

An Undergraduate Academic Journal of
Gender Research & Scholarship

Through *gendered* Lenses



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Letter From the Editors

Dear Readers,

We members of Triota, the Gender Studies Honors Society, are extraordinarily pleased to present to you the inaugural edition of *Through Gendered Lenses*, an Undergraduate Academic Journal of Gender Research and Scholarship. The goal of this journal is to recognize and distribute high-quality scholarly research done by fellow Notre Dame undergraduate students on a variety of topics related to the study of gender. During our review process, we received over thirty submissions, on topics ranging from Film to History to Engineering to Theology to Italian to Art History and more, demonstrating that Gender Studies is truly a thriving, interdisciplinary field of study at Notre Dame. After carefully reviewing all of our submissions, we unanimously agreed to publish the five papers you will find in this journal. These selections represent outstanding research and writing in the field of Gender Studies as it relates to Sociology, Anthropology, English, Philosophy, and

Pop Culture. We hope you find these works as interesting and challenging as we do and that they enhance what you already knew about the study of gender or challenge what you thought you already knew about this exciting field of study.

Sincerely,

Mandy Lewis

Miriam Olsen

Jill Schroeder

Patrick Tighe

**Through Gendered Lenses Chief Editorial Staff and
Executive Board of Triota**

Whose Right? Whose Fantasy?

An Anti-Pornography Argument

Patrick Tighe



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Whose Right? Whose Fantasy?
An Anti-Pornography Argument
Patrick Tighe

On April 3, 2009, the University of Maryland decided to cancel the student union's screening of *Pirates II: Stagnetti's Revenge*, a pornographic film loosely based off of Disney's *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. Produced by Digital Playground, *Pirates II* cost over \$10 million dollars to produce. By providing free copies of *Pirates II* to student organizations on American college campuses, Digital Playground hoped to encourage students to buy pornographic films, rather than downloading them online for free. The University's decision to cancel the screening ignited the perennial pornography debate about whether colleges should advertise pornography, the role of pornography in the exploitation of women, and the First Amendment. However, on April 6, 2009, the University of Maryland capitulated to the students and allowed the screening of *Pirates II* to occur on campus due to the student union's support and

legal backing from the non-profit, freedom of speech group, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.¹

The decision to finally let the University of Maryland students show the pornographic film on campus was defended in the name of free speech and expression. I will, however, challenge the protection of pornography under the First Amendment. That is, I will argue that the violence and harm inflicted upon workers and performers in the pornography industry constrains and limits a producer's right to make violent, inequalitarian pornography and a consumer's right to view such violent pornography. This paper will thus contend that producers do not have the right to pay others to be harmed and violated while making pornography and that consumers do not have the right to enjoy and view the infliction of violence and harm in pornography. To accomplish this task, the first part of this paper clarifies what we mean by "pornography" as well as whose rights are at stake in the pornography debate. The second part describes the various perspectives within the pornography debate, many of which were raised on the University of Maryland's campus. This section is purely expository and details how the various perspectives regard pornography and the rights at stake. By laying out the various arguments for and against pornography, there will be more clarity when analyzing the various sides. The third part of this paper will thus challenge

a producer's right to make violent porn and a consumer's right to view and enjoy the infliction of violence and harm in pornography.

Part I

A. What are we talking about?

The first major shortcoming of most debates about pornography is the lack of clarity about the type of pornography under scrutiny. Often the pornography that critics attack is not the pornography that others defend. For example, Catharine MacKinnon, the anti-pornography feminist, defined pornography in the "Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance" as "graphic sexually explicit subordination of women² through pictures and/or words."³ While MacKinnon characterizes pornography as the eroticization of gender inequality and violence, liberal Nadine Strossen argues that, "Many sexual materials defy traditional stereotypes of both women and pornography by depicting females as voluntarily, joyfully participating in sexual encounters with men on an equal basis."⁴ As examples of pornographic material, Strossen often references pornographic books such as the *Joy of Sex* and egalitarian, erotica production companies such as Femme Productions. Pro-pornography advocate Wendy McElroy argues that "Pornography is safe sex. No diseases. No violence."⁵ Thus,

much of the confusion within the pornography debate seems to stem from advocates of various perspectives arguing about and discussing different types of pornography.

The confusion over the type of pornography considered by various feminist, liberal, and pro-pornography positions demonstrates the need to define and support the type of pornography being challenged or defended. Furthermore, this confusion raises the question about the correct understanding or picture of pornography. That is, should one adopt a view that most, best-selling or mainstream pornography is violent, extreme, and inequalitarian or that most pornography is safe, joyful, and egalitarian? The type of pornography under discussion will often guide a person's personal and political opinions about pornography. Or in other words, a person's understanding about what constitutes the most commonly viewed pornography often shapes and molds a person's response to various questions about whose rights are at stake, who is harmed by pornography, the effects of pornography on consumers, and the role pornography should play within a person's life and relationships with others. Due to this confusion, I will propose a typology of pornography in which critics and defenders of pornography can identify the type of pornography under discussion.

B. A Typology of Pornography

In an attempt to bring clarity to this debate, I will advance a typology of pornography. This classification system

enables critics or defenders of pornography to identify the type of pornography that they criticize or defend as well as bring about agreement over the type of pornography in question. Such clarity moves this debate closer to resolution. The typology goes as follows:

1. Inegalitarian, Violent Pornography: Sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequity and violence.
2. Inegalitarian, Nonviolent Pornography: Sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender inequity.
3. Egalitarian, Violent Pornography: Sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender equity and violence.
4. Egalitarian, Nonviolent Pornography: Sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterized by gender equity.⁶

This typology needs some clarification. First, violence refers to any rough or injurious physical force, action, or treatment. Examples of violence include slapping, hitting, punching, kicking, suffocating, choking, stabbing, cutting, or killing. For my purposes in this paper, I will assume that these violent acts listed are objectively wrong. Secondly, “gender inequity” refers to the subordination of women by men or

to the subordination of men by women. So, in order to be egalitarian, the sexually explicit representations must eroticize the subordination of women by men or vice-versa. Third, the phrase “as a whole” means that “any sexually explicit representations such as a pornographic movie that has few scenes that eroticize egalitarian relations but are balanced or outweighed by other kinds of scenes in which there is no subordination of women by men does not constitute egalitarian pornography”.⁷ And so, when I discuss the various perspectives proposed during the pornography debate, I will identify how each perspective focuses on one or more types of pornography as identified in the pornography typology.

C. Whose Rights are at Stake?

It is also important to note whose rights are at stake in the pornography debate. Each perspective may defend or challenge namely two types of rights: 1) the right to produce and 2) the right to consume. The right to produce includes the rights to manufacture, sell, and distribute pornography as well as the rights of those who perform and engage in the making of pornography. The right to consume refers to a consumer’s right to have access to pornography for consumption purposes such as to watch, to masturbate to, to use for arousal, etc. I will argue in the third section that the right to produce pornography is restricted by worker’s rights and standards and that the right to consume pornography

is restricted by the infliction of violence and harm in the production of pornography. With this understanding of the various types of pornography and whose rights are at stake in the pornography debate, we can now turn to a discussion of the perspectives raised in opposition or defense of pornography.

Part II

There are a variety of perspectives and views raised throughout the pornography debate, and this section will outline and describe the major perspectives offered. While this overview is in no way exhaustive of the perspectives and views surrounding porn, it will identify major themes and arguments. Five central perspectives will be described in detail, namely: A) the moral, anti-pornography perspective, B) the feminist, anti-pornography perspective, C1) the anti-censorship perspective—freedom of speech and expression, C2) the anti-censorship perspective—sexual autonomy, and D) pro-pornography perspective.

A. The Moral, Anti-Pornography Perspective

The moral challenge to pornography begins with a critique at how explicit sexual images undermine traditional values and institutions such as the family. Proponents of this moral perspective such as Anthony Comstock and Patrick Fagan argue that “Pornography...portrays a world of sexual plentitude and therefore encourages the pursuit of sexual

pleasure outside of the confines of traditional marriage.”⁸ That is, proponents believe that pornography encourages and promotes sexual deviancy, desensitizes viewers of pornography, decreases sexual fulfillment in marriage, weakens marriages in general, and reduces faith in the viability of marriage. Due to the effects of pornography on traditional values, proponents assert that pornography can be restricted in the name of collective decency and traditional values due to the primacy of community’s right. That is, if a community finds pornography destructive, proponents of this perspective argue that a community has the right to prohibit such material.

Interestingly, the moral, anti-pornography perspective argues that pornography harms the viewers, especially male viewers. Testifying before the US Senate’s Committee on the Judiciary, Pamela Paul, author of the book *Pornified*, said, “When opponents of pornography talk about the ways in which pornography affects people, they often talk about how pornography hurts women. But this leaves out an important point: pornography is also harmful to the men who use it.”⁹ Thus, proponents of the moral perspective suggest that pornography harms men in the following ways: 1) leads to sexual Internet addiction; 2) increases rape fantasies; 3) leads men to pornographic material they would have once considered appalling such as bestiality, group sex, hard core S&M, genital torture, child pornography; and, 4) shapes the way men look at women in real life, warping women to fit

men's fantasies that they consumed on screen.

While the moral perspective offers insight into how pornography harms male consumers, a problem with the moral perspective is that it frequently employs religious and (patriarchal) traditional norms to primarily justify condemning and censoring any pornographic material deemed pornographic by the community. Such moral, anti-pornography efforts have led to the banning of now acclaimed literature such as the *Joy of Sex*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, or John Updike's *Rabbit Run*.¹⁰ Often the motivation behind the moral perspective has been to purify communities by enforcing various religious conceptions about pornography. Furthermore, this perspective tends to squash any sense of individual freedoms and rights by permitting the community to override a person's individual choices and decisions.

Thus, the moral perspective targets all types of pornography as identified in Part I.B because all types of pornography could potentially weaken traditional family values and norms. Similarly, all types of pornography could harm men and boys; indeed, men and boys could still become addicted to all types of porn, and all types of porn could ruin relationships between couples and spouses. Under this perspective, the community reserves the right to restrict a producer's right to create pornographic material as well as a consumer's right to have access to such material.

B. The Feminist, Anti-Pornography Perspective

The feminist challenge to pornography shifted the pornography debate by not focusing on community morality or the effects of pornography on (patriarchal) traditional and religious values. Rather, the feminist perspective confronts pornography because it sexualizes violence as well as maintains, legitimizes, and encourages misogyny, male domination, and the subordination of women. By sexualizing violence and subordination of women, such feminists contend that women as a group are harmed by pornography because porn encourages men to commit acts of violence against women. As feminist Catharine MacKinnon states, “Pornography contributes causally to attitudes and behaviors of violence and discrimination which define the treatment and status of half the population.”¹¹ Thus, feminists like MacKinnon suggest that pornography causes viewers to hold misogynistic beliefs and attitudes and encourages viewers to commit violence against women. The feminist perspective distinguishes between two types of pornographic harm: 1) the harms that occur during the production of pornography and 2) the postproduction harms.

In the spirit of MacKinnon, A. W. Eaton refers to the feminist focus on the harms of pornography as the “harm hypothesis.” The harm hypothesis goes as follows:

1. Our society is marked by gender inequality in which women suffer many disadvantages as compared with men.

2. This is a grave injustice.
3. The subordination of women is not natural or inevitable but is sustained and reproduced by a variety of subtle and explicit social factors.
4. Aspects of gender inequality have erotic appeal for many people.
5. The erotic appeal of gender inequality is not inevitable but fostered by various kinds of representation, from fashion magazines to high art.
6. Eroticizing gender inequality is an effective mechanism for promoting and sustaining gender inequality.
7. Pornography eroticizes gender inequality.¹²

C: Pornography is an effective mechanism for promoting and sustaining gender inequality. (6,7)

This harm hypothesis demonstrates that such feminists oppose pornography because it promotes and sustains gender inequality and violence against women. This argument though is not against all forms of violence in pornography, but rather just against the pornography that is inegalitarian. Thus, such feminists are opposed to inegalitarian, violent pornography and inegalitarian, nonviolent pornography. According to this feminist perspective, such inegalitarian pornography promotes and sustains gender inequality. By generating and soliciting strong, positive feelings (arousal, pleasure, and orgasm) about gender inequality and sex discrimination, pornography helps sustain and reproduce a system of gender

inequality and sex discrimination. Consequently, many anti-porn feminists call on the law and the government to address pornography just as the law and government would address other forms of sex discrimination and gender inequality.

It is important though to note that the feminist, anti-pornography perspective is specifically opposed to two types of pornography: inegalitarian, violent pornography and inegalitarian, nonviolent pornography. Both types of pornography sustain and reproduce a system of gender inequality and sex discrimination because they both eroticize gender inequality. Consequently, such feminists argue that the right to produce these two types of pornography is limited because the effects of such pornography on consumers are detrimental and dangerous to the safety and well-being of women as a group. Furthermore, the right to consume these two types of pornography is limited because such pornography encourages its consumers to hold misogynistic beliefs and attitudes and to commit violence against women.

C. Liberal Sexual Morality Perspectives

Unlike the moral perspective, the liberal sexual morality perspective asserts the primacy of the individual's right to pornography over the community's right to restrict access to pornography. Liberal sexual morality emphasizes that individuals have a substantial degree of control over their lives and that governments and individuals must respect a person's decision regarding how to live his or her life. A

person's liberty under this perspective is only constrained by the duties of that person towards others; that is, liberal sexual morality holds that people are free to choose what to do sexually as long as the exercise of their sexual liberties has no direct unwilling victims. Since the production and consumption of pornography is part of the exercise of one's sexual liberties, liberals advocate that the government and other individuals should not seek to censor or prohibit porn. One central debate within liberal sexual morality concerns the specific right or liberty guaranteeing and protecting a person's access to pornography. Thus, I have identified two right-based perspectives that guarantee the right to access and manufacture pornography, namely the right to freedom of speech and expression and the right to sexual autonomy.

C3. Anti-Censorship Perspective--Freedom of Speech and Expression

This perspective contends that the right to pornography is grounded in a person's freedom of speech. Under this liberal view, free speech and expression, including pornography, help discover truth. Consequently, censorship even of pornography restricts access to that truth. Nadine Strossen, the former President of the American Civil Liberties Union, states, "The First Amendment's free speech clause refers unqualifiedly to 'the freedom of speech,' indicating that all speech should be protected equally."¹³ Thus, free speech advocates argue that even speech or material

such as pornography that promotes gender inequality, sex discrimination, misogyny, and violence against women should be protected. The principle of free thought is “not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for thought we hate.”¹⁴ Strossen’s position demonstrates that free speech proponents do not necessarily agree with or like pornography. Rather, regardless of their feelings or thoughts about pornography, such proponents hold that pornography should nevertheless be protected. Pornography thus should not be censored because it is protected by a person’s right to freedom of speech and expression. This right of free speech and expression is central to human freedom and sexuality—to exploring and expressing oneself as a sexual being.

Therefore, the anti-censorship position defends and protects all four types of pornography identified in Part I.2. Furthermore, this position defends the right to produce and manufacture pornography because the production and manufacturing of porn is a type of speech and expression that is protected by the civil right of freedom of speech and expression. The right to consume pornography also is protected because people have the right to consume any speech or expression protected under the right to freedom of speech.

Responding to the feminist critique that pornography induces harm and violence against women, proponents of this perspective argue that potential speech-induced harms of pornography do not pose any immediate harm or danger to women individually or collectively. As Strossen notes:

The Supreme Court has consistently rejected calls for censoring (nonobscene) speech when there is no demonstrable, direct causal link between the speech and immediate harm...But this is the feminist procensorship argument in a nutshell—that pornography should be suppressed based on speculation that it may lead to discrimination or violence against women in the long run, despite the lack of evidence to substantiate these fears.¹⁵

Thus, anti-censorship advocates attack the feminist critique by challenging the claim that pornography causes harm and violence against women. By questioning the causal link between pornography and violence against women, Strossen contends that the feminist critique lacks evidence to demonstrate that pornography induces violence against women and sex discrimination. Rather, she argues that this speech, pornography, is really speech that feminists disagree with and not anything that poses an immediate harm or danger to women. Consequently, she suggests that such feminists should counter the speech they don't like (pornography) with more persuasive speech. She states that, "the appropriate response to speech with which one disagrees in a free society is not censorship but counterspeech—more speech, not less. Persuasion, not coercion, is the solution."¹⁶ Under this perspective, feminist efforts to counter pornography should

not include censoring pornography because pornography is just speech that feminists disagree with and not speech that causes any immediate harm or danger.

3B. Anti-Censorship Perspective—Sexual Autonomy

Philosopher Andrew Altman argues that the right to pornography is better understood as part of another human freedom—the freedom of sexual autonomy. He states, “Individuals ought to have a broad liberty to define and enact their own sexuality. Persons who view pornography are excising their sexual autonomy, and the debate over pornography should be seen from the standpoint of that liberty.”¹⁷ Altman suggests that the presumption should be that adults can make up their sexually-defining decisions and some of these decisions include producing pornography for profit or using pornography for sexual arousal. He contends that pornography is akin to contraceptives in the sense that, “Adults must be free to manufacture and use pornographic material, just as they must be free to make and use contraceptive devices, and others must not interfere with those choices.”¹⁸ Thus, Altman claims that sexually-defining activities (i.e. using or making pornography, engaging in homosexual activity, or using contraceptives) cannot be restricted on the basis of community standards, personal revulsion or religious morality. Rather, pornography can only be restricted if it uses or involves an unwilling victim or participant.

This perspective consequently contends that pornography should not be censored because of a person's freedom of sexual autonomy—a freedom that entails the manufacturing, distribution, and consumption of pornography. In sum, Altman defends all four types of pornography as long as none of the four types involve an unwilling participant in the production, because the decision to make and participate in pornography serves as one choice out of many sexually autonomous choices a person can make. Furthermore, the right to consume pornography is also part of a person's exploration and demonstration of his or her sexual autonomy.

Lastly, Altman argues that if the performers in pornographic films and videos are uncoerced adults, then he defends their right to make whatever type of pornography. He states:

Nonetheless, the key point is this: even if we grant that much pornography does involve women performing humiliating and degrading sexual acts, it does not follow that the actors have no right to participate in making such material...But the men and women who perform in such pornography have a right to make their choices.¹⁹

Following from a person's right to sexual autonomy, Altman contends that people are free to consent to performing and engaging in violent and dangerous sexual acts. The right of

sexual autonomy grants people the right to make sexually-defining decisions, even if those decisions include harm, violence, humiliation, or degradation.

D. Pro-Pornography Perspective

The pro-pornography perspective moves beyond the liberal sexual morality perspectives by not only claiming that pornography should not be censored but that pornography benefits people both personally and politically. Even though Wendy McElroy discusses the various ways in which pornography benefits women both personally and politically, her argument could easily be adapted to highlight the various ways that porn benefits both women and men in general. Central to this perspective is the principle of self-ownership: a person's body, a person's right. This principle entails that people have a right to choose how to use their body since it is their own body. This principle of self-ownership includes people deciding to use pornography for arousal and masturbatory purposes or to use their bodies in pornography to make money.

Some of the benefits of pornography for people, both personally and politically, are as follows:

- 1.Provides sexual information and education;
- 2.Shows that sex doesn't have to be emotionally confusing;

- 3.Breaks cultural and political stereotypes and thus allows people (namely, women) to express themselves as sexual beings;
- 4.Reduces the shame surrounding sex;
- 5.Can serve as sexual therapy;
- 6.Operates as freedom of speech in the sexual realm;
- 7.Provides an outlet for men who have violent urges toward women; and,
- 8.Legitimizes and consequently protects stigmatized female sex workers within our society.²⁰

Pro-pornography advocates thus defend all four types of pornography as identified in Part I.2. Furthermore, they defend a person's right to produce pornography as well as a person's right to consume pornography on the basis of the principle of self-ownership.

