POST-COLLEGE REFLECTIONS ON INVOLVEMENT IN *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*: A FEMINIST NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

By

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ABSTRACT

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In this qualitative feminist narrative analysis of eight women's reflections on their co-curricular involvement as cast members in Eve Ensler's iconic feminist play *The Vagina Monologues*, I seek to understand the ways that participants ascribe meaning to these experiences five or more years later. While evidence in the literature suggests that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive growth evidenced in college will continue to influence students after graduation, there is little evidence suggesting specific student involvement experiences play a role in former students' lives years later. I studied lasting influences and associated meaning-making by conducting individual and collective interviews with individuals who, during their time in college, engaged in a particularly provocative co-curricular experience—a production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Prior research shows it is apparent the play affects students; this study examined the extent to which the play influenced these individuals over time by exploring the stories women share about their involvement experience today. Findings from this study indicate that the play was a catalyst for further engagement, a location of connection, and an influence on these women over time. This study also shows how feminist narrative methodology can enrich the study of and praxis within higher education.

This dissertation is dedicated to my kids and my parents…
for their support, patience, and—most of all—love.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I may feel as a prisoner in a broken glass body
Not soft, not girly, too hard, just perfume and breath,
A desire of others for eyes of smoke, and candy lips,
But my voice is young, and not a secret,
A woman blooming, ferocious and wild,
Rising, with sisters, into the wide sky.

magnetic poetry
submitted by Wanda
The Vagina Monologues
cast member, 2011

"I was there in the room:" My Reflection on *The Vagina Monologues*

While working as the director of a campus-based women's center, I co-produced Eve Ensler's iconic feminist play *The Vagina Monologues (TVM)* each year from 2009 through 2013. During this time span, each year dozens of students and several faculty, staff, and community members would show up for auditions (usually in late October or early November) and serve in various roles on the cast and crew throughout the months-long preparation until the performances (typically a Friday and Saturday evening and a Sunday matinee) on a February weekend near Valentine's Day.

Like other performances that were part of the national V-Day— "the 'V' in V-Day stands for Victory, Valentine, and Vagina" (*About V-Day*, n.d., para. 6)—campaign, proceeds from our *TVM* performances benefitted local agencies addressing sexual violence (we donated approximately $5000 each year to a local community non-profit agency). While the funds we raised were significant, I observed something equally important occurring concurrently to the annual production. When the final curtain dropped, the emotional energy release among the cast members was palpable. It appeared to me that this play was intensely inspiring, personally

challenging, and emotionally consuming for these individuals. Months later, students would return to the women's center still processing the effects of involvement on their values, beliefs, and identities. And, I watched several students take on other campus initiatives to combat gender-based violence or engage in other types of feminist activism.

What exactly is *The Vagina Monologues*? What prompted Eve Ensler to write the play? And, how has this annual production transformed into a complicated and controversial mainstay on college and university campuses and in larger society over the past two decades? I offer a brief overview of the background of *The Vagina Monologues (*or *TVM* or the *Monologues* for short) and description of the play itself for those readers unfamiliar with the text, the play, or the V-Day movement spawned from the play. In chapter two I provide a more in-depth review of scholarly literature highlighting the critiques and cultural value of the play—including responses to and resulting effects of the play—on U.S. campuses during the height of its popularity.

First written and performed as a one-woman, Off-Broadway stage show by Eve Ensler in 1994, the play is based on Ms. Ensler's interviews with over two hundred women about their sexuality. An individual monologue might intend to convey the combined story of a group of women or provide an individual portrait of one woman. Together the *Monologues* reveal a complex and emotional narrative of a collective of women and their experiences with sexuality, abuse, love, birth, awakening, and empowerment (see Appendix F for short summaries of each monologue). After a five-year Off-Broadway run, while touring the U.S., Ensler described women approaching her after the performances, wanting to share their own stories of violence and survival, "leading her to see that *The Vagina Monologues* could be more than a moving work of art… the performances could be a mechanism for moving people to act to end violence" (Why V-Day Started, n.d., para. 1).

Indeed, in a tangible and embodied way, activist theater has a distinct capability to transform people and move them toward action. The visceral experiences of women within and because of their bodies, described in detail in the play, create unique learning opportunities for audience and cast members alike. Butterwick and Selman (2012) confirm, "theater processes can powerfully connect mind, body, and emotions, providing opportunities and spaces for transformation" (p. 61). Likewise, Perry and Medina (2011) described how "within performance pedagogies bodies can be acknowledged, made visible, and moved to the center" (p. 63). The particular power of this play, then, is the way that women's experiences are made visible and embodied onstage as a type of activist moment and movement. And so, with the aim of extending the theatrical impact beyond the professional, one-woman stage show, twenty years ago, on Valentine's day, in 1998, V-Day was founded. Since then, Ensler has given rights to use the *TVM* script to campus and community-based groups for benefit performances with the express purpose of raising awareness and funds for "local individual projects and programs that work to end violence against women and girls" (Why V-Day Started, n.d., para. 3). According to the V-Day website, there were over one thousand V-Day events worldwide in 2018 in celebration of the play's twentieth anniversary. While the play has its share of critics—it is seen by some as outmoded and tired and by others as race- and gender-essentialist and transphobic (all critiques shared by both the women in this study and me)—there is no denying the continued impact of *The Vagina Monologues* on college campuses and in the community both for the cast members and audiences.

On college and university campuses, the play's presence provides a distinctive co-curricular learning moment through a type of "embodied pedagogy" defined by Nguyen and Larson (2015) "as learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge

construction" (p. 332). The students as cast members, with varied positionalities and life experiences, take on the experience of the monologue's narrator, which is situated within the narrator's lived reality within a broader patriarchal society. Drawing awareness to this critical stance enables cast members to "perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" (Freire, 1970/2007, p. 83). A critical perception of this reality results in, what Freire called "a deepened consciousness of their situation" which "leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation" (p. 85).

In essence the play's emphasis on women's experiences with oppression coupled with embodied experiences and increased interest in intellectual knowledge engages students to take up the feminist movement's aim to end sexist oppression within their own spheres of influence. Sutherland (2013), who studied the role of theater as embodied knowledge in post-conflict South Africa confirmed, "theatre's potential to interrupt the fixedness of a story or an identity is one of its profound strengths as a tool to challenge attitudes and behaviours" (p. 736). My colleagues and I directly witnessed this phenomenon. In 2010, after our first year co-producing the play together, my colleague in the women's center and I reflected on the events from audition to final curtain and recalled stories of student cast members' expressing increased interest in campus activism, feminist group involvement, sexual assault prevention, and concern about larger issues of equity in society. Our center's mission specified promoting and advocating for gender equity on campus through programs and services and so we looked for opportunities such as this to engage students and build campus and community coalitions to that end. As the women's center was a student affairs unit charged with integrating learning outcomes-based assessment, my colleague and I were also significantly aware of the controversial nature of the play in a conservative state climate and we needed data to speak to student learning. Indeed, during my

tenure, we received phone calls from the governor's office regarding the play and our office's involvement (there were concerns about how our time and resources—some of our budget was from general (state) dollars—supported what was described as "pornography").

With an interest in collecting data to demonstrate the effectiveness of the play in moving students toward critical consciousness of gender inequity (one of our learning outcomes we hoped to achieve through the production) and to justify the use of our time and women's center resources, the following year we created a multi-phase assessment plan (which involved a pre/post cast survey and post production focus groups) with the aim of understanding students' perspectives on their own learning and development. As transformation was apparently occurring in students' beliefs and perspectives, we were guided by the inquiry question: What evidence could we collect to justify the usefulness of *The Vagina Monologues (TVM)* as a significant co-curricular involvement experience related to our mission of promoting gender equity?

Annually from 2011 to 2013 we administered pre/post cast surveys and facilitated focus groups to understand the ways students experienced their involvement and to make the case for our office's continued support of the production. While not a methodologically rigorous study, our initial findings provided some evidence of the embodied knowledge gained through theatrical performance. In short, we found evidence of students' increased interest in working for gender equity, preventing sexual assault, and understanding feminism (Shea Gasser & Salsbury, 2012). Further, our pre/post cast surveys showed evidence of transformation; student cast members' personal beliefs about feminism, awareness of gender equity issues, and intent to participate in activism increased from pre-audition to post-production. These preliminary findings, presented at a regional women's and gender studies conference, prompted my interest in the present study.

Co-Curricular Involvement in College and Self-Authorship

Theater is one of many "co-curricular" experiences in which student might engage while in college. The extensive literature (Astin, 1984; Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, n.d.) on transformational student experiences, co-curricular involvement, and the power of student engagement out of the classroom indicates that these experiences shape students' identities—including their political, social, and personal beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). As students engage in co-curricular experiences out of the classroom, they often interact with peers, faculty, and staff. Kuh (1995, 2011) and others associated such interactions with desirable developmental outcomes including humanitarianism, interpersonal competence, and cognitive complexity.

While comprehensive research over the past three decades reports on the overall long-term effects of college student involvement on competence, development, persistence, and overall quality of life (Astin, 1984, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), less empirical evidence supports the lasting effects of specific intensive co-curricular experiences such as participating in *The Vagina Monologues*. Studies documenting the linkages between outcomes and various types of co-curricular activities primarily emphasize benefits and growth of individual students occurring within the timeframe of a student's college experience or immediately afterwards.

Higher education literature (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b) shows that engagement in educationally purposeful out-of-class activities matters to students' cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. Baxter Magolda (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2003, 2009), drawing on the work of Kegan, studied the nexus of three aspects of development—

cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal—in her longitudinal work on self-authorship. Pizzolato (2005) and Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) also emphasized the importance of fostering co-curricular involvement to further students' capacity for self-authorship. As co-curricular involvement experiences often require institutional human and financial resources, showing that benefits of such involvement last beyond the experience itself may be important. Yet, educational researchers have not yet consistently demonstrated long-term benefits of involvement. Life-span models and longitudinal studies of college students post-graduation (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015) offer insight into how students reflect upon their college experience, but less is known about what meaning students make of their involvement in specific out-of-class activities upon reflection after significant time has passed. In recalling individual transformational co-curricular experiences, like participating as a cast member in the play *The Vagina Monologues*, what (if any) long-term effects do former undergraduate students name and what meaning do they make of that experience now?

Rationale for the Importance of the Study

In completing this study, I contribute to the literature in higher education in two meaningful ways: 1) by providing evidence and understanding on the lasting significance of co-curricular campus involvement for students, and 2) by deepening the use of feminist narrative methodology in higher education research. As a student affairs educator who, throughout my career, has designed and implemented a variety of intensive and engaging involvement opportunities on campus (e.g., student leadership development activities, living-learning communities, undergraduate research, and education abroad programs), I am specifically interested in the ways in which students reflect upon these experiences and what meaning

students make years after their involvement. Knowing about students' reflection and meaning making is important because educators in higher education and student affairs need to know what engagement and involvement in co-curricular and curricular experiences means for students' collegiate and post-collegiate lives. And yet, studies of these long-term influences in the higher education literature are scant. In studying the effects of the play on college students, this study also fills a gap in the student affairs and higher education literature about the long-term effects of *TVM* specifically as a tool for social change, as V-Day purports it to be, on college campuses and beyond.

Many factors influence my interest in studying meaning making and long-term effects experienced by students in *The Vagina Monologues* versus other types of co-curricular experiences. First, the previous informal assessment study described above (Shea Gasser & Salsbury, 2012) found *TVM* provides an effective venue for studying students' feminist beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Immediately after the performance, students reported an increase in both their interest in activism and feminism, as well as an increased concern about the prevalence of gender-based violence and desire to take action. This previous finding begs the question—what about their beliefs, attitudes, and actions *now*?

Second, *TVM* enjoys a nearly two decades-long history on college and university campuses orchestrated through V-Day (Obel, 2001). At the time I was producing the play, the campus at which I worked was one of over 300 campuses engaged in the V-Day College Initiative (Obel, 2001), a grassroots educational and outreach campaign started by Eve Ensler and other activists to partner with "local volunteers and college students [to] produce annual benefit performances [and] raise awareness and funds for anti-violence groups within their own communities" ("About V-Day," n.d., para. 2). According to the V-Spot website

(https://vspot.vday.org), a page for organizers of productions, in 2018, twenty years after its inception, hundreds of U.S. campuses and community organizations produced benefit performances of *TVM* and Eve Ensler's other play *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant, and a Prayer* during the month of February. The V-Day website states that over 1,000 individual performances tied to the V-Day movement were held worldwide in 2018. Though critiques of the play have affected performance numbers in recent years causing some campuses to end the production (e.g. Slagter, n.d.), the play is still well-known and the ubiquity of the performance on college and university campuses is still engaging potentially thousands of college students each year as cast members, crew, or audiences.

Third, while several scholars in gender/women's studies (Bell & Reverby, 2005; Braun, 1999; Braun & Wilkinson, 2005) and communication studies (Hammers, 2004) have analyzed *TVM's* influences, messages, and impacts on campus and in society, to date, no scholars in higher education or student affairs have studied the play. Given the play's perennial presence on college campuses and the number of college students who have at some point or potentially will engage in a production (either as a cast member or as a member of the audience), it is important to ask larger questions about the (possibly long-lasting) effects of such involvement. To be clear, unlike other studies of the play, within this study, *TVM* is not the *object* of analysis, but rather the *context* or where students' co-curricular involvement was situated. In other words, this study is not an analysis of *TVM* per se, but rather a study of the college students engaged in a campus-based production of this specific play.

In short, given the gap in the higher education literature coupled with the play's widespread familiarity as a provocative campus event, *The Vagina Monologues* serves as an

effective "scene" in which to situate this study of women's reflections on their co-curricular student involvement in college.

Problem Statement

While the play clearly affected students *back then*, what is unknown are the stories of the long-term impact (if any) students might share upon reflection *today*. In this study, I address a tension between oft-cited benefits of co-curricular involvement during college and the lack of evidence these benefits extend long after graduation. While comprehensive research over the past three decades reports on the overall long-term effects of college student involvement on competence, development, persistence, and overall quality of life (Astin, 1984, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), less empirical evidence supports the lasting effects of specific intensive co-curricular experiences, such as participating in *TVM*. Evidence in the literature (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, n.d.; Keen & Hall, 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007) suggests as a result of co-curricular involvement, students experience transformation resulting in a number of benefits *during college*. Additional sources (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007) show how interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive growth evidenced in college will continue to influence students' development *after graduation*. Less evidence exists of lasting effects of specific activities and the ways participants make meaning of these experiences years after graduation.

I studied the meaning former students make of their involvement in a co-curricular experience—a provocative play—by conducting narrative interviews with former students who, during their time in college, took part in a production of *TVM* as a cast member. To what extent over time and how do students make meaning of their involvement five or more years after the experience? Furthermore, how might feminist narrative methodology help illuminate sense-

making? In answering these questions, I add to knowledge about long-term outcomes and meaning-making of co-curricular student involvement, while also demonstrating how feminist narrative methodology enriches the study of and praxis within higher education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research, therefore, was to explore the stories of eight women who during their time in college participated in a production of *The Vagina Monologues (TVM)*. In examining these women's stories through a feminist narrative methodology, the two primary research questions guiding my work are:

1. Upon reflection five or more years later, how do women ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *TVM*?
2. Through recounting stories of their experiences since college, how do the women in this study explain the ways taking part in *TVM* influenced their collegiate and post-college lives?

After concluding data collection and as I uncovered the findings I present later, it became clear that both the topic *as well as* the methodology were significant within the findings. Clearly the methodology undergirding a research study matters. However, given what I found in the literature (described in chapter two), I determined that my use of feminist narrative methodology was significant in and of itself, warranting a separate question. Thus, the third research question is:

3. In what ways does feminist narrative methodology enrich the study of and praxis within higher education?

In the next section, I discuss the epistemological beliefs and theoretical framework(s) undergirding my study. By laying this groundwork in the literature and linking together my

philosophical foundation, feminist identity, and critical commitments, I intend to inform the methodological and research design choices and challenges described later in chapter three.

Research Paradigm, Epistemology, and Theoretical Framework(s)

When I consider my perspectives on the nature of reality and knowledge, I align most closely with an epistemological perspective that there is not one universal truth or known reality, but rather my knowledge of the world and my understanding of my place in it is *constructed* and *contextual*. This foundational perspective is generally labeled constructivism. Maxwell (2013) described how one's "understanding of this world is inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and no such constructions can claim universal truth" (p. 43). Constructivists value the ways individuals "construct" or make meaning of their experiences. In describing a "complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2013, p. 8), constructivists value each individual's interpretation of their experiences and seek to (re)present the broadest possible range of experiences. And yet, described this way, constructivism feels, as Bentley, Fleury, and Garrison (2007) described, "*inert*" (p. 3). It feels too unflappable and passive to approach reality from a place of accepting "it is what it is" instead of asking the questions: why is it this way, to whose benefit, and what role did power play? And then, as an impatient activist would, I resist and insist on structural or systemic change. To me, what is missing is a critical consciousness of how one's socially-constructed experiences influence one's values and beliefs and how an individual then, with consciousness, must be urged to *act*. In their essay for the *Journal of Thought*, Bentley, et al. (2007) wrote,

> Understanding both that knowledge is constructed and "how" it is constructed serves to reveal the contingency and contextuality as well as theory- and value-ladenness inherent

> in knowledge. Theory-ladenness of observation, for example, is a phenomenon that one's observations are influenced in various ways by one's background. In other words, observations and experiences have to be *interpreted* [emphasis in original] to be meaningful and it is this unavoidable association of a theoretical dimension that represents theory-ladenness. Awareness of these characteristics more readily renders all knowledge claims subject to deconstruction and reconstruction, an important basis for a more critical, creative, and mindful approaches to teaching and learning. (p. 3)

While constructivists see these individual meaning-making processes as highly contextual, a critical constructivist might ask about the systems of power and control that influence how and what meaning is made. Contexts matter. My interest as a researcher is not just to understand and to describe specific contexts within which participants are situated but also to ask about the influences such contexts have on their actions.

According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2000), the historical emergence of critical alignment with constructivism was driven by scholars who, frustrated by dominant ideologies (positivism), saw critical theory as a means to "temporarily freeing academic work from these forms of power" (p. 280). If the aim was to use research in social sciences to a more egalitarian and democratic ideal, "the promise that men and women can at least partly determine their own existence offered new hope for emancipatory forms of social research" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 280). In this study, my intent was to utilize feminist narrative methodology in a specific critical constructivist way in order to foster liberatory research and praxis.

Theoretical Framework(s): Feminism(s)

This study of narratives and stories drawn from students' reflections is grounded in feminism(s) and feminist framework(s). I identify as a feminist and my identity as such interacts

in important ways with this study. Identifying as a feminist and/or positioning feminism(s) in research means different things to different people. There are as many perspectives on and definitions of feminism as there are feminists. To impose any universal definitions—or singular, generalized framework—is antithetical to feminists' beliefs about power, oppression, and hegemony. Yet, when reading the work of scholars who ground their research praxis in the theoretical perspective of feminism, some loosely shared principles emerge that resonate with mine. First, feminist researchers (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002) believe the politics of gender in society makes investigations of gendered lives (e.g., trans', women's, men's) relevant. Relationships and interactions between individuals are situated within a social construction of gender that affects one's values and how one thinks and acts. And yet one cannot look at the effects of gender alone. Therefore, feminist research is complicated by interrelations of gender with other power relations (for example, racialized power, heterosexism, capitalism) and "targeting gender can have the effect of excluding, silencing or marginalizing significant divisions between women" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 147). Attending to the ways power differentials are created when gender intersects with other aspects of individuals' identity and systems and structures in society is critical when one identifies gender as a relevant construct to include in research.

Upon recognizing gender as a relevant construct in research, a second principle of feminist research emerges: that women's perspectives, knowledge, and beliefs have long been unjustly treated and subordinated by those of men (Blackmore, 1989; Harding, 1987; Lather, 1992). Lather states, "feminist have challenged the invisibility and distortion of women's experiences" (Lather, 1992, p. 92). Therefore, not only have women been underrepresented among researchers in the academy, but issues and concerns affecting women's lives have been

delegitimized or ignored altogether. One approach, favored by feminist empiricists, is to counter distortions by working to ensure sexist stereotypes are eliminated in traditional scientific research processes. Drawing from liberal feminism and positivism, these studies aim to equally represent women in sample selection and engage in a data analysis process in which "serendipitous sex difference should not be overemphasized nor should sex similarities be ignored" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 781).

Yet, many postmodern feminist scholars state that simply employing the same scientific techniques while attempting to remove a sexist bias in the research process is not enough (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Harding, 1986; Hill Collins, 1991). Feminist standpoint theory, then is a critical approach that operated from the assumption that there is no universal truth, but rather experiences and understandings are situated within one's social group identity (race, class, gender, and other identities). Critiques of standpoint theory largely stem from concerns regarding the ways "woman" is constructed as a singular universal entity—largely leaving out women of color, trans women, and "others." And Crenshaw (1991) troubled the centrality of *any* group inequality; instead emphasizing the inseparability of social group statuses (notably class, gender, and race) and their complex intersectionality. In describing crticisms of standpoint theory then, Anderson (2017) stated "women cannot even have privileged access to understanding their own oppression, since this takes different forms for different women." The key principle of including *women* (in all the complexity that that word connotes) in research is to capture women's lived experiences. "Feminist research is politically *for* women; feminist knowledge has some grounding in women's *experiences*, and in how it *feels* to live in unjust gendered relationships" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 16). It is to this aim—to engage in *empathetic* research *for* and *about* women—to which I aspire in this study.

Finally, I observed a key commonality in the ways in which feminists attend to relationships with research participants. Not the sole purview of feminist researchers alone, the aim of "deconstructing power relations within the research context is important in all researcher and participant relationships" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 147). Given hooks (2000) definition of feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. 1) recognizing research participants as co-constructors of knowledge and attending to unjust power relations that might exploit participants is critically important to me. In short, as a feminist, in this study, I worked to decrease the effects of power inherent in hierarchical relationships between researcher and participants by openly sharing, co-constructing findings, and telling my own story alongside my participants. I also designed the study to have a connective and collective component with the intent of bringing women together to discuss their lives and uncover deeper meaning. As a feminist researcher, I strove to "cultivate collaboration and emphasize reflexivity to lessen and make visible the power inherent in the research process" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 147). I describe the specific strategies I employed to these ends in the next chapter as I discuss feminist narrative methodology and my research design in detail.

Despite these commonalities among feminist researchers, those who write on feminist approaches to research also identify the many complications of engaging in a feminist praxis. Feminist ethnographers Wanda Pillow and Cris Mayo, (2007) referencing the calls for feminists to attend to intersections of race and other backgrounds, stated "as we think about what it means to do feminist research, we assume that feminism entails a complex examination of the identity positions and community and cultural associations that structure the lives of various gendered people" (p. 155). And then they said, "until gender ceases to matter, feminism is necessary and correspondingly feminist research… is necessary" (p. 155). Given the apparent hostile climate

towards women after the 2016 presidential election, gender remains relevant in 2018, when I completed this study. Indeed, feminist researchers must persevere.

In educational research, as in other disciplines, feminist research methods remain at the margins. In fact, just the mere labeling of a project as such is what Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) called "a political act" (p. 151). And yet they indicated the value in naming research "feminist" is to contribute to social justice because of the many ways that feminists have attended to the many forms of structural inequality present in society and challenged power and oppression. This study, therefore, brings to the fore feminist narrative methodology and corresponding research design choices that have the potential to enrich the study of and praxis within higher education. In short, "feminist research is political work and knowledge building is aimed at empowerment, action, and ultimately social transformation…[it] creates democratic spaces within the research process for cultivating solidarity and action" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 150).

A critical feminist approach. In combining these epistemological (critical constructivism) and theoretical frameworks (feminism(s)), I ground this qualitative study in an emancipatory framework that seeks to understand the ways in which power-laden social structures have created disparities at the intersections of diverse identities. A feminist research praxis is particularly congruent with this study for a few specific reasons. First, the vehicle for analysis (the play, *The Vagina Monologues*) is generally assumed to be a "feminist" production, that serves to mobilize activists and break the silence surrounding sexual violence. While many scholars (Bell & Reverby, 2005; Cooper, 2007; Stevens, 2004) have interrogated and critiqued this play as essentialist, as (mis)representative of peoples/cultures/"traditions," and as glorifying of statutory rape—fair critiques that I illuminated in my findings as they arose in the data—the

play's feminist presence on college campuses is noteworthy. And, by juxtaposing this play against conventional beliefs about the co-curricular, high-impact practices, and learning and reflection, I centered a feminist aim of eliciting and attending to knowledges and experiences of the women cast members that generally would not be (by other definitions of "high-impact") considered. The play's influence on former students has also been largely ignored in the higher education and student affairs literature. By attending to these students' experiences and knowledge(s), I performed the political act of centering stories not yet told in my field.

Finally, I recognized that deeper meaning arises through a complex interplay between myself as researcher and the women as participants through our present-day interactions and our shared histories. Feminist researchers work to reduce hierarchy and facilitate the development of trust with their participants (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). With pre-existing relationships and rapport in place, I began this study from a place of questioning "power and authority and subjectivity of the researcher as it questions the purpose of the research" (Mayo & Pillow, 2008, p. 190). I quickly realized as I engaged in reflexive writing that it was not possible for me to remain objectively outside of this story; my own understandings, prior interactions, and current relationships with participants make our intertwined stories both inherently complicated and also incredibly rich. I invested my own emotional experiences and personal stories into this research and in the end, I believe this only enriched the study, findings, and discussion.

In conclusion, by taking a critical feminist approach to this study, I recognize the unjust subordination of women's perspectives in research in tandem with the relevance of investigating gendered lives. As I engaged with the women—former students of mine—who participated in this project, I attended to these pre-existing relationships, interrogated power, and centered

participants' stories. In short, the theoretical framework(s) of feminist epistemology broadly guided me this research from beginning to end.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the purpose, research questions, theoretical framework(s), and background for this study. In the next chapter I offer a review of the literature related to my topic, specifically focusing on co-curricular involvement, longitudinal studies of students and self-authorship, other scholarship on *TVM*, and work using feminist narrative methodology. In chapter three I review my methodology and research design, ending that chapter with brief profiles of the eight women who participated in this project. The findings that emerged from the data are spread over the next three chapters. In chapter four, titled "Catalysts and Connections," I delve into findings stemming from the women's reflections on the play's meaning. I review findings related to the "Influences on Post-Collegiate Lives" in chapter five. In chapter six, I discuss the findings related to the emergent third research question, uncovering through "Sense-making, Storytelling, and Self-authorship," the ways that feminist narrative methodology enriches the study of and praxis within higher education. Finally, in chapter seven, I discuss and synthesize these findings, identify specific contributions, and posit implications for research and practice.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I review the background literature informing this study of women's stories about their co-curricular involvement in a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues (TVM)*. In the first section, I situate this study within the literature on co-curricular campus engagement, including a summary of the various benefits and types, including "high-impact practices" (Kuh, 2008). I then look at longitudinal and post-college studies of students and involvement, highlighting work on self-authorship. In the final section, I review relevant scholarship related to *The Vagina Monologues* and its influences on college and university campuses. The purpose of this review is to ensure that my study confirms and extends what is already known in educational research and identify my unique contribution to the literature.

Co-Curricular Involvement

Student involvement on campus outside of academic coursework or degree programs can take many forms—each with varying effects on student outcomes. Over several decades, scholars in higher education and student affairs have explored a number of these experiences and concluded that generally co-curricular involvement certainly has an overall positive effect on students during college (Astin, 1984; Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, n.d.; Cress et al., 2001; Keen & Hall, 2008; Kuh & Schuh, 1991; Mayhew et al., 2016). But there is evidence to suggest that not all co-curricular experiences equally contribute to student achievement of desired learning and development outcomes. Certain types of student engagement—known generally as "high-impact practices"—have received significant attention in the literature for their positive effects on student persistence toward graduation, achievement of general education outcomes, and other positive effects (Kuh, 2008, 2009). In this section of the literature review, I explore the various

types and effects, importance of, and long-term outcomes attributed to co-curricular/out-of-class involvement during college.

Student affairs educators have long served as proponents of out-of-class involvement—often called co-curricular or extra-curricular—as a critical component of a holistic college experience (American Council on Education, 1937). The terms "co-curricular" and "extracurricular" are often used interchangeably (Bartkus, Nemelka, Nemelka, & Gardner, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009), however in this study, I generally refer to *The Vagina Monologues as* co-curricular, because of the structured nature of the experience for students. Bartkus et al. (2012) defined co-curricular as an "activity that requires a student's participation outside of normal classroom time" (p. 699). These activities can be related to or complementary of the curricular aspects of campus. Many of the students who participated in the play reported connection to their academic interests, whether it was campus initiatives for gender equity, courses in women's and gender studies, or the practical experience for theater majors the play provided. Other examples of co-curricular experiences include leadership development experiences and programs, internships (not for credit), certain types of campus employment (like the resident assistant position), and positional leadership in student organizations. In the next two sections, I review the literature that discusses the benefits of co-curricular involvement, and describe a specific type of engagement experience, known as "high-impact practices" (or HIPs) tied to many other desirable outcomes.

Effects and Benefits of Co-curricular Involvement

Extensive literature (Astin, 1984, 1993; Kuh, 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, n.d.) indicates co-curricular experiences shape students' psychosocial, political, and personal beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Cress, et al.,

2001; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Wolf-Wendel, et al., 2009). As students engage in co-curricular experiences, they often interact with peers, faculty, and staff, which Kuh (1995, 2011) and others associated with desirable developmental outcomes including humanitarianism, interpersonal competence, and cognitive complexity. Studies documenting the linkages between outcomes and various types of co-curricular activities primarily emphasize benefits and growth of individual students occurring within the timeframe of a student's college experience or immediately afterwards (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, n.d.; Keen & Hall, 2008). As I frame *The Vagina Monologues* as a co-curricular involvement experience, this literature informs my understanding of what I believe students experienced through this type of involvement. The literature suggests that there are a variety of immediate/short-term outcomes, but what is less well known are the reported outcomes as former students reflect on these experiences years later.

High-Impact Practices

One specific area of curricular and co-curricular activities extensively described and studied in the literature are "high-impact practices" (HIPs) defined by Kuh (2008) as programs and practices that extend positive benefits to students' self-reported outcomes and overall engagement. Kuh (2008, 2009) identified ten HIPs, "service learning, diversity experiences, undergraduate research with faculty, study abroad, first-year seminars, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, common intellectual experiences, internships and other field placements, and senior capstone experiences" (Kuh, 2009, pp. 688-699). Referencing Kuh (2009) and the National Study of Student Engagement (or NSSE), (2007), and its decades of comparative, multi-institutional data, Tukibayeva and Gonyea (2014) identified six defining characteristics of high-impact practices and provided additional explanation about why these six features are consequential for students:

> First, they require a substantial amount of time and effort directed toward a challenging educational goal. Second, high-impact practices are not typically pursued in isolation, but involve shared intellectual experiences with faculty and peers. Interactions with others who have shared interests provide more opportunities for personal and intellectual growth, and ultimately, student success. Third, students step outside of their routine environments and settings, and are exposed to a diversity of novel ideas, worldviews, and practices. Fourth, students in these activities generally receive frequent and continuous feedback about their performance, which is instrumental for growth and improvement. Programs that create conditions for frequent feedback help students stay engaged and focused on learning and achievement. Fifth, high-impact activities provide opportunities for students to apply what they learn in the classroom in different settings, experiencing firsthand how to approach real-world problems and situations. Finally, they create conditions conducive to deep learning, where students synthesize ideas and concepts that cumulatively make a noticeable change in students' worldviews and self-awareness. (pp. 19-20)

In his introductory remarks in Brownell and Swaner's (2009) article in the American Association for Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) publication *Peer Review*, Kuh described the adaptability of the characteristics of HIPs toward other activities. In the above paragraph, I listed the ten high-impact practices and their defining features primarily to convey that while not specifically noted as such, *The Vagina Monologues*, if constructed as a structured, educative student learning and development experience, has the potential to have a significant impact on students. The features of HIPs above, including "substantial time and effort," "shared intellectual experience with…peers" as well as "exposure to a diversity of novel ideas, worldviews, and

practices" and "frequent and continuous feedback" are each possible within the context of the play between auditions to curtain. As such, it might be reasonable to assume that student engagement in this play has a similar effect on students compared to other HIPs.

While the literature cited above shows that students benefit from HIPs, other authors have noted that not all students have access and consequently some groups (e.g. students of color, low income students, and first-generation students) are less likely to participate (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Some of the critique of HIPs has to do with making these time-intensive experiences more accessible to low-income students who must work to afford college (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015). Understanding the extent of scholarly work on effects of HIPs helps make the case that student engagement experiences, like participating as a cast member in a play like *The Vagina Monologues*, are meaningful and important to campuses and students alike.

Longitudinal (Post-College) Studies of Student Involvement and Self-Authorship

In this section, I review post-college and/or longitudinal studies that provide evidence of the positive effects of co-curricular involvement lasting beyond college and into adulthood. I then turn to perhaps the most-well known and oft-cited longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda's work on self-authorship, and her findings that indicated that involvement and other college experiences are relevant into adulthood.

Longitudinal Studies of Involvement

Students' involvement in co-curricular engagement during college and its influence on long-term outcomes, most likely to be documented in longitudinal studies following college students into adulthood, are rare. Looking more broadly, the longitudinal evidence that college affects students' attitudes and values beyond those related to civic, political, and diversity outcomes is also limited. In the recently published third volume of *How College Affects Students*,

Mayhew et al. (2016) noted in the chapter on attitudes and values (noncognitive or affective outcomes),

> we identified no studies detailing the long-term college effects—those effects sustained for a year or more—on gender-role attitudes, attitudes toward LGB people, religious and spiritual attitudes and values, educational and occupational values, or understanding and interest in the arts (p. 314).

In this section, I share some of the findings related to longitudinal studies as evidence that some work has been done in this area, but, as Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, and Pascarella (2015) noted "the role that these good practices play within co-curricular experiences in college has not been examined in great detail" (p. 510).

Using longitudinal data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS) data, Kilgo et al. (2016), sought to document the effects of participating in HIPs "on a variety of liberal arts outcomes, including: critical thinking, moral reasoning, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, intercultural effectiveness, and socially responsible leadership" (p. 512). The WNS sample included 4,193 first-year students (in 2006) and follow-up data collection with a sub-set of 2,212 students (in 2010) at 17 participating institutions. The quantitative study of WNS data using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression found that two specific HIPs (undergraduate research and active and collaborative learning) were significant predictors of nearly all the desired liberal arts outcomes. While the methodological differences between this study and the proposed study are significant, and the timeframe between data collection moments was within the span of students' four years in college, the positive effects of HIPs overall were noted in this longitudinal data analysis. While my study investigates women's

reflections much farther into the future, Kilgo et al.'s findings have implications for this study as they note that some HIPs are associated with lasting effects.

Two longitudinal studies of co-curricular service learning also indicate evidence of lasting effects. Keen and Hall (2008) used quantitative methods to study sustained co-curricular engagement with service learning and the related impact on the desired outcomes "appreciation of diversity and of dialogue across boundaries of perceived difference" (p. 60). The researchers included 40 recent graduates as one of the groups in their sample and noted one significant finding related to these alumni. The researchers showed that service learning experienced during college influenced alumni service-learning commitments post-college, resulting in higher rates across many different civic engagement activities. Keen and Hall (2008) summarized,

> The value of providing support for co-curricular service-learning for all the college years may be that more experiences are likely to result in more enculturation, more reflection, more consolidation of the meaning of the experience, as well as more application to studies and future plans (p. 75).

The other study on the lasting effects of service learning by Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) explored "the comparative effects of service learning on cognitive and affective development of undergraduates" (p. i) through a mixed-methods study of longitudinal multi-institutional data combined with qualitative case studies consisting of interviews and observations. These researchers also indicated significant longitudinal findings related to student engagement in purposeful out-of-class experiences, however, similarly to Kilgo et al. (2016), Astin's et al. (2000) study examined first year students and follow-up data four years later—indicating only in-college (not post-college) effects.

This section of my literature review demonstrated some evidence of long-term effects, of these practices on student, however, the data related to co-curricular experiences and specifically the long-lasting influences of High-Impact Practices is limited. In my study of women's reflections on their involvement in *The Vagina Monologues* five or more years later, I addressed this gap in the literature, thus enhancing the literature investigating long-term outcomes of student engagement in co-curricular pursuits. In this next section, I discuss the primary long-term study of self-authorship, a study investigating students' capacity to articulate beliefs, social relationships, and interpersonal identity.

Self-Authorship

In her study of meaning making and self-authorship, Marcia Baxter Magolda conducted—and is still conducting—perhaps the most well-known longitudinal study of college students to date. Self-authorship, or the "internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269), emphasizes a constructivist-developmental approach to understanding how students' epistemology is intrinsically connected to other aspects of who they are and how they relate to others. The model is described as "holistic" and exists at the intersection of three aspects of development—cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal—as shown in Figure 1 below. Many researchers (Barber & King, 2007; Barber et al., 2013; Pizzolato, 2003, 2005; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007) have applied the model to the higher education context and beyond.

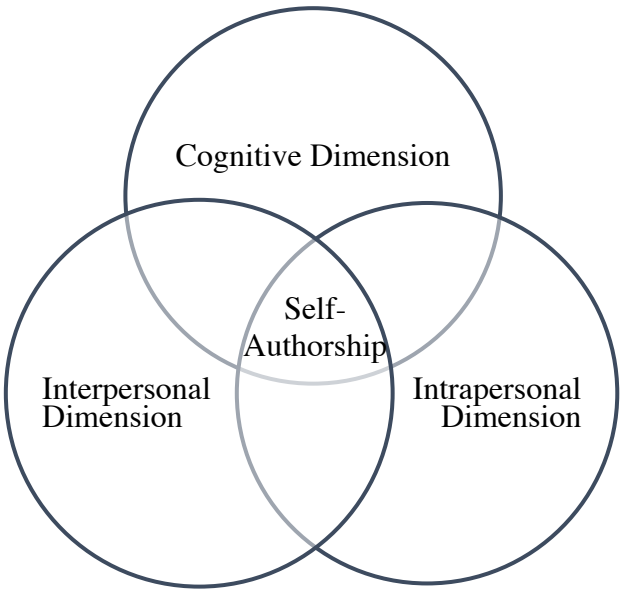

Figure 1: Self-Authorship at the Intersection of Three Dimensions of Development

In developing the developmental model of self-authorship, or the capacity to define one's beliefs, relationships, and identity, Baxter Magolda built upon concepts put forth by Robert Kegan in his 1994 book about individuals' capacity to understand and respond to the demands of modern life through the development of "orders of consciousness." Baxter Magolda conducted her initial research, which later led to the development of her theory, with a group of 101 college students in her study of post-college experiences and epistemology (Baxter Magolda, 1994). A subset of 39 individuals who participated in her original research continued in Baxter Magolda's study into their 20s and 30s. As Baxter Magolda followed this subset of individuals, she further developed the theory and identified four phases or developmental stages to self-authorship: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation. Each of these phases exists along the three dimensions described above in which students ask, "how do I know?" (cognitive development or epistemology), "who am I?" (interpersonal development

or psychosocial identity), and "how do I want to interact with others?" (interpersonal development or relational development) as depicted in Figure 2.

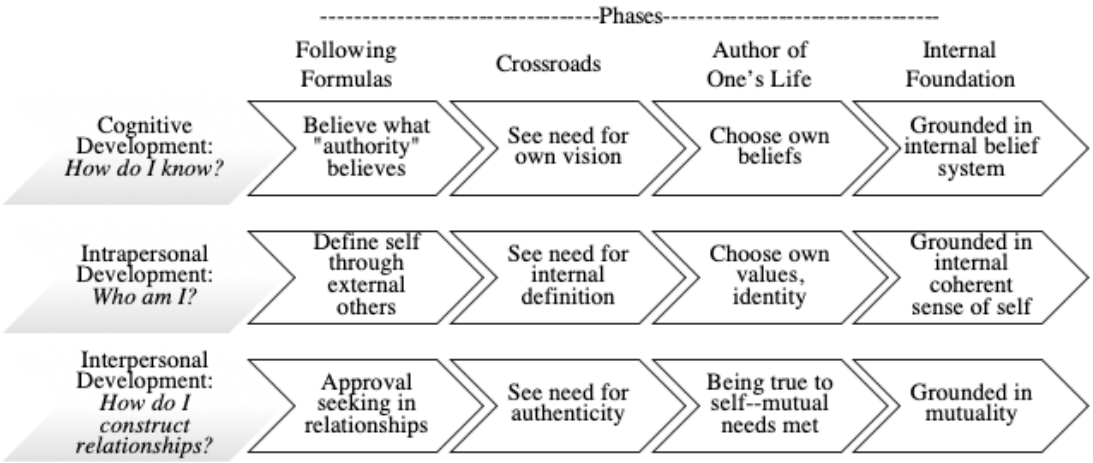

Figure 2: The Four Phases of the Journey Toward Self-Authorship

Adapted from Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Later Baxter Magolda joined colleagues engaged with the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education to apply the theory to a much wider sample of college students across the U.S. From that work, dozens of researchers have published studies applying the theory (e.g. (Barber & King, 2007; Barber et al., 2013; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Del Prato, 2017; King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, & Lindsay, 2009; Pizzolato, 2003, 2005; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007).

I include this review of the self-authorship model and associated concepts because it is applicable to the present study for three reasons. First, as one of the longest-running longitudinal studies of college students into adulthood, Baxter Magolda and King's work provides a model of using retrospective interviewing techniques to follow students' meaning making capacities into adulthood (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). As my study is focused on women's post-college reflections five or more years later, this demonstrated technique proved effective in helping to

elicit important reflections and resultant meaning-making from the women in this study. Second, the stories women told about their experiences in college and since graduation could be interpreted using a "self-authorship" lens. While this was not the theoretical framework for this study, I did consider how self-authorship might emerge in the data. Indeed, it was an effective model to think through the narratives the women shared with me and with each other, particularly as they described experiences that might be considered "crossroads."

I this section, I reviewed studies that follow students over time to see if previous work has uncovered the ways student ascribe meaning to specific campus-based co-curricular experiences upon reflection five or more years later. Finding only a few longitudinal studies that speak to the effects of co-curricular involvement over time and even fewer that have engaged graduates, my contribution to this body of literature seems certain. Previous studies have not explored specific co-curricular experiences' influences on former students after significant time has passed. In the next section, I explore relevant literature related to the play, *The Vagina Monologues*. I specifically looked for studies that investigated the play as a campus-based phenomenon to see how it was portrayed and what prior literature says about how the play affects students.

Relevant Literature on *The Vagina Monologues*

From its debut Off-Broadway in 1996, to the V-Day edition (one of many publications) of the text (by Eve Ensler in 2001), to a world-wide stage sensation now nearly two decades old, scholars, critics, and aficionados have written extensively about *The Vagina Monologues*. As the focus of many editorials, literary and theatre critiques, popular media reviews, and journal articles, writers have explored nearly every aspect of the play. While the gamut of published work about the *Monologues* is beyond the scope of this literature review, identifying how (if at

all) other writers have explored *TVM*'s impact on college campuses *is* relevant. Therefore, in this section, I describe the peer-reviewed literature and academic studies (including some dissertations and theses) specifically about *TVM* and the V-Day college initiative to situate my study among those exploring similar contexts, activities, and influences on college students.

In conducting this review, I read the work of several scholars in gender/women's studies (Bell & Reverby, 2005; Braun & Wilkinson, 2005) and communication studies (Hammers, 2004) who have analyzed the play's influences and impacts on college campuses, and yet to date no scholars in educational research have explored the play's effects on campus environments, or its effects on the individual students engaged in a campus-based production. In short, despite its familiarity on college and university campuses, this review of related literature makes clear that the field of higher education and student affairs has largely ignored the effects the play has on students; thus, my study serves to fill this void.

Fear and Uproar: Literature Describing and Addressing Campuses' Concerns About *The Vagina Monologues*

Throughout the two decades, but specifically in the wake of the widespread adoption of the *Monologues* and the V-Day College Initiative across the U.S. in the early-mid 2000s, the shock of a play with such a provocative subject matter (nearly all fixated on the word *vagina* in the title) drew a range of critics and defenders. Several writers explored the ways in which *TVM* created tensions between campus values and activism, particularly for religiously-affiliated institutions (Kaveny, 2006, 2008, 2009; Schaller & Boyle, 2006). In a study of student affairs professionals at Catholic institutions, Schaller and Boyle (2006) cited *The Vagina Monologues* as an example of a "controversy" or "difficulty" that student affairs staff had to come to terms with as discrepancies between Church values and issues of sexuality. In describing the controversy of

TVM, Schaller and Boyle stated, "pressure from outside constituencies was ever present" (p. 172). Christine Kaveny, a law and theology professor at Notre Dame, wrote extensively about Catholic institutions' responses to the play given both internal (student) as well as outside pressures. In one article in which she makes the case for allowing space for *TVM* at Notre Dame, she described the play as "explicitly and enthusiastically recount[ing] a wide range of sexual activity viewed as immoral by the Catholic Church" and "resonat[ing] with an ideological worldview not known for its sympathy to Catholicism or other patriarchal religions" (p. 13). By the end of the article, she provided a case for a middle ground between the difficult and controversial by stating:

> Given these aspirations, banning a play such as *The Vagina Monologues* not only presupposes a far too simplistic analysis of the play, but also a far too pessimistic assessment of the resources of the Catholic tradition to deal with criticism and challenge. On the contrary, I think the occasion should be used to delve ever more deeply into the questions raised by the monologues, the play, and its performance. The Catholic intellectual and moral tradition will be richer for the encounter, as will the students who have a sustained opportunity to examine the conflicting currents of thought that shape their everyday lives. (Kaveny, 2009, p. 18)

In contrast, on other campuses (even those that are public) the play has been the subject of political uproar and controversy. In her master's thesis for a degree in religious studies, Jill Peterfeso (2008) explored a campus-based version of *TVM* performed at Utah Valley State College juxtaposed against a (re-written and significantly edited) version performed as the "*Mormon Vagina Monologues*." She wrote as her purpose:

> At the heart of this project is a desire to explore the ways theatre can change religious

> communities, either by commenting on restrictive religious doctrine, inspiring new conversations, or allowing religious persons to re-evaluate what it means to be faithful participants. (Peterfeso, 2008, p. 26)

The full version staged by the Gender Studies Club for an audience of 300 people at Utah Valley State College had a significantly negative impact on the campus. Peterfeso described:

> Despite the Gender Studies Club's stated purpose of raising "awareness about violence against women, that we may stop it in its tracks," UVSC's *The Vagina Monologues* came to represent far more than that. The play became part of political debates swirling around UVSC and was cited in conjunction with three major issues: 1) the Utah state legislature's refusal to fund a new library, 2) the challenge of UVSC attaining university status, and 3) the issue of "academic freedom" and perceived liberalization at UVSC. (p. 27)

Significant to my study is the context described in the UVSC version. The play was still considered controversial there between 2009 and 2013. And, the research site for my study is a region politically similar to Utah that contains a significant Mormon population—particularly in the southern part of the state, from which many students come to the university. Like other campus-based women's centers or other student affairs units who sponsored a production when the play first arrived on college and university campuses, each year, we faced similar pressures from within, resulting in us keeping the play off-campus (actually, this venue served us far better because we displayed the play's name on a marquis on the town's main street!). And, each year prior to staging the *Monologues* we encountered political repercussions. One year, I received a call from the state governor's office asking about the source of the funding and requiring reassurance that no general fund dollars were being used to support the play. As a case in point

this year (2019), Gonzaga University, a school in the same region as NWSU, hosted its first public performance, which the Spokesman-Review article described as previously forbidden by the school's president, citing conflict with the school's mission (Sokol, 2019). While *TVM* performances staged today on campuses in more progressive contexts may be considered tired, outmoded, exclusionary, on campuses located within conservative state climates, sponsoring a benefit performance of the play can still be interpreted as controversial.

TVM as a Means of Engendering Campus Dialogue

In contrast to the controversy, debate, and campus sanctions described in the previous section, the literature about *TVM* on campus also describes the introduction of the *Monologues* on campuses as creating an opportunity for campus leaders, feminist activists, and advocates for sexual assault prevention to come together to discuss shared goals. In their article discussing the tensions inherent between "celebration of the pleasures of the body and the politics that underlie the play and the movement it has spawned," Bell and Reverby (2005, p. 431) discussed their own experiences as faculty members and actors in a campus-based production:

> It is not as if these issues–of women's relationships to our bodies and the structures of power–are not dealt with anywhere else on US campuses. Many campuses (including our own) have health and sex educators, "safe space" organizations, take back the night groups, women's centers, etc. . . . The power of *TVM* comes from its transgressive and carnivalesque public stance. (Bell & Reverby, 2005, p. 433)

Indeed, the opportunities for coalition-building surrounding the public nature of the event, as described above, between various groups on campuses is part of what the literature discusses as the power of the movement. Bell and Reverby (2005) described *TVM* and V-Day as "embody[ing] what bell hooks has called 'yearning' across racial, sexual and class lines that

allows for the recognition of common commitments and serve[s] as a base for solidarity and coalition" (p. 439).

As I studied the ways in which *TVM* affected the women who participated in my study, the literature described above provides a significant background for understanding the phenomenon surrounding the play and its powerful effect on both campuses and students. Basu (2010) stated

> There is no denying the effect of testimonies in the play, indeed the transformative power of the play to help myriad women find voice to name both sexual desire and sexual violence . . . [there is an] energizing effect of campus performances, to which many of us involved in *TVM* on our own campuses can no doubt bear witness (p. 35).

As I reflected on this testimonial from Basu, I recollected the energizing effect of the play and how it stimulated dialogue among the cast, the audience, and on the NWSU campus. The foundational tenet of the V-Day College Initiative is Ensler's belief that this dialogue has the potential to create lasting, substantial change on campuses and in larger society (Obel, 2001). So, whether it created fear, concern, dialogue, hope, or healing, the ways that *The Vagina Monologues* affected campuses is significant (Bell & Reverby, 2005; Kaveny, 2009; Scott, 2003; Shea Gasser & Salsbury, 2012), making it even more troubling that scholars studying student affairs and higher education have largely ignored this campus event. A singular study mentioned the controversy of *TVM* in relation to student affairs professionals' work (Schaller & Boyle, 2006), yet to date no one in student affairs has directly studied the student participants in the play or the play's long-term effect on cast members. In this regard, I contribute to this literature by interviewing women about the meaning they made of their involvement during college. In the

next follow, I explore the literature on the methodological choices I made, to see if they are also a unique contribution to the study of higher education.

Feminist Narrative Methodology in Higher Education Research

In this final section, I reviewed literature not based on topic, but rather through a methodological lens. I approached this review with the intent of finding other scholars who used feminist narrative methodology in the study of higher education and student affairs. In this final part of my literature review, I share what I found as I reviewed feminist narratives and frameworks for feminist analysis.

Feminist Narratives in Higher Education

Feminist narratives, or narratives about feminism, appeared a few times in the higher education literature. While not explicitly titled "feminist narrative methodology" the studies all explored stories of women's voices in higher education. One study, *Knowing feminism: The significance of higher education to women's narratives of 'becoming feminist*,' (Guest, 2016) conducted by a sociologist in the UK interpreted the narrative of three recent college graduates, their pre-college feminist identities, and how their engagement in "academic feminism" in the college context influenced their self-perception as "proper feminists." While she does not directly identify her methodology as "feminist," Guest (2016) makes a direct statement about the importance of narrative methods. She states,

> Narrative methods, therefore, can offer a means of exploring the numerous and intersecting ways that political identities are formed, understood and articulated. Such methods highlight the processes of politicization that cannot be measured solely by participation in particular practices. Indeed, they offer a means of understanding why and

how an individual might come to participate in these forms of political activism that are often taken as a marker of a political identity. (p. 475-476).

Another feminist study in higher education looked at narratives of adult women returning to college to uncover pathways, constraints, and supports in completing their education. Qualitative data was collected at two "historically all-women's colleges" through two "all-women focus groups" with 11 total participants and two individual interviews (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011, p. 483). Two aspects of this study caught my attention. First, the obvious parallel between my individual/collective interview structure (although there were no overlapping participants in this study). Of the focus groups, the authors stated "focus groups were used because of the potential for rich information to emerge from the interactions and dialogues that occur within groups… Our intention [in groups] was to create a safe space in which these women could voice their stories." (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011, p. 484). The second aspect that was significant regarding the methodology, was the authors' frequent return to viewing data through a feminist lens. They described feminist methodologies as "privileg[ing] listening to the voices of women and challenging traditional, societal hierarchies… and attempt[ing] to dismantle the power and authority implied in the researcher-participant relationship" (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011, p. 484). The authors also focused on the relationships between the researcher and participant and encouraged reflexive practice. At one point, after hearing different women referring family structures as gendered, the authors said, "given our feminist lens, which considers the ways in which the gender system visibly and invisibly influences lives, we regard both types of narratives as illuminating how gender influences women's educational lives." (p. 485).

