the way in which women of color and working class women were alienated from the narrow version of white middle-class feminism. Women of color addressing rights and equality were “constantly engaged” with the co-occurring issues of race, class, culture and historical context as represented in their writing and activism. (Carby, 2003) This nuanced, specific and more comprehensive approach to analyzing women's rights deepened and complicated existing feminist analysis and sharpened feminist theory. According to bell hooks, “feminist thought and practice were fundamentally

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<sup>12</sup> Second wave feminism is described as a re-birth “in the 1960s as women sought to liberate themselves from the traditional roles of wife and mother. Iconic images such as bra burning and women's encounter groups made Women's Lib a powerful movement.” For more detailed descriptions of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave feminism, see Terri Senft, 2008. ([www.livejournal.com/talkread.bml?itemid=9823946](http://www.livejournal.com/talkread.bml?itemid=9823946))

altered when radical women of color and white women allies began to rigorously challenge the notion that ‘gender’ was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate.” (hooks, 1984)

Women of color in the U.S. effectively linked their movements with women around the globe whose experiences and perspectives were also not originally considered by Western women’s movements. Initially marginalized by the women’s movement in the West, women of color later exposed the inequality and hypocrisy it perpetuated. Pushing beyond a simple analysis of gender inequality, they evaluated and critiqued the many layers of oppression they experienced, which enabled them to define an expansive, human rights based movement that addressed the links between gender, race, culture, class, history, colonialism, and development. Third World feminists resisted the traditional Western feminist practice of universalizing the female experience of oppression. Importantly, Third World feminists brought attention to issues of cultural, historical, and economic difference when analyzing women’s rights as well as working to resist what Uma Narayan describes as essentialist “portraits of culture that often depict culturally dominant norms of femininity, and practices that adversely affect women” within their own cultural contexts. (Narayan, 2000, 85)

In Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Post Colonial, Feminist World,

Uma Narayan problematizes the way Western feminists assumed the “heterogeneity” of Third World<sup>13</sup> women. These assumptions, she argues, were based on “essentialist representations” of the most “marginalized and underprivileged” women as the “average” Third World woman, contrasted with the fact that “the most underprivileged of western women are seldom cast as

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<sup>13</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty “defines the Third World geographically: ‘the nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-east Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania constitute the parameters of the non-European third world. In addition, black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples in the U.S., Europe, Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third worlds, also define themselves as third world peoples.’” (for further analysis of Third World feminisms, see <http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/ThirdWorld.html>)



“Representative of Western Culture.” (Narayan, 2000, 84) This “asymmetry” in feminist representations of global women is also well depicted by Chandra Mohanty, who writes, “this average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.) This...is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.” (Mohanty, 1991, 56)

In an essay entitled, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism” Uma Narayan describes how many women’s issues have been underrepresented or ignored in traditional feminist theories stating “the feminist critique of gender essentialism does not merely charge that essentialist claims about ‘women’ are overgeneralizations, but points out that these generalization are hegemonic in that they represent the problem of privileged women (most often white, Westerners, middle-class, heterosexual women) as paradigmatic ‘women’s issues.’” (Narayan, 1998) The contradiction within feminist practices that advocated for gender equality yet simultaneously ignored the diverse experiences and challenges facing women depending identities beyond gender, disenfranchised and disenchanting many women of color and “Third World” women - negatively altering their perception of feminism and diminishing the belief that a global women’s movement could benefit all women. Long before Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality was recognized as “the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women,” editors Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith discussed the gaps in the

theoretical analysis of oppressions in a book they co-edited All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies stating:

Black feminists on both sides of the Atlantic and Third World feminist scholars had already produced numerous critiques of how the experiences of women of colour had been neglected in feminist discourse and had already underscored the importance of theorizing multiple identities and sources of oppression. As early as 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a Black US feminist lesbian group, issued a stirring and highly influential manifesto in which they argued that gender, race, class, and sexuality should be integral to any feminist analysis of power and domination. Several years later, the first anthology of Black feminist thought appeared with a title that provocatively stated what was at stake with intersectionality. (Hull, Smith, and Scott, 1982)

Author and activist Mahua Sarkar describes in her essay "Looking For Feminism" how "critical interventions led by black, third-world and/or lesbian feminists have rightly pointed out insistence on a universal category such as 'woman', based on a single axis of identification/signification" in fact "occludes the simultaneous workings of other axes such as race, class or sexuality (to name a few), that necessarily inflect one's experience of gender oppression or privilege." (Sarkar, 2004, 321) In doing so, they illuminated, as described by Anthias and Davis in Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle, how early feminist theory and activism originally "ignored the ways in which gender and class processes differentially affect women from different social groups." (Anthias & Davis, 1992, 96) This insight established the necessity for the re-working and re-organizing of the feminist lens, and compelled feminist theory to shed its concept of a "category woman with an essential and static property always in a dichotomous relation to the dominant 'other', man." (Anthias & Davis, 96)

In many important and tangible ways, feminist activism has shifted away from the historically narrow vision of feminism, and instead, enhanced by the insights and critiques made by women of color and Third World feminisms, it has evolved to more proactively incorporate

the vast plurality of perspectives, to create space for oppositional voices within feminist organizing, activism and conversations, as well as maintaining self-reflexivity among feminists about their own context, position, privilege, and perspective. In fact, in her book Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory and Postcolonial Histories, Mary E. John describes contemporary feminism as “a narrative about the discovery of representation itself - from the prior moment, when women’s identity as women was either largely accepted or disregarded, to the present, in which we make our subject politically and interpretatively.” (John, 1996, 19)

The cost of not working with an intersectional analysis, according to Kimberlé Crenshaw, is essentially immeasurable. In her essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” Crenshaw emphasizes the need to attend to issues of intersectionality within feminism and demonstrates that the failure to do so, negatively impacts the possibilities not only for women, but for all people:

If we aren’t intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the cracks. When we don’t pay attention to the margins, when we don’t acknowledge the intersection, where the places of power overlap, we not only fail to see the women who fall between our movements, sometimes we pit our movements against each other. The average sentence for someone convicted of raping a black woman is two years, and the sentence for raping a white woman is ten. This is what happens when our movements are pitted against each other. Women lose. People of color lose. We all lose. Women come from a whole range of backgrounds. If our visions of peace don’t include these differences, then our peace will be partial. We can celebrate some of our victories but it is important for us to learn. It is important for us to move from images of women’s rights that look exclusive and exclusionary and to different ideas of how inclusion is supposed to look. As long as we are imagining and fantasizing about a female President, why not fantasize about a truly intersectional feminist politics.” (Crenshaw, 1994)

In order to create a “truly intersectional feminist politics” through her work with V-Day, Eve Ensler has had to not only recognize and critique the wide spectrum of experiences and oppressions facing women and girls (and boys and men) depending on locations and identities of race, culture, religion, geography, and socioeconomic status. Through her writing and her public

speaking, Ensler has openly challenged racist, colonialist, and ethnocentric practices present in the global political and cultural community today.<sup>14</sup> Speaking directly to the challenges within feminism regarding the importance of recognizing intersectionality, and as Crenshaw suggests, making “visible the multiple positioning” of gender, race, class, sexuality and other identities, “that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it,” Ensler’s role in the transnational feminist community bears more integrity. (Phoenix, 2006, 187) Crenshaw and Ensler co-wrote a response to the implications in the feminist community arguing that based on gender, women should cast their 2008 presidential vote for Hillary Rodham Clinton instead of Barack Obama. Critiquing this overly simplistic analysis when both Presidential candidates represented the possibility for a person to emerge through oppression to arrive as the leader of the United States, Crenshaw and Ensler argued that women were assuming a false hierarchy of oppression, in which the system and experience of sexism was understood as worse than that of racism. As well, such an analysis failed to acknowledge the intersectional position of feminists of color who are impacted by both interlocking systems of gender and racial oppression, as they said, “for many of us, feminism is not separate from the struggle against violence, war, racism and economic injustice. Gender hierarchy and race hierarchy are not separate and parallel dynamics. The empowerment of women is contingent upon all these things.” (Crenshaw and Ensler, 2008) They described their intersectional stance:

Because we believe that feminism can be expressed by a broader range of choices than this ‘either/or’ proposition entails, we again find ourselves compelled to say ‘no’--this time to a brand of feminism that betrays its inclusive and global commitments. We believe we stand in unity with many feminists who will say, ‘Not in Our Name’ will this feminism be deployed. At issue is a profound difference in seeing feminism as intersectional and global rather than essentialist and insular. Women have grappled with these questions in every feminist wave,

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<sup>14</sup> See “An Open Letter to President Bush,” “Drill, drill, drill,” “Does the Brotherhood of Fame Endow You With a Lifetime of Exemption from Accountability?” & “Ten Radical Acts in Congo for the New Year” (<http://www.vday.org/search/node/huffington+post>)

struggling to see feminism as something other than a 'me too' bid for power whether it be in the family, the party, the race or the state. As feminists our freedoms have been hard won and we'd like to think that we have learned from our mistakes along the way. The feminism we fought so hard for and benefited from was not to make us blind to the complexity, but to help us see beyond simple formulas and body politics." (Crenshaw and Ensler, 2008)

Ann Ferguson points out that feminist alliances across difference can be deepened through the process of carefully negotiating differences that otherwise unaddressed and unexplored, might create tension. Borrowing from bell hooks, she argues that in a transnational feminist space, "solidarity between women...must be struggled for rather than automatically received" and in working through conflict and difference, women create more inclusive, empathic and collaborative outcomes. (Ferguson, 2003) By recognizing and exploring intersectionality, transnational solidarity fosters powerful alliances to critique other power inequities that impact members uniquely. For Ensler, starting with women's bodily experiences of sexuality and violence, as explored through the stories in *The Vagina Monologues*, the scope of her work through V-Day, and her understanding of feminism, has expanded. She describes this expansion saying that feminism is "part of one story -- connected to saving the earth, ending racism, empowering women, giving young girls options, opening our minds, deepening tolerance, and ending violence and war." (Ensler, September 8, 2008) Since *The Vagina Monologues* were first performed, the fundraising and issues that V-Day now calls attention to include sexual violence, along with racism, poverty, incarceration, colonialism, privilege, heterosexism, war, capitalism, environmentalism, and ethnocentrism. Ensler's essay "Drill, drill, drill" warning women about the risks of voting for the McCain/Palin Presidential platform that would undermine the environment and made important connections between the degradation of the natural world and the prevalence of destructive violence in the global society, writing:

This vote is a vote that will determine the future not just of the U.S., but of the planet. It will determine whether we create policies to save the earth or make it forever uninhabitable for humans. It will determine whether we move towards dialogue and diplomacy in the world or whether we escalate violence through invasion, undermining and attack. It will determine whether we go for oil, strip mining, coal burning or invest our money in alternatives that will free us from dependency and destruction...I think of teeth when I think of drills. I think of rape. I think of destruction. I think of domination. I think of military exercises that force mindless repetition, emptying the brain of analysis, doubt, ambiguity or dissent. I think of pain. Do we want a future of drilling? More holes in the ozone, in the floor of the sea, more holes in our thinking, in the trust between nations and peoples, more holes in the fabric of this precious thing we call life? (Enslar, 2008)

Through V-Day's annual Spotlight Campaigns, which focus on one group of women and girls that have been harmed by sexual violence, along with other social, political, racial and economic injustices, these campaigns recognize the specific intersections of how sexual violence and other institutionalized oppressions have affected the community. Spotlight campaigns since 2002 include Women in Afghanistan (2002), the Indian Country Project for Native and First Nations women in the United States & Canada (2003), the Missing and Murdered Women of Juarez, Mexico (2004), the Women of Iraq (2005), the Comfort Women who survived WWII (2006), Women in Conflict Zones (2007) the Women of New Orleans (2008) and the Women living in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2009 and 2010). Most recently announced for the 2011 Spotlight Campaign will be the Women and Girls of Haiti, and according to V-Day's website, the Campaign "will highlight the high levels of violence against women and girls in Haiti, and will focus on the increased rates of sexual violence since the devastating earthquake" in January of 2010. These funds will be support "a revolutionary national campaign in Haiti lead by a coalition of women activists - including longtime V-Day activist Elvire Eugene - that will address sexual violence through art, advocacy, safe shelter and legal services." Each of these projects, guided by the vision of the women being "spotlighted" has effectively supported

existing local programs, provided education and training opportunities in anti-violence organizing in the community, while also importantly raising awareness of the real issues women face globally through V-Day's close collaboration with local leaders and activists.

Within the context of empowering women from around the world, feminists interested in creating transnational partnerships and commitments to the diversity of women must attend to language and definitions as they relate to violence against women, empowerment and surviving. Ensler has described the global scale of V-Day and the alliance among global women and girls as an opportunity that “enables us to learn from each other and to develop transnational partnerships.” (V-Day Press Kit, 2004) V-Day's work would benefit from dedicating more time to processing and negotiating with women, how V-Day defines the key concepts utilized repeatedly in discussion of the movement, such as: survivor, vagina, female genital mutilation, among others. Language and meaning must mirror the diversity and fluidity of feminism and just as feminism is not static, nor are women's multiple, conflicting, and layered interpretations of the meanings of these words – as well as the values associated with them. While Ensler argues that actually “talking about women's private parts...gave birth to a public social movement” some women and men, as well as communities, may have been alienated by an overly simplistic discussion of women's reproductive organs. (Fensterstock, 2008)

By broadening their understandings of violence and women's bodies, as well as recognizing that some highly contested topics such as “female cutting” may never be easily located within the spectrum of violence and cultural tradition, V-Day can make the necessary space for greater discussion, participation, and analysis. This approach also supports the mindfulness necessary to cross-cultural collaborations, and the willingness to grapple with complex issues that may be outside of one's immediate cultural or contextual framework. By

making space for the discussion around language, meaning and culture, V-Day would not exclude women who do not identify with the word “survivor,” (and it might seek to explore what meanings are attached to that word) nor would it exclude more specific although marginalized voices of women who, for example, understand female cutting as an integral cultural ceremony. Instead, the movement could invite broader participation and could build panels and workshops that specifically attend to issues of cultural autonomy, women’s rights, and transnational feminisms, giving participants more tools and skills around these complicated topics.

In V-Day’s guidelines for hosting V-Day events, which may include performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, screenings of the V-Day documentary “Until the Violence Stops” as well as workshops such as “V-Men Events” there is an emphasis on reaching out to local community groups and therefore making direct connections between the local and global by using local benefits/performances/events to support both community based anti-violence efforts as well as the Spotlighted group to which 10% of the funds generated will be directed. For performances of “Any One of Us: Words from Women in Prison,” a play written collaboratively between Ensler and women in prison that reveals the important connection between incarcerated women and their histories of abuse and it’s implications for society, V-Day’s website suggests that groups “consider a beneficiary that is specifically working with women in prison groups addressing the issues of violence against women in relation to incarceration, laws, policy, advocacy, etc.” The guidelines also suggest that performers include “up to 2 local pieces of writing from formerly or currently incarcerated women” that focuses on “how their experiences with violence led to their incarceration” allowing the voices of incarcerated women, formerly muted by their status in society, to emerge in the public eye. Additionally, the groups are encouraged to “reach out...and include formerly incarcerated women whose experiences with violence directly led to their



incarceration” and “reach out to local correctional facilities to request permission to perform inside of the prison” which empowers formerly incarcerated women to tell their stories, as well as bringing the message of their stories to women in prison who may identify with and feel validated by the play.

In line with an approach to organizing that makes space for diversity, accessibility, collaboration, and local leadership, other guidelines for the myriad of V-Day events, translated on V-Day’s website in English, Spanish, French, and Dutch, recommend; working collaboratively with other V-Day events in the area, keeping production costs down, donating profits to a local group that specifically works to end violence against women through prevention, education, support, and empowerment as well as donating 10% of the proceeds to the Spotlight Campaign (making a connection between the local and the global), striving for diversity and finding a way to include anyone that desires to be a part of the event, including male performers under the organizer’s discretion and for events that focus on men, such as *A Memory, A Monologue, a Rant and a Prayer* and V-Men workshops, considering a beneficiary that is working with men and boys to end violence against women and girls. For *The Vagina Monologues* performances, the performers must identify as female, which includes people who lead their lives as women and individuals who are born as women or are transgendered.

The V-Day guidelines make space for events and the participants in many ways, such as; financial accessibility with low production costs, cultural availability through the online guideline translations, the integration of men into the movement and identifying the essential role of groups working specifically with men and boys to end violence, emphasizing both local and global groups that are working to end violence, and finding creative ways to involve anyone who is interested in being a part of the production, yet there are also limitations placed on

performances and performers that prevent for total artistic/political/cultural freedom. Some of those limitations include being able to only utilize the most current version of the scripts, not allowing edits (or the ability to exclude) either the monologues or introductions, nor allowing additions to the scripts are unless specified, as well. The inability to exclude parts of the Monologues, however slight, creates an all or nothing option for performers that may have relevant concerns with “moments” within the performances that they disagree with, while otherwise, feeling inspired by the overall message of the play. In addition, male actors are not allowed to perform the Monologues, unless they identify as transgendered or live their lives as “female”, excluding drag queens, although the organizers are encouraged to invite male involvement.

While connecting violence and sexuality triggers fear-based concerns that largely ignore the relevance of the connection, as well as the possibility to promote empowered sexuality in healing past violence, V-Day’s connection of the vagina with empowerment, has been rightly critiqued for excluding individuals and groups in the intersex and transsexual community. Activists from this community have argued that organizing female empowerment and a movement to end gender-based violence around the vagina is exclusionary, and that, as summarized by Adrienne McCormick, using the vagina “as a concept with shared meaning and significance for women globally” is debatable. (McCormick, 2010) McCormick describes how activists from the Intersex community “point out how using the vagina as the common denominator is inadequate since so many women are born with ‘missing vaginas.’” (McCormick, 2010) Due to the prevalence of intersexual persons, approximately 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000

according to the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)<sup>15</sup>, “whose sexual indicators are not strictly male or female, then there can be many socially identified women who do not have vaginas.” (Intersex Society of North America)

Emi Koyama, Program Assistant for the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) confronted V-Day on its negative portrayal of the experience of intersex individuals in one of the monologues, which thereby silenced the truth of the experience. The monologue suggested that the character, born without a vagina, was incomplete, as well as that ultimately, having a vagina is about pleasing a future male partner. According to ISNA’s website, while consoling his daughter, the father in the story says he will “buy” her a vagina, and tells her “when you meet your husband he’s gonna know we had it made specially for him.” Seeking to increase collaboration among anti-violence activists and intersex activists, who share a commitment to end oppression and violence, Koyama created the V-Day Challenge to engage V-Day College Campaign organizers and participants to create a more inclusive movement to end violence against women, including women and girls born without vaginas.<sup>16</sup> In response to the ISNA’s feedback and critique, V-Day released a statement on their website in support of the ISNA’s work, stating that “Currently, the standard protocol for treating intersex children involves irreversible and risky surgical interventions to make their genitals appear more ‘normal’, but

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<sup>15</sup> “Founded in 1993 by Cheryl Chase, Intersex Society of North America is a 501c3 non-profit organization dedicated to ending shame, secrecy and unwanted genital surgeries on intersex children.” ([www.isna.org](http://www.isna.org))

<sup>16</sup> Responding to the Challenge put forth by ISNA to the V-Day College Campaign “production crews at Portland State University Women’s Resource Center have already made a commitment to support ISNA’s effort while putting on the play: they agreed to provide ISNA with a table at the show, put ISNA’s leaflet as an insert in the program, and make ISNA’s local project, Intersex Initiative Portland (which has a specific focus on domestic and sexual violence) one of the beneficiaries for the event. ISNA looks forward to working with other organizations across the country who want to make their cities as intersex-friendly as they are (or will become) vagina-friendly. (<http://www.isna.org/node/152>)

there is a growing movement among intersex people, allies, and medical professionals to replace these often harmful procedures with social and psychological interventions.” (V-Day Press Release, January 21, 2002) In addition to their statement of collaboration with the ISNA, V-Day began “urging participants of its College Campaign and Worldwide Campaign to raise the awareness about intersex experiences by distributing information about intersex, showing a documentary film, or hosting an intersex speaker during this year’s V-Day activities” as well as “encouraging the more than 500 benefit productions of the play to consider contributing a portion of their proceeds to Intersex Society of North America.” (V-Day Press Release, January 21, 2002)

In 2004, Ensler wrote a new monologue, “They Beat the Girl out of my Boy... or So They Tried,” to reflect and address the experiences of transgender women. (V-Day Annual Report 2008) The ISNA responded positively to V-Day’s willingness to refine its commitment to women and girls, “We applaud V-Day for taking a stand against unnecessary and unconsensual genital cuttings that are ritually practiced in Western societies, just as they have stood against unnecessary ritualistic genital cuttings in other cultures,” said Emi Koyama, the Program Assistant for ISNA quoted in a V-Day website press release. She continues, “I have always respected the work of V-Day on behalf of women and girls, and I am glad to know that V-Day has not left out women and girls born with intersex conditions,” and importantly, that V-Day integrated the critical analysis presented by ISNA, responding with action, education and collaboration. Discussing the issue of receiving critique, in an interview with Budd Mishkin, Ensler discusses the way in which she responds, “If I allow myself to be teachable and if I allow myself to listen to criticism and to what people really want, hopefully I get better at this.” (Mishkin, 2010) In the same interview, she also importantly recognizes and understands the

suspicion towards V-Day's work around the globe saying in the same interview, "I think suspicion is a good thing. I think it means you're discerning and you're checking things out." (Mishkin, 2010) In integrating the voices of Intersex activists and introducing a new dialogue to reflect their experience, Ensler and V-Day upheld their commitment to call for an end to all forms of violence against women and girls. In addition, the willingness to integrate critique helps to expand and improve the scope of the movement itself, making it accessible and meaningful to more and more individuals and communities. Given the scale of V-Day's work, coming up against conflict will be inevitable – and working through that conflict will be strengthening if V-Day remains open to growth, learning, and consciousness raising opportunities.