In response to the feminist criticism that pornography is violent and degrading, pro-porn proponents make two claims. First, proponents argue that degradation is a subjective term and that all people should determine degradation for themselves. Thus, other individuals and the government should not enforce a certain understanding of degradation but allow people to determine what constitutes degradation for themselves. Secondly, they contend that arguments for banning pornography due to porn's violent and degrading nature ultimately fail because of the issue of consent. If people freely consent to make or view porn, proponents

argue that other individuals and the government should not restrict people from doing so.

While pro-pornography advocates agree with liberals that pornography should not be censored, they reject the liberal position on pornography because liberalism shares much of the same underpinnings with the feminist criticism of porn. Wendy McElroy argues that the flaw with liberalism's position on pornography is that it "shares many of the ideological assumptions underlying the radical feminist attack...Both liberal and radical feminists condemn the free market for making a profit by using women as 'body parts.' Both believe that the commercialization of sex demeans women."²¹ Unlike liberals who are only committed to the position that pornography should not be censored, pro-pornography advocates thus move beyond the liberal position and argue that: 1) pornography should not be censored and 2) pornography benefits people both individually and politically.

Part III

These various perspectives raise important questions about pornography. However, I find the liberal and pro-pornography positions to be insufficient and inadequate. I believe that these porn defenders do not have the right conception of mainstream pornography, whose rights are at stake in this discussion, or the proper reality that pornography is an industry, a workplace for many individuals, including

women. In this part, I will challenge the anti-censorship positions and pro-pornography position by arguing that a notion of worker's rights and standards limits a producer's right to make certain pornography as well as a consumer's rights to access such pornography.

A. What are we talking about?

Again, I would like to return to this question about what we mean by "pornography." As demonstrated with the typology, the feminist anti-pornography perspective is understood as applying specifically to inequalitarian, violent pornography and inequalitarian, nonviolent pornography. Pornography defenders however seem to focus on egalitarian, nonviolent and sometimes egalitarian, violent pornography. Take for example Strossen's repeated references to *The Joy of Sex*, an egalitarian, nonviolent book, or Femme Productions, an egalitarian erotica production company. However, such defenders of pornography hold that all four types of pornography are at least legally permissible.

Furthermore, recall that many defenders of pornography claim that feminist and moral critics of pornography overemphasize and exaggerate the amount and extent of inequalitarian, violent pornography viewed by consumers. With this typology, we have the resources to identify the most common and prevalent type of porn; that is, with this typology, we can settle what perspective accurately captures mainstream (or the most popular) type

of pornography viewed by consumers. Do consumers view more frequently the inegalitarian, violent pornography or the more egalitarian porn?

B. What is mainstream pornography?

To answer this very question, I will refer to a 2006 study conducted by a team of researchers from New York University, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of Rhode Island. The study analyzed the content of best-selling, mainstream pornographic videos as designated by the Adult Video News (AVN). Since the most popular way for consumers to access pornography is through videotapes and DVDs, the research team examined the content of the fifty best-selling porn videos from December 2004 through June 2005 according to Adult Video News as a way to grasp an accurate understanding of mainstream pornography.²² The research team found:

- 89.8% of the scenes included either verbal or physical aggression;
- 48% contained verbal aggression, mostly name-calling (“bitch” and “slut”) and insults;
- 82.2% contained physical aggression, mostly spanking (35.7%), gagging (27.7%), and open-hand slapping (14.9%);
- 94.4% of the aggressive acts were targeted at women;
- 72.7% of the aggressive acts were perpetrated by men;

- 96.7% of male ejaculations occurred outside the female recipient's vagina; and,
- 58.6% of male ejaculations occurred in the female recipient's mouth.²³

In these best selling pornographic videos, women were significantly more likely to be spanked, choked, and gagged than men. According to the research team, "Women were spanked on 953 occasions, visibly gagged 756 times, experienced an open hand slap 361 times, had their hair pulled or yanked on 267 separate occasions, and were choked 180 times."²⁴ Forty-one percent of scenes examined featured "Ass to Mouth" where the male inserts his penis in the woman's anus, and after removing it, puts it in the woman's mouth.²⁵ Interestingly, female performers frequently expressed enjoyment in response to aggressive behavior. When aggressed against, 95.9% of females were significantly more likely to express pleasure (encouragement, sexual moans, and so forth) or neutrality (e.g., no change in facial expression or interruption to actions).²⁶

This research reveals that most pornography is inequalitarian and violent. It is not as pro-pornography advocates describe as "safe" and "egalitarian." Thus feminist critics do not exaggerate the extent that viewers and consumers of porn watch inequalitarian pornography because the material researched is the best-selling, most popular material. The men in pornography inflict a disproportionate amount of

violence upon the women in pornography, and this violence and aggression in pornography is mainstream, conventional, and common. Safe and equalitarian pornography is uncommon and not best-selling material. Despite Strossen's claim, egalitarian pornographic material such as *The Joy of Sex* and Femme Productions do not constitute mainstream pornography. Thus, for the rest of this paper, when I refer to pornography, I will refer to the most popular, mainstream type of pornography—the inegalitarian, violent porn.

C. Whose right?

Even though most of the violence in mainstream porn is directed at women by men, liberal and pro-pornography proponents still maintain that their defense of pornography is a defense of women's rights. Take for example the title of Nadine Strossen's book, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights*, or the title Wendy McElroy's book, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*. As Strossen states, "The feminist procensorship movement is a far greater threat to women's rights than is the sexual expression it condemns with the epithet "pornography."²⁷ McElroy argues that because of the principle of self-ownership, women, in the absence of force "should be free to make any and every sexual choice they wish,"²⁸ including the right to view pornography.

Liberals such as Strossen and pro-pornography advocates such as McElroy, however, fail to distinguish

between the many stakeholders whose rights are at stake in this debate. That is, while they argue that they are defending “women’s rights,” they often seem to only defend the women who view pornography. Take for example McElroy’s remark that, “Pornography is safe sex. No diseases. No violence. No pregnancy. No infidelity. No one to apologize to the next morning. Pornography is one of the most benevolent ways a woman can experience who she is sexually.”²⁹ This reflection that pornography is safe sex only captures the experience of the women who view pornography. That is, women who watch porn will not get diseases, have acts of violence committed against them, get pregnant, etc.

Besides the women who watch porn, women are also involved in the production of porn. Women are the female porn stars who engage in these often violent, aggressive scenes and productions. Consequently, many female adult performers suffer great bodily harm. Physically dangerous acts such as double penetration and others including choking, hanging, and suffocation have become commonplace in many featured pornography films. In addition to these dangerous, extreme sexual acts, the pornography industry is a breeding ground for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Less than 17% of the 1,500 adult performers use condoms, and only 2 porn production companies out of 200 require the use of condoms. Furthermore, between January 2003 and March 2005, “approximately 976 performers of the 1,500 adult performers tested were reported with 1,153 positive

STI test results. Of the 1,153 positive test results, 722 (62.6 %) were Chlamydia, 355 (30.8%) were gonorrhea, and 126 (10.9%) were co-infected with Chlamydia and gonorrhea.”³⁰ Furthermore, 64% of the individuals who tested positive for at least one STI were women.³¹ While McElroy defends women’s rights, she clearly does not consider the rights of women in porn—those adversely affected with physical and biological harm.

Interestingly enough, both Strossen and McElroy defend a woman’s right to consume pornography but also fail to mention that they simultaneously defend a man’s right to consume porn. That is, they over exaggerate the female audience of pornography. Seventy percent of pornography’s audience is heterosexual men watching alone.³² It is important to note that this statistic does not include homosexual men watching porn alone, women watching porn alone, heterosexual couples watching porn together, homosexual couples watching pornography together, or group viewings of pornography. Furthermore, pornography is not marketed to women. As Michael Kimmel notes, pornography is primarily marketed towards white young men.³³ It is acceptable to defend the rights of men, but it is interesting that Strossen and McElroy do not mention that they defend primarily a male activity, a product that porn producers primarily market to men.

Thus, liberal and pro-pornography positions fail to adequately take into consideration a variety of stakeholders,

especially the women who perform in pornography as well as the primarily male audience that views pornography. By failing to recognize all the stakeholders, liberal and pro-pornography positions fail to take into consideration how pornography affects consumers, primarily the male consumer.

D. Pornography as Sex Education

With this understanding that the most popular, mainstream pornography is inequalitarian and violent and that men are the primary consumers of porn, it is important to note that all the perspectives—the moral, the feminist anti-pornography, the liberal, and pro-pornography positions—recognize that pornography is sex education, a training tool about how to have sex. Anti-pornography feminist Robert Jensen states that pornography “provides a training manual,”³⁴ a “how-to” guide for viewers about how to have sex. Anti-censorship advocate Nadine Strossen notes that, “At the most basic level, porn provides information about women’s bodies and techniques for facilitating female sexual pleasure, which is otherwise sadly lacking in our society.”³⁵ Pro-pornography advocate Wendy McElroy asserts that, “Pornography is more than just an encyclopedia of sexual alternatives. It offers emotional information that comes only from experiencing something directly or vicariously. It provides us with a sense of how it would ‘feel’ to do something.”³⁶

While opponents of the feminist critique of pornography downplay and counter the “harm hypothesis” or the claims that pornography encourages, legitimizes, and induces men to commit violence against women, such opponents inadvertently undermine their own counterarguments by suggesting that pornography is a form of sex education, a training manual about how to have sex and how such sexual acts will feel. Since mainstream pornography is as violent and aggressive towards women and since 70% of consumers of pornography are heterosexual men and boys, what is pornography teaching men and boys about sex? Is pornography teaching men and boys to slap women, to gag women, to ejaculate on women’s faces, or to place a penis removed from a woman’s anus directly into her mouth? What expectations does pornography create about what sex should be like and feel like? After viewing pornography, do boys and men expect sex to be as rough, violent, and aggressive as the sex documented in pornography?

Since Strossen and McElroy do not have an accurate understanding of best-selling, mainstream pornography and because they fail to recognize that men and boys are the primary consumers of pornography, they fail to grasp the connection between pornography as an educational tool and pornography as instructing and teaching men and boys how to engage in violent sex with women. Since liberals and pro-pornography advocates argue that pornography is a training tool, they support the feminist critique that pornography

contributes causally to attitudes and behaviors of violence against women because porn teaches men and boys to expect, want, desire, and engage in violent, rough sex with women. Furthermore, since all perspectives argue that pornography is a training tool, we have more reason to be concerned about whether or not consumers should have the right to view material that inflicts harms on others because such material teaches men and boys to be violent when having sex with other people, namely women.

E. Whose fantasy?

Often, liberal and pro-pornography feminists argue that pornography is not real but a fantasy. As Wendy McElroy states, "Pornography is not real. Pornography is words and images....Why? Because pornography is fantasy. And fantasy is not just some form of attenuated reality."³⁷ McElroy however fails to ask the appropriate question: To whom is pornography just a fantasy?

Pornography is simultaneously a fantasy and a reality. It is a fantasy for those who view it, who masturbate to it. It is a reality for those who are fucked in the making of it, who perform and are used in the sex scenes. While pornography may be just some words and images to the viewer, it takes real human beings to speak, express, and make those images.

By overlooking this fundamental aspect of pornography, McElroy fails to recognize a fundamental difference between producing a pornographic film and

writing a book or producing a movie. When an author writes a book about a murder, a person slapping another person, or a sexual encounter, no one is physically harmed; that is, no one is murdered, slapped, or actually engaged in sexual activity. These actions are just fictitious, a fantasy. When a director produces a movie in which an actor is murdered, slapped, or engaged in sexual activity, that actor is not actually murdered, slapped, or engaged in sexual activity. Rather, through cinematic effects, choreography, make-up, lighting and acting, producers and actors create an illusion, a fantasy in which people are murdered, slapped, or sexually active. No one is intentionally injured in the production of a movie, but if someone is injured during production, there are various monetary, civil, and even criminal means of recourse.

When pornography is produced though, someone (usually a woman) is intentionally harmed and injured. Someone is slapped, spit on, gagged, and fucked. When a woman engages in ATM (ass to mouth), she actually sucks a penis immediately removed from her anus. After removing the penis from the anus, the penis is not wiped off and cleaned. Through a continuous, direct shot, the man removes the penis from the anus and places it in the female recipient's mouth. The appeal of pornography for its viewers is the knowledge that these (violent) actions are actually happening to real people, to real women. When people watch *Hotel Rwanda*, the audience knows that the actors portraying historical events are not actually murdered

and slaughtered. But when people watch pornography, the audience knows the performers are actually being slapped, gagged, penetrated, and ejaculated on.

Under the guise of freedom of speech and expression, pornography appears as nothing other than words and images. However, pornography is something quite different than just words and images; pornography is the documentation of real life sex acts involving real life women and men. As MacKinnon states:

The experience of the (overwhelmingly) male audiences who consume pornography is therefore not fantasy or simulation or catharsis but sexual reality: the level of reality on which sex itself largely operates. To understand this does not require noticing that women in pornography are real women to whom something real is being done.³⁸

Strossen and McElroy fail to understand pornography as both a reality and a fantasy. The creation of the viewer's fantasy world requires real people to engage in, execute, and experience real actions.

F. Limited Rights for Producers and Consumers of Pornography

So far, I have argued for a few points. First, I have demonstrated that mainstream pornography is inegalitarian

and violent. Any critic or defender of pornography must contend with the most popular, most viewed pornography, namely the pornographic material that is violent and involves the subordination of women by men. Second, I have held that we must consider the rights of women involved in the production of porn as well as the primarily male audience that views porn. Third, since pornography is both a training tool and is violent and inegalitarian, I have asserted that we must be worried about what pornography teaches its primarily male audience. Fourth, I have argued that pornography is not just a fantasy but a reality in which real women are violated and harmed by real men.

These arguments and points have laid the foundation for arguing that producers and consumers of pornography have limited rights regarding the manufacturing and consumption of pornography. I will first tackle the producer's rights. The reality of pornography highlights the fact that pornography is an industry in which male and female workers are employed to produce a product in which they receive compensation for their labor. All workers have rights to certain working conditions, and the fact that some workers are adult performers does not negate their rights to having a safe work environment. Consequently, the current working conditions within the pornography industry for adult performers are unacceptable. Too many adult performers are subjected to infection with (life-threatening) diseases, dangerous physical acts, and violent behavior. Thus, the producer's right to make

and manufacturer inegalitarian, violent pornography (namely, mainstream pornography) is constrained by worker's rights to decent and safe working conditions.

So, for example, one way to improve the industry's working conditions is requiring that all adult performers wear condoms when engaging in sexual activity. Such a requirement decreases the rate and spread of infection. Requiring condom use is akin to requiring all construction workers to wear hard hats on construction sites. Regardless of the fact that some construction workers would consent not to wear hard hats on a construction site and may even prefer not to wear a hard hat (e.g. for comfort reasons), all construction workers must wear hard hats *when on a construction site*. A construction worker's consent is overridden by a worker's right to safety and to decent working conditions. Similarly, regardless of the fact that some adult performers would consent not to wear condoms and may even prefer not to wear condoms, all adult performers should be required to wear condoms to decrease the transmission of biological pathogens like STIs.

This line of reasoning is also applicable to acts of violence targeted primarily at female adult performers. It is one thing for a porn producer to create the illusion that a female porn star is slapped and gagged, but it is another to actually and intentionally slap and gag a female porn star. To create an illusion of violence is no different than what movie producers or writers do, but to actually and intentionally violate and harm someone is completely different because

real life people and workers are being harmed and violated. What other group of workers are allowed to be intentionally and actually harmed in their line of work?

While pornography defenders may argue that these workers consented to such acts of violence, this is a rather bad argument. Worker's rights are based on the understanding that employers cannot intentionally and actually harm employees, regardless of the employee's consent or monetary compensation for the infliction of harm and violence. Take for example sweatshops. The working conditions of sweatshops are so poor because employers are reducing working conditions for profit and financial gain. The fact that employers paid workers to labor in sweatshops, that workers agreed and consented to work in the sweatshops, and that the workers were intentionally harmed and hurt because of the poor working conditions are not sufficient for permitting the poor working conditions or the resulting intentional harm to the workers. Other forms of labor where employers cannot intentionally and actually harm employees even if the employees consent to such harm or are financially compensated include agriculture farmers and crop-pickers to those working and dealing with toxic chemicals at power plants. If we permit people to make money for being intentionally and actually harmed and violated, we create an economic system in which people are paid to be intentionally and actually harmed and violated. To permit people to make money for being intentionally and actually harmed and

violated would undermine any notion of worker's rights. Worker's rights is grounded in the fact that workers have the right not to be intentionally and actually harmed in the line of work. To say that you can get paid to be intentionally and actually harmed in the line of work undermines the very concept of worker's rights.

Thus, the right of producers to make violent, inequalitarian pornography is limited by the fact that producers cannot pay adult performers to engage in acts of violence in which they are intentionally and actually harmed because it undermines the very concept of worker's rights. This is not to say that producers cannot create illusions of violence or inequalitarian pornography in which adult performers are not intentionally harmed or injured. Additionally, this is not to say that people in general cannot engage in violent, inequalitarian sex. They just can't do such violent, inequalitarian sexual acts for money because doing such things for money undermines the concept of worker's rights. If a person wants to be slapped and hung during sexual intercourse, then they are more than welcome to do such things, but they can't do it for money because producers and employers have a responsibility not to intentionally and actually harm an employee.

A consumer's right to access pornography is also limited by adult performer's rights as workers and as human beings.³⁹ A consumer has the right to watch pornography as long as no one is intentionally and actually being harmed

in the pornographic material (namely, films or scenes). If someone is slapped, gagged, or suffocated in a pornographic film, they are actually and intentionally being harmed. However, when a person is slapped, gagged, or suffocated in a movie, they are not actually and intentionally harmed; it is an illusion created through cinematic effects and techniques. A similar scenario to consumers having the right to watch and enjoy violent pornography is Roman citizens having the right to watch and enjoy Christian martyrs being eaten alive by tigers and lions in the Colosseum.

This discussion about consumer's rights highlights this important question: Are consumers allowed to enjoy the real infliction of harm and violence on another human being? It is a question that seeks to legitimize certain kinds of consumption. I, however, would answer this question by arguing that a person's right to consume pornographic material is limited by whether or not a person's rights as workers were violated in the making of the pornographic material. If a worker's right is to be free from violence and harm in the workplace, then a consumer cannot consume pornographic material in which the adult performers are actually and intentionally harmed or violated.

My argument thus attempts to remove the actual and intentional violence and harm in pornography by advocating for and advancing worker's rights within the pornography industry. Since I have focused on the "violence" in pornography, my argument differs from feminist, anti-

pornography advocates who object to pornography because of the inegalitarian relations portrayed in pornography. While I object to the inegalitarian relations in pornography, I am more concerned about the escalating level of actual and intentional violence in pornography because real people in porn production are being harmed and are consenting to such harm.

Furthermore, I have also proposed that producers could create fictitious and fake acts of violence but just not actual and intentional acts of violence. Feminist, anti-pornography advocates could still object to my proposal because the fake violence will still encourage violence against women since pornography will still teach men and boys how to have sex. However, by focusing on the actual violence in porn and by advocating for its removal from pornography, I have tried to make pornography more like violent movies. Without any actual and intentional violence, pornography is much more akin to popular horror and war movies which depict fictitious acts of violence. Without actual violence in pornography, feminist, anti-pornography advocates would have to do more work to explain why they target pornography (which is now non-violent) and not all portrayals of fake violence in the media such as popular war and horror movies.

More so, my focus on violence in pornography is in some part driven by the feminist, anti-pornography advocates' failed efforts to restrict pornography on grounds that porn

supports and induces sex discrimination and inequality. As Strossen argues, the harms of “sex discrimination” and “subordination of women” are not immediate enough. By focusing on the actual harms done to porn workers, the harms become more immediate and dangerous, especially to those who experience the infliction of such harms. Perhaps this will allow for some restrictions to be placed on the content of pornography.