The final example of feminist narrative in higher education research was a dissertation by

Jessica Jennrich (Dr. Jennifer Hart, a noted feminist higher education scholar was the dissertation supervisor). The dissertation offered a feminist personal narrative of the author's own classroom learning experiences as a "counter narrative to some accepted theories regarding graduate learning practices" (Jennrich, 2016, p. iii). The author described a research style "scholarly personal narrative. . . . [which] provides a narrative of one's experiences supported by scholarly work in the area… written about by Robert J. Nash (2004)" (p. 3), which she layered with feminist theory, postmodernism, and disability studies. She stated in the introduction,

> I will suggest that my story, by its very nature of being a feminist narrative that takes place in a higher education setting, is useful to the field of higher education as a model for how theory can become practice. By making intentional connections between higher education and feminist theory as well disability studies, new perspectives can emerge about how higher education practices instruction, administration, and creates educational policy. (p. 1)

This statement—feminist narrative methodology can influence practice, perspectives, and polices—indicates that these methodological choices might enrich the study of higher education (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Trahar, 2009). Narrative methods can and do uncover how individuals make meaning of their experiences and identities, has value within educational processes, and is an effective tool for learning about oneself and the world around them (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1996). In the next section, I discuss additional articles from both inside higher education and beyond provide frameworks for feminist narrative analysis.

Frameworks for Feminist Narrative Analysis

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) was used as a conceptual framework to study the narratives and dialogic conversations among five men of color in a higher education doctoral cohort and the program's faculty director (a woman of color) (Squire, Kelly, Jourian, Byrd, Manzano, & Bumbry, 2018). The authors define CRF as "a branch of Critical Race Theory… that acknowl[edges] that higher education exists in gendered and racialized contexts, among others" (Squire et al., 2018, p. 18). Like Jennrich (2016) above, the authors ground their stories in scholarly personal narrative methodology, which they described as "utilize[ing] the authors' life experiences, along with academic research, to support the argument or questions being posed" (Squire et al., 2018, p. 19). They aligned SPN with CRF, citing Behar (1996) and Hill Collins (2000), who accept and encourage researchers to situate themselves within their scholarship. The significance of the Squire et al. study lies in the use of personal stories, told through scholarly personally narrative, as real-life experiences that can counter the dominant discourses. Centering narratives of people of color in academia within a conceptual framework of Critical Race Feminism, allows individual's marginalized or underrepresented voices, to emerge and provoke change within higher education—a significant contribution to higher education literature.

Another recent dissertation used feminist narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of adult women pursuing their bachelor's degree (Tyson, 2017). The benefits of narrative methods, for this researcher, who worked alongside participants in a position of power at her university, was activism and change. With a postmodern feminist lens, Tyson designed her research in a collaborative way with the women in her study so as to illuminate the women's stories into a "united voice, or master narrative, seeking to change a system" (p. 63).

Moving outside research theory into the practical application of storytelling within college contexts, a counseling technique known as "narrative therapy" is described in a recent volume of the *Journal of College Counseling*. In the article, the authors discuss ways this technique is used as a trauma-informed response with college women who are survivors of power-based personal violence. Narrative allows college women to retell or "restory" the events related to the trauma they had experienced. Conley and Griffith (2016) cited growing empirical support for the technique and then offer their feminist take on the practice as a tool for deconstructing the dominant gendered stories inherent in rape culture in counseling conversations with college students. Lee (as cited in Conley & Griffith, 2016) stated "these stories…are central in maintaining the social construction of femininities in contemporary society" (p. 283). Overall, the authors described the purpose of the narrative technique as important for safety, fostering empowerment, and finding a voice; helping women feel safe, trust their own experiences and power, and challenge the beliefs that may have led to silence. The use of the feminist narrative counseling technique described in this article has a practical as well as methodological implication for my study. In the last chapter, I discuss implications for practice, providing practical tools that come from my (and other's) research. The importance of this article, then, is not only what it contributes to the body of scholarship, but also for how it might influence our work with college students.

Outside the realm of the study of higher education, I found two articles that explicitly utilized feminist narrative analysis as a research method. Canadian faculty members in nursing conducted a feminist narrative study about dating violence among young women (Ismail, Berman, & Ward-Griffin, 2007). The authors described their approach and said it "provided a means to access participants' stories…and to incorporate the context and chronology of events

while imparting meaning and relaying larger cultural themes and values (Ismail et al., 2007, p. 461). They described incorporating reflexivity, using dialogue, critique, and reflection, resulting in "both the investigator and the participants . . . contemplate[ing] the issue of dating violence from many different vantage points, thereby fostering new understanding and possibilities for action and change at the individual and structural levels" (Ismail et al., 2007, p. 461). Ismail et al. cited the dialogic conversational process, also employed by Squire et al. (2018) above, as important for new meaning to emerge.

In another study outside higher education, Sosulski, Buchanan, & Chandra, (2010) used life history methods and feminist narrative analysis to tell the stories of Black women with mental illness. They stated that their intentional combination of life stories with Black feminist epistemology and feminist narrative analysis serves "a political purpose . . . to expose hegemonic power arrangements and inherent silences, and revalue knowledges that risks being disqualified" (Sosulski et al., 2010, p. 37). They stated, "this study privileges the narrators' (i.e., study participants) interpretations by examining their actual language and symbolic meaning and presents an overview of the connections the narrators make as they weave their stories into the whole narrative construction" (p. 37). The author's use of narrative grounded in Black feminist epistemology (they cite Hill Collins) provides an explicit recognition of women's lives as affected by socio-historical realties coupled with personal histories and the intersections of race, gender, class, and metal health status (Sosulski et al., 2010). The significance of these methodological choices, according to the authors, is the ability to "collaborate with participants to amplify their subjectivity and agency" (Sosulski et al., 2010, p 53). They noted that these methods stand beside other multidimensional approaches in "presenting holistic views of experiences, versus small slices of decontextualized data . . . and integrates the women's

standpoints in the process" (Sosulski et al., 2010, p. 53). While outside of higher education, the significance of this article as contributing to the literature on which I based my study, is the direct alignment of data analysis methods (feminist narrative analysis), interview technique (life history), and epistemology (Black feminist thought).

In summary, I found few examples in the higher education literature that directly employed the feminist narrative methodologies I utilized in this study. Later in my findings, I make the case that feminist narrative methodology does indeed enrich the study of higher education and our praxis with students.

Literature Review Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed background literature on co-curricular campus engagement, including a definition and examples of "high-impact practices," in which I made the case that *The Vagina Monologues* is both an example of co-curricular involvement as well as a high-impact practice. In contributing to the literature on the co-curricular, I add to the conversation about the long-term benefits of such involvement and how students make meaning of these experiences later in life.

Second, I turned to existing longitudinal studies of former college students to see what scholars have already discovered regarding long-term effects of involvement. I highlighted the work of Baxter Magolda and others who have studied students' post-college reflections, meaning-making, and capacity for self-authorship. While my study is not longitudinal in nature, I contributed to this literature by studying reflections and meaning-making of students five or more years after a particularly engaging collegiate experience.

In the third section, I reviewed some of the extant literature on the play, *The Vagina Monologues*, specifically focusing on the ways the play's influences on students and their

development has been taken up by scholars in student affairs in higher education. Finding no evidence of such research, my study uniquely contributes to the study of higher education and student affairs by naming many ways women ascribe meaning to this involvement.

I ended this review by investigating how feminist narrative methodology has been utilized by other scholars in higher education (and beyond). By applying a uniquely *feminist* lens to narrative inquiry, I contribute to a conversation about how feminist narrative methodology enriches the study of and praxis within higher education. This lens aligns with my commitment to influence social change, center voices of women, highlight feminist activism, and enrich the study of and praxis within higher education. In short, the process by which I conducted this study (feminist narrative methodology) is as fundamentally important as the topic (women's reflections on their co-curricular involvement in *The Vagina Monologues*). In the next chapter, I discuss in detail how I positioned this methodology within a qualitative research tradition and operationalized it within my research design.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

I was never a performer. It did not occur to me that I was actually performing *The Vagina Monologues* until I had been doing it for about three years. Before that point, I felt merely as if I were telling very personal stories that had been generously told to me. I felt strangely, and at times, fiercely, protective of these women and their stories.
-- Eve Ensler (2001, pp. xxv-xxvi)

This study draws upon the traditions of narrative inquiry in harmony with my theoretical framework(s) grounded in feminism(s) resulting in a qualitative feminist narrative methodology. In this chapter, I define the epistemological and methodological foundations, describe my positionality, and review my research design choices (including research site, participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures).

Restatement of Problem and Research Questions

In this feminist narrative study, I explored the stories of eight women who during their time in college participated in a production of *The Vagina Monologues (TVM)*. In examining these narratives, I sought to understand former college students' prior experiences and lasting impressions of engagement in a particular co-curricular collegiate experience. I also wanted to understand the ways that participants construct meaning of these experiences upon reflection five or more years after graduation. While evidence in the literature suggests that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive growth demonstrated in college will continue to influence students after graduation, there is less evidence in the literature about the long-term effects of particular involvement experiences on students. I studied lasting influences, reflections, and associated meaning-making by conducting unstructured narrative interviews with individuals who, during their time in college, engaged in a production of Eve Ensler's iconic feminist play *The Vagina Monologues*. Prior research (cite) shows it is apparent the play affects students, but to what

extent over time, and how do former students make meaning of their involvement experience today? The two primary research questions that guided this study are:

1. Upon reflection five or more years later, how do women ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *TVM*?
2. Through recounting stories of their experiences since college, how do the women in this study explain the ways taking part in *TVM* influenced their collegiate and post-college lives?

And, as I described in chapter one, the third research question, which emerged later is:

3. In what ways does feminist narrative methodology enrich the study of and praxis within higher education?

Feminist Qualitative Research: Overview and Key Concepts

In congruence with my social constructivism stance and feminist philosophical grounding, this study followed a qualitative research tradition. A definition of qualitative research, offered by Denzin & Lincoln (2000) is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world" (p. 3). Those who embark upon qualitative research "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). The key to qualitative research, in comparison to a quantitative approach, is the belief that "meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). Creswell (2013) stated that "qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to the social or human problem" (p. 4). These generic definitions of the qualitative

paradigm say little of the process of social inquiry as value-laden or the centrality of the social construction of gender to one's inquiry inherent in feminist qualitative studies (Lather, 1992). Whether one believes that feminist methods are distinct from other qualitative methods or that the main power of feminist methods is the "feminist uses of these familiar research methods" (Lather, 1992, p. 92), there is central agreement that one can situate feminist qualitative methods in many ways. In this chapter, I aim to describe in detail the ways that I integrated a feminist use of the familiar methods.

In 1992, Lather spoke on the importance of reflexive qualitative research processes that aim to go beyond the "too easy use of accepted forms" and advocates instead for the "creation of a more humble scholarship capable of helping us tell better stories about a world marked by the elusiveness with which it greets our efforts to know it" (p. 95). As qualitative research processes evolve, Rossman & Rallis (2012) describe the need for the researcher to critically reflect on how she "is critically important in conducting the study. Because the researcher enters the world of the participants, she may shape that world in significant ways" (p. 10).

As qualitative researchers collect and analyze multiple sources of data, they "turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3), they triangulate methods and sources to make sense of and increase the trustworthiness of findings (Golofshani, 2003). The emergent nature of qualitative research means that early design choices might change as knowledge about the topic grows, potentially affecting data collection, research questions, sites and locations, and the very purpose of the project as the study emerges (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Qualitative researchers are reflexive or aware of the ways that they, as the primary instrument of data collection, reflect upon who they are and how this affects the participants and

the study overall (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Finally, by creating a "holistic account" Creswell (2013) meant that qualitative researchers do not isolate one variable or test one theory, instead they work to "develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study… reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors in a situation" (p. 186). While qualitative researchers within the academy have undertaken research on the "problem or issue" of gender, "not all research on gender in higher education is feminist" (Blackmore, 2013, p. 179). Indeed, the methods themselves are not gender-neutral.

Both Creswell and Merriam indicated that one's paradigm or worldview should be in alignment with the inquiry method they choose. As a critical constructivist researcher, my "voice is that of [a] 'passionate participant' engaged in facilitating the 'multi-voice' reconstruction" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115). Guba and Lincoln stated that constructivist qualitative researchers engage in dialectical "interaction between and among investigator and respondents…the final aim is to distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions" (p. 111). A qualitative tradition is also in line with my feminist aims and has a deep history within the feminist research community. While feminists also undertake quantitative studies, Blackmore (2013) described feminist researchers'

> ambivalence towards quantitative research methods …[and] its tendency to obliterate the complexity of how context, discourses, processes, and practices produce gender subjectivities and relations of power, or reduces gender to a statistical variable. Furthermore, quantitative research often claims to be objective and generalizable across different contexts, where feminist researcher would argue that situatedness, intersectionality, and difference are key to understanding the lifeworld. (p. 180)

Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) stated "feminist researchers… developed face-to-face, qualitative and interactive methods as the most appropriate way to produce data on the realities of women's lives…" as "[interactive methods] encouraged researchers to give voice to personal, experiential, and emotional aspects of existence" (pp. 154-155). In conducting this study of women's' experiences, feminist qualitative methods are most aligned with my epistemology and theoretical grounding.

As my research questions indicate, the aim of this study was to understand the ways that women ascribe meaning to and explain their collegiate and post-collegiate experiences upon reflection five or more years after participating as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*. Next, I describe how, in employing a feminist narrative research design, I collected narrative stories via in-depth, unstructured individual and collective interviews with the end goal of facilitating a multivocal reconstruction of student's personal, emotional, and experiential meaning-making as they reflected on their experience with *The Vagina Monologues*.

Methodology: Feminist Narrative Inquiry

In this section, I describe what feminist narrative inquiry as a research methodology aims to accomplish and how specifically this methodology harmonizes with my epistemic grounding of this study in critical constructivism and feminism. I will also describe how using a feminist narrative methodology uniquely contributes to the study of higher education, a topic to which I return in chapter six.

The ability to construct a narrative, or what some might call "storytelling," is a "vital human activity that structures experience and gives it meaning" (Kramp, 2004, p. 104). When individuals tell and retell stories about their experiences, they construct accounts that are highly personal and contextual, embedded in particular times and places. As researchers ask people to

tell stories about their experiences, we as researchers are granted access to the individuals' reflections and resulting meaning-making. How or if events unfold sequentially or linearly is less important than detailing exact time intervals when one (re)tells stories—thought processes that accompany storytelling might go off on tangents or jump from one time period forward or backward as the story unfolds. Indeed Bruner (1991) in his influential book *A Narrative Construction of Reality,* wrote of narrative diachronicity, or how the meaning of events are understood by how they relate over "human time" (not "clock time" quoting Ricoeur). He said, "it is time whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass" (p. 6). Since context, time, experiences, and personal interpretation are all vital elements of my study, narrative inquiry as my chosen research method allowed me to hear, through storytelling, the significance women assigned to their involvement in *The Vagina Monologues*.

The arguments for turning toward narrative as a research method within the social sciences coincides with the paradigmatic "wars" between various ways of knowing. In recounting the history, Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) described Bruner's original treatise in which he "argues for two ways of knowing in the human sciences… and in doing so articulates the historical basis for the credibility of narrative knowing" (p. 6). In line with my feminist constructivist grounding, narrative inquiry as a research method opens space for valuing individuals' stories as their unique constructions of reality and discounting hegemonic positivism that reality is universal/singular and discoverable through scientific methods. Another point of alignment is how narrative inquiry attends to "voice" and studies of "the personal," which for Connelly and Clandinin (1990) "aligns narrative with feminist studies" (p. 3). Furthermore, feminist narrative inquiry mirrors the intent of *The Vagina Monologues* as an activist theater event, which centers the stories of women. Other studies that have employed feminist narrative

methods describe how the process of storytelling allowed participants to tap into their usual language, discuss the passage of time, and describe contextual details asynchronously (Ismail, Berman, & Ward-Griffin, 2007). Feminist researchers, as I wrote above, pay attention to multivocality and personal experiences as political.

How then does the feminist researcher design a project with narrative methods? Who is allowed to tell one's story? Whose story is (re)told by others? And whose voices are valued or included? An important marker of integrating a feminist lens together with narrative methods is bringing to the forefront the voices of the participants in the story telling process. Feminist narrative methodology "privileges the narrators' (i.e., study participants) interpretations by examining their actual language and symbolic meaning . . . as they weave their stories into the whole narrative construction" (Sosulski et al., 2010, p. 37). To forefront voices of participants, feminist narrative researchers must also attend to relationships and power, a topic to which I will now turn.

Feminist narrative researchers have an ethical responsibility to attend to and negotiate collaborative, mutual relationships with participants. In the sections that follow, I discuss in detail the complexity of relationships with participants in this study. With respect to narrative inquiry research, Clandinin and Connelly (1990) wrote "collaborative research requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined by the narrative unities of our lives" (p. 4). With the establishment of relationships of trust comes responsibility and care for individuals and their words. The use of feminist narrative methodology allowed me to uncover the stories of women who were involved in the study and then, through collaborative connection, represent these women's truths as they want them to be told collectively while caring for the individuals.

Feminist narrative inquiry as a methodology requires a particular "way of knowing the world" (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p. 7) where the lived experience of women and their self-representation, is central to the practice of conducting research. Pinnegar and Daynes state,

> we become narrative inquirers only when we recognize and embrace the interactive quality of the researcher-researched relationship, primarily use stories as data and analysis, understand the way in which we know is embedded in a particular context, and finally that narrative knowing is essential to our inquiry. (p. 7)

After exploring in detail relationships and my own reflexivity and positionality, I elaborate on the research design, keeping in mind these key components of feminist narrative inquiry. I describe the collection of data-as-stories, the situated context at the campus from which we all drew our experience, and the use of narrative portraiture as essential to data analysis and knowing.

Relationships with Participants, Reflexivity, and Positionality

In his book on qualitative research design, Maxwell (2013) identified "negotiating research relationships" with participants as an initial and key research design decision. Feminist researchers take that farther, indicating the importance of centering the voices of women and "encouraging reflexive and engaging practice …dismantl[ing] power and authority" (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011, p. 484). Indeed, the nature of the relationships between myself and the women in this study, who were former students of mine between 2009-2013, is complex. Five or more years passed since we were last on the same campus. Time affects relationships. In addition, the processes of initiating, forming, and negotiating ongoing contact with participants changed and rearranged these relationships from how we knew each other then, to how we know each other at the time of this study. Therefore, I heeded the advice of others conducting feminist research to

> maintain a reflexive awareness that research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power. Rather, they are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance. (DeVault & Gross, 2014, p. 215)

From the first contact, I openly disclosed my research goals and incorporated clear information about the study in all of my communications with potential participants. Then, I checked back in with my participants' perceptions of this research purpose asking questions about how it felt to participate, uncovering interesting findings about storytelling as method. In this section, I will describe they ways I reflexively considered my positionality and relationships with the aim of creating equity between my participants and me.

Statement on reflexivity. Attending to reflexivity in feminist research is "a process whereby researchers recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location, and assumptions affect their research practice" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, pp. 16-17). I identify as a White, cisgender woman from a middle-class, college-educated family background. These social identities, in addition to my two decades of work experience in several functional areas within the field of student affairs, offers me a particular lens on studying student involvement in the co-curricular realm. Furthermore, my epistemological and ontological views, perspectives on social justice and feminism, and my own experiences with workplace sexual harassment and sexual assault advocacy work add additional lenses and affect my approach to this topic. As "narrative inquirers often engage in intense and transparent reflection and questioning of their own position, values, beliefs and cultural background" (Trahar, 2009, p. 7), in reflecting on my own experiences and taken-for-granted assumptions, I recognize the multitude of ways that these

positions have affected the choices I made in determining *what* to research and *whom* to include in the study.

Given my involvement in the productions and former (and in some cases current) connections with students involved in the play, I am conscious of the ways readers of my study might critique my relationships with participants. There is undoubtedly complexity related to relationships between "researcher and researched" in this study. As a researcher I am, as Maxwell (2013) described "part of the social world he or she studies, and can't avoid either influencing this or being influenced by it" (p. 90). I describe my function and role in more detail below to give readers an idea of ways in which I interacted with students and how I addressed this in my research design.

While working as the director of the women's center, I served as one of two co-producers of the play *The Vagina Monologues* each year for four years. As "producers" my colleague, the program coordinator of the women's center, and I served in behind-the-scenes support roles consisting of: communicating with V-Day and officially registering our events; identifying and selecting a student director(s); helping her/them organize auditions; working with the director(s) to plan a day-long cast "retreat" with specific learning outcomes; designing and presenting a series of "V-Day Teach-Ins" for select classes in sociology, psychology, and women's studies in collaboration with student cast members; and providing logistical support like reserving the off-campus venue and facilitating venue use for rehearsals. The women's center administrative staff processed financial transactions including ticket sales and collected monetary donations. Finally, as I have a background in graphic design, I worked with student designers to design and print promotional materials and play programs each year. While this list of reasonable and practical supports seems extensive, it was typical of tasks related to implementing many of the events the

women's center supported. Additionally, the ways in which my colleague and I provided emotional support and developed trust with students involved in the production are important to name. While many student cast members were "women's center regulars" and individuals who, prior to their involvement in the *Monologues*, served as committed volunteers, engaged student leaders, interns, or work study student-staff members, we attended to the needs of all students in the production. After establishing trusting relationship with students at the retreat and through attending rehearsals, we met with students individually and engaged in group conversations about the emotional nature of the play.

From working with my colleague to identify a purpose for *TVM* within the structure of the women's center, to the emotional support we provided to students, to the logistics of implementing the play each year, we were all heavily involved and committed to the play's continued production on our campus. This commitment specifically tied me to these students' past experiences. Now, years later, as I look back on this experience, it remains meaningful in myriad ways.

Since I left my position as the director of the women's center in 2013, I have remained peripherally aware of and connected to former students (primarily via Facebook)—some more so than others. Any ongoing relationships with these former students have transitioned from me as "director" or "producer" to colleagues, friends, and acquaintances with whom I may exchange periodic private messages or casual comments on social media posts. For one or more of the women in this study, I served as a job reference and advocated on their behalf. With others, I was barely in contact. Instead of bending toward impartial and disconnected, as a feminist researcher I embrace the messiness that this entanglement likely creates in the minds of outsiders.

Interlude: My *Vagina Monologues* story. To conclude this section on reflexivity and positionality, I include this brief statement describing the personal impact of producing *The Vagina Monologues* beyond my professional role. While it is difficult to separate the play from the totality of feminist activism I engaged in during my time in the women's center—which included educational outreach, rallies for peace, gender justice, and social change, and protests of hegemonic power structures on campus and in the community—the play holds a special place of significance for me. Perhaps it is the deeply personal and painful stories centered in the play and their resonance with my own girlhood stories of sexual awareness and experience. Or perhaps it is the deep feeling of vagina-community-love that emerged among members of the casts during the months of preparation each year. Or, perhaps it is the personal-and-private-made-public-and-political that builds confidence and power among women engaged in the play. There is not just one impact—and upon reflection today the totality of those four years working closely with the casts of the play represent not just a professional responsibility of my job, but in addition a personal and deeply powerful feminist act that together with all the other experiences I had in the women's center shaped who I am and how I exist in the world today. Telling my own and my former students' stories is not a culmination of the experience but a continuation of my own feminist purpose.

In the next section, I further outline the ways that relationships intertwined as fundamental to this study.

Feminist Researchers Attend to Relationships

> *"Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying 'them' to studying* us." *(*Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 733)

Lisa Tillman-Healy posited "through authentic engagement, the lines between researcher and researched blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity of both self and other" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 733). She highlighted feminists and specifically the work of Patricia Hill Collins who urged researchers to embrace methods and ways of knowing that "include dialogue, relationships, and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion, and empathy" (as cited in Tillman-Healy, 2003, p. 733).

My aim, therefore, was to work in partnership with research participants to co-construct knowledge and explore the commonalities and differences in the ways in which we experienced *The Vagina Monologues*, attempting to not put my own interpretation of the importance, relevance, or effects of the experience upon participants, but rather listen openly while remaining cognizant of how my perceptions and understanding might differ.

Above I wrote extensively about the relationships I had (and currently have) with the women in this study. I feel fortunate for the interactive and engaging power of social media, which served to maintain our connections over distance and time. In this section, I will address how these relationships remained central to this study. I was a participant engaged in meaning-making alongside the women, not objectively on the outside looking in. I recognize that while the collaborative emphases of feminist research are intended to diminish the power differential between researcher and participant, it does not negate all effects of power. I worked to diminish hierarchy to the extent possible between me, as researcher, and the women as participants by attending to my own participation, using several collaborative tools, and conducting an in-depth analysis of my own positionality and experience with the play.

From the beginning, I knew the relationships with the participants in this study would be complex; after all, I was directly involved in these plays as a producer. I intentionally place this

discussion with methodological contributions, instead of under "limitations" as I believe my relationships with the women in this study enhanced the research. Lisa Tillman-Healy wrote extensively about "friendship as method" in her article describing her own dissertation study using ethnographic field-work on a softball field with individuals with whom she had developed close friendships. She discussed how researchers must navigate such dynamics, "negotiating how private and how candid we will be, how separate and how together, how stable and how in flux" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 732). In my study, on several occasions as the women shared their stories, particularly in the collective interviews, I also participated, adding my own candid reflections, stories, or contributions to the conversation. Doing so blurred the line between my "data" and theirs, between the researcher and the participant.

One of the most tangible outcomes of diminishing these false boundaries, similar to a method known as participatory action research (or PAR), is its efficacy as a tool for liberation. Tillman-Healey (2003) noted, "PAR honors lived experience and aims to produce knowledge and action directly useful to those being studied" (p. 733). One such example came from Wanda, who wrote an email to me after I sent her narrative portrait and findings sections:

> I just read through the portrait section that you wrote up, as well as the additional chapters, and it was such a joy to read! I've never really considered my life from another person's perspective but in reading over what you wrote, I felt quite surprised and proud by what obstacles I've overcome. And, as always, it's always refreshing to return to the memories of *TVM* and the many stories that I learned and shared in that time. It's a good and powerful reminder of inner strength as well as shared/collective strength.

Throughout, I reflected constantly on the differences (and similarities) between my experiences as "producer" of the play and their experiences as cast members. Ramazanoğlu and Holland

(2002) suggested acknowledging the "taken-for-granted assumptions . . . allowing for complexity in establishing what you may or may not have in common with those you study" (p. 155). I conducted a "bracketing interview" as part of my steps to address trustworthiness. In the process of reading through the transcript of that interview, I uncovered that I have several very different perspectives on the experience of being engaged in *The Vagina Monologues*. Perhaps some stem from my own vicarious longing for a similar sense of belonging or feminist awakening during my own undergraduate years. Or perhaps it was the significant formative experience of my time as director of the Women's Center. Regardless, I recognized from the beginning that my engagement with this process could never be unbiased or detached. Therefore, being willing to investigate my own meaning-making processes throughout the study has been a significant part of this feminist research experience.

As I transition in the next section to the specifics of my research design choices, the important through-line from this section on feminist methods is the centering of individual voices, recognizing subjectivity with participants, and research on a "co-curricular experience" like *The Vagina Monologues* as a subversive feminist act. In this study, as with any gender equity work on college and university campuses, I find myself as a researcher and student affairs educator navigating the complex terrain between feminist political moments and movements, personal identities and subjectivities, and my professional work with and for students in higher education.

Research Design

In this section, I describe five key aspects of my research design for this feminist narrative study of students' lasting impressions, and associated meaning-making of engagement

in *The Vagina Monologues*: research site and participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Research Site Selection

The shared context and research site/location for all the participants is their participation in a production of the play between 2009 and 2013 at a research intensive, land-grant institution in a small/rural community with a population of about 25,000 in the northwest. For the purposes of the study, I will use the pseudonym Northwest State University (NWSU) in place of the institution name. At the time of the production, NWSU enrolled approximately 12,000 students.

The state and region provided an important backdrop for this study. The state that is home to NWSU is politically and socially conservative. In the 2008 presidential election (relevant given the proximity of that election to the dates of the production), only two counties in the state voted for Barack Obama, one of which is the county where NWSU is located. Local political progressiveness in a conservative state combined with distant proximity to the state capitol means that the area has developed into a "liberal haven" for faculty and staff who work at NWSU.

Despite the progressiveness of the faculty and staff (generally speaking), the student population, representative of the rest of the state, was at the time and is today relatively conservative at NWSU. For some students, arriving on campus at NWSU might cause a noteworthy reaction as they experience a form of culture shock. And, the active presence of campus resources like a women's center and LGBTQA (LGBTQA stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally) office as well as a strong presence of student groups focused on social justice, and feminism as well as LGBTQ issues, might have been

uncomfortable for some students; and for others, a welcome relief as they escape what they perceive as the constricting conservativism of home.

The state, local, and campus context is significant to this study for several reasons. While *The Vagina Monologues* had, in the late 2000s, withstood most critiques across the country and was relatively commonplace, the play was still seen as provocative and "controversial" at NWSU given the conservative political climate of the state. Our office took a calculated risk in championing the production on campus—on one occasion, I was discouraged from bringing the play back to NWSU by a member of NWSU upper administration. It was also personally risky for students to participate. In our prior study (Shea Gasser & Salsbury, 2012), we learned that some students auditioned for and were cast in the play without telling their parents or families, because they knew their disapproval might have deeper repercussions. Despite these concerns, the local community support for *TVM* was significantly positive. Sold out performances, significant funds raised through individual and business sponsorships, and annual community engagement in the cast itself (each cast contained a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and community members) are indicative of the support the production received each year.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Maxwell (2013) described identifying participants through a process of purposeful selection where "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 97). My choice to purposefully select former NWSU students was based on my specific knowledge and personal and professional involvement in their experience with the *Monologues* at NWSU. To select students from other campuses would create a gap in

background knowledge that would require time and attention in the interview as I would need to ask these students about the particulars of their campus' production. Further, the participants I included in this study were all undergraduate students at NWSU and these students experienced a similar context (the primary difference being year of production). Far from a "convenience" sample, which Maxwell warned against, this group of students was purposefully identified and specifically chosen based on the goals of this study.

A very real concern at the beginning of my study was my ability to sufficiently recruit past cast members to be participants in this study. Upon initial tabulation, I found that I had access to 35 or so former students via Facebook friendships and *TVM* groups, and when I reached out, I quickly heard back from potential participants, thus my fear of recruiting was unfounded. In all outreach efforts (primarily Facebook), I clearly identified my aims, my ethical responsibilities, and my presentation of myself as a feminist researcher and discussed the legitimacy of this project. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) stated that "practical considerations about how to get access to the people you have selected are entwined with ethical issues about informed consent, and possible harm to research subjects or others" (p. 157). In the section above regarding relationships with participants, I outlined my intentionality regarding attending to these relationships and the ways in which they shift over time.

Using Facebook Messenger (see appendix A for initial and follow-up message and Appendix B for the participant questionnaire), I recruited a group of 8 former undergraduate students who participated as a cast member in one or more productions of *The Vagina Monologues* at NWSU between 2009 and 2013. Participants (see Table 1) ages ranged (at time of interview) between 26 and 36 and they were somewhat evenly divided among all four TVM cast years, although I had no participants from 2012. Despite the state context (described above and

the general race and ethnicity student body at NWSU as predominantly White), I was able to recruit a very ethnically and racially diverse group (half identified as multiracial or women of Color). While all of the participants who agreed to participate identified as cisgender women, not all cast members identified then (or today) as cisgender. While gender is a relevant category given the gendered nature of the content of the play (and the participation requirements imposed by V-Day), I did not impose the same restrictions and included in my outreach individuals who identified as genderqueer, trans, or men. No gender non-conforming individuals were able to participate, a limitation to this study that I address in the final chapter. Student experiences also varied. Approximately half of the participants entered NWSU as "non-traditional" students (or above 21). Two were married at the time of the production and one had children. Three have children today. At the end of this chapter, I provide short profiles of each woman and a participant chart, which includes pseudonym, age at time of interview, years in TVM, details about identity and experiences, as well as current pathway or career.

Data Collection

In making choices about data collection and analysis, I attended to the ways that feminist narrative inquiry is both a *process* of the participants telling their stories and a *product* of my resulting "retelling" of the story from the data I gather. In this section and the next, I discuss how a feminist narrative inquiry methodology is interwoven through my research design choices based on what I wanted to understand about the women's stories. Reflection and meaning-making were overarching aims that drove the narrative interview and data collection process. Upon *reflection* how do women ascribe *meaning* to and explain experiences as cast members? And, do those experiences influence the women today?

Individual interviews. I conducted unstructured, open-ended narrative interviews with each of the eight participants considering the two purposes above—reflection and meaning-making. I framed the interview initially and later asked emanant questions drawn directly from women's narratives. The individual interview structure I employed was based on the narration schema proposed by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) and replaces the question-and-answer format of most structured interviews. Jovcelovitch and Bauer (2000) said, "The underlying presupposition is that the perspective of the interviewee is best revealed in stories where the informant is using his or her own spontaneous language in the narration of events" (p. 59). But, this lack of question flow does not mean that the narrative interview lacks all structure. Instead, after "preparation" there are four "phases" that the authors propose: Initiation, main narration, questioning phase, and concluding talk. Each phase comes with accompanying "rules" which, according to Jovcelovitch and Bauer (2000) "offer guidance and orientation for the interviewer in order to elicit rich narration on a topic of interest, and to avoid the pitfalls of the question-answer schema of interviewing" (p. 60). I dislike the concept of "rules" and do not see imposing specific requirements on the process as consistent with feminist methods. However, in Jovcelovitch and Bauer's schema, the rules have to do with refraining from interruptions, asking emanant questions drawn from the story, and refraining from asking "why questions" until after the storyteller has stopped speaking. I adopted these interview techniques as guidelines, and in appendix C (the individual interview protocol), I provided my interpretation of the schema. This served as a detailed guide for me as interviewer, I had a copy on my desk during each interview, including framing text and follow up probing questions.

I also incorporated several of Baxter Magolda and King's (2007) strategies for interviewing students to help them make meaning of key life experiences. King and Baxter

Magolda suggested that the role of the interviewer is complex as individuals respond on the spot to each unique interviewee. During interviews, using the narrative storytelling method described above, I constructed emanant questions on the spot, within "the context of what the respondent introduces" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 496). Interviews require focus and attentiveness in order to follow stories, often told in pieces and parts and not linearly.

Below I describe the opening moments from my interview with Carla. This is my description of how a typical individual interview unfolded:

> *I launch into my introductory matter, discussing processes and confidentiality, and expressing sincere gratitude for Carla's participation and trust in me. Then, I turned to this prompt: "Carla, tell me about your experience as if it were a story with a beginning a middle and an end. I want to hear the story of your experience as a cast member in the play—what prompted your involvement and what it was like to perform on stage?—however you'd like to tell it, from start to finish. I want to hear about what else happened in your life at that time and what you've been doing since leaving college. As you tell your story, I won't interrupt or ask any questions. I'll take a few notes on things I might want to come back to after you're finished telling your story—consider this a monologue! And, we've got as much time as you need – please don't cut yourself off or feel like you're talking for too long. Just share whatever you like to share as openly and as honestly as possible. Also, while I'm interested in hearing about how The Vagina Monologues is meaningful for you, if it was <u>not</u> meaningful or if it held little meaning or was a negative experience, I want to hear about that, too. Again, thank you for trusting me and sharing your reflections.*

I conducted all eight individual interviews over an online video conferencing service (Zoom) within a two-month time span in late spring of 2018. Individual interviews with the eight participants lasted between 50 minutes to one hour 20 minutes (four interviews ranged from 50 to 59 minutes and four interviews ranged from one hour seven minutes to one hour 20 minutes). I also took notes in a small hard-bound notebook about details in the initial story that the woman shared (after the prompt above) that I wanted to return to and unpack or clarify further. I have approximately 30 pages of (mostly illegible) handwritten scrawl in this notebook with passages starred for further probing (see appendix D, an excerpt of pages of notes from my interview with Carla as a sample). I transcribed these notes and captured them in a few creative writing pieces I created alongside my data analysis. Follow-up questions after hearing the story in its entirety were the key to deeper reflection and meaning making. Baxter Magolda and King (2007) reinforce the need for attentiveness, "because the interviewer must attend to the responses to figure out how to guide the conversation toward meaning making" (p. 504).

Collective interviews[1]. After conducting individual interviews with each of the eight women, I began the second phase of my data collection process in the summer of 2018. Initially, I envisioned the "collective" interviews as a type of follow up group conversation, to which I would invite three to four women from the same cast-years to join me again through on online video conferencing service (Zoom or Google Hangout). However, based on scheduling challenges, I found myself with only two participants able to participate in the first collective interview session and the remaining six signing up for the second session. I revised my plan,

[1] I made an intentional choice to call these interactions among research participants "collective interviews" instead of "focus groups." As a feminist, my interpretation of a collective is a type of group who is coming together to accomplish change and to "act" together through the power of the group, like what one might witness when a group takes a collective action in protest. I use this designator for this group interview instead of "focus group," which, to me, has an apolitical or business-like connotation.

knowing that I only had two people and that we would each have more time. I sent them both a note stating that it would be just the three of us and attached the collective interview protocol (appendix E). Also, in that email, I wrote:

> If you have a moment and would like to review the protocol, I've attached a document below. The one thing you might want to think about in advance is the "story or memory of your involvement in *The Vagina Monologues."* Otherwise, you can just show up and I'll facilitate. Really, I'd like this to be an open conversation among all three of us, so feel free to bring your own ideas.

In prompting them to thinking in advance about a "story or memory of your involvement," I happened upon an interesting experience, which I have expanded as a stand-alone finding (more on this in chapter six).

And so, Tonia and Wanda and I met on a Saturday morning via Zoom. Nearly two hours later, it was such a wonderfully rich and fulfilling conversation, that I decided to intentionally re-form the rest of the collective interviews as pairs (plus me). As a result, in each of the subsequent interviews, two participants and I came together (with the same collective interview protocol and story prompt). While initially unplanned, my experience with these smaller groups was a fortunate, if accidental, design choice. As a result of the smaller collective interviews, what emerged was easier rapport and trust which led to an opening up, vulnerable sharing, and ultimately, I believe, to a deeper understanding of the TVM experience. Certainly, each person had more time to talk than would have been possible with four to five participants. In the end, I conducted four collective interviews with pairs of participants—Wanda and Tonia, Maggie and Nina, Carla and Mona, Erica and Sandra—together with me. To give the reader an idea of the data set, the collective interviews spanned in length from 59 minutes (Erica and Sandra) to one hour 52 minutes (Wanda and Tonia). The other two collective interviews were one hour 25 minutes (Carla and Mona), and one hour 36 minutes (Maggie and Nina). It is important to note that in the collectively interview, all three of us were full participants/storytellers—I openly

contributed as we reminisced and told often hilarious stories—as my own experience was intertwined with theirs.

Why collective interviews? From the beginning I knew having individuals come together in small groups for conversation about the play was just as important as conducting individual interviews. Through a feminist lens, I also approached the collective interviews as a place where the participants and I could share space, listen to one another, give voice to our stories, and attempt to "dismantle power and authority implied in the researcher-participant relationship" (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011, p. 484). It was also important that women felt empowered and safe to share and reflect with in the collective interview (virtual) room. Rodgers (2002) stated "reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others" (p. 845). She included this direct quote from Dewey's 1916/1944 text of *Democracy and Education*:

> In so far as we are partners in common undertakings, the things which others communicate to use as the consequences of their particular share in the enterprise blend at once into the experience resulting from our own special doing. (Rodgers, 2002, p. 857)

In this quote, I believe Dewey is saying that it is through conversation with others that individuals make meaning of their experiences as they go through the process of reflecting, engaging, receiving feedback, and then seeing things anew through others' eyes. The importance of a reflective community is, then, a forum or a place where ideas can be tested before moving them out into the public (Rodgers, 2002). I believe that a key component of the experience of serving as a cast member in *TVM* is the simple structure of a community of women—students, faculty, and staff together—working toward a shared vision. The cast and affiliated student volunteers became close over the months they spent together. Building trust and respect within

this community is key for students who are likely nervous about sharing such personal stories (even if, perchance, their experiences were not universally positive).

Rodgers noted that to Dewey, the idea of refection in community requires a specific attitude towards openness, which Rodgers defined in her final criterion, *reflection as a set of attitudes*, which includes "whole-heartedness, directness, open-mindedness, and responsibility" (p. 858). In introducing the women to the collective interview process (see Appendix B for my Collective Interview Protocol), I asked them to consider these four attitudes as ways to approach their time of sharing their stories with the other students.

While not a longitudinal study, the two-part interview process (with individual and collective interviews) allowed for participants to reflect on the experience on two separate occasions. A few months passed between the individual interviews (April) and the collective interviews (June), and participants reported thinking about it more during that interval. Perhaps then, connecting in a group, allowed these same participants to consider (on a different level) what meaning they ascribe to the experience of being a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues* during college.

Before moving on to how I analyzed the data I collected, I describe the core concepts of reflection and meaning making as central to the overarching process of collecting narratives and stories as data.

Reflection and Meaning Making. A key component of learning requires asking research-participants-as-learners to reflect upon key experiences. As I prompted deeper reflection and meaning making about a specific experience—the experience as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*—I used Dewey's criteria for reflection, as framed by Rodgers in her 2002 article and Baxter Magolda's strategies for interviewing to elicit meaning making. I used

these frameworks to engage students in different types of storytelling in order to make meaning and describe the role of their co-curricular experience with *TVM* in several ways.

Rodgers' framework identified four criteria of reflection: reflection as a meaning-making process, reflection as a rigorous way of thinking, reflection in community, and reflection as a set of attitudes. I integrated three of these four criteria into my data collection methods described above. According to Rodgers (2002), reflection can be a particular, systematic process of thinking through the meaning of an experience. A *rigorous way of thinking,* as Rodgers described it, is a systematic inquiry and differs significantly from other modes of thinking like stream of consciousness, invention, and belief. She said, "reflection, in contrast to acceptance of conventional belief, constitutes active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 850).

The process of reflection as systematic inquiry can be broken down into phases consisting of experience and interpretation through observation, naming the problem or question that arises, generating possible explanations, and then discussing implications (Rodgers, 2002). I shorten this process even further to the heuristic "what, so what, now what" in which students, after an experience, describe an event, analyze the impact, and then plan for future action. Tell me a story about your experience as a cast member of the play? What did that experience mean to you then? What does that experience mean to you now? By using an interactive process of engaging with students and reflecting on the various events that transpired, the consistency of this structure may assist my understanding of variations in their recollection. This structure aligns with what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested when writing narrative inquiry that participants recall a "time and plot in which events are clearly linked … and although it is clear

that the events in a chronology are linked, the meaning of the events, and the plot which gives the explanatory structure for linking the events, is unstated" (p. 9). Thus, my role as the researcher and narrative writer was to link events chronologically and illuminate the meaning of these events.

Marcia Baxter Magolda and others identified strategies for collecting data through stories to assess meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Pizzolato, 2005). While it was not my intent to *measure* meaning-making—but rather use meaning-making as an inquiry strategy in narratives tied to my research question about "ascribed meaning"—the ways in which Baxter Magolda and others described assessment techniques was potentially useful in my collective interview protocol development. In the article *Interview Strategies for Assessing Self-Authorship*, she and Pat King described a phased interview process designed to invite the student to describe personal background and other entering characteristics. Included in the phases were questions in which interviewees are invited to discuss "educational experiences . . . and how students make meaning of these educational experiences" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 500). Then, during next phase synthesis may occur when the "interviewer summarizes some of the content of the interview, then invites respondents to consider how they are 'putting it together' or what they are taking away" (p. 501). Uncovering meaning, is part of reflection. Rodgers (2002) noted how reflection is a meaning-making process when

> a learner [moves] from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. (p. 845)

The key elements of the meaning-making process, evident in the description, therefore, includes making connections with other experiences and ideas. To form connections, experiences and interactions must also have continuity or temporality—allowing the interview participant and me to make meaning of new experiences in relation to our past experiences and prior knowledge (Rodgers, 2002). This is where quickly integrating stories from the first part of the interview (requiring a specific "retelling" skill as I conduct the interview) will be helpful as a form of both member-checking and expanding the conversation into what meaning the experience held for the student. In this way, I intended for the women in this study to make meaning of their involvement in *TVM* through connecting that experience with other related co-curricular experiences or prior coursework (in women's studies, for example) in the college context. In the process of reflecting by forming connections to other experiences, they also reflected on the ways *TVM* involved affected their later life course (e.g., family, identity, career, engagement in activism). How and in what ways these women made meaning upon reflection, therefore, involved drawing connections between *TVM* and other life-experiences.

Data Analysis

After conducting eight individual and four collective interviews, I transcribed the recordings with Trint.com (an online transcription software). I then double checked the accuracy of the transcription by listening to the recorded audio alongside the transcript. Once I confirmed that the transcripts were accurate, I exported the transcripts to word documents and forwarded those transcripts to the participants for their review. I invited their feedback, revision, and/or further explanation of their story. Two of eight participants wrote back with minor (mostly typographical) edits. In narrative inquiry, the data to be analyzed consists of participants' words forming stories with plots, primary and secondary actors, situated within specific scenes or

contexts set in a period of time. In the next two section, I describe two ways I analyzed the data through writing narratives and coding the data.

Writing narrative portraits. I analyzed the stories of the eight women who participated in this study in two ways—individually and collectively. Given the feminist narrative methodology undergirding this study, I wrote lengthy continuous narrative portraits of each of the women. This process of retelling the narratives in the women's voices helped me identify the ways the stories interacted, which assisted in the coding process described in the next section. In this section, I will describe why writing portraits was important to me and aligned with feminist narrative methodology. Then, I will share some of the data analysis techniques suggested in the literature related to narrative inquiry as a research method, which I employed as I wrote the eight narrative portraits.

Offering narrative portraits of each of the women was important to me for several reasons. First, combining my theoretical feminist foundation with narrative inquiry methodology helped me see great value in representing voice. Therefore, in writing narrative portraits, in addition to coding and looking for deeper meaning, I was encouraged as a feminist researcher to retain the wholeness and completeness of the stories the women willingly shared with me using many direct quotations. In doing so, I respect the voices of women who shared their personal reflections—many of which were raw, painful, and private. Therefore, as a feminist attending to voice, significance of one's experience, and the personal as political, I pieced together these eight stories as told to me and as the women told each other in order to add to the meaning these narratives embody.

Second, I wanted to preserve a space that kept the women's stories whole and complete for the reader. Retelling or representing these stories as disconnected or isolated data, given the

complexity and interconnectedness of stories seemed in contrast to my methodology of feminist narrative inquiry. Given the interconnected nature of these stories, narrative data is difficult to pull apart or "unitize" into short phrases or sentences for the purposes of analytical coding. DeVault and Gross (2014) described a feminist narrative analysis not as "extracting thematic bits of those stories, [which is] likely to disrupt the coherence of informants' perspectives" but that by "looking at longer stretches of talk and assessing especially the stories people tell and how they tell them… [offers] distinctive possibilities for maintaining the coherence of a person's perspective" (p. 219). And, it was for this reason that I never used a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). When I started the next phase of coding, I kept the individual and collective transcripts printed out in hard copy and whole, I refrained from clustering, consolidating, and disconnecting parts of stories.

Yet, simply transcribing then copying and pasting the text into a linear story is not engaging in data analysis. Together with the coding process, I saw writing these narratives as both a product and a process and the first step in narrative data analysis. Kramp (2004) described a general framework for analysis as:

> Begin with the text, the story, and end with it. Be aware of the language used by your participant, or narrator, because the language used by your narrator constructs what it narrates. Attend carefully to each story. Engage in the whole story before you address singular excerpts that stand out for you. Repeatedly read and reread, listen and hear the stories you have gathered. It may help to read a story aloud, either alone or with your research group. Familiarize yourself with the narrator's language, inflection, and especially the story itself. This may be the most tedious part of your research… in your reading and reviewing of the texts you open yourself up to the themes, which are the very

> structures that make up the lived experience you are researching. Work with the text until the particular themes in each narrative emerge and become clear. (p. 116)

Kramp described the themes "like threads that, when woven together, create a pattern with a plot like structure" (p. 116). It is through this construction of themes, the narrative researcher creates connections within and among the stories and then retells them together in a narrative whole. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) framed these steps after the development of themes as "writing the narrative," which begins as early as the initial contact with participants or as the study is being formulated. They indicated "time and place, plot and scene, work together to create the experiential quality of narrative" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). But, they warned, if it is simply a chronology of time, the point of narrative as a meaning-making structure is unrealized. Thus, critical to effective data analysis is the development of themes, collaboratively engaging in writing with participants, and together finding the essence or underlying meaning. The development of the final written piece (the narrative as "product") is therefore the result of an iterative process in which participants and researcher as writer, submit a telling and retelling of the stories together with the meaning as students reflect. Bruner (1991) said:

> I think it's precisely this interplay of perspectives in arriving at a 'narrative truth' that has led philosophers like Richard Rorty to abandon univocally verificationist views of truth in favor of pragmatic ones. Nor is it surprising that anthropologists have increasing turned away from positivist descriptions of cultures toward an interpretive one in which not objective categories but 'meanings' are sought for… by participants immersed in the culture's own processes for negotiating meaning. (p. 17)

I used a tool for narrative data analysis, described by Saldaña (2016) and drawing upon an adapted Labovian narrative structure. Each woman's story was reorganized and retold with the

following five section structure: *orientation* (description of the person, her background, and the campus "scene" in which her story emerges), *chronology of events* (specifically the *complicating actions* that prompted her engagement in *TVM*), *evaluation* (meaning she attributes to experience of her involvement), *result* (the influence of her involvement on her collegiate and post collegiate life), and *coda* (a summary of or key takeaway from the woman's story). See appendix I for the full narrative portraits of each of the eight women.

Coding. After writing each woman's narrative portrait, I sent it along with the individual interview transcript to the participant. I expressed my gratitude and asked for any edits, additions, change and an overall accuracy check of my retelling of their story. While I waited for them to reply, I sat with these stories and interview transcripts for a while. As I reread them, I began to notice similarities and differences among their accounts and reflections. After confirming accuracy and noting any edits, I added line numbering to the raw data (interview transcripts) and printed out hard copies. Then, by hand with multiple colors of markers, I engaged in a first-cycle elemental coding method best described as "initial coding" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115), where as I read, I underlined significant passages with an assigned color and then assigned "tentative or provisional" (p. 115) labels or phrases. I collected a list of the short descriptive phrases or labels and noted the corresponding color as I went. These basic, initial codes helped me get familiar with the data and prepare for the next round of analytic work.

As I transitioned to a second round of coding, I created a code map on a wall in my office (see appendix F). To do this, I looked closely over the list of short phrases and labels looked for overlaps or opportunities for collapsing and clustering. In order to think visually and look for new patterns, I wrote the labels and phrases on post-it notes, and then put all of these clustered

groups into a wall where I could see all of the data. Then, I assigned a "parent code" to clusters, ending with 33 different parent codes.

As I looked at these clustered groups alongside my research questions, time periods emerged from the data. Some of the parent codes could be categorized under an ascribed meaning of the experience upon reflection—or what meaning the experience held back then. I grouped these parent codes under the first research question. Some of the parent codes related to stories women told about their lives since college and the ways the play had influenced them over the past five or more years. I grouped these under the second research question. A third group of codes related to the sensemaking and the deeper purpose of storytelling. I did not have a place for these codes at the time, so I set them aside; but I knew then (and now) that this was an important methodological question. I have included the grouping of parent codes into the matrix in table 1 below. Then I grouped applicable parent codes into columns (under each research question) and separated themes under the larger categories of "catalyst" and "connection" in a matrix to connect my findings with relevant research questions. After concluding this process, I created a codebook with both parent and child codes and included short descriptive phrases and examples from the data (see appendix G). Ultimately, this coding structure helped me write the findings of my study found in chapters four and five. I went back over the coded transcripts, noting all of the line numbers where exemplar quotes existed under each of the sub headings and collected those quotes together in a document.

Table 3.1: Data Analysis Matrix

	RQ 1: How do the women in this study, upon reflection five or more years later, ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *TVM*? (*I'm labeling this RQ as "PAST")*	**RQ2:** Through recounting stories of their experiences since college, how do the women in this study explain the ways taking part in *TVM* influenced their lives since their involvement? (*I'm labeling this RQ as "SINCE"*)
Theme A: Catalyst The cataclysmic power of personal change involves risk-taking and feminist activism through speaking truth to power, and the emergence and significance of voice.	Catalyzing Change(s) **in college** A.1.1: "Igniting" Feminist Awareness A.1.2: Signaling a Personal Rebellion A.1.3: Moving Toward Healing A.1.4: Transforming Purpose	Catalyzing action and activism **since college** A.2.1: Influences on Feminist Activism today - male dominated industries - whiteness and intersectional feminism - raising feminists A.2.2: Self- Confidence
Theme B: Connection There's power in connection, continuity, belonging, and community among—and for—women. There's also continued connection to individual pathways, career, and movements.	Connection **in college** B.1.1: Seeking involvement and belonging B.1.2: Discovering a Community of Support B.1.3: Complicating Relationships with "Women" and Women-Only Spaces. B.1.4: Theatre as Collective Action for social change	Connection(s) **since college** B.2.1: Connections to Current Career and Contexts

Throughout the study described above, I kept in mind fundamental questions regarding trustworthiness within these data collection and analysis processes. It is to this topic I now turn.

