

**The Vagina Monologues as Embodied Theology:  
Eve Ensler's Response to End Violence Against Women and Girls**

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*For the countless women who have been raped  
Whose legs have been spread on the crossbar of crucifixion  
For those sacrificed at the hands of foolish fathers  
Victimized by a violent world  
For those whose names we may not know  
Whose voices we have not heard  
For the women who hear the promise  
Yet are still eagerly awaiting the resurrection of the body  
We dance on your behalf<sup>1</sup>*

Playwright Eve Ensler responded to the 1993 United Nations' declaration on the rights of women by writing and performing in *The Vagina Monologues*. Raising over \$70 million to support organizations that fight to end violence against women and girls, *The Vagina Monologues* treats women's bodies and women's stories as the subject and starting point of revolutionary theology. As such, this paper is a theological reflection on choreography created specifically for the 2008 V-Day campaign that was performed as a "liturgy" in the "Chapel of the Great Vagina" at the Pacific School of Religion.

As a professional dancer/choreographer and ordained clergywoman, I was initially shocked when asked to create choreography for Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*. This shock deepened when I discovered that this secular theatrical performance would be performed as a "liturgy" in the "Chapel of the Great Vagina." The creative and performative process, however, proved to be the most meaningful and holy experience of my career thus far—as a performer, scholar, and minister. And this

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<sup>1</sup> These are the words I wrote that the two dancers spoke in tandem prior to performing the choreography for the "Dance on Behalf of Women Raped."

meaning stemmed in great part from the feminist theological lens through which I approached the choreography.

The script does not call for a dance in the *Vagina Monologues*, but the director decided that two monologues addressing the violence and suffering of rape needed to be “embodied in addition to spoken.” Thus, the “Dance on Behalf of Women Raped” was choreographed and situated between “My Vagina Was My Village,” which discusses the horrors of rape in Bosnia and Kosovo and “The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could,” which describes an adolescent experience of rape.

Rather than organizing a neat thesis that attempts to cover the range of my reflections, I have formatted this paper in the same manner as the choreography. As such, I offer brief vignettes that speak to various themes and motifs within the choreography. These vignettes are divided into movements, or sculptures, guided by the movements and bodily shapes of the choreography.

### **Crucified Woman**

We speak of the passion event, crucifixion, and it’s odd that we hear this word: *passion*. A double entendre if you will. As Christians we know that, in this instance, we are referring to the divine pathos of God—the passion of Christ’s sacrifice, the outpouring of love so deep that it leads to death on a cross. Yet in the everyday mundane of life this word—*passion*—has an entirely different connotation. Rarely associated with what we “holy” people deem as “sacred,” passion more often refers to the flesh: sensual, lust, intimacy, sexuality.

And it’s ironic, perhaps even divinely coincidental, how these two connotations of passion merge in the act of crucifixion: a *body* on the cross...suffering, naked, dying, and

passionate. In no way have I witnessed this more profoundly than through artistic renderings of the passion. Of course, being the feminist that I am, this passion is made manifest in art work displaying a crucified Christ in female form.

For example, in 1984 New York City witnessed a host of crucified women during holy week. Saint John the Divine took the daring step of displaying Edwina Sandy's now famous sculpture, *Christa*, depicting a female figure crucified. At the same time Union Theological Seminary displayed James Murphy's small clay sculpture, *Christine on the Cross*, which depicted an inverted cross with a woman's arms nailed to the vertical beam and her legs spread on the horizontal crossbar—signifying the way in which rape and domestic violence crucifies women on a daily basis. According to Union professor and liturgist, Janet Walton,

Both crucifixes challenged the literal historical interpretation of the cross. They expressed an evolving interpretation which sees all humanity participating in the pain of crucifixion. In "Christine on the Cross" a statement of hostility and humiliation heaped upon women in the form of rape and submission is visibly portrayed . . . The sculpture identified these women and women of all ages as suffering servants who have been wounded, broken and forsaken because of our inequities.<sup>2</sup>

In the choreography for the *Vagina Monologues*, I attempted to create an embodied response to the intersections of passion, bodies, rape, and sexuality. Drawing upon the themes of crucifixion and resurrection in James Murphy's sculpture, the dancers shared this embodied vulnerability as a symbol of God's passion and theirs.