Lastly, I believe that by removing actual and intentional violence from pornography, we will remove the central appeal of pornography for many viewers. What viewers enjoy and like about pornography is that porn is simultaneously a fantasy and a reality. Viewers get off on the fact that they know the violent sex acts are actually happening to real life people. Viewers fantasize about fucking and gagging that porn star in the film but they simultaneously know that that porn star in reality was fucked and gagged. Viewers fantasize about committing sexual acts of violence but simultaneously know that someone has violated and harmed that porn star. By removing the actual violence, we eliminate a central appeal of pornography. Without violence, pornography loses the reality in which a woman was willing (and stupid enough) to consent to the infliction of harm and violence on herself. While feminist, anti-pornography advocates might object to the portrayal of fake violence in porn, my motivation to remove actual and intentional violence in porn stems from wanting to eliminate the central

appeal of porn for consumers—the actual and intentional infliction of violence on female porn stars.

This restriction on producer's and consumer's rights not only applies to unequalitarian, violent pornography but also to unequalitarian, nonviolent pornography and equalitarian, violent pornography. In the case of the unequalitarian, nonviolent pornography, if the subordination of a female performer by a male performer resulted or would result in harm and injury, then the consumer and producer are restricted from viewing or manufacturing such pornography. Furthermore, since equalitarian, violent pornography involves the intentional and actual infliction of harm and violence against one person by another, producers are restricted from producing such material and consumers are restricted from viewing such material. A worker or adult performer has rights in all types of pornography, and a central right is to be free from workplace harm and violence. Lastly, my argument for the restriction on producer's and consumer's rights does not apply to equalitarian, nonviolent pornography.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that actual and intentional violence are impermissible in pornography because such violence violates an adult performer's rights as a worker. These worker's rights consequently limit and restrict a producer's right to manufacture and distribute pornography as well as a consumer's right to access such pornography. Rooted in

the notion of worker rights, this argument overcomes the anti-censorship and pro-pornography positions because it recognizes pornography as an industry in which people are employed to produce a product in return for financial and monetary compensation. Furthermore, it is an argument that targets the escalating violence in pornography as well as any violence and resulting harm in three of main types of pornography, namely the inegalitarian, violent porn; the inegalitarian, nonviolent porn; and, the egalitarian, violent porn.

¹Russell Goldman, "Porn 101: Adult Film Marketed on College Campuses - ABC News," ABCNews.com, 3 April, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/story?id=7244102&page=1> (Accessed December 16, 2009).

²In this ordinance, MacKinnon stated that the terms "men," "children" or "transsexual" could take the place of the term "women" in this law.

³Catharine MacKinnon, "Model Antipornography Civil-Rights Ordinance," No Status Quo Website, <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/other/ordinance/newday/AppD.htm> (Accessed December 18, 2009).

⁴Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (New York: New York UP, 2000), 162.

⁵Wendy McElroy, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 132.

⁶I have created this typology by using and adapting the definition of inegalitarian pornography as provided by A.W. Eaton in her paper, "A Sensible Antiporn Feminism." A. W. Eaton, "A Sensible Antiporn Feminism," *Ethics* 117 (2007): 674-715.

⁷*Ibid.*, 676.

⁸Michael S. Kimmel, "Guilty Pleasures: Pornography and Male Sexuality," *The Gendered Society Reader* 3rd ed, (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 410-29.

⁹United States. Cong. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. *Why the Government Should Care About Pornography: The State Interest in Protecting Children and Families*. 109th Cong., 1st sess. S. Rept. 109-280. U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE, 2006, <http://ftp.resource.org/gpo.gov/hearings/109s/25923.pdf>.

¹⁰Kimmel 2008, 412.

¹¹Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1991), 196.

¹²Eaton 2007, 677-9.

¹³Strossen 2000, 56.

¹⁴Ibid., 39.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 41.

¹⁷Andrew Altman, "The Right to Get Turned On: Pornography, Autonomy, and Equality," *Contemporary Debates in Ethics* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 223.

¹⁸Ibid., 226.

¹⁹Ibid., 231.

²⁰McElroy 1995, 128-9.

²¹Ibid., 124.

²²While the study analyzed the content of pornographic material on videotapes and DVDs, the study's findings still pertain to other mediums for viewing pornographic material such as the Internet, cable and hotel video-on-demand because often the scenes on these videos are distributed and available through other mediums. That is, the pornography industry does not necessarily just create separate pornography for the Internet and separate pornography distributed by DVDs and videos. More often than not, the same pornography is created and distributed via a variety of different mediums including DVDs, videos, the Internet, cable, etc.

²³Chyng Sun, "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography: A Content Analysis," *International Communication Association* (2006): 1-39, http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/7/0/5/2/pages170523/p170523-1.php.

²⁴Ibid., 19.

²⁵Ibid., 20.

²⁶Ibid., 19.

²⁷Strossen 2000, 15.

²⁸McElroy 1995, 126.

²⁹Ibid., 132.

³⁰Aynalem M, Kerndt P, Rotblatt H, Montoya JA, Kim-Farley R, et al, "Recurrent and Multiple Sexually Transmitted Infections Among Performers in the Adult Film Industry: A Need for a Model Industry Exposure Control Plan," International Society for Sexually Transmitted Disease Research (2006), http://www.parthen-impact.com/cgi-bin/pco/6_05STD/public/index.cgi?unit=pub_search_results&form_id=303&abstract_id=522&fsession=yes.

³¹Corita R. Grudzen, "The Adult Film Industry: A Time to Regulate?" Plos Medicine 4.6 (2007): 0993-996, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1892037/pdf/pmed.0040126.pdf>.

³²Jason Young, "The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality, & Relationships," Media Education Foundation Study Guide (2009): 1-21, http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/235/studyguide_235.pdf.

³³Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 185.

³⁴Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, (New York: South End, 2007), 105.

³⁵Strossen 2000, 166.

³⁶McElroy 1995, 132.

³⁷Ibid., 133.

³⁸My argument here also applies to certain professional sports like boxing



Biologically Universal, Culturally Individual: The Cultural Construction of Responses to Menstruation

Jill Schroeder

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**Biologically Universal, Culturally Individual:
The Cultural Construction of Responses to Menstruation**
Jill Schroeder

Abstract

Puberty is a tumultuous period, forcing individuals to confront physical, emotional, and social changes. For many, the successful navigation of puberty relies on assistance from outside sources, including family and friends. However, the most significant impact on how a person interprets her pubescent milestones is the culture in which she was socialized. I chose to look at how specific societies respond to menstruation, reinforcing it as a positive or negative life occurrence. Women of all ages assign meanings to this biological event based on the culturally-proscribed responses they have learned through their earlier years. I explored how various cultures around the world

teach women how to respond to menstruation, both positively and negatively. I then explored the cultural tendencies within the United States, influencing how individual females perceive their own periods. Does the United States present a menstrually-friendly culture, or does our country perpetuate the oft-discussed menstrual taboo? To answer my question, I interviewed 12 women and surveyed about 160 women, all undergraduate students, to discuss their experiences with menstruation, comparing them to the cross-cultural examination. Our culture actively maintains four sub-cultures which all play a role in women's menstrual experiences: culture of embarrassment, culture of fear, culture of silence, and culture of acceptance. Unless specific steps are taken to improve the sub-cultural messages that our country is sending, the acceptance will cease to exist, usurped by anxiety, disgust, and humiliation.

Introduction

Puberty is widely recognized as a tumultuous and trying period in the lives of both males and females. Tremendous biological and social changes occur, often simultaneously; this torrent of change effectively splits an individual's life into two distinct components – before puberty and after puberty. Before puberty, a person is

typically recognized as an asexual child and is given relatively few responsibilities. However, the onset of puberty forces an individual to negotiate the physical and emotional transformations that occur within the body, such as wildly fluctuating hormone levels, the development of secondary sex characteristics, and the creation of an adult sexuality. In addition to these potentially difficult bodily changes, the person then must navigate how puberty's changes have impacted his or her standing in the overall population – many societies label people as adults following the onset of puberty, assigning additional responsibilities and behavioral expectations. David F. Lancy appropriately summarizes the difficulties and confusions associated with adolescents' liminal existence, stating, "Society goes to enormous trouble to insure that teenagers are exercising their brains and not their libidos. The result: a significant segment of our society lives in a state of limbo – neither child nor adult."¹ Given this onslaught of oftentimes difficult changes, many adolescents rely on family, friends, and neighbors to help them make sense of what their new statuses, new responsibilities, and new bodies truly mean. When loved ones and acquaintances alike respond positively to the changes an adolescent is undergoing, it is likely that the teenager will confidently assume her new roles and lifestyles; when puberty and its accompanying changes are portrayed as gross and disgusting, the teenager will develop a significant aversion

to her own body and its uncontrollable nature. Puberty is a clear example of how a person's biological events can have noteworthy impacts on her psychological and social existences.

One of the most salient examples of a pubescent biological event conflating with considerable social ramifications is menstruation. Every female on the face of the earth, at some point in her lifetime, experiences her first menstrual period. The onset of menstruation, or menarche, is a biological universal, existing as an indicator of a mature, healthy, and properly functioning female reproductive system. Some researchers, such as Paula Weideger in her successful 1977 book *Menopause and Menstruation*, have asserted that the universality of menstruation among the world's female population is only matched by a universally negative reaction to menstruation among the entire global community. Specifically, some individuals have asserted that there is a clear and universal menstrual taboo, or a pervasive perception that menstruation is unclean and embarrassing for the females involved. However, not all researchers are in agreement about the menstrual taboo, as anthropologists Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb state,

The "menstrual taboo" as such does not exist. Rather, what is found in close cross-cultural study is a wide range of distinct rules for conduct regarding

menstruation that bespeak quite different, even opposite, purposes and meanings... “The menstrual taboo,” in short, is at once nearly universal and has meanings that are ambiguous and often multivalent.

Some cultures view menstruation as an unclean and shameful process, sequestering menstruating women to a remote location for the duration of their bleeding periods. At the same time, other cultures see the onset of menstruation as a celebratory event that helps to initiate a young girl into an adult status within the group. Both internationally and domestically, how a culture responds to menstruation is instrumental in dictating how the menstruating girl will perceive herself, her new body, and the process of menstruation – for better or for worse. In this paper, I will outline the varied international responses to menstruation, ranging from seclusion to celebration. After examining the breadth of cross-cultural reactions, I will explore how the United States as a culture responds to menstruation, focusing on four key sub-cultures: embarrassment, fear, silence, and acceptance. Finally, I will outline specific concrete suggestions to eradicate some of the harmful anti-menstrual messages our culture perpetuates. If we as a global community intend to eradicate the supposed menstrual taboo, we need to restructure our cultural responses to this biological occurrence, depicting menstruation as a natural, normal, and maturing part of a young woman’s life.

Background

The varying manifestations of the menstrual taboo can clearly be identified by exploring cultures' individual responses to and practices regarding menstruation. Humans' wonder and trepidation concerning the topic of menstruation can easily be seen through cultures' and history's terminology for this biological process. Lisandra Rodriguez White explains, "The Latin word for menstruation was *sacer*, meaning both pure and impure. The Romans called a menstruating woman *sacra*, sacred and accursed."³ The historical development of the word menstruation demonstrates the both positive and negative perceptions of this process, signifying the complete spectrum of responses that have existed throughout much of the human population. While not everyone may be aware of the term's background and development, it still serves as yet another representation of the varied responses menstruation has received throughout history, likely playing a role in shaping cultures' perceptions of it.

Similarly, the mixed reaction that exists in language is also evident in cultures' perceptions and practices. A sizeable portion of the world's cultures sees menstruation as a disgusting, dangerous, and toxic biological process. Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth summarize many cultures' perspectives, saying,

In many societies, the menstruating woman is believed to emit a mana, or threatening supernatural

power. The taboos of menstruation are practices that help others to avoid her and her dangerous influence and that enable her to get through the menstrual period without succumbing to her own deadly power.⁴

Regardless of whether a culture believes in mana or not, if menstrual blood is seen as harmful or dirty, a menstruating woman is likely to be vulnerable to specific interventions designed to protect herself and others during this supposedly dangerous time period. When menstruating women are vulnerable to culturally-imposed sanctions to offer “protection” from the menstrual blood, it is tremendously common for the women in these cultures to absorb the rationale behind these sanctions into their own thought processes. The women come to see their own menstrual blood as toxic and disgusting, while they consider their bodies to be producers of dangerous and repulsive substances. Both menstruation and women’s bodies are denigrated simultaneously when a culture demands that a menstruating woman be handled with extreme caution and care in order to prevent her from spreading her dangerous toxicity throughout the population.

For those cultures who wish to seclude menstruating women as a form of protection for the remainder of the population, one of the most common responses to menstruation is the creation of a menstrual hut. Simply stated, menstruating women temporarily relocate to a separate residential area for the entirety of their bleeding

periods. Although this relocation is temporary, it is far from voluntary; the cultural mandate does not offer women an opportunity to voice their preferences regarding this relocation. Regardless of whether a woman wants to completely uproot her established lifestyle for a week every month, she has no choice in the matter – the entire population would be at risk if she remained in her normal residence. This response is designed to offer protection to the entire population; the menstruating woman has no access to any other group members, preventing her unusual menstrual powers from inflicting damage upon their lives. For example, for Zulu women in South Africa, “Compared to ordinary blood, menstrual blood is regarded as filth, and accordingly a woman emitting such is considered unclean and unfit to mix with people” and is required to enter a seclusion-hut.⁵ Similarly, the Kolosh Indians of Alaska force newly menstruating females to remain locked away in tiny huts for an entire year following menarche; for this year, the females are not allowed fire, exercise, or company.⁶ For the Zulu and Kolosh, their cultures’ menstrual taboos are manifested in the forms of menstrual huts; menstruating women cannot live among their loved ones and neighbors, and they are seen as unfit to participate in typical activities, such as food preparation and most social interactions. The women of the Zulu and Kolosh cultures are victims of their own societies’ reactions to menstruation – their naturally-occurring blood is presented as toxic, they themselves are treated as threats

to the well-being of society, and the menstrual experience is proven to be a trial of forced separation and harsh exclusion.

For the overwhelming majority of cultures who rely upon menstrual huts, this relocation is often accompanied with additional rules and customs to dictate the menstruating female's behavior. The Utes of what is now the United States utilized a menstrual hut and strict rules from the time of a girl's first menstrual cycle. "When a young woman began to menstruate, she was confined or secluded in a hut separate from the family dwelling... [She] was subject to severe restrictions; she had separate eating and drinking receptacles...and she must avoid hunters, gamblers, and the sick."⁷ These regulations help to keep the menstruating woman from contaminating her neighbors and their food sources. In addition to the Utes, the Kapauku of Indonesia must obey specific cultural laws during their stays in the menstrual hut. As described by Leopold J. Pospisil, the Kapauku are subject to an exhaustive assortment of prohibitions and taboo behaviors. Some regulations only apply for the first few menstrual periods, while others apply for the entire remainder of the young girl's life,

She is not allowed to hear or tell legends during her first two menstrual periods, otherwise her future husband will die; neither is she allowed to leave her thatched hut for the stated time because she would become very ill. Should she wash or comb her hair

during the puberty seclusion, death would be her supernatural punishment. At the same time, she is also prohibited from eating any kinds of birds, rodents, marsupials, banana, sugar cane, Kapauku beans, manioc, and some kinds of caterpillars lest sickness result... Should she violate any of the above prohibitions, her husband would die and she, most probably, would be executed by the enraged "in-laws."⁸

The customs of the Utes and the Kapauku clearly exhibit how demanding life in a menstrual hut can be. Life in the menstrual huts is far from ordinary; these severe behavioral restrictions further demonstrate exactly how negatively these given cultures perceive menstruation. By demanding that females avoid common foods and refrain from normal behaviors, the cultures are teaching young girls who have only begun to menstruate that these regulations are the natural consequences of the harmful menstrual experience. Although the girls have absolutely no role in deciding whether or not to menstruate at all, or when to experience menarche, they are nevertheless strictly punished, teaching them that menstruation is equated with abnormal behaviors and harsh restrictions. These regulations help to highlight exactly how dangerous and negative menstruation is within the contexts of these cultures, indicating the apparent presence of a menstrual taboo.

To an outsider, it may easily appear that a menstrual

hut lifestyle is harsh, demanding, and overtly restrictive, as it prevents women from residing with their families and neighbors and inhibits women's behavior as well. Nevertheless, in some cultures, the opportunity to live in a menstrual hut is seen as a welcome reprieve from the day-to-day obligations of a female's life. For example, the Simbu group in Papua New Guinea uses menstrual huts as an instrument to provide women with a female-only space and a rest from their usual workloads.⁹ Similarly, Buckley and Gottlieb argue that the seclusion menstruation rituals do not have to be interpreted in a negative light, saying menstrual huts can successfully help to unify a culture's female population through the shared menstrual experience. Additionally, when menstruation is coded as dirty or toxic, it is beneficial for menstruating women to have their own physical space to menstruate privately; this practice prevents them from receiving negative attention or criticism for their bodies' normal processes.¹⁰ Simply stated, the Simbu culture's negative response to menstruation is at least partially diluted by the women's positive experiences in the menstrual hut. When the relocation to a menstrual hut is deemed a positive experience, that perception is oftentimes traced back to the women involved; they create a helpful environment that welcomes their fellow menstruating women. When young girls enter a menstrual hut to find this sort of atmosphere, it can have drastic effects on their own perceptions of menstruation. The forced yet temporary relocation that comes with living in a menstrual hut maybe

a nuisance or cast menstruation in a negative light; however, when the young girl finds that the menstrual hut contains a positive network of women who have experienced these trials and tribulations beforehand, the menstrual experience becomes substantially more pleasant for the girl. While the notion of a seclusion ritual in the form of a menstrual hut seems foreign and bizarre to us, it is imperative to recognize that these rituals are not inherently negative, as they offer advantages to menstruating women in the forms of privacy, rest, and unity. It is also crucial for us to remember that rarely is an individual influenced by only one culture or only one set of responses; the negativity of the restrictions imposed by the culture as a whole is tempered by the warmth and welcoming nature of the culture of women who reside in the hut.

On relatively rare occasions, a culture's negative reaction to menstruation reveals itself through physical violence, in the form of a slap. One popular response to the onset of menstruation, especially among traditional Jewish families, is to slap the newly menstruating female across the face. Many accounts of this symbolic ritual have little clear explanation of the slap's origins or ultimate purpose. Caren Appel-Slingbaum received a slap to welcome her to womanhood, and she received a multitude of explanations from her mother when she inquired about the reasoning behind the slap. Specifically, it may have been to "slap sense' into a newly fertile girl... [or] to 'awaken' her out of her childhood slumber and into her role as a Jewish woman."

However, when she pressed her mother for a conclusive answer, her mother shrugged her shoulders and appeared just as confused as her daughter.¹¹ Additional explanations are offered in Rachel Kauder Nalebuff's *my little red book*, which states, "One view is that [the slap] is intended to shock you out of childhood. Another explanation is that it is done to ward off the evil eye. Most women seem to have little idea of the origins of this ritual."¹² This Jewish culture's act of marking the physical transition from childhood to adulthood with a physical assault hardly reinforces the notion that menstruation is a positive event in a woman's life. Moreover, the physical slap practiced in some Jewish families parallels the specific set of regulations imposed upon menstruating women in Orthodox Jewish families. For example, a menstruating woman in this religion is prohibited from having sexual relations with her husband and must cleanse herself with a ritual bath to restore her marital cleanliness.¹³

The combination of a form of physical abuse with little to no clarification of its purpose reinforces the confusion and distress that comes with menarche; newly menstruating women, by being slapped, are taught to connect menstruation with pain, shock, and confusion. They are apt to internalize this series of events as a natural occurrence for newly menstruating girls – menstruation is sufficient cause for an unexpected yet moderate physical assault. In simplistic terms, their bodies have betrayed them and caused them to be slapped by one of their loved ones. Perhaps the most troubling

aspect of this slap is the fact that it is frequently passed from generation to generation with no substantial explanation as to its purpose. A girl can easily pass on the initiatory slap even without being able to pass on the significance of it; this incomplete rite of initiation unfortunately perpetuates the negative connotation of menstruation to subsequent generations of young Jewish females.