Still, V-Day and *The Vagina Monologues* have been critiqued for drawing too much from the perspective of white, Western, middle-class women and the way in which the Monologues have problematically portrayed women of color in negative relationships. University of Michigan graduate and participant in *The Vagina Monologues*, Ashwini Hardikar argues that Ensler responded to the critique of the play's lack of diversity by simply adding "several monologues that were 'marked'—that is, these monologues included specifications for the character's race or ethnicity. The marked monologues were almost all supposed to represent women of color—and they were almost all representations of violence, brutality, or coercion. Subsequent monologues that focused on Middle-Eastern women, Native American women, and Eastern European women represented them all as victims." (Hardikar, 2007) Ensler's failure to equally provide empowering representations of women of color in *The Vagina Monologues* has minimized the potency of her message to end violence for *all* women and to believe in *all* women as powerful agents of change in their lives and in their community. Out of this critique of the under-representation or negative presentations of women of color in *The Vagina Monologues*, some

very powerful and innovative work has been born. For example, in 2003 a group of women out of California called the South Asian Sisters wrote their own “monologues” entitled *Yoni Ki Baat* (*The Vagina Monologues* in Hindi), which more appropriately and comprehensively reflected their experiences of sexuality, violence, relationships, self-esteem, etc. Another of many examples of interpretations of the play occurred in Barbados, where the review of the 2006 play emphasized the way in which the cast and producer made it their own as they “maintained unity in communication of the concepts being explored, while not compromising the theme of variety and diversity of experience which was a key part of the message. It was indeed a strong Caribbean interpretation and production of...a North American creation.” (Caddle, 2006) Importantly, in 2010, there was a performance in American Sign Language, which was performed by an all-deaf cast and brought to center-stage another population of survivors whose experiences might have otherwise been missed if they did not take their own course of action. (Nesvig, 2010)

Despite feeling that *The Vagina Monologues* failed to attend critically to the representation and voice of all women, many who felt portrayed as “Others”, or who were not at all represented, mobilized amongst themselves to creatively and more accurately articulate their genuine experiences. Whereas *The Vagina Monologues* were the result of interviews with women in New York City discussing their relationships with their vaginas, V-Day, the movement, was formed with a clear intention to recognize, support and empower anti-violence women’s activism and coalition building among women around the globe. *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day are strongly linked, although there are clearly ways in which the play negatively affects the impact of V-Day and the way it is perceived by its global audience. *The Vagina Monologues* still contain much unexplored terrain and possibility for the ways in which

they could be shaped, bent, and softened to more closely reflect the stories of the women (and men) performing them. It would be exciting to see Ensler create a new framework for V-Day guidelines that would allow for more of the individual's voice to shine through within the performances, while still remaining true to the overall theme of her artistic work. With the possibility of "local" monologues being intentionally introduced (and supported by V-Day) within or alongside the original play, I can imagine the performances becoming even more positively contagious. This approach to the Monologues would also make the play feel more congruent with V-Day's successful work to empower the voices of women and girls around the world and exemplify a commitment to the value of the most marginalized voices, as well as allowing participants a more complete and organic opportunity to speak from their experience.

Within V-Day, the starting point was confronting and dismantling gender-based violence against women and girls, which lead to critiquing and dismantling other systems of oppression and violence. Ensler has spoken out against the U.S. militarism and occupation of the Middle East and the resulting degradation of the communities and families in that region, the blatant racism inherent in the way the global political community responds to (or ignores) the atrocity of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war depending on the geographical region, the destruction of the environment for capitalist gains, and other urgent global concerns. The ability to utilize the insight gained from a critique of gender-based oppression to then analyze and contest other forms of oppression has strengthened V-Day's transnational reach. Speaking specifically about marking the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with new performances of the play "Swimming Upstream", Ensler emphasized the importance of staying connected to history and not forgetting, in order to create real change, stating "if we don't really investigate the history, we will continue the kind of oppression and colonialism and raping and destruction

that is going on in the Congo, goes on in Haiti and goes on in New Orleans.” (Goodman, 2010) She also emphasized her belief that “art has the power to keep generating memory, to keep generating legacy, to keep—to keep history alive, so we don’t repeat what was done in that incredibly cruel and horrible way” which is also the power of the annual V-Day events that remind the global community that gender-based violence remains an urgent concern to address.

In discussing the lack of rapid response to the epidemic of sexual violence occurring in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ensler challenged the global community asking, “Is it flat-out racism, the world’s utter indifference and disregard for black people and black women in particular? Is it simply that the UN and most governments are run by men who have never known what it feels like to be raped?” (Ensler, May 18, 2009) She suggested that racist attitudes have slowed the response to the women of the DRC by comparing the response of the global community to the mass rapes in Bosnia:

There is something sinister afoot. I was there in Bosnia during the war in 1994. When it was discovered that there were rape camps and that thousands of women were being raped as a strategy of war. I watched the rapid response of the world community or the western world community. After all these were white women in Europe being raped. Within two years there was adequate intervention. It has been 12 years in the DRC. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls raped and tortured. I can only believe now that we are dealing not just with the terribly legacy of genocidal colonialism in the DRC, the core impact of it now lodged in the DNA of the worst perpetrators, but more disturbingly the Congo has become...the ‘heart of racism’-- the place where the worlds disregard, indifference towards black people and particularly black women has completely manifested. I cannot tell you how often people say to me you are crazy. The Congo will never be saved. It is doomed, cursed. As if there were a zone now on the planet that had been designated finished, failed. The problem is human beings, gorgeous, kind, loving, longing human beings are living there.” (Ensler, 2009)

The historical disenfranchisement of women of color, Third World women, low-income women, disabled women, as well as intersexed and transgendered individuals, and the tensions that still permeate conversations among diverse women, have imprinted a skepticism towards the



notion of a “unified” women’s movement that V-Day seeks to build through its organizing. Mirroring Mohanty’s critique of “global sisterhood” which Susan Moller Okin summarizes as “the suggestion that women can recognize each other’s experiences and problems across cultural, class, and ethnic lines seems both incredible and reprehensible” are the critiques of V-Day’s effort to unify women in their identities as survivors of violence. (Moller Okin, 37) V-Day supposes the experience of surviving violence as a point of commonality among diverse women, as well as an activist issue around which women can create transformation and healing in global societies, by educating, empowering and integrating their own experiences of oppression and resilience in meaningful ways.

Still, the balance between forging connections among women and holding the space for the reality of how women’s differences shape their life experiences and opportunities uniquely is essential to creating a liberatory movement for all women. As clearly stated by Barbara Smith in her book The Truth That Never Hurts, “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.” (Smith, 1990, 50) Kimberlé Crenshaw describes how feminist “efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Al-though racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” and therefore, utilizing a transnational approach to organizing against gender-based violence is essential. (Crenshaw, 1994) Crenshaw describes through her personal experience how she first experienced the gap

between feminist and anti-racists practices stating, “I understood that we can all stand together as long as we think that we are all equally affected by a particular discrimination, but the moment where a different barrier affects a subset of us, our solidarity often falls apart. I began to look at all the other ways that not only the race and civil rights agenda but the gender agenda are sometimes uninformed by and inattentive to the ways that subgroups experience discrimination.” (Crenshaw, 2004) She details the way in which women of color were most at risk for falling through the cracks of these practices and theories, due to the lack of an intersectional awareness within the movements:

When the practices expound identity as ‘woman’ or ‘person of color’ as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. The struggle over which differences matter and which do not is neither an abstract nor an insignificant debate among women. Indeed, these conflicts are about more than difference as such; they raise critical issues of power. The problem is not simply that women who dominate the anti-violence movement are different from women of color, but that they frequently have power to determine, either through material or rhetorical resources, whether the intersectional differences of women of color will be incorporated at all into the basic formulation of policy. Thus, the struggle over incorporating these differences is not a petty or superficial conflict about who gets to sit at the head of the table. In the context of violence it is sometimes a deadly serious matter of who will survive-and who will not. (Crenshaw, 2004)

Critics of movements, such as V-Day, that seek to establish a sense of global female solidarity, emphasize the necessity for feminists to acknowledge their own “situatedness” and the ways they are both implicated in and reproduce power relations. (Lugones and Spelman, 1983) For Ensler specifically, critics are concerned about the role of a white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual woman who attempts to define the standpoint or perspective of women through her anti-violence organizing. The risk of combining Ensler’s privileged position with her role as the leader of a global movement is that she may consciously or unconsciously, exert her privileges over other women. Ensler’s “situatedness” can be seen in V-Day’s articulation of its clear

condemnation of female cutting. In fact, this is a moment where the reality of transnational feminism and the flexibility and permeability it requires, challenges many feminists' commitments. In a 2007 panel discussion in Washington, D.C. at the American Anthropological Association, a group of scholars debated the topic of female cutting from both the insider and outsider perspectives. Dr. Fuambai Ahmadu, raised in the United States and originally from Sierra Leone, suggested that the medical and health dangers, as well as the negative impacts on female sexuality, are often exaggerated by Outsider critics. Challenging Western feminists who have stigmatized the practice, she stated how her "feminist sisters insist on denying us this critical aspect of becoming a woman in accordance with our unique and powerful cultural heritage." (Tierney, 2007) Dr. Ahmadu described her impression of the practice, a perspective rooted within her culture, stating "It is difficult for me — considering the number of ceremonies I have observed, including my own — to accept that what appears to be expressions of joy and ecstatic celebrations of womanhood in actuality disguise hidden experiences of coercion and subjugation...I offer that the bulk of...women who uphold these rituals do so because they want to — they relish the supernatural powers of their ritual leaders over...men in society, and they embrace the legitimacy of female authority...particularly the authority of their mothers and grandmothers." (Tierney, 2007) Dr. Ahmadu's input should remind feminists like Ensler, about resisting cultural assumptions and making space for all voices to participate in the discussion. The actual practice of transnationalism within the movement to end gender-based violence requires difficult and uncomfortable conversations, negotiating complex topics perhaps inconclusively, and broadening our feminist perspective as more and more voices are incorporated into the movement.

Yet much, if not all, of Ensler's work is driven by her personal and philosophical beliefs that transcend the scope of traditional feminist theory and organizing. As a practicing Buddhist for over a decade, Ensler says, "I've been criticized for having grand ideas and a vague methodology...to me it's a spiritual issue" and her spiritual practice has provided her "a deeper view of everything's connectedness." (McGee, 2002) Ensler's style of activism may be informed by Buddhist teachings of interdependence and connection among all beings and things which inspires her to soften her boundaries that, for many, are often constructed around individuality and difference, as well as notions of self versus other. These notions inform an approach to organizing that is outside of traditional feminist scholarship as well as traditional feminist political organizing, and rather comes from a personal practice and belief in the connectedness among all beings – perhaps realized most experientially through her connections with other women. However she arrives at the notion of interconnectedness among all beings, the most important aspect is how she integrates that concept into her analysis of the many issues facing women around the world. To go deeper with V-Day, Ensler must specifically open herself up to additional perspectives, such as those who support female cutting, and take the opportunity to listen, learn, and forge paths to understanding and respect with women and movements whose feminisms challenge her own. She may also spend more time exploring the reasons surrounding when and where other women may put up barriers between themselves, and Ensler – and be even more curious about her identity and her role, and how she can work to alleviate the sense of distrust among women. If she can stay with the practice of permeability and receptivity she aspires to in her articulation of her growth through V-Day, she can become more accountable and more accessible to women and activists around the world.

More and more recently, Ensler has acknowledged her own privilege, and has brought the privilege of her race, nationality and economic status into the public conversation. Recently diagnosed with uterine cancer, she emphasized her “luck” in being able to access and utilize many resources for treatment and support. She compares her experience of illness, fear, and pain, with that of the women she has worked with in the Congo who have faced the intentional acts of gender-based violence and have been largely neglected by the global community. She acknowledges the very fact that she has health insurance and access to treatment, which is not available or accessible to so many individuals around the world. Ensler has been showered with the unconditional support of family and friends to instill her with strength and faith that she will overcome the disease and the associated physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. She juxtaposes this space for healing with the fact that Congolese women have yet to receive that essential vision of hope, support, and healing from the global community recognizing their pain, combined with collective and organized action to foster an end to the atrocities. “I am lucky,” she writes:

I have been blessed with a positive prognosis that has made me hyper-aware of what keeps a person alive. How does one survive cancer? Of course—good doctors, good insurance, good luck. But the real healing comes from not being forgotten. From attention, from care, from love, from being surrounded by a community of those who demand information on your behalf, who advocate and stand up for you when you are in a weakened state, who sleep by your side, who refuse to let you give up, who bring you meals, who see you not as a patient or victim but as a precious human being, who create metaphors where you can imagine your survival...Every day I get up, and I think to myself, I can keep going. If a woman in Congo gets up this morning after she’s had her insides eviscerated, what problem do I really have? And I think of how they dance. Every time I go to the Congo, they dance and they sing and they keep going, in spite of being forgotten and forsaken by the world. (Ensler, 2010)

Essential to continuing the healing and strengthening of the feminist movement internally, women must uphold a commitment to privilege cognizance and its implications for

their work, as well as creating safe spaces to foster honest, although difficult, dialogue and accountability. Women, individually and collectively, must uphold what Alison Jaggar calls a “commitment to open discussion” with the “recognition of the realities of power inequalities” within an emerging global feminist discourse community. (Jaggar, 2000, 1) Simultaneously, feminists must take the wisdom gained from exploring difference towards a place where women are ultimately empowered as a group to act together. Until women can consciously work together and remain present with discomfort and tension, as well as acknowledging historical wounds that may require decades of healing – the systems of patriarchy and oppression, in and across all of our unique communities, will continue to diminish the innate strength, wisdom and energy of organized female activism. Understandably, when women remain divided, it is difficult to see how women relate across differences of language, culture, sexual orientation, and economic status, and therefore, the possibility for international resistance and the powerful capacity of a cross-cultural coalition becomes less desirable, less urgent, and often feels emotionally risky for all participants. The choice, and the challenge, for global feminists is to embrace those risks and be accountable to themselves and to other women, or else surrender to the engrained divisions and hierarchies that will not only prevent an organized movement to end gender-based violence, but will minimize the possibilities for solidarity across cultures in the face of all forms of oppression.

## ***Chapter 5: Embodiment and Empowerment, Realizing the Body's Resilience***

*“Our body space is literally the ground of our personhood and the means of communicating the power of our presence to and with others.” (Beverly Wildung Harrison, 1985)*

*“I have to learn alone to turn my body without force in the deep element...besides you breathe differently down here. I came to explore the wreck. The words are purposes. The words are maps. I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail.” (Adrienne Rich, 1973)*

In an attempt to locate a platform for feminist solidarity which recognizes the importance of differences among their experiences, women risk disconnecting themselves from their bodies – physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. By reducing the value of the connections found through an identification with the female body and the body space, women are less able to see, and may even ignore, how the body itself contains resources for empowerment and connection. In fact, the body can serve feminist activists and survivors of violence as a powerful vessel for healing, as well as an immediate source of creativity, insight and courage through which women can deepen their organizing. Eve Ensler’s vision for V-Day offers a feminist philosophy that encourages speaking from and fully living in the body, as well as creating opportunities for survivors to transform trauma<sup>17</sup> through local and global activism. Ultimately, V-Day seeks to inspire survivors to use their experiences, and their healing, to collectively create positive change in the world.

Taking risks with feminist activism also includes the risk of criticism. The critique of V-Day’s feminism that “derives entirely from trusting our bodies” raises relevant concerns about how racial, cultural, gender and sexual identities manifest differently in the body, as well as how the biological functioning of the female body has been used to justify women’s oppression. Ann

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<sup>17</sup> Trauma has been defined as “an event outside of normal human experience” as well as “any sudden and potentially life threatening event” and can include either “single instance” or prolonged experiences of trauma. Examples include rape, assault, natural disaster, war, accidents, and other events, that disrupt emotional, physical, mental and sometimes spiritual cohesion and functioning. (Martinson, 1998)

Cahill describes this theory of biological inferiority that stretches back to concepts suggested by influential 18<sup>th</sup> Century European philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jean Jacques Rousseau writing, “in the justification for women's inherent inferiority, the role of the body was crucial. Women’s more insistent and direct ties to the body, as exemplified by the details of menstruation, childbearing, and the child rearing...rendered her capacity for reason stunted and just barely above that of animals. If being human was feigned as the mastery of the intellect over the body, then it was only right and just - it was only humane - to have the more intellectually capable rule over those incapable of transcending their bodily being.” (Cahill, 52)

Enslar’s decision to locate the center of the resistance and practice of V-Day’s feminist activism in the body, transforms historical notions of a weak female body into body that serves as a source of strength and power. Since the “embodied effects” of violence against women impact their “subjectivity and personhood” such that violence, “reduces a woman’s mode of being-in-the-world from an absorbed lived body to a broken body with a self somewhere else or a self reduced to a body-thing” Enslar’s body-centered philosophy deepens the conversation about addressing, healing, and dismantling gender-based violence. In her book Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women’s Self Defense, Martha McCaughey describes the importance of attending to the body-centered impact of violence, and offers innovative and creative ways for women to embody feminist theory through the practice of self-defense. Speaking specifically about sexual assault, she describes why attention to the corporeal aspect of the violence is imperative to the feminist theoretical analysis:

Women are regarded by men who rape (and, regrettably, by many others) as things, void of a moral will or a body-self distinct from the rapist’s, or they are reduced to his (mis)interpretation: “She really wants it.” Rape is harmful because it imposes an “ownable” status, effectively construing a woman as passive and as property...Rape is harmful not only because a man claims sovereignty over that



which belongs to a sovereign woman – the female body or female sexuality. The body in feminist theory cannot stand simply as an appendage that women ideally own. Rape is a violation not simply because a woman lost sovereignty over this thing, but because the body is a form of social expression and rape makes the woman's body into an object or possession of the rapist rather than a lived body. Social identity is the body-self. A broken body is the collapse of one's social expressiveness. (McCaughey, 1997, 171–73)

Still, survivors of gender-based violence experience their bodies uniquely, based on multiple factors, therefore, within the concept of a body-centered movement there must remain room for individual interpretations of how theory, activism and transformation takes root within each body, each culture, and each context. As Camille Sutton-Brown describes, transnational networks are not “a utopia” but in fact they expose “some of the tensions that arise from linking and forming partnerships between various feminist organizations” and specifically, when talking about the female body, which is interpreted, experienced, and received in countless ways around the globe.

In my analysis of V-Day, I highlight the importance of Ensler's choice to situate the movement around an emphasis on the body space and “embodiment” (body awareness, body connection and body responsiveness) providing a holistic central location around which survivors can organize. Locating the body at the center of the movement has influenced the participation and the quality of V-Day activism, as well, situating the body as a common starting point, has served to connect survivors of violence who have been uniquely impacted by violence based on their different identities. For Ensler, “The whole problem with feminism was that it was always too ‘heady’... Women were changing their ideas, but they weren't changing their being. It was all in the head. We didn't change our bodies or our beings, so all this stuff kept happening. Now there's a chance for this next movement to change all of us, not just our heads.”

(Aitkenhead, 2004) Ensler's innovative and holistic approach to feminism and ending gender-

based violence through a body-centered philosophy is what not only differentiates it from feminist theory and feminist organizing, but also what strengthens it and makes it more complete as both a theory and as a practice. Not only is V-Day “transforming armchair post-feminists into activists” but they are also opening up the conversation about one of the most essential and powerful tools for feminist activism and empowerment, which is a deep connection to and respect for the body. (Atkenhead, 2004) Using a body-based movement to heal, and ultimately end, the epidemic of gender-based violence against women and girls, Ensler can elevate the conversation beyond dualities and difference. Instead, this approach to organizing and activism can provide a safe space, literally and figuratively, to incorporate diversity and draw on embodiment as a tool for empowering global women.

In an interview on TED.com<sup>18</sup> Ensler emphasizes the value of “seeing what’s right in front of you, and talking about it, and stating it” and continues, “I think what I learned from talking about the vagina, and speaking about the vagina is it was the most obvious thing – it was right in the center of my body and the center of the world -- and yet it was the one thing nobody talked about. The second thing is that what talking about the vagina did is it opened this door which allowed me to see that there was a way to serve the world to make it better. And that’s where the deepest happiness has actually come from.” (Ensler, 2004) Ensler regards the body as an important tool for self-awareness and self-healing which, having moved trauma through the body, allows survivors to generate compassion for others and to participate in ending violence. Specific attention is placed on body-based activities and treatments at V-Day events and V-Day

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<sup>18</sup> TED is “a small nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading.” It began in 1984 “as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, Design. Since then its scope has become ever broader,” covering music, art, activism, environmentalism, science, global issues, and more. The interviews, conversations and performances from global leaders in their fields are made available for free online. TED guests have included Isabel Allende, Jane Goodall, Al Gore, Herbie Hancock, and many more. ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com))

sponsored organizations to support survivors in re-connecting with their bodies, one of their greatest sources of resilience. Ensler describes the way in which theater, art, and the body powerfully connect in her work, “I am really interested in the theatre of the body and discovering just what the relationship is of the body to theater—and of the body to everything. I think one of the reasons that feminism has not been successful yet is that it hasn’t translated into the body—it’s just in the head. I believe when the translation actually happens, so that women actually love their bodies, feel safe in their bodies, feel empowered in their bodies, the world will change. And theatre has the capacity to do that—to really let things enter the body.” (Mirrione, 2003, 42–43)

When questioned in an interview about how a “dance workshop” can help someone “in the midst of a civil war” at the City of Joy<sup>19</sup> in the DRC, Ensler responded, “Dance has a transformative effect on bodily trauma. When you’ve been raped, the trauma lodges itself in your being. Dance is a surefire way to release it.” (Ensler, 2010) The interviewer continued questioning the value and intention behind incorporating body-based techniques for healing into the work V-Day supports stating “You treat everything as a problem of self-esteem, as opposed to a complex set of political and economic problems” to which Ensler replied, “The City of Joy is not going to end the war. But if enough leaders come out of it, maybe they’ll end the war.” (Ensler, 2010)

When asked about how the kinds of events that V-Day sponsors, (such as performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, open-mics, documentary screenings and panels) can impact the political

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<sup>19</sup> “V-Day and UNICEF, in partnership with Panzi Foundation, are currently building a special facility for the survivors of sexual violence in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Conceived, created and developed by the women on the ground, the City of Joy in Bukavu... will support women survivors of sexual violence to heal and provide them with opportunities to develop their leadership through innovative programming. Through its groundbreaking model, the City of Joy will provide up to 180 women a year with an opportunity to benefit from: group therapy; storytelling; dance; theater; self-defense; comprehensive sexuality education (covering HIV/AIDS, family planning); ecology and horticulture; and economic empowerment.” According to the site, V-Day has also created a “City of Joy Gift Registry” which allows people to contribute to its creation, stating that “by purchasing items on the registry you can provide much needed supplies that will make the City of Joy a comfortable, caring, and healthy place for women survivors of sexual violence to learn, lead, and inspire.” (<http://drc.vday.org/city-of-joy>)

system and create real institutional change, Ensler remarked, “I hope it will get political candidates to see that violence against women is an issue that needs to be brought into focus, that violence against women is at the center of everything... We are the majority of the population, we raise the children, we keep the culture and the communities together, our bodies give birth to the future. When you’ve been violated, you don’t feel a future in your body, so you translate that to your children. Society just breaks down.” (Zeisler, 2004, 91)

Ensler believes that trauma lodged in the body can have a detrimental ripple effect not only on the survivor’s entire life, but also on the lives of those around the traumatized person. Yet, if survivors can attend to, and work with, their experience in a supportive way, healing and transformation can emerge from within the traumatized body. This perspective mirrors concepts created by leading body-based psychotherapists Dr. Peter Levine and Dr. Pat Ogden who recognize that the body stores trauma, and therefore the body is the site where much of the healing work must be directed.<sup>20</sup> These trauma specialists emphasize how a somatic (body-oriented) approach to healing “recognizes that untreated sensorimotor processes haunt clients and interfere with complete healing. This occurs, in part, because so much of the damage done by trauma revolves around the nervous system and somatic processes.” (Minton, Ogden & Pain, 2006) Ensler’s work through V-Day demonstrates a commitment to work through and release trauma from the body by moving and working with the body, allowing the process of healing trauma from within, to enhance and promote, a sense of empowerment.