### **Bodies and Theologies Unfold**

In the same way that Luce Irigaray describes the layered and infinite unfolding of "woman," or Catherine Keller describes the layered and infinite unfolding of Trinity, so I endeavored to embody this unfolding with real bodies, real dancers, real women. As

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Walton, *Art and Worship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 106.

such, the two professional dancers weren't necessarily the most technically trained, and they both had average female bodies (for dancers). They were not the emaciated sylphs of ballet, but real women's bodies. The choreography performed by two curvy women unfolds differently than it would if the two women were emaciated and thin, and this was intentional. Irigaray's concept of sensible transcendence undergirds my choreography as two women, two dancers, fold and unfold, becoming and embodying the holy, "you/I become two...but thus divided in two, one outside, the other inside, you no longer embrace yourself, or me... You become whatever touches you... *Between us*, there's no rupture between virginal and nonvirginal."<sup>3</sup> The choreography endeavored for the dancers to become one another, to become divine, through infinitely connected movements, through touch and through embracing the self and the other.

### **Performing Gender Identity**

Furthermore, the way in which the two dancers embodied their "gender roles" reflects Judith Butler's notion of performative acts constituting identity. Butler notes the way in which philosophers "rarely think about acting in the theatrical sense, but they do have a discourse of 'acts' that maintains associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting...[gender] is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."<sup>4</sup> In this way, my choreography was an attempt at embodying Butler's theory, of "acting out" the discourse of philosophers through a repetition of movements. This was manifested in simple ways, such as both dancers sharing equal roles in lifting and being lifted. There was no need for

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<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 210-211.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 49:1 (December 1988): 401-402.

a man to sweep in and perform his gender role by lifting a female sylph into the air; instead there were two, strong women who lifted one another, subverting classical definitions of movement-vocabulary and of gender identity.

### **Holy Vagina, Sacred Pleasure, and a History of Patriarchy**

In her introduction to the *Vagina Monologues*, Gloria Steinem reminds us of the history of the feminine divine in religion:

Gnostic Christians worshiped Sophia as the female Holy Spirit and considered Mary Magdalene the wisest of Christ's disciples; Tantric Buddhism still teaches that Buddhahood resides in the vulva; the Sufi mystics of Islam believe that *fana*, or rapture, can be reached only through Fravashi, the female spirit; The Shekina of Jewish mysticism is a version of Shakti, the female soul of God; and even the Catholic church included forms of Mary worship that focused more on the Mother than on the Son. In many countries of Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world where gods are still depicted in female as well as male forms, altars feature the Jewel in the Lotus... In India, the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali are embodiments of the yoni powers of birth and death, creation and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar vein, Riane Eisler's entire text, *Sacred Pleasure*, recounts the shift in history from what she calls partnership-oriented societies to where we now reside in dominator-oriented societies.<sup>6</sup> Eisler differentiates sacred pleasure from the "holy" pleasure many Christians in the Middle Ages ascribed to, which derived from self-inflicted torture in order to identify with the suffering of Christ. She highlights the way in which the view of the "sacred conveyed by thousands of religious representations of cruelty and sacrifice—of the human body pierced, crucified, incinerated, impaled, and otherwise hideously tormented—that to our day fill both our museums and our churches,"<sup>7</sup> is *not* what ancient

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<sup>5</sup> Gloria Steinem, "Foreword," in *Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard, 2001), xxx-xxxii.

<sup>6</sup> Eisler, Riane. *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body—New Paths to Power and Love*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Eisler, 168.

partnership-oriented societies would have deemed “sacred.” What is it about bloody, sacrificed violence that so fascinates the theologian and devotee of Christ?<sup>8</sup>

In this regard, my choreography sought to return to these ancient partnership-oriented models of the sacred by creating equal movements where each dancer relied on the other dancer to shape, move, and lift, and visa versa. The movements sought to be sensual *and* sacred, ambiguous so that the viewer could determine for herself what the movements embodied and meant.

### **Saying the Unsayable: Our Lips Speaking/Moving Together**

Gloria Steinem speaks of the *Vagina Monologues* as “the power of saying the unsayable.”<sup>9</sup> Ensler describes the process of “speaking the word,” saying the very word, “vagina,” and the power of uttering the unspeakable:

The excitement and danger of speaking the *word*, of performing the play in tiny villages or conservative cities, with unlikely performers (ministers and doctors and telephone workers and members of parliament) and in unusual venues (churches and synagogues, women’s living rooms, stadiums, factories), has propelled the play to be performed in 45 languages and 119 countries.<sup>10</sup>

For Ensler, the word that must be spoken is clearly “vagina,” and this word is representative of the unspeakable, the taboo. But the way in which Ensler describes the “word,” seems also to parallel the way in which many Christian theologians refer to speaking the “Word,” logos, the Gospel of Christ. And perhaps this parallel is not as sacrilegious as it may first appear; for both words *must* be spoken. The speaking of both words leads to a type of salvific liberation and freedom. Is not the “word” Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker answer such a question throughout their most recent book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*; however, the scope and limit of this project prevent me from discussing this further here.