Although some cultures' responses reinforce negative perceptions of menstruation, other groups teach girls that menstruation is a positive life event, using menstruation as a reason to celebrate. The onset of menstruation shows that a female is ready to take on adult roles and responsibilities, and this transition can be a momentous occasion for an entire population. The Yanoama in South America, more popularly known as the Yanomami, commemorate a girl's menarche through specific traditional practices. During a period of ritualized isolation immediately after the beginning of the girl's first bleeding period, the menstruating female receives a specific tattoo from her mother. "With this tattooing, all the evil, mysterious forces which are in the menstrual blood, and which might bring danger to the husband, are banished for the rest of the woman's life...after [the second menstrual cycle] a celebration takes place."¹⁴ While in this example menstrual blood is initially treated as a dangerous substance, the ritual removes the fluid's stigma, transforming it to a normal result of a regular bodily process. The tattooing ceremony makes menstruation acceptable for the young girls, and the tribal

celebration helps to fortify this positive transformation. Through a group celebration, the Yanoama publicly demonstrate that menstruation is positive and should be embraced by *all* of the tribe's members, not merely the females.

In addition to this South American tribe, the Navajo population of the United States employs a menarcheal celebration to help communicate the commemorative importance and significance of menarche. As Delaney, Lupton, and Toth write, "This menarcheal celebration finds its origin in Navaho mythology; its purpose is to make sex relations holy and effective, and to produce children to carry on the work of the tribe."¹⁵ The adult women of the group educate the young females about the social responsibilities of being an adult in addition to the physical responsibilities of being reproductively mature. After this period of instruction, the entire tribe celebrates the female's transition from child to adult. Menstruation is intimately connected to the joys of childbirth; the Navajo community effectively teaches the young girls that menstruation is key to experiencing the delight of successful procreation. Because menstruation plays such a large role in an overwhelmingly positive life event, it is transformed into a positive event by proxy. Tribal practices in both North and South America successfully abolish the menstrual taboo; menarche and menstruation are treated as noteworthy events that deserve to be observed with a celebration for the entire population, as new women are created and new future mothers emerge within the population.

A second category of menstruation-inspired celebration is designed to improve female bonding. Because all women menstruate for a significant portion of their lifetimes, all women can consequently relate to one another through this life event. Jean Elson states that “Women described over and over again how, as girls, they developed camaraderie and solidarity around the [menstruation] issue.”¹⁶ The onset of menstruation, for certain individuals across cultures, is treated as an appropriate opportunity to fortify the bonds between females. For many women, menstruation carries a great deal of symbolic significance. If and when channels of communication are open regarding this physiological development, a clear dichotomy emerges, between those who have started and those who have not. Those who have already started to menstruate can either commiserate with or congratulate each other, depending on the context. Many women report feeling as though they have joined an elite and privileged club once they experience their first menstrual cycle; they have a shared set of lived experiences that allows them to compare stories and perspectives with other women of varying ages. Janet Lee’s research on menarche experiences determined that nearly 20% of the United States college students she interviewed were excited to start their periods, feeling like they were finally “becoming ‘one of the club’.”¹⁷ Men and premenarcheal females are incapable of understanding the complexities and feelings associated with the menstrual experience – physically, emotionally,

psychologically, or socially. For this reason, menstruating women exist as a clearly-defined, distinct subset of the global population; all women in this group, regardless of race, religion, or age, can know with complete certainty that they share a bond through their individual experiences with menstruation. When the emotional bonds between women deepen because of this shared experience, menstruation becomes a positive entity within their lives. This population of menstruating women offers a positive response to the onset of menstruation, as young women find that they are not bizarre nor are they freaks; instead they are normal, healthy individuals who have a great deal in common with many of the women surrounding them in their daily lives.

Despite the dichotomy of postmenarcheal women and premenarcheal women, the gap between these two groups can be bridged through fruitful and beneficial conversations, bringing all women into the menstrual experience to a certain extent. Those who have already started to menstruate offer a source of information, counsel, and support for those who are awaiting their first periods with either trepidation or excitement. The manner in which the social and symbolic importance of menstruation is able to cut across this dichotomy of females is also clearly conveyed in Judy Blume's 1970 novel *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. In this influential young adult novel, the main character, Margaret Simon, and her friends agonize over their impending periods' arrivals and impacts. Margaret, as

the narrator, describes her emotions as she awaits her first period, how her relationships with her friends evolve, and her reaction to discovering that she has become a menstruating woman. Both the relationships Margaret describes and the first-person perspective she articulates help to illuminate the sisterhood that often emerges when dealing with menstruation. Although this book is commonly banned in school libraries because of its sexualized content, *Time* magazine listed this novel as one of the 100 all-time best novels, describing it as a “groundbreaking, taboo-trampling young adult novel.”^{18,19} This novel proved that discussing menstruation in popular literature is not disgusting, and it also showed young readers that starting to menstruate can be a positive bonding experience with their fellow females; both of these impacts greatly helped to reform the United States’s perceptions toward the menstrual cycle. Overall, some women have found that menstruation is not a taboo topic that leads to shame, disgust, and embarrassment; instead, it provides a gateway for deeper relationships through shared experiences with the mature women in their lives.

Based on a thorough cross-cultural comparison, individual populations’ reactions to menstruation vary tremendously, creating a very wide variety of individual women’s experiences with and reactions to this natural life event. Some cultures see menstruation as dirty and dangerous, secluding women from the rest of the general population and imposing exceptionally strict restrictions on their behaviors

and interactions for hygienic and safety reasons. Some societies use a rather unexplained slap across the face to welcome a young girl to womanhood. Finally, some groups recognize menstruation as a significant life milestone that deserves a public celebration, indicating that menstruation is positive and should be embraced by the entire group. Given that there is little continuity across the international spectrum, where exactly does the United States fall on this varied continuum of reactions to menstruation? How does the United States as a culture respond to menstruation; how does this cultural response manifest itself in young girls' lives today?

Methods

To answer my research question, I have focused on the undergraduate female population at the University of Notre Dame. This population presented many benefits to my original research: all of the subjects were over the age of 18, making parental consent a non-issue; members of this target population are easily accessible for me; and, as Elissa Koff and Jill Rierdan state, "College students are mature enough cognitively to be able to analyze and abstract from a relatively recent experience...menstruation, by virtue of its recency and novelty, should be highly salient."²⁰ Most importantly, "Girls often are reluctant to describe their menstrual experiences directly or right at the time of menarche."²¹ College-aged women are distanced enough from menarche and the embarrassment that is stereotypically

associated with the onset of menstruation to speak frankly about their individual experiences. While many of these young women have been menstruating for two to 10 years, their retrospective analyses are still noteworthy and important to consider, containing valuable insights into the presence of the menstrual taboo and stigma in the United States.

The first phase of my original research consists of a 10-question online survey that was electronically distributed to 250 female undergraduate students. All 250 women reside in the same single-sex residence hall, with a roughly equal distribution of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The survey's questions determine important background demographic information, such as age of menarche and current year in school, in addition to sources of pre-menarche education, reactions to menarche, and perceptions of menstruation on a whole. I received 162 completed surveys, or a response rate of roughly 65%. The final question on the survey asks the respondents if they would be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview, lasting about 30 minutes. Of the 162 responses I received, only 38 respondents, or close to 24%, indicated they would like to participate in an interview discussing their menarche and general menstrual experiences.

I assigned a number between 1 and 38 to the students who indicated their willingness to be interviewed based, and then used a random number generator to select students to interview. After determining which students I would extend an interview invitation toward, I contacted the students and

scheduled an in-person interview. I divided my interviews into two cohorts – cohort 1 interviews focused on the basics of menstrual experiences. I entered each interview with a specific set of questions, broken into six main categories: menarche and reaction, schools, friends, family, media, and overall. The “menarche and reaction” questions probe the details of the informant’s first menstrual cycle, including the age of menarche, pre-menarche education, and the female’s reaction to discovering she had started her first period. The categories of “school,” “friends,” “family,” and “media” explore how each of these components influenced the individual’s thoughts on both her first period and menstruation in general. The questions in the “overall” category discuss the woman’s general perceptions of her menstrual experience, her assessment of her level of pre-menarche preparation, and the advice she would give to young girls preparing for their first periods today. At the completion of my cohort 1 interviews, I had spoken with six students: one senior, one junior, two sophomores, and two freshmen, investigating specific facts of their first menstrual cycle.

After analyzing the responses from the cohort 1 interviews, I produced an updated list of questions to develop a more in-depth understanding of the certain areas of response that emerged from cohort 1. Specifically, I looked to have a better appreciation of the females’ perceptions of menstruation now as college students, suggestions for how to make menarche and discussing menstruation easier for

people of all ages, and perceptions of the United States's cultural response to the process of menstruation. I selected females for cohort 2 in the same manner that I did for cohort 1, with a random number generator. At the completion of my cohort 2 interviews, I had spoken with six additional students: one senior, three sophomores, and two freshmen. In total, I interviewed 12 students in an attempt to explore the individual and cultural significance of menarche and menstruation.

All of the interviews were semi-structured in nature, meaning that I came to the interview with a pre-determined set of questions intended to provoke thoughtful insights and discussion; however, I was open to the possibility of the interview proceeding in unexpected directions as the conversation dictated. The 12 interviews were all conducted in my dormitory room, allowing students to talk freely about this personal matter without worrying about a roommate or neighbor overhearing.

Results

Through my interviews and surveys, it became clear that the United States has created a multifaceted cultural response to menstruation. Many girls had overlapping experiences, but at the same time, there is a wide spectrum of reactions to this biological event. When talking to the college students, the interviews revealed that within the United States culture, there are four main sub-cultures that

play an enormous role in determining how an individual girl will respond to her own period: a culture of embarrassment, a culture of fear, a culture of silence, and a culture of acceptance. I will analyze each of these sub-cultures and their impact on young females' responses to their new menstrual cycles.

Culture of Embarrassment

Without a doubt, the most common response I received in both my interviews and my surveys was that menstruation was an embarrassing incident. For many young women, this embarrassment starts when the girl is first exposed to the concept of menstruation, especially when this discussion takes place in a public setting such as a classroom. Riley, Katie, Esmeralda, and Meredith all explained that they learned about menstruation in a classroom setting; these classes were sex-segregated and essentially explained the biology behind menstruation and what to expect physically when it actually occurs. Despite this cursory introduction into a natural biological event, these young women report they left their respective class sessions with only a fuzzy, partial understanding of the entire process. Esmeralda, a sophomore, explains that her class concluded with a question and answer session, "but obviously no one asked questions. If a girl asked a question, I would have been embarrassed for her, but also, embarrassed for me for having to listen to some teacher actually answer the girl's question!" These classroom session, though designed to actually answer the girls' understandings

and clear up any confusion about menstruation, proved to be quite ineffective. The students, according to these four young women, all sat in awkward silence, knowing that any other reaction would have placed an embarrassing spotlight on the student and the topic being discussed.

A second but equally important source of embarrassment was from the male students that interacted daily with the female students. Katie, a freshman, said that in her school, the boys were fully aware of when the girls were receiving “the talk.” Instead of trying to understand the female side of puberty, the boys masked their own discomfort by publicly mocking the girls. She astutely observes, “In retrospect, it is really obvious that they were hoping that by deflecting the attention onto the embarrassed girls, they would avoid having to show their own embarrassment with the topic. At the time, though, I hated it and could only hope that no one would talk to me about it.” Holly, another freshman, described a similar reaction from her male classmates, stating, “They were totally immature about it. In reality, there’s no reason to laugh about periods, since every girl has them. I just wanted to turn and yell at [the boys], ‘I’m sorry I’m female!’.” In addition to the painfully public discussions and jokes about periods, many young women also cited issues surrounding hygienic products and boys. Riley, a sophomore, describes that she was terrified to go to her locker to get her tampon, since she was sure a boy would see her and make fun of her. Her school’s bathroom didn’t have

any machines to dispense hygienic products, leaving her in an uncomfortable position. Fortunately, she found a solution, “In middle school, I always made my friend carry my tampon into the bathroom so if any boys saw her, they would talk about her instead of me. I know it sounds mean, but it’s the only way I could survive!” Middle school boys play an undeniable role in the perpetuation of humiliation revolving around menstruation, furthering the entire culture of embarrassment.

The stigma associated with menstruation doesn’t end once a girl actually experiences menarche; in many cases, it actually worsens, due to the heightened embarrassment of transforming from a girl who wonders and worries about periods to a girl who actually has to deal with the unappealing event. Survey respondents were given a list of 14 adjectives, seven negative, five positive, and two neutral, and asked to indicate all of the adjectives that matched their reactions to the discovery that they had begun their first menstrual period. The second most commonly selected adjective was embarrassed, with 45.5% of respondents selecting this choice. Essentially, upon discovery of the first bleeding period, a girl’s immediate reaction is not to celebrate or commemorate this life-changing event; instead, she retreats into a shell of embarrassment and anxiety. When menstruation is coded as a humiliating event in the lives of young girls, the discovery of a bloody pair of underwear instantly becomes a life-altering event for the worse. Before the newly menstruating girl has the chance to fully absorb the importance, or lack thereof, of

what has occurred, or to discuss this event with family and friends, she defaults into the culturally-proscribed reaction of mortification and shame. Simply by living in the United States, many girls, even before their first periods, construct unflattering perceptions of menstruation which become the natural response whenever the blood actually appears.

Culture of Fear

The combination of my interview and my survey responses has illuminated that many young women, as middle school students and high school students, dreaded the start of their menstrual cycles. For many, this trepidation related to menarche developed even before a girl experienced her first period. Without even experiencing the emotions and physical sensation of menstruation, the young women felt they already knew what to expect and what to fear. When asked what served as the foundation of these inexperienced fears, many interview respondents discussed their experiences observing and discussing others' experiences with periods. For example, Clara, a senior, stated that she "had heard horror stories from the girls who already had their periods... [she] knew pain was super common because the other girls talked about cramps all the time." Similarly, Andrea, a sophomore, was "dreading the start of [her] period" because she had seen her mother struggle with intense cramps and nausea during her period for many years. For both Clara and Andrea, the secondhand experiences of others' menstrual cycles were traumatizing

enough for them to construct negative ideas about their own menstrual cycles. The cultures in which these two girls matured – for Clara with her classmates, and for Andrea with her mother – effectively taught them that menstruation was painful and undesirable, truly an event to be dreaded.

The effect of others' experiences with menstruation is not limited to acquaintances and family members; the media's portrayal of "average women's" interactions with their periods also has a noticeable impact on the apprehension within the premenarcheal population. Emily, a senior, said that she was terrified to start getting her period because of the messages she received from television's advertisements for products like oral contraceptives and medications such as Midol. She stated, "It's almost like companies are saying 'we know that it's bad, we want to make it easier on you'... they pretty much made having your period seem like a downfall to life. I definitely got the impression that when you're on your period you can't enjoy a lot of things." Esmeralda voices similar sentiments to Emily, saying, "Those nasty ads totally put me on edge about stuff like cramps and leaking. My mentality after watching all sorts of TV was 'I don't want my period because I might die!' I came to expect the worst from having my period." Riley states that when she thought of her period before she actually experienced her first menstrual cycle, "All [she] thought of was sweatpants, ice cream, and complaining about sweat, since that's what all the ads made it seem like!" Just as Clara and Andrea's experiences with friends and

family made them fretful about what having a period would actually entail, these interviews demonstrate how the media, though a removed and distant player in girls' lives, still has a sizeable impact on premenarcheal assumptions about the horrors of having a period. In the United States, individuals are continually barraged with advertisements for a multitude of products; these ever-present marketing strategies add to an already-existing culture of fear, significantly impacting how young girls' conceptualize their impending periods.

The premenarcheal fear that many girls described did not simply cease to exist whenever menarche finally occurs. As noted above, survey respondents were given a list of adjectives and asked to note which described their own reactions to discovering their first periods. Almost 44% of respondents indicated they were "scared" when they discovered they had begun bleeding, making it the third most-selected adjective from the list. Grace, a sophomore, explains,

I saw the blood in my underwear, and I completely freaked out. I knew that periods were gross and came with blood, so I was already freaked out just thinking about that, but I didn't realize that the blood in my underwear was the same as a period. I honestly thought something was really wrong with me... like maybe I was dying even though I was only 12.

Thus, for Grace, her fear during menarche came from two angles – she was alarmed at the prospect of having a period

in the first place, and she was also alarmed at suddenly seeing blood in a location in which she had never seen it before. Even if she had immediately recognized that she had started menstruating, she still would have experienced the culture of fear, as seen in her anxiety before her first period. Unlike Grace, Emily was quite unfazed when she discovered she had started her first period. However, Emily's fear grew immensely as she became more and more familiar with the individual experiences of her own period. Specifically, "I was totally surprised by how easy my period was at first, since I had expected it to be really miserable. But after a while, I was even more surprised by how painful the entire process was." Emily describes a significant amount of emotional distress and physical pain that became commonplace during her monthly periods. She exclaimed, "I thought the first one was the hard part... I didn't think it was supposed to get worse as it went on. I was dreading my period every single month. For a while, the fear was impossible to ignore." Both Emily and Grace had been culturally informed that periods are something to fear; their own experiences even after starting to menstruate confirmed their anxieties. Unfortunately, neither of these girls has had experiences to prove that the culture of fear is off-base and nonexistent; therefore, it is not unreasonable to presume that this sub-culture could continue into future generations through continued cultural discussions and education led by individuals such as Emily and Grace.

Culture of Silence

For many young women, the discovery of the first menstrual cycle is a closely guarded secret, only to be shared with a very select number of individuals. The sub-culture of embarrassment translates into a sub-culture of silence; girls are taught that what is occurring to their bodies is unpleasant and not a topic appropriate for every day conversation. Instead, talking about menstruation should be kept to only very private and intimate conversations, usually restricted to discussions with health professionals, family members, and friends. Obviously, each female exercises her own judgment in deciding who to notify about her new bodily changes; however, no one from my research stated that they willingly told more than a select number of people in their lives. My electronicsurveyincludedthequestion,“Whenyoudiscovered you had started your first period, who did you tell within roughly the first 2 weeks?” Respondents were instructed to mark all choices which applied to them, including: mother, father, sibling, other family members, teachers, friends, classmates, school nurse, and no one. Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of girls indicated that they went immediately to their mothers to alert a trusted female of this new physical development – over 99% of respondents stated that they told their mothers. The next most commonly told group was the girls’ friends, with 42.4%. Aside from mothers and friends, no other option received more than 25%, indicating that other generally trusted sources of advice and comfort, such

as fathers, siblings, and teachers, were largely neglected when the girls needed someone with whom to discuss their news.

Although nearly every survey respondent indicated that she told her mother about her discovery, for many girls, that personal disclosure did not translate into a willingness to actually engage the topic in deep conversation. Repeatedly in my interviews, the students remarked with visible discomfort that what had meant to be a mere notification had unexpectedly transformed into an emotionally-driven mother-daughter bonding conversation, much to the girls' chagrin. Many of the girls articulated that they merely wanted to let their mothers know so that their homes could be stocked with the necessary hygienic products, not to add extra attention to the entire startling event. Clara recalled, "I was really nervous about telling my mom that I had started my period, because I knew it would be awkward and embarrassing...I really didn't want one of those 'You're a woman!' moments to make things worse than they already were." Meredith, a sophomore, complained that all she wanted was for her mom to go to the pharmacy and pick up some pads, and instead, "She launched into this whole 'Welcome to Womanhood!' speech with a big smile on her face. I didn't want a speech, I didn't want to talk, and I didn't want to tell my dad. I just wanted some pads. That's it." Grace physically cringed when describing her mom's reaction, which included a surprise gift to welcome her to her adult life. As Grace states, "It could not have been more awkward. Seriously, Mom, a gift?! I

felt like now that I had a present, I actually needed to sit down and talk to her about it, which was just about the last thing I wanted to do at that point in time.” All three of these interviews, in addition to many others, expressed the distress the newly menstruating girls felt when the messages received within their home culture were in conflict with the messages they had already received from the culture of silence in the United States – the girls had previously been convinced that menstruation is not something to discuss; it is simply a nasty monthly event to survive. The fact that the mothers were actively pursuing this topic in conversation caused considerable dissonance for the girls’ perceptions of what menstruation really meant in their own lives.