Ensler described how women’s relationships to themselves, their bodies, and one another, may be deepened, “activism is the cure -- the more you focus on people who are really in need, the harder it is to hate your body. I think it’s a huge antidote” to the self-loathing and shame

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<sup>20</sup> For deeper discussion on trauma and the body see Waking the Tiger by Levine and Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy by Minton, Ogden & Pain.

brought on by societal pressures to achieve an idealized female body. (Zeisler, 2004) That same self-loathing and shame can be present in survivors who have had to hide their experience of violence or minimize the impact of the experience as societal pressures ask them to “move on” before they are ready. Speaking the truth of one’s experience allows survivors the opportunity to fully embrace themselves and release negativity and shame from their bodies, while recognizing their resilience and capacity for healing. Referring to her experience performing in *The Vagina Monologues*, despite the threat and eventual consequence of suspension from her high school, Megan Rebak stated “When I was able to say the word ‘vagina’ and be proud to say it -- and it wasn’t crude and it wasn’t inappropriate and it was very real and very pure, it was important to me... We were willing and ready to take whatever came.” (Costello and Elan, 2007) As pointed out in an article analyzing the V-Day documentary, *Until the Violence Stops*, for many women “speaking of the vagina – not the pookie, the pussy, or the twat – is rare and makes it difficult to confront sexual violence” and it is through the productions of *The Vagina Monologues* and the annual work of V-Day, that safe and creative outlets for naming the female body and telling the story of the body, can be found. (Jankowicz, 2005)

V-Day’s style of activism represents a belief that embracing one’s physical being (and sexuality) provides a potent tool for healing, empowerment, and peace. Ensler insists, “Do the most radical thing you can do – love your body, and get on with it.” (Zeisler, 2004) The healing, strength and solidarity that emerges out of a deep connection with and trust in the physical body, a rootedness in the body that is described as “embodiment”, creates a bridge between dichotomies of self and other, body and mind, as well as the personal and political. The sense of solidarity across borders that V-Day has ignited, the possibilities for collaborative feminist organizing among women, in addition to binding theory and activism together, have been

intensified through a body-based movement to end gender-based violence. In her book Gyn/Ecology, author Mary Daly wrote about the power of “coming full circle” and transcending trauma by facing and working through it. She described how for a survivor, “as a consequence of her courage to see, she finds the focus of her anger, so that it fuels and no longer blocks her passion and her creativity” rendering her more able to see the “interconnectedness” of women and girls’ experiences of violence around the globe. (Daly, 1978, 112) Importantly, Ensler’s approach suggests the possibility for women and girls that their own bodies, once the sites of abuse and trauma, can serve as the catalysts and the containers for healing, empowerment and leadership.

The belief that humans (as well as animals) contain an innate healing capacity within themselves that can be accessed through the body has been a guiding methodology in the field of contemporary trauma work. In fact, the recognition of the effectiveness of body-based healing techniques for trauma work continues to grow. Dr. Peter Levine, the creator of a “body-awareness approach to trauma” called *Somatic Experiencing*® describes on his website how “Therapeutically, this ‘instinct to heal’ and self-regulate is engaged through the awareness of body sensations that contradict those of paralysis and helplessness, and which restore resilience, equilibrium and wholeness.” Dr. Levine holds a Ph.D. in medical biophysics as well as a doctorate in psychology, and brings over 40 years of experience in the “field of stress and trauma” to his work. According to Dr. Levine’s website, his body-based approach to working through trauma facilitates and “returns a sense of aliveness, relaxation and wholeness to traumatized individuals who have had these precious gifts taken away.” (Levine, 2010)

Sensorimotor Psychotherapy<sup>21</sup> is another body-based approach to working with trauma,

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<sup>21</sup> “In the 1970’s, Pat Ogden became interested in the correlation between her clients’ disconnection from their bodies, their physical patterns and their psychological issues. As both a psychotherapist and body therapist, she

described by Pat Ogden as “a comprehensive method that utilizes the body as a primary entry point in trauma treatment, but one which integrates cognitive and emotional processing as well.” This approach “ultimately fosters ‘holistic’ processing where all three levels will operate synergistically.” (Ogden, 2000) Sensorimotor psychotherapy also teaches “mindfulness” which enables survivors to become more in tune with their “internal sensorimotor reactions” thereby “increasing their capacity for self-regulation.” (Ogden, 2000) According to Ogden, a leader in the Sensorimotor psychotherapy field, “Mindfulness is a state of consciousness in which one’s awareness is directed toward here-and-now internal experience, with the intention of simply observing rather than changing this experience” and eventually encourages the client to “come out of a dissociated state and future or past-centered ideation and experience the present moment through the body.” (Ogden, 2000) This holistic approach to treatment brings “the body, body processes and body experience into the foreground” for trauma survivors, offering a possibility for more profound, complete healing and empowerment. (Ogden, 2000)

Body-based therapeutic approaches are specifically useful for trauma survivors, such as individuals who have experienced gender-based violence, as the violence often damages the relationship and connection with the body. Ogden describes the impact of body-based therapies with survivors, saying “For traumatized individuals, fully experiencing sensations may be disconcerting or even frightening, as intense physical experience may evoke feelings of being out-of-control or being weak and helpless. On the other hand, traumatized individuals are often dissociated from body sensation, experiencing the body as numb or anesthetized. Because many

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was inspired to join somatic therapy and psychotherapy into a comprehensive method for healing this disconnection.” The Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute (SPI) “offered its first course in the early 1980’s under the name Hakomi Bodywork” and was “influenced by leaders such as Emilie Conrad, Ruth Lanius, Peter Levine, Peter Melchior, Ellert Nijenhuis, Stephen Porges, Allan Schore, Dan Siegel, Martha Stark, Kathy Steele, Onno van der Hart, Bessel van der Kolk, and Ken Wilber.” This form of psychotherapy “draws from somatic therapies, neuroscience, attachment theory, and cognitive approaches, as well as from the Hakomi Method, a gentle psychotherapeutic approach pioneered by Ron Kurtz. SPI conducts trainings throughout the world, and has gained international acclaim over the past twenty-five years.” (<http://www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org/about.html>)

traumatized clients are anhedonic (unable to feel physical pleasure), experiencing and savoring pleasurable sensations can increase their overall capacity for experiencing pleasure and also can change their relationship with the body, which heretofore may have felt like ‘the enemy,’ the source of disconcerting sensations and physical pain.” (Ogden, 2000) Importantly, body-based therapies can reduce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>22</sup> symptoms that many violence survivors experience “such as nightmares, panic attacks, aggressive outbursts and hyperarousal” while “the ability to track body sensation helps clients experience present reality rather than reacting as if the trauma were still occurring.” (Ogden, 2000) Ogden provides insight into how reducing “distressing bodily-based symptoms” and increasing “capacity for both tracking body sensation and interactive self-regulation” can help survivors “become increasingly able to work with other elements of trauma, such as attachment, meaning-making, and dissociative patterns that were previously overshadowed by bodily states and the inability to utilize interactive self-regulation.” (Ogden, 2000) In fact, research done for a study on the Health and Human Service Programs Serving Human Trafficking Victims in the United States, found that alternative therapies, such as yoga, massage, acupuncture, meditation, dance, art, among others “offer promise in helping victims build self-esteem, empowerment and re-connection with themselves and society.” (Clawson, Salomon & Goldblatt, 2008)

The impact of violence can permeate a survivor’s entire life, affecting every facet of their individual and interpersonal experience, including relationships and sexuality, as well as mental, emotional and physical health. In her book focusing on the healing capacity of survivors Strong

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<sup>22</sup> Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is “an anxiety disorder that can occur after you have been through a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something horrible and scary that you see or that happens to you. During this type of event, you think that your life or others’ lives are in danger. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening. Anyone who has gone through a life-threatening event can develop PTSD.” (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/what-is-ptsd.asp>)



at the Broken Places, author Linda Sanford emphasizes how “alienation from the body leads to an alienation from the self.” (Sanford, 2005) Speaking specifically about sexual assault, Ann Cahill describes the pervasive impact of such abuse, as well as the way in which surviving violence essentially transforms the person’s entire being:

As a traumatic, violent, embodied experience, rape thus does not merely attack the victim’s sexuality, or her sense of safety, or her physical being. It does all of this, and more. It destabilizes the personhood of the victim and the victim’s intersubjectivity at the most fundamental level. It cannot be assumed that there is one aspect of that person’s being that is untouched by the experience of rape. There is no pristine, untouched corner to which to retreat...the extent of the rapist’s influence is broad, but not infinite...the self that emerges from the process of healing will always be qualitatively and profoundly different from the self that existed prior to the assault. To know oneself as not only rapable, but as raped, is to become a different self. (Cahill, 133)

Author and sexual assault survivor Susan Brison<sup>23</sup> articulates the multifaceted impact of violence that statistics reporting, “globally, at least one in three women and girls is beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime” (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 2000) are still unable to capture:

I was no longer the same person...I had a different relationship with my body. My body was now perceived as an enemy...and as a site of increased vulnerability. But rejecting the body and returning to the life of the mind was not an option, since body and mind had become nearly indistinguishable. My mental state (typically, depression) felt physiological, like lead in my veins, whereas my physical state (frequently, one of incapacitation by fear and anxiety) was the incarnation of a cognitive and emotional paralysis resulting from shattered assumptions about my safety in the world. (Brison, 1997, 16–17)

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<sup>23</sup> See Philosophy professor Susan Brison’s book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* for a “movingly written meditation on the effects violence has had on her life” in which she “evokes the experience of trauma, both for those who seek to understand its power and for survivors who might find solace in her words.” The book is a “result of years of recovery both the physical healing in the immediate aftermath and the emotional repairs necessary over the subsequent decade. Her training as a philosopher makes this an intellectually stimulating read, even as she successfully avoids the academic tone that could be off-putting to a wider audience. Brison’s reflections on memory and forgetting and the manner in which traumatic events divide time and affect personality and relationships will resonate with anyone who has experienced great pain and suffering, as well as with the people who love and care for them...She writes on the importance of telling the story, ‘control, repeatedly exercised, leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that enables them to be integrated into the rest of life.’” (Publishers Weekly, Cahners Business Information, Inc, 2001)

V-Day recognizes that connecting with the body is essential in reconciling and making meaning out of traumatic experiences, as well as how a disconnect with the body can reduce a survivor's possibilities for healing and empowerment. Large scale V-Day events and initiatives such as the V To the Tenth celebration in New Orleans and the "City of Joy" in the Democratic Republic of Congo involve yoga, dance, massage, medical exams, makeovers and more. (see V-Day Press Release "V-Day Announces Its Tenth Anniversary Plans in New Orleans" and Soloman, 2010) V-Day's work emphasizes a belief that there exists an obvious, although painful, connection between women and girls' experiences of sexuality and their experiences of violence.

Continuing further along the path of the mind, body, and spirit connection that is so often splintered for survivors of violence, Ensler released a book in 2004, entitled The Good Body which examined women's negative relationships to their bodies and the impact of this negative self perception on their life possibilities. Decca Aitkenhead, journalist with *The Guardian*, interviewed Ensler about her understanding of feminism as expressed through her work and in her new book. Ensler described a vision of feminism and female empowerment that "derives entirely from trusting our bodies" and stated that her "brand of feminism has evolved" since writing *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler described her feminist philosophy to Aitkenhead as "a longing for women to stop trying to transcend their body, in an assertion of intellectual equality, but to name and return to it as the source of female wisdom and power." (Aitkenhead, 2004) She continues explaining, "Women have fallen for a post-feminist delusion that the greater their physical self-control, the greater their prospects of happiness, not realising that alienation from their own bodies actually destroys the possibility of empowerment." (Aitkenhead, 2004) According to Ensler, "women alienated from their own bodies no longer identify themselves by their universal femaleness, but isolate themselves instead into unisex categories – profession,

class, nationality – in which a broader sense of sisterhood is meaningless” thereby erasing the “feminist context of their problems” and weakening the possibility for solidarity and understanding. (Aitkenhead, 2004)

Postmodernist feminists theorists have criticized the notion of universalizing the concept of “woman” and “female” as a negative essentialist practice. (Butler 1990, Flax 1983, Spelman 1988) Described on Stanford’s Encyclopedia of Philosophy website, essentialism “refers to any theory that claims to identify a universal, trans-historical, necessary cause or constitution of gender identity or patriarchy. The objection to essentialism is fundamentally political: in claiming that gender identity is one thing or has one cause, such theories convert discursively constructed facts into norms, difference into deviance. They either exclude women who don’t conform to the theory from the class of true ‘women’, or else represent them as inferior.” (Butler 1990, Flax 1983, Spelman 1988) In addition, some lesbian and women of color feminists critique concepts “about the unity presumed in the category ‘woman’ by highlighting the intersectionality of identities of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation” which as significant social inequality markers, can therefore create deep “fault lines for the fragmentation of the category ‘woman.’” (Butler 1990, Flax 1983, Spelman 1988)

At the same time, the body is the location of the impact of the physical, emotional, and spiritual impact of the trauma of gender-based violence, and inhabiting a female body increases one’s risks to the incidences of sexual assault and domestic violence. Therefore, ignoring or minimizing the physicality and the gendered incidence of this type of abuse, misses an element essential to understanding the impact of the trauma of bodily violence, knowing what conditions/attitudes/beliefs create such violence (in order to prevent it), and importantly, learning how to heal from violence. Considering how bodily experiences can shape perspectives, as

Lakoff and Johnson describe in Philosophy in the Flesh: Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought, “reason is not disembodied...but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience...it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment,” activists and philosophers can recognize the importance of working specifically to address and enhance the connection and relationship between the self, the body, and the mind, in their work with survivors. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, 4)

While Ann Cahill explores the physicality of sexual violence and its impact on the survivor’s entire life in Rethinking Rape, her analysis could be applied to all forms of gender-based violence, stating, “precisely because the assault is visited upon the victim’s body, it will have profound effects on the victim’s personhood and being.” (Cahill, 130) Cahill highlights the significance of living in the female body in terms of understanding the physical, psychological and spiritual impacts of sexual assault when she writes that “Women’s bodily experiences...tend to incorporate at a basic level an assumption of the threat of rape, to the extent that it forms a kind of backdrop for daily, even seemingly trivial, decisions. The fact that women are constantly subjected to the threat and possibility of rape is itself an integral part of any one experience of rape. To be the victim of an assault whose danger has been persistently reiterated virtually guarantees an emotional reaction of guilt and responsibility.” (Cahill, 121) Cahill focuses on embodiment as both a way to understand the impact of sexual assault, and as an approach that supports healing and wholeness after the trauma of sexual violence. Described in an essay by Dr. Jorge Ferrer, Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, “What Does It Mean to Live a Fully Embodied Spiritual Life?” embodiment as a practice, or a way of living includes “engagement of the body and its vital/primary energies as crucial for not only a thorough spiritual transformation, but also the creative exploration of expanded forms of spiritual

freedom.” (Ferrer, 2008, 2) In breaking the notion of duality between mind and body, and instead recognizing the way each informs the other, the analysis of sexual assault’s pervasive mark on the survivor’s entire being is more complete and validating. In addition, by emphasizing the embodied experience of sexual assault, Cahill is able to interpret both the impact and the significance of it through the lens of the female body, as well as the gendered and sexual nature of this type of violence. Cahill concludes, “Rape, as a particularly sexual violation, is a bodily assault that particularly and blatantly invokes the sexuality of both the assailant and the victim.” (Cahill, 197)

Observing the prevalence of “victim blaming”<sup>24</sup> against sexual assault survivors (as well as survivors of domestic violence, battery, sexual harassment and stalking) we can understand why some feminist theories “encouraged a refusal of the sexual significance of rape” while suggesting “it be seen as just another assault, with no more sexual meaning than other assaults.” (Cahill, 199) Equating sexual assault to other types of assaults served to “put a stop to the persistent questioning of the victim’s sexual past and behavior as well as her attire and justification for being in certain places at certain times.” (Cahill, 199) Yet, Cahill argues that because of the social and political functions of rape, as well as “its focus on those bodily parts most invested with sexuality, it constitutes a wrong that is persistently and decidedly sexed, While the particular harms imposed on victims may differ from case to case, they are all linked to the bodily aspects of personhood, and especially those aspects related to the victim’s sexuality.” (Cahill, 197) Cahill’s emphasis on the embodied aspect of sexual assault also serves to support her idea that “resistance to the phenomenon of rape is not to be limited to battles

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<sup>24</sup> Victim blaming “releases the (person) who commits violence from the responsibility for what he has done. Friends or family may blame the victim in order to feel safe themselves: “She got raped because she walked alone after midnight. I’d never do that, so rape won’t happen to me.”  
[http://www.feminist.com/resources/ourbodies/viol\\_blame.html](http://www.feminist.com/resources/ourbodies/viol_blame.html)

fought in the courtroom or legislature” and therefore resistance, recovery, and the understanding of rape may be best accessed through a specific attention on the embodied aspects of the assault, including the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual components. (Cahill, 199) Cahill examines possibilities for both healing and resistance through embodiment, making an excellent argument for the incorporation of women’s self-defense, referred to as “physical feminism” as a political, social, and spiritual tool to resist rape culture.

Drawing upon Martha McCaughey’s work on self-defense for women as “physical feminism,” Cahill emphasizes how the practice of women’s self-defense creates a sense of empowerment that can transform victims to survivors since, she argues, “to change the habits and abilities of one’s body – as well as the assumptions and expectations one holds of one’s body – is to change one’s very self.” (Cahill, 202) Cahill re-connects feminist theory and embodiment through her analysis that self-defense takes “feminist theory at its word – namely, assuming that the feminist body can be shaped into other, more empowered, forms than the ones imposed by patriarchy. Ultimately, women’s self-defense seeks to transform women’s bodies into defensive weapons.” (Cahill, 202) In her book, Martha McCaughey details the way in which self-defense allows for feminist theory to become a feminist practice, describing how gender “is a lived ideology – a system of ideas about men and women with which we live our lives. As lived ideology, those ideas get transformed into specific bodily practices... What feminists talk about interrupting – femininity – self-defenders practice interrupting: They enact the deconstruction of femininity. In the process, self-defense enables women to internalize a different kind of bodily knowledge. As such, self-defense is feminism in the flesh.” (McCaughey, 89) Ensler’s work with V-Day resembles “feminism in the flesh” and has been critiqued for “singling out” the vagina and focusing heavily on the body. Ensler reiterates why attention to the body is essential, “When

people say singling out this one aspect, I always laugh. There are some women who say, ‘Well, what about the brain?’ Look, I’m not anti-intellectual. I’m not saying women don’t need to think. But I am saying that you can think all you want to and have all the great ideas and theories, but nothing changes. I completely lived in my head for years and years and nothing changed. It was only when I began to live in my vagina that the world really changed.” (Enslar, 2000)

Much of the critique of *The Vagina Monologues*, V-Day, and Enslar, is specifically targeted at her insistence on the female body as a central component of the movement to end violence against women. While trauma research emphasizes the way trauma is stored and manifested within the body, and theories suggested by Cahill and McCaughey align with body-based approaches to empowerment and transformation, V-Day’s focus on the body as a significant, if not the most essential resource for healing, connecting and ultimately disrupting rape culture, remains threatening and problematic for some feminists. Christine M. Cooper, a conservative feminist researcher at Brandeis University’s Women’s Center, writes about the dangers of a feminist practice rooted in the body:

Binding subjectivity to the body, especially via sexuality, has been decidedly double edged for women, fostering ontological definitions of female nature used against them in various historical moments and cultural contexts, as well as oppositional reclamations of such nature used on their behalf by certain schools of feminism. To an extent, we know this story. Women were known as ‘the sex’ for centuries in the West, delimited by, and thus reduced to, their bodies, which provided justification for their subordination in society. The notion persists today, though it may go by different names or simmer nameless beneath the surface, the doxa of everyday experience. The Vagina Monologues’ collapsing of self and vagina, however energizing and entertaining the gesture, carries the ideological baggage of this essentialist history. (Cooper, 2007)

Based on historical justifications for sexism, Cooper continues “reclaiming the vagina, one’s own or the idea, does not erase or empty of meaning the historical conditions that have made corporeality a liability for women.” (Cooper, 2007)

Despite the historical “liability” of corporeality for women, without emphasizing the body as not only specific to the incidence of sexual violence (as well as other forms of violence against women), but essential to the healing process, an analysis of the prevalence of sexual violence against women and how to address and heal from it, will be shallow. While Cooper argues that by “reclaiming the vagina” women can still not “erase or empty” the historical implications of the female body, in fact, V-Day succeeds in doing just that – reclaiming the vagina while expanding and enhancing the concept of female embodiment. Metaphorically describing both the physical connection and global connection that she sees in V-Day’s anti-violence work, Ensler states “We need to realize that the earth is one body...and if we don’t start seeing it as one body, we are all going to die. Because we are dependent on each part of this body to live. So when a woman in the south is beaten, I can’t walk – my feet are being crushed. And when a woman in the north is raped, I can’t think – my brain is being attacked.” (Katzarova, 2004) Ensler reiterates the connectedness of issues and beings that are impacted by violence against women when asked why she focuses on this specific issue, “I think the reason is that it’s the center of everything. If you really look at what’s happening to women’s bodies and what’s happening to women who are the resource of life, you can’t but look at poverty, AIDS, racism, immigration, empire-building...the environment. All these things come together that are really enacted on women’s bodies.” (Goodman, 2006)

Ensler’s work through V-Day reaches beyond the historical meanings of “corporeality” that precluded women’s opportunities to participate equally in the professional, political and public realm of most patriarchal societies, and instead deconstructs a dualistic understanding of the body and the self, instead emphasizing the way they merge and inform one another. Cahill suggests that the reason why feminists originally moved away from locating the body as a



primary source of identification, was based on confining patriarchal rationale that tied their relationship to the body (through menstruation, childbearing, and child rearing) with an inability to utilize reason and rationale, and therefore, the bodily connection justified their inferiority. (Cahill, 52) The dichotomies and dualities that have been assumed to justify oppressions in the form of sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism, also draw harmful and false boundaries between mind and body, Self and Other, Western and non-Western, and male and female. These imposed binaries force individuals, communities, and politicians to fail to see interconnections and interactions that make such totalizing dualities impossible, as well as the significant spaces in between. Therefore the political, cultural, and social analysis that emerges from this false perception of duality misses the context, intersection, and the way in which identities and histories that have shaped and continue shaping the globe tend to overlap.