Addressing Quality and Trustworthiness

In collecting and analyzing qualitative narrative data, I was conscious of the perception of quality and therefore worked to increase the trustworthiness of my findings through several

steps. While some qualitative researchers have shunned the term *validity* the fact remains there is a need for some way of judging the quality of research findings (Golofshani, 2003). Maxwell (2013) identified "two broad types of threats to validity that are often raised in relation to qualitative studies: researcher bias and the effect of the researcher on the individuals studied" (p. 124). Indeed, these are important concerns to be addressed. And yet, as I have discussed earlier, it is impossible to remove researcher influence. Guba and Lincoln (1994) indicated a key tenant of qualitative inquiry is the acknowledgement that the researcher is subjectively engaged as co-inquirer. Maxwell (2013) later suggested that key to addressing researcher bias is not to mitigate against it but to explain the possible biases and describe techniques for dealing with them in the proposal. In this section, I discuss three steps that I took in both data collection and analysis to address these two concerns. First, I will discuss the "bracketing interview," then triangulation of data, and finally I will outline my process of member checking.

Kramp (2004) described a "bracketing interview" as a pre-interview technique often associated with phenomenology. In narrative inquiry, however, this technique is not meant to "set aside one's own perspectives" but instead it is designed to make me as researcher, aware of the presuppositions, stories, and experiences I bring to my research. The technique I employed, described by Kramp, involved asking a colleague to interview me with the same unstructured and open-ended individual interview prompt used with each of my participants. Participating in the individual brought to the forefront an awareness of my biases—not as a negative—but instead as a way to "inform you as your work to achieve a clearly stated description of the experience of those to whom you listen, and whose stories you engage in the process of narrative inquiry" (Kramp, 2004, pp. 115-116). I engaged in a "bracketing interview" not only to understand my biases, but also to recognize the value of my own experiences and their

contribution to the narrative. Under the section on reflexivity and relationships with participants, I described some of what emerged during that bracketing interview.

Triangulation, the second technique I used to ensure goodness and quality, involved collecting data from multiple sources via a variety of methods. Triangulating the data from multiple sources is a process that reduces the possibility of bias related to only one source or method. It also "allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). Golofshani (2003) discussed in detail the ways that triangulation is congruent with constructivism as a constructivist researcher believes in the existence of multiple realities and must therefore use multiple methods to gather data from many different perspectives. Golofshani (2003) said "engaging multiple methods, such as observation, interviews and recordings will lead to a more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities" (p. 604). As I described in the data collection section above, I collected narrative stories from both individual interviews as well as from collective interviews. I also interviewed multiple participants, which Polkinghorne (2005) described as,

> a triangulation on the experience, locating its core meaning by approaching it through different accounts . . . the use of multiple participants serves to deepen the understanding of the investigated experience; it is not for the purpose of making claims about the distribution of the experience in a population. (p. 140)

Triangulating methods and participants' multiple realities provided me as the researcher with an opportunity to see what constructions of reality emerged between and among narratives.

The third way I addressed trustworthiness was through "member checks" or respondent validation, which Maxwell (2013) described as "a process of systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying" (p. 126). He said this

technique is the best and most important way of ruling out researcher bias or misinterpretation of meaning. Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) discussed a variety of strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research, however, in their article they noted that member checks have largely been employed as "verification of overall results" in post hoc evaluation. They said that besides in case study or narrative inquiry, once "study results have been synthesized, decontextualized, and abstracted from (and across) individual participants… there is no reason for individuals to be able to recognize themselves" (p. 7). Taking concerns about member checking into consideration, in this narrative study I sent participants their data in three different ways: first, they verified the accuracy of their transcripts, second, they reviewed the eight- to ten-page narrative portrait, and then third, I sent them two findings chapters (five and six). In this way, member checks were an ongoing process through the study duration.

Eight Vagina Warrior Profiles

Before moving on to findings, I include short profiles of each woman to provide a more complete review of important life details than simply the basic characteristics summarized in the table at the end of this section. For readers who wish to have a more complete/full picture of each of the women in this study, including lengthy passages of direct quotes from their individual interviews, please read the full narrative portraits in appendix I. Also, for those unfamiliar with the monologue titles and themes, in appendix H, I include a table of the monologues with a short summary.

The short profiles below are organized into groupings by collective interview. In each case below, the two women are profiled individually, but the reader might imagine them speaking together with each other and with me about their experiences, often recounting stories that I have summarized here. In the next two chapters, I quote several passages from these

collective interviews. As the reader explores these findings, returning to these short summaries may help make sense of the individual woman's backstory and place the quotes in context.

Collective Interview 1: Tonia and Wanda

Tonia – *storytelling for a purpose*. Tonia is a white 33-year-old woman who identifies (today) as a lesbian. She came to NWSU married to a man and a member of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (or LDS). Tonia grew up in an extremely conservative Mormon family and spent part of her high school years at a boarding school where she experimented with bisexuality. Upon moving home, she ended up marrying her long-time boyfriend as a response to and rejection of that part of her identity. The couple went away to college at NWSU together. Tonia told me in her interview that at some point during her teenage years, her sister was sexually abused by a male cousin, a topic that was never discussed or dealt with in her family. When she arrived at NWSU, she was already interested in processing that trauma, and reached out to the local advocacy agency, where she began volunteering. It was through the advocacy organization that she first saw the play *The Vagina Monologues*.

Tonia auditioned and was cast in the production to perform the part of little child in *The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could*, a monologue about memories of a childhood filled with first curiosity and then later violence and abuse. Shortly after the production, Tonia discovered that her husband was cheating on her and she filed for divorce. Later that year, she was hired to work for the advocacy agency as the outreach coordinator, and then moved into a jointly-funded position at NWSU as the interim violence prevention coordinator. Her work with the Dean of Students office occurred right around the time of the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter[2] resulting in a

[2] The 2011 Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) (Ali, 2011) was issued by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights to identify and clarify federal policy as related to Title IX. The intent of the DCL was to encourage higher education institutions to examine and subsequently revise policies and practices regarding handling of sexual

number of changes around how campuses dealt with sexual assault—which Tonia was instrumental in establishing at NWSU. After funding for the jointly-held position ended, Tonia moved to a nearby city and began work as a 911 operator. Later, she left that position for an education and outreach position with a feminist non-profit focused on advocating for women in the building and construction trades. Today, Tonia lives in that city and works closely with tradeswomen to tell their stories of job-site harassment. She credits her appreciation for story telling as a tool for advocacy to her involvement in *The Vagina Monologues*.

Wanda – *seeking feminism and feminists*. Wanda is a 26-year-old white woman who identifies as an activist and feminist. Wanda's older sister and she were raised by feminist parents and she came to NWSU and got involved in both the Women's Center and the Sustainability Center right away, with the intent of finding like-minded people. Academically inclined, Wanda grew up in the (metropolitan) southern part of the state and was valedictorian of her high school class. Prior to giving her valedictory address at graduation, Wanda was determined to conquer a speech impediment that had affected her all of her life. She went to speech therapy, discovered the cause, and cured it. Within weeks she gave the speech at a sports arena in front of hundreds of people. When Wanda arrived at NWSU, she was looking for a new "speaking" challenge, and upon connecting with the NWSU Women's Center, learned about the upcoming auditions for *The Vagina Monologues*. While Wanda was unfamiliar with the play, the title attracted her because she liked the idea of making people uncomfortable. She auditioned her freshman year and got cast in a small role, which was enough for her to feel challenged. Wanda graduated *summa cum laude* from NWSU with a degree in environmental science.

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harassment and sexual violence to meet new requirements for compliance or potentially face federal investigation/sanction.

After undergrad, Wanda worked at an avian ecology field work site in the southwest, where she encountered a creepy, harassing male supervisor. After that experience was over, Wanda got another "bird job" working on Midway Atoll studying albatross. Later, she worked in D.C. where she encountered another sexist male supervisor who made her life very difficult (she later filed a report). When she started thinking about graduate school, Wanda said she thought back to her time in *The Vagina Monologues* and sought a graduate school advisor who fostered that same kind of empowerment for women. She was looking for an inclusive and equitable environment for women in STEM. She began a master's degree at a prestigious program the fall after our interviews under the tutelage of a woman advisor who blogs frequently on sexism in science. Wanda received a funded research fellowship for her master's degree with plans to study house mice eradication on Midway (and its effects on the larger ecology of the island). Before going to graduate school, Wanda moved home with her parents and worked as a substitute science teacher, where she worked to dismantle the myth of "scientist=man."

Collective Interview 2: Maggie and Nina

Maggie – *reaching and teaching across political divides*. Maggie is a multiracial/Latina woman who is now 30 years old and identifies as pansexual. She lives in the southern part of the state with her mother and works as a florist in a very conservative town (she describes herself as the "lone liberal"). She engages regularly with her coworkers on political "hot topics" – pressing them to see other perspectives, but in a really non-threatening and accepting way. Maggie's mom, who when she was growing up was what Maggie described as "anti-feminist," is a supportive and loving parent. Maggie came out to her as pansexual after being in her first production of *The Vagina Monologues*.

Over the years she was at NWSU, Maggie participated in multiple productions of the play and was also a non-traditional student (21 years old when she started college). She initially tried out after going to the production the year before as part of a "sex and culture" class at NWSU. Maggie got involved in the play partially to heal from her own trauma stemming from childhood sexual abuse. While she loved participating, she shared many critiques of how triggering some of the monologues—specifically the *Coochi Snorcher*—were for her. She was cast to read the "happy and not-so-happy facts" and the next year read *The Vagina Workshop*. In addition to participating in the play, Maggie was also the "female-identified co-chair" of the NWSU gay- LGBTQ student group. Maggie majored in psychology and has the desire to go back to school to get her doctorate in psychology so she can counsel people who are survivors of violence and college students with mental health issues.

Nina – *engagement for equality*. Nina is a multiracial 26-year-old woman who participated in *TVM* during her sophomore year at NWSU. A traditional-aged student from a very small town, Nina came to NWSU with significant financial need (raised by a single mother) and as such was awarded a federal work-study grant. After a less-than-satisfying experience working for the NWSU library during her first year, Nina sought out more engaging work, which she found in a work-study position at the NWSU Women's Center. There, Nina met Sandra (another participant in this study) and together, given that they'd likely "be involved in the play anyway" they auditioned for parts in *The Vagina Monologues*. Both received relatively small roles in the "wear and say" lists, but that seemed to be fine. That year, Nina got involved in a number of other initiatives in the Women's Center and became, for the first time, truly engaged in gender equity initiatives on campus.

Nina also applied for and got a part-time job working at the local comic book/costume/adult sex store in the town where NWSU is located. That store was an important partner with the NWSU Women's Center and always distributed tickets for the *TVM* shows each year, provided vibrators to be given away (with a donation to the beneficiary), and sold chocolate vulvas during intermission at each performance. In addition, the store was the source (at the time) for a fair amount of sexual health education and the co-owners ran the local drag show each month. It was evident to Nina that the community in and around NWSU was incredibly supportive of the NWSU Women's Center and the play. Nina was, until recently, still employed at the local adult store and continued to remain engaged in *TVM* via her role as an employee. After finishing her degree this past year in sociology and criminology and interning with a probation and parole office, Nina applied for and was hired to work in a nearby state as a corrections officer, a position she thinks will likely be significantly different.

Collective Interview 3: Carla and Mona

Carla – *searching for a "tribe."* Carla is a multiracial 36-year-old woman who entered NWSU as a non-traditional student, wife, mother, and community member. She was referred to the NWSU Women's Center and office of multicultural affairs to connect with a community of support; she reported feeling "lost" and in search of a "tribe." Carla grew up in a nearby state under the thumb of conservative and controlling parents. She went to college initially right out of high school at another state university but left that university after only a few semesters after reporting being sexually assaulted. The case went to trial and Carla was painted as "asking for it." After leaving that institution, she moved home—distraught. She immediately butted heads with her parents who had imposed "new rules." Soon after, struggling with the oppressive household, Carla ran away and got married to her husband (to whom she is still married today).

Later, Carla moved to the town where NWSU was located and later enrolled, not quite sure what she was seeking, but knowing she needed to get her degree. She had seen a production of *The Vagina Monologues* in a city north of NWSU years before, and when she heard, through the Women's Center, about auditions, Carla decided to try out. She participated in two productions of *The Vagina Monologues* while at NWSU (one as the *Little Coochi Snorcher who Could* and one as a narrator). After a few years at NWSU, Carla figured out what she wanted to do and then realized that NWSU did not have that degree program. She transferred to a nearby college (with a nursing program) and finished her degree and later moved south with her family. She is now working as a nurse in a relatively conservative/Mormon part of the state where she faces (and is constantly concerned about her son facing) racism. She and her husband own their own house and have two teenagers.

Mona – *vulnerability is strength*. Mona is a multiracial, 30-year-old, married woman who was a traditional-aged college student at NWSU. Mona grew up in the same town where NWSU is located, after having moved to the conservative state from California with her parents when she was five. Mona was a theatre major at NWSU and also a Spanish minor, and she reported knowing nothing about the play (or its feminist aims) when she initially tried out for a part in *TVM* as a favor to another student who was serving as the director that year. In fact, she had pretty stereotypical perspectives on what and who feminists were, but reported that once she learned the reality she readily adopted the feminist label for herself. In all, Mona participated in three (or possibly four—she can't remember) productions, specifically reading the parts of *The Little Coochi Snorcher who Could* and *Reclaiming Cunt*.

Concurrently to her college experience, Mona experimented with bisexuality and entered an abusive relationship with a woman. That relationship steered Mona down a destructive path;

she began using drugs and then later was arrested and convicted, serving a year in prison, for stealing to support her drug habit. Today, Mona is married to the man who helped her get out of the abusive relationship and clean up her life. They have a three-year-old daughter and live in a larger city north of NWSU. After leaving prison and finishing her undergraduate degrees at NWSU, Mona reflected on her life and ultimately decided to go back to school for a counseling certificate. She now works as a chemical dependency counselor/professional where she helps people who struggle with addiction. Mona speaks in depth about the strength and power of vulnerability, wholehearted living, and living with shame.

Collective Interview 4: Sandra and Erica

Sandra – *making a difference*. Sandra is a 26-year-old white woman who initially came to NWSU as a traditionally-aged student from out of state. Upon arriving on campus, Sandra immediately joined a sorority. Her second year, her financial situation changed and she was awarded a federal work-study grant. She found a position in Women's Center where she met Nina and together they immediately became engaged in the outreach and education efforts (via the Women's Center) for *The Vagina Monologues*. Sandra convinced Nina to audition (or, as they each said in their individual interviews, maybe it was the other way around) and they were both cast in relatively minor roles as members of the ensemble reading the "Wear and Say" lists. Regardless of the amount of speaking time, that role in the play and in the Women's Center was significant, and set Sandra on a path for further involvement on campus.

The year after she was in *TVM*, Sandra was appointed as the Director of Safety and Violence Prevention, a new position on the cabinet of the NWSU student government. In the new role, Sandra was instrumental in bringing initiatives, like the Green Dot bystander intervention program, to NWSU. She also was instrumental in building strong relationships

between the student government, the Women's Center, and Greek Life. Her senior year, Sandra was president of her sorority and continued to be engaged in violence prevention initiatives, helping sorority sisters find resources when they disclosed to her that they'd been sexually assaulted. Her involvement at NWSU helped her realize the difference she could make on campus through educational advocacy.

Sandra graduated with political science and public relations degrees and moved back to her home state where she got what she called a "corporate job." Unsatisfied after about a year, she began looking for new opportunities. Sandra is now in a graduate program, seeking a degree and teaching license in secondary education. She is in a serious relationship and living with a man and remains close friends with Nina today.

Erica – *TVM set her life on a trajectory*. Erica is a white 35-year-old woman who is now married and has a toddler. She came to NWSU as a non-traditional student after starting college initially at a different university in the state and leaving after a year (she described not being "ready"). Erica was raised on a sheep ranch in the "middle of nowhere" within a conservative and patriarchal family with a stern and misogynist grandfather at the helm. But her family was one from which strong feminist women—Erica, her sister, and her mother—quietly emerged. Erica, at the time of the production, was living with a man who was emotionally abusive and controlling—a relationship she described as unhealthy. Her interest in auditioning for the play was, in some ways, an opportunity for her to connect with the feminist themes of empowerment. And, she said, she saw some of the stories reflected in her own life.

Erica was cast to read the monologue *The Woman Who Liked to Make Vaginas Happy*, a story of a sex worker that ends with a chorus of orgasmic moaning. The controlling boyfriend was not pleased, but Erica persisted anyway, despite his anger. Erica describes her participation

in *TVM* as setting her life on a personal and professional trajectory. From her involvement, she learned about and began volunteering with the local domestic violence advocacy agency. Once Erica had the resources and support, the abusive relationship ended shortly afterwards. She was later hired by the same agency to do direct service work with victims of domestic violence, met her now husband, and moved to the west coast where she now works for the YWCA as a paralegal. While no plans are in the works (she and her husband are balancing busy lives with an active toddler), Erica expressed interest in the law as a long-term educational and career goal.

Table 3.2: Participant Chart (organized alphabetically by name)

Pseudo -nym	**Age**	**Year(s) in *TVM* and monologue(s)**	**Identities**	**Relevant Experiences, College Major, Other Involvement Experiences in College**	**Current Pathway or Career**
Carla	36	2009 – Narrator 2010 - "The Little Coochi Snorcher who Could"	Multiracial, woman, straight, married with two teenage children	Entered NWSU as a non-traditional student, returned later in life after getting married and having kids. Left NWSU before graduating to pursue a nursing degree at a nearby institution. Some prior theater experiences.	Now works in healthcare (nurse) in a conservative (predominantly LDS) area in near the state capital
Erica	35	2011 - "The Woman Who Liked to Make Vaginas Happy"	White woman, straight, married with baby	Entered NWSU as a transfer, non-traditional student. Some prior theater experiences. Described the relationship she was in at the time as "not a very healthy relationship." Volunteered and later worked for community advocacy agency and later as a domestic violence shelter advocate.	Paralegal at a YWCA in a big city on the west coast

Table 3.2 (cont'd)

Maggie	30	2010 - "Happy and Not-so-Happy Facts" 2011 - "The Vagina Workshop"	Multiracial/Latina woman, pansexual, single	Entered NWSU as a non-traditional student. Graduated with a degree in Psychology. Some prior theater experiences. Was female-identified co-chair in GSA. Victim of childhood sexual violence.	Works as a florist in a flower shop in a small town in a conservative area. Wants to get her doctorate in Psychology.
Mona	30	2009, 2010, 2011 "Reclaiming Cunt" and "The Little Coochi Snorcher Who Could"	Multiracial woman, now married (straight) with a baby, but was in an abusive relationship with a woman for 4 years in college	Grew up in the same town as NWSU (local), majored in Theater and minored in Spanish. Extensive prior theater experience. Struggled with addiction while in college and spent a year in prison during college (charged with stealing to support drug habit). Returned to graduate (in 2012) and is now sober.	Works as a drug/alcohol addiction counselor with an outpatient clinic in a medium-sized city in a nearby state
Nina	26	2013 – The Wear/Say Lists	Multiracial woman, straight, single	Graduated earlier this year with a degree in sociology and emphasis in criminology. Worked in the women's center as a work study. Some prior theater experiences.	Now works as a correctional officer in a nearby state

Table 3.2 (cont'd)

Sandra	26	2013 – The Wear/Say Lists	White woman, straight, in a relationship	Came to NWSU from out of state. Graduated a few years ago with a degree in political science and public relations, and worked in corporation, but decided to go back to school for a degree in teaching. In a sorority (later president) while in college. Also worked in the women's center as a work study student. Later became involved in student government and led safety and violence prevention initiatives on campus.	In grad school getting a degree in secondary education and a teaching certificate
Tonia	33	2010 - "The Little Coochi Snorcher Who Could"	White woman, lesbian, single	Married and Mormon when she arrived at NWSU. Divorced and then later came out as lesbian. Volunteered extensively with a community advocacy agency, later worked for that agency and then for NWSU.	Working for an advocacy agency that helps women's workplace inequity in a specific industry
Wanda	26	2011 – "A girl was asked…"	White woman, straight, single	Came to NWSU having just addressed a speech impediment. Was valedictorian of her high school (in state capital area). Environmental studies major. No prior theater experiences.	Post undergrad, Wanda conducted field research on albatross on Midway Atoll. Now in graduate school working on an NSF-funded research project.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described in detail the feminist qualitative tradition undergirding my narrative inquiry methodology. I provided an overview of my formation of relationships with participants, and reflexively discussed my positionality as a white, cisgender, woman. I then turned to the specifics of research design, including details about site and participation selection, data collection techniques, data analysis processes, and how I addressed trustworthiness of my findings. I ended this chapter with brief profiles of each of the eight women. In chapter four, I turn to a discussion of the findings stemming from my first research question. I share how, upon reflection five or more years later, women saw their involvement as both catalyzing change and connecting them to each other, their communities, and to future purposes while they were in college.

CHAPTER 4: CATALYSTS AND CONNECTIONS

As I reviewed the stories the eight women shared with me through both individual and collective interviews, I found many overlapping themes. In the previous chapter, I presented short vignettes of each of the eight women. In appendix I, I offer continuous, complete, and rich narrative portraits of each of the eight women who shared their stories with me and with each other as part of this study. These narratives are meant to be primarily comprised of the women's voices as they shared stories about their lives prior to, during, and after college, with the central emphasis on their involvement as cast members in *The Vagina Monologues*. For readers who wish to have a more complete/full picture of each of the women in this study, please read the full narrative portraits in appendix I before continuing. In this chapter, I merge portions of these individual stories together with the conversations from our collective interviews and share ways that involvement in the play affected these women's college experience. Reflective of my analysis of the transcripts from the individual and collective interviews, as well as the women's narratives, I identified two major themes evident in the data: *catalyst* and *connection*. In the sections that follow, I describe these two themes and related sub-themes, weaving in parts of the eight women's stories to demonstrate the richness of the many ways the participants in this study ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members.

Catalyzing Change in College

By definition, a catalyst is a substance or an agent that provokes, speeds, increases, or prompts significant change, action, or reaction. Catalysts incite change in a dynamic way, resulting in an effect that extends beyond what might have been possible without the catalyst's presence. In both the stories women shared of their involvement during college and changes that they have experienced since college, women spoke of what I am labeling as a "catalytic effect."

Change and transformation can take many forms while students are in college. Indeed, an entire body of literature describes the developmental processes, stages, and milestones college students experience (Barber et al., 2013; Jones & Abes, 2013; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). In speaking with the women in this study, many of them described the ways their involvement in *The Vagina Monologues* served as a catalyst for changes in their awareness of feminism and interest in engaging in activism as well as a number of personal transformations during their time in college. With regard to my first research question, several subthemes emerged as I sought to understand how women in this study, upon reflection five or more years later, ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *TVM*. The two subthemes related to this question include: "igniting" feminist awareness, being "rebellious," healing from past trauma, and experiencing personal transformations. In the subsequent sections, I unpack these themes and give examples of the catalytic power of *TVM*.

"Igniting" Feminist Awareness

As the women shared stories of their experiences as cast members in *TVM*, many spoke of the ways the play sparked awareness of and interest in feminism, alignment of personal values, and—for some—a desire to engage in feminist activism. Initial awareness of feminism or sometimes called *feminist 'click' moments,* reappeared several times in the stories as women reflected on the way the play affected their understanding of a larger social movement focused on ending gender-based oppression. While some students arrived at NWSU with firm feminist perspectives and attributed their feminism as a motivating factor for their participation in the play, others' identification as a "feminist" was foreign ground. For example, Mona, a 30-year old multiracial woman who majored in theater and Spanish and participated in three productions during college, initially described her involvement in the play as "just another opportunity to be

on stage." Mona was first recruited to audition in 2007 by a Theater MFA student who was serving as the director that year. Mona talked extensively about how her perspectives on feminism shifted during the time period around her involvement in *TVM*. In our collective interview, Mona told Carla and me, "I didn't understand what it was to be a feminist. And that's when I think back about it now that's kind of the big thing that sticks out for me at least maybe today and my life." She said she "initially perceived feminism as like this totally alt-left, hippie sort of movement of women that don't want to wear bras, that, you know, want to walk around topless." While Mona did not initially identify as a feminist, participating as a cast member in the play in conjunction with a course on women's studies, prompted her awareness that her perception of feminism was "ignorance." She described how she learned "that [feminism] is about women's empowerment and equality and you know not having those strict gender roles." She later said, "I never really considered myself to be a feminist until I started learning more about women's studies. And through that experience, [I understood] really what it means to be a feminist and how empowering that was."

Later during the collective interview with Carla, the three of us discussed parenting and how Mona and I had discussed her process of learning about feminism. Mona, who now has a three-year-old daughter, said,

> I think we talked about just the whole idea of feminism and what kind of a misconception I guess that I had before really learning what it truly is and to advocate for women. And so, I just want to be able to talk to her [daughter] about those things and… even again at three years old, she's intelligent and brave and all of these things that I've tried to instill into her.

For Mona, the way that feminism shows up in various parts of her life today is evident of some catalyst (whether TVM of otherwise) that had a catalytic effect on her feminist awareness.

Carla, a multiracial 36-years old woman, also relayed a key component of her experience as evaluating differently how she parents. Her evaluations may also be a reflection of the way her parents interacted with her. Carla described her daughter, now a teenager, as having "grown and changed and she's a fit soccer athletically-womanly-shaped gal." And she said that her daughter, self-assured and confident, was asked by a peer why she was wearing leggings, Carla said her daughter responded:

> 'My body: number one. Number two: my body is not here for you to look at. You know I could really care less what you think. I'm athletic. Yeah, I have a big butt. I like to wear leggings. I don't see what the problem is unless you make it a problem.'

Then Carla, laughing, said, "And she can say that to others without being rude! She feels confident in her body." When I asked, Carla did not know whether or not her daughter's ability to speak her truth stemmed directly from Carla's involvement in *TVM*. But she said she does believe having frequent, open dialogue about sexuality and self-worth beginning early in her kids' lives was really worth it: "It's helped to shape them to be very compassionate and empathetic community members, in regard to looking out for others and advocating or you know just keeping themselves them and their boundaries in mind."

Erica, a non-traditional student and white woman, now 35 years old, who was in the play in 2012, came to college already identifying as a feminist. She described auditions, "I was both like really excited and probably like, you know, I consider myself a feminist and aware of issues affecting women specifically." The act of auditioning, for Erica, was a way to embody her feminist commitment and make it more visible. She described, "And I remember like feeling like

this was a really important thing for me to do because I was a big believer in all of the, you know, the themes around that production." But for Erica the incongruency between her feminist values and her personal life clicked the moment she decided to audition and go through with the play. She said, "at the time that I did the play, I was in an emotionally abusive relationship." She disclosed, "I remember there was a lot going on in my personal life at the same time. My partner at the time… [it] was not a very healthy relationship. And so, I had a lot of outside stress during the monologues because of that." She was cast to read the monologue *The Woman Who Liked to Make Vaginas Happy* (a memorable and provocative piece about a woman sex-worker/dominatrix that ends with a chorus of orgasmic moaning). That Erica was cast to read this particular monologue was not well-received by the partner: "He was not thrilled with the monologue that I ended up doing…." In the collective interview with Sandra, Erica described her persistence in engaging, despite her partner's misgivings:

> then also like having this personal weight, the conflict with my partner at the time, because on the one side, he was . . . He would appear to be supportive of me in public. And then, you know, in our personal life I would get a lot of pushback from him because he didn't want me to embarrass him by doing something like this.

She was unrelenting, "but I still, like you know, I was very sure that [*TVM*] was something I wanted to do and push myself a little bit to be uncomfortable in that experience." Erica's description of her action to engage in the play is another example of how feminist identity intersected with co-curricular involvement. Either her feminist identity prompted her stubbornness to stick with it despite her partner's objection, or perhaps her involvement further solidified her feminist identity. Regardless, there was a clear catalytic effect for Erica.

Overlapping feminist circles provided the catalyst for Nina, a multiracial 26-year-old woman, who was also serving in a work-study position in the Women's Center at the time she was cast in the production. Nina described an increased ability to more directly engage in activism coinciding with her multiple and layered involvements. What she described happening for her is evident of how the play ignited a catalytic spark connecting issues with action. Nina described, "It's not that I wasn't aware of issues, I just I didn't really have a platform, or the language, I think, to really maneuver around certain topics." She went on to say, "After *The Vagina Monologues,* after working at the Women's Center, like those doors for those conversations just swung wide open."

Unlike any of the other women in the study, Wanda participated as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues* her first year in college. Now 26-years-old, when she arrived at NWSU in fall 2010, Wanda was an 18-year-old straight white woman and a goal-oriented and high-achieving student from [metropolitan city]. She was also an unapologetic feminist and environmentalist. Wanda was raised by parents who openly discussed gender equality and encouraged her interests in feminism and science. Wanda described, "from a young age, my mom and dad were always presenting us with various examples of strong women whether it be in science or education or whatever. Whenever we had to do research projects, we always end up talking about strong women." Her parents encouraged Wanda's interests in "feminism, ecofeminism." She said, "And then when I got to NWSU, there were two things I was looking for: an environmental club to be a part of, and then I wanted to find something related to feminism that I could be part of." In this way, the play catalyzed a new phase in Wanda's feminist activism in college.

Despite identifying as a feminist, Wanda described being largely unfamiliar with the play, "I mean I suppose I heard parts of *The Vagina Monologues*, but I never read it in its entirety." However, Wanda said the play intrigued her. "I mean just the title itself, I thought, that just sounds so powerful and raw-like . . . *The Vagina Monologues* . . . the fact that "vagina" is in the title of the play. You know I just love that because it's out there! It's very, very honest. And so, yeah, I just thought on a whim, I was like, 'You know I'm going to try it out to see what happens.'" Wanda described the atmosphere at the auditions, "There was a buzz in the room; it was really exciting, everybody in the room had this sense of, 'Yes! We're here for *The Vagina Monologues*!" I felt like everyone was so excited about it and I hadn't really had that experience before . . . being surrounded by a group of women talking about something we all had in common, as well just being really excited." And, the atmosphere among the cast at auditions carried through to Wanda's experience after she joined the cast, which she said was "a safe, confident, and uplifting atmosphere all at once."

Upon reading the *TVM* script in its entirety, Wanda said, "It was just unlike anything else I'd ever read." She said that something about the feminist aims of the production just clicked,

> It was, for me, not really a play at all but it was a journey into all these different women's lives and their experiences with their bodies . . . How society perceived them, with how they saw themselves and it was kind of like, reading someone's diary except it was a very open conversation and I, I really loved that about it.

Tonia, a 33-year-old white woman, made a clear connection to the play being a catalyst when she described the experience as "life changing." She talked about her first contact with the play, "The very first time I went, I think was either my freshman or sophomore year at college, I just heard about it … and I went. And, it was like life changing." She saw the play as a tool itself

to engage others in conversations about feminism, "it was powerful, I started bringing other people. There were years I would go multiple times in a year." The reason why Tonia saw the play as an important activist tool, as she described, was because it was:

> the first kind of space that I felt like there was some open and real honesty and stories about what happens for women, at least in my life it was…It was like my first baby feminist thing! And it was, like even before I was in it, my first activist thing, where I was like "everybody has to see this!"

Tonia's feminist act of bringing other people with her to see the play is an example of the larger impact *TVM* has on college campuses. With word-of-mouth promotion, more students are exposed to the feminist themes in the play and may engage in conversation afterwards about their experience. Identifying as a feminist was one way that students at this university in a conservative state "rebelled." In the next section, I further explore the signals students subtly and often not subtly sent of their personal rebellion.

Signaling a Personal "Rebellion"

I heard many stories of the ways in which the women cast members in this study, many of whom were from conservative, rural towns or conservative families, saw the act of participating in the play as a way to rebel against their upbringing or restrictive gender norms.

As Erica described growing up on a sheep ranch in the "middle of nowhere [state]" with a grandfather who she described as a "hard man and not in any way on board with progressive ideas." She said, "even though my grandfather is a somewhat terrifying man, I had felt comfortable for the most part like pushing back against him. I wouldn't say that I grew up in a feminist environment in any way. I would say the opposite is true. You know the patriarch of

that ranch, [my grandfather] was very hard on the women. So, I think probably . . . that's what planted the seed." Starting around her mid 20s, Erica said she was drawn to

> things that helped me process the way that I grew up… the violence around me and the misogyny that was consistent in our daily lives. I think mostly is that even though the women in my family are certainly oppressed, they have this sort of quiet strength about them that was always consistently there. So, the shocking aspect … when I chose to do that play, I think it was probably a little bit of that rebellious like, you know, 'this is going to shock you and make you uncomfortable and that's what I want to do.'

I returned to Erica's comments about her upbringing, curious about how her strong feminist identity emerged in the midst of grandfather that she described as oppressive and misogynist. I dug a little deeper and asked about her immediate family. She said, "My mom expected us to be strong and independent and know how to do things and take care of ourselves." Erica shared this story,

> My mother was married quite a few times… you know, to NOT very healthy men. And there was some abuse in her relationships … over most of them actually. But just having seen the power that she still had even in an abusive relationship was really interesting. So, and then I see this is my mom primarily. And then I have two sisters and a brother. So even though there were you know various men in and out of our lives it was mainly a female household… So, I think that sort of planted the seed and then both my mom and my grandmother are very social and sort of liberal and progressive in that way. So that also helped, I think. And my dad even though he wasn't you know married to my mom and living there. He has always been a very… I would say he's probably somewhat feminist-minded, for an older man. So that was helpful too. But I . . . I can't tell you

> when it, like, all came together but it was somewhere around the time that I started college the second time around at NSWU.

In addition to the title itself, women described the language used in the play as "taboo" and to participate was, for some, to use words that were intensely freeing. Maggie, a Latina woman now 30 years old, who also identifies as a sex-positive pansexual, shared how she was raised by a single mother who, she later discovered, was "anti-feminist." And yet, Maggie gives her mom a lot of credit for empowering her and encouraging her to speak for herself. She portrayed her mom as not a feminist *per se*, but she always gave me the idea of thinking for myself." Her parents divorced when she was very young, and growing up, Maggie described her mom as "very strong." She goes on to say,

> It's really hard to describe her otherwise...Like she worked three jobs to put us through school and like you know that kind of stuff… I've always had very strong female role models and so that's kind of helped me gravitate towards strong female empowerment and stuff and that was always natural to me. And so, when I heard [others say] 'feminist' was a dirty word and think I was like 'why is that?' I have all these strong females in front of me that are teaching me that being strong is normal. That you need to be taking charge of your life and stuff. And I guess it kind of related very strongly to that."

While she had a background in theater, Maggie's motivation for audition wasn't purely to act. She said, "I wanted to not just act, but do something greater with that, which I think was very fulfilling." She stated in her opening remarks of her individual interview:

> [*TVM*] was life-changing to be in it, mostly just because I'd still been learning about like being more comfortable with and using certain vernacular like clitoris and things like that—in my household we didn't really say that kind of stuff, you know I grew up

> Catholic and it was very…. We just didn't talk about a lot of things in my household! [laughs] So it helped me kind of free up my language and be able to talk to other people about things.

Over the course of her time in college, Maggie was in two productions (in 2010 and 2011). After being cast in the play that first year, Maggie talked about the ways that the language in the play stretched her outside of her comfort zone. Maggie's description of the play as "life-changing" and "freeing up language" is an example of a sentiment many of the participants expressed upon watching the play for the first time.

Often voiced was the way the play provoked action and awareness through the powerful use of direct and taboo language. Initially, Mona said her reaction "was kind of like 'oh yeah this sounds cool. This sounds fun.' But I didn't really realize how, you know, how impactful that experience would be later on in my life." She said that later, when she first read the script, she exclaimed "oh my gosh! What am I signing up for? My parents can't come to this play! I'm not inviting anybody to see this!" In the interview she then laughed and said, "How much my view of that really changed! The more that we rehearsed… Obviously, I did it three years in a row, so it was something that I enjoyed, as well that was impactful for me." After that first performance, Mona was cast the following year to perform the monologue *Reclaiming Cunt*, which might be one of the most "taboo" words in the play. Mona described her rebelliousness through reclaiming the power of the word *cunt*,

> … you know my whole life has been like, don't say that word! Like that is the worst of the words you know? And doing that monologue really put a whole different perspective not only on just reclaiming the word cunt, but also just all of those you know ...slut… bitch… whore . . .

The women described calculating the risks of rebellion and figured into that calculation the effect on relationships. For three of the women, their participation prompted relationships to eventually (or immediately) end. Erica eventually left the partner whom she described as "not thrilled" by her involvement in the play. Wanda, too, shared how she was dating someone at the time, who, when she invited him to come watch her in the performance said, "Ugh, the word 'vagina [is in the title]?'" but despite his misgivings, came to the play anyway. She said, "he was very quiet afterwards and just didn't want to talk about it at all… just totally quiet. And I feel like that's sort of like solidified my thoughts about him was like, 'ok, or like, we're done.'" It seemed that Wanda was hoping for the provocativeness of the play to open a conversation with her boyfriend, or maybe she was fine, after all, with the relationships ending. She told Tonia and me during the collective interview:

> You know I was like, I was hoping, you know, it would like shock and awe him, like after like going through a kind of quiet life where you don't hear these words very often in a moment where you're just bombarded with [those words], like I hoped that it would cause him to say *something* in return. And [for him] to reflect on experiences by lots of different women rather than just me sharing my thoughts on life, which were, you know, kind of small and naive…I just like never got anything out of him, and that was a very interesting response like, to just like shut down. So, I think, yeah, that changed our relationship.

Tonia, raised in a conservative Mormon family, described her marriage ending within six months of her involvement in the play. After hearing the story about Wanda's boyfriend's reaction, she shared with us, "Actually right after I was in *The Vagina Monologues,* I remember [my husband] coming to the performance and his reaction afterwards he was just, he was very

weird about it… I really feel like that started the ball rolling." As we were discussing these relationships and identity, Tonia, who now identifies as a lesbian, shared,

> being around these other women and talking about these things like really actively while being a part of this play that made [me] explore [my] own emotions. But then [we] also told these true stories… all of that ended up, I think, in me ultimately being like 'I actually don't want to be treated like this and you have been treating me like this for a while.' … Like it was, you know, within six months of doing *The Vagina Monologues* that I was divorced.

She described how, after her divorce, she "had another significant relationship with a woman after that, and then one more . . . That that one lasted five years. And then I had another significant relationship for about six months." While the play may have started as rebellion, coming to a realization of one's personal worth, was powerfully summarized by Tonia, "And I think that, like in a really positive way, *The Vagina Monologues* got me to a safer, better place."

Moving Toward Healing

Several women described the play as a significant moment when they moved toward healing from personal traumas they had endured. During our collective interview, I asked Carla, a non-traditional student with two young children, why being in *The Vagina Monologues* was an important investment of her limited time. Carla had disclosed to me in her individual interview that she was assaulted by a family member in her early teenage years and then again by an acquaintance during her first year at another university. In response to my question, she said to Mona and me, "There were a couple of holes that I needed to fill in my life and patch up and healing up from some childhood trauma." She then said, "having participated in *The Vagina Monologues,* it allowed me to heal in some respects…You know from some previous traumas

I've never really dealt with." She then described seeing the play years before as an audience member, and how she "was so moved by the emotions and the stories shared." She went on to share,

> I recognized I, myself, could find usefulness in it. And that's what really prompted me to go out on a limb, take that risk, find a creative spark within me . . . "Oh! On top of everything else . . . Oh man. I'm doing a little bit of healing! That's fantastic!" And so, for me it was an opportunity. And, I found that [*TVM*] would serve many purposes, and did.

Carla spoke at length about how she related strongly to one particularly powerful and difficult-to-hear monologue, in which a Bosnian woman describes being brutally raped by soldiers as systematic tactic of war. The monologue, *My Vagina Was My Village*, is performed in two contrasting voices—prewar, when the woman is youthful and free and after the rape. Carla described relating to the woman and how "she had this very virginal Happy-Go-Lucky experience and then that was taken away from her." Then, pausing, Carla said

> actually, hold on, I just had a "a ha moment" you know we're talking about like how after getting married and after having kids I struggled with my identity… here's this girl who loves her femininity and her ability to travel here and there without fear and she gets taken advantage of. And she kind of closes off her love of her vagina and her self-worth.

Carla took a moment and a deep breath and then said, "I'd always find myself bawling at the end of that [monologue], and I wonder if I see part of me [in her] losing myself after I experienced my own trauma." She then described "it did hit a couple of nerves in… or not nerves, but like [a] soft spot inside myself where I may have not been done healing just yet."

As she recounted her stories of the personal traumas she had endured, it was clear that the play was much more than just an opportunity to grab a moment to herself; it was really about rediscovering her passion and fire, taken away from her through sexual assaults. She disclosed being assaulted by a family member in her early teenage years and then again by an acquaintance during her freshman year at another university. Carla said, "I've never really dealt with [these previous traumas] because you know to this day some of my family members still are unaware it happened." She described in greater detail the situation on campus during her freshman year, where she was assaulted by an acquaintance after a party at which they had both been drinking. Carla had asked a friend to take her home, but that friend had apparently been arranging with another guy, Tim, to set Carla up. Carla remembered that friend saying,

> "Tim can take you home." And at that point I was too inebriated and couldn't drive [myself]. He ended up driving me back to my dorm room, sexually assaulting me, and then leaving the next day. I called [the] hospital, got a rape kit going on. I reported the incident.

Carla's case went all the way to trial, but the man, Tim, was not found guilty. She described being "completely blindsided [at the] rape trial where the police officers were rooting for the hometown guy and insisted that there was no way that he could have done it." Carla described how the "prosecutor … painted me to be this west side [nearby state] girl that went to raves and was into partying and got drunk and was basically trying to take advantage of one of the good old boys from the local area."

Later, when I returned to this topic after she finished speaking, I asked her how the trial felt to her now, she said "You know, it used to hurt before, Heather, it used to hurt a ton. And I think doing things such as you know going to the Women's Center and learning more about

sexual assault …And that it's OK to be sex positive. And also doing *The Vagina Monologues* allowed me to heal… and now I'm a little bit more vocal you know, not so much about my own experience, I mean I do share my experience with those who it sounds like they need to hear about it. But it just opens up necessary dialogue to have with other people." She then said, "I feel like getting up there in *The Vagina Monologues* helped me to close the chapter in that part of my life and move on."

Tonia described how, in her family, "there had to be a lot of silence around sexual assault…we were told to not talk about it and not create a rift in the family." I ended up making it through the auditions and I was [cast] in the *Coochi Snorcher* role." Tonia disclosed

> My sister was sexually assaulted as a child. So that story in particular . . . I did not necessarily ask to be put on that story, that I was picked for that one. But that also resonated for me and for my family… I loved that it was huge for me to think about how to get onstage and not just be onstage but also be representing something that was so important to my life.

Some steps toward healing this trauma came in the form of Tonia's participation in the play. She said, "So, I think *The Vagina Monologues* played a role in me working towards healing from that. And there wasn't any shying away . . . Talking about sexual assault and what that means for somebody's life." She said, "but also how there are all of these smaller experiences with women's bodies that shape and define how we interact in the world. So, it [*TVM*] felt really powerful and liberating." In this explanation of her experiences, Tonia's description of the healing prompted by the play—for both herself and for her mother and sister—was an extraordinary example of the larger meaning cast members ascribe to the experience. Tonia went on to share in the collective interview how her role in the play became a catalyst for others to

connect with her. Tonia performed the young girl's perspective in *The Little Coochi Snorcher Who Could*—a monologue of a series of memories spanning from a girl's childhood through her emerging adolescence. She shared,

> [another actor and I] split her time as a child and then over to her time as a teenager. So, I end [my section] with the part where her father kills that guy with her in the room. What was so interesting is I [had at the time] no training or anything about people sharing their stories of sexual assault with me. But I think because I played that really intense part and that really intense portion of that story […] I actually had a few of the women that were in the cast come and disclose sexual assault stories to me.

Tonia's experience in those moments, catalyzed her subsequent engagement with the local non-profit advocacy agency and even further along the path toward healing. She said, "And I think part of what drove me to go to [local agency], I was like, oh my gosh, like, people are telling me these things, and I don't know how, I don't know how to handle that." Even though it was not her exact story, she thought that performing that monologue on stage changed how other's saw her (and changed how she saw herself). She shared, "I think I think some folks, even though they consciously knew that that wasn't my story it somehow … labeled me as a person who could handle that intensity, even [though] I'd never necessarily thought of myself that way." The movement of healing was powerful, not just at the individual level, but also at the community level. Tonia summarized, "it made me think a lot at that time how little space women have to be honest, and how little safe space they have to be open about these very real things that they hold every day by themselves."

For Mona this experience was also intensely personal and a significant path toward healing. The time in her life in which she was involved in *The Vagina Monologues* involved

significantly challenging experiences with an abusive relationship, addiction, and a year in prison, which she disclosed to me during her interview. She shared,

> I was in a really abusive relationship actually for about four years. And I've learned so much …I think people look into that situation and think, 'oh my gosh what is a strong woman like you…? How can you not see that this is unhealthy for you? How come you don't break out?' It is just so much more difficult than I think people really understand. And there's a lot of shame involved in that. But you know in all honesty, the things that I learned about feminism and just the kind of perspective that I have now. It really helped me to get out of that relationship.

It was in these moments during the interviews when I recognized how—even if it is not the woman's own story that she is sharing—standing up there on the stage, telling these stories of assault, while painful, is one step toward healing for both the woman on stage *and* for the audience. And, the connections between the woman's life, while mostly hidden from view (given that we were not particularly close at the time, I had no idea Erica or Mona were experiencing abuse when they were in the play), were instrumental in them taking control of their own futures and empowering them to take control or action.

Sandra also spoke about an experience during college (which occurred the year after she was in *TVM*) in which she faced a situation that required her to access campus resources for her own safety. When an ex-boyfriend began stalking her, Sandra described the feeling as "weird." She explained "I almost feel like it . . . the reason it felt so weird I guess is because everything felt like it was so out of my control . . . Like I didn't even realize what was really happening until . . . I didn't know what to do anymore." As she felt like she didn't know what to do, Sandra sought out campus resources based on her knowledge gained from the play. In fact, Sandra

contacted a staff member who was also on the *TVM* cast that year who worked in the Violence Prevention Programs office, "[it was] she who I told . . . I was having problems with this guy. I feel like she knew exactly what to do and she handled the situation very well." This personal experience brought about a deeper insight, "And I think it just like made me feel like I could really feel how impactful intrapersonal violence is and how scary it is and how hard it is to label how much stigma is around it." She identified the institutional barriers that she personally faced and later tried to address,

> I mean it was interesting because the guy was in one of my classes and they [said] . . . I could switch class sections, but they wouldn't make him switch class. And that was like really it just made me realize that there's like problems in every system, I guess.

Later, when Sandra goes on to serve in a leadership role in the NWSU Student Government, she works to raise awareness about these inequities and do something to address them.

As nearly every woman I spoke with disclosed an experience with sexual harassment or assault at some time in her life, it became clear to me how fundamental breaking the silence—even through sharing someone else's story—is for moving toward healing. While a single event does not "heal" the tremendous pain of abuse, assault, harassment, or stalking, the power of being in a group of women, many of whom were experiencing similar circumstances, was a powerful reminder of solidarity among survivors.

Transforming Purpose

As the women in this study reflected on their experiences as cast members in *TVM*, their stories show evidence of the transformative power of the play for students during college. Some of the women told stories about how they thought differently about a past experience as a result of participating in the play. Some told of their identities shifting. Others told of overcoming

barriers resulting in transformation. In these ways, the play held a particular meaning because, for these women, it was a powerful catalyst for personal transformation.

Maggie directly framed the power of this theatrical performance as a tool for transforming students from passive observers to activists with a purpose. In her description, Maggie described not only transformations she directly experienced, but also those she observed in other members of the cast. She said,

> I felt like you could see the shift in the students from before the play or the experience or whatever and then from afterwards and how they would just talk and talk and talk about it… how exciting it was! And that momentum would just keep building and building . . . it was amazing to watch how minds can be changed that way.

Another key takeaway for Maggie was the power of theatrical performance as activism for social justice and personal transformation. Maggie said,

> and I always thought that like artistic things like art and music and theater always mattered. but I never saw how big of a capacity it could be until I did something like *The Vagina Monologues*. How a big social justice impact would work. And how it would spin off into doing other things like other people going off into doing other things . . . Not just acting, but going out *to do* . . . I saw a couple of kids changed their majors to go and like international studies and things like that versus like business, which was incredible to me because I love how art can just move people to do things that way.

Nina highlighted the way that her involvement during her sophomore year was "pivotal" because she was around "like-minded individuals with similar goals, but different stories." Nina spoke extensively about coming to college from a small town, and how she wanted to find a stronger connection to the community. She exclaimed, "I mean having a math class with more

people in it than my graduating classes was a pretty big culture shock!" But, when she went to interview for a work-study position, she said, "walking in there and just feeling safe . . . And kind of that I mattered" was significant. Nina reminisced that as soon as she concluded her work-study interview, she said to herself "OK I have to work here!" Overall, Nina described working at the Women's Center as "definitely a turning point for both my activism and just kind of my growth as a human being, I think."

While Nina had prior theater experience, she hadn't heard of *The Vagina Monologues* before. She said,

> Well before 2013, working at the Women's Center, I hadn't heard about *The Vagina Monologues*, which sounds like a disservice to myself, but I was just really not involved.

It was my sophomore year at NWSU and I really hadn't escaped my bubble of activities. Perhaps had their time on campus overlapped or if she and Carla had been in the same collective interview, Carla might have been an example of finding connection, passion, and community for Nina. Carla described her experience—she was a mother of two young children at the time she was involved—and how *TVM* "sparked a passion in my life that was missing." She said she went to auditions to "rediscover who I am and what I like to do." She described her reaction, sitting in the audience of a performance in a nearby town years before her involvement as a cast member, "I was just blown away by the dialogue and passion behind sharing stories and I found myself wanting to kind of express myself in the same way." Carla's transformation, rediscovery of herself, and finding a missing purpose of her life outside of her roles as a wife and a mother was unique in that she was the only participant in my study who had children at the time of the productions.

Wanda's story of personal transformation began in high school when she overcame a speech impediment. During the collective interview with Tonia and me, Wanda shared this story:

> It was so weird, I finally liked to talk! … I felt like I was the whole new person, and it kinda like it started like this addiction where I was, like … doing things I have a fear of that I will be uncomfortable [doing] and then like overcoming them. Like this competitive streak came out of me! I wanted to push and do more and see what I could actually succeed with.

Having overcome her speech impediment, Wanda had a newfound sense of confidence, and that drove her to get involved when she got to college the following fall. Wanda was looking for opportunities and described going to a student involvement fair during the school's welcome week looking for a feminist group to join: "I was kinda looking for a women's center type of thing and something environmentally focused"

It was only a month or two into the fall semester when Wanda saw the notices to audition for the play. Again, she drew on her (newfound) confidence of having overcome her speech impediment when she thought "Wow, you know [auditioning for *TVM*] would be a really good challenge for me to do! Because I just wanted to keep on pushing myself to see if I could handle it and embrace it. And I knew I could do something like that because I was ready." Wanda told Tonia and me, "

> I feel like I get pulled to things that make [most] people uncomfortable. I was nervous about the audition. But I was like "Yeah, this is the next logical step," like I overcame my speech impediment … Now I want to talk to a lot of people about something uncomfortable. So, going through auditions, I was like really giddy with excitement, I was also very anxious because I did it! And, I was surprised that I even got in! And so,

> you know it's going to all the rehearsals and finally the big show was kind of like another milestone for me.

Wanda's essential positive nature and ability to take on new challenges seemed to have reoccurred over and over throughout her life after overcoming her lisp. When she came to college, taking on new challenges, like participating in *TVM* was part of the way that she was remaking herself during her first year at NWSU—truly she was engaging in a transformational process. She also shared this insightful comment that she realized through her purposeful involvement in *TVM*,

> We tackled something that probably would make a lot of people uncomfortable, but I feel awesome talking about these things…So, I think I hadn't realized how absent [frankness about women's bodies] had been so like in my health classes learning about sexual health education . . . I mean that was something that I had not really put together because it kind of blurs this line between self-esteem and sex ed, and that is just kind of like, 'that's up to you. You go figure that out.' But I think it's pretty critical to building a strong foundation.

This belief that sexual health and sexuality were something to be "figured out on your own" or "explored on your own time" was corroborated by the very purpose of the play: to break down the stigma around women's sexuality as a mechanism for empowerment and esteem.

Other students talked about transforming their purpose in other ways through the play. For some this meant figuring out who they were through exploring aspects of their sexuality through their involvement in the play. Mona, now married to a man and raising a daughter, disclosed exploring bisexuality at the time she was in the play. She said, "I was in a relationship with a female during that time. And, you know, being in *The Vagina Monologues* really helped

me to explore my sexuality, explore that side of my life." She then talked about how that exploration unfolded as her perspective shifted, "And I . . . I did things that I probably would not have done if I didn't [participate in *TVM*]—because it really helped change my perspective." Mona, who now works as a chemical dependency professional and counselor, described not only the connection with her personal life, but now with her work.