Culture of Acceptance

Despite the overwhelming majority of negative perceptions of menstruation, some interview participants regarded menarche and menstruation as an exciting life event that sparked a feeling of acceptance in a network of females. Monica, a freshman, said that after discovering she had started her first period, “It took a while for me to understand the magnitude of it...but once I got over the initial shock, I felt like I had checked off a life experience or accomplishment.” To her, menstruation had been idealized as a huge turning point in a young woman’s life, and “definitely not a big awkward thing” Her in-school preparation thoroughly explained the biological reasons for menstruation,

and her social preparation with her friends and friends' parents conveyed that it was a completely normal event for young girls of her age. Therefore, she felt prepared for her first period, and experienced a positive reaction, feeling like she had reached a new level of maturity. Similarly, Grace said that before her period, "I was so excited to start it! I definitely felt like I was missing out on something, and I was ready to be one of the mature girls." In her experience, her mother and three older sisters had all openly communicated what to expect with menstruation, and her menstruating friends frequently talked about the details of their own periods. Grace attributed these conversations to her eager anticipation for her period. To her, menstruation had been presented as natural, mature, and "cool," and she readily awaited her own menarche experience. Just as Clara and Andrea created expectations about menstruation after hearing negative reactions from others, Grace and Monica formed positive expectations about menstruation when they received adequate preparation and a sense of welcoming acceptance.

Many females I interviewed also expressed their happiness to start their periods because of their now deeper relationships with other females. Clara described a particularly interesting experience during her middle school years regarding a "menstrual sisterhood," as she put it. In her grade school, all of the girls who were menstruating on a given day were invited into the bathroom during lunch, and the older girls sang a made-up song about menstruation. At

the end of the song, a younger girl would be invited by one of the “elders” to place a coin in the combined pad and tampon dispenser. The younger girl then would request both products by turning both knobs simultaneously, and she was required to use whichever product emerged from the dispenser. Clara, at the age of 21, now describes her memories of this lunchtime ritual as “really demeaning...it was probably super embarrassing for the girls who got tampons before they were ready,” but she said that “at the time, I really wanted to start my period so I would at least have the option of going into the bathroom with all the other girls.” Grace said that she definitely felt like she had joined a club when she finally began her period, as she could now participate in the conversations, both positive and negative, that her three older sisters and mom would frequently have. Erin, a freshman, also said she was looking forward to starting her period; she described the anticipation as “waiting to be cooler.” In her opinion, “All the girls who had started their periods seemed older, cooler, more mature, and I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to join their ranks and have stuff to talk about with them.” In summary, these three females’ experiences reveal that, for some girls, menstruation is an entry to closer relationships with the females in their lives, benefitting from conceptualizing their periods within the framework of a culture of acceptance.

Suggestions

Although the vast majority of my interviews and

surveys turned up negative perceptions about menstruation in our country, I accumulated specific suggestions for how to make our culture more menstruation-friendly for both women and men alike. Coincidentally, all of the suggestions centered around what schools can do to make menstruation less scary and embarrassing.

The most oft-cited suggestion from my interviews was a re-structuring of the typical classroom education about menstruation and puberty in general. For many young women, this class is filled with awkwardness even when it is composed only of girls, and the embarrassment is furthered in the halls when boys immaturely mock the girls for their newly-received health education. Given the fact that the single-sex education style leads to these two levels of awkwardness already, there is no reason to continue it. Instead, many girls have suggested transitioning to a co-ed puberty education set-up. In this case, even if the awkwardness cannot fully be avoided, at least both sexes will be receiving the same information about puberty for both sexes. This design will increase the overall awareness about what happens in others' bodies, creating less confusion and less embarrassment for everyone involved.

A second suggestion for changing the classroom component is to bring in a fellow student who can serve as a guest speaker to the middle school students. Riley states,

I would have learned so much more if there was more than just diagrams. I think more resources and more

speakers would be helpful... definitely more than just a school nurse. Ideally, a “cool” person, like an 8th grader, should be brought in to discuss this matter with 5th or 6th graders. Obviously, that 8th grader would have to be super comfortable with her period, but I think this would really work for the younger kids.

By enlisting the help of an experienced menstrual veteran, school administrators would help younger students to have a clear example of a female student of a similar age who has successfully navigated the ups and downs of menstruation. This guest speaker would have concrete advice about how to handle unexpected situations like retrieving a pad from a locker without attracting boys’ attention. She would be exceptionally relatable and a good sense of comfort to girls who are growing very nervous about the prospect of negotiating the demands of menstruation with the demands of school life.

In addition to tweaking the individuals involved in the puberty education classroom, many students cited the need for a more complete curriculum to help prepare them for the realities of menstruation. In order to provide a fuller understanding of what having a period actually entails, a school needs to communicate three distinct messages. First, as Katie states, “Teach girls that it’s not embarrassing; it’s natural. The girls need to know they have support from people all around them, ranging from someone to talk with to someone who can give them a pad in an emergency.”

Secondly, schools should emphasize the universality of menstruation. Emily argues, “It’s a common fact of life that girls menstruate. It happens to everyone. It doesn’t make you a monster, it’s not random, and it’s not bizarre. If you teach girls that menstruation equals normal, it would probably be less traumatizing.” Finally, although menstruation is a biological universal, as Esmeralda claims, it’s important to emphasize that it’s not a “one-size-fits-all” phenomenon,

I know when I was starting my period and starting to learn about periods, I got really freaked out when my own period didn’t match what I had learned about periods in general. It took me a really long time to realize that there are differences in start dates, cycle lengths, and pads versus tampon preferences... it’s a much broader topic than my school indicated. I would have felt way more “normal” if I had known that it’s not abnormal to have some slight differences from other girls’ periods.

Thus, by explaining to girls that menstruation is normal, universal, and individualized all at the same time, schools would provide a much clearer understanding of what menstruation entails for females on a whole and for each individual girl.

A final alteration that schools could make to their curriculum is the frequency of puberty education sessions. Most of my interviews explained that their schools offered

a one-time session and then the topic was never open for discussion again. By holding sessions in multiple grade levels, the schools would provide a more open environment for dialogue and conversation about puberty in general, including menstruation. Meredith offers her suggestion, stating:

I think it's dumb that it's only discussed in PE classes or in one-time puberty classes. Schools should offer repeat discussions throughout middle school and high school, giving people a bunch of opportunities to discuss these topics. Maybe a girl doesn't have a question about periods in 5th grade but really wants to talk about it in 8th grade... we need a system that makes that a possibility.

The repeated classroom discussions would also complement the suggestion of making the classrooms co-ed; by having more than one session, schools could offer a single-sex classroom setting one semester, and then offer a co-ed one the following semester to help provide a more well-rounded opportunity to learn and converse.

All in all, I repeatedly heard that schools should work to adopt these basic strategies to restructure their classroom settings, alter their classroom messages, and increase the frequency of their classroom discussions. If these suggestions are implemented in America's classrooms, combined with the additional suggestions of providing pad and tampon dispensers in all school bathrooms

and female wastebaskets in all bathroom stalls, the cultures of embarrassment, fear, and silence will largely be replaced by a true culture of acceptance in our society.

Conclusions

In summary, the manners in which a culture on a whole responds to menstruation has a significant impact on how each individual woman interprets her menstrual experiences, especially for young girls who are relatively new to menstruation. The results of my interviews and surveys parallel the wide continuum of responses to menstruation that exists around the globe. Most of the college women, similarly to many cultures, view menstruation as an inherently negative process. Internationally, this negative response manifests itself in the forms of menstrual huts, restricted behaviors, and painful slaps. In the United States, females find themselves trapped in a culture of embarrassment that treats menstruation as disgusting and humiliating, a culture of fear that presents a period as terrifying, and a culture of silence that socially prohibits the discussion of menstruation. On the other hand, some cultures treat menstruation as a cause for celebration. This positive response is mirrored in the responses from college women who acknowledge the presence of a culture of acceptance, warmly recalling their menarche experiences as times of budding physical and social maturity. In order to create a more menstruation-friendly culture within our own country, we need to produce

¹David F. Lancy, "Living in Limbo" in *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 274.

²Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 7.

³L. Rodriguez White, "Newly Postmenarcheal Adolescents' Understanding of Menarche and Menstruation Across Race and Income Level as Defined by Qualification Status for Free or Reduced Lunches" (Ph.D diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2001), 16.

⁴Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Champaign, IL: First University of Illinois Press, 1988), 7.

⁵Marianne Brindley, "Old Women in Zulu Culture," *South African Journal of Ethnology* 8, no.1 (1985): 106.

⁶Rodriguez White 2001, 17.

⁷Donald Janetski Callaway, Joel C. Steward, and Omer Call, "Ute," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Volume 11 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1986), 352.

⁸Leopold J. Pospisil, *Kapauku Papuans and Their Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), 45.

Caren Appel-Slingbaum, "The Tradition of Slapping Our Daughters," *The Museum of Menstruation and Women's Health*, <http://www.mum.org/slap.htm>.

⁹Buckley 1988, 13.

¹⁰Appel-Slingbaum.

¹¹Rachel Kauder Nalebuff, *my little red book* (New York: Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2009), 84.

¹²Elizabeth M. Whelan, "Attitudes Toward Menstruation," *Studies in*

Family Planning 6, no. 4 (1975): 107.

¹⁴Hans Becher and Frieda Schütze, *The Surara and Pakidai, Two Yanoama Tribes in Northwest Brazil* (Hamburg, Germany: L Kommissionsverlag, Cram, De Gruyter & Co., 1960), 142.

¹⁵Delaney 1988, 33.

¹⁶Jean Elson, "Menarche, Menstruation, and Gender Identity: Retrospective Accounts From Women Who Have Undergone Premenopausal Hysterectomy," *Sex Roles* 46, no. 1/2 (2002): 38.

¹⁷Janet Lee, "A Kotex and a Smile': Mothers and Daughters at Menarche," *Journal of Family Issues* 29, no. 10 (2008): 1336.

Whitney Matheson, "Some of the best books in life are ... banned?" *USA Today*, September 28, 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/popcandy/2004-09-28popcandy_x.htm.

¹⁸ "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret (1970)," *Time*, 2005, http://www.time.com/time/2005/100books/0,24459,are_you_there_god_its_me_margare,00.html.

¹⁹Elissa Koff and Jill Rierdan, "Preparing Girls for Menstruation: Recommendations from Adolescent Girls," *Adolescence* 30, no. 120 (1995): 797.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 798.



Integrating Identities: Negotiating the Religious Lives of Homosexual Christians in the Netherlands

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Scott Mitchell

Abstract

This paper explores how homosexual Christians experience their religious life, as well as the various methods used to negotiate any difficulties or conflicts between these two identities. Data for this study consists of in-depth interviews with homosexual Dutch adults who participate in worship services at a Catholic congregation in North Holland which ministers specifically to the homosexual community. Findings reveal that respondents describe their religious life as taking place on three different levels: the denominational, the individual, and the community level. These descriptions were characterized by an

overall rejection of official denominational doctrine concerning homosexuality, an isolation of religious practice and experience in the personal level, and a strong desire for a welcoming church community. The complexity of the multidimensional nature of religious experience suggests that the existing typologies oversimplify the negotiation of religion and sexuality among homosexual Christians, and that a new analytical tool for examining this process is needed.

Across the globe, the Netherlands is regarded as a tolerant nation, especially in its relations with the LGBT community. While the Netherlands may lead the struggle to create a hospitable environment where LGBT individuals may lead lives free of discrimination, not all pockets of Dutch society are completely hospitable towards homosexual* identities. The official doctrines of some religious denominations create an environment that is not always welcoming towards LGBT individuals. In some instances, a denomination will require that an LGBT individual refrain from acting on his or her sexuality, while others deny full membership and participation to individuals who even identify with these sexualities. Debate remains as to whether or not Dutch tolerance extends into the domain of religion. This research seeks a better understanding of how Dutch religious who are also homosexual negotiate these two often-

conflicting identities. Specifically, this research examines how homosexual Christians in the Netherlands experience their religious life, as well as the various methods by which they resolve difficulties or conflicts between these identities.

In his research on homosexuality and Islam, Nahas puts forth a typology of methods for negotiating religious and homosexual identities.¹

The first method involves complete exclusion of all religion in favor of total freedom of sexual expression. In contrast, the second method involves severing contact with the LGBT community, effectively ignoring one's sexuality by taking shelter in religion. The third strategy is to personally reinterpret religious statements on homosexuality in order to incorporate these teachings into one's own lifestyle. Finally, those employing the fourth method leave religious teachings and statements as they are, and also accept themselves the way they are.

A number of other research studies posit their own typologies of strategies to negotiate these two identities, many of which support the typology developed by Nahas.² Using survey, questionnaire, or interview research methods, these studies provide empirical support for the "complete exclusion of religion" method,³ the "severing contact with the gay community" strategy,⁴ the "reinterpret religious statements" method,⁵ and the "accept personal sexual self and religious statements as they are" method.⁶ These studies offer statistics representing the relative prevalence of each of these strategies, as well as theories on why some

strategies were more prevalent than others. Factors that were observed to influence strategy selection included religiosity,⁷ perception of the church as irrelevant,⁸ and quality of relationship with the Christian community.⁹

Some of the aforementioned research highlights additional methods not accounted for in Nahas' typology.¹⁰ One additional method, identified by Yip,¹¹ includes the rejection of institutional religion in an effort to preserve one's personal faith, spirituality, and Christian identity. This method involves a rejection of an official institution that does not meet the individual's needs, and refocuses faith based on the individual and personal experience, rather than the practice of religion within an organized institution. In subsequent research, Yip¹² analyzes data from a national survey of 565 respondents, and finds evidence that the strategy of refocusing faith based on the individual may indeed be an emerging trend among homosexual Christians.

In their research, Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles¹³ identify another important strategy used to reduce dissonance. In their interviews, researchers found that after attempting to reconcile their sexuality with their religion, their respondents often chose to join a different religious denomination that was more accepting of alternative sexualities, and even joined non-traditional religious denominations.

The body of literature surrounding the negotiation of an individual's religion and sexual identity provides a wealth of strategies to negotiate these two identities. The

current knowledge of the topic, however, relies heavily on survey and questionnaire data. This research makes a unique contribution to the current body of literature by collecting data through in-depth interviews. By analyzing interview data, this research can capture nuances of respondents' thoughts and feelings that are essential to the discussion of this topic. Also, placing this study in the highly tolerant and progressive Netherlands provides an examination of whether or not this tolerance extends into the domain of religion. Lastly, this research adds an international dimension to a body of literature that is largely focused on American Christians.

Methodology

Data for this study consists of in-depth interviews with eight individual homosexual Dutch adults who participate in worship services at a Catholic congregation in North Holland that ministers specifically to the homosexual community, referred to henceforth by the pseudonym "Pride Nederland," or "Pride." Participants were recruited by contacting the Pride administration via email, which then announced the project to the congregation as a whole during a worship service and petitioned participants on the researcher's behalf. Participants were recruited and scheduled for later interviews at this worship service. This analysis also makes use of participant observation data from one Pride worship service.

Interviews were conducted at respondents' private

residences or at the SIT World Learning office. Interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes in length; questions focused on the respondent's history of church involvement, "coming out," conflicts or difficulties regarding their religion and sexuality, and conceptions of religious and sexual identities. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

Although Pride is a Catholic Congregation, many respondents reported Protestant backgrounds. The sample was 87.5 percent male and 12.5 percent female, a distribution that is representative of the Pride congregation as a whole. The estimated mean age of the sample is 50 years, which is also representative. This research does not suggest, however, that the Pride congregation is representative of homosexual Christians as a whole.

The in-person interview format aims to capture nuances of respondents' thoughts and feelings that are essential to understanding how they negotiate their religious and sexual identities. In an effort to understand how individuals negotiate conflicting identities, the interview format allows in-depth exploration of facets of the topic that are not accessible with quantitative analysis. Given the sample size and nonrandom recruitment method, the generalizability of this study is limited. The responses given by participants cannot be taken as representative of any larger group; rather, these stories should be seen as personal, lived experiences of individual LGBT Christians.

Analysis

The following findings constitute an exploratory look into how homosexual Christians separate and experience their religion at the denominational, personal, and community level, as well as how this separation is used to integrate one's religion and sexuality.

The Denominational Level

The first dimension of experienced religion to be discussed here is religion at the denominational level. Respondents' experience of the denominational level includes their knowledge of and contact with official church doctrine and statements issued by its leaders. Distinct from the experience of religion within the community of a particular parish or congregation, experience of the denominational label pertains to membership in a specific religious category. While this interaction remains largely intangible, it can have a very concrete and profound effect on the faith lives of individuals. This can be seen in the ways in which respondents describe their religious denominations. A vast majority of respondents described their religious denominations as discouraging, alienating, or unwelcoming. Conversations about religious denominations included descriptions of how homonegative doctrine is driving parishioners away from organized religion, and how many have chosen to forsake institutionalized religion to preserve their personal faith.

Official Church Doctrine as Discouraging, Alienating, or Unwelcoming

Respondents who discussed the religious denominations they have been a part of were likely to describe these official churches as having a negative effect on their faith lives. As one man explains, “the Roman Catholic Church, they’ve always been punishing, saying, ‘Oh, you can’t do that; that is impossible.’” In this quote, the parishioner makes clear the restrictive role that the Roman Catholic Church plays in his religious life. He later continues, describing the Church’s opposition to his marriage:

Sometimes you hear it anonymously from someone in a high position in the Roman Catholic Church, who says, “This shouldn’t happen, this shouldn’t be done.” We’re still confronted that way. The priest that we had last Sunday said that he cannot allow himself to put his name on all the things we do and he cannot allow us to present it to everybody.

Here, the Church is depicted as a force that hinders the respondent’s activity within the Church, and punishes Church leaders who minister to the homosexual community. This man is not alone in his sentiments; every respondent interviewed voiced their disagreement or dissatisfaction with official Church statements on homosexuality at

least once during their interview. Another man shares,

In the Pentecostal church [homosexuality] is a great sin. Not only do they say that you cannot practice, but even to be homosexual is not allowed. Because they say that you are not born that way, and so you can be healed of it. I felt that I was not understood.

In describing the official stance of his church regarding his sexuality, this respondent reveals the denomination's rejection of him and its desire that he change his sexuality. Despite being intangible church dogma, the Pentecostal church's words affected the respondent's faith life. He states, "Actually I believed what they said about homosexuality. I think I had more of a fight with myself than with the church." This individual's interactions with the denominational dimension of religion caused him severe guilt, and he later shared that his involvement in church has had an overall negative impact on his life.

Opposition to Official Church Statements

Individuals who took the negative statements of their denomination to heart proved to be the exception because the majority of respondents interviewed reported that they never believed these official statements to be true. These individuals, by rejecting their denomination's condemnations of their sexual practices, maintain their own faith lives and

self-esteem. The following interview provides an example.

I: How did the conflict between your religion and your sexuality make you feel?

R: Well, for my own feelings there's never been a conflict. I've accepted [myself] from the beginning. I know that this is the way I should live, and live it up to the best, and fulfil it.

I: So even though the church has told you it's not ok to be homosexual, you've never believed that yourself.

R: Yep, exactly.

Here, self-acceptance lies diametrically opposed to the acceptance of church doctrine. Another interview echoes these feelings, saying, "I still feel that most parts of the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church hold for me. But here I can feel in myself that the Church cannot be right in this respect, because I didn't make the choice of being gay."

Others described more pronounced clashes between sexuality and denominational edicts; the following interview chronicles a conflict whereby the respondent sends a condescending priest out of his home,

[The Priest] said, “You’ve been a big sinner all your life.” He was very annoyed, and it got that far that I said, “Now you’re out, I don’t want you anymore. You get out of the door.” He said, “You’re a big sinner, and God won’t forgive you.” I said, “You better get out because I don’t want to talk to you anymore. If I’ve been a sinner all my life, I don’t feel that way. I don’t understand it.” Immediately I don’t want to go to the church again. Never.

Citing personal experience, these respondents justify their rejection of official church statements. Often, this rejection of the denomination’s teachings on homosexuality were coupled with a rejection of the denomination altogether.