With biological differences between men and women being used as a basis for patriarchy's historical justification of male dominance and women's inferiority, focusing on embodiment as an essential component of feminist theory and activism presents risks for feminists seeking to subvert oppressive gender biases and norms. Malika Basu explains the impact of objectifying women and the female body, arguing that objectifying women "deprive(s)" them "of the possibility of being independent persons." (Basu, 2000) She emphasizes the danger of reducing women to their body parts, which many critics of V-Day caution in their analysis, "To objectify is to depersonalize, to depersonalize is to make the woman not quite human. It is a way of defining her in terms of anatomical and physical attributes. In the minds of men this view of women arouses a strong undercurrent of sexuality. The explosive mixture of object and sexuality makes the woman easy target for male violence." (Basu, 2000) Reacting to the historical objectification of women, some feminists de-emphasized,

and rejected, their connection to the body, focusing on intellectual qualities and attributes men recognized as similar to their own. Still, there are feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, who suggest that it is essential to argue “against re-jecting the woman-nature connection” believing that this false duality “is at the root of both the oppression of women” as well as animals and the environment. (Radford Ruether, 1974, 195)

Expanding on the connection between women and the environment, feminist philosophers and editors of the book Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations, Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan describe how “Historically, the ideological justification for women’s alleged inferiority has been made by appropriating them to animals: from Aristotle on, women’s bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality. Since rationality has been construed by most Western theorists as the defining requirement for membership in the moral community, women-along with non-white men and animals, were long excluded.” (Adams and Donovan, 1) The essays in their book examine the ways women’s oppression can be linked to the mistreatment and cruelty towards animals, as well as the exploitation of nature and argues for an analysis of feminism that incorporates a commitment to both animals and nature. Useful to understanding both Ensler’s attention to the body and the critiques she has received for doing so, is an analysis from Elizabeth Spelman, who created the concept “somatophobia.” Somatophobia describes, “the equating of women, children, animals, and ‘the nature’ with one another and with the despised body. Somatophobia refers to the hostility to the body that is a characteristic of Western philosophy and its emphasis on reason. Spelman explains that somatophobia, a legacy of the soul/body distinction, is often enacted in unequal relationships, such as men to women, masters to slaves, fathers to children, humans to animals.” (Adams and Donovan, 2) Spelman emphasizes that understanding and recognizing somatophobia will allow feminists “to see the

context for women's oppression and the relationship it has with other forms of oppression.

(Adams and Donovan, 2) Malika Basu argues that the “domination of nature by humans, and the sexist domination of women by men thus rely on the same general framework” and therefore, feminists and environmentalists “should and must be allies.” (Basu, 2000)

Considering the way in which Basu articulates a “logic of domination” present in both the destruction of nature and the oppression of women, one can see why early feminist analyses of sexual violence carefully delineated the differences between sex and rape, and instead emphasized that rape was about violence and power. (Brownmiller, 1975) Karen J. Warren describes “an oppressive conceptual framework” utilized by both patriarchy and environmental destruction, in which value is placed on “dualisms...which organize reality into oppositional (rather than complementary) and exclusive (rather than inclusive) pairs.” (Warren, 1994, 184) In fact, this line of thinking will “place higher value, prestige or status on one member of the pair (e.g. dualisms which give higher status to ‘mind’, ‘reason’, and ‘male’ in alleged contrast and opposition to that which is ‘body’, ‘emotion’, and ‘female’, respectively.” (Warren, 184) Given the patriarchal tradition of associating that which is female with that which is inferior, many feminist analyses of sexual assault, de-emphasized the gendered aspect of such violence.

According to Yarrow Place, a public health agency that responds to sexual assault in South

Australia, many feminist theorists locate the root of rape within society, suggesting:

That the crime of rape and sexual assault is a crime of power. Rape and sexual assault is an abuse of power, which: is a result of unequal power between perpetrator and victim; reinforces the inequality of power in this relationship; and reinforces the inequality of power between men and women. Feminist theory focuses on the wider picture of women living in a society which is dominated by men. Rape and sexual assault is seen as one of the ways in which men enact their dominance in a violent way over women, children and other men. It rejects ideas that rape results from sexual attraction or from the way victims/survivors dress or behave. (Yarrow Place)

Yet, Ann Cahill argues that the separation between sex and violence when analyzing rape presents a false dichotomy, “Rape was not sex, as a sexist society often claimed: it was violence...I find this dichotomy to be faulty. However, the distinction between sex and violence was invoked for honorable purposes, namely, to insure that women who had been the victims of rape were not blamed for their own victimization.” (Cahill, 119) By separating the sexual nature of rape from the violence of rape, it is difficult to provide comprehensive analysis of both the impact of sexual assault on a survivor’s life, and it ignores the misogyny enacted on the female body through rape. It is necessary for those in the field of sexual violence, both activists and survivors, pay special attention to the body, as it is the site of the impact of sexual violence. In addition, many survivors report a split or disconnect with their bodies as a response to the trauma that compounds the pain of the experience. Importantly, the body can actually be an essential place for transforming the trauma through conscious work to re-connect the body, the intellect, and even the spiritual or energetic aspect of the survivor. Cahill further explains:

An understanding of rape as an embodied experience needs to recognize the sexuality of rape, not with relation to the victim’s culpability, but rather with relation to the particularity of the experience and the harms it visit on the victim. Rape is sexual because it uses sexualized body parts and the very sexualities of the victim and the assailant as a means to commit physical, psychic, and emotional violence. To say that it is sexual is only to recognize the experiential relevance of the means of the violence committed, and not to undermine in any way the recognition of the crime as a horrifically violent one. (Cahill, 120)

Complications and challenges around sexuality and intimacy are among the many post-traumatic stress related symptoms that survivors experience in the aftermath of sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence. According to Dr. Judith Herman, a leading psychiatrist and researcher in the field of sexual violence and trauma, attention and work with the aspect of sexuality in a survivor’s life is essential, as well as challenging. Dr. Herman explains the impact and importance of attending to sexual intimacy:

[Sexual intimacy] Presents a particular barrier for survivors of sexual trauma. The physiological processes of arousal and orgasm may be compromised by intrusive traumatic memories; sexual feelings and fantasies may be similarly invaded by reminders of the trauma. Reclaiming one's own capacity for sexual pleasure is a complicated matter; working it out with a partner is more complicated still. Treatment techniques for posttraumatic sexual dysfunction are all predicated upon enhance the survivor's control over every aspect of her sexual life....Including a partner requires a high degree of cooperation, commitment, and self-discipline from both parties. A self-help manual for survivors of childhood sexual abuse suggests "safe-sex guidelines" for exploring sexual intimacy, instructing partners to define, for themselves and for each other, activities that predictably trigger traumatic memories and those that do not, and only gradually to enlarge their exploration to areas that are "possibly safe." (Herman, 206)

Given the complex impact of violence on a survivor's sexuality, V-Day's method of emphasizing the body in both its philosophy of empowerment and its form of activism (through performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, open-mics, etc) speaks specifically to those who have survived violence. Author and feminist activist Janet Afary writes about the specific importance of the play's apropos usage of the vagina as subject in her essay "Seeking a Feminist Politics in the Middle East After September 11<sup>th</sup>" stating, "the play...is an apt metaphor for women in global politics today...Most politicians (Western and Middle-Eastern) completely ignore women and their issues. When women's issues do appear on the center stage, they often come across as something very uncomfortable, very embarrassing, not just for men but also for women, despite the vital role women play in our world as well as the gendered subtext of so many political issues." (Afary, 2004) In addition, the female body provides the space for feminist embodiment, the place in which theory, activism, and the body converge. Exploring the layers of McCaughey's emphasis on self-defense as embodied feminism, Cahill reminds discusses how self-defense allows women to transform "the feminine body" into "more empowered, forms than the ones imposed by patriarchy...This bodily transformation necessarily constitutes a shift in the being of the woman who undergoes it, for to recognize and realize one's bodily strength and

capability is to challenge a discourse of femininity that undermines women's physical abilities.”  
(Cahill, 202)

Since V-Day seeks to end violence against women and girls, and the fact that the reproductive and sexual organs are a predominant site of violence and where trauma is often stored, Ensler's choice to use the vagina as both a concept around which to inspire survivors, and also as the subject of the movement, supports self-empowerment. Placing the vagina and the body at the center of the movement also challenges the taboo of speaking about, exploring, and attending to women's sexual organs and their relationship to them. Importantly, Ensler creates space for each girl and women to define and describe their understanding and relationship with their bodies, their sexuality, and their vaginas in the way she collects and documents their experiences. While she openly admits taking some artistic freedom with the stories that formed the play, the experiences remain accessible to a broad audience of listeners who often find “their” story embedded in the play. Summarizing her critical analysis of *The Vagina Monologues*, V-Day and Ensler, which problematizes the lack of diversity in the play, Alyssa Reiser states that her experience of the performance:

Provided a segue...to examine the construct of womanhood and to develop a conscious awareness of the oppression and agency of women. My own first experiences with *The Vagina Monologues*, coupled with witnessing and reading about the relief and validation that women feel after seeing it, overshadow my problems with the play. Flawed as Ensler's script is, the conversations it sparks are crucial to raising awareness about violence against women; linking the isolated experiences of individual women and building solidarity; breaking the silence surrounding the vagina and women's sexuality; and dismantling the self-hatred that women learn to associate with their bodies. (Reiser, 2010)

In both *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day, the usage of the vagina can be understood as a concept that represents a belief in the innate source of strength, intuition, wisdom, compassion and resilience people have within – including both those who identify as female, as well as those

who identify as male, female, transsexual, intersexed, or other. Ensler's survivor-centered approach to the movement and its advocacy efforts convey a commitment that all survivors hold the capacity to heal and empower themselves from within. Ensler has been critiqued for choosing the word vagina, instead of vulva, which would have biologically encompassed more of the female reproductive and sensory organs. To the critique she responds, "Look, I could have picked the word 'vulva', but it seemed much more difficult" she continued:

I believe in the power of language. When I was a child, my father called me a slut all the time. I came to believe that and went out in the world and behaved like that. When I started doing The Vagina Monologues, I realized how impossible it was for women to say the word. I would see the disgust, the shame, the embarrassment. The vagina is smack in the center of our bodies, yet it is a place that most women felt ashamed of talking about. What did that say about the center of our beings? There's something in the uttering of the word that reattaches you to it. It's empowering. Now I turn on the television and I see vagina being used everywhere. (Ensler, 2006)

Attaching concepts of embodiment and intuition to women's empowerment risks defining set characteristics as female/feminine, and therefore can narrow and confuse interpretations and experiences of femininity. Drawing from Stanford's Encyclopedia of Philosophy's website, the section on "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science" highlights the danger of linking qualities and characteristics to gender roles utilizing various feminist theorists, explaining, "Traditional stereotypes about women's thinking (as intuitive, holistic, emotional, etc.) uncritically valorizes these stereotypes. This leads to several problems. There is no evidence that women all do think alike or that thinking in a 'feminine' way reliably leads to truth. Acceptance of conventional stereotypes about women also puts unjust pressure on women who think otherwise to conform to feminine cognitive styles." (Haack, 1993) In addition, "valorization of 'feminine' ways of thinking may also trap women in traditional gender roles and help justify patriarchy." (Nanda, 2003) Essential to integrating practices and approaches to healing from

violence and preventing violence that draw on the intuitive qualities of a survivor, is the work to expand our understanding of these qualities as not necessarily feminine or masculine, but rather human.

V-Day events that include and celebrate performance, art, yoga, meditation, dance, and massage, among other practices, are informed by a holistic philosophy that recognizes the power of maintaining a connection between the body, mind, and spirit – a connection that is often lost or damaged when a person is sexually violated. Leaders in the field of psychology have addressed the necessity to work with trauma (such as violence) through working with the body. (See Herman, Levine, Ogden) Bessel Van der Kolk, founder of The Trauma Center<sup>25</sup> in Boston, describes in his essay “The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Post Traumatic Stress” how in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Sigmund Freud discussed the biologically based aftermath of trauma’s impact, quoting Freud, he describes, “After severe shock...the dream life continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster from which he awakens with renewed terror... the patient has undergone a physical fixation to the trauma.” (Van der Kolk, 1994) Currently, the field of psychology that works specifically with the trauma of bodily violence emphasizes the importance of addressing the body-based effects of trauma in order to foster more complete healing, empowering the survivor to utilize their body as a resource for transformation.

Enslers’ honesty about the challenges of her own recovery, reminds survivors that they can be simultaneously healing and struggling, and that constant duality is a part of living in this world. She describes this duality that is always present, “We have no choice, we struggle. That is

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<sup>25</sup> The Trauma Center works to “help individuals, families and communities that have been impacted by trauma and adversity to re-establish a sense of safety and predictability in the world, and to provide them with state-of-the-art therapeutic care as they reclaim, rebuild and renew their lives.” ([www.traumacenter.org/about/about\\_landing.php](http://www.traumacenter.org/about/about_landing.php))



what we do. It has been said that struggle is the highest form of song. I live constantly in the center of two opposite thoughts: the world is ending, the world is about to be born. I am fighting for the latter.” (Schnall, 2009) As friend, actress, and V-Day activist Rosie Perez says about Ensler, “her vulnerability and her honesty are part of her charisma,” and it is her authenticity around her own healing that draws survivors to the movement. Much has been written about the importance of actively grieving trauma in order to heal from it, which is exactly what participation in V-Day events allows many survivors to experience. In her book, Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity, Aurora Levins Morales writes, “What is required to face trauma is the ability to mourn, fully and deeply, all that has been taken from us. Only through mourning everything we have lost can we discover that we have in fact survived; that our spirits are indestructible.” (Morales, 1998) The value in naming the atrocities that one has experienced in order to no longer let them terrorize a survivor, cannot be overstated.

The context of violence does indeed differ greatly across cultures and continents, but the essence of the violence - power, control, domination, and abuse committed against women and girls’ bodies, minds, and spirits every single day, is a universal epidemic. The impact of trauma on the body is pervasive, and yet, the body’s capacity for resilience can overcome the physical, emotional, energetic and spiritual impacts of trauma. In fact, survivors can emerge from the trauma feeling a deeper sense of connectedness with all aspects of their being, and utilizing activism and performance can facilitate that sense of integration that comes with healing. College professors and participants in *The Vagina Monologues* Susan Bell and Susan Reverby reflected the important connection being made between women, the body, and activism based on their experience with the play, “on the surface, it appears that Ensler’s play and the movement has inspired and helped to fund have solved what we have called elsewhere the body/body politic

problem in women's health activism. That is the play and the movement have seemingly enabled women to connect their individual body concerns with the larger structures of societal oppression." (Bell and Reverby, 437) They continue discussing how "the power of body talk" helped to "bond diverse women together...we saw how performing the differing parts taught them to see themselves anew and to see from the position of others." (Bell and Reverby, 437) Women who work to express and release the impact of gender-based violence through the body, connecting to the body and cultivating a strong bodily awareness, can, as suggested in Somatic Experiencing® "take advantage of the body's unique ability to heal itself." (Segal and Smith, 2008) Since the emphasis on a body-based therapy is "on bodily sensations, rather than thoughts and memories about the event" a survivor can focus "on what's happening in (your) body" and "gradually get in touch with trauma-related energy and tension." Eventually, once the survivor is connected to their bodily sensations, their "natural survival instincts take over, safely releasing this pent-up energy through shaking, crying, and other forms of physical release." (Segal and Smith, 2008)

Important to both the personal work to heal the body after the trauma of violence, and the commitment to be an activist in the movement to end gender-based violence, is not only a belief in the capacity for survivors to transform their trauma and heal, but actually seeing empowered individuals making meaning out of their trauma. Dr. Peter Levine responds to concerns about how he sustains his "work with a subject as morbid as trauma without becoming burned-out or depressed" and explains how for him, "witnessing the transformation that takes place in people when they master their traumas has proven to be a deeply sustaining and uplifting experience." (Levine, 2010, 1) While he reminds us that the effects "of unresolved trauma can be devastating. It can affect our habits and outlook on life, leading to addictions and poor decision-making. It

can take a toll on our family life and interpersonal relationships. It can trigger real physical pain, symptoms, and disease. And it can lead to a range of self-destructive behaviors,” in fact, trauma “doesn’t have to be a life sentence.” (Levine, 2010, 2) It is this belief that we must recognize the pervasive impact of gender-based violence on a survivor’s whole life, in order to provide creative, meaningful, and holistic ways for healing, so that survivors can ultimately be empowered to take back control of their lives. In describing both her battle with cancer and the harsh experiences of the women and children in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ensler emphasizes the possibility for healing, “The real healing comes from not being forgotten. From attention, from care, from love, from being surrounded by a community of those who demand information on your behalf, who advocate and stand up for you when you are in a weakened state, who sleep by your side, who refuse to let you give up, who bring you meals, who see you not as a patient or victim but as a precious human being, who create metaphors where you can imagine your survival. This is my medicine...” (Ensler, 2010)

V-Day’s work to end violence against women and girls focuses on empowerment through the body – locating the site of violence, the body, as an essential source for healing. Despite having myriad relationships with the body, both positive and negative, connected or disconnected, all humans can identify with the experience of living in the physical body. Ensler attends to the body as a vessel around which diverse women can connect, and as a space that is specifically important to survivors, who may struggle with their relationship to their body in the aftermath of violence. According to Dr. Amy Menna, after the trauma of interpersonal violence such as sexual assault, “The body then becomes less of a vessel for the spirit, and more of an enemy always reminding them of what they long to forget. Resolution of the sexual assault requires the body to be empowered. Forming a loving relationship between survivors and their

bodies will enhance their ability to care for themselves as well as live with less anger and fear.”

(Menna, 2004) The consequences for many survivors who feel disconnected from their bodies can result in substance abuse, self-injury, eating disorders, low self-esteem, dangerous sexual behavior, numbness and chronic pain, among others. (A Safe Passage) Essential to moving from victims to survivors is healing the relationship with the body - learning to trust and respect the body, as well as reclaiming one’s power as felt and expressed through the body. By recognizing the body’s resilience after surviving violence, survivors can then experience the body as a tool for healing and activism, instead of a source of pain. In exploring the body and the stories and experiences it holds, the discussion of both violence and sexuality are inevitable for many. Linking the two issues in its movement to understand and mobilize against gender-based violence, while also promoting female empowerment, has served to strengthen V-Day’s work, and bring the powerful and resilient body towards the center of feminist theory and activism.

## ***Chapter 6: Building a Survivor-Centered Movement***

*“The question is how long can women exist as powerless victims when they bear the qualities of powerful social agents?” (Malika Basu, 2000)*

*“After listening to many women’s stories, I am struck with their brilliance in constructing strategies that are not rooted in war or violence, but rather in courage, enabling justice, transformation and real security.” (Eve Ensler, 2009)*

Eve Ensler was originally inspired to create *The Vagina Monologues*, and eventually V-Day, based on her own experience as a survivor, “My life was real terrible... You either shut down and say, ‘I’m going to pack it in.’ or you say, ‘I’m going to do something about it.’ I had a fantasy I would change things for other people so it wouldn’t be like that for them.” (Lewis, 2001) As a survivor, Eve Ensler utilizes her personal work to heal from domestic and sexual violence as a resource that informs and motivates her commitment with V-Day to empower other survivors. Explaining the impact of the process to heal trauma on an individual’s life, Dr. Peter Levine reminds survivors that “Of all the maladies that attack the human organism, trauma may ultimately be one that is recognized as beneficial... because in the healing of trauma, a transformation takes place – one that can improve the quality of life... you will also begin to recognize the ways in which your organism attempts to heal itself... you can support rather than impede this innate capacity for healing... and continue on your way with a fuller, more sure sense of yourself. While trauma can be hell on earth, trauma resolved is a gift of the gods – a heroic journey that belongs to each of us.” (Levine, 1997, 12) Eve Ensler’s transformation from a victim of abuse – to that of a survivor, activist, and global leader, serves as an inspiration for those challenging societal norms and breaking the pervasive silence surrounding gender-based violence in their lives, and in the world around them.

The experience of making meaning out of trauma through action, in utilizing the knowledge gained in the process of working deeply through one's own abuse, to later generate healing for others, is an invaluable component of a survivor's ongoing healing process. Dr. Judith Herman describes the meaning of this kind of activism in her book, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror illuminating how “social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capacities. It offers her an alliance with others based on cooperation and shared purpose. Participation in organized, demanding social efforts calls upon the survivor's most mature and adaptive coping strategies of patience, anticipation, altruism, and humor. It brings out the best in her; in return, the survivor gains the sense of connection with the best in other people.” (Herman, 207) V-Day represents a survivor driven and survivor-centered movement in which survivors of violence guide the direction and tone of the movement, educate society about the reality of violence against women and girls, offer insights and approaches to prevent violence and promote healing based on their first-hand experiences, and finally, channel those experiences of pain and suffering into acts of empowerment through their activism. In a survivor-centered movement, activists inadvertently empower themselves in their work to support, advocate for and empower others and the voices of survivors are emphasized as central to the movement. When asked to describe her role through V-Day, in the Spotlight Campaign of Women in New Orleans, Ensler pointed out how the powerful theater piece that emerged, “Swimming Upstream,” grew out of the collective voices and experiences of women in the Gulf:

Well, it's actually their work. I had the privilege for a year to go down to New Orleans once a month and be in a room with sixteen artists, Mardi Gras dancers, gospel singers, community activists, who came together to basically tell their

stories, to have their feelings, to create a community, and to create this glorious piece...I had originally, right after the flood, gone down to New Orleans to see what I could do, and I thought maybe I'd create a piece. And then I met this extraordinary woman named Carol Bebel, who's head of the Ashé Cultural Center, which is kind of the center of culture in New Orleans. And I went and said, "I'd really want to interview people and write a piece." And she looked at me, and she said, "Would you do something else? Would you not write the piece? And would you work with all the women here, so they could write a piece, so their voices could be heard?" And I was like, "Done. Done." What an honor! (Enslar, 2010)

Enslar's willingness to appreciate why the women themselves had to tell their own story, instead of telling it for them – as occurred in *The Vagina Monologues*, demonstrates a shift in her approach to the work of story telling over the past decade. Allowing the women the opportunity to compile their stories into a play, and supporting that effort through V-Day funding and marketing, as well as utilizing V-Day's existing connections with performers/actresses such as Kerry Washington and Shirley Knight, amplified on stage the insights and perspectives of women whose stories might have otherwise not been heard so broadly.