> So, I help people with that struggle with addictions and a lot of those people struggle with abusive relationships. I work with women that are in domestic violence situations. I help connect them with resources today. And you know I do think a lot about my experience in *The Vagina Monologues* and how that has helped me to be more sensitive to those situations plus my own experience going through it as well.

She also reflected on how her understanding of feminism and gender roles has impacted her purposeful work as a counselor, "And you know as I mentioned talking about domestic violence but also talking about how you know our gender roles have changed and … how does this also impact men?"

From the power of igniting feminist identity and activism, to exploration and rebellion, prompting healing, and catalyzing transformation, for the women in this study participating in this intense co-curricular experience was significant. As women shared stories of their engagement, transformations, and healing, the meaning they ascribe to their experience as cast members revolved around the ways the play catalyzed various changes in their lives during college. In the next section, I will discuss the ways the personal and individual bridged into connection with a larger community and purpose.

Connections and Community

Women in this study shared strong feelings about a desire to connect with a community of support and told stories about surprising experiences resulting from those connections during college. *Connections and community* is the second emergent theme related to how the women in this study, upon reflection, ascribe meaning to their involvement in *The Vagina Monologues*. In this section, I discuss the ways that connection and community occurred (and reoccurred) in various ways for the women in this study during college.

Within the shared stories of seeking connection and community, four sub-themes emerged. First, the women shared how they sought (and found) a community of belonging on campus within the community-based, co-curricular experience of involvement in the play. Second, several women shared stories of connecting with the other cast members and the significance of the support the cast members provided to each other, particularly related to the catalytic changes they were experiencing as described above. Third, given the requirement set forth by V-Day limiting participation in the cast to only women-identified individuals, many of the women in this study told stories of their complicated relationships, friendships, or connections (or lack of) with other women in college and how the women-only space was significant (in this section, I also discuss related critiques of that exclusionary aspect of the play). Finally, women talked about their recognition that the play on college and university campuses (and in cities) worldwide, *is an activist event itself* and connected to a larger movement for social change. Different from other theatrical productions, in joining a cast, women acknowledge the ways they were connected to a much larger collective action during college and how this deeply mattered. In this section, I describe these sub-themes of connection and provide further

examples of how, upon reflection, women ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *The Vagina Monologues* during college.

Seeking Involvement and Belonging

Greater involvement in co-curricular opportunities on campus was a motivator toward as well as an outcome of participating as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*. Women in this study spoke about the desire to connect to involvement opportunities as a way of joining communities and feeling like they belonged at NSWU. After hearing this theme emerge in the individual interviews, I asked in the collective interviews specifically about the college environment/context and students' co-curricular involvement as a way of digging deeper.

Wanda, who studied environmental science, spoke about arriving at NWSU her first year and immediately looking for ways to get involved. As she reflected during the collective interview, she described exploring the campus involvement fair, an annual event during welcome week, "I was a freshman, I was like, I want to try everything. I want to get a taste of it all!" she found the Women's Center and the Sustainability Center and signed up for their listservs. She then talked about why she wanted to get involved in both of these centers. She said she was interested "because they resonated with the values that I had." Through the Women's Center, she learned about the auditions for the play. In our collective interview, she shared, "I think *The Vagina Monologues,* in that way kind of, I mean it made me aware of very specific parts of our community […] it made me, like, a more aware person and being engaged and willing to speak up for others."

For Wanda, making connections with people who she would not have likely engaged with otherwise was an unexpected benefit of her involvement. She elaborated,

> And I think [connecting across difference] is the really nice part about *The Vagina Monologues* . . . And that's a really special thing and especially in academic communities and campuses sometimes you just hang out with the same group of people because you think a certain way, and act a certain way, so that cross pollination is always really nice when it happens.

Beyond connecting across difference, Wanda also described the ways that her involvement led to increased awareness and activism on campus:

> and I think that it really affected me a lot, you know, more like when I was a junior and senior and things were happening where programs were going to get cut, potentially. And I feel like I was at least a little more in-tune to what was happening. It made me a lot more vocal because I didn't want to see the academic program that I was getting my degree in getting cut, but it did.

This unwelcome move on behalf of the NWSU administration was later the target of Wanda's activist engagement. Later in the collective interview, Wanda summarized her insights from her involvement on campus, "but I think, yeah for me, it just made me realize that I… like, being an engaged student is more than just getting your degree."

Similarly, Nina spoke at length in her individual interview about the series of events that contributed to her joining the cast of the play her sophomore year, starting with her quest for a place where she belonged on campus. Like Wanda, Nina noted that just going to class was not enough. She said, "I didn't really have a direction when I got up here. I knew I loved political science, and so I started taking a bunch of political science classes, with not really much of a direction." Nina, who received federal work study funds as part of her financial aid package, described her search for a different work study position after spending her first year working at

the university library, "It was a great experience… but I realized that I wasn't really… I wasn't really meeting a lot of folks. I wasn't really having any meaningful conversations with anyone… I just… I wanted to have a more interactive work study position." She identified the Women's Center on a list of potential work study jobs and realized that she had seen flyers for events on campus during her first year and had always thought about going to them (but ultimately did not go). As she was looking for a more "interactive" position, she thought working at the Women's Center would "force" her to be involved. She described thinking, "This is what the college experience is about, you know, new things, new stuff, new people." That work-study position ended up being instrumental for Nina, "working at the Women's Center was definitely a turning point for both my activism and just kind of my growth as a human being."

At the Women's Center, Nina met Sandra (another participant in this study, who was also a work study student in the Center that year). Nina claims that it was Sandra ("who is now probably one of my best friends") who wanted to participate in the play. Nina disclosed "she was super into it and she really wanted to audition and was a little tentative about doing it alone. And I had had previous stage experience and quite loved the spotlight." When Nina was cast in the production, she quickly learned all about the play and Eve Ensler. She gushed,

> I just fell in love with her. She is absolutely fantastic, and I got to, actually got to do a presentation about her in one of my classes and just really found a deep respect for this woman. And so, after some research and kind of getting, you know, the reasoning behind why . . . Why she was doing this . . . why the production . . . Why? And I just, I loved everything about it. I was all in.

Nina shared, "Just you know going in headfirst and doing the monologues. That year was very subversive."

Later during her collective interview with Maggie and me, she described the community of belonging that emerged as a result of her participation.

> **Nina:** I would probably say back then (and now) the solidarity really meant so much to me … just being a part of something […] The following year or the year after, [another women's center staff member] and I did a 'consent is sexy' campaign on the NWSU campus, and so on a lot of the cast was kind of involved here and there you know handing out posters and stickers and whatnot. But also, just having the Women's Center is such a resource to do something.
>
> **Maggie:** … channel your fire into something else that way!
>
> **Nina:** Absolutely. And I really do think that the *Monologues* opened a lot of doors like that for a lot of folks… at least that I saw. And you know whether that door was to be in a production again the next year or, you know, aid either the production or the Women's Center, or [community advocacy agency] in some way. I feel like the faces that I saw in the *Monologues*, you know whether it was my year in 2013, or the year following, you still see those faces in those other communities, like in [agency], and in the Women's Center. And so, it was just . . . I think . . . I really do feel like it's a great segue for continued activism. But also, just having those folks that, you know, are going to be familiar faces in that crowd especially in [town]. So that, to me, having that camaraderie, that solidarity, that extra cushion for you when you needed it, you know, emotionally. You know it's… it's been really nice.

Nina and Maggie's conversation shows that, through involvement on the cast, the women formed a community of support with other cast members, and that subsequent involvement (even beyond the play) saw them reappear in the same groups, recognizing each other all over again. It

seemed *The Vagina Monologues* was just one way that this group of cast members engaged on campus.

For other women as well, *TVM* was a segue into other involvement. Tonia spoke about the ways that participating as a cast member in the play led to subsequent connections on campus. She described, "like, I hadn't been super involved with the Women's Center before that. And so, when I started by getting a newsletter from the Women's Center, [I thought] I'm like, actually going… and spending time in that place!" Tonia spoke about her later involvement with the beneficiary of that year's proceeds—a local non-profit agency that provides emergency and supportive/advocacy services for survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse as well as education and outreach. The agency, with several partnerships on campus—including with the Women's Center—often solicited NWSU students to serve in volunteer peer advocate roles. Tonia described learning about their volunteer training program through the Women's Center,

> After I did *The Vagina Monologues,* I signed up for [local agency's] volunteer program the next spring—so, they have like a 40-hour training. So yeah basically that's how I ended up involved with them. I was… [after *TVM*] I'd been looking to be more involved in *something*. But yeah, [*TVM*] definitely spurred me on. And I learned about the volunteer programs from the Women's Center.

Tonia's involvement with the agency as a volunteer turned into a full-time position as she shared during our collective interview, "and then when I graduated, they hired me directly from being a volunteer. And so, it was super formative where I am now."

In the collective interview with Sandra and Erica, I asked, "what is meaningful about the involvement specifically within the college context for each of you?" Sandra, a white 26-year-old woman came to NWSU from out-of-state. Like her friend Nina, Sandra also served as a

work-study student in the Women's Center and participated in the play her sophomore year. Sandra's perception of the purpose of *The Vagina Monologues* from the outset was for outreach and education on violence against women. Sandra recalled her and Nina being influenced to try out because of their involvement in the Women's Center. Sandra said, "I heard positive things from people I interacted with at the Women's Center and I thought it would be like a good opportunity." She then proceeded to talk about other aspects of college life. Sandra was already a member of a sorority at NWSU when she began working in the Women's Center and auditioned for a part in the play her sophomore year. Sandra mentioned how, once members of her sorority knew she was engaged in *TVM* and the Women's Center, she opened the doors for more sorority members to engage in feminist spaces on campus. She spoke at length about how important it was that she was visibly involved in the Women's Center as an active member in the Greek community:

> I was also really involved with my [sorority] in Greek life. I was in a sorority and I was an officer and … I mean, you know, Greek life had issues itself. But I think having me, like in this sorority as kind of a leader, and also to be involved with the stuff at the Women's Center it helped, I think, other women in my sorority feel okay about going into that kind of stuff and like being interested in that kind of stuff.

She spoke about how there's a strong culture of support within the community, which was extended to Sandra's involvement in *TVM*:

> And you know that's something that's kind of interesting about the Greek community is if there is someone involved with something all your sisters or brothers will support you no matter what it is. So, I heard [there were] people from my house [and from fraternities] in the audience every single night and they were super supportive. I think it

> helps a lot of the fraternity men to realize but like a lot of things that they probably have never thought about before.

Sandra lived in her sorority house all four years at NWSU. She described how she was also often the person to whom women in her sorority would disclose a sexual assault.

> I don't think I would have been able to be as supportive in my sorority without *The Vagina Monologues*. I had a couple women disclose sexual assault to me and without *The Vagina Monologues*, I would not have known where to point them to or known the right people and so that was really impactful…

She reflected, later, when she was president of her sorority her senior year, and shared how, based on the knowledge she had, she could "be there for them as a leader and know exactly what needed to happen in those cases. And I just felt like I had a lot of knowledge that I wouldn't have had otherwise."

The experience of being an information and advocacy resource for her sorority led Sandra to pursue other opportunities on campus. In fact, a direct outcome of Sandra's involvement in *TVM* was her increased interest in becoming involved in campus outreach and education efforts. That same year that Sandra was in the play, a new position was created in the NWSU Student Government—the director of safety and violence prevention. Sandra expressed her interest, "I think I just almost saw like a need for that kind of work –it just kind of felt like a proper stepping stone." And, Sandra attributed her interest to her involvement in *TVM*,

> I mean the play definitely just ignited like a passion that I hadn't really ever felt before. And I think the fact that it was like tied so closely to like our campus and like how like prevalent sexual assault is on campus . . . Just like the numbers and the statistics . . . It was kind of like alarming and I just kind of felt like if more people were just simply

> aware, then we could get more problems solved or get the right/more resources in the right places and things like that. And so, I think that was just like a kind of natural next opportunity for me.

The new director of safety and violence prevention position was instrumental in not only raising awareness, but also in advocacy for dedicated student government funding for anti-violence education and outreach. Sandra described bringing initiatives, like the Green Dot campaign, to campus as she worked to, "bridge the gap with students and administration as far as safety and what the students wanted, and what was good for them." What's most significant is how Sandra, through this subsequent involvement, continued to have a connection with the Women's Center and supported future productions of *TVM*. She said,

> Having that relationship between the Student Government and the Women's Center was like my number one priority. And so [was] supporting future productions, even though I wasn't involved myself . . . Just knowing that the Student Government supported the production . . . that was something that was very important to me.

The ongoing theme of making a difference is a guiding force behind Sandra's work and a theme to which she returned often throughout her interviews. She said that this desire to make a difference came from her involvement in the play. She elaborated,

> that was something that *The Vagina Monologues* made me feel like I could do, like … seeing how Eve Ensler took what she was good at and made a really incredible thing out of it. I felt like I should figure out a way that I can make a difference too and that really was driving my passion continuing my whole education and time there [on campus]. . . . And it was incredible to be like a leader on campus as far as like anti-violence. So, I think

> it was probably one of my proudest moments . . . that was probably one of the times, I was the happiest and felt really connected to what I was doing.

As the women discussed co-curricular opportunities on campus (they largely did not refer to them as such) the feelings of connection and belonging were motivators to audition as well as outcomes of participating as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*. Women in this study spoke about involvement opportunities as way of joining communities and feeling like they belonged at NSWU. Involvement outside of the classroom was one form of connection, but for other students, like Erica, Maggie, Carla, and Mona, a stronger motivator seemed to be the other women on the cast and the community of support that evolved in the months they prepared for the production. It is to this topic I now turn.

Discovering a Community of Support

Feelings of belonging to a community (discussed above) developed most strongly when relationships were established, and friendships were forged among participants in *The Vagina Monologues*. Finding and establishing these relationships requires some mixture of intentionality and spontaneity, and is easily influenced by pre-existing friendships, prior cast involvement, student leadership (who was serving as the director of the play that year), and the number of women cast members in the play in a given year. Over the four years that I was producing the play, cast sizes ranged from a dozen or fewer (mostly theater majors) in the early years to more than 20 women from all backgrounds, including faculty, staff and community members in 2013.

Three women (Carla, Maggie, and Mona) participated on several *TVM* casts over multiple academic years. Maggie described how over that time, "I got to be really good friends with like a couple of the girls in the productions." She said this came from the process of group

rehearsing and "being silly and stuff on top of [rehearsals] like the retreat, it just felt like a really strong community."

Carla talked about the importance of building a community of support among women. She had worked through her trauma the prior year, and the next year she saw her role very differently,

> [my] energy changed to, 'Okay. The spotlight's not on me. I'm not one of the main performers. I'm here to, you know, … help contribute to warm and inviting and safe environment for these other cast mates to perform or, you know, work through their own personal experiences by performing a monologue. Yeah. It was interesting and great for me to take some of the energy that, you know, I was needing in order to patch up a couple of things in my life, and then the next year return it back.

For many of the participants, the fact that they were survivors of sexual assault was a basis of that connection and community support. Every year, women would often share their own stories of personal trauma they had survived with one another, thus deepening the bonds of support. Mona spoke of connection with other cast members as a place in which she was able to be truly and fully vulnerable, "[it] just brings people closer when you can be also vulnerable with each other, you know? And doing shows like [*TVM*] tends to make people be more vulnerable than they would, I think, in a normal setting." A key meaning of the play for Mona, as she unpacked and complicated her own identity processes, was the connection with the other cast members. She spoke of connection with other cast members as a place in which she was able to be vulnerable, "[it] just brings people closer when you can be also vulnerable with each other you know and doing shows like [*TVM*] tends to make people be more vulnerable than they would, I

think, in a normal setting." A theater major, Mona also said that *TVM* was different in comparison to other plays. She described,

> Well, because I've done other shows as well… a few shows really stick out for me where I'm like 'yes, I really bonded with that cast!' There are other shows that I did where I don't ever even think about those people hardly, you know? I think what separates the shows that I've done that have that [continued connection] versus those that don't is the intensity of the work we do and the willingness to be vulnerable with each other, I think. And so just the nature of *The Vagina Monologues* really kind of sets the stage well for that.

Mona said it was fun to think back on the performance and consider how the community of support affected feelings of empowerment in life, which she takes into the group counseling sessions she leads. She said "as I said before, it's really helped me find my empowerment and become who I am and the person that I am today. You know, it really has helped shape me a lot."

When reflecting on what exactly prompted safety and connection with the other cast members in *The Vagina Monologues*, Nina said:

> I'm sure every cast is different. But I really felt like everybody made it safe… maybe they were doing it, you know, unintentionally or whatnot but [they] just kind of let down those guards and opened up to the opportunities to connect. I don't know if there was any particular time, I can't say that "Oh at this event, you know, at this time we all just sat down and held hands." It wasn't like that. It was just very organic. "I'm here for you if you want to talk." This unspoken safety was just there. And it was really instrumental in building a good cast.

After the first year, when the cast bloomed to over 20 women who largely did not know each other, my Women's Center colleague and co-producer and I planned what became an annual cast retreat a "Vagina Warrior Workshop" held shortly after auditions once casting was complete and people committed to their parts. The expressed outcomes of the cast retreat building strong connections and a community of support among the cast. We also wanted the women to experience the entire play (we conducted a table read of the script), watch a film by V-Day designed to help the cast members understand the larger/global purpose of the play, and engage in some sort of creative activity, which changed from year to year. In addition, given the statistics that one in four women in the room were likely survivors, we always included an introduction to the campus violence prevention programs office and the local advocacy agency. The workshops proved formative as part of developing a connected and supportive community within the cast.

These workshops were often mentioned during the individual and collective interviews as the women reflected on their opportunities for connection. Maggie shared her recollection,

> Like I remember it was a really good bonding day like we'd been doing like rehearsals and rehearsals and rehearsals and you can only do so much bonding with that because you have to pay attention! You have to learn your lines! it's not like on the workshop days … it was just more chance to be social with everybody. And I love that that was like a strengthening thing it was a really good bonding experience for everybody and that's I think the biggest thing I got out of that that I think.

Most women raved about the creative activity—always some sort of *vagina-art*—as an important component to building a connected and close cast community. Maggie described it as "art therapy." In addition to serving as a creative outlet, it provided an informal time during the

retreat for people to get to know one another while they were working on their "vagina" art project. To explain further, one year, we crafted vagina pillows out of felt, ribbons, sequins, and feathers. These hung off the stage in the theater. Another year we used a bake-able clay polymer to create vagina pins and pendants, which the cast wore at the performance. In both years, some of the women approached their vagina-art from a literal interpretation while others took a more abstract or symbolic approach—all were superb, individual expressions. The third year of the retreats, we supplied old Ms., Bust, and Bitch magazines, which the cast members cut up to make vagina collages. Nina said, "It was kind of like a collage of vaginas. They were hung up in the in the [theater name], and people got to see everybody's interpretation." Maggie described that activity, "we did a collage or something… like empowering words to describe your vagina and stuff. So, like I still have that, all glittery and feathery, fun stuff on there." She went on to comment on the importance of these activities for building a cast community:

> And so, like doing those creative [projects] actually I've kind of put [them] into perspective like different . . . like how [the other cast members] view themselves. And you get a good idea of who they are, what they feel, and their values by how they make their little vagina [pendant] … or their collages or whatever. It's amazing how much you can glean from making those kinds of things!

In addition to artistic expression, it was critical to forge relationships across differences, knowing the intensity of what lay ahead as the cast prepared for the performances. Each year, the women who joined the *TVM* casts came from all many different backgrounds, academic interests, and life-experiences. For Wanda, connecting with other women from completely different backgrounds was an unexpected benefit of her involvement. She elaborated, "I also feel like I still have this strong camaraderie with all the women […] these are women I probably

never would have met otherwise. And I think that that's the really nice part about *The Vagina Monologues*."

Beyond feeling safe to talk about prior trauma, the ability to bring one's whole self to the play was also key in connecting as a cast. Carla, as a non-traditional student and mother of two at the time of her *TVM* involvement, spoke about her need to reconnect with women who were also experiencing motherhood and raising kids. She said,

> I also connected with the other moms there that were digging deep into their current experiences with raising kids. You lose your, you know kind of like, your 'maiden self' when you have kids and get into a relationship. Finding those people, sharing their stories, and realizing that I wasn't alone in that, you know, here we are, together creating something new.

Women supporting one another was fundamental to the feelings of connection to community, but, as the next section attests, for many of the participants in this study, their complicated history with women-as-friends made the women-only cast all the more significant. Sandra summarized the community of support among women being vulnerable as vital to the experience, when she said, "I think just watching it come together it was just a really good testament of how supportive women can be of each other and push each other to do things that otherwise are uncomfortable." In the next section, I discuss how the connections with women was often fraught.

Complicating Relationships with "Women" and Women-Only Spaces

To discuss *The Vagina Monologues* and not mention gender or the ways that gender shows up—not just in the content of the play but infuses the entire experience of the V-Day movement—would be a major misstep. The casts of V-Day productions are (by rule) exclusively

comprised of women-identified individuals (a subject of much critique, which I address below as it was mentioned by many of the participants). As the women in this study reflected on their experiences, they ascribed meaning to the complexity of relationships between and among other women cast members throughout our conversations.

For some of the women in this study, prior relationships with the women and girls in their lives had proven difficult. Mona described, "prior to [college] my experiences with women was not so great… I just really reflect a lot on how unfortunate is that we see each other as threats as opposed to, you know, mutually respected as women." Talking about her relationships today, she mentioned, "I've been able to cultivate more of those [positive] relationships in my life [with other women], you know, in large part since this experience, because there's obviously no men really involved in this production."

Wanda, currently pursuing a master's degree in biological sciences, described strategically choosing her graduate school faculty chair and advisor because of her active work to address climate issues for women in STEM. She was drawn to her advisor, who Wanda described as "very passionate about getting women in science and giving them space to grow" partially because of the supportive environment for women which she experienced in college. Wanda said *TVM* was instrumental: "The power of being in a group of really empowered and strong women is something that really pushed me forward." She said that this model has given her hope, even in spaces where women do not seem to be empowering one another. She shared, "in order to preserve myself, [I] try to surround myself with more healthy relationships [with other women] that really focus on building each other up." She reflected,

> that was a pretty big moment because I think typically [relationships with other women] were--I'm trying to think of the best way to verbalize this, especially like with friendships

between women--sometimes they're really catty and competitive. And I don't really know where that stems from, I don't really understand. I've never had that [feeling].

Wanda also described how sometimes, even in circles of progressive women, there can be a form of competition that shows up as "'I'm trying to be more of a feminist than you,'" which she conveyed was detrimental for fostering solidarity within the movement and entirely counterproductive.

In contrast, or maybe because of the community of the support she felt, Nina saw the cast of *TVM* as "this amazing support system of folks that were all there for one reason. And it was that solidarity, I think, [that] really stuck with me." Before her experiences that year however, Nina relented, "I really hadn't had so much [positivity] with many female influences in my life, that we're all working towards the same goals." Nina, in conversation with Maggie during the collective interview said,

> before the *Monologues*, before working at the Women's Center, I had put up a lot of guards and a lot of walls and those were just going to get crushed. From then on, they were like 'hey you're going to open up and we're all going to be friends.'
>
> **Maggie:** Like it or not!
>
> **Nina:** And it really did happen.

Later in the conversation, when I asked her response to Nina's assessment of the barriers to women-only friendships, Maggie shared,

> I think that society has kind of just taught us [women] to not trust each other because we're all competing for a man's attention. And, like the cool thing is to be 'one of the boys.' And so [*TVM*] kind of taught you that you didn't have to be that way and you could trust other women. There's nothing wrong with having girlfriends and stuff like

> that! Absolutely nothing wrong. And I think it's kind of one of the more pure forms of friendship that I have is like with my best friend, Hillary. Like she didn't do [the play] with me or anything, but like I mean we've had a lot of long talks about like my experience with *The Vagina Monologues* and I think the sex-positive stuff now and just life in general and it's one of the best relationships I've had in my life, friendship-wise, because of things like this.

Unpacking the complexity of same-gender relationships and the connection between that and the exclusion of all other perspectives in the play (both in terms of the content as well as who can participate) brings to the forefront some of the critiques emerged as gender-identity and racial identity for the women as told their stories. I turn to these critiques to connect with the women-only discussion above, and to complicate the positive spin many put on the play's women-only emphasis.

Gender and race critiques of TVM. As mentioned above, the gender identity of people who audition is a key factor when directors select their casts. During the years that I produced *TVM* at NWSU, to gain access to the copyrighted script and have a performance listed on the V-Day website (www.vday.org) producers/organizers had to agree to V-Day's rules. For the performances at NWSU held between 2009 and 2013 (the rules appear to be slightly more lenient now), the director was limited to casting exclusively women-identified individuals for speaking parts. While V-Day's definition included male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals, other non-binary or trans-masculine, and all cisgender men were excluded from an "on the stage" cast role (however, backstage roles were allowed to be occupied by male-identified individuals). This exclusion, as a form of vagina-essentialism, is one of the primary criticisms of the play, and this came up several times during the interviews. Some of the women

in this study echoed the critiques, called for updates to the script and necessary evolution for continued relevance, and applauded local "rogue" efforts to include more voices.

I asked Maggie how, given that she had participated in the play a couple of times and was a member of the queer community at NWSU, she found engagement with other members of the GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) around the content of the play, which has been the subject of much critique. Maggie considered and then said,

> I can see why a lot of people had problems with that, especially with the trans movement being as big and more prevalent as it is in these days… about having issues with the play not accepting, you know, male-to-female trans people or like people who did not actually have vaginas … it just kind of excluded a whole portion of people. And so, I mean I can see the criticisms for that. And then, I guess for me personally like there were some like content that would be kind of triggering and so like it was kind of difficult for me to get through certain pieces or to listen to certain pieces and stuff so that kind of made it hard to do. But other than that, for the most part, especially at least for me, it was a mostly positive experience.

Sandra's experience was generally positive and led to so many other opportunities, she also shared critical perspectives on the play's content and how it (mis)represented members of the LGBTQ community. She shared this critique in this story:

> So, I think the first time that I read through the script and the monologues that were picked and then I saw like the people performing them I was like super jazzed about it! … but then just like talking through some of that stuff, and I think this was something the director brought up, was how *The Vagina Monologues* didn't really represent like the LGBTQ community very well… There was a monologue about a young woman who is

kind of questioning and she had this experience with an older lesbian woman and it was like, I don't know, like questionable about consent and things like that. Was it OK? And that really opened my eyes to like how maybe situations like that aren't OK, but that's kind of how things have been happening for so long that [it goes unquestioned].

The concerns Sandra mentioned above relate to the monologue *The Little Coochi Snorcher Who Could,* indeed one of the more problematic (and yet required) pieces in the production. Despite this critique, Sandra said given today's socio-historical context, "But I think it also just like it shows how important it is to have these productions and even though it is older, and whatever, it is obviously still relevant.

Nina, who still attends every year stated, "I am seeing the *Monologues* [at NWSU] make progress to …you know [update] because some of them are a little dated." Apparently, within the most recent productions of the play, the NWSU version included some original work, including a monologue written and performed by a trans-masculine NSWU student. Nina said, "we had some local folks do their own monologues. And so that was really nice, too… And that was one of the things that I think was probably my biggest criticism." Later in the collective interview, we were talking more about the complicated role that gender inhabits in the play and I mentioned again, the critique about the exclusion of trans-masculine voices. This conversation unfolded:

Maggie: Yeah, and that's very exclusionary to like female to male experiences. It completely cuts the whole experience out.

Nina: And I don't know, you know, we get Eve's perspective, we get her words and not only do we get that… but now, someone else is portraying that. So now we're getting two syphoned stories. Yeah. So, we'll have to take that for what it's worth. But either way, I enjoy them….

Later Nina said,

> I think to try and imagine a future Vagina Monologues. You know what's the next monologue going to be? And so I think I was thinking about that the other day, about like I wonder I wonder what it's going to look like in 10 years? Yeah. Because it's going to be around. You know?
>
> **Maggie:** I wonder if it just integrates more especially more people of color into it?
>
> **Nina:** And so, you know you do see so many violations. I'll say, you know whether they're gender-based, race-based, you're seeing that… And so, this is I why I just wonder how the monologues are going to reflect *this time*.
>
> **Maggie:** Especially with the #MeToo movement on top of that.
>
> **Nina:** Absolutely.
>
> **Maggie:** It will be very interesting to see how that affects it.
>
> **Heather:** Yeah, I kind of wonder if maybe Eve Ensler is not the right person to write them?

At this point in the conversation, both Maggie and Nina (who previously did not know each other at all) disclosed that they were each "half Mexican" after Nina mentioned, "Yeah like I haven't… like I'd really like to hear, one from a Latina perspective."

> **Maggie:** Exactly! Exactly! And that's something that I felt… like *I* was missing entirely. That was a whole aspect of *me* that I didn't get to [see represented].
>
> **Heather:** The race piece is really relevant. And I think especially in [state]. Right. I mean it's very, very white state.
>
> **Maggie:** It's actually pretty predominately, percentage-wise it's becoming more predominately Mexican or Hispanic or whatever word you would prefer to use.

Nina: Especially in southern [state].

Maggie: Exactly, in this area and specifically more so because of the migrant workers and because of the whole immigration issue, it's becoming more on the forefront. And I'm getting approached a lot about that because I'm the only Mexican in my group … and it's a hot-button topic for me.

In including this dialogue among the three of us, it became apparent to me that the women in this study were both willing to discuss both the value in the production, as well as confront the inadequacies in the gendered and racialized aspects that require addressing. I also note here, how among the three of us (Maggie, Nina, and I) the topic of race was brought up as both Nina and Maggie talked about growing up "half Mexican." This string of dialogue is one of only two places in the collective interviews in which the racialized aspects of students' experiences emerged (the other being with Mona and Carla). I note the relatively absent theme of race and racialized intersections in the limitations sections in the final chapter.

For continued relevance in today's sociopolitical climate, the V-Day movement collective needs to update *The Vagina Monologues* or audiences will only, as Maggie said, "appreciate it for its historical value" as a theater piece from a bygone era when just uttering the word "vagina" was shocking. Despite the need for updates to the base script, now over 20 years old, in states like the one home to NWSU, the continued connection of the play to activism and theater as collective action for gender equity arose several times. Collective action is the fourth and final sub-theme of connection in college.

Engaging in Theater as a Collective Action for Social Change

Participants in the study discussed the ways participating in or attending a performance of *TVM* was a form of activism or collective action for social change. In the previous section, I

discussed the shortfalls of the play. However, upon reflection today, the women in this study all saw the power of the play to connect students to larger social movements. Tonia discussed the play as a conversation-starter, "I tried to use it [going to see a *TVM* production] as a way also to have conversations with people who mattered to me. It was a pretty big deal." Maggie relayed the motivation to being involved as "I wanted to *not just act*, but do something greater with that, which I think was very fulfilling." Upon reading the *TVM* script in its entirety, Wanda spoke directly about how the play embodied feminism. She said:

> It was just unlike anything else I'd ever read. And especially when we started to do the first couple of dry runs, reading through the script, it was as if it suddenly just clicked. It was, for me, not really a play at all but *a journey* into all these different women's lives and their experiences with their bodies . . . How society perceived them, with how they saw themselves. And it was kind of like reading someone's diary, except it was a very open conversation and I, I really loved that about it.

Discussing the overall emphasis and message as universal and global, Mona asked rhetorically,

> What is the message that we're sending here? You know, what is this really about, if I'm taking my personal experience out of it; how does that particular show impact so many women all over? Because I know it's done in many different cities all over the world.

In each of these above passages, women emphasized the far-reaching impact of the play and their connection, through participating, to the larger V-Day movement. It was exciting for these women in [state] to be a part of something larger and with a global impact. One example emerged as V-Day prepared a global initiative.

In 2012, V-Day launched the *One Billion Rising* campaign, which according to their website (https://www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign/one-billion-rising/) has now turned

into the "biggest mass action to end violence against women[3] in human history." In 2013, Sandra was on *TVM* cast and working in the Women's Center when she was asked to, as part of the V-Day events on campus, put up an educational display on a wall in the student union for *One Billion Rising*. She talked about that in the collective interview,

> I put up the *One Billion Rising* wall, which was like kind of like the slogan for the year. And I think having [*TVM*] tied in to the larger kind of global movement was really helpful for me especially having like a smaller part in the local production. It's kind of supplemented and helped me to see the bigger issues and how we were helping on a bigger scale.

Tonia also saw the power in a collective solidarity for change. She said, "It is the voice, it is how we use our own voices and everyone's voices and their stories to create more connection and to bring about change." Maggie, too, commented on the ability of "artistic things like art and music and theater" to build collective momentum. She said,

> it was amazing to watch how minds can be changed that way. But I never saw how big of a capacity it could be until I did something like *The Vagina Monologues*. How a big social justice impact would work [on a large scale]. And how it would spin off into doing other things like other people going off into doing other things . . . Not just acting but going out to *do*.

The collective impact of the global movement was inspiring for sure, but for Sandra, because all of the proceeds from the production were donated, there was this strong connection to the local

[3] By women V-Day now includes cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities that are subject to gender-based violence.

community. She described, "I remember just feeling like the community was very involved then. I think just also feeling like I was helping make a local impact."

Wanda spoke directly about the collective action of theater. She described how intensely powerful listening to the stories in the play was for her. She described, again the power of being on stage and the embodied experience of theater,

> It was so personal and so meaningful even if some experiences described in *The Vagina Monologues* had not happened to me personally, I could feel like as if they did.
>
> And those are things that stuck with me for a long time…I'm glad I was a part of it because it makes me see things in a different way.

She said that the stories in the play have come back to her as she has reengaged over the year. Wanda recounted how *The Vagina Monologues* was "a little bit like 'feminine wisdom' for navigating the world. So definitely, I think that those stories have really just stuck with me. And every single time I've gone back to watch *The Vagina Monologues* afterwards in supporting the next round of women and those stories are sort of reinforced." Having never been involved in a theater production before, the impact on Wanda was significant. She said "All in all, when I came out of *The Vagina Monologues*, I surprised myself that I got in front of the stage and I was not just giving a presentation, but I was actually reading lines and had to put some thought and feeling into it and was participating with a community and a theatre." This powerful comment shows they was that embodied learning affected the women in the play. From collective action for social change, to creating communities of support among women and for women, involvement in *The Vagina Monologues* was instrumental in these eight women finding connections and community in college.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the women's stories of catalysts and connections that emerged within their stories about their involvement. The findings in this chapter responded specifically to the first research question, upon reflection five or more years later, how do women ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *The Vagina Monologues?* What was clear to me then, when I was co-producing the play and interacting with these women in person, and what is clear to me now, is that reflecting on this experience revealed several ways that the play served as a catalyst for "igniting" feminist activism, prompting healing, signaling personal rebellion, and transforming purpose. The play also held specific meaning for the women as a location for connection and belonging—in particular with other women (a space previously fraught) as well as a site for collective action. In the next chapter, I turn to the second research question and discuss the ways the play influenced the women's post-collegiate lives.

CHAPTER 5: INFLUENCES ON POST-COLLEGIATE LIVES

In this chapter, I delve into findings related to my second research question: through recounting stories of their experiences since college, how do women in this study explain the ways taking part in TVM influenced their post-collegiate lives? As I share some of the ways that the women in this study said *The Vagina Monologues* influenced their post-collegiate lives, I frame these discussions around three influences as the women described them today—on their feminist identities and activism, their careers and purpose, and their capacity for vulnerability and self-confidence.

Influences of *The Vagina Monologues* on Post-collegiate Lives

Making sense of one's experience, particularly when that experience cannot be looked upon objectively, is difficult. In the collective interviews, I employed an intentional process of establishing a level of trust, engaging in deeper conversation, exploring commonalities between stories, making reflective statements, and clarifying connections and meanings. Three subthemes about the influences of the play on the women's post-collegiate lives emerged through this process of storytelling and reflective listening—influences on feminist identity and activism today, influences on career and purpose, and influences on self-confidence through vulnerability—which I discuss in detail in this chapter.

Influences on Feminist Identity and Activism

In the preceding chapter, I clarified the ways that the play ignited feminist awareness while the women were *in college*. As the women shared stories of their experiences since college, most notably were stories about feminist identity and activism. During the timespan between their college experience and 2018, when I conducted interviews, a number of important

socio-historical moments occurred[4]. For some, the feelings of deeper engagement and commitment in feminist activism reemerged in light of the socio-political moment and in reaction to personal experiences with harassment. While the subject matter of the play is considered "feminist," it was not just the content that influenced the women's feminist activism.

In addition to attending to the gendered experiences of women, feminist researchers must not look at the effects of gender alone. Feminist researchers complicate the interrelations of gender with other aspects of identity. As Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) stated, "targeting gender can have the effect of excluding, silencing or marginalizing significant divisions between women" (p. 147). In this study, I intentionally sought participants with a range of experiences, identities, and backgrounds. Four of the eight women (Carla, Mona, Maggie, and Nina) in the study identified as multiracial or women of Color, two identified as lesbian, or pansexual (Tonia and Maggie), and their current ages ranged from 26 to 36. About half of the women experienced the play during their college years as "traditional" students (Wanda, Mona, Sandra, and Nina) while the other half would be generally considered "non-traditional" students (Carla, Maggie, Erica, Tonia). One participant (Carla) had children at the time of the production. Three women have a child or children today. I note these aspects because focusing solely on the ways gender emerged would have certainly diminished the study's richness. As the women discussed their experiences with the play, I asked follow-up questions that prompted further discussion about other aspects of their identity. I will address some of these conversations here. In each of the

[4] The socio-historical moment in which I conducted interviews is important and relevant to this study. A few of the events that arose during interview included: the uprising of feminist activism through women's marches around the world after the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017; the increased attention to sexual harassment in all industries, but specifically in the entertainment industry, and the #MeToo movement; battles over immigration, border family separation, immigration policies; and police shootings, alt-right violence, and racist ideologies perpetuated by Trump.

three stories that I share next, the feminist themes of the play resurfaced as women talked about their current jobs, roles, and activism.

Story one: Working in male-dominated industries. Tonia, who currently works as the director of advocacy programs with a feminist organization centered on getting women in the building and construction trades, connected her experience to a story that Wanda had just shared about being harassed in her job and finding the courage to file a complaint. This brief version of that story tells of how Wanda found her voice after the 2016 election and became more directly engaged in speaking out against hostile work environments, specifically on Midway Atoll, where Wanda worked as a research scientist. She said,

> Well, I pushed for doing a Women's March on Midway. I thought it was really important that we do that! And our little group of, like I think, six women marched… Given the current climate on Midway, there were some women who were scared to walk down the street with an albatross. And you know, they were upset with how the current climate is looking and we want to have some change. And we're not afraid. So, I think yes that was one thing on Midway, I was like I gotta do this because being out there is really strange as a woman.

She elaborated on the larger climate issues:

> There's a lot of problems with harassment especially in this last year, I became a lot more outspoken about it and started to report more and more on it because … I think a lot of women are hesitant about speaking out because they're afraid it will put their position in some kind of danger, and you won't be able to work in a wonderful, beautiful place like Midway. So, I just kind of got sick of that perspective and that fear. And I reported it [the

harassment]. And that started to result in some change, as it was taken pretty seriously by the Fish and Wildlife at the headquarters level nationally.

After saying to Wanda, "first [I'm] sorry that that happened to you and second, like amazing job like figuring out a way to do something about it," Tonia talked about how important it is to take action and speak up, particularly in her industry where people's activism can have a direct influence. She said, "that's a really hard decision to make and can have so much impact… unfortunately, in construction, sometimes they're very isolated. Some women have [even] experienced rape on the job."

Wanda's and Tonia's stories of hostile workplaces for women resonated as they talked about climate issues in their respective fields. Wanda shared she was still trying to "process and figure out like how I got sucked into a really toxic environment… I think it's also kind of… has to do with living a 'bio gypsy[5]' life." Then she said her perspective on her own worth and the presence of the play's feminist themes was a strong source of support and gave her strength during challenging workplace situations. Wanda said,

> …in the backdrop, having *The Vagina Monologues* has been a very strong reminder for me for when things are not going well—I can know it, and acknowledge it, and move on. This sounds maybe kind of trite, but ooh, I know I deserve better than this!

Wanda described struggling to stay positive during that time as she was trying not to let the man who was harassing her get the better of her. She said,

> But I just remembered thinking again back to *The Vagina Monologues*… And, I remember thinking, how would those women react to something like this? … I think I

[5] The label 'bio gypsy' is Wanda's own creation, which I took to mean that she identified as free-spirited and nomadic, going where work was and based on her academic interests.

> would go back to those memories every single time, and thinking like how did I feel at that point in time [in my life]? [I felt] really strong, really powerful, really confident in myself, and just get back into that mindset . . . like a reset almost. Because I could feel [myself] slipping and getting really upset and kind of depressed about things.

Even as they were countering the harassment in the negative environments of their industries (environmental biology for Wanda and construction trades for Tonia), both Wanda and Tonia said they stayed true to their feminist values through building communities that supported feminist perspectives (both in their professional and social networks). Tonia shared, "I know that some of the women, actually in our industry, have started like taking each other to *The Vagina Monologues* at the universities when they're out, as a way to like open up those conversations."

Wanda responded to Tonia's story and talked similarly about cultivating friendships and relationships with other feminists on Midway Atoll, where she found "a very heavily male dominated place and there are kind of different expectations of what women should do and how they should act." Wanda replied,

> I really like what Tonia said. Yes, absolutely I've done that…one of the things I'm trying to cultivate [are] these circles of feminism and critical thinking […] We started this group, maybe not the best name, it was called 'strong women, strong drinks.' We would make really strong drinks and talk about feminism. It was actually great, really fun. It was like our time. We're not being put on display at karaoke night. We were just talking about, you know, trials of women in the field and in science.

As Tonia and Wanda went on to further discuss their current lives, work, and activism, they interchanged several acknowledgements of and references toward the play. This prompted an

interesting commentary by Tonia about the play's influence and current relevance in her workplace today. Tonia said,

> I do feel like *The Vagina Monologues* was the beginning of this path for me. And like recognizing those things for myself but also recognizing those things for other people in my life and being . . . Like yeah, I feel it is given me sometimes the courage to start those conversations because in so many of the stories in *The Vagina Monologues* the characters are alone. Like coping with these like horrific things that are happening to them…. And then, Wanda, I also think it's interesting that you and I both are now in male dominated fields! Like construction only has 3 percent women!

They talked about the commonalities between their industries, sharing statistics and further evidence of women being degraded, harassed, or simply outnumbered and ignored. They also continued to draw upon the play and referenced a connection to the content, and this, I saw as evidence of the play's continued influence.

Story two: Whiteness and intersectional feminist activism. All four women of Color spoke about the pervasive whiteness present on campus at NWSU and in the state in which NWSU is located. As Maggie was speaking about her confidence in addressing politically-charged gender issues in the conservative region in which she lives, she transitioned to talking about her appearance (as a multiracial woman) and the affects that has on her credibility to talk about race. "I present as white. It's very hard to talk like an authority figure because I was raised by my white mother." Nina, also multiracial, mentioned how she feels *The Vagina Monologues* should be updated, "you know you do see so many 'violations' I'll say, you know, whether they're gender-based, race-based. You're seeing that. And so, this is why… I just wonder how the monologues are going to reflect this time." As we further discussed the ways they saw or did

not see themselves reflected on campus or in the play, Erica was particularly direct about the play (as an example of "white feminism") serving as a pathway into other forms of involvement,

> *The Vagina Monologues* were sort of like a gateway for me into a lot of other social issues. And I guess I would have to say that I have moved away from white feminism towards like intersectional feminism and working a lot more with … especially race issues that are happening.

The complexity of the interrelationships between race and gender are just one way that this study attended to intersecting identities and refrained from limiting the conversation or the analysis to gender alone.

In their collective interview, Erica and Sandra discussed the ways the play has influenced their perspectives on intersectional feminism and their engagement in activism today. Erica described the ways that *TVM* has raised her awareness and served as a "gateway into a lot of other social issues." She also described how her initial limited awareness has expanded, shifting her perspectives on feminism and activism in today's socio-political climate:

> I guess I would have to say that I have moved away from white feminism towards like intersectional feminism and working a lot more with especially race issues that are happening in. . . . There are a lot of things going on right now that are very like charged. So, I'm just sort of like educating myself about all of the other things that impact people who are minority groups and recognizing that, as you know, a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, woman who… or white person who happens to be a woman, I still have a tremendous amount of power. And so, I think [my] understanding that and recognizing that, and moving in the world with that knowledge, has helped. Well, yeah, [*TVM*] helped me move into different places with my feminism.

Today, Erica works as a paralegal for the YWCA, an organization that has been deeply engaged in intersectional feminist work for the last several decades. She described, "we just… they just had a rally yesterday for the family separation. So, we're doing all kinds of stuff. It's really exciting."

Hearing this, Sandra also connected this story to her own perspectives, "I really like what Erica said about it… kind of like opening my eyes to all the other kind of like social issues that are out there and how those issues intersect in individual people." In her individual interview, Sandra had mentioned gaining critical perspectives on white-cisgender feminism, and how focusing just on gender (or race) was problematic in her career in education. "And it has really opened my eyes to all the intersectional issues that women face. Like how important to have all the different voices represented and to let people speak from their own experiences." She sees this experience as an additional point that she can make when she is applying for teaching positions, "I have worked with various different people and that's, you know, something that people in education really strive for is you know catering to every single student that walks through your door."

Both Sandra and Erica expressed how the play affected their thinking about feminism in the time since college, even as they critique its sometimes-limiting influence on their early feminist thought processes. Erica shared how she was today (at the time of the interview) living on the west coast, married, and has a son, who is a toddler. She said she was anticipating a daughter, not a son: "I didn't want to have a boy. Because I felt like having a girl was going to be much easier for me. And I was gonna raise this really strong independent woman." As we discussed the experiences of raising sons (as I also have two boys), Erica commented,

> But in in hindsight, I'm glad that I have a boy, because now I have the opportunity to raise a sweet, sensitive, progressive, good, man . . . or whatever he is… I mean that ties in a little with my feminist perspectives, I guess, about the world in the way that our genders lend themselves to power and give us the advantages we have.

Story three: Raising feminists. Mona and Carla also spoke in depth about parenting and instilling feminist perspectives through conversations with their children of all genders (both have daughters, and Carla also has a son). Mona shared her initial misconceptions about feminism with Carla, "just the whole idea of feminism and what kind of a misconception I guess that I had before [*TVM*]" but then said how "a lot of messages will resonate with me today, still. Yeah, and especially in the way that I 'mother.'" Even though her daughter is only three, Mona said she wants her to "really [learn] what feminism truly is and to advocate for women. And so, I just want to be able to talk to her about those things and instill into her those kinds of things." Carla immediately responded about how, while her children were pretty young at the time she was in the play, they were still "picking up on the subject matter." She said she thinks about it today and has decided,

> it turned out to be a good opportunity to start those conversations. You know about how to respect others, how to respect ourselves, what does it mean to be a woman, and why should we have a greater concern for not only the women that we are or related to, but [also] other women in our local communities and outside of our communities.

Carla talked about how she uses *The Vagina Monologues* to continue that dialogue with her teenagers today—especially with her son. She said, "it's allowed me to have these good heart-to-hearts with my son about, you know, his role as a male in society and where he can benefit and provide help." Carla's son is now in high school and she said she sees this influence in his

choices of peers, as well. “As the years progress, it’s interesting that he seeks out other male counterparts that have good solid relationships with their moms and their sisters and are ok with him being around and being respectful towards other women.” In summary, Carla emphasized the bigger picture and how her feminism is constantly present in her role as a parent and in the community. She described,

> participation in *The Vagina Monologues* allowed me to realize how I can better serve others in my community by, you know, just like shedding some light, you know, what we as women struggle with and are, what things are imposed upon us and how we can fix them. You know, just like dialogue… just by talking or just by like small actions of changing our behaviors.

Whether their activism is on a larger, community/societal scale (in terms of Erica and Sandra) within their careers (Tonia and Wanda) or in the ways that feminist perspectives influence parenting (Carla and Mona), the play influenced both women’s feminism and activism. In these examples of the conversations we had, the women validated each other’s experiences, connected their own stories, acknowledged past pains, and made new meaning together.

Influences on Career and Purpose

As they discussed their current work and careers, many of the participants drew connections between their involvement in the play and their employment trajectories since college. In this section, I share the conversations we had about their work lives and how participation in the play has affected their career, professional networks, and purpose. In the table below, I present a summary of the career pathways of each woman.

Table 5.1: Pathways to Current Career

Pseudonym	Age	Pathway to Current Career
Carla	36	Transferred to a nearby campus to complete a nursing degree. Now works in healthcare (nurse) in a conservative (predominantly Mormon) area near the state capital.
Erica	35	Came to NWSU as a transfer, non-traditional student. Volunteered and later worked for a community advocacy agency. Proceeded next to work for same agency as a domestic violence shelter attendant and advocate. Now works as a paralegal at a YWCA in a big city on the west coast. Considering law school.
Maggie	30	Graduated with a degree in Psychology and moved home to live with her mother. Works as a florist in a flower shop in a small town in a conservative area. Wants to get her doctorate in Psychology.
Mona	30	After spending a year in prison, returned to NWSU and graduated with her bachelors in theater and minor in Spanish. Went on to earn a counseling degree and now works as a drug/alcohol addiction counselor with an outpatient clinic in a medium-sized city in a nearby state
Nina	26	Recently graduated with a degree in sociology and emphasis in criminology. Worked at the local comic book/costume/adult store. Recently hired as a correctional officer in a nearby state
Sandra	26	Came to NWSU from out of state. Graduated a few years ago with a degree in political science and public relations and worked for a while in a "corporate job," but decided to go back to school for a degree in teaching. Currently completing her master's degree in secondary education with a teaching certificate.
Tonia	33	Volunteered extensively with a community advocacy agency, later worked for that agency and for NWSU, helped draft Title IX protocols and policies after the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter. Later moved to a nearby state and worked as a 911 operator. Currently works for an advocacy agency that helps address inequity and harassment for women in the building and construction trades.
Wanda	26	Completed her degree in environmental science. Post undergrad, conducted avian bird research and engaged in environmental policy work in a number of locations (including worked in Washington D.C.) has returned several times to one field research location studying albatross on Midway Atoll. Now in graduate school working on an NSF-funded research project studying house mice eradication on Midway.

Of all the women, Erica most directly pointed to the pathway from the play to her current career. She said in her individual interview,

> I will say that like it's interesting because this sort of like set my life on the trajectory that has gone on… in that, you know [local advocacy agency] was the beneficiary of those funds, and I began volunteering with them. And, because of that, [I] still work in DV work. So, I think that was like the main effect that it had on my life, I guess. Which is pretty big.

As we discussed her current work and future path, Erica talked about a possible law degree as there is a need, in her area specifically, for attorneys who will do *pro bono* work for women going through divorces because, as she said,

> the system is not set up for [those women] . . . And you know, so I get to see a lot of those like really specific cases where, you know, abusive men in most cases are getting children because the power lies in their hands and they usually have control of the financial resources. So, I kind of oscillate between …. like family law and doing that sort of a practice would be my choice.

Her work with the YWCA has also spanned into immigration with family separation, and Erica is also engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement. She said she was also interested in "maybe doing something that's more on a macro level where I'm working for an organization and just, you know, civil rights type stuff…So, I think my feminism has definitely branched out into those movements."

Looking back was one way to note the influences on career, but for Wanda, having experienced a great deal of sexism in the biological sciences, she emphasized how *TVM* affected how she is approaching applying for graduate school. She described, "the power of being in a group of really empowered and strong women is something that really pushed me forward and now is pushing me into graduate school." In fact, as she looked for graduate programs, she said

she wanted "to be back in that kind of a group, like a group of very diverse women." This led her to find a faculty member who shared her values. She described her new advisor as:

> …very passionate about getting women in science and giving them space to grow and she keeps up this awesome blog about women in the field and how we prepare for that. And she's very focused on that. Because there are a ton of women that are in conservation biology and ecology, but a lot of times they're not so much in leadership roles. When I work in the field, most technicians are women, which is kind of surprising, but then most crew leaders and most scientists that are either the principal investigators or whatever other managers—they're usually men.

Two former cast members spoke of *TVM* leading them into education in some capacity. Today, Sandra is finishing her master's degree and teaching certificate with the desire to become a high school teacher. After she graduated from NWSU, she started work—at "a corporate job," which based on how she described it, I perceived was unfulfilling. But, even in that field she said, "I kept my involvement in *The Vagina Monologues* on my resume, like when I applied for a job after college." She shared this humorous story about that job interview,

> Actually … the person that was interviewing me asked me about it… He kind of said it like it was *hush-hush* almost, like he didn't really want to ask me but he [was interested] and he was like really awkward about it. And so, I explained to him what *The Vagina Monologues* was, and he was embarrassed! I think it was kind of a funny experience but at the same time it really just opened my eyes—even if you're not doing like anything involved with any kind of social justice—like if you're not working in that field, you can still spread what you know to other people and they can take it to heart and do their own research with it or whatever.

She described this as prompting her transition out of corporate life into education as a quest to raise awareness,

> I think that's something that will always ignite a passion to make a difference. And I think that's just because of like personal experiences that I went through and also like being in *The Vagina Monologues* … opened my eyes to how big of a difference education can make and . . . I mean that's what I want to do for the rest of my life is, you know, work in education and wherever that leads me.