Driving Away Parishioners

When discussing religious denominations and the statements on homosexuality that they endorse, respondents often reported that churches suffered diminishing numbers as a result of their views. One woman says, “They lose a lot of gay people, they turn their backs to the church because of this teaching.” She continues, substantiating this claim by citing her own experience:

I also like the Catholic liturgy when it is open minded, and it is too bad that it is sort of changing back again. There was a lot of space, and then Rome got stricter and that means that more Catholics are leaving the churches than before. John the 23rd was more popular here. The celibate rule, it is not possible of course. It is not human to be so strict. And no women and no gays; it is too bad because there are beautiful churches and it is a beautiful religion but they make too many restrictions; that's sad.

One man, with knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church's stance, avoided membership completely, stating, "I was sure that I wouldn't be welcomed in the Roman Catholic Church at all as far as I understood the Roman Catholic Church." Another followed similarly, reasoning, "The Pentecostal church is very strict, extreme. And I didn't like that anymore." These reports indicate a possible consequence of many denominations' unwelcoming stance towards homosexuality. Given that all participants were also unanimous in their rejection of their denominations' official teaching on homosexuality, it is reasonable to assume that severance from the professed denomination often accompanies this sentiment. While this may entail accepting one's sexuality as it is and continuing participation in one's local congregation, this solution is not always sufficient.

Leaving the Church to Preserve One's Faith

Given the finding that the negative messages at the denominational level are a negative force in the lives of many homosexual people, it is not surprising that many respondents mentioned leaving their church in order to maintain their religious faith. The following respondent describes the Roman Catholic Church as an impediment to his relationship with God:

R: It's a rule and someone made the rule, and between me and God or me and Mary there's always the structure of the Roman Catholic Church.

I: So the Catholic Church almost comes in between your relationship with God?

R: Yes. It not always very helpful, I must say.

This respondent describes his religious faith as dependent on the separation of God from the Roman Catholic Church. Another respondent agrees,

I see church and God as two different things. The church tries to do everything that God wants, but still there is not one church in this world that is completely right. And that's why I see it as two different things, God and the church.

By framing a perfect God in the background of an imperfect institution, this respondent separates the beneficial from the oppressive in order to maintain his religious faith. A third

man feels similarly, keeping only the aspects of religion that are positive for him, stating: “We always hated the prescriptions and the laws of the church. We say that the church is a church of love. For us, the most important thing is the love of Christ and the Gospels.” These uniform, abundant descriptions of the separation of church from religious faith, coupled with reports of dwindling numbers of church congregations suggest a shift away from the institutionalized practice of religion among homosexual people towards an expression of belief that is experienced on an individual basis.

The Individual Level

The data suggest that those who maintain their religious faith in spite of the negativity experienced at the denominational level respond to this negativity by segregating their experience of religion to the individual level. This involves choosing to practice religion unaffiliated with a denomination, solely on an individual basis. One man’s description of his mother’s words illustrates this well:

My mother, she said, “the only thing is that my son is happy and the church can’t touch him because his religion is inside, and whether he can go to church or whether he is forbidden, I think that that is not important. His belief in God is more important than if a pastor says that he has to change himself.”

This focus on religion as a personal journey often includes increased emphasis on personal experience of and relationship with God.

When asked, a vast majority of respondents reported that their religious journey was something that they did on a personal basis, rather than with a church (Appendix A). One respondent simply stated, “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” Another supplies his rationale for this choice: “The moment I understood for myself that I wanted to live a homosexual life, I put the church on the side because I didn’t feel that I fit in.” Citing a lack of support, many respondents professed a preference to experience religion at the individual level.

The Individual Practice of Religion

In place of practicing their religious faith in the context of an unwelcoming or alienating denomination, many respondents described the methods by which they maintained their religiosity while distancing themselves from their discriminating denominational affiliation. One man shares his solution:

I: So how did you end up resolving these conflicts with the church?

R: We found our own way to do it, lighting candles, having small prayers at home, going on holiday and going to churches to pray, light candles over there, going to masses,

having things together, sometimes with friends, but not really involved in church in the community of church.

This solution of practicing religion on a personal level was emphasized by a vast majority of respondents, and effectively allows homosexual people to practice their religious faith free from the dissonance imposed by an unwelcoming religious denomination. Another respondent introduces prayer as the core of his religious life, saying, "I don't think it (weekly church attendance) is important. I pray everyday. That is what I do. I never forget to do that, if it is short or long, but that is what I always do." Later, in a discussion of whether or not his involvement in the church caused him guilt or shame, he described the role of prayer:

I: So how did that keep you from feeling guilty?

R: That is because of prayer. In a prayer you feel that God is there, or, with me especially, I am a Maria fan. With the presence and with my prayer I never felt that I had sinned. I always feel the presence and the help of them in everything I do.

By emphasizing the individual practice of religion, these respondents free themselves from the negative gaze of religious denominations in an effort to balance Christianity and homosexuality.

Emphasize Personal Relationship with God

As one dimension of experiencing religion on a personal level, a number of respondents emphasized that a personal relationship with God was central to their religious faith and successful reconciliation of their sexuality with their religion. The following interview depicts one man's struggle:

I: So did you ever resolve those conflicts inside yourself?

R: Yeah, but not until a few years ago.

I: Ok, how did that happen?

R: I was growing in it. I was looking around at what other Christians say about it, and I read about it, and I came to another conclusion.

I: What was that conclusion?

R: That God loved me the way I am.

By looking at himself through the eyes of a loving God rather than from the gaze of a church that had rejected him, this man reached reconciliation between his sexuality and religious life. Another respondent recognizes the plurality of ways that individuals experience, feel, or know, God, "Godsbeeld," in Dutch:

I: Would you say that your religious journey is something that you do with the church? Or is it more of a personal journey for you?

R: More personal I think. I think the community is important for the community, but in our church the Godsbeeld, how you experience God, how you feel God, how you see God, is very, very diverse. I work for this bulletin and I interview church members, and I ask them how do they feel God, and it is completely different for each person, in nature, in your heart, in the community, in people.

This variety of ways to experience God affords believers a variety of ways to worship, each one unique to the individual. Thus, one's unique Godsbeeld transforms faith life into a very private matter.

Homosexual Christian Identity

Across nearly all of the interviews, responses were marked by a current lack of conflict or dissonance between respondents' religion and their sexuality. This could be attributed to the proper formation of a homosexual Christian identity that all but one respondent professed to possess (Appendix A). This reconciliation between religious and sexual life is characterized by a way of life that allows an individual to be both Christian and homosexual at the same time. The following interview provides an example:

I: Would you say that you have developed a gay Catholic identity? In other words, have you found a way of being both

gay and Catholic?

R: Yeah, I'm sure I did.

I: What does that look like?

R: The combination of being helpful in your own neighbourhood, going to Lourdes, volunteering, showing a Christian way of living, being helpful, showing that you care, putting effort into things you don't believe in on the first hand, seeing when someone needs something and what can I do about it. And that always in combination with saying this is my lifestyle, this is my husband, these are my friends, and I'm enjoying life in this or that way.

The presence of this identity was very evident in respondents' speech, as well as in the unanimous assertion by respondents that they felt positively and accepting towards their own sexuality (Appendix A). In addition, the vast majority of respondents denied that their religious background ever caused them to feel guilt or shame (Appendix A). It would be logical to assume that this identity empowered these individuals to turn away from unwelcoming institutions and turn the focus of their religious experience inward. Despite the emphasis on religion as a private matter and personal practice, the value of experiencing religion within a community was not overlooked or ignored by respondents.

The Community Level

Nearly all respondents mentioned, at least once in their interview, a desire, need, or appreciation for a welcoming and like-minded community with whom they could practice their religion. The vast majority of respondents had lengthy and diverse histories of church involvement, with experience in a variety of churches from different backgrounds. While many of these individual congregations met respondents with only tolerance or even rejection, participants offer a number of accounts of congregations where they were fully welcomed. Ultimately, an extremely high value is placed on congregations where the parishioner can feel accepted, welcomed, and at home; these congregations are usually encountered after a rigorous search, a “congregation search” that respondents also describe in full detail.

The Need for a Community Component

Although many respondents proved to themselves that they were fully capable of confining their religious experience to a personal level only, many also expressed a need or desire for their religious life to also have a community aspect. They describe this aspiration with uniformity:

I can pray on my own, but sometimes I like to be with people who also believe in a God. I felt very unhappy because I want to be a Christian and I feel I must go, and there was something missing by not going to church.

You do it together with your community. Of course it is also a personal way, but then it will be only a lonely way. You need your community because you need people around you to fulfill your life.

I think you need the church to be part of a Christian community, I don't think you can be Christian just by yourself. So for me church is important. It is also to celebrate the service with each other.

These excerpts portray faith life as rooted in the personal level, but highlight the point that in order to fully flourish, one's experience of religion must branch out into a community of people.

Rejected, Tolerated, or Welcomed

Despite the desire for a community component within their experience of religion, finding a community in which to actualize this goal often proved to be difficult. In recounting their histories of church involvement, respondents related accounts from a number of congregations in which they did not feel welcomed. The following interview illustrates this well:

I: Were the other church members supportive? Or the church leaders?

R: No, they were doing everything to keep me away from the gay lifestyle.

I: Church leaders, even other church members, they weren't accepting?

R: No.

I: And how about now in the Evangelical church? Would you say that the other church members there are supportive, or not really?

R: Most of them will support me as long as I choose for a celibate life. They don't support me in that.

Here, once the respondent's sexuality was made known, his status in these congregations hinged on him leading a celibate life. One woman describes a similar dilemma in a different congregation:

R: One of the Protestant churches we belonged to that is more right wing, more reformed, there you couldn't participate in the communion.

I: So you've been to the more right wing churches and you don't feel very welcome there?

R: No, it wouldn't be possible to participate actively. It would be possible to with the "no show, no tell" like in the army in the United States, that would be possible. But if you are well known and they know you live together then it would not be

very much appreciated.

While not explicitly refusing their homosexual parishioners, other congregations adopted instead a tolerant stance:

I: And have you felt welcomed in all of the churches that you've been a part of?

R: No, not at all. If it wasn't organized by us, if we weren't part of the team, I didn't feel welcome, only tolerated.

In this case, the respondent was not openly rejected, but the mere allowance of participation that he was afforded could not substitute for the welcoming congregation that he was searching for.

Respondents did not describe their experience as entirely negative however, and many reported that there were accepting and welcoming congregations interspersed among the unwelcoming ones. One woman describes a congregation she found, saying, "This church was always busy with gay people. In that way it was pretty modern, progressive, and liberal. Of course, not all of the churches are." A second respondent found one of these congregations, who, in spite of its denominational affiliations, married the respondent and his partner within the Roman Catholic Church. He states:

Our priest did, not all priests do, and you have to look for the right priest. And typically Catholic, you cannot ask the Bishop for permission because then they will think about it for a year or they won't give you permission, you just tell the Bishop, "I'm going to marry him, with that priest who is going to bless my marriage, and he's even going to take care of the body and soul of Jesus to be present at that marriage."

When asked for their thoughts regarding the church's attitude toward their sexuality, the vast majority of respondents replied that it depends purely on the community in question. This finding implies that while homosexual believers are being met with resistance in many congregations, a number of communities are fully welcoming these parishioners. To add the much needed community component to these parishioners' faith lives, they need only to search until one of these congregations is found.

The Congregation Search

As respondents detailed their histories of church involvement, they consistently and uniformly described the process of searching for a church community. A dominant theme across these descriptions was the notion that the congregation must minister fully to the parishioner, or the parishioner will move on to a different church, unwilling to be part of a community that isn't fully welcoming. One

woman describes this increased freedom in searching for a church community as a product of a liberal shift in church congregations. She reports, "I think now it is much easier to be gay in many churches. And if, not then you can go to another church were it is accepted. I think that's a big change from 20 years ago." The manner in which respondents describe their search for a congregation communicates the power and freedom they wield in their choice, saying, "You could go to whatever church you want. If you don't feel at home at one church than you can just to go another," or "[The church] has to fit what you believe. If they say things I don't agree with, then I'll move on to another church." Thus, in the process of searching for a church community, it is up to the congregation to fit the parishioner, not vice-versa. Another respondent describes his vigorous pursuit of the acceptance and welcome that he demands before he invests any effort in a church community:

You tell me exactly what you think about [homosexuality] and not "if you put it this way or you put it that way," no. I want to hear exactly from your mouth that I am welcome. I never hide it. The moment they meet me I'll let them know within one minute if possible that I'm married to a man and that we're living together already for 30

years. I'll do it on purpose, because I don't want a conflict in five years. I want to hear it immediately, otherwise I won't start; I won't put energy in it.

Due to the existence of congregations that are welcoming to homosexual people, homosexual believers are freed from participation in an unwelcoming congregation. To add a community dimension to their faith lives, parishioners may instead find a congregation that ministers to them, rather than face the dissonance that comes from participation in a community that disapproves of their sexual identity.

The Value of Feeling Welcome

Against a backdrop of intolerance, a consistent theme across interviews was the high level of importance placed on the specific community where a homosexual parishioner could feel at home, welcomed, and accepted. Often times, this congregation took the form of Pride, a congregation that ministers specifically to the homosexual community from which the participants were sampled. The language that respondents used to speak about their congregation suggested that this community is vitally important to their faith life.

I look forward to going to Pride. Because I feel that there is sort of a warmth coming to you. There you are accepted for what you are. When we were standing there together and praying, holding hands in a circle,

then you feel that you are one of the community. You feel you are believing in a God and you feel one of the people. You feel happy. You feel at home.

In '97 I met my partner and that was the first time I went to Pride services. That was the first time I said, "Okay, yes, there are people within the church where I can feel at home."

That gives me happiness. Whenever I enter that building, as simple as it may be. Everybody is accepted here. And then you feel you've won.

That feels good, just to be with other people who are, to a certain extent, like-minded, and empty your head and give your thoughts to something else other than yourself. In a way that's what church is about, it's about meeting people and having a sense of belonging.

In another conversation concerning the positives and negatives of church involvement, one man offers his praise and appreciation for the church community while drawing a clear line between the denominational level and the community level of religious experience:

I: So what part of your involvement in church has had a positive effect, and what part has had that negative effect?

R: The negative effect is the institute, the church as

an institute, and the positive effect is undoubtedly the community. The community inspires me.

The extent to which Pride parishioners value a welcoming congregation is also evident within the worship service itself. This is most noticeable during the Lord's Prayer, during which the entire congregation leaves their seats to form a circle around the perimeter of the room and join hands. This prayer is accompanied by the Sign of Peace, whereby each parishioner shakes hands with, or otherwise embraces those in close proximity. This particular Sign of Peace proved to be very lengthy, as parishioners left their seats and made the extra effort to embrace many friends who were not seated near to them. These outward signs of community and welcome suggest that this space is extremely important to these individuals' experience of their religion.

Although Pride services seem to be an enormous source of strength for its parishioners, a significant minority of respondents cautioned against retreating completely into this safe church community. They maintained that rather than comprise the entire community dimension of religious experience, Pride should instead be a source of strength for the parishioner, who should then allow his or her faith journey to branch out into less accepting communities. One man explains,

The reason I go to Pride is because of the community that is there. To help the other people who come there and to feel a sort of union with the people

there so you can go back to your parish and be strong there. So it should not be the only place where you go to church. And that's what we tell the people who come there. "Please, next week, go to your parish, live your life, be an example, and be open."

This parishioner sees Pride not as an end or a solution, but one means of strengthening homosexual believers in the community dimension of their faith lives. A second man agrees, referring to Pride as the "backbone" of his religious life,

We visited other churches but only with the backbone that we give ourselves from Pride, from the social life, the friends, from the talking with one another, with a Catholic background of course. And by seeing others with backbone you can go elsewhere and show enthusiasm or interest and also keep your dignity at the same time.

He later continues, seeing Pride as a calling to further action rather than an end to revel in:

Even at Pride, you can say "it's no good that you do that, you have to present yourself, you should fight all your life for Catholics who are gay to fit in the social life so they don't have to isolate or

lock the door or need just gays to have a thing like that.” But it shows that you need things like that to get a good firm backbone to present yourself.

Here, these respondents feel called beyond Pride’s accepting sanctuary, and into the larger religious community to live their faith life.

The Future of Pride

Based on the findings described above, it is reasonable to assume that Pride is a positive force in the faith lives of many homosexual people. What is the future of this welcoming community? One visit to a Pride worship service reveals a high median age of those in attendance, with no youth present. Respondents confirmed that the absence of youth was indeed typical of Pride worship services, and speculated about the congregation’s survival. When asked to conjecture as to why there were no young people at Pride services, many respondents cited widespread secularization, noting that there were few young people at any worship service. One man reasons, “I think it is the same reason that there are not any young people at other churches. It’s exactly the same. At our parish I don’t see any young people.” When asked, the vast majority of respondents answered this way, noting that the rising age of religious congregations was not specific to Pride alone.

Respondents supplied a number of reasons for

decreased church attendance among youth. One man, recalling the traditional nature of many church services, said, “They think it is a little bit boring.” Other respondents postulated:

Religion is not very appealing nowadays to youth. And if it is, it is probably less formal and more individualistic because everything in life has become more individualistic. Hence younger people are not tempted to go to church because it is such a set thing.

Young people hardly need church. I think they do but it’s a decision that they have to make themselves. I have a background in being in Catholic services every morning, but they don’t have that anymore, so they miss that part of church in their life.

These quotes suggest that rather than discarding all experience of religion, young people of today may have only disregarded the community dimension of religious experience, and may continue to experience their religion on a personal level. One respondent suggested that youth would find a need or desire for the community dimension later in their life:

I: So LGBT young people, they are living out their faith in their own way, just not with the church?

R: Yeah.

I: So they believe in God and they are religious, just not within Pride or another church?

R: Yeah. The examples I have in my mind, when I tell them that I live my life as a gay in combination with Catholic belief, I see that there is a sense in them that says “hmm, sounds interesting, I might do something with that in future.” But I think they’ll wait until the problem shows up or they meet someone.

Thus, it is possible that the need for a community dimension is delayed in youth until later in life, triggered in adulthood by a desire for deeper religious experience.

Conclusion

This investigation explored how homosexual Christians who are involved with Pride experience their faith lives, as well as how they negotiate conflicts between their religion and sexuality. In-depth interviews revealed that these parishioners experience their religious faith with strict lines drawn between denominational, personal, and community levels of religious experience.

It is through this multidimensional separation that this group successfully negotiates the difficulties and conflicts associated with being Christian and homosexual. By segregating and isolating the denominational level of

religion, homosexual Christians can effectively minimize this aspect of religion in their lives, an unwelcoming, discouraging, or otherwise negative aspect of their faith. This group may then find solace by experiencing religion on a purely personal level. By keeping the personal practice of religion separate from negative denominational edicts, homosexual Christians can disregard these harmful messages. While this group suggested that they were fully capable of living their religious life as a personal journey, they also revealed a definite need, desire, and appreciation for a community in which they could feel accepted, welcome, and at home. An increase in the number of these welcoming communities empowers homosexual Christians to leave congregations in which they do not feel welcome, and oblige parishes to minister to them, rather than feeling pressure to conform to the church congregation itself. Respondents conveyed the extreme importance of these welcoming congregations in their faith lives, congregations which some choose to use only as a “backbone,” a source of strength that allows them to venture out into less welcoming communities.

This research effectively explores the extent to which Dutch tolerance is experienced in religious domains, and expands the current body of literature by giving an international dimension to the exploration of how homosexual Christians negotiate their religion and their sexuality. It should be noted that while the observed multidimensional separation of religion does not fit neatly into the existing negotiation

method typologies, elements of this process are reminiscent of existing types. The strategy of “accepting one’s personal sexual self and religious statements as they are” resembles the process of turning away from negative denominational stances on homosexuality and focusing on the personal practice of religion.¹⁵ This study also directly supports research by Yip,¹⁶ who proposes a strategy that involves the rejection of an official institution that does not meet the individual’s needs, and refocuses faith based on the individual and personal experience. His research posits this strategy as a growing trend among homosexual Christians, and this research supports his conclusion. Lastly, this research provides partial support for research conducted by Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles,¹⁷ where the act of changing religious denominations to one that is more accepting was proposed as a negotiation method. Rather than change religious *denominations*, the respondents in the present research chose to change religious *communities* in search of tolerance and welcome.