In her research, transnational feminist theorist Chandra Tapalde Mohanty has examined how individuals are empowered as language users and knowledge producers, such as the women in the Gulf South telling their stories after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. In her essay, "Chandra Mohanty and the Re-Valuing of Experience," Shari Stone-Mediatore summarizes Mohanty's position on utilizing lived experience as a source for empowerment, stating "efforts to remember and to re-narrate everyday experiences of domination and resistance, and to situate these experiences in relation to broader historical phenomena, can contribute to an oppositional consciousness." (Stone-Mediatore, 117) Mohanty's analysis, shared by Stone-Mediatore, demonstrates the power of personalizing a story and making connections between one's experiences of oppression with that of another person or group in history, so that lived experience, however painful, becomes a tool for creating change. One's own willingness to name

their experiences and proactively work to transform negativity in relationship with one's self and with others, and also to raise public awareness about the issue of violence, can ultimately serve to alter a community for the better. In her book, Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity, Mohanty recommends that individuals "utilize our lived relations as basis of knowledge, narratives that skillfully contextualize personal struggles can contribute to a community consciousness that displaces the opposition between private and public life."

(Mohanty, 2003, 34)

According to Ann Cahill, feminist philosopher and author of Rethinking Rape, "Much of feminist consciousness raising has depended on the speaking of women's stories, and indeed, it was only this speaking that allowed the phenomenon of rape to be acknowledged as a pervasive, society-wide problem." (Cahill, 2001, 199) A V-Day participant in Michigan details the impact of her experience witnessing survivors' disclosures, "It was a privilege to share this experience with the city. There are some successes that can't be measured in monetary gain, like when a young poet at the Spoken Word Poetry Event expressed surprise at having shared her story. It was the first time she had ever told anyone about her abuse. I will hold the moments I shared on this journey close to me always." (V-Day Annual Report 2009) Contained within her critique of *The Vagina Monologues*, student Alyssa Reiser also describes her initial transformative experience with the play, "I left that performance completely stunned. I had no idea that other women felt and thought and experienced the subject matter of *The Vagina Monologues*. It was a truly freeing moment, and one that inspired me to explore women's studies literature." (Reiser, 2010) Finally, Christine Dennis, the counseling and advocacy coordinator of the Women's Center at Virginia Tech University commented on the fact that more sexual assaults were reported after the performances, stating "victims feel that they finally have permission to come



forward and seek services...The Vagina Monologues forces people to face extremely painful realities about their sisters, mothers or even themselves.” (Saur, 2003)

Shari Stone-Mediatore argues that texts in which women re-write their “personal experience as part of common struggle” allows them to simultaneously contribute “to the collective memory that sustains political community.” (Stone-Mediatore, 119) Ensler transformed her own experience of sexual abuse and domestic violence to empower herself and eventually other women around the world, to speak out about their abuse, their healing, and their survival. Naming and condemning gender-based violence, while offering support and options for victims, diminishes the power and the prevalence of violence. Yet, due to the emotional, mental, and spiritual intensity of the work, it is necessary as well as validating, to work collaboratively, as the work can be made more manageable and effective in a group. Ensler describes the group of women, men, girls, and boys, involved in V-Day, often referred to as “Vagina Warriors,” as “citizens of the world.” She states that they “cherish humanity over nationhood...Vagina Warriors know that compassion is the deepest form of humanity...Vagina Warriors are done being victims. They know no one is coming to rescue them. They would not want to be rescued...They have experienced their rage, depression, desire for revenge and they have transformed them through grieving and service. They have confronted the depth of their darkness. They live in their bodies....They are community makers. They bring everyone in. Vagina Warriors work to make the invisible seen.” (Ensler, Vagina Warrior Statement, 2004) Ensler emphasizes the abundance of grass-roots, anti-violence activism that those with a narrow vision of resistance tend to overlook, “In every community” she says, “there are humble activists working every day, beat by beat to undo suffering. They sit by hospital beds, pass new laws,

chant taboo words, write boring proposals, beg for money, demonstrate and hold vigils in the streets.” (Ensler, Vagina Warrior Statement, 2004)

From Ensler’s perspective, expressing one’s traumatic experiences in a supportive environment creates the necessary space for grieving, healing, and moving through trauma. Processing traumatic experiences and recognizing one’s resilience can create a foundation of empowerment that enables survivors to emerge as leaders in the anti-violence movement. She describes how survivors in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with whom she has worked over the past few years have transformed themselves from victims of violence to agents of change in their communities:

My experience is that in places where women have suffered enormous violence or witnessed it, there are always a group of women...who actually grieve it and feel it and pass through it and as a result, they become the strongest women. They become the leaders, they become the people who shift the culture. And I think there are many of those women in the DRC. And I think they are actually the future leaders of the DRC. Because they will not be motivated by profit or for politics or for ambition, they will be motivated to stop this happening because it happened to them. (Schnall, 2009)

Malika Basu describes the strength of the feminist activism that is present in V-Day’s approach to empowerment, which allows that women “be recognized as agents in their own lives as opposed to simply victims; as agents, women not only reproduce the terms of their existence, but take responsibility for their existence” and provides a setting for women and girls to define for themselves, based on their unique experiences, what shape the movement should take in their personal lives and in their communities. (Basu, 2000) In 2002, out of a partnership with V-Day, a safe house opened for young girls seeking refuge from female circumcision and early childhood marriages in Kenya. In V-Day’s collaboration with Agnes Pareyio<sup>26</sup>, a Kenyan Maasai woman

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<sup>26</sup> Agnes Pareyio received the 2005 United Nations Person of the Year award for her activism around

working to inform girls about their rights as they relate to female circumcision<sup>27</sup> and provide meaningful alternatives for coming of age practices in her culture, Ms. Pareyio described to Ensler what her project required in order to continue to serve young women. Pareyio requested funding for a vehicle that would allow her to travel more effectively, reaching more girls with information about their options, as well as telling them about the safe house she had opened. V-Day awarded Ms. Pareyio the vehicle and therefore, she was able to increase the impact of her work. Pareyio explains the results of her collaboration with V-Day on her work, “Eve and V-Day started by donating a jeep that has enabled me to reach my people - the Maasai - who are deeply rooted by their traditional cultures and who still hold their beliefs that girls can not be a woman without the cut. With the opening of the Safe House, girls who have escaped the cut can undergo

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female circumcision. After having “created a right-of-passage ceremony for girls in Kenya — an alternative to the 5,000-year-old practice of female genital mutilation...At 14, she “was mutilated against her will” and said “the pain of the genital amputation was horrific and that she will ‘never forget the sting of urine.’ The new rite is a 2-week long ceremony that celebrates nine to fourteen-year-old girls. They are presented with gifts, beads, and traditional clothing — and are exposed to values and information that direct them toward health and education first, before marriage...She is Maasai first. She respects tradition and her culture. She respects men and women alike, and the girls and boys, and wants them to experience a new way to become adults. Now, through Agnes’s work, many communities, circumcisers, parents, and tribal leaders recognize that girls ‘need to choose for themselves.’” (<http://www.adventuredivas.com/divas/profiles/agnes-pareyio>)

<sup>27</sup> Female circumcision, also called as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a highly contested practice as well as the language used to describe it (such as mutilation) has been resisted by many groups and individuals that consider it an integral and ceremonial part of their culture. According to UNICEF, an organization that considers this practice a form of violence against women, female circumcision “refers to a number of practices which involve cutting away part or all of a girl’s external genitalia.” As well they argue these girls and women “face irreversible lifelong health risks, among other consequences.” Those who condemn this global practice believe that it is a fundamental human rights violation. They emphasize that it “violates the rights to equal opportunities, health, freedom from violence, injury, abuse, torture and cruel or inhuman and degrading treatment, protection from harmful traditional practices, and to make decisions concerning reproduction.” As well, critics argue, “FGM/C does irreparable harm. It can result in death through severe bleeding leading to hemorrhagic shock, neurogenic shock as a result of pain and trauma, and severe, overwhelming infection and septicemia. It is routinely traumatic. Many girls enter a state of shock induced by the severe pain, psychological trauma and exhaustion from screaming. Other harmful effects include: failure to heal; abscess formation; cysts; excessive growth of scar tissue; urinary tract infection; painful sexual intercourse; increased susceptibility to HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and other blood-borne diseases; reproductive tract infection; pelvic inflammatory diseases; infertility; painful menstruation; chronic urinary tract obstruction/ bladder stones; urinary incontinence; obstructed labour; increased risk of bleeding and infection during childbirth.” ([http://www.unicef.org/protection/index\\_genitalmutilation.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_genitalmutilation.html))

an alternative ritual which I hope my people will grow to understand and adopt.” (V-Day Press Release, April 5, 2002)

Survivors, who through healing work are able to transform their trauma into a source of strength, will lead a movement that can guide individuals, communities, cultures and governments towards a greater understanding of the prevalence and impact of gender-based violence, as well as offering approaches to dismantle the culture of violence and instead empower individuals and communities. In doing so, victims of violence will transform themselves into survivors who emerge at the forefront of the anti-violence movement with an empowered sense of self and insight to share from their experiences. In describing V-Day’s collaboration with survivors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ensler emphasizes how providing opportunities for healing and empowerment for women and girls around the globe, is “not about women’s victimization, but about claiming their future.” (Soloman, 2010) This empowerment approach successfully and importantly positions local women as leaders and initiators of change, in both their local community as well as on a global scale. For example, in partnership with the women in the DRC, V-Day has created the “City of Joy” where “women survivors of gender violence will be supported, healed, and trained to be the next leaders of the DRC.” V-Day believes that the “City of Joy” will serve as a model of a “process of change that is directed by the women on the ground, conceived by the women on the ground, and fulfilled by the women on the ground. An ideology which knows that grassroots women are the major sources of change and inspiration and must direct the future of their countries.” (V-Day Press Release, 2010)

Recognizing the spirit of activism and social justice already present among women and girls, V-Day supports, strengthens, and validates activists against violence in a way that

facilitates healing, and also, identifies, dismantles, and works to prevent future violence through public awareness and social change. Through V-Day events and organizing, individuals of all genders who have experienced violence, empowered by this survivor lead movement, have more space to transform their pain into wisdom, power, and a hope for a new paradigm. Inspired by her interactions and research with young girls around the world for her recently released book, I Am An Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World, Ensler newly created “V-Girls”, which according to the V-Girls website, serves to provide young girls and young women a “platform to amplify their voices” while engaging them in activism and thereby nurturing future leaders. This approach to activism, amplifying the voices of survivors, demonstrates that healing and empowerment can be found by leaning into the most difficult parts of one’s life. Using the play as the format to raise awareness about gender-based violence was a non-traditional approach for addressing this political and personal issue – yet it has had a remarkable global impact in its ability to reach people deeply. The play simultaneously serves to educate society, while empowering and releasing survivors from carrying feelings of shame, secrecy, and the burden of the violence they experienced – giving them a safe place to express and transform what happened in their past so that they can fully live in the moment.

Importantly, V-Day’s work engages not only survivors of violence, but also engages “bystanders”<sup>28</sup>, suggesting that addressing and preventing violence against women must be a shared responsibility. Dr. Judith Herman reminds activists how advocating for survivors, and engaging bystanders in the work to end violence against women, requires more effort as “the bystander is forced to take sides. It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the

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<sup>28</sup> “The bystander approach offers opportunities to build communities and a society that does not allow sexual violence. It gives everyone in the community a specific role in preventing the community’s problem of sexual violence.” (Banyard, V.L., Plante, E.G., & Moynihan, M.M. 2004)

perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing... The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering.”

(Herman, 1992, 7) Through global, community-based organizing and events, as well as strategic political activism, V-Day and its participants analyze, educate, and seek to change the institutionalized violence against the female body that diminishes the possibilities and lives of all humanity.

Essential to empowerment and transformation, V-Day provides communities and individuals the space to express what ending violence means to them, how violence impacts their communities, and how they envision the shift towards developing peace, in ways that are both meaningful and effective for the communities from which they speak, live, and act. V-Day presents events that create space for meaningful activism including the “Stop Rape Contest” where young people around the world were able to directly impact their communities, an impact that was borne out of a completely organic and unique idea.<sup>29</sup> This and other projects such as the V-World Poetry Contest, as described on V-Day’s website, in which women and men were encouraged to “create poetry inspired by the question, ‘what will the world look like when the violence ends?’” offer outlets for creative and passionate activism that begins with the submission of an idea or a poem. V-Day events plant seeds for anti-violence activism to take root and grow in the lives of participants. Given opportunities to make meaning of the trauma they have survived, by strengthening their voice and having their visions heard, further facilitate the possibility for integration of their experience, a sense of leadership, and increased compassion.

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<sup>29</sup> In 2001, over 60 finalists from around the globe met at the “Gathering to End Violence” summit to present their projects to stop rape in their communities. The winning projects came out of Kenya, Germany and Brazil, including one project organized by a 13 year-old girl. See more information on the participants, the projects and the winners at V-Day’s website. (<http://www.vday.org/node/1517>)

Often, activism is born out of forging a connection between one's own traumatic experience and the collective struggle of many survivors, when groups gather together to address an issue. In a 2006 interview with Ted.com, Ensler described how empowering and healing this kind of activism can be, stating "when we give in the world what we want the most, we heal the broken part inside each of us. I feel in the last 8 years...this miraculous vagina journey, has taught me this really simple thing, which is that happiness exists in action, it exists in telling the truth and saying what your truth is, and it exists in giving away what you want the most." (Ensler, 2004) Ensler's sentiments mirrors what Stone-Mediatore describes as the "arduous and creative process of remembering" in which survivors can re-process and re-interpret their lived experiences in a collective context. (Stone-Mediatore, 119) This is not as Mohanty describes simply a mere "substitution of one interpretation for another" but rather, an individual who has done the intensive, deep work to come to terms with their experience. This long-term process can transform the person on a mental, emotional and spiritual level, "enabling them to claim subjecthood and to identify with oppositional struggles." (Stone-Mediatore, 119) Mohanty also addresses the value of marginal experience narratives since "experience-oriented writing brings into public discussion questions and concerns excluded in dominant ideologies, ideologies which sustain and are sustained by political and economic hierarchies." (Stone-Mediatore, 120)

Reading a letter addressed to former President George W. Bush at a V-Day event, Ensler exemplified her survivor-centered approach, as well as an emphasis on cultivating a more compassionate, collaborative approach to politics, communication, and social justice, "You cannot help people through force or violence. You help people by serving them, by asking questions, through humility, by being engaged in a process of discovery, admitting that you do not have answers and seeking answers together. You help people by providing safety and

resources so they can do their best thinking. You help people by trusting they have the capacity to help themselves.” (Enslar, March 31, 2003) This survivor-centered commitment informs V-Day’s empowerment philanthropy, which recognizes that the local people understand the needs of women and girls in their community, as well as the cultural environment in which violence occurs, better than outsiders do, and must therefore guide the movement. Enslar reiterates that V-Day is a “catalyst to raise money and awareness” and she “never refers to grants to describe the funds her organization dispenses; she prefers to talk about awards, which she says has more of a tone of celebration -- and less of dependency.” (Enslar, April 19, 2001)

The way in which V-Day promotes the public naming and speaking out about the injustices of one’s abuse has been criticized as reinforcing a debilitating victim mentality amongst survivors. Expanding on Christina Hoff Sommers’ critique of V-Day and its presence on college campuses, Camille Paglia writes in her article “The Bush Look” that the fact that “the psychological poison of Enslar’s archaic creed of victimization is being spread to impressionable women students is positively criminal.” (Paglia, 2001) While the prevalence of V-Day on campuses is largely positive, it does have a captive audience of young people that it could engage more deeply in global issues of violence, activism and empowerment – moving beyond the framework of the play and contextualizing women’s diverse experiences within a series of scholarly discussions, panels, workshops, etc. Coupled with *The Vagina Monologues* performances, collaborations amongst University departments could provide thoughtful analysis on the diverse issues brought forth in the play, as well as providing a space for audience members to process their experiences in a healthy, community setting. In addition, the identification with “survivor” terminology and the conflicting understandings about who can access or occupy that identity/space, as well as its Western feminist associations, potentially



isolates individuals from participating in the movement. (For a discussion on language and identity in the violence against women field, see Survivor Rhetoric: Negotiations and Narrativity in Abused Women's Language by Shearer-Cemean and Winkelmann, 2004)

At its core, V-Day focuses on supporting opportunities, organizations, and events that will foster healing and empowerment through engaging individuals in creative activism. Survivors have an opportunity to break the silence that deepens the pain of having experienced violence as described by Jaimee Roberts, Executive Director of the Rape Recovery Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, "Anything that is bringing attention to the violence against women in our community is a good thing...It takes the shroud of secrecy off of the issue of sexual assault and rape...It's always historically something we can't talk about, so women can't reach out for help as easily. What Eve...and others are doing is saying the shame should not be placed on the person who is hurt but should be placed the person who does the harm." (Horiuchi, 14) Making space for silenced individuals to speak out about the injustices they have experienced and to connect around those experiences, however negative or traumatic they may be, offers an opportunity for healing. As a Rwandan refugee stated regarding her participation in a V-Day sponsored panel on survival in conflict zones, "being in the same place with women who have gone through the same pain and torture made me feel more connected." (Seligson, 2006) Kimberlé Crenshaw describes the potency of women coming together when she writes, "Drawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices. This politicization in turn has transformed the way we understand violence against women." (Crenshaw, 1994)

One of the most prevalent examples of survivor activism has been the huge success of *The Vagina Monologues* performances and supporting events that have spread across college campuses. Addressing and healing sexual violence on college campuses cannot be underestimated when considering the statistic that in the United States, “at least 1 in 4 college women will be the victim of a sexual assault during her academic career.” (Hirsch, 1990) V-Day has now partnered with the New York City based program, Students Active for Ending Rape (SAFER) in launching a collaborative campaign described on V-Day’s website, to “bring a transformative policy reform initiative to college campuses.” Furthermore, this campaign positions college women and men in the role of activists, as it “invites college students to become advocates by researching their schools’ sexual assault policies, and finding out what their schools are doing to prevent and respond to sexual assault.” Using the students’ findings, V-Day partners with students and colleges to improve sexual assault policy, advocacy, prevention, and support services on campuses across the nation.

Psychotherapists specializing in trauma work have described how the process of working through the trauma, can serve as a catalyst for social action. Dr. Peter Levine, writes, “I believe not only that trauma is curable, but that the healing process can be a catalyst for profound awakening – a portal opening to emotional and genuine spiritual transformation. I have little doubt that as individuals, families, communities, and even nations, we have the capacity to learn how to heal and prevent much of the damage done by trauma. In doing so, we will significantly increase our ability to achieve both our individual and collective dreams.” (Levine, 1997) Dr. Judith Herman, also a trauma specialist, describes how the process of healing trauma powerfully impacts an individual’s future work and action in her research on recovering from trauma, explaining that, “Most survivors seek the resolution of their traumatic experience within the

confines of their personal lives. But a significant minority, as a result of the trauma, feel called upon to engage in a wider world. These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it a basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others.” (Herman, 2007) It is in this way, the participatory and collective nature of V-Day’s organizing, founded by a survivor, attracts and empowers survivors globally to join the movement and shape it in a way that furthers their healing and supports others.

## **Chapter 7: Negotiating the Perspectives of Insiders and Outsiders**

*“In everything we attempt, we must strive to welcome diversity rather than gather around us what is comforting and familiar. Without serious structural efforts to combat the racism and classism so prevalent in our society, women’s studies will continue to replicate its biases and thus contribute to the persistence of inequality. We must commit ourselves to learning about each other so that we may accomplish our goals without paternalism, maternalism, or guilt. This requires a willingness to explore histories, novels, biographies, and other readings that will help us grasp the realities of class, race, and other dimensions of inequality. At the same time, we must take the personal and professional risks involved in building alliances, listening to and respecting people who have firsthand knowledge of how to cope with oppression, and overcoming the institutionalized barriers that divide us. Within this context, our efforts to develop common goals have the potential to produce a truly diverse community of people who study women and who understand their scholarship as part of the broader quest to arrest all forms of social inequality.” (Cannon, Dill, Higginbotham and Zinn, 1996)*

Global feminists constantly negotiate the balance between making space for cultural authenticity and autonomy as they relate to women’s rights, with advocating for those within the community who are oppressed and whose voices have been silenced. Essential to equitable cross-cultural collaborations in which global partners impact local communities, is that the voices and leadership of the locals have a central role. Henriette Dahan Kalev explains in her essay on cultural autonomy and women’s rights, an area in which cross-cultural collaborations often occur, how feminists of color and Third World feminists advocating for more comprehensive analysis of gender and sexual violence in feminist theory “suggest[ed] that cultural practices are a lot more complex than they originally appear to those outside the culture, and often need to be evaluated within the context of their own cultural and moral framework.” (Kalev, 2004) Yet, it is equally imperative that activists recognize how opportunities for dissent within a community can be limited and therefore respond to local communities and individuals seeking and/or requiring partnerships to create change. It can be as risky for feminists, to ignore the issues women face outside of their immediate community, as it is for them to intervene without permission, and without context that identifies the historical, economic and political

connections among global cultures and countries, along with their implications. The Women's Rights Division<sup>30</sup> of Human Rights Watch, an organization addressing global human rights violations, emphasizes the importance of resisting complacency around global women's issues, and summarizes both the challenges and responsibilities facing transnational feminists in the movement to end gender-based violence on their website:

Our duty as activists is to expose and denounce as human rights violations those practices and policies that silence and subordinate women. We reject specific legal, cultural, or religious practices by which women are systematically discriminated against, excluded from political participation and public life, segregated in their daily lives, raped in armed conflict, beaten in their homes, denied equal divorce or inheritance rights, killed for having sex, forced to marry, assaulted for not conforming to gender norms, and sold into forced labor. Arguments that sustain and excuse these human rights abuses - those of cultural norms, "appropriate" rights for women, or western imperialism - barely disguise their true meaning: that women's lives matter less than men's. Cultural relativism, which argues that there are no universal human rights and that rights are culture-specific and culturally determined, is still a formidable and corrosive challenge to women's rights to equality and dignity in all facets of their lives. (Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Division)

Through transnational partnerships with women in other cultures and countries, local activism against gender-based violence can be strengthened. While it has served patriarchal societies to label women who contest culturally dictated gender rules as "Westernized" and argue that their resistance of social norms brings social and cultural disgrace, this convenient perspective ignores the local history of female organizing present in global cultures prior to the external influences of "Western" feminism. Malika Basu discusses the risks women face when