<sup>9</sup> Gloria Steinem, xxxiv.

<sup>10</sup> Eve Ensler, xiii-xiv.

proclaims, “let the oppressed go free”? So, too, is the purpose of Ensler’s “word.”

Further, Irigaray offers insightful sentiments regarding the power of “when our lips speak together,” in this instance women’s “lips” undoing what men’s mouths have always pontificated, the lips referring to both the mouth (*boca*) and the lips of the vagina:

But what about us? Come out of their language. Try to go back through the names they’ve given you. I’ll wait for you, I’m waiting for myself. Come back. It’s not so hard. You stay here, and you won’t be absorbed into familiar scenes, worn-out phrases, routine gestures. Into bodies already encoded within a system. Try to pay attention to yourself. To me. Without letting convention, or habit, distract you.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar manner, Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano describes Cherríe Moraga’s poetry, calling it a sexual/textual project where “the mouth fuses two taboo activities: female speaking and lesbian sexuality. ‘Mouth’ and ‘sex’ merge, both represented as organs of speech and sex.”<sup>12</sup> The choreography for the *Vagina Monologues* was rendered taboo by several watchers; it sought to “speak” through the body what is often left unsaid and unheard in churches, in liturgy, and in theology. The movements were described by some as homoerotic, erotic, sexual, provocative. These movements were intentional ways to escape the “routine gestures” and “worn out phrases” Irigaray speaks of, to fuse two taboo activities: female speaking and lesbian sexuality.

### **My Vagina Was My Village**

The monologue preceding the dance was “My Vagina Was My Village.” In 1994 Eve Ensler spent two months in Croatia and Pakistan, interviewing Bosnian women refugees. When she returned to New York she says, “I was in a state of outrage. Outraged that 20,000 to 70,000 women were being raped in the middle of Europe in 1993, as systematic

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<sup>11</sup> Luce Irigaray, 205-206.

<sup>12</sup> Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherríe Moraga*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 6.

tactic of war, and no one was doing anything to stop it...over 50,000 women were raped every year in this country [United States], and in theory we were not at war.”<sup>13</sup> So, Ensler responded by crafting “My Vagina Was My Village.”

This monologue juxtaposes the voice of a young woman delighting in fresh, innocent, and new sexual encounters with someone she loves with the voice of a young woman brutally gang-raped by soldiers. The sweet and chatty voice of the innocent lover’s vagina is silenced when the foiled voice describes her experience:

*Not since the soldiers put a long thick rifle inside me. So cold, the steel rod canceling my heart. Don’t know whether they’re going to fire it or shove it through my spinning brain. Six of them, monstrous doctors with black masks shoving bottles up me too. There were sticks, and the end of a broom.*<sup>14</sup>

While there are no words that can follow such a brutal description, and dancing following their hearing caused me to feel sick at my stomach, Irigaray’s words regarding the silencing and brutality women face seem apropos, “How, how many times, are we going to have to be cut into ‘parts,’ ‘hammered,’ ‘recast...’ in order to become sufficiently signifying? Substantial enough?”<sup>15</sup> Further, while referring to “My Vagina Was a Village,” Isherwood surmises, “Indecent theology does not shield its eyes and avert its gaze from these unpleasant realities. It declares the free, happy, wet homeland of the vagina as both original creation and eschatological hope.”<sup>16</sup>

In creating choreography that would follow such a graphic portrayal of rape, I, like Isherwood, felt a tremendous need to end on a movement of eschatological hope.

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<sup>13</sup> Ensler, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Ensler, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Luce Irigaray, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Isherwood, “Indecent Theology: What F-ing Difference Does It Make?,” *Feminist Theology* 11:2 (January 2003), 145.

Not hope that negates or forgets the horrors of what has happened. Not hope that ignores the realities of suffering, but the hope that occurs when women who have suffered join together to comfort one another and to stand against injustice. As such, the closing gesture of choreography involved both dancers reaching out their hands until they slightly touched, joining together, and slowly embracing. The rationale behind this closing movement is also based on the monologue that followed the dance, “The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could.”