As she reflected on how her career goals shifted from corporate work to education, she said these experiences "have only helped me you know bring me closer to my goals of being like a truly great teacher and that is really powerful." As she concluded her time at NWSU, Sandra was recognized with several awards. She commented "I have a placard hanging in my office right next to my degree, and awards that I received from the Women's Center. I have all of that stuff and it just. . . . I mean it makes me feel proud."

Mona, who now works as a drug and alcohol counselor, said "I always kind of wanted to be a teacher. And I just, you know, knowledge to me is very valuable. And how we can try and reduce the ignorance and stigma around things." She described the group counseling sessions that she leads and the connection to her involvement in the play alongside the inevitable fear of trying something that might seem risky or unfamiliar,

> . . . that's a lot of what I'm able to teach my clients today, you know, who are dealing with wanting to stop using and not relapse . . . well, it's the same thing. How do we embrace that discomfort and push through it? . . . So, group [counseling sessions] gives me the opportunity to do that and use my performance background, too. It's funny how, on face value, it doesn't seem like these things would be connected in terms of, you

know, a theater degree, a Spanish degree, with a chemical dependency degree. Right? But I'm able to use somehow use all of that and I feel like I needed all of that.

Mona talked about learning this interconnectedness and value of a theater degree from a faculty member at NWSU. She shared how that particular faculty member

> always used to talk about that even if you don't go into theater or film, you will use these experiences later in your life . . . she was so right . . . I wouldn't be able to teach any of that stuff had I not gone through it or understood it myself or learned it from someone else. And so yeah, it's just really a blessing and I feel like it's [her work as an addiction counselor] is where I'm supposed to be.

Carla is also in a "helping profession" as a nurse in a conservative, predominantly Mormon area, near the state's capitol. She described her nursing philosophy:

> I always try to help patients that come in, I'm like you know you shouldn't be ashamed. If you need to tell me stuff, feel free. I'm not here to judge. I'm just here to help. And so, you know, I live in a pretty conservative area and I can't tell you how many people are like 'Well I think I'm pregnant, or I think I have STDs, and I'm like… Like what symptoms are you having? Then let's talk about this… here's our plan of action that the doctor will probably prescribe and again no judgment here. You know, I'm just here to help.

She said, "After being in *The Vagina Monologues*, I realized it was just being myself. Being interactive and social and being kind and healing and also too, gently nudging people to get out of their comfort zone."

Carla noted,

> being involved in the Women's Center and being involved in *The Vagina Monologues* has turned me into a warrior to look out for others that came from a similar destination or from a similar point of origin. . . . Trying to find themselves in a world. And heal. Get resources so they can become their better selves and operate at a higher level. That's where my passion is being a mom and community member and health care worker.

She summarized, "I was thinking about how [participating in *The Vagina Monologues*] was such a critical point in my life. [I] polished up my identity and my whole purpose of existing besides like just my given hats that I wear now you know like as a nurse and community member." A result of participating in the play was, according to Carla, the way it "truly shaped me to feel comfortable with myself so I can be of support to other people."

In a tangible example of how she uses this social skill in nursing, Carla said:

> I know I have a gift on being able to interact with so many different people of different origins and coming from different backgrounds and whatnot. And really pride myself on the fact that, you know, I can get a 70-year-old… cowboy that comes in, And I still find space and I can create space where I can show him that we do have something in common you know. But outside of like my brown skin and [his] weathered white skin and [his] cowboy boots I realize I have a gift and I have a power. And I try to make small little gestures in order to help us help others that want to be helped in finding what is it that they're looking for.

Tonia talked specifically about the theater skills and public speaking abilities that come from theater performance. She explained her current line of work with a non-profit organization that engages in gender equity work centered in the building and construction trades. Tonia

portrayed how storytelling is now central to her work as the Director of Advocacy for the organization:

> Public speaking has become an active part of my work. In fact, the experiences in *The Vagina Monologues* helped me start doing public speaking when I worked for [former advocacy agency]. And now at [current activist agency], I actually do that for [these] women. So, we do a whole thing where we look at how storytelling is a part of the advocacy for them in the industry and how to use storytelling in different contexts.

Tonia described the overall influence and realization she gained from her involvement, "I would say [*The Vagina Monologues*] was pretty influential on my life. It was maybe the tipping point for me to realize how powerful that storytelling and how it affects advocacy." Tonia explained further the ways that education, sharing detailed information, and connection to the feminist themes of the play have shaped the stories she uses to advocate and address the harassment in her industry. She described,

> I also help women craft how to talk about your experience. How do you do that in a way that feels good for you and true for you—but it is not triggering. And then how do you use your personal story to move whatever it is that you're working on forward? So, like how do you tell a story at your union meeting? How do you tell a story to your boss? How do you use that as an engaging and effective mechanism to create cultural change? …I spend a lot of time working with tradeswomen to develop [their stories]. [I say], 'Okay great. You've got a wonderful story now. How do you tell that in three minutes? How do you tell it in ten minutes based on where what context you're in and what you want the result to be? And how do you pick which story because none of our lives can be fully encapsulated in three minutes or thirty minutes or even an hour.

Clearly, telling stories is central to their method, but it also works with advocating for legislation, where national and state policy work for women in the building and construction trades can also make meaningful change. Tonia emphasized that a handle on the facts and figures, as well as on the individual impacts, is critical. As an example, she shared some statistics about the differential treatment of men versus women in the construction industry,

> we see that on average white men complete their apprenticeship programs at a rate between like 53 and 55 percent, white women complete at a rate of 27 percent. And then women of color are only competing at a rate of eight percent. And when they've done studies to find out why, like issues of harassment and sexual assault are right at the top of the list. And then second underneath that is inequitable training where they'll bring on a brand-new guy who's never held the power tool in his life, and just set him free and he gets to do whatever he wants, and he gets to learn all this crap and the women just don't get the same training.

Tonia ended by saying, "Anyway sorry, [for the] side note! We think about this stuff all the time like . . . how do we get to that systemic conversation as well as [the story] from that individual." Tonia's tangential comments about the industry statistics affecting the women she works with, reminded me of the interludes in the play, where Ensler integrates vital statistics on issues facing women across the globe, which she labels as "vagina facts," making the very real point that statistics are essential to telling the larger story.

At the time of the interview, Nina had just graduated from NWSU after completing two bachelor's degrees (political science and sociology with an emphasis in criminology). She had recently finished an internship with the [state] probation and parole office and loved it. When we

spoke for the individual interview, Nina was awaiting word on an application for a correction officer position at the [nearby state] penitentiary.

While waiting to hear about a permanent position in her field, Nina worked at a comic book/costume/game/adult store in the town where NWSU is located. The co-owner, Christy, and her partner, Tara (pseudonyms) were longtime supporters of the Women's Center and *TVM*. In the years since she was on the *TVM* cast, Nina said this work [at the local adult store] allowed her to remain engaged and supportive of the cause. She said "I still do continue to go and sell vibrators and chocolate vulvas at the monologues or whatever production that they [the Women's Center] are doing. We also sell the tickets as well." Nina reflected, "And it's nice to still be a little involved, even if I'm not in the production. I feel like eventually I want to be in the monologues again… I feel like it was definitely one of the highlights of my sophomore year." Today, she described her everyday work

> I'm having conversation with folks about sex and health and everything all day and so it's pretty regular conversation for me but remembering that not everybody talks about all of these things all of the time. So be delicate, you know, let them come to you. Be approachable.

Nina imagines her future career in the department of corrections will be very different. Nina said, "my mother likes to remind me that [given] the field that I'm going into [I] will probably [find that my coworkers] are not going to have similar opinions to mine. Because it's, you know, it's a very interesting field." As Nina took a risk to step out of her comfort zone and work for the Women's Center, then audition for the play, and then later work for the adult store in town, her new pathway sounds even more interesting. She considers the dynamics in this new environment,

> I'm hoping that there are a lot more females in the corrections system now working. And I didn't do too much with gender studies and in the correctional system, I kind of wish I would have. I feel like as well as *Orange Is The New Black* is doing—even though it is a show—it is really bringing up a lot of issues that people don't think about. People don't want to think about people in prison or jails. But that show is really bringing a lot to light, which is fantastic. Yea, so that's my new trajectory. And a lot of people really don't understand it and that's OK."

I have no doubt her future career as a corrections officer will be significantly different, but still require a level of self-confidence, a topic to which I will now turn.

Influences on Self-Confidence Through Vulnerability

There is a paradox between making oneself vulnerable and expecting, as a result, increased self-confidence. And yet, the vulnerability required to perform in the play influenced the women's self-confidence later in their lives. I found that for the women in this study, self-confidence was borne from putting themselves in vulnerable positions. Therefore, vulnerability and self-confidence are not mutually exclusive concepts, but rather overlapping themes that all of the women in this study spoke of in one way or other as influences of the play on their later lives. Perhaps it is the "taboo" topics addressed in the play, the fierce and direct tone of the words themselves, or maybe it was the fortitude college-age women must muster to go on stage and bluntly share the intimate details of women's sexuality in the script. Regardless of the origin, there was something about making oneself vulnerable on-stage that led to increased self-confidence later. Wanda described it as "a *Vagina Monologues* backbone." In this section, I will share stories of how the women in this study drew upon the confidence they had gained through participating in the play.

Vulnerable then, confident today. The subjects of the monologues, the blunt descriptions, and the (what some would consider) vulgar language required a level of self-confidence that later empowered women in unexpected ways. Mona, who today works as an addiction counselor, spoke about how, in performing her role in the monologue *Reclaiming Cunt* the act of reclaiming that particular word diminished its power and this, today in 2018, allowed her to open up about other topics in her life. She portrayed the overall experience of the play,

> because to be honest, it's not an easy show to do, right? It's not easy to talk about a lot of the things a lot of the subject matter that is in the monologues […] As I said before it's really helped me find my empowerment and become who I am and the person that I am today. You know it really has helped shape a lot.

Mona also described how she is able to integrate her perspectives on vulnerability into her work as a counselor. She explained,

> Because I think you know one of the things I talk about a lot is this misconception that strength is not showing vulnerability, not showing emotion, not crying. You know being an adult being strong...physically...I think it's much more of a risk to be vulnerable and show emotion.

Mona also talked about her addiction in our collective interview with Carla, "the things that I've been through—a lot of it is taboo. You know a lot of people wouldn't feel comfortable talking about some of those things." But Mona found that in sharing her own struggles, she is breaking the silence around addiction, in the same way that *TVM* broke the silence for women on the taboo aspects of sexuality. She described,

> the play itself is a very taboo play. You know even today, even ten years later, even you know when it was first written, it's always been taboo like that… it helped me to be, you

know, just kind of more accepting of myself, but also then kind of shedding some of that self-consciousness, I guess.

Despite her willingness to speak about the play being taboo, she continued feeling vulnerable while sharing her experience with conservative in-laws,

> [they'd say] "What did you do in college, Mona?" [they knew] I majored in theater. "What are some of the plays that you did?" And although this one [referring to *TVM*] was really impactful in my life, I'm almost, like, I hesitate to share it with some people, you know, because I so have some of that, you know, fear of being judged and being rejected and, oh my gosh, this is such a taboo thing!

Carla responded to Mona's comment, agreeing and also emphasizing the power of being openly vulnerable "on a social platform" around taboo topics because, "I do find usefulness in that because [sexuality is] something that is often too [shameful] and there are others that feel the same way and are looking to network to feel normal or feel safe." In her new life and role as a nurse in a more conservative area of the state, Carla said she is often identified as the person on staff who is able to connect with patients who are dealing with something others consider "taboo." She described how she is "able to help build community … being okay with my vulnerabilities and able to share the strength [I] have accumulated from being comfortable … with others and recognizing that when I see others that, you know, maybe looking for me."

Maggie also spoke about feeling confident to have honest conversations about controversial or "taboo" topics, particularly as the lone liberal in both her workplace and in her family. She shared,

> I've always had feelings like how we treat women in society and how we treat children in society and how we treat minorities in society. I always felt it was wrong. But I never

> knew how I could convey it in a confident way. And since doing that [*TVM*] I've been able to do that with my friends, my family, my boss.

Despite her local community being conservative, Maggie says that she comes across as nonjudgmental of differences. She shared her approach,

> I found that a lot of people are very receptive as long as you're very polite and interested in what they're saying, that they're very receptive to opposite ideas, which has actually been very helpful especially since the election and how politics have been so divided. I'm kind of like the subversive liberal but they're willing to listen to me because I'm not really hard-edged about this kind of stuff anymore. I kind of softened since then about it. So, it's been a little bit easier to find middle ground with people that way, I think.

Maggie's role, in a small community, in a center of community life—a flower shop—is often to be the "lone liberal in this conservative area." But because her approach is congenial and friendly, and because "support for Trump has been lessening," she has "noticed a lot more open discussion and dialogue that's happened before in this community." She said, I've gotten a lot of questions about the more liberal perspective or the more socialist perspective or a 'millennial perspective'—that's what my boss's husband likes to call it!" But she's quick to qualify,

> I would never ever call myself any kind of like expert about that kind of stuff, but I love that they're wanting to learn about that kind of thing and they're wanting to learn the other side and they're not wanting to just listen to say Fox or like whatever news sources that they were listening to.

It's apparent that the community is, according to Maggie, "becoming more open minded about the whole thing."

In the collective interview, Nina also shared a story of being in a vulnerable position, saying what she needed to say directly to make her point, but then having the confidence to simply walk away versus engage and become extra combative (proving the stereotype of the 'angry feminist'). Nina shared a story of an incident that occurred after a recent first-date with a man. After several moments of good conversation, the guy made an ignorant comment about equal pay and Nina spoke up on the wage gap, "and he looked at me, and said, 'you're not one of those *feminazis*, are you?'" She described the overall scene to Maggie and me:

> it was appalling. But I mean it definitely has . . . No, since that year I've changed, like a couple of years ago I would have this laid into him and been done. And then he would have had just the best lunch he would have had it with a *feminazi*.

She reflected on the confidence it took to *not engage,* and said, "I decide who to let in my life. Because I don't need to be combative. I don't need to . . . It's not my job to change their mind if they're not open to having a dialogue."

Asserting their needs in relationships was another form of confidence the women in the study spoke about as an act of vulnerability-as-strength. In some ways, Wanda's path to auditioning in *The Vagina Monologues* was typical; like other feminist activists, Wanda came to the auditions and saw her involvement in the play as another way to express her feminist beliefs. In other ways, her story was unexpected, given what I know of Wanda's achievements today. In essence, the story she shared in the individual interview, is one of personal agency and confidence gained through public vulnerability. She told it best:

> So, for I guess all the way up from when I started school all the way to my senior year, I had a pretty embarrassing speech impediment and it really [held me back] . . . I know I was very shy and getting in front of a group of people was probably the most terrifying

> thing in the world and I just hated any type of public speaking . . . And when I was a senior in high school, I just was so sick of it. I was tired of not being able to say what I wanted to say in class. I was tired of the anxiety that I would get when I had to do presentations and I was tired of being bullied by people for the way that I spoke.

Wanda was prompted to overcome her speech stutter and lisp during her senior year. She described the process,

> I thought well I'm just going to go to speech therapy and see if I can fix this because it's just been annoying, and I feel like it's holding me back as a person. And my parents are always really supportive. They said, 'You know you sound fine the way that you are you don't need to change anything. You know we love you as you are.' So that was always really nice and so they were equally supportive either way… I started speech therapy about a month or two before I graduated [from high school] . . . within about three sessions it was gone, and I could talk normally. I was like, 'Oh my gosh a whole new world [opened] up!'

About the same time, she finished speech therapy, Wanda learned she would be giving the valedictorian's address at her high school graduation. Beyond receiving her diploma and highest honors, "the biggest part of the graduation was just the fact that I finally had the confidence to get in front of a big group of people and speak clearly. So, I think this started to change things a lot when I got to college because I finally felt like I could speak normally."

Wanda's confidence was only enhanced once she overcame her speech impediment. Wanda thinks her confidence was there all along, just hidden, given her parental influence.

> [it's] simply a fact, my sister and I have grown up in a specific environment and upbringing where we were always told that if you have an opinion about something you

> should be prepared to say it, and you should back it up… That you should stand your ground also be open minded if you have reasoning for something that you should be able to use that. You use logic! You should be tenacious in what you do if you start projects, you should finish it and you shouldn't be deterred by others.

In relationships, Wanda's confidence and strength is interpreted as intimidating. In the collective interview with Tonia, Wanda talked about the end to a recent long-distance relationship, in which she felt,

> I need to get out of this… I started to assert myself, and I think the biggest thing there was like having the confidence to say, 'yeah I do deserve this.' And not be like, 'I hope I don't hurt somebody's feelings when I assert myself.' Then I mean, 'No! I need to step on his toes dammit!'

Wanda's relationship ended a short while later. Wanda said strength and confidence in women has been the interesting subject of much discussion between her sister and her, "Usually men—in our age range—who are getting to know us or seem generally interested in us always say that we [my sister and I] are really intimidating and competitive." In addition to the parental influences, Wanda also shared this insight about the influence of the play,

> there is, like, this lasting confidence… and also awareness, that whatever things I have been through, either personal stuff or challenges in the workplace . . . a lot of times I think back to all of these narratives from *The Vagina Monologues*. OK, like those are women who have gone through really tough challenges—how would they react to this? Like, how can I take the wisdom from those stories and apply it to myself and where I am now?

For someone who began this experience from a place of newfound confidence having just overcome a speech impediment, Wanda's key takeaway was

> [becoming] more confident, just how I thought about my body, and like how I approach that and that it wasn't something that scared me, it was OK to speak about them in public and also encourage others that, it's okay to use the word 'vagina' and it's okay to speak about these very personal things and this shouldn't be a zone of fear at all.

In this final sentence, I find there is incredible power in Wanda referencing speaking, voice, and confidence. She took the wisdom of the stories from *The Vagina Monologues* and applied it to her life and where she is now. In the next section, I delve more deeply into the power of engaging in storytelling as advocacy and connecting over stories together in the collective interviews.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I addressed my second research question: through recounting stories of their experiences, how do the women in this study explain the ways taking part in TVM influence their post-collegiate lives? As women told stories to each other and to me in the collective interviews specifically about male dominated workplaces, whiteness and intersectional feminism, and raising feminists, I identified several common influences on feminist identity and activism today. In looking at the women's stories about their career pathways, it's clear there were some influences on their career and purpose. And finally, the women shared stories of the vulnerability required to participate in a "risky" production like *The Vagina Monologues* and how that has influenced their level of confidence today.

CHAPTER 6: SENSE-MAKING, STORYTELLING, AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP

It was Sir Isaac Newton who said, "To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction." Had he been a writer, he might have simply said, "To every action there is a story."

Take Charm's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.

--Thomas King (2003 from *The Truth About Stories*)

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) contended that narrative researchers "simultaneously embrace narrative as a method for research and narrative as the phenomenon of study" (p. 7). My third research question, In what ways does feminist narrative methodology enrich the study of and praxis within higher education, emerged as a separate finding through the course of the study. This was because I recognized that feminist narrative methods, while scant in higher education literatures, are indeed an effective tool for unpacking student experiences, particularly with affective co-curricular events. While sharing stories helped the women in this study make sense of the ways taking part in *The Vagina Monologues* influenced their college experience and post-collegiate lives, something unexpected occurred through the process. Our discussions, particularly in the collective interviews, led to increased clarity and deeper meaning not only for the participants, but also for me. The ability and desire to tell one's story is, what Kramp (2004) labels a "vital human activity that structures experience and gives it meaning" (p. 104).

In this chapter, I summarize the broader findings related to the research methodology of feminist narrative inquiry and discuss the ways utilizing this methodology enriches the study of and praxis within higher education. Then, in the second part of this chapter, I explore three

examples of this method's contribution to the study of higher education. First, I review storytelling as tools for advocacy and social change. Then, I review the meaning-making structures that emerged as the women in this study told their stories about their experiences in the play. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of one specific model as an example of the ways this methodology might contribute to existing research, like Baxter Magolda's (2001) model of self-authorship.

Feminist Narrative Knowing in the Study of Higher Education

Feminist researchers believe the perennial politics of gender in society makes research into the gendered aspects of human experience relevant. Despite some progress for (mostly white and cisgender[6]) women, the current socio-historical movement both globally, nationally, and locally increases the imperative for researchers to explore gendered lives through feminist methods. I employed an interactive process of storytelling using a method of feminist narrative inquiry in order to understand the ways that the women in this study made meaning of their experiences during college. This section serves as a meta-analysis of storytelling experiences, but in other ways, it uncovers an important methodological choice, to inquire how the narrative inquiry *feels* to the women in the moment as they participate in it.

How can studying experiences (and stories about experiences) be considered a feminist method? Feminist scholars have discussed the importance of attending to experience as a source of knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). In fact, narrative accounts of experiences and "how these feel, remain central to understanding similarities and diversity in gendered lives, and to investigation of inequalities, injustices, and institutionalized power" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, pp. 123-124). As women in this study engaged together

[6] In the limitations section in the next chapter, I will discuss the lack of representation of trans and genderqueer voices in this study.

in storytelling, several expressed deeper feelings and realizations after hearing the stories other women shared. Tonia commented,

> I think, for me, like how I'm feeling right now … [I] feel really connected to both of you and, that's a common experience that I have, that when hearing both the similarities and differences of ways being in *The Vagina Monologues* affected . . . or being involved in any way . . . *The Vagina Monologues* affected you both.

As she described to Wanda and me her current work with tradeswomen, Tonia described the power of narrative in feminist advocacy and how her time in our collective interview further reinforced this powerful advocacy work.

> I often think about the power of storytelling. I spent a lot of time doing leadership development for tradeswomen and a lot of that is me talking to them about the importance of their stories and the importance of their voice. And, I think, this just underscores that for me again!

Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002), in the chapter of their book on feminist methodology entitled *Knowledge, Experience, and Reality*, discuss how knowledge and experience of a specific event (in this case, rape—an appropriate topic for this study) can uncover both the individual and contextual as well as the larger continuum of women's many different experiences with sexual violence. They stated, "feminists take rape seriously because people have particular experiences. Sharing accounts of these experiences builds not foundational facts, but knowledge of what the experiences conceptualized as 'rape' are like" (p. 129). Sharing accounts of rape creates empathy and connections across differences, expanding knowledge and general understanding. Wanda, speaking about the candidness within the community of women on the cast who openly shared their own traumas, highlighted this importance:

> we find a way to link ourselves to the speaker, like, even if it's like this . . . vastly different life . . . we can find, like, a little piece of ourselves there and helps us form, like, a more realistic perception of the world because we're always kind of bound by our own boundaries and our own experiences.

The ability to link oneself to the speaker is the type of empathy and connection that results in deeper understanding and social change. Mona also spoke to the importance of connection. She said, "I learned the value of storytelling and being able to share our experiences. And when we share in these human experiences, we have really no other choice but to connect." As Wanda shared, this process does not just exist in the social sciences. In environmental biology, Wanda described storytelling has a bad reputation. She said,

> I've noticed . . . immediately [data] gets totally pulled away from the personal and the 'story' . . . [it] gets so focused on outcomes and success and somehow quantifying that . . . And, it drives me nuts because I feel like things become very dry, and just like you're hitting checkboxes . . . Like all the color kind of fades away like it doesn't really become a dynamic, full story.

When Wanda talks about the "color fading away" from descriptions when personal narrative is omitted, I saw immediately the value of including storytelling as an essential part of inquiry processes, regardless of the field.

The design choice I made to keep the collective interviews small (just three people) allowed for open and honest sharing. A deeper connection was also drawn from prior relationship. In only one of the four collective interviews did the two former cast members know each other; Mona and Carla were both on the 2009 cast. Mona, evaluating the feelings she

experienced in the collective interview with Carla, drew a connection with a prior experience of shared human connection,

> I remember having very, very similar experiences when I joined Alcoholics Anonymous and was getting sober. And it's that whole same kind of idea: when we have a shared human experience, it doesn't matter what our differences are because our differences are many. But I think we're far more alike than we are different and that's really when it helps us to identify and relate with [each other].

Carla's response shows that power of connection, as she thanks Mona for telling her story,

> My heart goes out to you, [I had] no idea what you had gone through during and slightly after [*TVM*]. Going through the monologues and that just makes me feel like and feel honored that you came [today], sharing this with me… it gives me the courage to work. Here's a beautiful person that's going through things, but still has the ability, like the phoenix rising, to recreate them self again. So, I think that's what I really took away from participation in this [the collective interview] and then the monologues.

Carla's response today, having known Mona back then, is a powerful statement on the power of this collective interview method.

Listening to the stories the women told, hearing them discuss the significance of these stories, and then recount the impact of the larger process of being in community with one another during the collective interviews was an important part of the feminist narrative inquiry methods I employed in this study. The process of narrative knowing, and valuing individual experiences was made more powerful through the use of collective storytelling. Further, the connections, new meanings, and deeper feelings about the experience of being in the play that

emerged during the conversations created powerful connections among the participants and me. In short, a feminist narrative methodology enriched this study in many varied ways.

Storytelling for Social Change

Participants shared memories of the play's content and specifically talked about the stories that Eve Ensler wrote into monologues, based on her interviews, as tools for social change. This section points to the research question on which this chapter is grounded. Engaging in feminist narrative/storytelling can become one tool student affairs educators might use to engage students. The conversation about social change among the women in this study led to a discussion about their own use of a story telling as a form of advocacy today and a revelation about the power of storytelling for moving social movements forward.

Tonia spoke most directly about her discovering that storytelling has incredible power to move advocacy forward on a large scale. She said, "I feel like I do a lot of public speaking for my job now as well, and I feel like *The Vagina Monologues* was a part of that like drive to do that." Her attribution of her participation in the play has partially to do with the specific monologue she was cast to read that first year (the *Coochi Snorcher*). She told Wanda and I that after people saw her in that cast role (a particularly intense monologue) women began disclosing sexual assault stories to her. She said, "I think part of what drove me to go to [volunteer at the local advocacy agency] I was like oh my gosh, like people are telling me these things and I don't know how, I don't know how to handle that." She then shared,

> but I think I think some folks, even though they consciously knew that that wasn't my story, it somehow felt like it was . . . or [they] labeled me as a person who could handle that intensity, even I'd never necessarily thought of myself that way.

Tonia's telling of the story of a young girl made her approachable and welcoming. By sharing her story, she created a safe space for those women to be honest about something that had happen to them. She said it made her think about, "how little safe space [women] have to be open about these very real things that they hold every day by themselves." Tonia, who now works with women in construction trades, said her time in the play made her realize the importance of the act of telling a story, even if it is not your own. Additionally, the physical theatrical stage was also significant. She said, "I actually liked the piece of being on the stage and really I think that started to form my understanding of how important storytelling is to moving advocacy forward." This quote from Tonia circles back to the third research question undergirding this chapter by describing the ways that feminist narratives enriching the experiences of former students through storytelling.

Later, she and Wanda and I were discussing the main "takeaway" from the play both then as a college student and now five to ten years later. Tonia shared this powerful sentiment,

> I don't know that I would talk about storytelling in the same way that I do now. Then, I think it would have been my take away was the confidence I gained by being onstage and telling a story that was both gut-wrenching at times but also funny at times and sometimes both at the same time. So, I would say it was a lot of confidence… a lot of like being connected with other powerful women helping me feel more powerful and strong… Now, I think I would identify that as the storytelling. It is the voice, it is how we use our own voice and everyone's voices and their stories to create more connection and to bring about change.

Maggie, in her individual interview, also discussed the power of her involvement in the play as a place for opening up conversations about feminism and social justice. She said,

> it just made conversations about not just feminism but like social justice kind of actions like the Black Lives Matter movement and things like that have been a lot easier to talk about especially with my more conservative family members and things like that.

In her community in the southern part of the state, Maggie often engages in conversations, in which she is often seen as the "subversive liberal." She described conversations with her boss, a man,

> . . . but we can have political discourse and we can have conversations about things like *The Vagina Monologues* and domestic violence and things like that. And he respects my opinion on it because he knows that at least I've done a little bit of research behind it and then I'm not going to yell at him and tell him that all men are pigs and stuff like that, which I think he expects… that's not what's going to happen. And so, I think it's kind of helped shift his mind a little bit.

Maggie's description prompted me to consider the extent to which, in spaces where relationships matter, true advocacy only occurs when there's a genuine connection and a personal story. And, it seems like Maggie's approach is not just individual, but also larger than that. She described, "so I think for activist outreach, I want to focus more on being able to reach people and teach them." This was the greatest takeaway from my interview with her, that in her way in her corner of the world, she's working to change minds.

> To describe it . . . I just keep going back to like the whole educational aspect and education through the arts . . . like when you go to this play, like yes, it's a story, it's great, you're going to learn all kinds of fun stuff, but you're also going to learn stuff that is going to stick with you. And that's kind of how I want to describe it to people. It's like not just a play, it's an amazing experience. And you're going to learn something not just

about the world, but about yourself… And it's really easy to engage, I think, in a theater production because it's like actual people right in front of you.

After hearing how stories and theater are fundamental to changemaking, as shared above by Wanda, Tonia, and Maggie, I consider the ways student affairs educators might allow for the sharing of personal stories and for personal connections to be made both inside and outside of higher education. With regard to my third research question, then, I find that story telling is a powerful tool for engaging former students in reflection and meaning making. In the recommendations section, I will return to this thought as I consider the ways in which feminist narrative methodology, as described in this study, might influence future interactions with students who seek to advocate for causes through storytelling.

Sense-Making through the Stories They Shared

The use of feminist narrative methodology enriches not just the study of higher education, but also student affairs educator's praxis in helping students make sense of the experiences they have while in college. As I described above in the third chapter, I prompted the women in advance of the collective interview to come prepared to tell a story or memory about their involvement. Then, during the collective interview, at about the halfway point, after some rapport was established, I asked the women to turn to these stories and share with one another. After the first woman finished telling her story, I asked something similar to the other woman, "what reactions do you have about her story? What resonated with your own experience? What questions do you have that you'd like to ask her?" Participants generally came with a story in mind and shared brief summaries with each other. I did this intentionally, because I wanted to see how this technique might be useful for deepening sense-making. As I looked at the data, I saw patterns, overlapping themes, and generative meaning emerging from these stories. In this

section, I share emergent commonalities and differences among the stories. I found four overlapping story threads: mothers, a positive community of women, risk-taking, and feminism. Therefore, regarding the third research question, I conclude that this finding indicates there is usefulness of this narrative technique as a tool for reflexively understanding student experiences in higher education.

Stories About Mothers

Two of the women (in different collective interviews) shared stories about taking their mothers to see the play. Both of these stories resonated with me as well, as I had also taken my mom to several of the productions over the years. Upon reading these stories, I thought about the ways we help students think about the stories they will tell about their involvement (or share these experiences directly in person) with the supportive people in their lives. If feminist narrative methods might affect praxis, asking students about these collective/shared experiences with family members could be one way of opening the possibilities of deeper meaning. Here are the stories they shared about mothers.

Tonia's story about opening healing conversations with her mother. Tonia shared a story about taking her mom to see the play later during college, after she had already been in it. She talked about how it opened up communication with her mom and allowed for the two of them to have healing conversations about the trauma they had both faced. She summarized,

> and I think it's significantly shifted her and my relationship because we have these new contexts and way to talk about this thing that was deeply impacted both of our lives . . . But that they like she never talked to her siblings about it… I think it changed the way that my mom thought about things and how she considered trauma and that also opened up that pathway for her and I [to] have a different relationship.

Maggie's story about coming out to an anti-feminist mother. Maggie shared, similar to Tonia in a different collective interview, a story about asking her mother to see the play the first year she was on cast. Maggie had already known her mother was "anti-feminist" but after Maggie approached the subject of her coming to NWSU to see her, explained the play was "more of an activist kind of thing where we'll be spreading education about what's going on," her mom agreed to come. The second year, after Maggie told her mom she was on the cast again, Maggie said her mom exclaimed, "'Oh, when is it? I'm going to get tickets, I'm going to come up and bring your sister!' Now she's really excited about it!" For Maggie, the sincerity that her mother expressed was a signal of her emerging openness. Maggie shared,

> And now she's like… she still has her old thoughts about that but she's there because at that moment it's opened up a lot more dialogue into the social justice kind of aspects. I came out to her after that about being pansexual, which she didn't really understand about all that, but she was more open to that conversation and I felt more comfortable opening up to her about that.

Stories About a Surprisingly Positive Community of Women

In the previous chapter, I shared the complexity of relationships with women as a major finding from the data analysis. Not surprising, this theme also emerged in the collective interviews as two women shared their meaningful memories about finding unexpected safety among women. Related to the third research question, when feminist researchers seek women's stories, how often do they look for the unexpected or surprisingly positive accounts? An important finding, therefore, is to give women's voices primacy within the research process.

Nina's stories about forming safe connections among women. Nina recounted several short memory snippets, which she called "choice moments that were just so collectively great,"

about connecting with other women from the "vagina workshop" (the retreat), to watching the *One Billion Rising* movie, to connections with the other women on the cast forged partially through the nervousness of being on stage. She described,

> when our opening night came, everybody was just very jittery and kinda nervous, but you just knew that everything was gonna be okay because you're surrounded by folks that you know, and it was it was just this this amazing support system of folks that were all there for one reason, and it was that solidarity, I think, really stuck with me.

Nina mentioned, in both her individual interview and in the collective interview, a lack of "female influences" in her life before that point. She said, "I definitely think before the *Monologues*, before working at the Women's Center, I had up a lot of guards and a lot of walls and those were just going to get crushed." When she began interacting with the women, including Sandra, who is now one of her best friends, Nina said the attitude among these women was "'hey you're going to open up and we're all going to be friends.'"

Carla's story about TVM as a non-judgmental feminine space. Carla described a memory of being "awestruck and having a happy, functioning, empowering, wonderful working relationships with other females" as the key takeaway from her time on the *TVM* casts. She also referred to the space as one which allowed her to be "more in touch with my femininity" and also simultaneously questioning, "What is it like to be feminine? Is it just being a mom? You know [motherhood as feminine] is just so obviously stereotype … is that the only hallmark or objective of being feminine?" As a wife and mother entering the cast, Carla's involvement in *TVM* allowed her to consider these questions, and she stated,

> I don't think it was with [the play], being comfortable with yourself and being comfortable around other women. So that's the thing that really struck me. I tried to keep

in the back of my head is to have this full and rich experience with the people I'm involved with.

Stories About Auditioning as Risk Taking

Two women—Wanda, who had no prior theater experience, and Mona, a theater major—both spoke about the risk-taking involved in auditioning for the play because the topics were uncomfortable and taboo. In each case, when the women told their story during the collective interview, the other person listening was deeply engaged as the story was revealing and personal in and of itself. This revelation caused me to consider how the process of feminist narrative knowing brings forth a vulnerability among all participants—including the researcher, who is entering into an unknown space.

Wanda's story about challenging herself and making others uncomfortable. Wanda's story in the collective interview was, in essence, similar to what she had shared in the individual interview. She told Tonia and me about how after overcoming her speech impediment her need to audition was borne of her desire to challenge herself and overcome residual self-consciousness. She described the play being an attractive outlet because it was about "a topic that made people uncomfortable." She summarized,

> it's kind of like ongoing evolution of character and getting comfortable with my voice and my thoughts and learning how to enunciate things well […] *The Vagina Monologues*, was talking about things I know can make people uncomfortable … like diving into it—I find it to be really, really, really addicting and less scary.

Mona's story about vulnerability with other women. In her collective interview with Carla and I, Mona talked about her very first year, walking into the auditions (after being recruited by a graduate MFA student) completely unaware of the content of play:

> I showed up and they were doing cold reads and I was like the last to go … And so, I, you know, I feel so self-conscious and embarrassed. You know, it's because it's just not something, especially in my particular family, we just don't talk about stuff like this, you know. It's just kind of like a taboo subject.

Mona shared how she "freaked out and panicked" but eventually overcame these feeling of self-consciousness as she let go of her fears within the community of supportive women. An experienced theater student, Mona reflected on the power of the play to create a safe place.

> Why is this play able to foster that more so than other [plays]? And I think it is because it … it takes such a risk. And you know you have to let go of those fears to be able to step into any one of these pieces. And, I think in doing that then you get to… again, you get to be your most authentic self. And, how can that not help you to have good strong empowering relationships with other women…. [as] you let go of those fears [I saw] how more authentically you can connect with other people.

Stories About Feminism

While I heard echoes of feminism in all of the stories the women told each other, Sandra's and Erica's stories most directly pointed to the feminist perspectives of the play affecting their perspectives, identities, and lives. Perhaps this is the most obvious story theme, and should not be that surprising to emerge, however, as a researcher keenly interested in feminist methods, to hear stories about feminism brought everything full circle. This left me considering if my use of feminist research methods, in labeling them as such, brought forth feminist perspectives among participants?

Sandra's story of feminist identity. Sandra shared, like Nina, a number of moments during that year she was involved in that shifted her way of thinking towards more feminist

perspectives, which she carries with her today. She shared how, despite being cast for a "pretty small part" she, as a work-study student in the Women's Center, got to help a lot with advertising and other awareness-raising initiatives,

> I put up like *One Billion Rising* wall… and I think having it like tied in to the larger kind of like global movement [for women] and was really helpful for me especially having like the smaller part in the local production… helped me to see like the bigger issues and how we were helping on a bigger scale.

That year, Sandra said "being in the play was eye opening for me. I was kind of new to like everything about gender equity and feminism and I think this was like a really good like pathway." She went on to share how this has "reflected in my professional life," she went on to talk about how she kept that involvement on her resume, and that

> when I interviewed for my corporate job right out of college, the guy asked me about it. And he wasn't like weird about it or like offensive. He was genuinely curious! And once he found out—I think the name kind of threw him—but once he found out like you know what it was about and like why people were doing it, he was like more settled in it. So that was kind of a cool experience, too.

Erica's story of feminist connection to TVM themes. Erica's story, shared with Sandra and I, recounted the emotionally abusive relationships she was in during the time of the production, but how that connection was significant to her involvement. She shared, "I remember like feeling like this was a really important thing for me to do because I was a big believer in all of the you know the themes around that production." So simultaneous to the production, she described the conflict in her personal life was causing her to "realize that the, you know, the themes that I was experiencing in my relationship were, you know, definitely related to the

themes in the production." The themes in the play were echoing in her own life and Erica talked about how her involvement illuminated the abuse, "there were a lot of things that contributed to me realizing what was going on, but I think *The Vagina Monologues* gave me a really clear picture of what was going on." She shared how, after the play, she tried to leave many times, but his

> general attitude around that was 'Well, where are you going to go? How are you going to leave me? You don't have any way to do that.' And he was right. I was living with him. I didn't really have the money to… to live on my own because I was in school and not really working.

The relationship ended after Erica graduated, and Erica today works as a paralegal for the YWCA with victims of domestic abuse.

In all, the stories the women shared provided evidence of the power of storytelling as sensemaking, further making the case that feminist narrative methodology enriches the study of and praxis within higher education.

Moving Toward Self-Authorship

Self-authorship is a holistic model of development describing "internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). In the model, self-authorship exists at the nexus of three aspects of development—cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. This study of the meaning women ascribe to their experiences as cast members in the play provided an effective longer-term vantage point to situate findings about self-authorship. This model provides a "rich conceptual lens for understanding the development of complex epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal capacities associated with student development

and maturity in effectively navigating adult roles and responsibilities" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 491).

The process of developing self-authorship takes place over time in four phases: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation. Each of these phases exists along the three dimensions in which individuals might ask questions about various aspects of their basis of knowledge, their identity, and their relationships with others. In the first dimension of cognitive development, the answer to the question, "how do I know?" moves from believing what one is told, to moving toward an internal belief system. In the intrapersonal dimension, individuals might explore "who am I?" as they move from defining themselves through the eyes of others to creating an internalized, coherent sense of self. In the third dimension of interpersonal development, as individuals ask, "how do I want to interact with others?" in relationships, they move from seeking approval from others to relationships that are grounded in mutuality (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In the sections that follow, I explore how feminist narrative methodology enriches the exploration of self-authorship in reflective interviews. In short, the women in this study articulated evidence of their development toward more complex cognitive processes and beliefs, a coherent sense of self or intrapersonal identity, and mutually beneficial constructions of interpersonal relationships with others. I propose these findings as evidence this methodology might be applicable within higher education research to confirm other established models, like Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship.

Moving Towards an Internal Belief System

Regarding the women's cognitive development, the clearest example emerged as the women shared stories of the ways the play "ignited" or complicated feminist beliefs, which alongside thought processes about their career and purpose, provided evidence of movement

toward self-authorship. Maggie, for example, spoke extensively about her mother's anti-feminist perspectives and how she developed her own thoughts and transmitted those beliefs today:

> I've been able to have a more honest conversation like with my mother, specifically, who is very anti-feminist—which I did not know growing up because she kind of kept that to herself—which I'm grateful for it because it gave me a chance to grow my own thoughts that way. But we've [recently] had really hard honest conversations about things like immigration …and the #MeToo movement and stuff like that … I keep pushing at her that [her perspective is] not right.

Mona described her emergent knowledge on feminist thought and her need to see her own vision and incorporate that into her internal foundation. She said,

> I didn't understand what it was to be a feminist….1970s hippies, you know, without any shirts or bras on, running around… And that's when I think back about it now, that's kind of the big thing that sticks out for me … I didn't know what I was getting into … [I] had no idea how really those [feminist beliefs] would carry with me, you know, into adulthood and into motherhood and, I'm sure, my future.

Both of these examples show evidence of more complex thinking about feminism and movements toward foundational belief systems that drives these women's understanding of the world.

Moving Towards a Coherent Sense of Self

The women also spoke about a sense of internal grounded-ness, self-confidence, and an authentic sense of self that emerged over the time since their experience in college. Maggie, who in the time that had elapsed between her individual interview and the collective interview, spent

time thinking about the ways that she wanted to apply what she'd learned in the play to her self-definition. She said,

> The biggest thing that I've realized since our last talk is a lot of a sense of confidence in my own self, in my ability to like *own* the "consent queen" that I was talking about earlier. And the sex positive stuff is me reclaiming my sexuality, which I just did not have till I was, like, 25 or 26 actually.

Wanda also talked about owning the values that are central to her identity as a feminist. She described a recent disagreement she had with a former friend, that tested her sense of self, grounded her, and solidified her identity. She described this process of learning to become "more protective" of herself. She shared,

> I guess like the way that I approached it was to take a step back. Like, I think that equality and equity are very important. They are values that I hold very highly, like, no matter what the nature of the relationship is.

Tonia talked about her intrapersonal development that occurred for her around the time of the play. And how her grounded-ness and sense of self moved from seeking external validation from her community (she was a straight, married Mormon woman at the time) to who she is today (a single lesbian). She described,

> I see it as a shifting moment in my life where I went from feeling really confused and not knowing what direction to go . . . to feeling very empowered and recognizing that not only my voice, but all the other women's voices who've been on the stage, and now all the women's voices that I interact with are critical for us to make a world that I want to live in, at least.

At the end of our individual interview, I asked Tonia a question about the process of looking back and what feelings had emerged. Tonia spoke about power of engaging in a conversation about something that was for her so formative. She described, "I think it's helpful to look back and see how things change and shift your identity. I think about it a lot."

Moving Towards Mutually Beneficial Relationships

The women spoke of the ways they constructed relationships and how they are more conscious today of forming mutually beneficial connections with "like-minded individuals with similar goals, but different stories" (Nina). From platonic friendships to romantic partners, the ways the women spoke about their relationships was evidence of interpersonal development. Erica described the emotionally abusive relationship coinciding with the play. She said the "themes that I was experiencing in my relationship were, you know, definitely related to the themes in that, you know, production" and then spoke about meeting her husband later. Today, they are married parents of a one-year old son living on the west coast.

Nina, Carla, and Wanda each described as they reflect today, the desire, especially in a conservative state or male-dominated field of finding mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships with other women. Tonia described, "I've been a lot more intentional about cultivating feminist communities for myself" and this prompted Wanda's response,

> …in terms of relationships and like cultivating friendships . . . One thing that's come out very strongly and I really like what Tonia said! Yes, absolutely I've done that. That was one of the things I'm trying to cultivate… these circles of feminism and critical thinking.

Mona bemoaned the competitiveness among women and how that has prompted her to seek more connected and trusting relationships,

> I just really reflect a lot on how unfortunate it is that we see each other as threats, as opposed to, you know, mutually respected people as women. And we can't come together in that? Although I'm seeing more of it. And I've been able to cultivate more of those relationships in my life, you know, in large part since this experience.

Carla agreed (as a nurse, she said she has been in several toxic all-female environments). She described an approach that has worked for her that maintains mutuality and protects herself in the process,

> And it might just come down to that scarcity feeling like something's at risk and that's where women lash out at each other. I don't know. But since *The Vagina Monologues* I know that there is a possibility of working and having fruitful relationships with other women. And so, I use that as my standard, and if I can't obtain something that's healthy and non-toxic that way, I'll find a happy medium and, you know, pull myself back and only allow myself to have access to these negative folks when I have to, in the working environment. It's a bummer. But it is what it is.

In summary, the findings from this study show the ways that women moved along the journey toward self-authorship, while also complicating the theory in significant ways. The participants talked in more depth and detail about the affective and relational aspects of their experience, than of the individualistic and cognitive processes. The complicated interplay between individual and community is missing in the theory of self-authorship and in this way the collective nature of the play complicates Baxter Magolda's theory.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I engaged in a meta-analytical discussion about the methodology of this study—a process called feminist narrative analysis—as a tool for understanding women's

individual experiences and centering women's collective voices. After exploring the literature in chapter two, I found this form of narrative inquiry methodology is largely unused in the study of student affairs and higher education. In writing the findings for chapter, I identified that this methodology brings forward a powerful tool for advocacy and social change, a method of using stories to reveal a deeper, collective meaning, and a pathway towards discussing established theories/models like self-authorship. As the collective interviews, in particular, showed this methodology allowed for the participants and me to discuss the power of storytelling to move advocacy forward. As stories were shared, patterns and identified connections between and among the stories emerged that revealed sense making structures and self-authorship. In the next and final chapter, I offer a broader discussion of this and the previous two chapters of findings and discuss the wider implications for practice and scholarship.

CHAPTER 7: TELLING STORIES AS FEMINIST METHOD: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND SCHOLARSHIP

This study explored the stories of eight women who during their time in college participated in a production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Through a feminist narrative inquiry methodology, I addressed the following research questions:

1. Upon reflection five or more years later, how do women ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences as cast members in *TVM*?
2. Through recounting stories of their experiences since college, how do the women in this study explain the ways taking part in *TVM* influenced their collegiate and post-college lives?
3. In what ways does a feminist narrative methodology enrich the study of and praxis within higher education?

In response to the first question, which I primarily addressed in chapter four, the meaning(s) women ascribe to the play as they reflect upon their experience years later are many and varied. The first overarching theme present in the women's reflections upon their experience was change and transformation or the play having a "catalytic effect" on their lives in some significant way during college. I call this theme *catalyzing change in college*. For women unfamiliar with feminist thought, their involvement "ignited" feminist activism. For those women whose lives had felt constrained or limited, participation in the play signaled a kind of personal rebellion. For women who were survivors or had experienced trauma, the play moved them toward a healing place. For many of the women, the engagement transformed their purpose or made them think more deeply about their career pathway or subsequent engagement on campus. The second theme evident in the women's reflections on their experiences in the play

was the play helping women form connections with other women and form communities of support. I call this theme *connections and community*. Women spoke about their desire to connect with a community of support and their surprise when they found a positive community among women within the cast. They also spoke about the complicated relationships with connecting in exclusive women-only spaces and about the potential of theater as collective action to promote social change. In short, the ability for the play to catalyze change and foster connections were key ways the women ascribed meaning to and explained their experiences as cast members.

With regard to the second research question, primarily discussed in chapter five, the women in this study told many varied stories about the influences of the play on their collegiate and post-college lives. These stories of their lives since college indicated that the play influenced the women's feminist identity and feminist activism and the ways those beliefs influenced their thoughts, actions, and behaviors. This was particularly true for those women dealing with sexism and harassment in male-dominated industries, those whose awareness of their own whiteness prompted their feminism to become more intersectional, and those who are raising children and teenagers to be feminists. As women shared stories about their pathways since college, they talked about the ways participating in the play might have affected their career pathway and present pursuits. Finally, through telling often painful stories of personal failings, risks taken and avoided, and vulnerability in the face of fear, the women spoke of assertiveness and the ways standing on that stage fomented self-confidence. In summary, the stories women shared about their post-collegiate lives indicate that the play had a significant influence on their trajectories.

Finally, in chapter six, I address the third research question, added at the end of this study when the feminist narrative methodology seemed to be more of a significant contribution to the

study of higher education. In this chapter, called *sense making, storytelling and self-authorship,* I first discussed the ways that story telling was powerful in and of itself and how it contributed to the women's self-authorship. Then, I unpacked the power of this method for conducting a study of women's experiences. Feminist narrative knowing through storytelling emerged as significant because the findings indicate that the method itself, particularly in the collective interviews, had something new to say to research methods. Within the collective interviews the women in this study experienced telling their stories, listening to the person sharing, reflecting and relating their own experience, and compounding and deepening meaning and sensemaking. In short, this method contributes a new and different way of conducting feminist research with students—a method already at the margins—in the study of higher education.

Having succinctly summarized the findings with my responses to the research questions, I will now turn to a more detailed discussion of this study's contributions to the following bodies of higher education and student affairs scholarship: co-curricular involvement, Astin's college impact model, and long-term/longitudinal inquiry. Then, I will outline the distinct methodological contribution this study makes through use of feminist narrative knowing highlighting the importance of students telling stories about singular and collective gendered experiences. I describe some of the limitations of this study, recommend future research to continue and expand inquiry, and then conclude by identifying implications for practice in student affairs and higher education.

Discussion and Synthesis

The eight women who participated in this study ascribed meaning to their experiences with a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues* through a process of reflection and telling (and retelling) stories about their time as cast members. The stories shared by these

women illuminated the many ways participating in the play influenced their collegiate and post-collegiate lives. As I described in chapters four through six, the broader themes that emerged through the process of data analysis were catalyzing change in college, connection and community, influence on post-collegiate lives, and sensemaking through storytelling. Overall, what I learned through this study was that in many ways, participating in the play during college was deeply influential on the remaining time these women spent in college and on their post-collegiate lives. The play held varied meanings, and the embodied experience of participating not only affected them individually, but also collectively.

Contributions to Literature on Co-curricular Involvement in College

First, this study makes an important contribution to the higher education literature specifically on the study of student involvement in college and the impact of co-curricular student engagement outside of the classroom. Before I proceed to discuss this contribution, it is important to note that while each of the women in this study participated in this play while enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at NWSU, largely they did not use the words "co-curricular," "student engagement," or "high-impact practices" when describing their experiences. The purpose of this discussion and synthesis section, then, is to provide a translation of these experiences into higher education and student affairs language and to discuss the ways in which these women's stories affirm, complement, or extend this body of literature.

The student affairs and higher education literature shows that engagement in purposeful out-of-class activities matters for students' growth and development (Astin, 1984, 1993; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b). Given this body of evidence in the literature, the findings of this study confirm that purposeful out of class engagement indeed matters and that these benefits

extend to years later. Indeed, as stories told by cast members five or more years after their experiences in the play demonstrate, a key contribution of this study to the literature on co-curricular involvement is this longer-term vantage point. Reflecting on an event that occurred five or more years ago indicates there are many long-term benefits of involvement that prior studies have not illuminated. Participating in *The Vagina Monologues* as an involvement experience during college contributed to these women's development and future trajectories. During college, the play served as a catalyst for future activism, helped students move toward healing from trauma, and helped them connect to communities of support and belonging. In addition, the play had a significant influence on the women's post-collegiate lives as they navigated hostile work environments, reflected on their careers and purpose, and raised children as feminists. In short, this study documents the many ways that engagement in out-of-class activities matters years later.

In addition, findings from this study contribute to the literature on the lasting impact of intensive campus involvement experiences, and specifically an embodied theatrical event like *TVM*. While the literature on embodied learning and embodied pedagogy have looked primarily at classroom-based learning, this study extends that to co-curricular campus involvement (Mathew, Ng, Patton, Waschuk, & Wong, 2008; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Perry & Medina, 2011). Furthermore, this study fills a gap in the higher education literature which, to date, has not explored the meaning of this play about sexual violence and awakening for college students. Since *TVM* is very well-known, enjoys a two decades-long history on campuses, and engages potentially thousands of college students each year, it remains surprising that scholars in higher education or student affairs have not yet studied its influence on college students. Therefore, a major component of his study is its contribution to the literature about a campus event that has

been relatively ignored in the literature. Considering the present sociohistorical moment and the push for continued activism related to the pervasiveness of sexual violence in society, exploring students engaged in *TVM*, this study further investigated theater as activism for social change. In short, given the gap in the higher education literature coupled with the play's widespread familiarity as an activist campus event to combat sexual violence, this study served as an effective "scene" in which to situate women's stories about their intensive co-curricular involvement.