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<sup>30</sup> According to their website, The Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch "fights against the dehumanization and marginalization of women. We promote women's equal rights and human dignity. The realization of women's rights is a global struggle based on universal human rights and the rule of law. It requires all of us to unite in solidarity to end traditions, practices, and laws that harm women. It is a fight for freedom to be fully and completely human and equal without apology or permission. Ultimately, the struggle for women's human rights must be about making women's lives matter everywhere all the time. In practice, this means taking action to stop discrimination and violence against women." (<http://www.hrw.org/en/category/topic/women>)

questioning culturally prescribed gender inequalities, and the way in which female empowerment can unsettle and confuse entire communities, “In cultures where the essence of gender inequality is the silence of women, the idea that they should begin to speak for themselves is a radical break with the past and as such constitutes a major threat to those who sense of themselves and of their places in the world is constructed around a social order in which women are silent and men speak on their behalf.” (Basu, 2000) Since gender inequality is a global phenomenon and feminist activism can be perceived as socially/politically/culturally disruptive regardless of the location, it is useful for women to work collaboratively across cultures, and to negotiate differences, to support each other’s movements. In an interview regarding women, culture and Islam, Lila Abu-Lughod emphasizes the importance in exploring the tangible connections among global people, cultures, and politics to promote human dignity and peace. Speaking specifically about the Muslim community, yet relevant to transnational feminist collaborations, Abu-Lughod says, “We should ask not how Muslim societies are distinguished from ‘our own’ but how intertwined they are, historically and in the present, economically, politically, and culturally.” (Shaikh, 2002)

Since acts of feminist resistance have sometimes been labeled as disloyal to local cultures, specifically outside of Western locations, some Third World feminists have been critiqued for succumbing to Westernization. Uma Narayan eloquently describes the very real connections between global women in their shared desire for female empowerment and dignity, as well as the possibility for establishing a transnational understanding and compassion through increased collaboration, information sharing, and self-awareness:

I would argue that if there seems to be considerable resemblance, at least at a certain level of abstraction, between the issues addressed by Third-World feminists and those addressed by Western feminists, it is a result not of faddish mimicry but of the fact that women’s inequality and mistreatment are,

unfortunately, ubiquitous features of many “Western” and “non-Western” cultural contexts, even as their manifestations in specific contexts display important differences of detail. Thus, while women in Western context might be unfamiliar with the violence against women connected to the contemporary functioning of the institutions of dowry and arranged marriages, they are no strangers to battery and violence prevalent within their own forms of marriage and family arrangements. They are no strangers either to the sense of shame that accompanies admitting victimization, or to a multiplicity of material, social, and cultural structures that pose serious impediments to women seeking assistance or to their leaving abusive relationships. There is considerable irony in the fact that our “Westernization” is blamed for our feminist cultural contestations, while the similarities I have mentioned suggest that “Western culture” has hardly displayed an easy willingness to take the fate of women seriously! (Narayan, 13)

Alison Jaggar challenges the idea that feminism is a Western practice by drawing upon Narayan’s description of her own call to feminism which Narayan depicted in “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist” stating, “the pain that motivated her Indian feminism ‘was earlier than school and ‘Westernization,’ a call to rebellion that has a different and more primary root, that was not conceptual or English, but in the mother-tongue”” to support her position. (Jaggar, 12) Narayan suggests, “one could argue that doctrines of equality and rights, rather than being pure ‘products of Western imperialism’ were often important products of such struggles against Western imperialism.” (Narayan, 91)

Contrary to arguments that feminism is a Western import around the globe, Narayan describes how out of oppression, imperialism, and colonialism, issues of equal rights and social justice became an integral part of many “Third World” movements and efforts to resist oppression. Jaggar borrows from Chandra Tapalde Mohanty’s position to further explain why “no non-contradictory or ‘pure’ feminism is possible” since there are so many layers to women’s rights and individual groups will always organize and focus on different aspects that more immediately impact them. (Jaggar, 13) Jaggar eloquently clarifies the delicate balance of a commitment to women while respecting diversity and individual beliefs when she states that

“global feminism requires concern for women in other communities and nations and raising questions about the moral justifiability of foreign practices is very different from peremptorily condemning those practices, let alone intervening unilaterally to change them.” (Jaggar, 15)

Finally, Jaggar challenges feminists to receive, and even invite, criticism as a catalyst for improvement, and that feminists “should not regard questions and criticisms of our own cultural practices by our foreign counterparts as inevitably presumptuous or unwarranted but should view them rather as moral resources.” (Jaggar, 15)

Responding to early critiques of Western feminists approaches to global feminisms that maintained systems of oppression and hierarchies, there was a strong shift to an “anti-universalizing climate” in Western feminist academia, and some of these feminists, unable to negotiate the balance of engaging with issues of women outside of their own cultural context, while resisting essentialism, became silent. Susan Moller Okin described how the feminist anti-essentialist critique was “carried to the extreme of asserting that no generalizations at all could or should be made about women, gender, mothering, or many other topics that some feminists thought it was still important to be able to discuss.” (Moller Okin, 37) In addition, Moller Okin continues, “it was sometimes claimed that, whatever the quality of the evidence presented or the strength of the argument made, the suggestion by any white, middle-class feminist that women and girls in cultures other than our own are disadvantaged or oppressed by elements of their own cultures amounted to offensive cultural imperialism” which inhibited both First and Third World women from writing or critiquing anything, “that was not entirely contextualized and localized in its focus.” (Moller Okin, 37) Moller Okin argues that this reaction to Western feminist theory as inherently inaccurate and imperialist, invalidated any thoughtful, contextualized research done



by Western feminist theorists solely due to their identity/location, not based on the quality of the work they produced for the field. (Moller Okin, 37)

The paralysis of Western feminist collaboration around global women's issues was problematic for feminist theory and activism, for as Uma Narayan points out, feminists, in fact, "need to be willing to engage in the considerably more difficult tasks of trying to distinguish misrepresentation and 'cultural imperialism' from normatively justifiable criticisms of Third-World institutions and practices. They need to be willing to take on the risks and effort of sharing their critical responses, and subjecting their views and evaluations to refinement and revision in the light of different (and often multiple) analyses of these institutions and practices by 'Insiders.'" (Narayan, 1997, 121) Ultimately, Western feminists integrated the critiques of essentialism coming from the voices and experiences of "Third World" feminists and women of color in the West, and re-engaged with global feminisms, refining their theories and activism to attend to differences "associated with race or class, ethnicity or religion, sexual orientation, and other attributes." (Moller Okin, 26) This shift demonstrated the value of constant self-reflexivity and fluidity within feminism that served to strengthen the movement, since out of the "critiques within feminism, most recent feminist scholarship has become more inclusive and less inclined to false overgeneralizations." (Moller Okin, 26)

Eve Ensler emphasizes her commitment to following the local women's agendas in the countries and contexts in which V-Day collaborates, "We don't want to be some outsiders coming in here and telling people what to do, how to behave...the only way things really change is when people from that culture work to change it." (Rosenberg, 2002) By empowering survivors to guide the process, the collaboration with V-Day supports a meaningful, organic, and sustainable change for the women directly affected by violence. Informed by a survivor-centered

approach, V-Day empowers women and girls (as well as men, boys, and communities) at the grassroots level to coordinate the movement in the way that best speaks to their unique individual, cultural and collective needs and goals. V-Day's allocation of support and resources demonstrate a level of fluidity and trust in giving women and girls the power to create culturally, linguistically, and spiritually appropriate events and activities to raise awareness and reduce violence in their communities, locally, nationally and internationally.

Connected to the idea of empowering versus rescuing, it is important that activists reflect on the ways in which they take action to empower women and create social change. Based on the initial impact of the play on her audiences, Ensler wondered about using the play for real transformation, asking, "What could we do with this play? How could we end violence against women and girls? Not manage it, not keep building more and more shelters to keep allowing it and giving it permission, but how do we end it?...It's raised close to \$80 million, that has all gone into local communities. And what's amazing, it's self-empowerment philanthropy. I mean, people put on the play, they raise money, and everything they raise they keep, and it goes to local shelters and hotlines, and it keeps their own communities going." (Ensler) Ensler discusses the gap between feminist theorizing and feminist activism, and the necessity for feminists to go beyond their comfort zones whether writing academically or writing checks, in order to create sustainable opportunities and possibilities for women. This perspective will be useful to future V-Day organizing as it shifts towards a more proactive, preventative approach, instead of reactive. She describes the gaps in historic feminist approaches to gender-based violence stating:

Even raising money to stop violence against women can make it some thing other, something separate from the human condition, from every moment of our daily lives. It creates a strange fragmentation and an even more bizarre fiction. We concretize what is abstract and integral because we need to raise money and people feel better writing checks. And so we have constructed an anti-violence

movement that has built shelters and hot lines and places for women to run to be safe. And although these places are crucial, they keep the focus on things or places rather than the issue, on rescue rather than transformation. It is the culture that has to change—the beliefs, the underlying story and behavior of the culture. (Enslar, 2008)

Guided by the core beliefs that “art has the power to reach, transform and inspire people to act; empowered women are unstoppable leaders” and that “lasting social and cultural change is spread through the lived experience of ordinary people who do extraordinary things,” V-Day works transnationally to empower women and girls to direct the provision of support based on their unique needs, goals, and cultural contexts. (V-Day Annual Report 2008) In following the agenda of the women and girls they collaborate with, the movement delicately balances providing support without attempting to “rescue” women from their environment. Enslar discusses V-Day’s funding of the Kenyan safe house for girls that also provides educational programming and alternative “coming of age” rituals:

I can share from my own experience with Agnes, for example, in Africa. Agnes was walking through the fields to end female genital mutilation. She knew how to do it, she knew the practice ... she had a beautiful method to educate people. She didn’t need me to come and tell her what to do. She didn’t need me to occupy her town in Africa and move in, and spread my knowledge all over her. What she needed was resources to do what she already knew how to do. And once she got those resources, she built a house, she changed her community, she became deputy mayor, she began to bring her way of thinking and her way of doing things, inside her own tradition, into being. (Schnall, 2006)

Malika Basu discusses the power women and girls, like Agnes Pareyio for example, have to re-define tradition - particularly those traditions that are oppressive to women and girls, and re-establish themselves as powerful actors in their communities, writing, “As the organized voices of dissent, women’s organizations can lead to the public contestation of dominant cultural meanings and values and thereby embody an alternative set of cultural meanings and values.”

(Basu, 2000) The collaboration between V-Day and Ms. Pareyio fostered the grassroots, local development of a meaningful rites of passage ritual that has already begun to transform girls' opportunities, as well as challenge and expand local understandings of women's bodies and women's rights. Women of all cultural backgrounds can play a role in addressing gender-based violence and resisting oppressive practices whether they come from outside or within their own cultural framework. The various forms of resistance by communities of women around the world allows V-Day's message to resonate on a global scale, as Sarah Mukasa, Director of Programmes at the African Women's Development Fund and V-Day activist, describes in her essay on culture and violence, "I Am Glad They Have Banned the Vagina Monologues." Mukasa addresses the concerns that V-Day's outsider philosophy cannot reach across diversity:

I think that we should be very careful how we fashion our arguments. For hiding behind cultural relativism has been the very tool used to stamp our oppression in the past. We pander to racist and sexist stereotypes about what African culture is when we do this. We paint a picture of this fossilised, immovable, intolerant, reactionary, monolithic culture. Let us also not forget that in the past these arguments have been used to safeguard dictatorial regimes. Concepts such as human rights, democracy, and gender equality were all once referred to as western and alien concepts. So whilst we Africans were stuck in oppressive, repressed, dictatorial, cultural systems, the west was showing us the way forward? What absolute garbage. The fact of the matter is that the oppression and exclusion of peoples, on the basis of race, gender, and ethnicity and so on is a universal practice, which each society justifies with slick explanations of culture, religion and what have you. And just as it has been practiced in every society, so has it been resisted. (Mukasa)

In her article "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism" Uma Narayan emphasizes the importance in acknowledging the diversity within groups of women (outsiders within) from the same backgrounds who share some, but not all, commitments. She argues that feminists can resist cultural essentialism by pointing to the internal plurality of their group and educating themselves on the plurality within all groups.

Within most groups, there is a level of dissent over the group's values and agenda, as well as ongoing changes in traditions and practices in virtually all communities that comprise modern nation-states. Narayan is a critic of cultural "essentialism" and rejects the idea that there is anything that can solidly and un-controversially be defined as "Indian" culture, "African" culture, or "Western" culture for that matter. Narayan refuses to grant any one perspective the status of being the sole "authentic representative" of the views and values of a particular culture. Rather she takes into account the multiplicity of differences in values, interests and worldviews that traverse contemporary national and transnational contexts. She states that "all generalizations are not equally problematic" and then further expands this concept by saying that "the claim that virtually every community is structured by relationships of gender that comprise specific forms of social, sexual, and economic subjugation of women seems a generalization that is politically useful; it also leaves room for attention to differences and particularities of context with respect to the predicaments of different groups of women." (Narayan, 1998, 97) Her technique of using generalizations without causing harm, but rather to emphasize possibilities for connection, suggests the opportunities available for an inclusive and collaborative global women's movement to end gender-based violence.

According to Catherine MacKinnon, feminism as a practice "not only challenges the partiality, it also critiques the purported generality, disinterestedness and universality of male accounts," and transnational feminism must also challenge such generality, disinterestedness and universality in privileged Western conceptions of women's rights. (MacKinnon, 1982, 23–24) Given this theoretical practice of valuing marginalized voices and experiences, as Sandra Harding's "Feminist Standpoint Theory"<sup>31</sup> suggests, Western feminists can commit to making

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<sup>31</sup> According to Sandra Harding, "Standpoint themes – the 'logic of a standpoint' – also appeared in the thinking of a wide array of other prodemocratic social movements, which did not overtly claim the Marxian legacy,

visible the injustices of their privileged position, move beyond the binary constructs of self and “Other,” and can participate in a reciprocal conversation among global feminists that incorporates and situates the diversity of context, challenges and aspirations among women. (Harding, 2003) Harding believes that the differences between women, such as culture, race, economic status, sexual orientation, and others are not necessarily “insurmountable obstacles” stating that “insiders” are not, by virtue of their social location, immune to understanding the viewpoints and experiences of marginalized groups. (Harding, 2009) In fact, Ofelia Schutte suggests in her essay “Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts” that “collectively, feminists can do much to promote cross-cultural understanding” by working together and “building and strengthening networks of solidarity.” (Schutte, 2000, 62) Schutte emphasizes the practice of intersectionality in feminism in order that feminist activism to be accessible transnationally in both theory and practice, for “if feminism is defined too narrowly, it will make an ‘other’ of women whose path to emancipation it may fail to understand or recognize.” (Schutte, 58)

Alison Jaggar’s discussion on negotiating “Insider” and “Outsider” perspectives provides insight into how to effectively collaborate across diverse groups of women when societal systems and historical patterns have entrenched immense power imbalances and feelings of distrust. Jaggar argues that closed “Insider” groups limit their potentially valuable “discursive openness” by narrowing their agendas and by placing restrictions on who is allowed to participate in the conversation. (Jaggar, 3) Agendas limited around specific moral convictions that every group member believes may fail to engage in complex conversations that analyze or

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standpoint terminology, or, often, feminism. Race, ethnicity-based, anti-imperial, and Queer social justice movements routinely produce standpoint themes...standpoint theory is a kind of organic epistemology, methodology, philosophy of science, and social theory that can arise whenever oppressed peoples gain public voice.” (Harding, 2003, 3)

debate their shared commitments, which could allow for more growth and fluidity within the group. These groups often exclude “outsiders” and in effect, by placing limits on conversations and participation, the formats ultimately “run entirely counter to the ideal of free and open discussion.” (Jaggar, 3) Jaggar acknowledges that there are specific times, groups, and reasons, when and where excluding “outsiders” is necessary, justifiable, or simply safer for the group participants. Oppressed groups may need to be exclusionary to more honestly discuss problematic practices within their community when the participation from “outsider” feminists who are “inadequately informed” or disconnected from the history, meaning and identities of those groups has resulted in those outsiders making unfair generalizations about traditions, values, or groups. (Jaggar, 3) Partially due to the insensitive and often ignorant judgment outsiders pass, already marginalized groups may fear publicly confronting the problems within their community because of a legitimate concern about affirming negative stereotypes, misunderstandings and assumptions. This fear of being judged, instead of receiving compassion and support to address injustices, and the consequences associated with that, leads to the deepening silence and the increasing prevalence of challenges faced by the already most vulnerable individuals and communities around the globe.

In specific moments, Jaggar argues, internal conformity is seen as a necessity to group survival and dissent may look like betrayal when “self identity is bound up with the community as constituted” as well as when internal critique threatens members’ sense of self, and disrupts group solidarity and cohesion. (Jaggar, 9) Those who do challenge the agreed upon beliefs of a group risk being ostracized, “Not merely excluded from the group, a nonconformist may be defined as unworthy to belong to it, she is labeled a heretic...traitor...no longer a ‘true feminist’” (Jaggar, 9) and eventually can be removed from the group, or shamed into silence. Jaggar warns

about the risk of limiting space for critique that can occur within marginalized groups working to resist oppressions by organizing together, “Conscious policies of exclusion reinforce tendencies towards cultural homogeneity that exist in all small communities...members rely on each other for emotional and intellectual support...although temporarily closed communities are indispensable for the development of systematic alternatives to hegemonic moral systems, the alternatives they produce eventually must be subjected to wider moral evaluation” (Jaggar, 9 – 10) Suggesting that it is not enough to be open to alternative perspectives, but that groups and individuals must actively seek them out, Jaggar addresses Western feminists saying that they “should pursue critical engagement with those members of non-Western communities who share some of our own commitments but who may have disagreements about or different perspectives on particular issues.” (Jaggar, 11) She further explains that interactions and conversations between members of diverse communities that “still share some basic concerns is likely to be more immediately useful in promoting reassessments of our own commitments and refinements of our own views than ‘dialogue’ with those whose commitments and worldviews are far removed from our own.” (Jaggar, 11)

Critiques about Eve Ensler’s role as an “Outsider” are rooted in concerns about her intentions to articulate a global vision for female empowerment that may contain colonialist representations of women, as well as the near impossibility of contextualizing the experiences of violence against women in a way that is universally accessible. Professor of Women’s Studies and Sociology, Wairimū Ngarūiya Njambi argues:

What I find troubling about *The Vagina Monologues* is the ways in which non-Western women are appropriated in this purportedly universal, but particularly Western, story of “female sexuality” and “vaginas” that intends to cut across racial, cultural, national, and geographical locations unproblematically. Under the global heading of “sisterhood”, Ensler justifies the need to represent the “problems and pains” of her non-Western “sisters”, separated from Ensler by



geographical and social space, but whose pains are still felt given their presumed biological bond. While this assumption of global sisterhood is a worthy ideal, there remain realities of power relations among women along lines of racial, cultural and economic status; sexuality; kinship; and nationality. (Njambi, 2009)

Given her experience as a survivor of sexual and domestic violence, Ensler believes that she can reach across “racial, cultural, national and geographical locations” and intimately relate to the suffering of millions of women, men, and children. Alison Jaggar suggests that all of us occupy the dual spaces of being both an insider and an outsider within our own groups and our moral and political commitments, thereby “recognizing the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of disagreement within as well as among moral communities complicates our hitherto simple model of insiders and outsiders.” (Jaggar, 16) Ensler occupies both spaces depending on the context of the situation, although she emphasizes the importance of the connections available to women as the ubiquitous global experience of gender oppression can also serve as a powerful bridge between Insiders and Outsiders. On the ground level, we see her waiver between both Insider and Outsider, depending on the topic – whether it is female cutting, forced veiling, or cosmetic surgery – and thus, it suggests this negotiation, understandably complex, is an area in which she could grow more.

Responding to discussion about the incidences of forced veiling in Muslim communities and the way in which some Western feminists have associated Islam with female oppression, Ensler recommended that people reflect upon the oppressions, overt or subtle, within their own cultural contexts, “We all have different forms of enforced burqas. Every culture has it. Whether it’s an idea or a fascist tyranny of what women are supposed to look like--so that women go to the extremes of liposuction, anorexia and bulimia to achieve it--or whether it’s being covered in a burqa, we all have deep, profound, ongoing daily forms of oppression.” (Ensler, February 11,

2002) Identifying both local and global occurrences of gender-based violence anchors feminists interested in global women's issues in the reality that women's rights must not be taken for granted in their own communities. Knowing the statistics and shapes of violence against women also helps activists and theorists recognize the connections between diverse women's rights based movements. As well, rooted in a local understanding of gender-based violence, activists have a tangible opportunity to begin organizing in a setting that is most physically and perhaps most culturally available to them. The connections between the local and the global, and the insider and outsider experience, will allow women and girls to feel less isolated in their experience, as well as foster creative and innovative solutions to ending violence against women and girls through cross-cultural coalitions and sharing of information.

Alison Jaggar emphasizes the value of integrating both insider and outsider perspectives to acknowledge differences within groups, make space for dissent, as well as to work more collectively. She suggests, "If we were to determine that issues that appeared to concern only a single group might be assessed solely by members of that group...we would immediately encounter new problems of identity, authorization, and legitimization. Who is entitled to speak for a group as whole and whence derives her authority?" (Jaggar, 16) Instead of attempting to universalize one particular method to addressing global issues and communities, V-Day works to revitalize existing local, grassroots work, and to empower and uphold the women at the center of the work. V-Day has effectively supported women leaders around the world to step into positions of power, increasing their influence in local, national and international decision making processes. Outreach into Africa, Asia and the Middle East has continued to grow through the Karama (Arabic for self-respect and dignity) program, with the representative of this region, Hibaaq Osman based in Cairo, Egypt. According to V-Day's website, the Karama program

serves to create more geographically accessible partnerships across the region among “women activists from eight sectors: politics, economics, health, art/culture, education, media, law, and religion.” The program supports regional efforts to address issues of violence and equality through training and conferences that function to increase the presence and visibility of the grassroots women’s rights movement occurring throughout the Middle East.