### **The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could**

For ten years, Eve Ensler interviewed homeless women, and after interviewing hundreds of women, she only met two were not subjected to incest or rape.<sup>17</sup> “The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could” is a monologue based on one woman’s brutal story as Ensler notes how poor women suffer terrible violence that goes unreported because of their social class. The story of this woman, while violent and horrifying, ends in hope as she met another woman in a shelter, fell in love, and through their love, they got out of the shelter system and “have a beautiful life together.”<sup>18</sup> The monologue recounts this homeless woman’s vaginal experiences throughout childhood and early adolescence, including the time that Edgar Montane, another little boy, punched her in the coochi snorcher, and when she is scolded by her mother for letting a boy touch her coochi snorcher, she cries, “he didn’t touch it, Mama, he punched it.”<sup>19</sup> At age ten, the little girl is raped by her father’s friend Alfred and her father responds by shooting Alfred in front of his daughter. And by age sixteen, the young girl experiences “salvation” through a lesbian experience with an older woman. Upon reflecting back on her first experience with a woman, after

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<sup>17</sup> Ensler, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ensler, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Ensler, 78.

her vagina had been ravaged by men, she stated poignantly, “I realized later she was my surprising, unexpected, politically incorrect salvation. She transformed my sorry-ass coochi snorcher and raised it up into a kind of heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

Ideally, I wanted my choreography to reflect the journey of this little girl in addition to addressing the themes of rape, crucifixion, resurrection, and sexuality. I wanted the movements to embody both the pain and horror of their stories in addition to the beauty, salvation, and liberation many of these women found in caring and mutual relationships with other women. So, the closing gestures of the choreography also reflect this woman’s story, as she tentatively reached out her hand and was touched in an unexpected way by a woman who raised her up into a kind of heaven through her embrace.

### **Surprising Responses**

Thus far I have reflected theologically on the choreography I created for the *Vagina Monologues*, but now I would like to share some of the responses that made the process so meaningful. The show was performed only once for an audience of around 300; we also had an open dress rehearsal where close to 100 people attended. And “The Dance on Behalf of Women Raped” was performed without the corresponding monologues as a part of a Palm/Passion Sunday worship service in a local Baptist church where roughly 75 people were in attendance. So, fewer than 500 people saw the dance. But I cannot begin to recount the number of responses from women who shared with me how they were sexually abused or raped at some point in their life. The numbers are too great to recall. One story is too poignant not to tell.

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<sup>20</sup> Ensler, 82.

A woman in her late sixties approached me following the performance. She was also a modern dancer in her younger years and talked with me about the movement-vocabulary and choreography choices. At the end of our conversation her voice began to tremble and her eyes filled with tears and she sat down and told me about how her older brother sexually abused her for nearly six years throughout her adolescence. She felt so ashamed that she had never told anyone— for sixty years. But she took my hands in hers and said, “But now I’m telling you.” Since she shared her experience with me, we have been in conversation, and she has begun seeing a counselor and sharing her story with young girls who have recently been abused. She told me, “Your dance gave me the courage to speak my hurt.” And it is her story that made the entire experience worth while.

### **Conclusions: My Politically Incorrect Salvation**

In conclusion, dancing this choreography in the *Vagina Monologues* was like my “politically incorrect salvation.” Because, as Isherwood and Althaus-Reid contend, “women’s bodies may be the starting points for theological revolution.”<sup>21</sup> My choreography was my attempt at using women’s bodies, real dancing bodies, as a starting point for theology. The choreography and the theology to which it ascribes is one that does not adhere to traditional notions of soteriology and atonement that have rendered broken women mute for centuries. Rather it is a theology and a dance that embodies women’s sexuality—both pleased and pained—as a part of the sacred process of becoming God’s body here on earth. For, as Isherwood contends, “It is time to start telling that it was not a sanctuary that held Jesus but a womb, he too took the walk down the vaginal aisle and arrived in a world of shit, blood, weeping, propelled into hopeful

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<sup>21</sup>Isherwood, 142.

arms.”<sup>22</sup> So, with all of these words in mind, I close with the words I spoke in a local congregation before we shared this choreography on Palm/Passion Sunday:

There is a chance this dance will make you uncomfortable. Perhaps you will want to avert your eyes. Perhaps the same is true when it comes to the pathos of God. We dance on behalf of women raped and forgotten—who have never had the chance to find sanctuary. In our dancing, however controversial or uncomfortable it may be, we give them respite in this space with our bodies. After all, doesn't everyone deserve the opportunity for resurrection?

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<sup>22</sup> Isherwood, 145.

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