Although these findings may resemble existing typologies, the finding of religious experience as multidimensional demonstrates the necessity of a new analytical tool for examining the negotiation of religion and sexuality among homosexual Christians. This research shows that the use of typologies to describe their experiences is an oversimplification of these phenomena, and that survey data alone cannot accurately capture the complexity of the negotiation process. These respondents’ reality of their

religious-sexual negotiation as multidimensional mandates that future typologies examine this negotiation process on a multidimensional level, assessing the thoughts, feelings, and actions at the denominational, personal, and community levels.

This research does not claim that this strategy of multidimensional separation of religion is characteristic of all homosexual European Christians. The demographic similarities among the sample may explain the similarities among responses, which should not be taken as representative. Instead, the presence of these separate dimensions of religious experience should provide a new lens through which to view future and existing typologies of strategies for negotiating religion and homosexuality.

Limitations of this research include sample size, under-representation of both women and youth, and demographic similarity of the respondents. Future research should incorporate a wider sample from a number of different congregations, including congregations not ministering specifically to the homosexual community. Further research should also capture the thoughts and feelings of homosexual religious youth on the topic, an area that has gone relatively unstudied, especially in Europe. Lastly, future research should make an effort to capture the thoughts and feelings of homosexual religious women on the topic. Given that the Pride congregation is overwhelmingly male, more attention should be given to homosexual women's religious experience, as well as to why this disparity exists.

Appendix A

Selected Interview Guide Items Tabulated (n=8)

3. Do you currently attend Catholic/Christian services? How often do you attend?

Monthly (37.5%)

Nearly weekly (50%)

Weekly+ (12.5%)

7. How would you describe yourself in terms of religion or spirituality? Are you very religious/devout, somewhat religious/devout, or not really religious/devout at all?

Not very religious (0%)

Somewhat religious (50%)

Very religious (50%)

11. Has your religious background ever made you feel guilt or shame about your sexuality?

Yes (25%)

No (75%)

13. Overall, do you think that your involvement in church has a positive or a negative effect on your life?

Positive (75%)

Negative (12.5%)

Equal (12.5%)

15. How did your parents react to your coming out? Were they very supportive?

Yes (75%)

No (25%)

19. Would you say that your religious journey is something you do with the church or is it more of a personal journey for you?

Personal journey (75%)

With the church (12.5%)

Both equally (12.5%)

20. How would you describe your attitude towards your own sexuality?

Accepting (100%)

Tolerant (0%)

Negative (0%)

* In light of Queer Theory, the term homosexual can be seen as inaccurate or problematic, as it does not denote the spectrum that the term queer implies. When seen within the context of the target population, however, homosexual is the most culturally accurate term to use for this analysis. Queer identity does not exist in the Netherlands to the same degree that it does in the United States, especially within the age group and non-academic circles of my study population. I use the term homosexual in this analysis because it is how my study population identifies.

¹Omar Nahas, *Homo en Moslim, Hoe Gaat dat Samen?: 1001 Vragen Over Islam en Homosexualiteit*. (Utrecht: FORUM, Instituut voor Multiculturele Ontwikkeling, Nederland, 2005).

²Ibid.

³A. Yip, "Leaving the Church to Keep my Faith: The Lived Experiences of Non-heterosexual Christians", in *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*, eds. L. J. Francis and Y. J. Katz (Trowbridge: Redwood Books, 2000): 129–145; K.A. Mahaffy. "Cognitive Dissonance and Its Resolution: A Study of Lesbian Christians." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35 (1996): 392–402; D.I. Garcia, J. Gray-Stanley, and J. Ramirez-Valles, "The Priest Obviously Doesn't Know That I'm Gay: The Religious and Spiritual Journeys of Latino Gay Men." *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2008): 411–436; E.M. Rodriguez and S.C. Ouellette. "Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39 (2000): 333–347.

⁴Rodriguez 2000, 333–347.

⁵A. Yip, "Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back." *British Journal of Sociology* 48 (1997): 113–127; Yip 2000, 129–145; G. Wagner, J. Serafini, J. Rabkin, R. Remien, and J. Williams. "Integration of One's Religion and Homosexuality: A Weapon Against Internalized Homophobia?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 26 (1994): 91–110; Mahaffy 1996, 392–402; Rodriguez 2000, 333–347.

Yip 2000, 129-145; Mahaffy 1996, 392-402; Garcia 2008, 411-436; Rodriguez 2000, 333-347.

⁶R.E. Hellman, R. Green, J.L. Gray, and K. Williams. "Childhood Sexual Identity, Childhood Religiosity, and 'Homophobia' as influences in the Development of Transsexualism, Homosexuality, and Heterosexuality." *Archive of General Psychiatry* 38 (1981): 910-915.

⁷Yip 2000, 129-145.

⁸Mahaffy 1996, 392-402.

⁹Nahas 2005.

¹⁰Yip 2000, 129-145.

¹¹A. Yip. "The Persistence of Faith Among Non-heterosexual Christians: Evidence for the Neo-secularization Thesis of Religious Transformation." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002): 199-212.

¹²Garcia 2008, 411-436.

¹³Nahas 2005.

¹⁴Yip 2000, 129-145; Mahaffy 1996, 392-402; Garcia 2008, 411-436; Rodriguez 2000, 333-347; Nahas 2005.

¹⁵Yip 2000, 129-145; Yip 2002, 199-212.

¹⁶Garcia 2008, 411-436.



Edward Cullen Gets the Blood Pumping: The Desire for Fatal Love in *Twilight*

Staysha Sigler

Staysha Sigler (Class of 2010) was born and raised in Wichita, Kansas and is an Accountancy major. As a senior looking to fill an elective timeslot, Staysha enrolled in Professor Jacquilyn Weeks' Fairy Tale Metamorphosis Gender Studies course. This paper was written for the class after learning how to question the traditional fairy tale paradigms that so frequently shape our hopes and desires as children. After graduation, Staysha will begin her career with Deloitte public accounting firm in Fall 2010 and will move to Chicago with her husband, Nick, and two-year-old daughter, Aria.

Edward Cullen Gets the Blood Pumping: The Desire for Fated Love in *Twilight*

Staysha Sigler

When the words “Edward Cullen and feminism” are googled, the first several results lead to a video titled “Buffy vs. Edward.” In this mash-up of the *Twilight* movie and various clips from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy becomes increasingly bothered by Edward’s stalker-like behavior, ultimately beating the vampire to a pulp and thrusting a wooden stake through his heart.¹ This video emphasizes Edward’s behavior as disturbing and characteristic of an abusive relationship. If this type of conduct is considered objectionable, why has Edward Cullen stolen the hearts of millions of women, from pre-teens to those with walking canes? Leonard Sax writes in *The Washington Post*: “Three decades of adults pretending that gender doesn’t matter haven’t created a generation of feminists who don’t need

men; they have instead created a horde of girls who adore the traditional male and female roles and relationships in the 'Twilight' saga."² Though Sax points out a common conclusion about the series, the connection between Edward and Bella (his lady love) actually reflects the audience's desire for fated love, a common fairy tale paradigm. *Twilight* is not a story focused on a male-dominated relationship, as many critics argue. Instead, Edward's over-protective, controlling behavior toward Bella is excused by most of the story's audience because the couple is described as having love so powerful that it "trump[s] a soul mate."³ Though Edward and Bella's relationship does take on blatantly abusive characteristics, the extreme focus on everlasting fated love within the *Twilight* series distracts the reader from disturbing behaviors, diverts critics from recognizing positive aspects of the relationship, and has ultimately fueled the story's mass appeal among an audience wishing for romantic happily ever after, regardless of the measures taken to obtain it.

Throughout the *Twilight* series, there are many examples which demonstrate Edward's alarming behavior in his relationship with Bella. He creeps into her room to watch her sleep without her knowledge; he disables her car to prevent her from visiting her friend against his wishes; and he abandons her for six months, causing her to enter a catatonic state for most of that period (not to mention his constant desire to kill her and drink her blood). Despite Edward's constant apologies for his upsetting behavior ("I

am more sorry than I can tell you”⁴), he always says he is acting out of his love for her, with Bella’s best interests at heart. His claim of protecting her wavers, however, when he physically harms her (though unintentionally) on their wedding night, as shown by the many bruises left on her body after their first sexual act. Though Edward loathes himself for accidentally hurting her, Bella scolds him for “killing [her] buzz,”⁵ because she had never been happier in her life prior to his constant apologies. She even goes so far as to describe the event as “wonderful and perfect.”⁶ When taking into account these disturbing behaviors, some critics have made a plea to those who idealize Edward’s behavior by saying: “These girls need a wake-up call: Edward Cullen is a caricature of an emotionally, psychologically and physically abusive boyfriend—and one with supernatural powers no less. It can’t be healthy to have an attachment to a fictional character with those qualities, much less a real person.”⁷ But girls *do* have a very strong attachment to the idea of Edward despite his controlling behavior. His domineering conduct is often interpreted as a form of chivalry and as Catholic blogger Mary Rose puts it, “Women yearn for chivalrous men who will put a women’s well-being above his own...Edward Cullen has brought the ideals of chivalry and chastity to a new generation.”⁸ So which is it, abusive or gentlemanly? These conflicting interpretations of Edward may be because women are longing for, not the actions that Edward takes, but rather the ideas behind what Edward stands for—true

love that is eternally devoted. Nevertheless, the series is full of questionable conduct that raises many red flags.

Indeed, Bella, her family, and her friends also recognize the unhealthy aspects of Edward and Bella's relationship. In *Eclipse*, many of these objections are explicitly stated. Bella's mom says it's "strange about...the way [Edward] watches you—it's so...protective"⁹; Jacob, Bella's best friend, says, "Is [Edward] your warden, now, too? You know, I saw this story on the news last week about controlling, abusive teenage relationships..."¹⁰; Bella herself even says, "Edward's shielding arms had become restraints."¹¹ Yet despite Bella knowing the extent of Edward's restrictive actions, as well as frequently finding it irritating, she still allows it, making the excuse that he is protecting her because she was "so fragilely human, so accident-prone."¹² Edward also knows that Bella has a "history of...let[ting] me off the hook when I make mistakes,"¹³ namely when he hurts her physically or emotionally. Everyone in the series appears to know about Edward's abusive behavior to some extent, including Edward and Bella. Recognizing the problem yet permitting it at the same time must mean there is a different focus distracting audiences from the abusive aspects of the relationship. In the audience's eyes, Edward is seen as utilizing his powers to protect his frail human girlfriend, ultimately evoking the belief that the end justifies the means—even though the means may be abusive—when the end result is destined, eternal love.

The theme of fated love can be found in many fictional

stories throughout literature. Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere—all represent a relationship that emphasizes the idea of one true love or soul mate. In these cases, as well as in Edward and Bella's relationship, the notion of fated love is so strong that it causes the audience to overlook certain "sins" or behaviors because the couples are portrayed as soul mates. Romeo and Juliet disregard their parents' orders, both Isolde and Guinevere commit adultery, and Edward and Bella justify Edward's abusive conduct. Even Bella discusses the tendency to excuse abusive behaviors when she discusses her love for *Wuthering Heights* and the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff. Edward asks Bella why she loves the story when "the characters are ghastly people who ruin each others' lives"¹⁴ to which Bella replies, "I'm not sure...I think it's something about the inevitability. How nothing can keep them apart—not her selfishness, or his evil, or even death, in the end...Their love is their only redeeming quality."¹⁵ Throughout the rest of *Eclipse*, Edward and Bella increasingly begin to believe the argument that Bella presented regarding Catherine and Heathcliff—that Bella and Edward's love is more important than the evils and difficulties that come from it. Audiences tend to ignore transgressions of couples defined as "destined" because many people hope for the couples to succeed in their love. Unlike the literary precedents which end in the death of one or both of the soul mates, Edward succeeds in protecting Bella and vice versa, giving the reader hope

that he or she can find that sort of lasting love in reality.

In the *Twilight* saga, Edward and Bella's destined love is constantly affirmed, showing their incredible devotion to one another. Edward tells Bella that he has endured "a hundred years of waiting for *her*" ¹⁶ and that, "You are the only one who has ever touched my heart. It will always be yours."¹⁷ In fact, he turned down many beautiful vampire women during his ninety years as an immortal, including his adopted sister Rosalie who is described by Bella as "the incarnation of pure beauty."¹⁸ Instead, Edward recognized Bella as his soul mate, showing that the male hero is not required to fall in love with the "most beautiful woman in the land," as is traditional among many fairy tales. Rather, his choice suggests that fated love surpasses appearances, and finding one's romantic match should be blind to exterior beauty. Edward clearly expresses his feelings, and Bella reciprocates his affection wholeheartedly, saying she loves Edward "more than everything else in the world combined."¹⁹ This kind of constant blind devotion further reinforces the idea of romantic destiny and gives a reason for why the negative aspects of the series are often overlooked by the reader.

Fated love is also shown outside of Edward and Bella's relationship in *Twilight*, specifically in Bella's association with another romantic interest, Jacob—a werewolf who competes with Edward in a love triangle. Overall, Jacob is a much more suitable boyfriend in just about every respect—Bella is always happy around him, he does not restrict her

freedom, and he does not have the instinctual desire to kill her. Jacob does not hide his romantic feelings for Bella and is constantly fighting over her with Edward. Though she first views Jacob as only a friend, Bella comes to realize her feelings for Jacob: “I was in love with him. Too. I loved him, much more than I should, and yet, still nowhere near enough.”²⁰ She even goes so far as to say, “He was my soul mate in [the rational] world—would have been my soul mate still if his claim had not been overshadowed by something stronger, something so strong that it could not exist in a rational world.”²¹ This quote suggests that perhaps many of the fans of the series love Bella and Edward’s relationship precisely because it does *not* exist in a rational world. Jacob seems like the perfect boy any young girl would bring home to Mom and Dad (werewolf-ishness aside), but because Edward is identified as Bella’s one true love, Bella’s love for Jacob, though strong and more sensible, cannot measure up to fate. The story provides the audience with a relationship that excuses culpability of all controlling and reckless behaviors in the name of fated love—a secure relationship that knows no bounds. Despite knowing that Jacob was, in every respect, perfect for her, Bella’s tie to Edward shows that fated love does trump all else (in this series at the very least).

The immortal werewolves in the saga, including Jacob, also present their form of fated love through “imprinting.” In short, imprinting is the phenomenon whereby a werewolf looks at person and immediately recognizes that person as

his or her soul mate. Jacob first explains the marvel to Bella by describing imprinting as “a little bit more powerful than [love at first sight]. More absolute.”²² This power is demonstrated when one werewolf, Sam, imprints on his girlfriend’s cousin, Emily. Ultimately, Sam must end the relationship with his girlfriend because he is unable to overcome his newfound devotion to Emily. Another werewolf imprints on a girl at school he had never noticed before; a different werewolf imprints on a two year old child; and Jacob finally imprints on Edward and Bella’s newborn daughter (although the reader is informed that in the cases of the children, romantic feelings will not surface until the children reach adulthood). These characters become completely devoted to and in love with the object of their imprinting, just like Edward and Bella share mutual devotion and love. Imprinting is seen as an involuntary action that cannot be controlled by the werewolves, therefore pardoning them from any responsibility, just like Edward and Bella’s fated romance excuses culpability for their actions. Fated love justifies most disturbing behavior in the eyes of the reader, from breaking a girl’s heart to loving infants to Edward’s abusive behavior toward Bella. In *Twilight*, fated love surpasses everything, for better or for worse.

The relationships within the Cullen family also present another aspect of Edward and Bella which the audience finds appealing—the chance for not only fated, but eternal love. All the Cullens (Carlisle and Esme, Jasper and Alice, Emmett and Rosalie) are described as being

soul mates, just like Edward and Bella; but because they are vampires, the Cullens can live forever with their eternal partner. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, however, believes that through fairy tales, one learns that forming a romantic relationship with another satiates desires for immortality:

The fairy tale [takes] existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to [a child]: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life, and the fear of death...“And they lived happily ever after”—does not for a moment fool the child that eternal life is possible. But it does indicate that which alone can take the sting out of the narrow limits of our time on this earth: forming a truly satisfying bond to another. The tales teach that when one has done this, one has reached the ultimate in emotional security of existence and permanence of relation available to man; and this alone can dissipate the fear of death. If one has found true adult love, the fairy story also tells, one doesn’t need to wish for eternal life.²³

Though Bettelheim says that fairy tales teach children to form romantic relationships which ultimately minimize one’s fear of death, *Twilight* is able to offer its audience both love and immortality. Not only are Edward and Bella as well as the Cullens fated lovers, but they have the potential to live and love forever. Bella even references her desire to

love eternally when she says, “I know it will be hard, but this is what I want. I want you, and I want you forever. One lifetime is simply not enough for me.”²⁴ By showing that living forever is a viable option for the couple, Edward and Bella’s relationship is even more desirable because both are able to spend eternity with their romantic match, a notion that is idealized because of humanity’s fear of death as well as one’s desire to find his or her soul mate.

Though fated love is probably the most powerful theme in the *Twilight* saga, what does it mean that after centuries of fairy tales, women are still obsessed with the idea of one true soul mate existing for everyone, even when it may be harmful to themselves? In an article on AskMen.com titled “Top 10: Reasons Why Women Love Vampires,” the author tries to give some insight into the appeal of fated love:

Woman [sic] love to think they were destined to be with one man for the rest of their lives. They love the romantic angle of a soul mate—two people destined to meet, fall in love and be together forever. Now imagine that man is just as eager to find her and has been searching for untold centuries. It knocks a woman off her feet like a silver bullet through the heart. When a vampire sinks his teeth (figuratively) into a

woman, he makes her feel like the only woman in the world. It's no wonder women fall hard—then again, it could also be the blood loss.²⁵

Though the semi-sarcastic insight presented in this article can only be taken with a grain of salt, it could be accurately stating the very fine line between a woman's desire to find a devoted man and her emblematic "death" from blindly submitting to him. The notion of fated love is a plot construction which is rooted in traditional fairy tale stories, such as *Sleeping Beauty*: the princess falls asleep but can only be awakened by her one true love. Feminist critic Madonna Kolbenschlag sums up the effect on women who believe in the idea of soul mates when she says, "They all have one thing in common: They are convinced they are waiting for something...They are sleeping beauties who may never wake up."²⁶ Because of their passivity and conformity to patriarchal ideas, women who follow the structure of a "Sleeping Beauty" awaiting Prince Charming (a.k.a soul mate) are accused of following traditional gender stereotypes of the strong, active male and the weak, passive female.

Yet despite claims that *Twilight* represents patriarchal concepts by foregrounding Bella's weakness and Edward's strength, I argue that Bella is less passive than critics believe. Gabe Lezra from *The Wesleyan Argus* at Wesleyan

University harshly describes Bella's role in the series:

[Bella] has no redeeming feature, no personality characteristic that makes her in any way interesting: in fact, her identity is defined completely by the men who pursue her...She has no attitudes, no opinions, nothing—other than Edward (and Jacob). The entire plot of the series rests on how Bella comes to be saved, used, and manipulated by men.²⁷

However, Bella appeared to be very comfortable with her predictable existence before Edward or Jacob entered it, suggesting she did not have the desire to be saved from or by anything. Bella was not searching for a transformation to her life. She only makes changes because she wishes to do so, as when she *chooses* to be with Edward despite his urgings for her to consider the danger he presents to her. Bella is not defined by a man, she chooses to be with her romantic match, seeing men as complementary rather than antagonistic to her individuality. In contrast, it is Edward who lives for almost one hundred years passively waiting for his soul mate, yet he is not commonly discussed as a passive character. He is surrounded by his vampire family, each person with his or her eternal companion, constantly reminded of his desire to find a suitable mate. It is Edward, not Bella, who sat around, in Kolbensschlag's words, "waiting for something." Though this passivity, whether exemplified by a male or female, is not seen as ideal, the fact that it was

caused by the search for fated love excuses the behavior in the eyes of the reader and demonstrates that Bella may not be as weak of a character as surface readings may perceive her to be.