The challenge groups face to establish “safe spaces” for women to honestly discuss their hesitations around cross-cultural organizing - and then take action collectively - reveals the residue of oppression and the tensions that still impact and shape women’s experiences. It is a primary concern of contemporary global feminisms to work against perpetuating the oppression, prejudice, and power imbalances that feminists seek to resist in their gender equality organizing. Working together as allies, feminists from diverse cultures can strengthen their critical analysis and global impact by addressing not only gender oppression, but also other equally important political, cultural, racial, economic, and environmental oppressions that the global community faces. Cross-cultural collaboration also offers insiders an opportunity to express or support a perspective that might not be politically or culturally accepted, as according to Alison Jaggar, “criticism of one’s own cultural practices... may be experienced as a form of betrayal” within closed groups. (Jaggar, 14) There are also moments when cross-cultural collaboration, and specifically Western feminism, needs to learn to yield to the perspectives of Third World feminists. Henriette Dahan Kalev explores how feminists may appropriately negotiate the balance of making space for dissent, without oppressing women outside their immediate framework, using the controversial topic of female circumcision as an example. Regarding the debate between both Insider and Outsider feminists on this issue, she suggests that “the aim of western feminists with regard to FGM should be to support the right of free speech for those

members of communities who are opposed to the practice and are currently unable to speak out.” (Kalev, 2004)

Addressing the effects of privilege and oppression in society as they relate to anti-racist feminisms, Alison Bailey argues in her essay, “Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a Theory of White Character Formation” that women can occupy the various spaces of “insiders”, “outsiders within”, and “traitors”. Bailey demonstrates explores how “privilege cognizant” whites who are “unfaithful to worldviews whites are expected to hold” can become allies in a transnational feminist movement. (Bailey, 2000, 283) She borrows from Mab Segrest’s Memoir of A Race Traitor (1994) to exemplify the process of locating oneself within the spectrum of privilege by committing to uncover the roots of oppression from marginalized perspectives, and then acting to reduce and challenge societal structures of oppression. Quoting Segrest, who stated “I was in daily, intimate exposure to the cruel, killing effects of racism...I began to feel more uneasy around other whites...maybe whiteness was more about consciousness than color? That scared me too, the possibility of being caught between the worlds of race, white people kicking me out, people of color not letting me in” she emphasizes the complexity of doing this work. (Segrest, 84)

Critics of V-Day have argued, as described in Adrienne McCormick’s article about strategic essentialism within *The Vagina Monologues* and V-Day, that it is “plagued by its white, U.S., Judeo-Christian, middle-class, mostly heterosexual leadership, such that the activist projects, strategies and language that these leaders choose essentialize the women in need of V-Day’s help as victim and ‘other.’” (McCormick, 2010) Yet, Enslar stresses that V-Day attends to and responds to voices of local women in all of its global work, stating that V-Day in fact, “only works because the women on the ground run everything and we don’t actually go in and tell

them what to do. They invite us to come to support what they're doing.” (Thomas, 2009) Ensler identifies herself as a *partner* in global grassroots anti-violence movements when she describes the delicate balance of negotiating power and privilege in a global movement, as well as offering solidarity versus trying to “save” women, negotiating the questions of “How do you support people and get out of their way? How do you nurture people and not decide their destinies? How do you be a friend and not manipulate or control people? You know these are really big questions. And I think I learn more and more how to do that all the time. I think my job now is to advocate...and to raise money...and to get out of the way.” (Mishkin, 2010)

Collaborative partnerships provide V-Day with essential information into how they can best support local movements, creating a participatory, inclusive coalition, where “cross fertilizing ideas and experiences and supporting key campaigns” function to achieve a “maximum impact.” (V-Day Press Release, January 23, 2003) For example, V-Day’s “Friends of V-Day Network” in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, encourages women’s rights advocacy groups “to define violence in their cultural context, identify the specific types of violence in their communities, and prioritize one campaign and one strategy to stop violence against women and girls in their country using the funds raised from V-Day benefit events. Through this inclusive, broad-based, participatory approach, the expressed needs of local partners will lead and shape V-Day’s work in their area.” (V-Day Press Release, January 23, 2003) One of the many important aspects of this cross-cultural solidarity is that way in which it decreases a sense of isolation and the potential to feel overwhelmed by the threat of violence against women in one’s community or in one’s personal life. It creates a space for women to come together, seek support, generate new ideas and receive the affirmation and energetic solidarity necessary to take on forces and systems that took root thousands of years back in human history.

Simultaneously, drawing on their experience as feminists, professors, and *The Vagina Monologues* participants, Professors Susan Bell and Susan Reverby, critique the concept of a global sisterhood which they identify in V-Day, in their essay “Vaginal Politics: Tensions and Possibilities in The Vagina Monologues.” Borrowing bell hooks concept of “yearning” across diversity to establish a common ground for solidarity among women, they argue in reference to V-Day, “the yearning that it invokes, after years of criticism of western white feminism, seems at best romantic.” (Bell and Reverby, 439) Also questioning the concept of global sisterhood, Kathy Davis concludes “this version of feminism with its belief in universal sisterhood, its celebration of individuality, and its embeddedness in modernist paradigms of social action” is limiting for women. (Davis, 2002, 226) Bell and Reverby also critique V-Day’s model as being “too narrow to contain the multiple experiences and actions of women across the world.” (Bell and Reverby, 439)

Ensler has responded to the feedback that V-Day is “too narrow to contain the multiple experiences” of global women by suggesting that it is the critic’s definition of feminism that is, in fact, too narrow. Ensler responds to suggestions that her movement essentializes women through its work to unify diverse women and its discourse of the body, saying “the problem with feminism is that somehow it’s translated into the world as something for a very limited number of people, as opposed to something that’s very broad.” (Dezell, 2001) With a global lens, the commitment to cultivate a privilege cognizant, knowledge of the world in order to create feminist solidarity and female empowerment, appears more present in V-Day than in *The Vagina Monologues*. V-Day’s global collaborations that respond to requests from existing groups for support, informs a more holistic, culturally and historically appropriate response to the violence that women around the globe experience, in addition to creating a complementary strategy for

action and change. Drawing a connection between the way in which women's bodies are often the sites of oppressive and manipulative practices that are performed, enforced or encouraged in order to uphold cultural images and ideals of women across the globe, Ensler writes, "I went from Beverly Hills where women were getting vaginal laser rejuvenation surgery--paying four thousand dollars to get their labias trimmed to make them symmetrical because they didn't like the imbalance. And I flew to Kenya where [women were working to stop] the practice of female genital mutilation. And I said to myself, 'What is wrong with this picture?'" (Hoff Sommers, 2007)

Finding the fine line between establishing a sense of female solidarity and simultaneously resisting practices that essentialize women and their cultures is part of the global feminist theoretical debate. Ensler cautiously negotiates the difference between empowering versus attempting to "save" women, and in making connections between gender-based violence and colonialism, militarism, racism, and capitalism, she continues to develop what Alison Bailey refers to as privilege cognizance. Bailey describes how "privilege cognizant whites who refuse to animate the scripts whites are expected to perform, and who are unfaithful to worldviews white are expected to hold" can be true allies in a cross-cultural movement. (Bailey, 284) She importantly states that to create the possibility of work that offers a "transformative" understanding of white identity, whites must investigate the historical systems of oppression as well as practice their own self-examining work to "rearticulate... identities in ways that do not depend on the subordination of people of color." (Bailey, 284) By looking inward and locating oneself within the spectrum of privilege and oppression, and how those structures have informed various aspects of any one woman's life, even the most privileged woman can be in solidarity with and serve as a co-leader in the global movement to end gender-based violence. Ultimately,

creating collaborative spaces where the perspectives of insiders and outsiders can be shared, where support and feedback can be utilized to enhance both local and global efforts, will allow for the most effective, egalitarian, dynamic transnational feminist organizing to occur.



## ***Chapter 8: Reframing the Connections Among Sexuality, Violence, and Masculinity***

*“I learned from my trip that there are men who take their sorrow and helplessness and destroy women’s bodies—and there are others with the same feelings who devote their lives to healing and serving. I do not know all the reasons men end up in one or the other of these groups, but I do know that one good man can create many more. One good man can inspire other men to ache for women, to fight for them and protect them. One good man can win the trust of a community of raped women—and in doing so, keep their faith in humanity alive.” (Ensler, 2007)*

In a world where societies participate in what Dr. Judith Herman describes as the “universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil,” both Ensler and V-Day naturally draw criticism for challenging our societal tolerance for the abuse and torture of women and girls, as well as explicitly telling those painful stories in public places. (Herman, 7) Yet one of the most important aspects of V-Day’s work is making public, the often private, experience of gender-based violence, which often isolates, shames, and silences the survivor. Through the public “truth telling”, many survivors release years of suffering from the burden of keeping their traumatic experience a secret and connect with a community of other survivors. Speaking about her participation in *The Vagina Monologues*, a woman emphasizes the powerful connections that could be made between truth-telling and empowerment, “It’s real women’s stories and telling their stories gives a voice to women who have been silent about domestic violence and sexual assault” in our global culture where violence is so prevalent in women’s and girls’ lives.

(Murray, 2010)

In his essay “Ending the Culture of Violence Against Women: A Critical Healthcare Issue” writer RJ Eskow describes how “the culture of violence begins with the idea that women are objects -- the younger and sexier the better -- rather than fellow human beings with as rich an interior life as oneself,” and that eventually and dangerously, “an object of manipulation can descend into an object of destructive impulses” including the high rates of violence against

women and girls around the globe. (Eskow, 2009) He adds that the fact that specifically, in the United States “meaningful statistics are hard to come by” regarding violence against women, represents “society’s neglect of the topic.” (Eskow, 2009) Another description of the societal tolerance of violence against women, specifically our tolerance of rape, is called “rape culture”. Rape culture is a culture in which rape is prevalent and pervasive, and is maintained through popular attitudes and beliefs about gender, sexuality, and violence. Those attitudes become beliefs, which eventually create behaviors that reflect an acceptance and tolerance of violence against women. In addition, rape is seen as inevitable, it is normalized and made “natural” and there is minimal action taken towards ending it. (Marshall Women’s Center)

Robert Jensen, a Professor of Journalism at the University of Texas – Austin, who focuses his work in a radical feminist critique of male sexuality, violence, pornography, white-privilege and racism, makes a strong argument specifically about the way in which society condones dangerous and unethical power relations when it comes to sexuality. He references how “mass-marketed pornography” consumed mostly by male viewers, “routinely depicts women as sexual objects whose sole function is to sexually satisfy men and whose own welfare is irrelevant as long as men are satisfied.” (Jensen, 2007) Jensen also suggests that the prostitution and sex trafficking industry is “grounded in the presumed right of men to gain sexual satisfaction with no concern for the physical and emotional costs to women and children” to demonstrate our cultural tolerance for gender oppressive and violent sexuality. (Jensen, 2007) Importantly, as with a rape culture which normalizes sexual violence against women and children, Jensen argues “these observations alert us to how sexual predators are not mere aberrations in an otherwise healthy sexual culture.” (Jensen, 2007)

Confronting the difficult topic about the reality of gender-based violence, sexism, and

men's roles in perpetrating female oppression can put men, as well as some women, on the defensive – especially if they do not identify themselves as actively participating in practices, like sexual assault or domestic violence, that they could clearly identify as forms of violence against women. Debating the societal significance of male violence against women, individual feminist Wendy McElroy argues that *The Vagina Monologues* “overlooks the salutary role men play in most women’s sexuality” and “equates men with ‘the enemy’ and heterosexual love with violence.” McElroy’s perspective simultaneously ignores the statistical evidence of male violence against women and she makes false assumptions about female heterosexuality when describing men’s “salutary role in most women’s sexuality.” (McElroy, 2002) In fact, acknowledging the statistical fact that 98% of sexual assaults committed against women are perpetrated by men, and that according to the U.S. Department of Justice, “84% of spouse abuse victims were females, and 86% of victims of dating partner abuse at were female”<sup>32</sup> should not be equated with signaling an anti-male stance.<sup>33</sup> (Women’s Justice Center, 2000) Rather, the statistics reflect the imbalance of gender rights, as well as our societal tolerance of male violence towards women, and provides essential information for those working to understand the issue through critical analysis of social, cultural, and gender norms. With the information about victims and perpetrators, educators and activists can more appropriately and more effectively target and train audiences around gender-based violence, and specifically create programs that reach, engage and inspire men and boys to join the movement.

Betty Dodson has also labeled V-Day as an “anti-male” organization based on the way it

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<sup>32</sup> Statistics taken from [www.ncadv.org/](http://www.ncadv.org/)

<sup>33</sup> For more statistical information on domestic violence in the United States, see the American Bar Association’s Commission on Domestic Violence Report at <http://new.abanet.org/domesticviolence/Pages/Statistics.aspx> and for global statistics see the United Nations Development Fund for Women Report, Violence Against Women - Facts & Figures 2007 at [http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc\\_Files\\_VAWnet/MarchApril08-eNewsletter.pdf](http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/MarchApril08-eNewsletter.pdf)

connects the themes of sexuality and violence. Dodson is best known for her involvement with the pro-sex feminist movement after having left what she considered a more traditional feminist movement because she found it to be anti-sexual, anti-male, and overly political. Dodson writes, “And who is to blame for all the sexual violence against women? According to feminist extremists it’s still the patriarchy. Does that mean daddy or our brothers? Is it the stranger who raped us? Or is it the first man who broke our heart or the first one we married who cheated on us? Maybe it’s the pope or God himself, but it’s definitely mankind.” (Dodson, 2001) In her criticism, Betty Dodson writes that “consistently equating sex with violence offers no real solution” and that “once again it’s sex and violence - never sex and pleasure.” (Dodson, 2001) Dodson’s interpretation of *The Vagina Monologues* may be based on her background and work in “pro-sex feminism” which may not be equipped to integrate the simultaneous occurrences of sex and violence in women’s lives. Yet, in his book *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, author Marvin M. Ellison argues that “Because overpowering women is, in fact, the prevailing cultural pattern for heterosexual relations, clear boundaries between what constitutes sexual intimacy, on the one hand, and sexual violence, on the other, are not readily discernible in a patriarchal culture” and that therefore, these issues do not exist in a vacuum. (Ellison, 1996) Contrary to Dodson’s negative impressions of *The Vagina Monologues*, Caitlin O’Brien, a graduate student at Oregon State University who studies and works in the field of counseling and sexual violence prevention describes *The Vagina Monologues* as a performance that contains “a collection of women’s stories that are all across the spectrum, ranging from positive relationships to sexual violence.” (Gutierrez, 2010)

While there is incredible value in empowering women and girls in exploring sexual pleasure, which is Dodson’s focus, as well as a theme Enslin’s *Vagina Monologues* explore, by

disregarding the histories of women that may include violence, Dodson impedes on her own work to sexually empower women. Many survivors have been forced to bury their experience of sexual and domestic violence and to dissociate from the sensations of the body in order to cope with the trauma. Unacknowledged and unprocessed history can limit the possibility of sexual pleasure for many survivors, and attempting to ignore the history of trauma when teaching workshops about female sexuality, can create a re-traumatizing and/or triggering experience for them in future consensual sexual relationships. Indeed, Dodson undermines the intention of her work to sexually empower women by asking them to disregard the very sexual, albeit negative, experience of sexual violence. In asking women, feminists, and movements such as V-Day, to de-emphasize the aspect of sexual violence that has impacted so many women's and girls' lives, Dodson is asking women to compartmentalize their sexual experiences, separate their mind from their body, and thereby definitely hinder their opportunities to have pleasurable, powerful, and healing sexual experiences.

In her discussion of the book Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma by Staci Haines, book reviewer Violet Blue writes, "It's tough to acknowledge both these two things — sexual trauma and a joyful sex life — without triggering accusations or hysteria, even knowing that sex-positivity and healing from assault are not mutually exclusive." (Blue, 2007) Using a "pro-consent" framework that empowers women and girls (and boys and men) to define their own boundaries, and to trust themselves in making choices about sexual relationships, can allow survivors of violence to practice healthy sexuality. By staying connected to their bodily sensations in any intimate encounter they can engage in sexual relationships in a healthy, healing manner. Ideally, this consensual approach to sexuality gives back the power, control, and self-confidence that was taken away from many women in past violent experiences,

as described by Staci Haines, “One has to risk being trusting again — not as a good idea, but as a real act of vulnerability. A survivor has to re-learn skills that trauma destroys, like recognizing what they need, allowing a full range of sensations and emotions, boundaries, consent — the ability to say yes, no and maybe — and combining intimacy with sex.” (Blue, 2007) Finally, the reality of the prevalence of sexual assault and domestic violence, dating violence, and sexual harassment, must be addressed and validated so that women and girls (and all survivors) can feel safe enough to begin their process of releasing trauma, connecting with themselves more deeply, and embracing both their bodies and their sexuality.

Ignoring sexual violence and simply talking about sexual pleasure will not make violence go away, but rather, it will further silence survivors, preventing them from being able to process and heal from their trauma. Within a transnational feminist movement, it is vital that activists account for and value the multiplicity of identities and experiences that shape a woman’s life. When talking about female sexuality, disregarding the prevalence of violence against women provides too narrow a view and does not allow for integration or healing of female sexuality when the survivor’s past is submerged beneath the conversation. Ignoring the trauma that remains within a survivor’s body, and disconnecting from the body, can create future unhealthy or risky behaviors. The lack of connection with the body experienced by many survivors in the aftermath of abuse, described by Nancy Venable Raine, summarizes the way sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence can hinder both positive and negative sensation, connection, and feeling - and further validates V-Day’s emphasis on female empowerment through an integration of the body, mind, and spirit:

The numbness associated with PTSD seems to spread out over the entire emotional landscape, like fog. Not only is pain blunted, but pleasure as well. Of all the consequences of the rape, this was the hardest to perceive and the hardest to endure. It was living with novacaine in the heart, condemned to life on the

glassy surface of the emotional horse latitudes. I felt cut off from everything and, as the years passed, even from the memory of emotional life as I had once experienced it. My capacity to feel deep concern about my feelings or the feelings of others seemed to have been freeze-dried, like instant coffee. The problem was, I didn't remember what brewed coffee tasted like. (Raine, 1998, 61)

Ann Cahill's work on understanding both the gendered and sexualized nature of rape provides further insight into the necessity to approach healing holistically – addressing mind, body and spirit, as well as how to prevent rape by dismantling the social institutions and norms that position women as vulnerable to male violence. She emphasizes why acknowledging the different gendered experiences when working to understand sexual assault is relevant to the work:

The masculine experience of rape does not have the same, or even vaguely similar, set of meanings attached to it, since men are not subject to such a reiterated threat, are therefore not exhorted to protect themselves against sexual attacks as a matter of daily life. Rape is not only sexed on the level of individual experience... It is also sexed on a larger, social level, in that it is a crime overwhelmingly committed by men against women... The risk to women with regard to sexual assault is so much greater than that facing men that it constitutes a qualitative and sexually differentiated distinction between the social lives of women and those of men. The degree to which the phenomenon of rape and the threat of rape affect a subject's perception of their own safety and mobility is directly related to the sex of that subject; thus rape itself is a means of social sexual differentiation. (Cahill, 122)

Not only must activists and researchers pay attention to the prevalence of male violence against women in order to dismantle patriarchal systems that tolerate and normalize the violence, but also, this information is critical in realizing that to truly challenge and end violence against women, men and boys must be involved. With education, as well as with support, as they heal their own pasts, negotiate and/or relinquish socially informed masculine identities, men and boys will be able to move towards collaboration as allies in the anti-violence movement. Attending to the reality that men and boys commit the majority of violence against women, activists and

theorists can highlight the absolute necessity of bringing them into the movement. In fact, V-Day has specifically and consciously engaged men and boys as allies and co-leaders in the movement to end violence against women.

Throughout the last decade of V-Day's work to engage the global community in mobilizing to end gender-based violence, it has facilitated male specific forums and events where men can process their relationship to violence against women and collaborate with other men and boys to facilitate changing male attitudes towards women and girls, as well as towards each other. The commitment to engage men as allies and co-leaders in the movement is essential to V-Day, and includes the V-Men Initiative, an online forum that includes essays from men about their experiences, and their commitments, to ending gender-based violence. Mark Matousek, the editor, writer, and curator for the V-Men Initiative emphasizes Ensler's commitment to incorporating men in the movement through her invitation:

Eve was firm, persuasive, and oracular as usual. She assured me that I had a story to tell, believing that I -- along with legions of other men whose lives have been affected by the female abuse, who've secretly hoisted dark crosses of shame, outrage, guilt even self-loathing -- over what we've seen, done, not done, not said, throughout our lives, imagining ourselves accountable somehow for acts we may not have committed but which implicated us by association -- could actually help to shed unique light on the epidemic of violence being perpetrated by members of our sex. With this in mind, I sat down to write and was stunned by how easily my own story emerged; surprised, too, by how profoundly the witnessing of hostile acts against women had affected my beliefs about the world, myself, and the role of men (both innocent and guilty) in putting an end to this violent cycle...It became clear to me (as it already was to Eve) that violence against women was not merely a female issue; it was a human dilemma twisting the lives and consciences of men as well; men whose voices needed to be heard in order for the dialogue that began ten years ago with the founding of V-Day to be complete...the war on female violence [is] nowhere near won, we can no longer afford to keep men's voices out the conversation...you don't have to be a woman to suffer from misogyny...It's far too late...for male guilt by association. There's only one team in the human race. (Matousek)



Rob Okun, Executive Director of the Men's Resource Center for Change, emphasizes how important the productions of *The Vagina Monologues* are, along with surrounding events such as workshops on teen dating violence, and men's roles in ending abuse, for young men (and women) like his high school aged son:

I am relieved to know my son will have an educational setting in which to discuss these sensitive issues. I expect the workshops will serve as an antidote to the non-stop, one way misogynist conversation pop culture directs at all of us, particularly the young. Still, like a growing number of men worldwide, I know we must redouble our efforts to address these issues. For women's sake. For men's sake. For our children's sake. Perhaps one day...men...will no longer see a need to endorse what might be called the "Patriarchy Monologues" and instead will join those men working to create what I think of as the "Egalitarian Dialogues." I'm hopeful the ensuing conversation would be worthwhile for all of us. (Rob Okun)

In Ensler's involvement with women and girls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo she has worked alongside a male champion for ending violence against women, Dr. Denis Mukwege. While confronting the atrocities of sexual violence as a weapon of war in the DRC, Ensler met Dr. Mukwege, who operates a clinic helping women heal after sexual violence through surgery, medicine and emotional support. Ensler and Mukwege's partnership allowed them to create a national campaign in the United States called "Turning Pain to Power" educating people about the realities of women and girls lives in the DRC and advocating for the global community to take action to end the atrocities.<sup>34</sup> Both Ensler and Mukwege recognize that men and boys are essential to stopping the violence against women and girls in the global

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<sup>34</sup> The campaign is "exposing the devastating impact of rape on Congolese women's health, their families and their communities; calling for specific measures to end impunity for perpetrators; economically and socially empowering women and girls to lead in the prevention of sexual violence and in the rebuilding of a country devastated by conflict; building and opening the City of Joy in conjunction with PANZI Hospital and Dr. Mukwege, a center where survivors will be provided with support to heal and training to further develop their leadership and life skills." Ensler and Mukwege worked to educate participants on "femicide and the sexual torture of women in the DRC, and relaying the stories of women survivors on the ground who are coming together and breaking the silence." As well, Dr. Mukwege "describe[d] his experiences treating and performing life-saving fistula surgery on thousands of Congolese women and girls destroyed by unspeakable rape and mutilation. Their conversations will also explore the causes of the brutality, ways to stop the ongoing femicide, and Congo's growing movement of women leaders." ([http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_47868.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_47868.html))

community and direct a portion of their efforts to engaging this group. It is through education, leadership, and dialogue about the limitations that gender roles and gender barriers impose on everyone, exploring masculinity from an alternate perspective that incorporates space for sensitivity, compassion, vulnerability, and accountability, that men and boys too, benefit from the movement to end violence.