Complicating the Temporal Dimension of Astin's I-E-O Model

The stories shared by participants and the resulting findings complicate Astin's oft-used college impact model described in the landmark book, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (1993a). Through this model, known as the input-environment-outcome (or I-E-O) college impact model, Astin discussed the ways that inputs, as well as experiences in the collegiate environment during college, affect student outcomes. Many researchers have taken up Astin's college impact model and applied it to various environments, populations, activities, and experiences to better understand the ways that different types of college experiences affect outcomes (e.g., Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Dugan, 2006; Flowers, 2004). In each of these studies, a key consideration for researchers and educators is to "specify the relevant outcomes, inputs and environmental experiences that are to be assessed" (Astin, 1993a, p. 8). Primarily, studies of outcomes and college impact (by Astin and others) have trended toward quantitative and positivistic (Kuh, 1993). Largely, studies employing Astin's I-E-O focus specifically on student characteristics at time of entry, the environmental attributes affecting their college experience, and the measurable outcomes. It is to the discussion of outcomes that I now turn.

Given my research questions, I was specifically interested in the noncognitive (sometimes called affective) outcomes related to meaning-making and reflection. Astin (1993a) described these noncognitive outcomes as "attitudes, values, self-concept, aspirations, and everyday behaviors" (p. 9). For the women in this study (as I described in detail in chapter five and six) the stories they shared helped them make sense of the various ways *TVM* influenced their attitudes, values, feminist activism, and career aspirations in the time period since college. For some, the play was a catalyst for feminist awareness and transformed their identities, for others, their self-concept in college in relation to other women was expanded. Some connected their larger life-purpose and engagement in collective action for social change.

Beyond the previously unexamined unique outcomes of *TVM* outlined above, the findings of this study also complicate Astin's model in one notable way: significant *time* has passed. The other primary consideration when applying I-E-O is what Astin called the *time dimension*. He noted that the collegiate environment and accompanying student experiences can have short- as well as long-term effects on students. While "most colleges intend to produce long-term versus short-term changes… long-term effects may be too remote and too difficult to comprehend… for students, then, college experiences are important in themselves, not merely for what they will mean later" (p. 12). While a prior study (Shea Gasser & Salsbury, 2012) shows anecdotal evidence of short-term effects of the play and influence on women's lives, it is precisely what the experience means upon reflection years later that prompted this study. Do specific involvement experiences hold meaning for these former students today? Since the findings bear out that it does hold meaning, this study also extends Astin's I-E-O model far beyond the model's usual reach.

I discuss two examples (samples from chapter five) to indicate that this specific experience affected these women's long-term outcomes in myriad ways. First, Sandra spoke directly of *The Vagina Monologues* igniting a passion to "make a difference" and the ways that her initial involvement in the play prompted her engagement in other leadership and involvement experiences on campus. She even credited the play for having "opened my eyes to how big of a difference education can make and . . . I mean that's what I want to do for the rest of my life is you know work in education and wherever that leads me." The significance of this outcome for Sandra is one of the ways that being able to reflect years later, allowed her to identify long-term outcomes. Second, reflection was also a powerful experience for Erica. She said,

> it's interesting because this sort of, like, set my life on the trajectory that it has gone on . . . in that [the local advocacy agency] was the beneficiary of those funds. And I, you know, began volunteering with them. And because of that [I] still work in DV work.

Each of these examples show how the play engaged women in deep and meaningful ways, ultimately affecting their long-term outcomes, career paths, and purposes.

Astin observed, "if [educators] focus on student outcomes, they limit their attention to outcomes that can be assessed while the student is still enrolled" (p. 12). Given that I extended the timeframe indicated by previous uses of the college impact model, this adaptation is contribution to the literature on the co-curricular. In other words, does *time*, in addition to inputs and environments, affect outcomes years later? The findings from this study would suggest that time does. As Sandra and Erica can attest, lifelong passions for engagement in education and community activism coupled with a "desire to make a difference" and a lifelong "trajectory" to work in the field addressing violence against women are significant. At the time of graduation, these effects (had they been measured then) might not have yet been realized. In this way, this

study contributes significantly to the literature on what involvement means years later for former students. There are bodies of literature that have looked at holistic student development over time, I discuss the ways that this study contributes to that literature next.

Contributions to Theory: Self-Authorship

As described above, studies documenting the ways specific involvement experiences in college affect students' development over long periods of time are relatively rare in the higher education literature. Those studies that do attempt to understand development over time are likely quantitative in nature (as documented by Mayhew et al. (2016) in the third volume of *How College Affects Students*) or emphasize overall development (not specific experiences), like Baxter Magolda's (2008) extensive longitudinal study documenting the holistic process of self-authorship. In chapter six, I talked about the findings related specifically to women's movement toward self-authorship, in this section, I describe the ways that this out-of-class experience during college continues to contribute to these women's self-authorship today. I end this section by discussing the ways that this study complicates self-authorship as a theory-in-use in higher education.

The theory of self-authorship, or the "internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269), is a concept popularized in the higher education literature by Marcia Baxter Magolda. Her longitudinal study following a group of college students into their 20s, 30s, and beyond built upon the work of Robert Kegan (1994). My study also contributes to this body of literature. While my study was not meant to be solely about these women's self-authorship, the holistic model of self-authorship does provide a "rich conceptual lens for understanding the development of complex epistemological, intrapersonal,

and interpersonal capacities associated with student development and maturity in effectively navigating adult roles and responsibilities" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 491).

This study of meaning women ascribe to their experiences as cast members in the play provides an effective longer-term vantage point to situate a conversation about self-authorship. In the examples provided in chapter six, the women articulated evidence of their development toward more complex cognitive processes and beliefs, a coherent sense of self or intrapersonal identity, and mutually beneficial constructions of interpersonal relationships with others.

Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) noted engagement in particularly intensive co-curricular involvement furthers college students' capacity for self-authorship; the findings of this study affirm this claim. The appeal of using this model to understand the eight women's meaning-making structures (as related to a specific co-curricular experience as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*) is significant. Of course, student affairs educators who want to know how their work contributes to student development may seek tools to gather this information. And yet, Baxter Magolda warned against investigating self-authorship effects until more time has passed. Pizzolato and Ozaki described how, in Baxter Magolda's longitudinal studies, participants did not develop self-authorship until years later. They indicate one reason for this might be that college and universities provide many "formulas" and "students did not have to think about how to get what they want or why they have the goals, beliefs, and/or values they do" (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 197). In my study, I had the advantage of stepping farther into the future, after the intensive experience has long passed. I found that the additional benefit of *time* provides opportunity deeper reflection on the meaning students ascribe to a particular experience.

In addition to the extension of self-authorship theory, this study also complicates the ways in which self-authorship has been conceived and enacted as a theory guiding the work of

student affairs educators as they work with college students in recognition of oppression. Recent calls to re-examine self-authorship in the higher education literature also emphasize the point that, given that Baxter Magolda's participants were White, the theory may not adequately reflect the journeys of students from minoritized groups (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Perez, 2019). The present study also makes clear that while self-authorship unduly emphasizes the individual's journey, development through relational and collective processes may speak more adequately to the experiences of feminists.

Contribution to Methods: Feminist Narrative Knowing

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that centers "narrative knowing" (many stories, many truths) as opposed to paradigmatic knowing (one generalized truth) (Kramp, 2004). This worldview is grounded in beliefs that: there is meaning in a multitude of experiences, these experiences are contextual, and inquiry into narratives is "built on a concern for the human condition" (Kramp, 2004, p. 108). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated "narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways" (p. 10). In utilizing a *feminist* narrative approach, I asked eight women to tell stories about their life experiences and their specific memories of a highly-gendered co-curricular college experience (a feminist play) in which they engaged with community of women. The eight women reflected on aspects of their feminist identity, sexuality, experiences with sexual violence, and relationships with other women. Clearly, we explored "gender" in its many sociological, psychological, and philosophical forms. And yet, just the many gendered layers of this study's subject(s) do not make it necessarily "feminist." It is not merely the investigations of gendered lives that makes a

research project feminist. Rather, it is the process by which the research is conducted—from start to finish—that signals this intent.

After reviewing the limited literature about the use of feminist narrative methodology in the study of higher education, it was apparent to me that this method has largely been underutilized. As the topic matters, so does the means of conducting the study. In alignment with my feminist frameworks, the employment of feminist narrative methodology provided the space and time for women's voices (often marginalized and discredited) to be centered. Reflexivity, the hallmark of feminist research, was central to my study. As a full participant in the collective interview process, designed with safety, empowerment, and voice in mind, I sought to minimize the hierarchy between the participants and me. Further, in writing full and complete narrative portraits, in conjunction with the participants through a continual member checking process, I retained the authenticity of these eight women's voices.

While I make the case that my use of feminist narrative methodology constitutes a contribution, I also want to describe the ways that, in staying true to the methodology, some limitations and restrictions emerge with implications for future researchers. With any research design, researchers make choices and tradeoffs that illuminate some findings and may obscure others. For example, I intentionally used an unstructured, open-ended, storytelling-focused, individual protocol, in which I, as researcher, asked only emergent questions from the first uninterrupted story. In doing so, I may have missed some opportunities to explore other avenues or lines of inquiry. What topics became "central" and what fell back as "peripheral" as themes in data analysis was certainly affected by these design choices. What might have emerged through a more structured question-and-answer protocol might have been likely more directed toward what I was hoping to find based on my own experience. For example, I was (and remain) curious

about the local political context (as a progressive town in a conservative, rural state). This rarely (if ever) came up in interviews. Perhaps a tradeoff, then, of feminist narrative methodology is allowing these topics to become peripheral to be truer to the participants' own stories.

In summary, this study of eight women's stories using a feminist narrative methodology enriches the study of higher education and student affairs praxis. Using feminist storytelling to uncover how individuals make meaning of their experiences in college upon reflection many years later brings to light opportunities for further research and practice, which I will address after I saw a few words about this study's limitations.

Limitations

This feminist narrative study of former college student's reflections on their involvement in a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues* contains several limitations. As I will address in this section, there are several research design choices I made to investigate the meaning women ascribe to their experience in *The Vagina Monologues* through a qualitative study focused on eight women at a single, unique institution.

Who answered my call to participate, whose voices are represented, and how do their (generally positive) perspectives on the play influence this study? The first limitation of this study is the representation of only cisgender women among the participants. As I have mentioned above, *TVM* has a conflict-ridden history with essentializing gender, narrowly defining the category "women," and directly excluding trans-masculine individuals from participating in "authorized" productions. In a previous section, I discussed these challenges in detail. Here I name this as a limitation because it also affected the perspectives of the participants. As Stewart Hall noted, "that *absence* means something and signifies as much as presence" (in *Representation and the Media*, Jhally, 1997, p. 15). While the local context for the

play was indeed homogeneous in terms of gender identity and expression, several trans individuals were cast in *TVM* productions during the four years I served as a producer of the play, but none agreed to participate in this study for reasons unknown. I am not assuming their experience was negative, but it is important to note, those who agreed to participate in my research, generally had a "good" experience as cast members in *The Vagina Monologues*. Given the trend over the past several years of campuses cancelling performances citing exclusion of trans individuals (Kingkade, 2015; Slagter, 2018), that there are no trans voices in this study deeply bothers me. Largely absent are negative perspectives or those who felt strongly excluded in the play. The meaning that the participants ascribe to the production—and the findings of this study—trend towards positive.

Related to the above limitation are the ways in which the topic of race and gender emerged in interviews. Also notable is how I, as a white cisgender woman, may have limited the openness with which the women of color in this study shared their experiences with the play's content. I note this here because I find a major limitation that race largely did not emerge within individual interviews. However, in the collective interviews (with both Maggie and Nina and with Carla and Mona) the realities of their racial experiences, both in the local/state context as well as with the content of the play was discussed. While the play itself is racialized (as discussed in previous sections), the lack of attention toward this in the findings is significant.

Given the widespread notoriety of *The Vagina Monologues* and the plays ubiquity on college and university campuses each February, a second limitation of this study is its single institutional context. While it was never the intention of this study to be generalizable to other campuses or to other groups of women who participated in a production of the play during college, those reading this study do not benefit from a comparison between student experiences

on campuses with different institutional histories or in politically diverse states. The many ways the politics, state context, and institutional history and the significant role all three played is relatively unexplored in this study. The unique characteristics of NWSU and progressive nature of the town in which the university is situated (compared with other state institutions in more conservative regions) might be just as much a factor as the women's stories. Certainly, context matters. In other studies of college students participating in student activism and social change (Barnhardt, 2015; Ivester, 2013; Kane, 2013) the campus's educational context and climate for inclusion and equity initiatives is an important variable in the study. The fact that the institutional context is largely absent is a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several interesting possibilities for future research prompted by this study. As noted above, participant choices, limitations of voice and representation, and other methodological choices might be important adjustments for future inquiry. In addition, there are sub-themes that went unexplored, which might be interesting topics for further discussion.

A future study could explore the experiences of trans and genderqueer individuals in the play and how they subverted narrowly-defined perspectives on gender by participating in the production. Perhaps more broadly, this discussion could focus on trans college students' experiences in other feminist campus initiatives or women-only spaces, a topic explored in detail from the perspective of historically women's colleges (Marine, 2011; Weber, 2016).

Other topical considerations include exploring the dynamics between community, staff/faculty, and students that existed among the casts in the NWSU production. Upon my own reflection, I recognized that this analysis was largely missing the intergenerational element. It might not be the case on other campuses, but with the NWSU production, each year several

faculty/staff, graduate students, and community members would also be among the 20 to 25 women on stage. This never came up in the interviews and in retrospect, I am fascinated by why. Informal, out-of-class opportunities for students to mingle with faculty is often cited as a key consideration for designing co-curricular student engagement (e.g. undergraduate research, campus internships, education abroad programs). Future studies could explore the interpersonal dynamic in more detail.

While comparing across institutions was also outside of the scope of this study for obvious reasons, a future inquiry framed as a case study could explore the ways that a study of *The Vagina Monologues* could be framed across various types of campuses (each campus being an individual case). Given the similarity between the production (including the "rules" imposed by V-Day), a cross-institution comparison of students' meaning-making might result in different findings if women from multiple campuses participated.

One methodology I strongly considered employing for this study was ethnography, which ultimately, I had to abandon given *TVM* audition cycles during the calendar year (factors far beyond my control). In an ethnographic design, I could audition and become embedded in a production for a calendar year, forming trusting relationships and developing a Participant Action Research (PAR) ethnographic study of the culture and experiences of the women as the production was unfolding. This method would have the joint benefit of my own reflection on my experience as a cast member (moving toward auto-ethnography) as well as students on the cast participating in writing and researching alongside me.

The final recommendation for future research would be to frame this study as a true longitudinal project, where women participate in individual and collective interviews before auditions, during the production, later in college, and then again five to ten years afterwards. A

series of time-and-place interviews, as opposed to retrospective reflections, would add strength to the discussion on co-curricular, high-impact practices above. As Brownell and Swaner (2009) note "there is a troubling lack of longitudinal data on high impact activities" (p. 3). And, those longitudinal studies that do exist (e.g., Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Kilgo et al., 2015) are largely quantitative in nature.

Implications for Practice

The stories shared by the eight women about their college experiences broadly and their engagement in *The Vagina Monologues* specifically have important implications for student affairs educators in higher education. The experiences of these eight women, while not generalizable to all college women, do give many areas to consider as student affairs educators work with college women, before, during, and after they engage in various co-curricular and/or high-impact experiences. As a student affairs educator who has designed and implemented a variety of demanding high-impact involvement opportunities on campus (e.g., student leadership conferences, mentoring programs, and education abroad experiences), I remain committed to improving my practice so students, years later, can articulate learning, growth, development or other effects. As I remain specifically interested in the ways in which students reflect upon these intensive experiences years later, and what those reflections might mean for my work, I think this study makes an important contribution to the literature about long-term effects with direct implications for our work. I believe that the larger field of higher education, as resources become exceedingly scarce, needs to better understand how in-person, high-impact involvement experiences affect college students. Scaffolding experiences, providing links to campus women's centers as resources, expanding the definition of HIPs to include many diverse experiences like *TVM*, and promoting further engagement once the intensive experience has concluded are

specific implications for student affairs work stemming from this study. Further, given the play's perennial presence on campuses and the number of students engaged in a production, I found that for the eight women in this study, the play retained relevancy and was vitally important to their life-trajectories. In what ways do student affairs educators reflect alongside students and look forward toward their futures? I explore these implications for practice in the sections that follow.

Scaffolding Learning Experiences and Meeting Students Where They Are

Each of the eight women in this study arrived at *The Vagina Monologues* auditions with different motivations. The reasons they wanted to participate varied significantly, as did their prior experiences on campus, identities/backgrounds, and levels of knowledge about the play or its perceived purpose. As with any intensive campus experience, student affairs educators should consider these various entry points and statuses and then intentionally design scaffolded developmental learning experiences that support students throughout their involvement. Student affairs educators and facilitators of such co-curricular experiences should consider the potentially harmful effects of ignoring prior knowledge and experiences or assuming that all of the students are experts on their own lives with little-to-no self-reflection or learning left to do. In short, administrators should consider the potential harm of a "one size, fits all" model. Whatever learning intervention is designed, it should address the needs of all of the students joining the production on that given year.

Given the play deals directly with sexual violence against women and the invisibility and silencing effects of sexual assault in society, those working with student cast members on a production should consider the ways cast members might bring these backgrounds as survivors to the cast experience. For several of the participants in this study who were survivors, like Tonia, Maggie, and Carla, the play served a cathartic, healing purpose. And yet, there is potential

for harm if students feel pressure to disclose prior assaults or if resources for counseling are not readily available. The play may also bring up previously unresolved concerns for students. Supporting students through this healing process means taking a trauma-informed approached where safety, awareness, trust, and choice/empowerment are provided. As Sandra and Tonia both discussed the ways that they were put in positions to serve as advocates for friends and sorority members who disclosed experiences with sexual assault to them after seeing them in the production, additional training for cast members might be important. And, while beyond the scope of this study, given the potential for triggering moments among cast members, like Maggie described when she heard the *Coochi Snorcher*, student affairs educators would do well to learn about trauma-informed approaches (e.g. Carello & Butler, 2014) as they engage with student survivors in educational contexts.

The other key component to keep in mind is the ways in which students learn and how they, in the case of *TVM*, are learning about the feminist themes of the play as part of a cast community. Exploring literature on effective learning interventions within classrooms (Lattuca & Stark, 2009) in high-impact practices (Sandeen, 2012), and in other "learning communities" (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003) could assist student affairs educators in building scaffolded group (as well as individual) interventions. Student affairs educators or student leaders should consider group development processes, timing of activities, and learning/training pedagogy beyond theater/performance skills.

Women's/Gender Equity Centers as Locations for Engagement and Belonging

Campus-based women's/gender equity centers, as feminist spaces for solidarity, engagement, education, and support facilitates the effective production of *The Vagina Monologues* as well as many, many other annual events on campuses across the U.S. A key

implication for student affairs and higher education is to recognize the vitally important role that these offices play on college and university campuses. Literature on the importance of women's/gender equity centers (Bengiveno, 2000; Kasper, 2004b, 2004a; Zaytoun Byrne, 2000) has recently expanded with a newly-published book edited by three women's and gender center leaders (Bethman, Cottledge, & Bickford, 2019). The new text describes the shifting landscape, support structures in higher education, key considerations for women's centers professionals, and expanded foci and scopes. This study, in particular, builds upon the importance of solidarity within women's/gender equity centers and points to these offices as places of support for students wanting to explore gender in its many facets. The fact that the women (specifically Carla, Wanda, Nina, and Sandra) in this study highlighted the importance of the women's center at NWSU in their own college experience is only one indication that these spaces should be preserved as they transform to better meet the needs of today's college student. The implication for the future practice in higher education is to refrain from discounting, silencing, or limiting access to women's and gender equity centers on college campuses. Given that the participants in this study found communities of support, locations and mechanisms for activism, and resources for various concerns they were facing, the continued support of women's and gender equity centers is imperative.

High-Impact Practices: What Counts and for Whom?

The findings from this study have implications for the ongoing discussion of High-Impact Practices (HIPs), what qualifies as such, and who has access. In the review of the literature, I discussed in detail the extent of scholarly work on effects of High-Impact Practices in order to make the case that student engagement in such experiences is meaningful and important to campuses and students alike.

In his introductory remarks in Brownell and Swaner (2009), Kuh specifically named the adaptability of the characteristics of HIPs toward other activities beyond the ten he named in his 2008 article for the American Association for Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). I identified several defining features of HIPs previously in this manuscript primarily to convey that while not specifically noted as such, *The Vagina Monologues*, was a significant "high-impact" educative student learning and development experience for the women in this study.

Specific characteristics of HIPs including "substantial time and effort," "shared intellectual experience with…peers" as well as "exposure to a diversity of novel ideas, worldviews, and practices" and "frequent and continuous feedback" were mentioned within the stories the women told about the time they engaged in the production between auditions to final curtain. For example, Tonia said, "there's a huge commitment of time in terms of memorizing your role and being there for practices." And Sandra spoke about the ways that *TVM* created exposure to diversity of novel ideas, worldviews, and practice, "I think specifically learning about the Native American community was really eye-opening and life changing." While exposed to a diversity of ideas, Mona spoke about the challenge of including this play as she talked about her college experiences as a theater major with her conservative in-laws.

There are two main questions about HIPs worth further discussion. First, higher education and student affairs administrators should ask what counts? Based on the stories the women told, *TVM* is as significant of a high-impact practice as any of the other officially named HIPs. For higher education and student affairs educators, the implications are to look broadly at campus experiences for what might be considered high-impact. Participation in student activism, identity-based groups, and provocative theater may be considered controversial, but these experiences may hold significant meaning for and have a great impact on students. This implies a

bigger question, in what ways are we, as student affairs educators, at the minimum acknowledging or preferably promoting engagement in these "alternative" campus involvement experiences, like *TVM*?

Related to this implication is the ways in which activist theater itself is an embodied pedagogy worth exploring in both co-curricular and classroom contexts. The visceral, embodied experience and movement toward action is a hallmark characteristic of performance and a unique learning experience. A key implication of extending the HIPs definition to include theatre is the implication, confirmed by Butterwick and Selman (2012) that, "theater processes can powerfully connect mind, body, and emotions, providing opportunities and spaces for transformation" (p. 61). Likewise, Perry and Medina (2011) described how "within performance pedagogies bodies can be acknowledged, made visible, and moved to the center" (p. 63). The high-impact nature of this play, then, is the way that women's experiences are made visible and embodied onstage and the ways that the audience and cast members learn as a result.

The second question with implications for student affairs is who is involved and how might these experiences be more accessible to students from low-income backgrounds (disproportionately affecting students of color and first-generation students)? While the literature states that all students likely from HIPs, other authors have noted that not all students have access and some groups are simply less likely to participate (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Some of the critique of HIPs has to do with making these time-intensive experiences more accessible to low-income students who must work to afford college (Kezar et al., 2015). A key implication then, for extending participation is noting those groups that are largely excluded from *TVM* and making sure that auditions, rehearsals, and performances, do not require so much time as to exclude participation.

Facilitating Involvement Pathways and Long-Term Connections

For Sandra as well as other students in this study, engagement in the play was a pathway to further involvement on campus. She described building upon the knowledge she gained and becoming increasingly involved in campus outreach and education efforts for violence prevention. Sandra's desire to "make a difference" was initiated within this involvement experience and then fostered in several other outlets on campus. For other students like Tonia and Erica, participation in the play brought increased awareness about the community agency (and beneficiary of funds raised), for which both of them volunteered and then later worked full-time. Both mentioned their engagement in the play as formative in their next steps (and later careers). The third implication for practice, then, is for student affairs educators to consider the ways in which intentional pathways for further involvement are facilitated or consider the ways students might build upon one experience and gain new and different skills from other programs.

Given the many positive outcomes associated with co-curricular involvement (e.g. Barnhardt, 2014; Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, n.d.; Kezar & Maxey, 2014), a broader understanding of what is available for students and helping them map these pathways at the conclusion of experiences seems like an important way to expand one-time, stand-alone events for a much bigger impact. Key for this implication's success is a coordinated, enterprise-wide system of tracking student involvement. Student affairs and higher education administrators should do the necessary developmental and cultural work of establishing some sort of campus tracking system (like a co-curricular record or experiential transcript) for documenting and validating non-credit experience coupled with allowing students space for reflection.

Coupled with the previous suggestion for building involvement pathways during their time in college, a further implication of this longer-term study is the ways in which students

reflect upon and tell stories about their involvement experiences years later. As student affairs educators are concerned about the long-term viability of campus programs that take extensive resources, perhaps collecting data about how co-curricular campus experiences translate to and become applicable in future endeavors, whether personal or professional, would help make a strong case for ongoing funding and support. For the time and effort students put forth during college, the intentional consideration of implication for student's future trajectories is key. Maintaining contact with students far in the future is a logistical challenge, but given social media and other communication tools, perhaps maintaining those longer-term relationships is possible. These long-term connections with former students might allow student affairs educators to maintain a presence in students' lives and in so doing learn from students' post-collegiate experiences in ways that student affairs, higher education, and larger society has not yet realized or appreciated.

If not through in-person/face-to-face relationships, then an important implication is how campuses might otherwise learn from students' campus experiences in digital spaces. Certainly, social media facilitated my connection with former students in this study. However, institutional record-keeping may be a more systematic way of attending to this data. Higher education administrators can further justify the establishment of a campus tracking system for documenting co-curricular involvement for institutional knowledge gained through aggregate data of student outcomes.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to understand to what extent and how women make meaning of their involvement five or more years after participating as a cast member in a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues*. In conducting narrative individual and collective

interviews with eight former cast members, I intended to add to the literature about students' outcomes and post-graduate meaning-making of provocative, high-impact, co-curricular experiences. The stories the eight women shared with me and with each other about their experiences in *The Vagina Monologues* show how, over time, former students ascribe meaning to and explain their experiences. Further, as they recounted stories from the past five to ten years, the many ways participating in *TVM* influenced their collegiate and post-college lives was apparent. Indeed, as the findings illuminated, there is incredible power in hearing and engaging with others' stories. In the cases of the women who participated in cast members in a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues*, their stories tell of healing from trauma, the importance of connection to communities of support, the cataclysmic properties of feminist activism, and the ability to integrate these experiences and create meaning years later. For me, this study brought together my personal passion, political lens, and professional pursuits in a powerful way. It is my hope that these narratives are instructive for others who see power in feminist activist work.

EPILOGUE

A Monologue for Carla, Erica, Maggie, Mona, Nina, Sandra, Tonia, and Wanda

vagina-community-love

you as an individual
you as a collective
you as a community

you came to belong,
to get "involved,"
to speak your truth,
to heal,
to stand up to abuse,
to break the silence,
to act,
to challenge yourself,
to get unstuck,
and to push boundaries.

you auditioned,
joined the cast,
memorized your lines,
rehearsed,
took feedback,
rehearsed some more,
sold tickets to
    your friends,
    your family,
    your sorority sisters,
    your professors.
told everyone you knew about the show,
or you told no-one. too risky.

you expressed your concerns,
your critiques of the content,
your criticisms of the play,
your knowledge that people—your friends—
    were excluded,
    or misrepresented,
    or tokenized.
    or hurt.
we heard you.
you showed up to be seen.
we saw you.

we saw your dedication,
your activism,
your willingness to be vulnerable,
your fear of the spotlight,
your belief in an equitable future,
your need to connect,
your desire for collective action
for justice-hope-change.

and, we saw your
anger
fear
pain
anxiety
vulnerability
on-stage, on opening night, we saw your confidence
the cast—together in solidarity

years and years have passed.

i reached out
"what meaning did this hold?"
you wanted to talk about it,
you couldn't wait to talk!
you talked for hours,
across time zones,
500 pages of transcripts,
you told stories,
you shed tears,
we talked individually, collectively,
in vagina-community-love.

we uncovered happy memories,
painful secrets,
places too dark to bring out into the light,
but in speaking them
diminishes their power.

despite fear and risks
you are out there,
graduated
working
mothering
moving mountains
advocating for survivors

telling stories
arranging flowers
tracking birds
representing truths
teaching kids

YOU are
Confident Carla
Empowered Erica
Magnificent Maggie
Marvelous Mona
Natural Leader Nina
Sensational Sandra
Tremendous Tonia
Wicked Smart Wanda

Aware, Fierce, Complex, Unafraid
Vagina-Warrior-You.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Participant Recruitment

Initial Facebook Message:

Dear ____,

Hello! I hope this message finds you doing well! I am connecting with you today on Facebook Messenger to find out if you might be interested in participating in my research study for my doctoral program. After leaving the Women's Center at [NWSU] in 2013, I began working on my PhD at Michigan State University. I am now a doctoral candidate studying Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education.

For my dissertation research, I am conducting a feminist narrative study of student involvement in a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues*. As a former cast member, I know how much time and intention you and others put into the [NWSU] production(s). I'm hoping you'd be willing to tell your story to me about the role that TVM played in your life during college and what meaning you ascribe to the experience today when you reflect on the experience.

I am aiming to connect with each study participant in an individual interview lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. Then, I'm hoping to bring together individuals in a "collective" interview so you all can talk with one another. My hope is that this study can contribute to my field's understanding about how undergraduate experiences influence students later and how students make meaning of these experiences years later.

If this sounds interesting and you would like more information, please reply and I'll send you the link to a quick demographic survey with an enclosed consent form (required for research with human subjects).

I look forward to hearing back from you!

Follow Up Facebook Message:

Dear ____,
Thank you for your interest in taking part in my study! I've created a quick demographic and contact information survey for you to complete:
https://msu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6KktlgnDqlbtER7 The first page of the survey is a consent form outlining the research aims, procedures, and measures to ensure confidentiality. Once I receive a completed survey from you, I'll schedule a time for our individual interview (hopefully in mid-April).

In gratitude,
Heather

APPENDIX B: Participant Questionnaire

Page 1

Post-College Reflections on *The Vagina Monologues*

A Dissertation Study by Heather Shea

INFORMED CONSENT

I agree to participate in a research study entitled *Undergraduate Students' Post-College Reflections on Their Co-Curricular Involvement in The Vagina Monologues* conducted by Heather D. Shea, from the Educational Administration Department at Michigan State University under the direction of Dr. Kristen A. Renn, principle investigator, Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University.

I attest that I am at least 18 years old, a requirement to participate in this research. I understand that my participation in this research study is completely voluntary. I have the right to say no. I may change my mind at any time and withdraw. I may choose not to answer specific questions or stop participating at any time. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research results, or destroyed.

The overall purpose of this study is to understand how former college students reflect upon their involvement in a particularly provocative co-curricular experience—a production of Eve Ensler's iconic feminist play *The Vagina Monologues*. By studying prior experiences and lasting impressions of their involvement, the researcher is looking to examine how students make meaning of these experience five or more years after graduation.

To take part in the study, I agree to participate in a narrative-style interview with the researcher over a thirty-ninety minute, recorded skype/phone interview. I may also be asked to participate in a group interview with other students who also served as cast members in a campus-based production of *The Vagina Monologues*. I will also be provided an option of submitting reflections in written, visual, or other medium. I may end the interviews at any time and may decline to answer any questions I don't feel comfortable answering. I may also ask to take a break during any portion of the interview.

The benefit of participating in this research study are to share the experience I had as a cast member to better understand students' reflections and meaning-making. The researcher hopes to make the case that this experience affects students and wants to know to what extent over time and how those effects were meaningful.

No major risks are anticipated. Any emotional discomfort I experience will be addressed by the researcher and referrals to support services will be offered.

I acknowledge that I will not receive any financial incentive or compensation for completing the interview.

No individually-identifiable information about me or that I share during the study will be shared with others without my written permission. I will be assigned (or will choose) a pseudonym that will be used for all written and verbal communication. All information obtained through the course of this study will remain confidential.

If I have concerns or questions about this study, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, I will contact the principle investigator (Kristen A. Renn, Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University, Erickson Hall, 620 Farm Lane Rm 423, East Lansing, MI 48824-1034, renn@msu.edu).

I indicate my voluntary agreement to participate in this study by clicking ">>" below.

Page 2

Post-College Reflections on *The Vagina Monologues*

A Dissertation Study by Heather Shea

DEMOGRAPHIC & CONTACT INFORMATION QUESTIONS

Please enter your first name and last name in the form below.
First Name
Last Name

What is your date of birth?
Date of Birth

How do you identify your gender?

How do you identify your race?

What is the highest level of school that you have completed?

- High School Graduate
- Some College
- Graduated 4-year College
- Post Graduate
- Prefer not to answer

What is your email address?
Email Address

What is the best daytime telephone number to reach you at?

Daytime Telephone
Number

What is the best evening telephone number to reach you at?
Evening Telephone Number

What year did you participate as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*? (click on all that apply)

- 2009
- 2010
- 2011
- 2012
- 2013

This concludes the demographic and contact information questions. By clicking ">>" below you will complete this survey. The researcher will be in contact with you soon.

APPENDIX C: Individual Interview Protocol

Hello.

Preparation
It's great to see you again, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I am currently a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education PhD Program. I am collecting narrative interviews from participants in a production of *The Vagina Monologues* at the University of Idaho between 2009-2013 for my dissertation study.

I am interviewing several members of the cast and crew from 4 years of *TVM* productions at the University of Idaho, I am using the pseudonym, North West State University (NWSU), but we can refer to it as the University of Idaho, so it's not confusing. All of the information that we discuss will be confidential and I will use a pseudonym for your name. You will not be identified in the manuscript or on any documentation related to this study.

Because of the nature of the play and some of the themes of sexual assault and violence, I recognize you could potentially share sensitive or upsetting experiences.

At any point you can end the interview or decline to answer any question you don't feel comfortable answering. You may also ask to have your interview withdrawn from my study at a later point in time. You may also take a break at any point.

We have as much time as we need, although I think we scheduled 90 minutes. I will audio-record our interview as well as take notes throughout the conversation. I will transcribe the interview and I will send you a copy of the transcription for any corrections/changes as well as for your own records (and memories).

Phase 1: Initiation: Start recording, present initial framing of topic
I'm interested in several aspects of your experiences, but ideally, I'd like to hear your story in whatever way you'd like to tell it from beginning to end with few (if any) interruptions. We've got as much time as you need for this. You've already completed a brief questionnaire and provided some initial information. So, today I'll begin by offering a bit of framing and then I'll turn it over to you. I'll listen and I won't interrupt, although I may take some notes about questions I may ask later.

Please be as honest as possible with me, don't tell me what you think I want to hear, or feel badly if the play either a) held no meaning for you or b) was a negative experience. I want to hear all about that, too.

The purpose of this study is to learn about your experience as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues* in college. I am looking to explore what might have influenced you to try out for a part in the play—or prior experiences that might have prompted your involvement. I'm also interested in how your participation was meaningful as you reflect on it today and during the time since the play.

Let's begin.

Tell me, in your own words, your story of your experience as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues*. I have no pre-determined set of questions to ask you… I just want you to tell me about your experience as if it were a story, with a beginning, a middle, and how you see your future playing out…. There is no right or wrong way to tell your story… just any way that is most comfortable to you….

Phase 2: Main narration: *very* limited questioning, non-verbal encouragement

- Can you tell me more about…?
- What happened before/after/then?
- How long ago was that?
- (Listen for coda or natural break/end)

Phase 3: Questioning phase: only immanent questions drawn from narrative

- You mentioned… can you tell me more about that? What stands out?
- I'm not sure what you meant there, can you give me some examples?
- Can you give me an example of…
- You just told me about… I'd also like to know about… (if relevant)
- When you reflect on this today, what meaning does [specific example] hold for you?

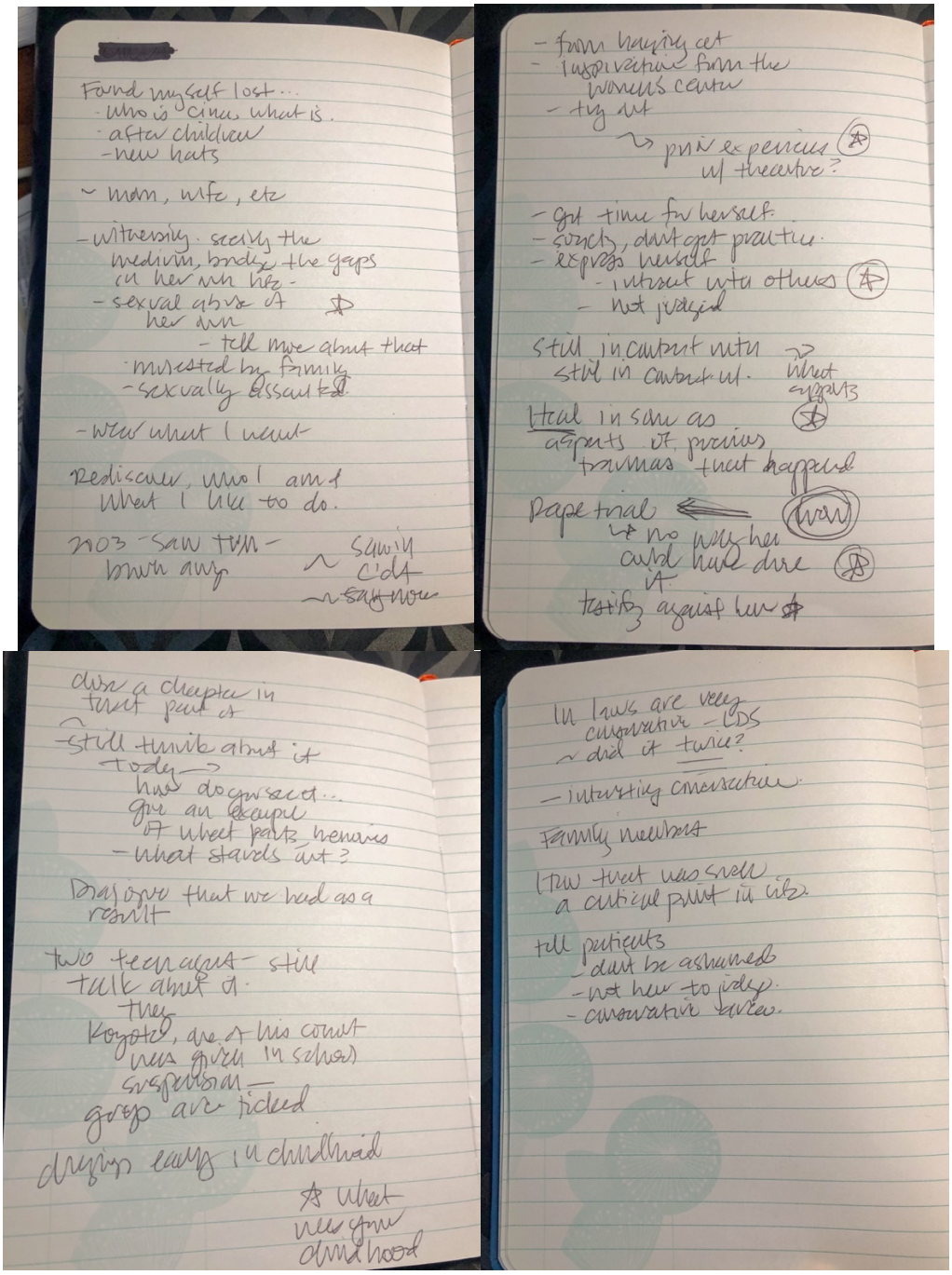
  Further Probes
  - Is this all you want to tell me?
  - Is there anything else you want to say about…?
  - What was interesting to you about that?
  - Can you tell me what you mean when you say?

Phase 4: Concluding talk and continue the conversation as it comes

Why questions allowed.

Construct a memory protocol of 'concluding talk'

APPENDIX D: Notebook from Individual Interview



APPENDIX E: Collective Interview Protocol

I am so grateful each of you gathered here today to talk together about your experience as cast members in *The Vagina Monologues* many years ago. Thank you for your time.

[this is the same content as individual interview intro]
I am currently a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education PhD. Program. The purpose of this study is to learn about your experience as cast members in *The Vagina Monologues* in college.

All the information that we discuss will be confidential and I will use a pseudonym for your name. You will not be identified in the manuscript or on any documentation related to this study.

I anticipate this collective group interview will last between 60-90 minutes. I will audio-record our time together as well as take reflective notes throughout the conversation. I will have this interview transcribed verbatim and I will send you a copy of the transcription for your records (and memories).

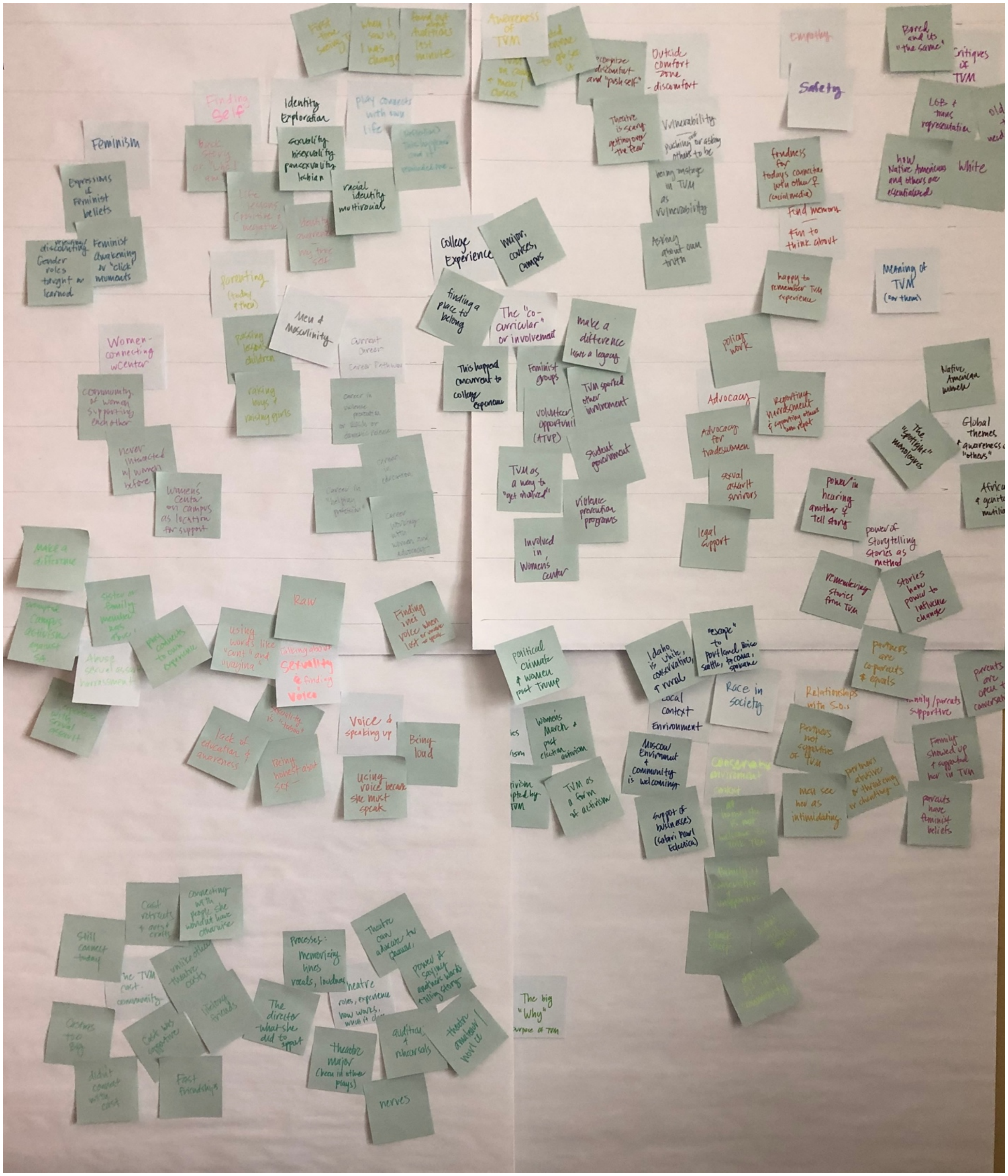
At any point you can end the interview or decline to answer any question you don't feel comfortable answering. You may also ask to have your quotes during this interview withdrawn from my study at a later point in time. You may also take a break at any point. Please let me know if you need me to clarify anything about a question's wording.
[end boilerplate]

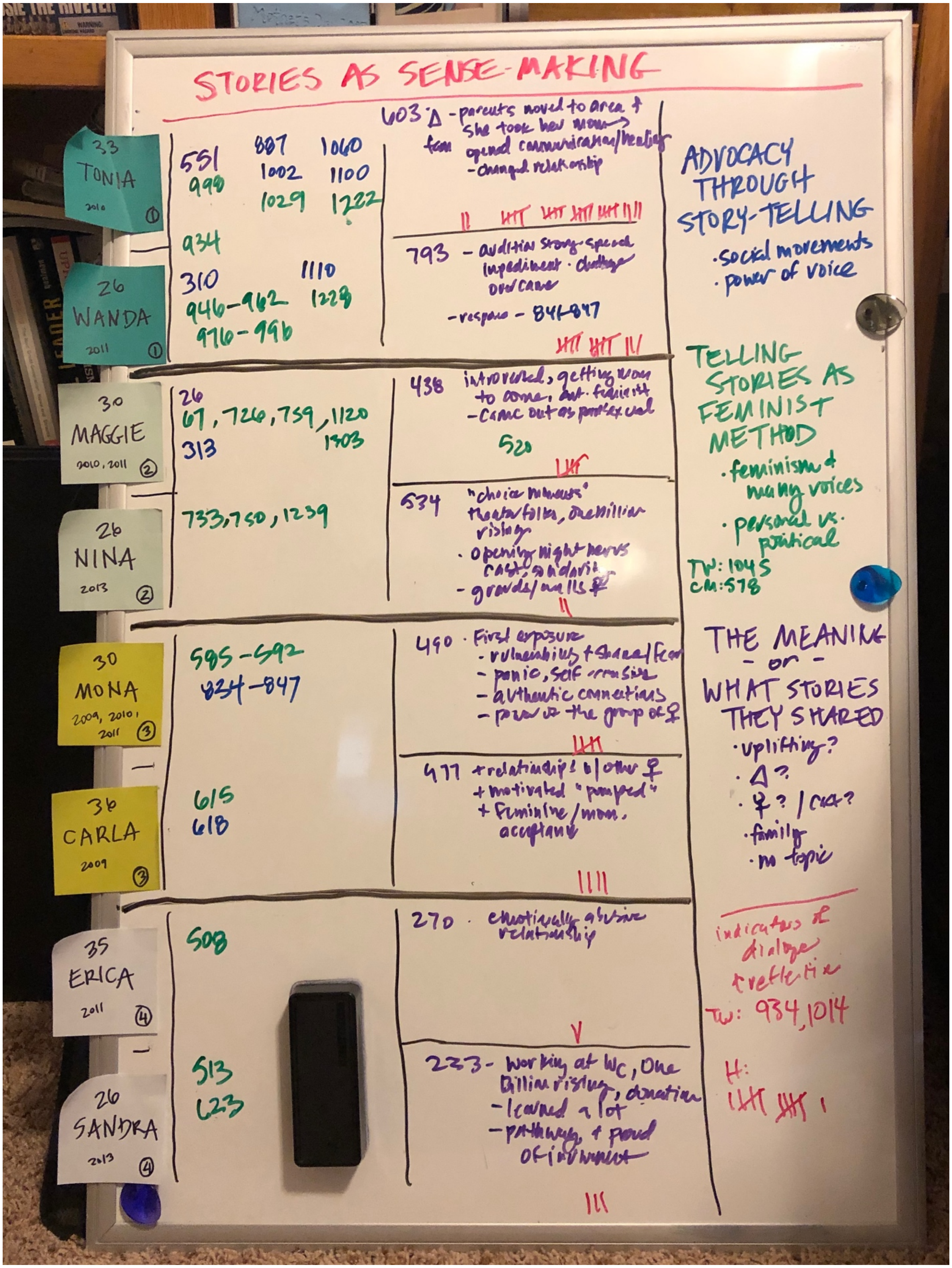
I am looking to explore collectively what might have influenced you to try out for a part in the play, the ways in which this experience was meaningful for you, and what role this involvement experience has played (if any) in your life since college.

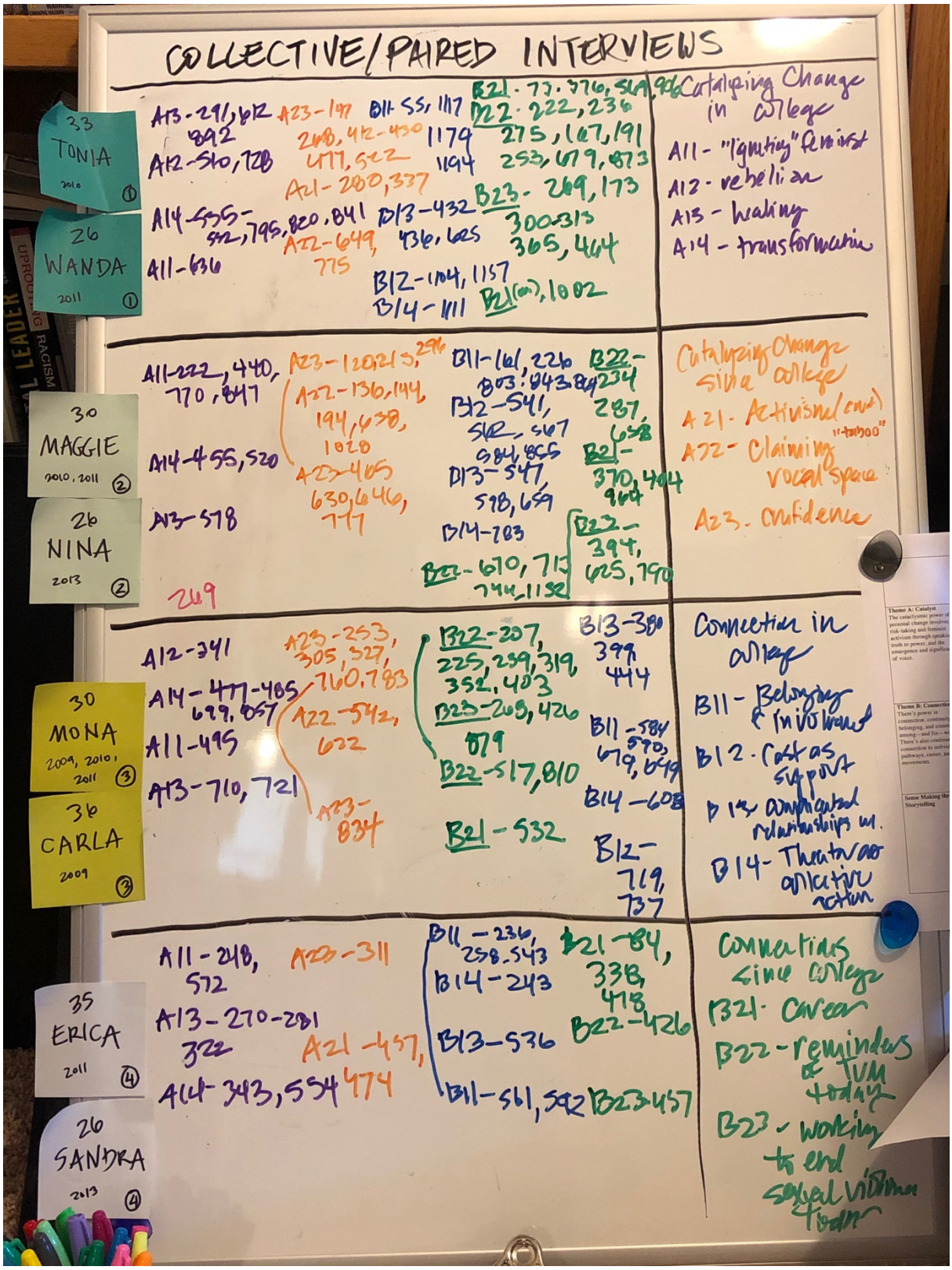
Mention: Attitudes of reflection: whole-heartedness, directness, open-mindedness, and responsibility

1. Introductions
2. What have you been doing since college? You can share whatever you feel comfortable sharing about your life since then.
3. Now I'd like each person to tell about a specific memory they have of their involvement in *TVM*. Each of you have been in an individual interview with me, so this could be a story about something you've already shared with me.
    a. What reactions do you have of each other's stories?
4. Does *TVM* play any role or have any significance since you graduated?
5. When you hear stories of other people's memories or significance, how does that affect your memory or perception of *TVM*?
6. What meaning does *TVM* hold for you? Then, at the time of the production, and now today, in 2018?
7. In what ways do you refer to or share about this experience with others outside of *TVM*?