Speaking about his experience coming to terms with his participation and responsibility in the movement to end violence against women, and connecting it to his location as identifying as a gay man, Yolo Akili, trainer/instructor at Men Stopping Violence describes:

As I grew older and came out as a gay man, my relationship to violence against women took on a very different perspective. My first community of gay men, for instance was one heavily involved in feminist activism. We saw ourselves as feminist/womanist/pro-feminist revolutionaries. Yet and still, we did not see or look into how society still privileged us because of our maleness. Because of the way our gay identity “warped” our perceived masculinity, we were very rarely, if ever, called out on the abusive behaviors we inflicted upon women. Our “diva worship” and idolization of normative feminine performance, which is directly connected to the degradation of women by devaluing women as objects of visual pleasure, went unnoticed. Our domination and silencing of lesbian and queer women at conferences, in the media, in classrooms and in community was not spoken of. We marched through feminist spaces, enjoying the notoriety we got for being men who say the exact same things women have been silenced about for eons. We rationalized our interruptions of women, and stifled their concerns of sexism by crying homophobia. Even though our locations were different, at the end of the day, it became very apparent to me that gay men and straight men’s sexism stems from the same root, even if the tree looks different. (Yolo Akili)

On V-Day’s website’s, Mark Matousek reiterates how V-Day works to empower everyone (women, girls, men and boys) stating that gender-based violence is “a human dilemma twisting the lives and consciences of men as well; men whose voices needed to be heard in order for the dialogue...to be complete...we can no longer afford to keep men’s voices out of the conversation...I learned that you don’t have to be a woman to suffer from misogyny...It’s far too late in the day for male guilt by association. There’s only one team in the human race.”

(Matousek) Ultimately, men and boys will be empowered through their collaboration with V-Day to experience the freedom of being themselves, to fully experience and honor their emotions, and to find healthy coping mechanisms and outlets for the challenges they face in life. Co-creating the movement to end violence against women and girls will provide men and boys with a space to recognize and relate to girls and women as partners, equals, and allies in our global society. By engaging men as allies, V-Day takes a proactive and preventative approach to ending violence against women. It clarifies that violence against women and girls is not just a “women’s issue” but rather, engaging men and boys in the movement to end violence is an essential component to prevention, and thereby truly transforming the tolerance of all abuse in the global society.

## ***Chapter 9: Conclusion “Evolving Feminisms”***

*“Survivors understand full well that the natural human response to horrible events is to put them out of mind. They may have done this themselves in the past. Survivors also understand that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. It is for this reason that public truth-telling is the common denominator of all social action. Survivors undertake to speak about the unspeakable in public in the belief that this will help others. In so doing, they feel connected to a power larger than themselves.” (Judith Herman, 1992)*

My research exploring V-Day, a global movement to end violence against women, demonstrates that while the global feminist community of activists and theorists has valid concerns and critiques about the movement, their feedback often makes space to endorse much of V-Day’s impact. Recognizing the movement’s flaws, the effects of V-Day activism on a social, political, and global level, as well as on individual lives, also signify a positive surge of momentum in the ongoing effort to end gender-based violence. Analyzing the movement from a broad lens allows theorists and activists to draw out the components that are useful for future organizing, to critique and improve upon the weaknesses, and ultimately co-create an expansive feminist vision to end violence that incorporates the voices of women and girls around the globe. Key to the future of V-Day will be its willingness to integrate critique in a way that strengthens and broadens the movement, to continue simultaneously developing its perspective by amplifying the voices and leadership of the women and girls it collaborates with, to incorporate more opportunities through its activism and education efforts for survivors and activists to connect with and heal their bodies, and to always maintain a sense of humility and self-reflexivity as it learns from, and is impacted by, the experiences from both insiders and outsiders. Integrating the tenets of transnational feminist theory will allow the movement to more deeply understand the oppressions of women in order to contextualize, complicate, and strengthen the

lens of feminist critical analysis, and importantly, strengthen the actions to end to gender-based violence.

The both/and critique prevalent in contemporary feminist theorizing, allows feminists to cultivate a complex and layered analysis essential to making space for that which is positive and productive in feminist theorizing and activism, as well as the space to sharpen their thinking and approach to issues that need to further development. For example, Associate Professor at Appalachian State University Dr. Wairimu Njambi writes as a preface to her critique of *The Vagina Monologues*, “During the times my women’s studies students and I have participated in The Vagina Monologues productions on our campus we have come across many women and men who have found the play to be inspiring and illuminating; they often point to ways in which it has changed their perspectives. It is in this spirit of appreciation of Ensler’s important work that I come to my critique of certain facets of her project.” (Njambi, 2009) Another professor, Adrienne McCormick, considers V-Day from this layered perspective, “So clearly the play and movement have essentialist moments. But how do we respond to those moments? Does this mean we should stop producing the play, disband the organization, and go home to pat ourselves on the back for eradicating essentialism once again? Or can we use essentialism strategically? Are there moments when we (feminists) should be essentialist? Are there moments when our (U.S. feminist) efforts to avoid being essentialist lead us right around in a circle to creating new essentialisms? The answers to these questions are carefully, no, yes, yes and yes.” (McCormick) Regarding the way in which the movement has been critiqued, and arguing that the necessity of global feminist activism outweighs the inherent challenges facing it, V-Day activist Sarah Mukasa writes, “The message is good but you should have packaged it differently, some now say. Hello? Have you been on the moon? What have women’s organisations been doing all these

years? 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. Seminar after seminar. Tree after tree chopped down, to produce report after report which presents these issues to fit comfortably with peoples sensibilities. And where are we? As I write this, these reports sit, gathering layers of dust in a number of peoples' offices. In the meantime, the crisis escalates..." (Mukasa)

The bold, controversial, and intimate performances represented in *The Vagina Monologues* play, as well as associated events, draw negative, positive, and mixed reactions to the performances, as the content can be triggering, inspiring, disturbing, too explicit or not explicit enough, validating or silencing – all depending on the viewers unique location of identity and life experience. Critical and affirming feminist reactions to the play offer possibilities for the way in which the play might expand, grow and improve - encouraging not just conversation among critics, but also action, about how to re-format *The Vagina Monologues* in a way that illustrates meaningful experiences that may not be represented in the original version.

Ultimately, V-Day participants are invited through the participatory nature of the performances (whether intentionally or unintentionally) to engage in the process of shaping and re-shaping the movement, serving to remind us that the play is just the beginning of a broader, on-going, and evolving project. Ensler's initial exploration of women's sexuality and experiences of violence, through a theatrical performance born out of one woman's question about how women felt about their vaginas, reminds us that there is more work to do and countless ways in which the content of women and girls lives can be explored, analyzed and ultimately, empowered.

The forms of resistance and the interpretations of women's rights that emerge around the globe are as varied as the cultures and contexts where they take shape. Malika Basu makes it clear that there is no such thing as a "single feminism" nor is there yet a "feminist perspective" that unites all women, yet through V-Day (and other organizations, networks and conferences)

women are finding ways to meet each other across difference out of a commitment to end gender-based violence. (Basu, 2000) While the absence of a “single feminism” complicates the debate about transnational feminism as it relates to cultural autonomy and women’s rights, transnational collaborations also provide an important space for negotiation, analysis, and new insights to emerge. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldua’s concept of a “Mestiza-consciousness” which is a “consciousness” that is based on common goals, rather than a common essence, V-Day’s approach to ending violence against women for all women and girls, allows greater possibility for transnational feminist organizing. Anzaldua believes that this level of consciousness enables cross-cultural coalitions, by individuals recognizing that it is the multiplicity, the conflict, and in particular, the tensions, within ourselves and our stories, that make our lived experience an invaluable resource for “seeing” differently. (Stone-Mediatore, 122) Transnational feminists must balance a respect for local practices and belief systems, while attending to the voices of dissenters within any given group who may not have access to, or the political or social power to contest local norms. V-Day’s collaboration with local movements to end gender-based violence, believing in, and empowering women and girls to provide the most honest, meaningful, and sustainable leadership in their communities, helps steer the movement in a transnational feminist direction.

Recognizing that the leaders of a global movement to end violence against women must come from those directly and uniquely impacted by gender injustice, V-Day has committed to collaborating with other “organizations that have a commitment to working across ethnic, religious, and class lines.” (V-Day Press Kit, 2003) As well, Ensler seeks to enhance global partnerships among the groups affiliated with V-Day, “Our mission is to unify groups and remind people that they are in collaboration and cooperation as opposed to competition. I want to

know in every community who is doing the work, so eventually we'll have a worldwide network." (Lewis, 2001) While V-Day's website states that it functions as "a catalyst that promotes creative events to increase awareness, raise money and revitalize the spirit of existing anti-violence organizations" it has also broadly demonstrated that the plays and performances were "just the beginning." Since the first benefit performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, V-Day has spread across the globe, with annual events taking place in over 130 countries, ranging from *The Vagina Monologues* performances, to V-Men workshops, V-Day documentary screenings and teach-ins, and most recently its V-Girls movement to inspire and engage young leaders, among other creative fundraising, educational and activist events. In allowing itself to integrate critique and moving forward, by exploring new formats to sharpen the way it introduces complex, cross-cultural content to audiences and bystanders, V-Day can more clearly mirror the transnational feminist commitment to embrace a style of activism that promotes cross-cultural dialogue and construct alternative spaces that enable multiple voices, subjectivities, and perspectives to be heard.

In cultivating connections from one woman to another and nurturing the many voices that emerge from diverse life experiences, V-Day provides a space where female power will be characterized as what Adrienne Rich calls transforming power, stating, "thus, not power *over others* but rather, *transforming* power, was the truly significant and essential power, and this, in a pre-patriarchal society, women knew for their own." (Rich, 1976) Group activism to end gender-based violence that incorporates a wide spectrum of experiences, cultures, ideas, beliefs and goals must work consistently and ceaselessly to maintain a balance of power. A collaboration that transcends both literal and figurative borders must practice self-reflexivity to remain accessible and effective for the whole group, and steer towards practices that foster



transformative, collaborative power, not only empowering the participant's immediate community, but hopefully, empowering communities around the world. As Linda Alcoff points out regarding the possibilities for cross-cultural, global collaboration, "Every individual...needs to feel a connection to community, to a history, and to a human project larger than his or her own life...without this connection we are bereft of a concern for the future or an investment in the fate of that community" (Alcoff, 265)

Essential to transnational feminism is the willingness to create space for diverse feminists, and, as described by Lila Abu-Lughod, to "work hard to respect and recognize difference – as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, as manifestations of differently structured desires. We might still argue for justice for women, but consider that there might be different ideas about justice and different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision best." (Shaikh, 2002) Utilizing an empowerment approach that incorporates women into their decision-making processes, emphasizes the contextual and intersectional (rather than additive) analysis of understanding how gender, race, class, culture, nationality and sexuality shape lives, V-Day will grow to be more accessible on a global level. (Ferguson, 194) The empowerment approach is most effective and inclusive because it assumes societies experience multiple internal and external social conflicts or contradictions that must be understood in relation to one another. (Ferguson) This intersectional model provides the space for activists to emerge from different contexts, yet still collaborate around a common issue/goal, as global feminist activists have done through V-Day in their work to end gender-based violence.

Freedom from gender-based violence will be a platform upon which all women and men will be able to stand if global feminist activists remain present to the structural oppressions that

still permeate society, and that uniquely shape experiences of gender-based violence. Along with that attention to the intersections of oppressions, feminists must remain receptive to critiques from marginalized voices both within and outside of the movement. Incorporating the lessons of the past, actively cultivating connections that transcend differences among women, and setting a clear intention that embraces the challenge and the opportunity found in negotiating difference will strengthen and solidify the movement to end gender-based violence. Lynet Uttal describes the opportunity that collaborating across difference provides feminist activists in her essay “Nods That Silence,” explaining:

Our shared efforts to figure out the differences make us feel closer to women whom we each initially perceived as “others”. There is a genuine commitment to work through the confusion no matter how much time it takes. It comes in the form of questions, hurt feelings, taking sides, felling frustrated, and “aha, so that's what you mean. Okay.” expressions. It doesn't always work out. Sometimes we stop with the hurt feelings. But just as frequently we plow through the confusion as a group, putting ideas in order and creating a shared picture which we all can see. And all of this is possible because disagreements and confusion are not received as invalidation of our individual ideas. (Uttal, 1990, 319)

Working transnationally, it is important to recognize that the trauma of gender-based violence transcends political, national, religious, racial, economic, and cultural barriers as its pervasive physical, emotional/mental, and spiritual impact touch all survivors on some level. The commitment to advocate against gender-based violence can be shared universally by diverse survivors and communities, since the baseline belief that violence is an atrocious and immense crime, as well as the recognition of its painful impact, can be agreed upon easily. Not as easily agreed upon in a transnational context are the definitions of “violence” and the specific language/words used to express resistance and “resisters” – this is where experienced leaders in the field of cross-cultural communication and other professional scholars could be utilized to provide support and guidance to the complexity of the movement. Efforts to establish

transnational solidarity to end violence against women and global advocacy may be enhanced by examining the recovery process of survivors. Often, much of the work to heal, process, and release the trauma of bodily violence occurs non-verbally, and requires creativity, patience, and also risk taking. Incorporating this approach to healing, it is possible to see that much of the support, hope, and solidarity expressed between survivors and activists could be, and often is, communicated in subtle, symbolic ways.

Feminist theorists remind us that feminist activism requires a willingness to take risks, and to embrace conflict and difference, so that ultimately, real change can occur. Feminists working collaboratively across cultures must insist on moving towards a more equitable conversation among global women, while creating organizational/institutional changes to promote equal access to leadership, and also, they must resist the apathy and complacency that comes with being overwhelmed by historical divisions and interpersonal conflicts. If women allow the past, as well as their personal fears of vulnerability and accountability, to paralyze their actions and create isolation, they will find themselves at odds with other women, as well as within themselves. While the concept of forging transnational alliances appeals to many women involved in women's rights advocacy and feminist theory, the work requires a steadfast commitment to honesty, self-awareness and an understanding of how one's identity informs and influences their feminist lens.

V-Day celebrates the healing and the wholeness of the physical body as the center of its movement – using the site of the trauma as an essential resource for healing and empowerment, in effect, healing trauma from the inside out. In a theoretical feminist framework, locating the source of healing at the exact site of the trauma, mirrors a feminist commitment to the value and wisdom of lived experience. Out of lived experience and healing work, survivors have the

capacity to integrate their past in a way that ignites their activism and leadership in the global movement to end violence against women and girls. Activists must actively work through their own healing, so that they can embody the capacity to heal, as well as be fully present, to other survivors and activists that they encounter along their path. Women leaders who speak, live, and work from their direct experience represent the capacity to transform trauma into a catalyst for empowerment, which serves to inspire and heal other survivors. As Dr. Judith Herman describes, “there is no way to compensate for an atrocity” such as gender-based violence, but “there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others.” (Herman, 207) In healing the trauma, physically, mentally, and spiritually and making meaning out of the experience, survivors can ultimately generate the energy to change the world through their activism. Describing the power of survivor activism, Dr. Herman describes the root of this activism, regardless of the various shapes that it may take, legal, intellectual/academic, creative/artistic, political, etc.:

Common to all these efforts is a dedication to raising public awareness. Survivors understand full well that the natural human response to horrible events is to put them out of mind. They may have done this themselves in the past. Survivors also understand that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. It is for this reason that public truth-telling is the common denominator of all social action. Survivors undertake to speak about the unspeakable in public in the belief that this will help others...Although giving to others is the essence of the survivor mission, those who practice it recognize that they do so for their own healing. In taking care of others, survivors feel recognized, loved, and cared for themselves. (Herman, 208 – 209)

Through activism, the survivor overcomes what Herman calls “the perpetrator’s attempt to silence and isolate her” and importantly engages the community to collaborate for change, as “when others bear witness to the testimony of a crime, others share the responsibility for restoring justice.” (Herman, 210) It is no longer the survivor alone who must confront and heal

the violence she experienced, but rather it is a societal duty to address the epidemic of gender-based violence which impacts all members of our global community.

V-Day events serve to unify global citizens to stand together as a community, and cease from excusing societal norms and institutions that tolerate violence against women's and girls' bodies, minds, and spirits. While V-Day activists and survivors together break the silence of gender-based violence by engaging global communities in the conversation and the movement, they also encourage a willingness to understand and transform violence by hearing the painful reality of the suffering experienced by so many women and girls around the world. Emphasizing the importance of eliminating the barriers that distance people from feeling the intensity of the world's problems with a false sense of security, Ensler describes her understanding of security in an insecure world, "It means not running from loss, but feeling it, surrendering to sorrow, entering grief...It is a process. It is the acute awareness that we are all utterly interdependent and that one action by one being in one town has consequences everywhere. Real security is the ability to tolerate mystery, complexity, ambiguity – indeed hungering for these things. (Ensler, 2005, 46) It is Ensler's willingness, along with V-Day, and most importantly, that of the activists with whom V-Day collaborates, who have changed the lives of women and girls forever, that mirrors to the global community the strength, courage, and ultimately, the human capacity to "tolerate mystery, complexity, ambiguity" in order to heal from and prevent gender-based violence on this planet. With its heavy emphasis on embodiment and the power of the body to function as a tool for healing and activism, the future of V-Day organizing and activism may be well served by drawing in more speakers, activities and research that articulate and educate the global population on the power of the mind, body and spirit connection. While much of the critique V-Day receives is leveled against this bodily emphasis, by promoting experts in the field

to speak candidly about the value of embodiment for healing, and by integrating and offering V-Day participants even more opportunities for connecting with the body through yoga, massage, martial arts, dance, and other body-oriented practices, the critique of its body-centeredness may lessen. More importantly, by providing the global audience greater opportunities and spaces to make those important mind, body, and spirit connections, V-Day will utilize its own commitments and beliefs to generate more healing and connection.

As V-Day examines its impact thus far, and then looks towards the future, it will serve both the movement and the global community as a whole to integrate a proactive preventative approach into its existing work responding to survivors. Creating a balanced approach to not only providing services to survivors and at-risk populations but also to addressing and dismantling systems of oppression that allow violence to occur so rampantly will reduce its prevalence. This will demand more collaborations and partnerships with other groups and leaders who specialize in prevention work. Speaking specifically about sexual violence, although equally applicable to any form of gender-based violence, cultural theorist Rachel Hall suggests that instead of taking a “risk management” approach, those in the field must “shift the focus of interventions...from women to men”, reject “the abstract figure of Woman as victim” and challenge “the images and stories...that make it appear to be a random force of nature.” (Hall, 2004, 15)

V-Day has evolved within its first decade by responding to and being shaped by the individuals and groups around it, and ideally, it will continue to do so in the future. Just as there is no flawless feminism, V-Day efforts will always be critiqued. Importantly, that critique must be utilized to sharpen V-Day’s work in the global community. Already, women, girls, men and boys have a forum, whether in conscious collaboration or through critical analysis, to vocalize

the need to effectively, creatively, and inclusively confront the epidemic of gender-based violence in our global society. Many activists have been born out of their participation in V-Day events, and in turn, have then ignited their own particular form of resistance within their immediate cultural context. Mary E. John emphasizes the value of the insight that emerges from local contexts and takes a global shape through collaborations, not only for the advancement of women's rights, but for the benefit of the entire global community:

As we approach the twenty-first century in the global context of a uni-polar world order, struggles by women and by feminists have never been more critical for thinking about and working towards a more democratic and equal world. If there is no single universal method that will take all of us there, the specific paths being forged in particular locations must be our starting point...an invaluable opportunity for demonstrating how entangled yet apart our distinct histories have been, and how much more needs to be built as we struggle for and towards a less unevenly shared – a common – future. (John, 546)

Transnational feminism will continue to grow within V-Day as it engages globally with intersecting issues of oppression, expanding the scope of how individuals, communities and nations can approach, understand, and dismantle systematic violence enacted upon not only women and girls, but on all living things. Essential to a transnational feminist movement is that the leaders of the effort to challenge gender oppressive practices and articulate a new vision for society are the survivors themselves. The movements, policies, and beliefs that emerge from this organic type of activism resonate with the local community norms, values, and beliefs. Not only is this a survivor-centered approach to healing, but also because these grassroots ideas come from the women who understand, live, and breathe the issues and ideologies specific to their communities, the changes fostered through their work can actually take root in the local community. V-Day has furthered a transnational conversation and movement that will inevitably continue to expand and reach more individuals and communities. Ultimately, out of this network

of individuals working to end gender-based violence, not only will survivors have a safe space to heal and transcend trauma, but also, they will become leaders.

Implementing a transnational feminist approach into the global movement to end gender-based violence requires a commitment to patience and diligence in developing critical thought. In her book *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, Hilde Lindemann frames the multiple layers that feminists will need to attend to and work through as they develop solutions, create interventions, and work collaboratively to address the nuances of women's rights around the globe:

True respect for ways of life other than your own requires that you drop the idea that yours is the first and only culture, and that you drop as well the reproduction of obnoxious cultural stereotypes. Then when you know the *complexity* of a culture other than your own, and you know its *history*, and you know how *widespread* a particular practice is and the different forms it can take, and you've considered analogs to the practice within your own culture, and you know what *feminists in that culture* think of the practice, you are in a position to make judgments that genuinely respect cultural difference. (Lindemann, 2006, 170)

Clearly, this level of thought and work can only be made possible through collaboration and dedication to learning, as well as the willingness to listen. When feminists come together to approach the complex and pervasive issue of gender-based violence, whether informally or in large conferences, a pledge to uphold this level of thoughtfulness in their analysis will perhaps complicate the work, but more importantly, will give the fruits of the collaboration legitimacy, roots, and a true spirit of respect.

Drawing upon the strength and insight that her healing process gave her, Eve Ensler found the inspiration to create a global activist movement to end violence against women and girls, while also providing survivors a space for healing. In this same spirit, V-Day calls upon individuals to utilize the insight gained from their own suffering to create positive change. Truly "turning pain to power" and making meaning out of their painful histories by teaching those around them a more peaceful way. Taking back their power and voice, these inspired and



embodied survivors will guide global society towards an awareness of the sacredness of all life, motivating individuals and communities to utilize their strength, creativity, resources and resilience, to cultivate compassion and end violence. While Ann Cahill reminds survivors that the “self that emerges from the process of healing will always be qualitatively and profoundly different,” Gloria Anzaldua importantly describes the awesome opportunity available to all women as they confront a new self and a new perspective, “To pass over the bridge to something else, you’ll have to give up partial organizations of self, erroneous bits of knowledge, outmoded beliefs of who you are, your comfortable identities (your story of self, tu autohistoria)...The bridge (boundary between the world you’ve just left and the one ahead) is both a barrier and a point of transformation.” (Anzaldua, 562, 2002) Let the commitment to transnational feminism be the bridge, the point of transformation that enables global women working to end gender-based violence to amplify their voices, creating through their collaboration a global echo that resounds around the planet and establishes lasting change for not only women and girls, but for all sentient beings.

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