APPENDIX F: Data Maps




STORIES AS SENSE-MAKING
33 TONIA 2010 ①
26 WANDA 2011 ①
30 MAGGIE 2010, 2011 ②
26 NINA 2013 ②
30 MONA 2009, 2010, 2011 ③
36 CARLA 2009 ③
35 ERICA 2011 ④
26 SANDRA 2013 ④
551 887 1060
1002 1100
1029 1222
934
310 1110
946-962 1228
976-996
26
67, 726, 759, 1120
313 1303
733, 750, 1239
585-592
834-847
615
618
508
513
623
793 - audition strong speech impediment · challenge overcame
438 introverted, getting women to come, but feminist
- came out as pansexual
520
534 "choice moments"
490 · first exposure
- vulnerability + shared fear
- panic, self conscious
- authentic connections
- power in the group of ♀
477 + relationships w/ other ♀
+ motivated "pumped"
+ feminine/mom. acceptance
270 · emotionally abusive relationship
223 - working at WC, One Billion Rising, donation
- learned a lot
ADVOCACY THROUGH STORY-TELLING
· social movements
· power of voice
TELLING STORIES AS FEMINIST METHOD
· feminism & many voices
· personal vs. political
TW: 1045
CM: 578
THE MEANING - or - WHAT STORIES THEY SHARED
· uplifting?
· Δ?
· family
· no topic
TW: 934, 1014


COLLECTIVE/PAIRED INTERVIEWS
33 TONIA 2010 ①
26 WANDA 2011 ①
30 MAGGIE 2010, 2011 ②
26 NINA 2013 ②
30 MONA 2009, 2010, 2011 ③
36 CARLA 2009 ③
35 ERICA 2011 ④
26 SANDRA 2013 ④
Catalyzing Change in College
A11 - "igniting" feminist
A12 - rebellion
A13 - waking
A14 - transformation
Catalyzing Change since college
A21 - Activism(end)
A22 - Claiming "in-between" vocal space
A23 - confidence
Connection in college
B11 - Belonging & Involvement
B12 - cast as support
B13 - complicated relationships w.
B14 - Theater as collective action
Connections since college
B21 - Career
B22 - reminders of UM today
B23 - working to end sexual violence today

APPENDIX G: Code Book

RQ1: Catalyzing Change(s) **in college**

Theme A: Catalyst

The cataclysmic power of personal change involves risk-taking and feminist activism through speaking truth to power, and the emergence and significance of voice.

A11 Igniting Feminist Awareness

A111 Awareness - First Contact with TVM

"When I saw it, I was changed"
Described first time seeing play
Found out last minute about auditions - on a whim
Promoted awareness among peers and family
Saw TVM as a part of a class

A112 Feminism

Description of feminist "click" moment
Expression of feminist beliefs
Gender roles
Rejecting or discounting gender roles

A12 Signaling a Personal Rebellion

A121 Identity Development

Race/Ethnicity
Sexuality

A122 Politics/Activism

Activism was prompted by TVM
Political climate post Trump election
TVM is a form of activism
Women's March Participant

A123 Relationship (family)

Family Showed Up to Watch TVM
Parents are Open to Conversation
Parents are supportive

A124 Relationships (significant others)

Found out partner was cheating
Men or prospective dates see her as Intimidating
Partners Abusive or Threatening
Partners are co-parents and equals
Partners are NOT supportive of TVM

A13 Moving Toward Healing

A131 Relationships (significant others)

Found out partner was cheating
Men or prospective dates see her as Intimidating
Partners Abusive or Threatening
Partners are co-parents and equals
Partners are NOT supportive of TVM

A132 Safety

A133 Sexual Assault/Abuse/Harassment

Break the Silence
Make a difference
Personal Experience with Sexual Assault
Play connects for (or stands in for) own experience
Sister or family member was abused
TVM Prompted Campus Activism

A14 Transforming Purpose

A141 Identity Development

Race/Ethnicity
Sexuality

A142 Parenting or Being a Parent

Passing Lessons to Children
Raising Children of all Genders

RQ2: Catalyzing action and activism **since college**

Theme A: Catalyst

The cataclysmic power of personal change involves risk-taking and feminist activism through speaking truth to power, and the emergence and significance of voice.

A21 Activism (today)

Politics/Activism

Activism was prompted by TVM
Political climate post Trump election
TVM is a form of activism
Women's March Participant

A22 Sexuality and "taboo" topics

Voice (talking about sexuality)

Lack of Awareness and Education

Need to be Honest and Open about Sex
Raw
Sexuality is a Taboo Topic
Using reclaimed or provocative words like "cunt" and "vagina"

A23 Confidence

Comfort Zone

Recognized discomfort and Pushed Herself
The spotlight monologues or campaigns
Theatre (performance) is scary
Totally comfortable

Vulnerability

Being onstage is an act of vulnerability
Being Open with Others about Own Truth
Pushing Others to be
Pushing Self to Be Vulnerable

Relationships (significant others)

Found out partner was cheating
Men or prospective dates see her as Intimidating
Partners Abusive or Threatening
Partners are co-parents and equals
Partners are NOT supportive of TVM

RQ1: Connection **in college**

Theme B: Connection

There's power in connection, continuity, belonging, and community among—and for—women. There's also continued connection to individual pathways, career, and movements.

B11 Belonging/Involvement

College Experience

Academics (major, minor, field of study)
Finding a Place to Belong in College
Happened Concurrent to College

The "Co-Curricular"

Involved in Women's Center

			Joined or involved in feminist groups
			Motivation: Make a difference/leave a legacy
			Student Government
			TVM sparked other involvement
			TVM was a way to "get involved"
			Violence Prevention Programs
B12	**Community of Support**		
		Cast Community	
			Cast retreats as team building (arts and crafts)
			Cast was supportive of each other
			Cast was TOO big
			Connected with People she wouldn't have otherwise
			Fast friendships
			Lifelong friends
			Still connect today
			Unlike other theatre casts
		Women	
			Community of support among women
			Interacting with Women is New
			Women's Center as a location of support
B13	**Complicated Relationships with Women**		
		Women	
			Community of support among women
			Interacting with Women is New
			Women's Center as a location of support

RQ2: Connection(s) **Since College**
Theme B:
Connection

There's power in connection, continuity, belonging, and community among—and for—women. There's also continued connection to individual pathways, career, and movements.

B21 **Connections to current career**

Career

- Career Aspirations
- Career in Education
- Career in Helping Profession
- Career is in Violence Prevention or RVSM or Domestic Violence Advocacy
- Career working with feminist aims/women's issues
- Current job or career

B22 **Reminders of TVM - critiques today**

Critiques of TVM

- Bored its "the Same" Every Year
- LGB and Trans (Lack of) Representations
- Native Americans and "Others" are Essentialized
- Old and "Tired" - needs to be revamped
- TVM is a display of Whiteness

B22 **Reminders of TVM today - gender in society**

Feminism

- Description of feminist "click" moment
- Expression of feminist beliefs
- Gender roles
- Rejecting or discounting gender roles

B22 **Reminders of TVM today - positive**

Fondness

- Connection today is positive (esp on SoMe)
- Happy to think back on TVM experience

B23 **Working to raise awareness/end harassment, etc.**

Politics/Activism

- Activism was prompted by TVM
- Political climate post Trump election

TVM is a form of activism
Women's March Participant

Sexual Assault/Abuse/Harassment

Break the Silence
Make a difference
Personal Experience with Sexual Assault
Play connects for (or stands in for) own experience
Sister or family member was abused
TVM Prompted Campus Activism

The Big "Why" - purpose of TVM widely

RQ3: Sense Making through Storytelling

Uncovering the deeper meaning of TVM

Voice (finding and claiming) regarding overall

Being LOUD
Finding one's (lost) voice
No Choice but to Speak

Vulnerability

Being onstage is an act of vulnerability
Being Open with Others about Own Truth
Pushing Others to be
Pushing Self to Be Vulnerable

Foundations of feminist identity

Description of feminist "click" moment
Expression of feminist beliefs
Gender roles
Rejecting or discounting gender roles

Critiques

Bored its "the Same" Every Year
LGB and Trans (Lack of) Representations
Native Americans and "Others" are Essentialized
Old and "Tired" - needs to be revamped
TVM is a display of Whiteness

Power of Storytelling - Stories as Method

Power in Hearing another Women Tell Her Story
Remembering Stories from TVM
Stories can Influence Change

The Meaning of TVM (for them)

APPENDIX H: Brief Summaries of the Monologues

Monologues listed below in the order V-Day expects productions to perform them.

Required Monologues	**Brief Summary**	**Participants**
Hair	A woman discusses the virtues of pubic hair and a cheating husband who wanted to shave her	
The "Wear and Say" Lists	"All of the women were asked the following questions: if your vagina got dressed, what would it wear...? If your vagina could talk, what would it say, two words…"	Sandra Nina
The Flood	A septuagenarian talks about "down there" and an experience in which she was caught by surprise	
The Vagina Workshop	A proper woman (probably the last one you'd expect to find at such a workshop) attends a vagina workshop in order to find her clitoris and reach orgasm	Maggie
Vagina Happy Fact	A few sentences about the virtues of the clitoris	
Because He Liked to Look At It	Horrified with how her vagina looks, a woman has a change of perspective after meeting "Bob" who spent hours staring at it	
Not-So-Happy Fact	A few sentences about female genital mutilation	
My Angry Vagina	Extended humorous rant about a woman who is extremely "pissed off" with various commercial products and other wrongs against the vagina	
My Vagina Was My Village	Based on one woman's story from Bosnia, and in memory of all of the women who were raped as a systematic tactic of war	
The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could	A woman reflects on childhood memories and various experiences she had with her "coochi snorcher," including curiosity, injury, to an experience of violation/sexual abuse, Later memories (from teenage years) include a sexual "salvation" experience with a woman. *Note: this monologue is, still today, one of the more controversial pieces. In an early version, the girl was 13 when she has a sexual encounter with a 24-year-old woman. Later, her age was changed to 16 (still statutory rape). Also, the original line "if it was rape, it was a good rape" was dropped from later versions.*	Tonia Carla Mona
Reclaiming Cunt	A woman reclaims the pejorative word, 'cunt' through a climatic reading of words that make up the sounds "c, u, n, and t" (ends with the audience chanting the word).	Mona

A six-year-old girl was asked…	Interview with a completely frank and unselfconscious little girl in which she is asked "what would it wear, say" etc.	Wanda
The Woman Who Loved to Make Vaginas Happy	A dominatrix/sex worker describes how she enjoys helping women find their moan (ends with a series of orgasmic moans)	Erica
I Was There in the Room	A woman witnesses and describes her utter awe at the process of childbirth	

APPENDIX I: Eight Vagina Warrior Narrative Portraits

Each of the eight portraits represents one woman's story, and each contain the following five sections: *orientation* (description of the person, her background, and the campus "scene" in which her story emerges), *chronology of events* (specifically the *complicating actions* that prompted her engagement in *TVM*), *evaluation* (meaning she attributes to experience of her involvement), *result* (the influence of her involvement on her collegiate and post collegiate life), and *coda* (a summary of or key takeaway from the woman's story).

In the preceding findings chapters, the women, their stories, and the data interacts—building upon the meaning drawn from the individual toward a collective understanding. These women's individual reflections, taken together, reveal the cataclysmic power of risk-taking and feminist activism through speaking truth to power, and the emergence and significance of voice. The women's stories together in conversation with one another also evoke themes of connection, continuity, belonging, and community among—and for—women.

CARLA – Searching for a Tribe

Orientation

Carla was one of the first people to enthusiastically respond to my request to participate in my study. As our individual interview began, she and I instantly reconnected as if almost no time had passed, sharing stories about our children and how much, over the past six or seven years, they've grown. Her younger daughter and my older son attended the same school in the town where NSWU is located. And, over the years since I've moved, as our kids have grown into teenagers, we have often commented on each other's Facebook and Instagram posts, commiserating about parenting, work, and busy lives. With this easy rapport established, Carla began: "Well, to start off with, I found myself lost." She clarified that she didn't mean in terms of what she was doing with her life, but in terms of her identity as a mother, wife, and community member returning to school after some time away. She thought she didn't fit "that formal archetype of, you know, what a mom should be like." Furthermore, she described feeling disconnected from the "fire or passion" in her life. In a previous point in her life, Carla said she had more fire and passion—and often sought opportunities to discover herself and her identity. She described her teenage years: "My dad is a super anxious older, old-school type of guy, so I wasn't allowed to drive until I was 21. So, I ran off, got married. And then [her husband] taught me how to drive. And you know, I wasn't allowed to do extracurricular activities. My parents dressed me until I was like a junior in high school, they're—you know—kind of control freaks…And I view myself as a very open and empathetic person. And also, I'm kind of a rabble rouser where I like to express myself in the ways that are taboo."

As she shared this orientation to her background, Carla described growing up in a nearby state: "even though it's a very diverse place, being multiracial limited my ability to find a tribe that would readily accept me. And I mean this was a common theme, I still, you know, deal with today officially in the workplace. And so, I really wanted to find another liberal or progressive area to live in." Carla, who had first started college right out of high school but left without graduating, came to NWSU to rediscover who she was and what she liked to do. "So, once I realized that I needed to go back to school, I found out really quick, OK. I'm a nontraditional student which makes it really difficult to socialize. I had kids at home and a husband and so I couldn't just go out to the bars or go to dances and this and that." Carla, looking for support groups and peers among other non-traditional students, was pointed towards the Women's

Center, the office of multicultural affairs and the [transfer student] program. She said of the Women's Center, "I started showing up and building connections and building a tribe, actually. [The Women's Center] was a place where I found a lot of inspiration and other strong women and diverse women, you know, with their backgrounds with their current familial relationships or interests."

Then Carla turned to the topic of the play. She had seen *The Vagina Monologues* in a nearby town back in 2003. She said, "I was blown away by the dialogue and passion behind sharing stories, and I found myself wanting to kind of express myself in the same way." Later, when she heard that the Women's Center was going to be producing it the next year, she was inspired to try out. She said she found that *TVM* was a way to get some time to herself, "you know that supposedly in our society moms don't get. And here I was, for an hour to two hours, going to practice—being able to freely express myself -- be it with words or the way that I dressed. Being able to interact with others without having to be judged. No one said to me, 'Oh you're a mom? Or you're a wife, shouldn't you be doing x y z?'" Carla even discussed the ways that she and her husband talked about her participation in the play with their (then young) children. She said they told their kids bluntly and openly, "Mom's doing *The Vagina Monologues* and here are the reasons why… and it's OK to say this word—it's just a body part. And everybody has the ability to feel safe, and feel protected. And, this is an ongoing issue that we as women have. So the more we talk about it hopefully the more healing and more education that goes with it." As an aside, Carla shared that part of her and her husband's parenting philosophy was always to have "dialogue early in the kids' childhood and normalizing…that sex and sexual identity and everything like attached to that isn't taboo. It's not dirty… It's a normal thing. It could be a beautiful thing and also can be a painful thing. But . . . Let's talk about it." It seemed to me Carla's parenting philosophy and openness with her own children was a response to her only conservative upbringing.

Chronology of Events

Carla recalled previous experiences that were also contributing motivators for getting involved in *TVM*. Recollecting a past pain, Carla said "participating in *The Vagina Monologues* allowed me to heal in some aspects." With this powerful statement, Carla began describing two incidents in which she was sexually assaulted. As she recounted her stories of the personal traumas she'd endured, it was clear that the play was much more than just an opportunity to grab a moment to herself; it was really about rediscovering her passion and fire, taken away from her through sexual assaults. She disclosed being assaulted by a family member in her early teenage years and then again by an acquaintance during her freshman year at another university. Carla said, "I've never really dealt with [these previous traumas] because you know to this day some of my family members still are unaware it happened." She described in greater detail the situation on campus during her freshman year, where she was assaulted by an acquaintance after a party at which they'd both been drinking. Carla had asked a friend to take her home, but that friend had apparently been arranging with another guy, Tim, to set Carla up. Carla remembered that friend saying, "Tim can take you home. And at that point I was too inebriated and couldn't drive [myself]. He ended up driving me back to my dorm room. Sexually assaulting me, and then leaving the next day. I called [the] hospital, got a rape kit going on. I reported the incident." Carla's case went all the way to trial, but the man, Tim, wasn't found guilty. She described being "completely blindsided [at the] rape trial where the police officers were rooting for the hometown guy and insisted that there was no way that he could have done it." Carla described how the "prosecutor from [local town] painted me to be this west side Washington girl that went

to raves and was into partying and got drunk and was basically trying to take advantage of one of the good old boys from the local area."

Later, when I returned to this topic after she finished speaking, I asked her how the trial felt to her now, she said "You know, it used to hurt before, Heather, it used to hurt a ton. And I think doing things such as you know going to the Women's Center and learning more about sexual assault …And that it's OK to be sex positive. And also doing *The Vagina Monologues* allowed me to heal… and now I'm a little bit more vocal you know, not so much about my own experience, I mean I do share my experience with those who it sounds like they need to hear about it. But it just opens up necessary dialogue to have with other people." She then said, "I feel like getting up there in *The Vagina Monologues* helped me to close the chapter in that part of my life and move on."

Carla ended up participating as a cast member in two productions—in 2009 and 2010. The first year, she was the narrator (reading introductions for each monologue) and the second year she was cast for the monologue called *The Little Coochi Snorcher Who Could*, a monologue that deals directly with sexual assault. While relevant and important to her healing, Carla said she also related strongly to a different monologue, in which a Bosnian woman is assaulted by soldiers as systematic tactic of war. She described, "There is one story . . . Whenever I hear it, just gets to me and I think it's just from how vivid the words are. You know like you have just innocence . . . she had this very virginal Happy-Go-Lucky experience and then that was taken away from her." Then, pausing, Carla said "actually, hold on, I just had a "a ha moment" you know we're talking about like how after getting married and after having kids I struggled with my identity… here's this girl who loves her femininity and her ability to travel here and there without fear and she gets taken advantage of. And she kind of closes off her love of her vagina and her self-worth." Carla took a moment and a deep breath and then said, "I'd always find myself bawling at the end of that [monologue], and I wonder if I see part of me [in her] losing myself after I experienced my own trauma." She concluded, "it did hit a couple of nerves in… or not nerves but like [a] soft spot inside myself where I may have not been done healing just yet."

Evaluation

What meaning does Carla apply to her experiences and how does that involvement affect her today? Carla relayed in her interview a key component of her experience as evaluating differently how she parents (maybe in relationship to the way her parents interacted with her). Carla described her daughter, now a teenager, as having "grown and changed and she's a fit soccer athletically-womanly-shaped gal." And she said that her daughter, self-assured and confident, was asked by a peer why she was wearing leggings, Carla said her daughter responded: "My body. Number one. Number two, my body is not here for you to look at. You know I could really care less what you think. I'm athletic. Yeah, I have a big butt. I like to wear leggings. I don't see what the problem is unless you make it a problem." Then Carla, laughing said, "And she can say that to others without being rude! She feels confident in her body." Carla didn't know whether or not her daughter's ability to speak her truth stemmed directly from Carla's involvement in *TVM*. But she said that she feels like having open dialogue about sexuality and self-worth from so early on in her kids' lives was really worth it: "It's helped to shape them to be very compassionate and empathetic community members, in regards to looking out for others and advocating or you know just keeping themselves them and their boundaries in mind."

Result

Taking stock of her experience of involvement in the play as Carla concluded her story as she shared about her current life's work. She said "being involved in the Women's Center and being involved in *The Vagina Monologues* has turned me into a warrior to look out for others that came from a similar destination or from a similar point of origin… Trying to find themselves in a world. And heal. Get resources so they can become their better selves and operate at a higher level. That's where my passion is being a mom and community member and health care worker." She summarized, "I was thinking about how [participating in *The Vagina Monologues*] was such a critical point in my life. [I] polished up my identity and my whole purpose of existing besides like just my given hats that I wear now you know like as a nurse and community member." A result of participating in the play was, according to Carla, the way it "truly shaped me to feel comfortable with myself so I can be of support to other people."

Today, Carla is a nurse in a conservative, predominantly Mormon area, near the state's capitol. She describes her nursing philosophy: "I always try to help patients that come in, I'm like you know you shouldn't be ashamed. If you need to tell me stuff, feel free. I'm not here to judge. I'm just here to help. And so, you know, I live in a pretty conservative area and I can't tell you how many people are like 'Well I think I'm pregnant, or I think I have STDs, and I'm like… Like what symptoms are you having? Then let's talk about this… here's our plan of action that the doctor will probably prescribe and again no judgment here. You know, I'm just here to help." She said, "After being in *The Vagina Monologues*, I realized it was just being myself. Being interactive and social and being kind and healing and also too, gently nudging people to get out of their comfort zone." In a tangible example of how she uses this social skill in healing, Carla said: "I know I have a gift on being able to interact with so many different people of different origins and coming from different backgrounds and whatnot. And really pride myself on the fact that, you know, I can get a 70-year-old… cowboy that comes in, And I still find space and I can create space where I can show him that we do have something in common you know. But outside of like my brown skin and [his] weathered white skin and [his] cowboy boots I realize I have a gift and I have a power. And I try to make small little gestures in order to help us help others that want to be helped in finding what is it that they're looking for."

Coda

Three powerful quotes from Carla's interview summarize the meaning of *The Vagina Monologues* and the influence this involvement has had on her life. First she said, "I kind of use that energy [from the play] and apply it both to familiar relationships, to the relationship with myself, and to other people and to my patients." When I asked her about *TVM* as a form of activism, she exclaimed, "I definitely saw participating in *The Vagina Monologues* as a form of activism! And it gave me the courage and a sense of purpose, and made me realize, we have to . . . I mean if you're brave enough, be that light for other people. Be that source of healing. Be that warrior for other people." Finally, as we signed off and were about to hang up, Carla said to me, "I'm really thankful that I found the Women's Center and found *The Vagina Monologues*, because I feel like I was definitely missing something, and I found it. And I was able to heal and dig into a different adventure that I'm still on right now."

ERICA – *TVM* Set Her Life on a Trajectory

Orientation

Erica, a 35-year-old white, straight woman, shared a vivid description about her childhood growing up on a sheep ranch in the "middle of nowhere [state]" with a grandfather who she described as a "hard man and not in any way on board with progressive ideas." She

said, "even though my grandfather is a somewhat terrifying man, I had felt comfortable for the most part like pushing back against him. I wouldn't say that I grew up in a feminist environment in any way. I would say the opposite is true. You know the patriarch of that ranch, [my grandfather] was very hard on the women. So, I think probably . . . that's what planted the seed." Starting around her mid 20s, Erica said she was drawn to "things that helped me process the way that I grew up… the violence around me and the misogyny that was consistent in our daily lives. I think mostly is that even though the women in my family are certainly oppressed, they have this sort of quiet strength about them that was always consistently there. So, the shocking aspect … when I chose to do that play, I think it was probably a little bit of that rebellious like, you know, 'this is this is going to shock you and make you uncomfortable and that's what I want to do.' Being a bit rebellious and stepping outside of her previously oppressive life were motivating factors in Erica's involvement in the play.

At the time that she auditioned, Erica was a nontraditional student who started college for the second time (she said she started originally right out of high school but, "wasn't ready"). She came to NWSU in her mid-twenties and declared a major in psychology and a minor in anthropology. She also identified as a feminist. Erica said ideas about gender, women, and roles in society percolated throughout her upbringing. She shared, "when I was 25, I went back to school and that was probably when it really like… like all of these ideas that I had about how I should be treated as well as any other person regardless of my gender. You know, and all the things that go along with that, I think that's sort of when everything came together, and I could apply that you know the title of *feminist* and really all of those ideas started to flesh themselves out. And then it's just kind of grown from there." The sense from her interview that Erica came into the play already identifying as a feminist is a key point for Erica's story and is important context for her experience during and after the play and the ways in which her feminist beliefs have evolved.

Chronology of Events

Erica conveyed that she was attracted to *TVM* because she had been involved with theater in high school. She described going to auditions, "I was both like really excited and probably like, you know, I consider myself a feminist and aware of issues affecting women specifically." Erica was prompted partially because she identified with feminist themes of the play, but also because other aspects of her personal relationships were negatively influencing her day-to-day life. She disclosed, "I remember there was a lot going on in my personal life at the same time. My partner at the time… [it] was not a very healthy relationship. And so, I had a lot of outside stress during the monologues because of that." She was cast to read the monologue *The Woman Who Liked to Make Vaginas Happy* (a memorable and provocative piece about a woman sex-worker/dominatrix that ends with a chorus of orgasmic moaning). That Erica was cast to read this particular monologue was not well-received by the partner: "He was not thrilled with the monologue that I ended up doing…. But I still, like you know, I was very sure that was something I wanted to do and push myself a little bit to be uncomfortable in that experience." Despite her partner's hesitations, Erica persisted.

After she shared her initial beginning-to-end story of her involvement, I asked further about the partner's objection and learned the relationship had ended shortly after; Erica is now married to a different man and they have a child together. The termination of the unhealthy relationship wasn't the only way that *TVM* affected her life. She elaborated on this influence: "it's interesting because this [play] sort of like set my life on the trajectory that it has gone on . . . in that that's like you know [local advocacy agency] was the beneficiary of those funds. And I

began volunteering with them. And because of that [volunteer work], I still work in DV (DV=domestic violence) work. So, I think that that was the main effect that it had on my life, I guess, which is pretty big."

I returned to Erica's comments about her upbringing, curious about how her strong feminist identity emerged in the midst of grandfather that she described as oppressive and misogynist. I dug a little deeper and asked about her immediate family. She said, "My mom expected us to be strong and independent and know how to do things and take care of ourselves." Erica shared this story, "my mother was married quite a few times… you know, to NOT very healthy men. And there was some abuse in her relationships … over most of them actually. But just having seen the power that she still had even in an abusive relationship was really interesting. So, and then I see this is my mom primarily. And then I have two sisters and a brother. So even though there were you know various men in and out of our lives it was mainly a female household… So, I think that sort of planted the seed and then both my mom and my grandmother are very social and sort of liberal and progressive in that way. So that also helped, I think. And my dad even though he wasn't you know married to my mom and living there. He has always been a very… I would say he's probably somewhat feminist-minded, for an older man. So that was helpful too. But I . . . I can't tell you when it, like, all came together but it was somewhere around the time that I started college the second time around at NSWU."

Her mother's openness and receptivity led to Erica inviting her mom and sister to come and watch her in the play, which she said she "felt empowered to do because I knew that they had similar feelings about especially feminist issues." But she said she knew that even though they had feminist perspectives, it was "going to be uncomfortable for them to watch because it was meant to be. And so, they were there the first night. And that made me very nervous, of course!" She described their reaction as "shocked." And said her mom "probably took in much more than she expressed to me because she had lived so much of that herself."

Evaluation

Of all of the interviews, Erica was the only woman who emphasized experiencing a lack of connection among the cast while she was in the play. She seemed disappointed that the play didn't result in the type of community of women and support she was seeking. She said she felt "kind of sad because of the content of the monologues I thought would have been a really like, it would have been really important for us to have really more connection with each other." Erica emphasized in her interview that connection did not occur as easily for her as it had in other plays in which she had participated. She said "Well, I think that that is because of the structure of the monologues, and because they are monologues, you don't interact with the other people in the same way that you would in a different type of production."

After participating in *TVM*, the next year Erica tried out for a part in another production by Eve Ensler that the Women's Center staged in lieu of *TVM* (in 2014) called "Any One of Us." She said because the [*TVM*] experience was "so individual. It was hard to connect with people…" but the other production "was a little different because there were some group pieces and I felt like we spent a tremendous amount of time with each other also." She also was closely connected to other people who participated: "a lot of the women that were in that production with me were either colleagues of mine I worked with a year at that point and my best friend, who surprisingly enough was actually in *The Vagina Monologues* too but we didn't know each other, like we didn't connect then. She and I chose to do *Any One of Us* together because we had been in *The Vagina Monologues* and thought that that was really cool full circle experience for us."

Result

Erica is now living on the west coast, married, and has a son, who is a toddler. She said she was anticipating a daughter, not a son: "I didn't want to have a boy. Because I felt like having a girl was going to be much easier for me. And I was gonna raise this really strong independent woman." As we discussed the experiences of raising sons (as I also have two boys), Erica commented, "But in in hindsight, I'm glad that I have a boy, because now I have the opportunity to raise a sweet, sensitive, progressive, good, man . . . or whatever he is… I mean that ties in a little with my feminist perspectives, I guess, about the world in the way that our genders lend themselves to power and give us the advantages we have."

Erica elaborated on experience of volunteering with the local agency and the resulting influence on her life. She said, "I got in touch with [DV agency] because I wanted to volunteer and just barely made it in before the cutoff date and ended up volunteering because it would have been for a year almost because I until I graduated." Then after graduating from NWSU, she was living in [a nearby state] and saw "there was a job open [at the same DV agency] and I applied for it as a sexual assault advocate and I got it. And I did that for two and a half years. And then I got married and … my now-husband wanted to be in [new state], where we are now. And so, he found an internship and I was ready for change."

The work with [local advocacy agency] was physically and emotionally taxing. Erica said "So I was a little… I was burned out. I mean this honestly, what it was, I was really burned out." After they moved, she said she "would probably get a job like baking cakes at 3:00 in the morning because that was really all I could stand to do. But I did take a chance and applied for a job at the YWCA here." After being told by the deputy director that she had skills beyond those needed to be a shelter advocate, she was offered a position as a legal advocate, a position in which she worked for a while when she was promoted to a paralegal (also at the YWCA). The YWCA's mission and work is to empower women through an intersectional lens.

Coda

As we discussed her current work and future path, Erica talked about a possible law degree, "there's a need for especially attorneys who can do pro bono work for women going through divorces and trying to get custody of their kids because the system is not set up for them. And it's not so that for people who can't afford to have attorneys. And you know, so I get to see a lot of those like really specific cases where, you know, abusive men in most cases are getting children because the power lies in their hands and they usually have control of the financial resources. So, I kind of oscillate between …. like family law and doing that sort of a practice would be my choice. And then also between, you know, maybe doing something that's more on a macro level where I'm working for an organization and just, you know, civil rights type stuff." Her work with the YWCA has also spanned into immigration with family separation, and Erica is also engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement. She said, "What have I done other than that? Not anything necessarily specifically related to women." Again, she seemed almost apologetic. But she emphasized the work of the YWCA as intersectional and that as a result her feminism has evolved. Erica stated, "So I guess I think it's interesting because as you get deeper into these you know [the complexity of intersectional] issues. I have focused less on, you know, being an oppressed woman because as a white woman I'm not that oppressed. [Instead] I'm more on using what power I do have to try to help people who are oppressed minority groups and women in those minority groups. So, I think my feminism has definitely branched out into those movements."

As we concluded our individual interview time together, I asked Erica about her activism since the 2016 election, like with the women's marches and other equality movements. She described, almost apologetically, "You know my everyday work, I consider a large amount [of activism] … I put a lot of energy into it. And so, I don't always do extra." I said that I completely understood, and that the work she's doing with the YWCA is vitally important—it is activism! She described her current position "I'm everything from an administrative type, you know, setting up appointments to drafting pleadings meeting with clients to you know draft pleadings with them or advise them on things. Just a lot of . . . It's a lot of diversity in work which is really nice. I mean there's a thousand little things I do in a day. It's hard to say." Erica expressed really loving her current position, that while still emotionally involved, she's finding working as a paralegal to be invigorating, versus burning her out. She described, "As an advocate. I did client work all day long. And that was my job was to meet with people and help them with their paperwork and stuff. So, I've been I've been isolated a little bit from that. And I feel better probably than I did before because I'm not having to, you know, take in so much of the really sad stuff all the time. And then I also get to develop . . . the attorney will take on like 13 clients . . . So, I get to build, you know, a pretty good relationship with those 13 people and because their cases will go on for a year. A lot of them. And so that's really nice, too, to get to know those people on a level that's much deeper than just knowing their crisis and not really getting to know anything else about them. So that's positive. I think."

MAGGIE – Reaching & Teaching Across Political Divides

Orientation

Maggie, a 30-year-old Latinx woman who identifies (today and in college) as pansexual, described her connection to acting beginning early life. "Well like I always have been into theater. Like even as a little kid, I was always really into doing theater." So, when she got to college at age 21 (she described herself as a nontraditional student), Maggie said, "I wanted to do get back into acting and all that other stuff and I wanted to do more philanthropy." At the time that she auditioned for a part in *TVM*, she was already involved on campus with the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) as the female-identified co-chair. When asked to compare *TVM* with her other involvement, she reflected, "It's kind of like apples and oranges to me, like they're very similar but very different. Different to me like they both affected me very personally … like I don't identify as straight, I identify as pansexual so like GSA was something that helped me explore that whole part of me and being activist in that part of me."

Maggie was familiar with the play, she said she had gone to see it on campus during her freshman year; it was one of the "suggested things" for the sex and culture class she was taking that previous spring. Maggie described her first impressions: "it just, it was astounding to me like that the language that was used and the freedom that everyone had to just express how they were, and I just … I wanted to be a part of that so much!" She later described, "I learned so much from that play, just from watching it that first time, like just from all the little facts and tidbits and things that were thrown in along with all the personal anecdotes. Not only did it make it easy to connect with, but I also learned something from it. And so that's kind of what I took from the play, is that I was going to help teach people about that kind of stuff."

Maggie gives her mom a lot of credit for empowering her and encouraging her to speak for herself. She portrayed her mom as "not a feminist *per se*, but she always gave me the idea of thinking for myself." Her parents divorced when she very young and she was raised by her mom. She described her as "Very strong. It's really hard to describe her otherwise...Like she worked

three jobs to put us through school and like you know that kind of stuff… I've always had very strong female role models and so that's kind of helped me gravitate towards strong female empowerment and stuff and that was always natural to me. And so when I heard [others say] 'feminist' was a dirty word and think I was like 'why is that?' I have all these strong females in front of me that are teaching me that being strong is normal. That you need to be taking charge of your life and stuff. And I guess it kind of related very strongly to that."

Chronology of Events

While she had a background in theater, Maggie's motivation for audition wasn't purely to act. She said, "I wanted to not just act, but do something greater with that, which I think was very fulfilling." Maggie described being drawn to audition also because she was also a victim of child sexual violence. Because the themes of the play had affected her directly, being on stage was her way of healing. She wanted to "be able to do that kind of stuff and to spread awareness" as her way "to do the activist part." She elaborated, "Well, with my particular experience, it made it very hard to be open with my own body and talking to others about issues about like what had happened to me. And I guess [*TVM*] gave me a vocabulary to be able to talk about these kind of things… like I had um . . . with what had happened to me like I completely shut off everything that had happened, like I couldn't remember half the stuff [that happened]. And being in this kind of gave me a way of working through some of that and getting it out of my system and then giving me a vocabulary of like what it was that was going on and that that I wasn't alone with all of that kind of thing.

During her sophomore year at NWSU, Maggie tried out for a part in *The Vagina Monologues*, which she stated was "life changing." She said, "it was phenomenal honestly. It was life changing to be in it." Over the course of her time in college, Maggie was in two productions (in 2010 and 2011). After being cast in the play that first year, Maggie talked about the ways that the language in the play stretched her outside of her comfort zone. She recalled, "I'd still been learning about like being more comfortable with and using certain vernacular like clitoris and things like that. Like, in my household we didn't really say that kind of stuff you know? I grew up Catholic and it was very--even though she [mom] was very supportive of me doing . . . Like finding like finding out my own information. We just didn't talk about a lot of things in my household! [laughs] So it helped me kind of free up my language and being able to talk to other people about things and it's also helped . . . I don't know . . . Connect with other people in a more like feminist and activist kind of the way I think."

Maggie, who currently lives with her mom, said that she invited her to come watch the play that first year. She remembered "my mom actually came up to see me in it because she was very supportive of me being in plays and stuff . . . but she was not comfortable with that kind of language. She knew about *The Vagina Monologues*, but she was not really like interested in seeing it or anything. But she came up to see me in it and [*TVM*] kind of opened her eyes to like what it actually was about. I think she thought it was just something that we just shouted nasty things into the theater! And [she realized] it was actually something that we were using to educate people … and when it was taken with that kind of framework, it was a little bit easier to digest the language that was used."

Evaluation

Introducing herself (and her mom) to a broader level awareness was one outcome, but Maggie also talked extensively about the continued connection with cast members, "I got to be really good friends with like a couple of the girls in the production." She said this came from the process of group rehearsing and "being silly and stuff on top of [rehearsals] it just felt like a

really strong community. … I'm still friends with a few of those women from the first production today." In her description of the community that evolved within and among the members of the cast, Maggie described not only changes she directly experienced, but also those she observed in other cast members, "I felt like you could see the shift in the students from before the play or the experience or whatever and then from afterwards and how they would just talk and talk and talk about it… how exciting it was. And that momentum would just keep building and building . . . it was amazing to watch how minds can be changed that way.

Another key takeaway for Maggie was the power of theatrical performance as activism for social justice and personal transformation. She said, "And I always thought that like artistic things like art and music and theater always mattered, but I never saw how big of a capacity it could be until I did something like *The Vagina Monologues*. How a big social justice impact would work. And how it would spin off into doing other things like other people going off into doing other things . . . Not just acting, but going out *to do* . . . I saw a couple of kids changed their majors to like international studies and things like that versus like business, which was incredible to me because I love how art can just move people to do things that way."

She also described *TVM* as affecting her own awareness: "it's hard to talk about it how it changed how I thought about things… like how I now view . . . Like not just how like domestic violence and things like that happen in the U.S. [but instead] it kind of gave me a better understanding of how it worked on a global scale." Maggie credited her involvement in the play for affecting her activism and her willingness to talk openly about her perspectives. She summarized "So I guess in a personal way that that has a big impact on my personal family, which I thought was huge. It just made conversations about not just feminism but like social justice kind of actions like the Black Lives Matter movement and things like that have been a lot easier to talk about especially with my more conservative family members and things like that. And I've had her [mom's] support with some of those kinds of things because her family is fairly conservative and they're not willing to listen to that kind of side. And so, with that kind of framework she's been more supportive, and they've been more likely to listen to my 'social justice warrior' kind of stuff and they actually have a little credence for it now because of it. So, I guess that's the biggest thing that's kind of come from [*TVM*] is the ability to talk openly with my more conservative family members."

I asked about how, given that she'd participated in the play a couple of times and was a member of the queer community at NWSU, she found engagement with other members of the GSA around the content of the play, which has been the subject of much critique. Maggie considered and then said, "I can see why a lot of people had problems with that, especially with the trans movement being as big and more prevalent as it is in these days… about having issues with the play not accepting, you know, male-to-female trans people or like people who did not actually have vaginas … it just kind of excluded a whole portion of people. And so I mean I can see the criticisms for that. And then, I guess for me personally like there were some like content that would be kind of triggering and so like it was kind of difficult for me to get through certain pieces or to listen to certain pieces and stuff so that kind of made it hard to do. But other than that, for the most part, especially at least for me, it was a mostly positive experience."

Result

When I asked her to tell me about her life since the play, Maggie described graduating from NWSU and moving to [a small town] where she is living with her mom and working in a flower shop as a florist. She described the area as "conservative" "slowed down" and "a very different environment [from NWSU]." The town she lives in has four to five thousand people,

and the flower shop serves as kind of a "community hub." She explained, "the flower shop that I work at is actually one of the only ones in the area, so we service like a twenty-mile radius. So, that includes like five or six different communities in there and they're all in 5,000 or less population. And everybody knows everybody around here." In this context, Maggie sees herself as "on the outside with how my views are." And she said "Yeah, I'm still like the 'new one' and I've been here for like about five years now." But she's been able to connect with members of the community despite the differences. She shared, "the community I live in right now… it's actually a very, very conservative community. And my boss is a very conservative woman, but I've been able to talk to her and her husband about these kinds of things because of the language I've become used to and because of the way that I opened up since being in *The Vagina Monologues*."

Despite her local community being conservative, Maggie says that she comes across as nonjudgmental of differences. She shared her approach, "I found that a lot of people are very receptive as long as you're very polite and interested in what they're saying, that they're very receptive to opposite ideas, which has actually been very helpful especially since the election and how politics have been so divided. I'm kind of like the subversive liberal but they're willing to listen to me because I'm not really hard-edged about this kind of stuff anymore. I kind of softened since then about it. So, it's been a little bit easier to find middle ground with people that way, I think." Maggie's role, in a small community, in a center of community life—a flower shop—is often to be the "lone liberal in this conservative area." But because her approach is congenial and friendly, and because "support for Trump has been lessening," she's "noticed a lot more open discussion and dialogue that's happened before in this community." She said, "I've gotten a lot of questions about the more liberal perspective or the more socialist perspective or a 'millennial perspective'—that's what my boss's husband likes to call it!" But she's quick to qualify, "I would never ever call myself any kind of like expert about that kind of stuff, but I love that they're wanting to learn about that kind of thing and they're wanting to learn the other side and they're not wanting to just listen to say Fox or like whatever news sources that they were listening to." It's apparent that the community is, according to Maggie, "becoming more open minded about the whole thing which is I think very incredible. Like considering everything that's gone on. It's incredible really."

Maggie described in detail the kind of workplace conversations she has with her employers, "he's actually really interesting because he's very staunch in his beliefs but he's willing to have an open and engaged conversation at least with me so far because I've never like . . . Because I don't go out of my way to attack him about his beliefs. He's never come at me to attack me about my beliefs and [even though] we're very opposite ends of the spectrum. But we can have political discourse and we can have conversations about things like *The Vagina Monologues* and domestic violence and things like that. And he respects my opinion on it because he knows that at least I've done a little bit of research behind it and then I'm not going to yell at him and tell him that all men are pigs and stuff like that, which I think he expects… that's not what's going to happen. And so, I think it's kind of helped shift his mind a little bit."

As a returning cast member (she was in the play in 2010 and 2011), Maggie remembered participating in our focus groups and pre-post surveys for *TVM* those years. She recollected, "I mean you can even see how the cast members and even like the directors and stuff would talk you know in the beginning like they were just like 'oh it's a play, it's going to be fun!' or whatever and then afterwards they be talking about like 'Oh did you hear about that thing in Africa or that thing in South America about what's going on with that group of girls over there?'

Things like that. The conversations changed. Whether we realized it or not. And I loved that, and I thought was so interesting! You wouldn't really notice it unless we did those pre-post surveys. I noticed it because of doing those and the exit interview type things [focus groups] like I would know how my own thinking would shift throughout the course of like two to three-month period of this play." While hearing Maggie positively comment on our intentional assessment strategy, hearing her reflect back the key lessons about the conversation changing interested me as a researcher.

I asked Maggie where she sees herself in the future and she described aspirations of getting her doctorate in Psychology. "I still want to get my doctorate in psychology and stick with counseling people who have gone through domestic violence issues or [work with] the college age kids where the mental illnesses start popping out more prevalently during that time. That was kind of my area of focus, even when I was in college. That's where I'm going to end up." She's thought a lot about this recently, again because of her current environment. "The [state] has a shortage of mental health supports … especially in rural areas, there's no resources here for anything. And so, there's a lot of issues of like you know with the domestic violence and also with depression and anxiety and suicide rates … with being in a florist shop—like we do a lot of funerals and within the last year we've had two kids within one small community commit suicide. One of them was 14 and the other was 16, and it just hit the community really, really hard of course. And there's no help over here. Like they have the school counselors, but there's not anybody really you have to go to [state capital] or to the west side of [neighboring state] or something to even find a lot of help for that kind of stuff. And it's … it's awful."

Coda

The summarizing statement that I found so powerful and significant for Maggie is, "So I think for activist outreach, I want to focus more on being able to reach people and teach them." This was the greatest takeaway from my interview with her, that in her way in her corner of the world, she's working to change minds. "To describe it. . . . It just keeps going back to like the whole educational aspect and education through the arts . . . I just recently saw *No Greater Love*, which I'd seen like several times before … basically the whole story of like how Jesus was crucified, told through the perspective of outsiders. And when you go to that you start learning about the whole movement surrounding [Christianity]. And so that's how I want to describe [*TVM*] to other people. Like when you go to this play, like yes, it's a story, it's great, you're going to learn all kinds of fun stuff, but you're also going to learn stuff that is going to stick with you. And that's kind of how I want to describe it to people. It's like not just a play, it's an amazing experience. And you're going to learn something not just about the world, but about yourself. Like when I talked to people about being in [*TVM*], that's how I present it to people that it was just an amazing experience that I learned stuff about not just about like and other people but like about myself and that if people go and watch that they learn something about themselves or they find something about themselves in that play which makes it easy to connect with and then helps further the conversation of how can we help others. In domestic violence in child abuse situations and things like that. And I think that that's such a positive thing to go forth with, you know…. And it's really easy to engage, I think, in a theater production because it's like actual people right in front of you."

MONA – Vulnerability is Strength

Orientation

Mona, a 30-year-old multiracial woman, majored in theater and Spanish in college at NWSU. As a theater major, she initially saw the play as "just another opportunity to be on stage." She went on to participate in three (or perhaps four—she has lost count) productions, starting in 2008. That first year, Mona was encouraged to audition by an MFA student who was serving as the director. Mona recollected, "I was I think about 18 or 19 at the time… I had done a show with her prior and she said 'Oh you'd be great for the show. I really think you should...' And I had never heard anything about [*TVM*] and that was my first introduction to it." Initially, Mona said her reaction "was kind of like 'oh yeah this sounds cool. This sounds fun.' But I didn't really realize how, you know, how impactful that experience would be later on in my life."

Mona, originally from California, described moving to [state] when she was a child: "I am an only child and so my mom and dad and I moved to [small town where NWSU is located] when I was about five years old from California. Kind of the idea [they had] was that it's a great place to raise kids. You know [name of town] is this idyllic little town. You know I kind of think of it as like kind of this oasis in the middle of a very conservative state. And [name of town] is still pretty conservative but it's pretty liberal compared to the rest of [state]. So, I grew up in [name of town] and my parents you know are definitely left-of-center sort of people. And so, I've always grown up with more liberal sort of beliefs and ideas."

And yet, early in her awareness, Mona was very conscious of how she didn't quite fit in with the other kids in the very white state. "But still, you know I remember like in second grade realizing that I wasn't white you know because I was the only person of any sort of color growing up in my class and I and I didn't realize until somebody had said called me a 'brownie' or called me....they started calling me names and I didn't really, like, 'what are you' . . . 'What, I'm the same as you, you know?' And really then I start it started to be more kind of painfully obvious that I was a little bit different than everybody else in that town." But going to college (even though she was still in the same geographic location), felt different. She said, "Going into college, I finally sort of found my people. I felt more accepted. And, especially you know starting to do plays and shows, and *The Vagina Monologues* too . . . You know just that acceptance that I had never really felt before." Mona's feeling of connection and belonging because of her involvement was a continuing theme throughout her interview.

Chronology of Events

Mona talked extensively about how her perspectives on feminism shifted during the time period around her involvement in *TVM*. She said: "Yeah, well you know I initially perceived feminism as like this totally alt-left, hippie sort of movement of women that don't want to wear bras, that, you know, want to walk around topless. And it was just, it was . . . ignorance, it was total ignorance. You know especially because I grew up in [state], it's not necessarily the most diverse place, right? And so that definitely shaped kind of what I perceived feminism to be. But then I took women's studies when I was a freshman in college and did *The Vagina Monologues* shortly after that. So, it kind of coincided at the same time. And just really learning that [feminism] is about women's empowerment and equality and you know not having those strict gender roles."

While Mona did not initially identify as a feminist, participating in conjunction with a course on women's studies, prompted her awareness that her perception of feminism was "ignorance." She later said, "I never really considered myself to be a feminist until I started

learning more about women's studies. And through that experience and really what it means to be a feminist and how empowering that was."

The first year, Mona performed the monologue *Reclaiming Cunt*. She said, "Reclaiming the power of that word when you know my whole life has been like, don't say that word! Like that is the worst of the words you know? And doing that monologue really put a whole different perspective not only on just reclaiming the word cunt, but also just all of those you know ...slut… bitch… whore..." The next year, she was cast as *The Little Coochi Snorcher Who Could*, a monologue that explores an emerging adolescent girl's experience with a sexual relationship with a woman. It should be noted that this monologue has received significant critique, from mildly problematic (at best) to glorifying statutory rape (at worse). Mona, now married to a man and raising a daughter, linked her involvement in *TVM* and her own identity exploration when she disclosed being in a relationship with a woman at the time she was cast in that monologue. She said, "I was in a relationship with a female during that time. And, you know, being in *The Vagina Monologues* really helped me to explore my sexuality, explore that side of my life." She then talks about how that exploration unfolded as her perspective shifted, "And I . . . I did things that I probably would not have done if I didn't—because it really helped change my perspective."

A key meaning of the play for Mona, as she unpacked and complicated her own identity processes, was the connection with the other cast members. She spoke of connection with other cast members as a place in which she was able to be vulnerable, "[it] just brings people closer when you can be also vulnerable with each other you know and doing shows like [*TVM*] tends to make people be more vulnerable than they would, I think, in a normal setting." Mona also discussed the ways that being involved in feminist circles expanded her beliefs about gender and sexuality. She described her belief in the importance of "just seeing men and women as equals… I started to recognize that it's not about, it's not about what parts we have, right? It's about if our souls connect. And that's what allowed me to be able to comfortably explore that part of myself."

Evaluation

Mona (and other participants who had prior theater experience) emphasized the distinct ways in which the cast experience in *TVM* was different from other productions. Mona said, "Well, because I've done other shows as well… a few shows really stick out for me where I'm like 'yes, I really bonded with that cast!' There are other shows that I did where I don't ever even think about those people hardly, you know? … I think what separates the shows that I've done that have that [continued connection] versus those that don't is the intensity of the work we do and the willingness to be vulnerable with each other, I think. And so just the nature of *The Vagina Monologues* really kind of sets the stage well for that." She described, "That show is just so powerful … not only just the monologues themselves but the connections and the relationships that I've formed with the women in those shows." She said that she thinks back on the experience and "the fact that I still talk to some of those women that I did the show with. I think it really does speak volumes about how doing that kind of work and stepping outside of your comfort zone like that. Because to be honest, it's not an easy show to do, right?"

Discussing the overall emphasis and message as universal and global, Mona asked rhetorically, "what is the message that we're sending here? You know, what is this really about, if I'm taking my personal experience out of it; how does that particular show impact so many women all over? Because I know it's done in many different cities all over the world." In these

statements, Mona seems to be indicating the extent of the far-reaching impact of the play and the ability for this specific theater production to create awareness and potentially enact change.

While she spoke at the universal and global level, for Mona this experience was also intensely personal. The time in her life in which she was involved in *The Vagina Monologues* involved significantly challenging experiences, which she disclosed to me during her interview. She shared, "I was in a really abusive relationship actually for about four years. And I've learned so much …I think people look into that situation and think, 'oh my gosh what is a strong woman like you…? How can you not see that this is unhealthy for you? How come you don't break out?' It is just so much more difficult than I think people really understand. And there's a lot of shame involved in that. But you know in all honesty, the things that I learned about feminism and just the kind of perspective that I have now. It really helped me to get out of that relationship."

Mona then described the various ways that the dysfunctionality of the relationship affected her life. She said, "we were together for off and on for about four years. And it was just . . . It was so abusive. And part of that had to definitely do with the drug use… it was co-dependent. I recognized at a certain point that it was abusive and that I needed to get out of it. And I, I just didn't know why I couldn't, you know? I would take the steps to be like, 'OK we're not going to see each other anymore.' And then five days later she would call and I would pick up the phone and just let her right back in because I . . . I was not comfortable being by myself, being alone. I wasn't confident in my own ability to take care of myself, to love myself."

The negative effects of the abusive relationship extended into Mona's life and affected her future in immediate and serious ways. She shared this extended story that occurred adjacent to her time in college, "So, I was in prison for about a year [during college]. I went to prison because of my drug addiction. I was stealing to support my habit. And I got caught up in… so long story short, I ended up going to prison because of my because of choices that I made. And my first reaction was like . . . This isn't fair. You know it's not my fault. Other people get off for a lot, you know, worse things and all of the things that I told myself. And after the first month or so of being there I'm like OK this mentality is not going to work for me. Right? It's just going to make it harder. How can I embrace this? How can I embrace this discomfort? Right?"

Mona said she started spending more time by herself because "one of the things that they, you know, really stressed when we got there is you're not going to make lifelong friends with these people you know don't do anything that's going to jeopardize your future you're here for a certain amount of time, Don't make it worse on yourself. And so, I really started to put my feelers out there about who can I trust who can I not trust. And I did make actually a couple of really good women friends while I was there, one who I still talk to today. She was actually my bunkie for a little while. And you know I think about if she had not been there with me, she was really kind of my rock. And I think I was for her, as well. You know, and how we really helped each other to get through that experience."

Mona realized she had a choice, she explained, "I can either make this hell or I can get through it. Right? And so, there were … like I mentioned a couple of women that I was close with, but for the most part I did a lot of time on my own and I. . . . It allowed me a lot of time for inner reflection and I started to view it as an experience where not a lot of people get the opportunity to put their life on hold for a year to re-center, to regroup, to figure my shit out. And I started viewing it as that . . . As an opportunity, not as a punishment. And it made all of the difference in the world you know, because I really do think had that not happened, I would I would probably be dead somewhere. In all honesty. You know? Many of my friends have overdosed and died that were in you know, running in the same group that I was running in."

While she said she didn't really think about this at the time, now she think "about how that actually helped me to be more understanding of people that I initially didn't understand or didn't think that I fit in with or belonged with. Because when I got there it was like 'oh, I don't belong here you know I have a higher, I have higher education. I know a second language, I … you know?' but the more that I spent time there I'm like 'why am I actually different?' What makes you actually different than these people you know? Because I have more education? So? You know and I still try and carry that with me today and pass it on to other people to you with the work that I do. I feel like I'm in such a position to be able to educate people and share some of those views that maybe that they've never considered before but have never been taught to them before. You know how one person even one person can change the lives of many just simply by sharing this kind of stuff. You know it's a . . . It's a beautiful thing."

This powerful story reflection and transformation floored me when I heard Mona tell it. As she shared with me how this ended (fortunately, very happily) for her, I was deeply inspired by the vulnerability it took to share what she shared. Later when Mona went into rehab, she said it took her a little while to get clean, but "when I was in in-patient treatment, I really realized that this is really what I want to do with my life… I'm thankful I get to do what I do today. But at times it's, it's a little disheartening and overwhelming to be honest. But yeah, my you know my experience in prison it has absolutely shaped me and it made me so much stronger than I ever even knew I could be, you know. Because when you're in that situation you don't have much of a choice. You know, really how you do it. Well I didn't have a choice. I had to do it and I had to go through it." It's clear Mona wouldn't be who she is today had she not had the experiences she had in college or in prison.

Result

Mona, who now works as a chemical dependency professional, described her work. "So, I help people with that struggle with addictions and a lot of those people struggle with abusive relationships. I work with women that are in domestic violence situations. I help connect them with resources today. And you know I do think a lot about my experience in *The Vagina Monologues* and how that has helped me to be more sensitive to those situations plus my own experience going through it as well."

Mona also sees herself as an educator. "I always kind of wanted to be a teacher. And I just, you know knowledge to me is very valuable. And how we can try and reduce the ignorance and stigma around things." She goes on to describe the group counseling sessions that she leads and the connection to her involvement in the play and the inevitable fear of trying something that might seem risky or unfamiliar, "…that's a lot of what I'm able to teach my clients today, you know, who are dealing with wanting to stop using and not relapse . . . well, it's the same thing. How do we embrace that discomfort and push through it? … So, group gives me the opportunity to do that and use my performance background, too. It's funny how, on face value, it doesn't seem like these things would be connected in terms of, you know, a theater degree a Spanish degree with a chemical dependency degree. Right? But I'm able to use somehow use all of that and I feel like I needed all of that. And I remember [faculty member at NWSU] who was chair of the theater department. She always used to talk about that even if you don't go into theater or film, you will use these experiences later in your life… she was so right… I wouldn't be able to teach any of that stuff had I not gone through it or understood it myself or learned it from someone else. And so yeah, it's just really a blessing and I feel like it's [as a drug/alcohol counselor] is where I'm supposed to be."

She also reflected on how her understanding of feminism and gender roles has impacted her work as a counselor, "And you know as I mentioned talking about domestic violence but also talking about how you know our gender roles have changed and how even for men too because we talk a lot about women. But how does this also impact men? Because I think you know one of the things I talk about a lot is this misconception that strength is not showing vulnerability, not showing emotion, not crying. You know being an adult being strong...physically...I think it's much more of a risk to be vulnerable and show emotion."

Coda

Mona's powerful story about her experiences adjacent to *The Vagina Monologues* largely speaks for itself. Her vulnerability and willingness to share openly with such compassion shows the best way that one's story can move others to action. To conclude, I'll share one of Mona's comments, Mona said "It's just really fun to think back about [*The Vagina Monologues*] really…, you know, as I said before, it's really helped me find my empowerment and become who I am and the person that I am today. You know, it really has helped shape me a lot."

NINA – Engagement for Equality

Orientation

NWSU was the first and only college Nina applied to. As an only child from a very small, rural community in the southern part of the state, Nina said she was "kinda done with southern [state]… I knew I wanted to leave but not go too far away. I'm really close with my mom, I'm the only child, so I'm kinda her world." When she arrived on campus, she said "I didn't really have a direction… I knew I loved political science and so I started taking a bunch of political science classes with not really much of a direction. My first year I was working at the library, the university library. And it was a great experience. I loved the library … but I realized that I wasn't really I wasn't really meeting a lot of folks I wasn't really having any meaningful conversations with anyone."

A desire to have a more interactive work-study position on campus brought Nina to the Women's Center. When she looked at the list of potential jobs, she said "I realized that I'd never actually been into the Women's Center that whole first year. And I'd seen flyers and things and, you know, always [saying] 'oh we should go to that,' but then never actually going." With the idea that working at the Women's Center would essentially obligate her to participate, Nina applied for the job. She reminisced, "And so I figured you know let's do something. You know I said they're doing stuff all the time. I will be *forced*. I will be put out of my comfort zone. And this is what the college experience is about, you know, new things, new stuff, new people."

When she arrived for her interview, Nina shared how, just walking into the space, felt welcoming. She remembered thinking, "this is a place that, even if I don't work here, I'm coming back to because it's just that, feel-good homey area that I wasn't getting at the university. Coming from such a small town—I mean my graduating class was 81 people—so that tightknit community I was definitely missing, and I definitely felt really isolated. At the university, I mean having a math class with more people in it than my graduating classes was a pretty big culture shock! And so, walking in there and just feeling safe . . . And kind of that I mattered." Nina reminisced that as soon as she concluded her work-study interview, she said to herself "OK I have to work here. This is, this is what I'm doing! And sure enough I was offered a work-study position." That risk to step outside of her comfort zone was significant on many levels for Nina. She said "It really did change the course of my sophomore year, for the better, of course! I mean, I was involved in so many things . . . And I met Gloria Steinem! After I figured out who she was!

[laughs]." Overall, Nina described working at the Women's Center as "definitely a turning point for both my activism and just kind of my growth as a human being, I think."

Chronology of Events

At the Women's Center, Nina met Sandra (another participant in this study, who was also a work study student in the Center that year). Nina claims that it was Sandra ("who is now probably one of my best friends") who wanted to participate in the play. Nina disclosed "she was super into it and she really wanted to audition and was a little tentative about doing it alone. And I had had previous stage experience and quite loved the spotlight. So, you know, I said 'of course! You know let's go do it!'" While Nina had prior theater experience, she hadn't heard of *The Vagina Monologues before*. She said "Well before 2013, working at the Women's Center, I hadn't heard about *The Vagina Monologues*, which sounds like a disservice to myself, but I was just really not really not involved. It was my sophomore year at NWSU and I really hadn't escaped my bubble of activities."

When Nina was cast in the production, she quickly learned all about the play and Eve Ensler. She gushed, "I just fell in love with her. She is absolutely fantastic, and I got to, actually got to do a presentation about her in one of my classes and just really found a deep respect for this woman. And so, after some research and kind of getting, you know, the reasoning behind why . . . Why she was doing this . . . why the production . . . Why? And I just, I loved everything about it. I was all in." Nina shared, "Just you know going in headfirst and doing the monologues. That year was very subversive."

In fact, from her involvement in *TVM*, Nina connected with Christy Shafer (a pseudonym), the co-owner of a local comic book, gaming, costume, and adult entertainment store, a business for which Nina would later work. Every year, Christy would bring products from her store to sell at the *TVM* performances. Nina described "They usually will donate vibrators and little goodies and things like that, all proceeds going to the who's ever being featured. I think at the time it was [local advocacy agency]. That seems to be the main organization that the donations are going to, which is fantastic. But they will also sell vibrators and things. And it's so much fun." She described, "You know it, either at intermission or at the end of a show, just to kind of break well, as much as we can, kind of break the stigmatization of enjoyment and pleasure so . . . that's always one of my favorite parts. And you know whether someone's first little vibrator or you know they just want to support the cause. It's always a very, very fun experience."

Nina shared that this connection with this business is a part of the ways that the local community was incredibly supportive of *TVM*. "We had the three showings, like usual. And it was just that. We had, oh gosh I can't remember how many, I'm pretty sure it was sold out. They usually do. I mean, it's, you know, one of the more popular productions I think of the year, and the [town] community is fantastic. You know, along with the students, the community is, I think one of the cornerstones of this place. And I think a lot of people stay [in town after graduation] for the community. And it was just so fantastic to see a mixture out in the audience of community members of staff and faculty and students and alumni. It was really amazing to see all the seats full and all that support out there."

This comment is in contrast to Nina's assessment of her home town, which she described as "a very rural community" where "just to say the word vagina out loud in public on a stage would probably freak everyone out or just make everyone uncomfortable which I think is ridiculous. Especially now that I say it all the time. And you know it's a very conservative little place down there. It's not too progressive." While Nina describes her mom as "pretty sex

positive I mean she's rather open minded about most things" she still had "no idea what I was talking about" when Nina shared with her that she was going to be in *The Vagina Monologues*. She went on to say, "Nobody knew about the monologues or what I was doing and so I would have to explain it a couple times over to her and to family members. Eventually I just was like . . . 'I'm in a play.' But I don't think they weren't concerned or anything because I had been posting a lot of stuff [on Facebook] from the Women's Center and so I think at this point they were just kind of used to me posting about events and you know things that we were doing."

While she didn't think her friends back home were shocked at the time that she was doing something with an activist purpose, Nina said that she "always wanted to be more involved in more activist-y… [trails off] … but I never really had a direction as to what I was going to be active about. And when I started working at the Women's Center, I was like 'OK, this is it.' I'm going to be activist and feminist and I'm going to do all of these wonderful things and I'm going to change the world."

Evaluation

In addition to participating in the play and in feminist activism for the first time, it was also Nina's first time engaging with a large group of women. She disclosed, "before then, I hadn't really had a lot of female friends or been around large groups of females. I really hadn't. And it was it was an interesting experience. There were a lot of personalities going on and it was really awesome to just see the diversity that was there and the stories that they were telling and the stories that they weren't telling." Participating in the cast, as well as working in the Women's Center, forced Nina to not just show up, but also engage in activism with other women. Her bonds with Sandra, in particular, became stronger through all of the time they spent staffing the *TVM* ticket table and awareness-raising. Nina recalled, "I think that really helped the you know those bonds as well. Because when you're tabling with someone … you build those [bonds]. It was really nice a lot of what I did with Sandra, of course. And it just really strengthened our relationship and built a really fantastic foundation for the last—you know, I guess—five years because this was back in 2013! That was probably one of the one of the main takeaways that I got from it was –Sandra—you know, having this fantastic connection but also connecting with all of the other folks that were there too. You know, I mean whether, you know, it was just connecting, you know, on Facebook or seeing them around campus and just having some extra support."

For someone who hadn't connected with other women in this way before, Nina described the feeling of safety and support she experienced, "We were all very committed to the production and wanted to see it succeed, but we were also really into connecting… And I think at one point I think it was one of the little impromptu rehearsals… some folks told their stories about, you know, whether it was a funny experience or maybe a not-so-funny experience and I think it [was] their willingness to be open with everybody else. And I'm sure every cast is different. But I really felt like everybody made it safe. Everybody kind of threw judgment out the window. You know even for this hour time frame that we were rehearsing or just hanging out and doing our collages that maybe they were doing it unintentionally or whatnot but just kind of letting down those guards and opening up to the opportunities to connect." The power of that connection for Nina was a key point that stays with her today. I asked what prompted it, and she said "I don't know if there was any particular thing, but I can say that that . . . 'Oh at this event we all just, you know, sat down and held hands' … it wasn't like that. It was just very organic. 'I'm here for you if you want to talk.' This unspoken safety I think was just there. And I think it was really instrumental in building a good cast."

In contrast from the positive comments above, Nina offered several important meta-analytical comments about the play itself, and articulated critical perspectives on *TVM*, which, given how affirming her experience was, is particularly powerful. She told two stories which I'll recount here.

First, she spoke about the need for *The Vagina Monologues* to be more inclusive. And yet, "it's hard to be so inclusive. Because if you wanted to include everything you would be a week weeklong production… But it would have been nice to see maybe a little bit more diversity a little bit more. I don't want to say 'updated' because diversity isn't about being "updated" but maybe more recent stories." While technically against the V-Day "rules," in response to the critical perspective that the monologues didn't effectively represent transgender individuals, NWSU inserted a new/original monologue in a recent performance. Nina described "we had a [trans] person, Madeline. She wrote her own monologue. I think it was two years ago and I thought that was really fantastic. All about her journey and transition and it was it was really amazing. I don't think there was a dry eye in the room. All three nights. And just having you know that touch of personalization that the I think really, really went a long way." In support of including newer stories, Nina said "But I do think we should have some more recent newer stories, you know times are changing and I'm sure they're coming."

The other story Nina shared was about the production held the year after she was in it. She was in the lobby, selling vibrators with Christy, when she "peeked in on this monologue and the person that was doing it." On the stage at that moment was a woman with restraints on her wrists and a collar around her neck. She was portraying the lesbian dominatrix sex worker in the monologue *The Woman Who Liked to Make Vaginas Happy*. Nina said, "I guess it is an issue with the portrayal of the woman… I think everybody probably loves that monologue because they get the orgasm train of entertainment. But I find that one really . . . it can be difficult to do." When Nina peeked into the theater, she said she was "very confused. I was very confused because those [costume and props were] symbolic of NOT a dominant role. So, I had a real issue and I actually talked to the director and I said 'What are you doing? That doesn't make any sense. Please fix this.' And it was [a friend of hers] at the time which I feel like he should know. But I was I was very frustrated like this. This is this is a big epic fail. He said, 'I really wanted my cast to have their own look . . . and I think it's really important for individuality…'" Nina interrupted him and said, "Yes but not when it's contradicting your monologue."

After the confrontation, Christy and Nina talked further and about "how different the speaker in the monologue looks to everyone else. Some people portray them as this like 'dominatrix type' other people see her as a kind of a butch female you know. So, it's really interesting to see how … sexualized they make her even without thinking that they are doing it because that whole dominatrix role is hyper sexualized. And this version of it, maybe it's just a mask. I don't know how to say it. Maybe we're looking at it through kind of like a patriarchal sense of what should be on stage."

Result

At the time of the interview, Nina had just graduated from NWSU after completing two bachelor's degrees (political science and sociology with an emphasis in criminology). She had recently finished an internship with the [state] probation and parole office and loved it. When we spoke for the individual interview, Nina was awaiting word on an application for a correction officer position at the [nearby state] penitentiary.

While waiting to hear about a permanent position in her field, Nina worked with Christy and her partner at their comic book/costume/game/adult store. In the years since *TVM*, Nina said

she's remained engaged in the Women's Center and in *TVM* because of her work with [local adult store]. She said "I still do continue to go and sell vibrators and chocolate vulvas at the monologues or whatever production that they [the Women's Center] are doing. We also sell the tickets as well." Nina reflected, "And it's just it's nice to still be a little involved even if I'm not in the production. I feel like eventually I want to be in the monologues again… I feel like it was definitely one of the highlights of my sophomore year at the university." Today, she describes her everyday work as "I'm having conversation with folks about sex and health and everything all day and so it's pretty regular conversation for me but remembering that not everybody talks about all of these things all of the time. So be delicate, you know, let them come to you. Be approachable."

Nina imagines her future career in the department of corrections will be very different. Nina said, "my mother likes to remind me that [given] the field that I'm going into [I] will probably [find that my coworkers] are not going to have similar opinions to mine. Because it's, you know, it's a very interesting field. And you definitely feel the tension there. It will be interesting. I'm hoping that there are a lot more females in the corrections system now working. And I didn't do too much with gender studies and in the correctional system, I kind of wish I would have. I feel like as well as *Orange Is the New Black* is doing—even though it is a show—it is really bringing up a lot of issues that people don't think about. People don't want to think about people in prison or jails. But that show is really bringing a lot to light, which is fantastic. Yea, so that's my new trajectory. And a lot of people really don't understand it and that's OK."

Coda

Nina's story included a description of the visceral experience she had as a cast member. She reflected "When the play finally rolled around, [it's] Valentine's Day…. My favorite part of any production is the backstage before the show actually starts and during because the adrenaline is just going . . . everybody's ready . . . [it's] everything you've worked for. And being around such amazing folks… Backstage was definitely buzzing! You know … we're ready to go. Anxiety. But everybody knew it didn't matter really what happened out there. It was kind of a great show. And everybody was going to do fine. And it was!"

SANDRA – Making A Difference

Orientation

Sandra, a white 26-year-old woman came to NWSU from out-of-state. Like her friend Nina, Sandra also served as a work-study student in the Women's Center and participated in the play her sophomore year. Sandra's perception of the purpose of *The Vagina Monologues* from the outset was for outreach and education on violence against women. She had watched a film with Eve Ensler and had in her mind that Ensler was "championing and using her creative influence on this thing that she was so passionate about." Sandra was also motivated to get involved and learn more when she found out that the performances benefited local agencies. She said, "I thought it was pretty cool how I knew that all the proceeds were pretty locally donated. So that was also influential [in my decision] to know that it was helping my community."

Chronology of Events

In contrast to Nina's version of the auditions (she claimed it was Sandra who wanted to try out!), Sandra said "I had made a really good friend, while working at a women's center, Nina, and she kind of persuaded me to audition. I had extra time that I could participate, and it was something that I was interested in." Regardless of who instigated their involvement, both Nina and Sandra recalled being influenced to try out by their involvement in the Women's Center.

Sandra said, "I heard positive things from people I interacted with at the Women's Center and I thought it would be like a good opportunity."

Sandra said, "I don't remember too much about the audition, but I think they like cast everybody for the play . . . pretty much everyone that auditioned… and not that it made my experience less meaningful, but I think it kind of took away [from the impact] . . . There was almost like too many people involved in the actual performance part where there could have been more people involved with behind the scenes stuff or something like that." Sandra recalled that the logistics of rehearsal created challenges that resulted in the material being largely new for nearly everyone, "So like when we had our dress rehearsals and stuff that seemed like the first time that everybody was kind of together. And I kind of remember thinking like it would have been more beneficial to see the performance more times with everybody involved versus just like the one or two times. I think that would have given everybody more time to process and just kind of get used to the different aspects." She described the collective impact on the cast, "I think it was like hitting us all at the same time as it was like hitting the audience, and I think we were all just like really emotionally exhausted by the end of the show."

I asked Sandra about peer and family support she received as a cast member. Sandra stated "both my parents were really supportive. My mom was like really excited about it. She I think she did her own research after I kind of explained it to her a little bit… [she] sent me flowers for like the first opening day and that was really cool." Her dad was, according to Sandra, "kind of funny about it. But I think that [her being in *TVM*] has stuck with him as something that I've been involved with and something that I'm passionate about. He continues to bring up my experiences today and I think that is really cool." It's clear both Sandra's parents are supportive and proud of her engagement.

Sandra was a sorority member, and also mentioned getting significant support from members of the Greek community. She also commented on how vital her involvement was in getting sorority and fraternity members out to the production. "I think it really helps to have people in the Greek community involved with it because otherwise I think… they are like standoffish about it like it's something that they don't really want to get involved with and so it helps to have people in that community be involved [as cast members] with it. And you know that's something that's kind of interesting about the Greek community is if there is someone involved with something all your sisters or brothers will support you no matter what it is. So, I heard [there were] people from my house [and from fraternities] in the audience every single night and they were super supportive. I think it helps a lot of the fraternity men to realize but like a lot of things that they probably have never thought about before… I think it was really awesome to see all the different people that supported the production. And, seeing other cast members and their communities or families supporting them was really awesome, too."

The size of the cast came up a couple of times as we spoke. Sandra commented on the difficult job the director had in trying to make roles for everyone when she made "sure everyone was still involved and connected, and nobody was checked out. And I think she did a really good job of that and I think I mean we were all you know supportive and engaged with each other." Given the size of the cast and competing demands on time, Sandra commented "I think there were times where there was like some conflict and I think we all did a good job of just like working through it and you know getting to the end goal that we had in mind. And I think it just spoke a lot like we were all . . . I mean there are professors and students involved in the production and we all had other stuff going on and we were all you know dedicated and volunteered to do this like really powerful thing."

Despite her frustration with the number of people who were on stage, Sandra also spoke about the community of support among women in the production being vulnerable as vital to the experience. She described "I think just watching it come together it was just a really good testament of how supportive women can be of each other and push each other to do things that otherwise are uncomfortable."

Evaluation

A direct outcome of Sandra's involvement in *TVM* was her increased interest in becoming involved on campus in outreach and education efforts. That same year that Sandra was in the play, a new position was created in the NWSU Student Government—the director of safety and violence prevention. Sandra expressed her interest, "I think I just almost saw like a need for that kind of work –it just kind of felt like a proper stepping stone." And, Sandra attributed her interest to her involvement in *TVM*, "I mean the play definitely just ignited like a passion that I hadn't really ever felt before. And I think the fact that it was like tied so closely to like our campus and like how like prevalent sexual assault is on campus . . . Just like the numbers and the statistics . . . It was kind of like alarming and I just kind of felt like if more people were just simply aware, then we could get more problems solved or get the right/more resources in the right places and things like that. And so, I think that was just like a kind of natural next opportunity for me."

Her ongoing involvement in the Women's Center played a role in her engagement as well. In her new role with the Student Government, Sandra was able to make connections and dedicate resources to supporting violence prevention work in the Women's Center, like *TVM*. She shared, "Having that relationship between the Student Government and the Women's Center was like my number one priority and so supporting future productions even though I wasn't involved myself . . . Just knowing that the Student Government supported the production … that was something that was very important to me. [I was] just doing whatever I could to make a difference I guess." The ongoing theme of making a difference is a guiding force behind Sandra's work and a theme to which she returns often throughout her interviews. She said that this desire to make a difference came from her involvement in the play. She elaborates, "that was something that *The Vagina Monologues* made me feel like I could do, like I guess just seeing how Eve Ensler took what she was good at and like really made like a really incredible thing out of it. I felt like I should figure out a way that I can make a difference too and that really was driving my passion continuing my whole education and time there [on campus]."

Sandra's efforts to increase awareness also extended to her involvement in her sorority house, where she lived all four years at NWSU. When she was president her last year Sandra described, "there were instances of sexual assault and in my sorority [my involvement] really helped me, I think, be there for them as a leader and know exactly what needed to happen in those cases. And I just felt like I had a lot of knowledge that I wouldn't have had otherwise. I want to continue building that, and just continue educating myself and trying to educate others." She recounted "how many times it [sexual assault] has come up since. But unfortunately, that's just kind of how it is. And, like I said, I don't think I would have been able to be as supportive in my sorority without *The Vagina Monologues*. I had a couple women disclose sexual assault to me and without *The Vagina Monologues*, I would not have known where to point them to or known the right people and so that was really impactful."

Sandra makes this direct connection to her current career pursuits when she said, "And that was I think probably one of the biggest moments where I realized like how powerful education can be and the different ways you can educate people too. And I think that that you

know continues now into what I really believe especially now, as I want to be a teacher. And I think you know there's a lot of different reasons for that. But I think you know my passion for education really it started when I was in college."

Unfortunately, during her junior year at NWSU, Sandra faced a situation that required her to access resources for her own safety. When an ex-boyfriend began stalking her, Sandra described the feeling as "weird." She explained "I almost feel like it . . . the reason it felt so weird I guess is because everything felt like it was so out of my control . . . Like I didn't even realize what was really happening until . . . I didn't know what to do anymore." As she felt like she didn't know what to do, Sandra sought out campus resources. In fact, it was a staff member who was also on the *TVM* cast who worked in the Violence Prevention Programs office, "[it was] she who I told . . . I was having problems with this guy. I feel like she knew exactly what to do and she handled the situation very well." This personal experience brought about a deeper insight, "And I think it just like made me feel like I could really feel how impactful intrapersonal violence is and how scary it is and how hard it is to label how much stigma is around it." She identified the institutional barriers that she personally faced and later tried to address, "I mean it was interesting because the guy was in one of my classes and they [said] . . . I could switch class sections, but they wouldn't make him switch class. And that was like really it just made me realize that there's like problems in every system, I guess." In her role in the Student Government, Sandra tried to raise awareness about these inequities and directly do something about them.

Result

Today Sandra is finishing her master's degree and teaching certificate with the desire to become a high school teacher. After she graduated from NWSU, she started work—at what I perceived as a somewhat unfulfilling workplace—in what she labeled as "a corporate job." But, even in that field she said, "I kept my involvement in *The Vagina Monologues* on my resume, like when I applied for a job after college. Actually … the person that was interviewing me asked me about it… He kind of said it like it was *hush-hush* almost, like he didn't really want to ask me but he [was interested] and he was like really awkward about it. And so, I explained to him what *The Vagina Monologues* was, and he was embarrassed! I think, it was kind of like a funny experience but at the same time it really just opened my eyes—even if you're not doing like anything involved with any kind of social justice—like if you're not working in that field, you can still spread what you know to other people and they can take it to heart and do their own research with it or whatever." She described her transition out of corporate life into education as a quest to raise awareness, "I think that's something that will always ignite a passion to make a difference. And I think that's just because of like personal experiences that I went through and also like being in *The Vagina Monologues* … opened my eyes to how big of a difference education can make and . . . I mean that's what I want to do for the rest of my life is you know work in education and wherever that leads me."

Sandra expanded on how her perspective shifted, "And it has really opened my eyes to all the intersectional issues that women face. Like how important to have all the different voices represented and to let people speak from their own experiences. And I'm just, I think specifically just learning about the Native American community was really eye opening and life changing." She sees this experience as an additional point that she can make when she is applying for teaching positions, "I mean those are all experiences that add to my like professional resume and professional experience like I have worked with various different people and that's, you know,

something that people in education really strive for is you know catering to every single student that walks through your door."

As she reflected on how her career goals shifted from corporate work to education, she said these experiences "have only helped me you know bring me closer to my goals of being like a truly great teacher and that is really powerful." As she concluded her time at NWSU, Sandra was recognized with several awards. She commented "I have a placard hanging in my office right next to my degree, and awards that I received from the Women's Center. I have all of that stuff and it just. . . . I mean it makes me feel proud." These awards for her involvement and efforts to make a difference on campus had a much farther-reaching effect. Sandra stated, "And I think that it was something that really drove my education and changed what I wanted to do with my life.

Coda

It's important to name that while Sandra's experience was positive, she also shared (with Nina) critical perspectives on the play's content and how it (mis)represented members of the LGBTQ community. She described how that perspective/critique evolved in this story: "So like I think the first time that I like read through the script and like the monologues that were picked and then I saw like the people performing them I was like super jazzed about it and I'm just like really excited but then just like talking through some of that stuff and I think this was something the director brought up was how *The Vagina Monologues* didn't really represent like the LGBTQ community very well. I think there was specifically a monologue about a young lesbian woman or a young woman who is kind of questioning and she had this experience with an older lesbian woman and it was like, I don't know, like questionable about consent and things like that. Was it OK? And that really opened my eyes to like how maybe situations like that aren't OK but that's kind of how things have been happening for so long that [it goes unquestioned]."

Sandra also linked her involvement to current climate issues around sexual assault. She shared a story about her current workplace—a high school—where she is a paraprofessional teacher (completing student teaching internship). "Our principal was just put on leave and no one really knows why but there are rumors that it was some kind of sexual assault situation. And I mean it just, like, really is shaking." In these moments, Sandra described looking back on her experiences and summarized, "I guess it's just nice to have something to come back to where you do realize that there's like positive that can come from it and people are trying to work to make a difference."

"But I think it also just like it shows how important it is to have these productions and even though it is older, and whatever, it is obviously still relevant. And I think it just has helped me to really like not only feel supportive in those times were also like I know how to advocate for myself and for others who are facing those kinds of situations because really just makes you feel like powerless. And … without like the people that I knew from *The Vagina Monologues* I don't know…. [in my stalking situation] like what would have happened."

TONIA – Storytelling for a Purpose

Orientation

Tonia, a 33-year-old white woman who identifies today as a lesbian, came to NWSU having recently married her high school sweetheart, Daniel. After a very conservative upbringing in the Mormon faith, Tonia's identity shifted dramatically in college and in her interview, she shared this story of that process, which occurred around the time she started college: "I'd already started to change my identity a little bit… I got married very young. I had been dating a boy

actually in high school. And while I was at boarding school [I] had kind of been wrestling with this attraction to women and there was a very stark difference in how I felt romantically with Daniel versus how I felt with women. And very stereotypically, also you know [given] my Mormon background, I kind of ran the opposite way and was like 'OK I've got to commit to this being straight thing.' And that was also tied to my grandma. She was very active in the Mormon church, I knew how the Mormon church felt about things. Unsurprisingly my marriage went horribly, and he cheated on me extensively. Toward the end of our marriage I found out actually that he had raped several women, which was a big reason that I decided to get divorced from him. So, I think really there were these very hard circumstances in my life that drove me to find something else. So, I sought out the women's center. I sought out [the community advocacy agency]. I thought, whatever I have been taught is NOT working. And I don't want that for my life. And so, I just had the resources and started to make friends with people who had had similar experiences to me but had moved in a different direction."

Tonia's identity realization and eventual actualization coincided with her engagement on campus with feminist groups, and around that time, Tonia also saw *The Vagina Monologues* for the first time. She shared, "The very first time I went I think was either my freshman or sophomore year at college. I just heard about it on campus and I went. And, it was like life changing…., it was powerful, I started bringing other people. There were years I would go multiple times in a year." For Tonia, the production was "the first kind of space that I felt like there was some open and real honesty and stories about what happens for women, at least in my life it was…It was like my first baby feminist thing! And it was, like even before I was in it, my first activist thing, where I was like 'everybody has to see this!'"

TVM played a direct role in Tonia's activism as she made a point of bringing people who she wanted to have conversations with to the play. "Like I remember taking my mom to it . . . It was really shocking for her. She never went again. But, like I tried to use it as a way also to have conversations with people who mattered to me. It was a pretty big deal."

After Tonia shared this story about taking her mom to see *TVM*, I asked a follow up question about how conversations about feminism resonated (or did not) within her family. Tonia stated, "It was huge… Well my mom does not identify as Mormon and hasn't been in the church since she was a kid, however my family is very rigidly Mormon. They are one of the 'founding families' and . . . Sorry I'll try to turn down the sarcasm! So, I grew up in an extremely conservative environment. We did talk about women as having power but only through their role as a wife and a mother. We talked about women in my family being strong. But it was that whole self-sacrificing-do-whatever-you-have-to-do-for-your-family conversation and not so much anything else… we definitely don't talk about feminism stuff at all in my family. And so that was something I was more exposed to at college." This background experience sets the stage for Tonia's interest in participating in a more direct way in *TVM*.

Chronology of Events

Tonia said she doesn't remember what eventually prompted her to try out. At that point in her life, she said "I assume that it had to do with the community that I was spending time with… I had also been volunteering [at local advocacy agency] through a combination of referrals from the Women's Center but then also my French professors who were very active in feminist social circles as well…So, I actually think it was a lot of the experiences around volunteering and then that combination with the community that kind of led to the try out."

She said she was nervous about being on stage, even though "I've been told a few times that I was a good public speaker and I had done some drama in high school. But it was mandated

as a part of my high school, so I wasn't so sure about that. And [as I said] I loved going to *The Vagina Monologues,* so I remember that me and a few of my friends just went ahead and decided to sign up and try out. And I kind of expected like 'Oh we probably won't get this, but this is a fun activity I did with my friends and like we all care about this issue and so of course we support *The Vagina Monologues…*' I ended up making it through the auditions and I was [cast] in the *Coochi Snorcher* role." She interjected, "I don't know if you remember but we did kind of two versions like a younger self telling the younger version of that part of the story and then a second person doing the kind of second half when they're older." I said I did remember how that monologue was split into two parts. What I didn't know at the time was the personal connection that this particular piece held for Tonia (in the monologue, the young girl is assaulted by a friend of her father's). Tonia disclosed, "My sister was sexually assaulted as a child. So that story in particular . . . I did not necessarily ask to be put on that story, that I was picked for that one. But that also resonated for me and for my family… I loved that it was huge for me to think about how to get onstage and not just be onstage but also be representing something that was so important to my life." She went on to share another experience, that year a close friend of hers was raped on campus. She reflected, "So I think *The Vagina Monologues* actually ended up being a way at a time for me to also process those things. A way to understand what was happening in my life and also to feel like I was I was doing something about it."

She described how in her family there was "a lot of silence around sexual assault. I know he got assigned to counseling. I know that my sister got counseling but ultimately, we were told to not talk about it and not create a rift in the family." She directly attributes her experience in *TVM* as a moment in which she feels like she faced this situation, "So, I think *The Vagina Monologues* played a role in me working towards healing from that. And there wasn't any shying away . . . Talking about sexual assault and what that means for somebody's life but also how there are all of these smaller experiences with women's bodies that shape and define how we interact in the world. So it [*TVM*] felt really powerful and liberating."

The following year, Tonia recruited over a dozen people ("some who were still in school and some in the community") and they all tried out together. She described how in doing this she was taking a much more activist role. But, that year, based on casting decisions, there were too many people, and Tonia explained "most people had very, very short parts and that time commitment didn't feel worth it to me." She said, "I think… it was, I think *The Vagina Monologues* is really powerful. But there's a huge commitment of time in terms of memorizing your role and being there for practices and in that particular year there had been a decision to fit in everyone who had tried out.… And so, I felt really bad. I went to a couple of practices, but I eventually was like this isn't . . . for this short amount of time to spend hours and hours and hours rehearsing and watching everybody else rehearse, it just wasn't quite worth it for me the second year." Despite not participating for a second year, Tonia remained connected through her volunteer work with the local advocacy agency, later serving in a paid staff position before leaving for a position as a 911 operator.

Evaluation

Tonia's overall evaluation of her participation in the play was "It was fabulous! And I actually liked the piece of being on the stage." But more than that Tonia discovered, in her one year of involvement, a mechanism for her own activism. She said, "I think that started to form my understanding of how important storytelling is to moving advocacy forward."

Result

Today, Tonia is living in a nearby state working for "a feminist organization…. We're called [state] Tradeswomen. So, I help women . . . well our organization helps women… get into the building and construction trades. I am actually our Director of Advocacy Programs. There is so much that I love [about] my job. It's amazing. Public speaking has become an active part of my work. In fact, the experience in *The Vagina Monologues* helped me start doing public speaking when I worked for [local advocacy agency]. And now at [new organization], I actually do that for trades women. So, we do a whole thing where we look at how storytelling is a part of the advocacy for them in the industry and how to use storytelling in different contexts. It's not always live, on-stage although I have partnered with live real true storytelling events like The Moth. We have one here locally called [show name] and we've shared tradeswomen-only stories about their experiences in the industry, which is really powerful. On a basic level, I also help women craft how to talk about your experience. How do you do that in a way that feels good for you and true for you—but it is not triggering. And then how do you use your personal story to move whatever it is that you're working on forward? So, like how do you tell a story at your union meeting? How do you tell a story to your boss? How do you use that as an engaging and effective mechanism to create cultural change? Yeah, and then I do other leadership development training with them but it's a lot of that we do the same thing with moving legislation. We do state and the national legislation and policy work for tradeswomen's issues. I spend a lot of time working with tradeswomen to develop [their stories]. [I say], 'Okay great. You've got a wonderful story now. How do you tell that in three minutes? How do you tell it in ten minutes based on where what context you're in and what you want the result to be? And how do you pick which story because none of our lives can be fully encapsulated in three minutes or thirty minutes or even an hour."

Coda

Tonia wrapped up her interview, in discussing the themes of the play, her current work, and the messages she received as a child growing up. She shared, "Another example that plays out in my current life is my family owned a machine shop and did a lot of construction work…When I was pretty young, I would say I was 11 or 12, it was explicitly explained to me that this was not 'women's work.' That was not a role for me, and I was *uninvited* from participating. And that conversation has shifted through what I do now… but it definitely influenced where I'm at now where I recognize that women are told very clearly that they cannot be a part of construction or those 'non-traditional jobs for women,' which also plays into the whole pay gap. Because that's not just based on what people make per hour, but occupational segregation and how my family unwittingly pushed me toward a path where I would not have as much earning potential by telling me certain things were not accessible to me."

The stories Tonia shared, together with the others in this study, are powerful. Encapsulated in this one quote, is so much truth for many of the women in this story: "I would say [*The Vagina Monologues*] was pretty influential on my life. It was maybe the tipping point for me to realize how powerful that storytelling and how it affects advocacy."

WANDA – Seeking Feminism and Feminists

Orientation (time, place, scene)

Unlike any of the other women in this study, Wanda participated as a cast member in *The Vagina Monologues* her first year in college. Now 26-years-old, when she arrived at NWSU in fall 2010, Wanda was an 18-year-old straight white woman and a goal-oriented and high-achieving student from a city in the (metropolitan) southern part of the state. She was also an

unapologetic feminist and environmentalist. Wanda was raised by parents who openly discussed gender equality and encouraged her (and her sister's) interests in feminism and science. Wanda described, "from a young age, my mom and dad were always presenting us with various examples of strong women whether it be in science or education or whatever. Whenever we had to do research projects, we always end up talking about strong women. One of the most influential research projects I did was on Wangari Matai, the first woman in Africa to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Reading all about her and reading her autobiography was what catapulted me into environmental science because she found this wonderful way of bringing together natural resources, understanding of the environment, and feminism. So that's something that has really fueled me over time." Her parents encouraged Wanda's interests in "feminism, ecofeminism." She said, "And then when I got to NWSU, there were two things I was looking for: an environmental club to be a part of, and then I wanted to find something related to feminism that I could be part of."

Wanda's engagement on campus was immediate, intentional, and intense. She described being "really excited about going to college and furthering my education and just jumping into the world and exploring" where a lot of her friends back home were "already talking about getting married and having kids and I was like . . . I mean good for you. But I was like, I can't do that and it's not what I want right now. I saw how people are pretty different and that's not, I mean, if that works for them, that's fine but it's not for me and I don't want that kind of perspective or role placed on me." Wanda had her sights set on much more distant goals and places.

In her interview, Wanda described feeling like she is misperceived by others. She described a common challenge facing strong women like her—the perception that her strength makes her "intimidating." She said "My sister and I, we are always told that we are intimidating. By all kinds of people, but mainly men. Usually men—in our age range—who are getting to know us or seem generally interested in us always say that we [my sister and I] really intimidating and competitive… we've talked about that a lot and we're wondering, why is that? Because it's one thing for a guy to be told that he's intimidating, but it's another thing for a woman to be told that she's intimidating. And we've been exploring that … What is it about our personalities that sets us apart, especially as women?"

Wanda thinks her assertiveness (called intimidation by others) is because of how she and her sister were raised, "[it's] simply a fact, in that my sister and I have grown up in a specific environment and upbringing where we were always told that if you have an opinion about something you should be prepared to say it, and you should back it up… That you should stand your ground also be open minded if you have reasoning for something that you should be able to use that. You use logic! You should be tenacious in what you do if you start projects, you should finish it and you shouldn't be deterred by others. So, I think that sometimes that comes across as, for some reason, intimidating. But I think it's really inaccurate, and badly used term. I think I like 'tenacious' and 'stubborn.' I mean I would say I'm stubborn, very much so."

Given her tenacity, her stubbornness, and her pre-orientation to feminist perspectives and aims, in Wanda's case, it is difficult to discern how much an influence participation in *The Vagina Monologues* had on her trajectory toward graduate school (where she is today). However, in her interviews and in a follow up conversation, I was both surprised and then also *not* surprised by Wanda's story.

Chronology of Events

In some ways, Wanda's path to auditioning in *The Vagina Monologues* was typical; like other feminist activists, Wanda came to the auditions and saw her involvement in the play as another way to express her feminist beliefs. In other ways, her story was unexpected—if not surprising, given what I know of Wanda's achievements today. She tells it best: "So for I guess all the way up from when I started school all the way to my senior year, I had a pretty embarrassing speech impediment and it really [held me back] . . . I know I was very shy and getting in front of a group of people was probably the most terrifying thing in the world and I just hated any type of public speaking . . . And when I was a senior in high school, I just was so sick of it. I was tired of not being able to say what I wanted to say in class. I was tired of the anxiety that I would get when I had to do presentations and I was tired of being bullied by people for the way that I spoke." Wanda was prompted to overcome her speech stutter and lisp during her senior year. She described the process, "I thought well I'm just going to go to speech therapy and see if I can fix this because it's just been annoying, and I feel like it's holding me back as a person. And my parents are always really supportive. They said, 'You know you sound fine the way that you are you don't need to change anything. You know we love you as you are.' So that was always really nice and so they were equally supportive either way… I started speech therapy about a month or two before I graduated [from high school] . . . within about three sessions it was gone, and I could talk normally. I was like, 'Oh my gosh a whole new world [opened] up!'" About the same time, she finished speech therapy, Wanda learned she would be giving the valedictorian's address at her high school graduation. Beyond receiving her diploma and highest honors, "the biggest part of the graduation was just the fact that I finally had the confidence to get in front of a big group of people and speak clearly. So, I think this started to change things a lot when I got to college because I finally felt like I could speak normally."

Having overcome her speech impediment, Wanda had a newfound sense of confidence, and that drove her to get involved when she got to college the following fall. Wanda was looking for opportunities and described going to a student involvement fair during the school's welcome week looking for a feminist group to join, "I knew that was something very core to my belief system and it's somewhere where I wanted to grow, and I knew that the people that would be supportive of me but also kind of opened up my mind to a lot of new things that I might not be aware of. So, when I was at [student involvement fair], I was kinda looking for that, it was like a woman center type of thing and something environmentally focused, so then I came across the sustainability center and then the Women's Center. OK. Yes, this is what I want! So that was how I got to where I am."

It was only a month or two into the fall semester when Wanda saw the notices to audition for the play. Again, she drew on her (newfound) confidence of having overcome her speech impediment when she thought "Wow, you know [auditioning for *TVM*] would be a really good challenge for me to do! Because I just wanted to keep on pushing myself to see if I could handle it and embrace it. And I knew I could do something like that because I was ready."

Wanda described being largely unfamiliar with the play, "I mean I suppose I heard parts of *The Vagina Monologues*, but I never read it in its entirety." But despite that, Wanda said the play intrigued her. "I mean just the title itself, I thought, that just sounds so power and raw-like . . . *The Vagina Monologues* . . . the fact that "vagina" is in the title of the play. You know I just love that because it's out there! It's very, very honest. And so, yeah, I just thought on a whim, I was like, 'You know I'm going to try it out to see what happens.'" Wanda described the atmosphere at the auditions, "There was a buzz in the room; it was really exciting, everybody in the room had this sense of, 'Yes! We're here for *The Vagina Monologues*!" I felt like everyone

was so excited about it and I hadn't really had that experience before . . . being surrounded by a group of women talking about something we all had in common, as well just being really excited… And it was a safe, confident, and uplifting atmosphere all at once. It wasn't scary or raw, which was maybe what I had in mind? I mean, I didn't really know how to approach it, but the audition was really fun."

Upon reading the *TVM* script in its entirety, Wanda said, "It was just unlike anything else I'd ever read. And especially when we started to do the first couple of dry runs, reading through the script, it was as if it suddenly just clicked. It was, for me, not really a play at all but it was a journey into all these different women's lives and their experiences with their bodies . . . How society perceived them, with how they saw themselves and it was kind of like, reading someone's diary except it was a very open conversation and I, I really loved that about it." And we did a type of workshop together, like a team building day. And I loved all of that because every single time I'd leave those auditions or the workshop I just remember feeling like really excited and powerful and confident in myself. And I was like, "Yeah! We tackled something that probably would make a lot of people uncomfortable, but I feel awesome and I feel ok talking about these things." I think that that's a pretty big deal because it's not something that we really ever get taught, especially in school and growing up, or like in our health classes. I think that's it. So unfortunately, I think it's a really big gap that we never really get taught that. It's like, it's OK to talk about these things, it's OK to have questions. Yeah, and not really understand why we feel the way we do. So, I think I hadn't realized how absent that had been so like in my health classes learning about sexual health education . . . I mean that was something that I had not really put together because it kind of blurs this line between self-esteem and sex ed, and that is just kind of like, 'that's up to you. You go figure that out.' But I think it's pretty critical to building a strong foundation. Yeah. So, there's that."

Evaluation

For Wanda, connecting with other women from completely different backgrounds was an unexpected benefit of her involvement. She elaborated, "I also feel like I still have this strong camaraderie with all the women that were there. You know, we see each other on campus around town and it was like, 'hey!' We just have this really neat connection. And I thought what a beautiful thing. Because these are women I probably never would have met otherwise. And I think that that's the really nice part about *The Vagina Monologues* . . . And that's a really special thing and especially in academic communities and campuses sometimes you just hang out with the same group of people because you think a certain way, and act a certain way, so that cross pollination is always really nice when it happens."

Several years later, after graduating *Summa Cum Laude* from NWSU with a bachelor's degree in Environmental Science, and minors in French and Wildlife Resources, Wanda moved back to her parents' house briefly before beginning a field-work assignment in the summer in Arizona, doing avian ecology research. It was during this experience that Wanda was reminded of the messages from *The Vagina Monologues*. She told this story:

"After I graduated, I packed up my stuff and I left for Arizona. I worked there for a summer in the back country running around after birds . . . I was really excited about the job since it had come up in online forums as one of the coolest bird jobs ever. You're way out in the middle of nowhere. I was really excited, but it ended up being a really bad field job. Where I mean, one thing was the pay . . . We were only paid like three bucks an hour, which was sad. Yeah, that was ridiculous. But then, the group of people that were hired for that project was unreal. It was the weirdest, probably most inappropriate and just like kind of disgusting group of

ecologists I had ever worked with. And I remember there was one Ph.D. student who was really explicit with all the technicians out there and, towards the field season and he did something called the 'inappropriate awards night' which kind of like made me shudder. I was like, I don't know how this is going to go. I mean, he would say terrible things all of the time at camp. To me, he would say, 'You're so polite, you never really seemed to get offended by what I say, and you seem just so innocent.' And I was thinking, 'Yea, I don't want to deal with that kind of sick stuff that you're saying.' But anyway, so inappropriate awards night came around and I just knew it was going to be like a complete shit show for lack of better terms. And so, he gave an award to every single technician that was out there working. And I forget like what the other awards were, but I just remember one in particular that was he gave it to this other female technician; it was called 'the wettest vagina' award. It was so bad, but it wasn't even like the worst award! It was just one of many that he came up with and I couldn't help but think of like *The Flood* monologue. I'm so relieved I had that story in the back of my mind. It gave me some strength to get through that night and thankfully the technician that got the award just kind of went with it. But I would have been crushed and mortified. I wouldn't even know how to react to that. Yeah . . . and then he got to me and I remember he talked to me before that awards and he had said, 'I don't know what kind of an award to give you because you're just so innocent and so nice and polite in camp.' And so, I was like, 'yeah well knock yourself out. Think of something funny.' Anyway, I got the 'hidden sinner' award, which was actually surprisingly of nice and generalized, since it wasn't so specific or personal. Yes, I mean that summer in a nutshell, was like really kind of terrible. But I just thought back a lot to *The Vagina Monologues* said [to myself] OK that at a different time, I had a totally opposite experience where, I was really close with everybody in that group. We're all very supportive. We talked about our bodies in a very healthy positive way. And this is the polar opposite. So, I could at least have that other perspective in mind. This is not normal. And this field season will come to an end. And at least I can walk away from it and not be so affected by what was said. So that is one experience that was just really bizarre."

After that terrible field experience, Wanda worked on Midway Atoll on a research project with albatrosses (a type of large seabird) for close to a year before she was hired to work at a government wildlife conservation agency in Washington, D.C. where she had another terrible experience with a male supervisor whom Wanda described as "a raging narcissist and also, incredibly rude, cruel, and discriminatory towards women." She shared this recollection, "Now, after I left, I learned that he had this nickname, the 'Trump of the conservation world.' So, he was like a really nasty guy to deal with especially because I think the biggest thing is that he would just constantly put women down around him . . . Especially me, like I think I was his 'favorite.' And whenever I would do work or ask for feedback on lobbying and research work, I was doing, he would always say like 'why are you here, you are so unqualified for this job. What are you doing?' And when I asked him some questions about this big analysis of all of these protected areas in the Pacific, he would say 'You know we hired this really smart woman from Midway to figure this out for us . . . You. So, figure it out like stop bitching around. Get to work.' And it that was like that every single day. And I just kind of rolled with it, because I guess, I thought this is how he treats everybody...This Is D.C. My contract came up for renewal at six months and I knew I was done and that I was going to leave. I'm going to head out and I finally talked with some of the other women who were working at the same organization as I was and they're like, 'Yeah David… this guy is terrible, and you should have told us about this like months ago.' But I just thought it was normal and how he treated everybody. I mean, everybody

seemed to love him and just, oh David, you're so great. He eventually got kicked out actually by his own board after I left."

Wanda described struggling to stay positive during that time as she was trying "not [to] let this guy get to me . . . But I just remembered thinking again back to *The Vagina Monologues*. OK. And, I remember thinking, how would these women react to something like this? … I think I would go back to those memories every single time, and thinking like how did I feel at that point in time? Really strong, really powerful, really confident in myself, and just get back into that mindset . . . like a reset almost. Because I could feel like slipping and getting really upset and kind of depressed about things."

A distinct change in Wanda's response to these discriminatory and harassing experiences occurred after the 2016 election. I asked her if (and how) she had been involved in any of the activism arising around the women's marches. She shared this story, "Well I pushed for doing a women's march on Midway. I thought it was really important that we do that! And our little group of like I think six women marched… Given the current climate on Midway, there were some women who were scared to walk down the street with an albatross. And you know, they were upset with how the current climate is looking and we want to have some change. And we're not afraid. So, I think yes that was one thing on Midway, I was like I gotta do this because being out there is really strange as a woman."

Then Wanda described how she has become more directly engaged in speaking out. "There's a lot of problems with harassment especially in this last year I became a lot more outspoken about it and started to report more and more on it because … I think a lot of women are hesitant about speaking out because they're afraid it will put their position in some kind of danger, and you won't be able to work in a wonderful, beautiful place like Midway. So, I just kind of got sick of that perspective and that fear. And I reported it [harassment]. And that started to result in some change, as it was taken pretty seriously by the Fish and Wildlife at the headquarters level nationally." She sees this as part of the larger socio-historical moment and is excited to see some solidarity. A solution she suggested in the sciences, was "elevating women in workplaces in terms of giving them like a space to talk and to address issues that are pretty problematic that think so far, we just kind of like let them go . . . Let them roll on saying well you know that's kinda the way it goes . . . but instead actually say like, No, this is not OK. We don't deserve to be treated like this. So, I did the women's march. I unfortunately missed it this year because I was doing a welding workshop so that was kind of cool too because a welding with a bunch of women, it was really fun. And I think otherwise, in terms of my friendships, relationships, and partnerships that I try to set up in terms of research that I'm doing the work that I do. It's really important for me always to make that connection between science, research, and women. I mean I always I try to bring together a community a lot of times with ideas focused on outreach either towards younger crowds like children, school-age kids, and science but I also try to push the inclusion of women and minorities in science."

As I listened to these stories shared by Wanda during her individual interview, I was interested in the extent to which Wanda referred back to her experience in *The Vagina Monologues* as grounding "reality" for her and to help get her through these difficult experiences. It also makes sense then, as she began thinking about graduate school, that she would consider these past experiences when looking for a program.

Result

Currently Wanda is pursuing a master's degree in biological sciences and serving as a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow completing a project related to the

effects of invasive house mice on the ecosystem at Midway Atoll. Wanda emphasized in her individual interview (held the summer before she started graduate school) that she was looking for something different than her previous (negative) experiences. And, that she was thinking about previous positive experiences, which she described as "the power of being in a group of really empowered and strong women is something that really pushed me forward and now is pushing me into graduate school." In fact, as she looked for graduate programs, she said she wanted "to be back in that kind of a group, like a group of very diverse women." This led her to find a faculty member who shared her values. She described her new advisor as: "very passionate about getting women in science and giving them space to grow and she keeps up this awesome blog about women in the field and how we prepare for that. And she's very focused on that. Because there are a ton of women that are in conservation biology and ecology, but a lot of times they're not so much in leadership roles. When I work in the field, most technicians are women, which is kind of surprising, but then most crew leaders and most scientists that are either the principal investigators or whatever other managers—they're usually men."

Wanda described figuring out how "*The Vagina Monologues*, and that whole experience drove me towards [her advisor]. That's what I want. I don't have to work with like the number one person in the field because he's awesome and he's published all of these papers. I want to work somebody who has a solid background in ecology but she's also very aware of the context of ecology. And producing strong students who are going to be able to address those nuanced problems in the field."

Coda

Wanda's story of involvement in the play was significant in that she clearly draws upon the messages still today. There was something intensely powerful for her listening to the stories in the play, and also in connecting with the other women on the cast. She described, "It was so personal and so meaningful even if some experiences described in *The Vagina Monologues* had not happened to me personally, I could feel like as if they did. And those are things that stuck with me for a long time. Like there are still times that I think back on it. A line will just pop out of my head all of a sudden, that's a *Vagina Monologues* line! I'm glad that I read that and that I was a part of it because it makes me see things in a different way. It's a little bit like 'feminine wisdom' and navigating the world. So definitely, I think that those stories have really just stuck with me. And every single time I've gone back to watch *The Vagina Monologues* afterwards in supporting the next round of women and those stories are sort of reinforced. And I think that's a really beautiful part of storytelling is that it empowers people. But then it also brings us back together and kind of repeats, keeps themes going of strength and understanding and compassion especially when it comes to women. All in all, when I came out of *The Vagina Monologues*, I surprised myself that I got in front of the stage and I was not just giving a presentation, but I was actually reading lines and had to put some thought and feeling into it and was participating with a community and a theatre."

For someone who began this experience from a place of newfound confidence having just overcome a speech impediment, Wanda's key take away was "I became a lot more confident just how I thought about my body, and like how I approach that and that it wasn't something that scared me, it was OK to speak about them public and also encourage others that, it's okay to use the word 'vagina' and it's okay to speak about these very personal things and this shouldn't be a zone of fear at all."

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