In actuality, Bella demonstrates many characteristics that present her as an active, strong female, both as a human and a vampire. She openly expresses her sexual desires when around Edward, even convincing him to have sex with her on their wedding night despite his strong resistance (he believed the desire to drink her blood would be too strong); she ignores Edward's requests when she wants something, as shown when she runs away to spend time with Jacob despite Edward's efforts to keep her away; she also becomes the rescuer, not the damsel, when she travels to Italy to save Edward from death, because he tried to kill himself when he thought Bella was dead. Moreover, Bella truly becomes a powerful female character when transformed into a vampire. As a "newborn," Bella is stronger, faster, more self-controlled, and more supernaturally skilled than all the vampires in the story, including Edward. This changes the traditional gender roles of their relationship, yet Edward loves Bella exactly the same, and is in fact relieved that he need not protect her frail humanity anymore. Edward's unchanging yet unconditional love despite the changing relationship roles presents an interesting concept to the reader: the idea of a man who loves a woman regardless of her strength or weakness or power or gender role. Just like fated love, unconditional love presents security in a

relationship by removing culpability for one's actions, as well as welcoming the idea that traditional gender roles need not be abided for a person to be deserving of eternal devotion.

With over 85 million copies sold and over a billion dollars in movie revenue so far, the *Twilight* saga is undoubtedly putting its finger on something that compels its audience. Though many critics perceive this series as a regression back to traditional gender roles, thus destroying the progress of many feminist movements, Edward and Bella's portrayal of traditional roles during Bella's humanity does not have to be seen as entirely negative. Perhaps critics' time would be better spent focusing on why the story has become a cultural phenomenon in the first place, rather than analyzing what is wrong with it. In fact, *Twilight* may be providing its audience with the solution to an inner struggle or desire shared by millions, as shown from this conclusion by Bruno Bettelheim:

Explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him destroys, moreover, the story's enchantment, which depends to a considerable degree on the child's not quite knowing why he is delighted by it. And with the forfeiture of this power to enchant goes also a loss of the story's potential for helping the child struggle on his own and master all by himself the problem which has made the story meaningful to him in the first place.²⁸

Regardless of the fairy tale and the adult messages it may

or may not contain, Bettelheim says that a child will be compelled by a story because of the essential human problem it addresses that is currently a factor in his or her life. As adults, we may be even more compelled with a story because we are able to recognize that the fantasies it presents and problems it solves aligns with our own subconscious desires and fears. The problem that may be facing *Twilight* readers might be what Leonard Sax describes as “three decades of adults who have pretended that gender doesn’t matter.” However, my belief is that *Twilight* audiences are compelled by the centuries-old desire for fated love, the wanting to believe in soul mates, and the longing for a man who will desire a woman regardless of her individual role—passive, active, weak, or strong—in the relationship. By presenting these three factors within the series, *Twilight* might be expressing this generation’s longing for love, security, and eternity in a scary post-modern world, even if the fulfillment of those three desires is a sparkly bloodsucker with fangs.

¹Jonathan McIntosh, "Buffy vs. Edward: Twilight Remixed," YouTube, June 19, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZwM3GvaTRM&feature=player_embedded.

²Leonard Sax, "'Twilight' Sinks Its Teeth Into Feminism," The Washington Post, August 17, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/08/15/AR2008081503099.html>.

³Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 599.

⁴Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 89.

⁵*Ibid.*, 91.

⁶*Ibid.*, 92.

⁷Este Yarmosh, "'Twilight' Pushes the Harmful Gender Stereotypes We've Fought for Decades," AlterNet.org, July 7, 2009, http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/141135/%22twilight%22_pushes_the_harmful_gender_stereotypes_we%27ve_fought_for_decades/.

⁸Mary Rose, "The 'Twilight' Series: Chivalry and Chastity," True Confessions of a Prodigal Daughter, December 1, 2009, <http://catholicprodigaldaughter.blogspot.com/2009/12/twilight-series-chivalry-and-chastity.html>.

⁹Meyer 2007, 67.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 224.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 84.

¹²Meyer 2008, 8.

¹³*Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴Meyer 2007, 28.

¹⁵Ibid., 29.

¹⁶Ibid., 497.

¹⁷Ibid., 195.

¹⁸Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 304.

¹⁹Ibid., 498.

²⁰Meyer 2007, 528.

²¹Ibid., 599.

²²Ibid., 123.

²³Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 10-11.

²⁴Meyer 2008, 27.

²⁵Chris Illuminati, "Top 10: Reasons Why Women Love Vampires," AskMen.com, June 9, 2009, http://www.askmen.com/top_10/dating/top-10-reasons-women-love-vampires_4.html.

²⁶Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 7.

²⁷Gabe Lezra, "Feminism, Twilight and the End of the World," *The Wesleyan Argus*, December 4, 2009, <http://wesleyanargus.com/2009/12/04/feminism-twilight-and-the-end-of-the-world/>.

²⁸Bettelheim 1976, 18-19.

Mother-Questing Through Stories of Origin

Sean Grammel



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Mother-questing Through Stories of Origin

Sean Grammel

How can a community possibly repair itself after the devastating effects of being forced into slavery or marginalized by colonialism? Toni Morrison and Maryse Condé address this daunting task through their historically-based novels. In Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy* and Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, characters challenge long-held notions of their communal histories and start to insert their own voices into the public discourse. Despite being widely different novels, the role of the mother stands out as a central concern of all three. Mothers dominate these texts, whether they be the central character like Sethe in *Beloved*, a spiritual presence as in *I, Tituba*, or a palpable absence from the main character's life, as the case is with Florens in *A Mercy*. Maternity can even become a source of pain for the female characters, as for Florens' mother or for Baby Suggs in *Beloved*. Women in these novels struggle to assert their own subjectivity under the destructive forces of colonialism and slavery, and it is through the creative act of story-telling that they are able to begin this process. Specifically, stories that assert maternity

by exploring origins most effectively produce agency for the speakers, showing a quest both the characters and the authors share, namely to recover the community's lost mother.

These novels by Morrison and Condé engage with Edouard Glissant's theories concerning "nonhistory...the erasing of the collective memory" of colonized and enslaved peoples, outlined in his essay "History-Histories-Stories." Understanding Glissant's arguments and ideas is centrally important both to this paper and to the challenge of asserting a new history, as he explores the direct and reciprocal link between storytelling and history. In his essay "Global Minoritarian Culture," Homi Bhabha indirectly responds to Glissant when he stresses the importance of the "process of enunciation" for marginalized characters and peoples. Examples from the texts themselves show the various ways that slavery and colonialism negatively affect community, specifically the devastating denial of maternal connections. Morrison and Condé write their characters to seek the mother through the speaking of origin stories. I focus on three specific kinds of origin stories: those about births, those that address names, and those describing personal and community origin. In each of these kinds of origin story, speakers concern themselves with asserting maternal agency, and the quest for the recovery of the mother is a reassertion of their community's history. Due to this concern for community, I then look at how men affect this quest for the mother, as male characters consistently prompt maternal

stories and female autobiography. I conclude with the idea that Morrison and Condé themselves quest for the lost communal mother, just as they write their characters as doing so.

Morrison and Condé both participate in the assertion of an unspoken perception of time and history for marginalized peoples, following the theories described by Glissant. He argues that a “creative approach [is] necessary” to the problems of Caribbean “nonhistory,” since “the historical approach can constitute ... a paralyzing handicap,” and Morrison and Condé choose to use the “creative approach” of storytelling.¹ Glissant writes of the Caribbean that “[w]ith us history and literature...come together once again to establish, beyond some historical ideal, the novel of the relationship of individual to collectivity, of individual to the Other, of We to Us”.² The writing of literature establishes how to write the community’s history, albeit a painful one. “Because the collective memory was too often wiped out, the Caribbean writer must ‘dig deep’ into this memory,” highlighted by Morrison’s choice to examine colonial and Civil War-era America, and Condé’s decision to write the colonial Tituba, a character and time which was actually mostly unfamiliar to her.³ Condé directly engages with Glissant in her interview with Ann Armstrong Scarboro, stating that “for a black person, history is a challenge because a black person is supposed not to have any history except the colonial one,” echoing Glissant’s point that “[i]n the first place, the only recorders of local history were French

colonists, who told the story from their point of view”.⁴ While Condé rejects Scarboro’s attempt to “argue that Tituba exemplifies Glissant’s notion of Caribbeanness in that it fills in blank spaces from lost history, giving voice to the silenced collectivity,” Condé does allow that she “wanted to admit [Tituba] her revenge by inventing a life such as she might perhaps have wished it to be told,” a similar idea.⁵ By giving the colonized and marginalized Tituba a voice, Condé participates in rewriting and retelling her own ancestry.

In confronting a legacy similar to Condé’s, Morrison writes her own kind of history, working against the “paralyzing handicap” of slavery that Glissant mentions. Morrison suggests the difficulties of writing this history: “The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless”.⁶ Glissant explicitly allows the possibility of non-Caribbean writers, like the American Morrison, taking up his ideas. He writes that “our diverse histories in the Caribbean have produced today another revelation: that of their subterranean convergence,” meaning a similar past undergirds each community, though each group has unique experiences.⁷ Discussing Patrick Brathwaite’s phrase “[t]he unity is submarine,” Glissant says, “[t]o my mind, this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels...We are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship”.⁸ Morrison adopts this perspective, searching for a way to express the past trauma of a larger community

while exploring themes and issues pertinent to the present.

Following this diasporic thread of similar, yet unique, pasts, Morrison writes *A Mercy* and *Beloved*. In *A Mercy*, for instance, she makes numerous allusions to Barbados, which is the source of wealth for Jacob Vaark, the white plantation owner living in the seventeenth-century mid-Atlantic, and heavily emphasizes the connections between even ostensibly moral colonial Americans who did not physically abuse their own slaves and the Caribbean plantations which provide the seed for their growing economies. In her "Introduction" to *Beloved*, Morrison uses language similar to Condé's when recounting her decision to create Sethe as a literary figure based on the historical Margaret Garner: "The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history".⁹ Just as Condé works to remember her own kind of Caribbean history by fictionalizing Western history, Morrison uses an old newspaper clipping she recalls to engage with the overwhelming devastation of history. By doing this, Morrison proves Glissant's argument that "history as a consciousness at work and history as lived experience are therefore not the business of historians exclusively".¹⁰

The very act of speaking the story of enslaved peoples begins the healing process. Homi Bhabha argues in his essay, using W.E.B. Du Bois as a background, that "minoritarian

agency is envisaged as a process of enunciation— the enslaved or the colonized represent their community in the very act of political poesis,” that is, the very act of speaking their group’s culture.¹¹ It is important to note that Bhabha says this process “is not merely the demand for the respect and recognition of cultural or political differences,” as that would allow an oppressing group to remain totally ignorant of the stories behind those whom they have oppressed.¹² Instead, Bhabha says that the “very aesthetic act of communication or narration is also an ethical practice” and illustrates this by using Sean Hand’s idea “that it is complete not in opening to the spectacle of, or the recognition of, the other, but in becoming responsible for him/her”.¹³ The process of enunciation not only allows the speaker to “represent their community,” but asks readers for acknowledgement of past grievances through this act of “becoming responsible.” In order for this admission of a different kind of past, there must be a dialogue, or at least a second-party listening, about cultural differences and historical disagreements. Speaking this story is just the first step in assuming power, but it is the critical one.

These novels participate in an ongoing conversation about how to rewrite and refigure the past, embodying Bhabha’s theory perfectly. Caroline Rody notes that in *Beloved*, “[s]torytelling becomes the text’s self-conscious task: many scenes present a character narrating his or her life to a listener”.¹⁴ Indeed, the novel ends with the admonition “This is not a story to pass on,” with the obvious irony that

almost anyone who reads *Beloved* feels compelled to share it with someone else.¹⁵ *A Mercy* begins with the teenaged slave girl Florens writing on the walls of Jacob's house, wondering to herself "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?"¹⁶ While the story on Jacob's walls might not ever reach the blacksmith's eyes, Morrison appropriates it to modern day America to revoice Florens' story. Condé shares this concern in *I, Tituba*. Patrice Proulx suggests that Condé is writing a "mythopoetical autobiography" of Tituba, and "[a]lthough Condé is not the first writer to envision Tituba's existence, she is the first to create her fictional autobiography, thus underscoring the primacy of this woman's 'own' voice as a component of her narrative strategy".¹⁷ Several other authors had already undertaken the project of imagining Tituba's history, such as Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* or Ann Petry in *Tituba of Salem Village*, but their choice to give main narrative focus and development to others left Tituba relegated into roles ascribed by Western ideas of history once again, instead of asserting her own reasons and motivations. "Inscribing her own subjectivity— what she thought, why she did the things she did, who she cared for and by whom she was cared for— is Tituba's project," and in representing this Condé , through Tituba, "shatters the image of a passive, ignorant, or evil Tituba...re-placing it with that of an active, agitating subject who refuses reification."¹⁸ Instead of allowing others to define her and to position her in history, Tituba becomes more than a historical footnote and engages

with her history as an active subject. Indeed, “Tituba’s function as storyteller connects her with her past and allows her a salutary means of self-expression”.¹⁹ In her fictional autobiography, Tituba, through Condé, participates in the “act of political poesis” that Bhabha discusses, allowing her to enter into dialogue with their oppressors and with each other about their past, in a manner similar to Morrison’s characters.

This act of storytelling does not just allow the women to join a conversation, however, but is the mechanism by which these characters assert their maternity. The mothers within this set of novels had to follow the emotionally-scarring practices which their masters prescribed: “birthing children was required, but ‘having’ them, being responsible for them— being, in other words, their parent— was as out of the question as freedom. Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal”.²⁰ In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law and the mother of eight children, embodies this system and its destructive consequences perfectly:

in all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen

or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children²¹

What Baby Suggs considers the "nastiness of life" links back to what Morrison would call simply an "assertion of parenthood." Baby Suggs still loves her children, but her owners never allow her to mother them. Of her eight children, she notes that "Every one of them gone away from me," including her son Halle, who is driven insane by the sexual assault on his wife, Sethe, and subsequently never reunites with his mother.²² She tries to remember the rest of her eight children, saying: "My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember".²³ Slavery has entirely annihilated not only the familial and social ties she has with her children, but even the memory of them. She has no idea who they are, what their preferences or their personalities might be; she gave birth to them and biologically is their parent, but has lost her status as a mother due to their being sold away by her master.

Florens' mother's fear of her daughter suffering the same fate as millions of other slave women, rape, forces her to abandon Florens, who then suffers in some profound psychological ways. Florens, the slave girl whose journey to the blacksmith forms the main thread in *A Mercy*, exhibits

the other end of this system when considered alongside Baby Suggs, as a child left motherless due to slavery's evils. Her mother sacrifices her maternal connection to Florens by giving her to the less-leering Jacob, choosing for Florens a life without a mother for her own sexual safety, as a precaution against the rape from their owner which she views as inevitable. At novel's end, Florens has finished writing her story on the walls of Jacob's great house, but she laments, "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her".²⁴ Though Florens regularly sees visions of her mother trying to tell her something, she is never able or willing to hear the story.²⁵

There are specific kinds of stories that mothers tell that seem especially productive in asserting their maternity, all focusing on retelling the past in some way. Origin stories, and the many forms they can take, are the primary vehicle. Stories behind the stories of central characters, for instance, pervade these novels. It is vitally important that these characters take the usually violent circumstances of their births and speak them, having grown and learned from them, as shown in Bhabha's process of enunciation. That is, in order to become full subjects, they must know from where they came, despite the challenges coming from their enslavement. Florens, for example, does not tell her own birth story because her mother never told her one, and so struggles throughout *A Mercy* to gain subjectivity.

The birth stories of Tituba and Denver, Sethe's daughter, contrast starkly with the characters from *A Mercy*, as that particular novel's characters almost unanimously lack this knowledge. Every character in *A Mercy* is an orphan in some way, either because their parents died, as is the case for Jacob Vaark, his slaves Lina and Sorrow/Complete, or abandoned them as Florens' and Rebekka Vaark's did.

I, Tituba, on the other hand, begins immediately with the title character's conception: "Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of *Christ the King* one day in the year 16** while the ship was sailing for Barbados. I was born from this act of aggression".²⁶ While it seems natural for a woman telling her "mythopoetic autobiography" to begin with her conception, there is a deeper reason behind Condé's choice.²⁷ Tituba is claiming what her mother, Abena, never could. Tituba narrates that:

I never stopped reminding my mother of the white sailor who had raped her on the deck of Christ the King, while surrounded by obscene voyeurs. I constantly reminded her of the pain and humiliation. So whenever I used to cuddle up to her, as children are wont to do, she would inevitably push me away. Whenever I would throw my arms around her neck, she would quickly duck her head.²⁸

For Abena, the act of rape overwhelmed her maternity. Any affectionate instincts a mother may have towards her child

disappeared, and Abena's neglect of Tituba could have been disastrous for Tituba's well-being had it not been for the care of her mother's lover, Yao. Tituba, though, starts off the novel by acknowledging why her "mother did not love [her]," and so retroactively allows for a maternal connection to be made from mother to child where formerly only a painful one existed.²⁹

Beloved's Denver shows the greatest attachment to her birth story from any of these novels, as she considers it the sole productive and happy part of being Sethe's daughter. Quite simply, "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about," referencing the story about how her namesake Amy Denver helps Sethe give birth on the banks of Ohio River.³⁰ Caroline Rody agrees with Denver as to her birth story's importance, as she writes that this story is "at the novel's mythological core".³¹ Denver dislikes the other stories her mother tells, because she is still struggling to recognize Sethe as a caring, loving mother after the murder of *Beloved*. It is disconcerting, however, that the only two times Sethe refers to herself in the third-person during the birth story show a willingness to remove herself psychologically from the scene. The first instance reads: "Concerned as she was for the life of her children's mother, Sethe told Denver, she remembered thinking: Well at least I don't have to take another step".³² Sethe curiously refers to herself as "her children's mother," and then admits that she perhaps coveted death at the time. "Her exact words"

to Denver later are “I believe this baby’s ma’am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River,” another association of maternal abdication and death spoken in monologue immediately before Amy Denver appears.³³

What is the importance of Sethe’s withdrawal from the scene as a subject, considering these are the two crucial points at which Morrison inserts Sethe herself as the storyteller? Sethe is not being selfish here, but showcasing the intensity with which she sees her agency as arising from maternity. How she tells the story is just as important as the story itself. She simply could not bear knowing that, as her “children’s mother,” she died “on the bloody side of the Ohio River,” meaning the slave states from which she was escaping. If this story is the “mythological core” of *Beloved*, and the only two times Morrison inserts Sethe as explicit storyteller involve her identifying solely in the third-person as a mother, this shows that in Sethe’s story, she is quite simply a mother. She is positing that sole identity for herself; if she had to die before taking another step, she considers herself “her children’s mother” foremost. Though Denver admits to being “scared” of Sethe for killing Beloved, Denver’s birth story allows Sethe to show through telling this story about birthing Denver that she sees her agency as based in her maternity.³⁴

The best example of subjectivity through a birth story in *A Mercy* surfaces when Sorrow becomes Complete after assuming the role of mother and finally being able to enunciate her subjective story. When Sorrow’s water breaks,

“Mistress was not well enough to help her, and remembering the yawn [of her infant murdered by Lina], she did not trust Lina,” and so Sorrow decides to enter the forest in “[w]ith a frail hope that Will and Scully would be stationed as usual on their fishing raft.”³⁵ Oddly enough, the other half of her psyche, her “Twin was absent, strangely silent or hostile when Sorrow tried to discuss what to do, where to go”.³⁶ Sorrow decides on her own to seek the help of the neighboring men rather than trust her fellow slave Lina, who had previously killed Sorrow’s baby and then lied about it. Will and Scully “offered to carry mother and child back to the farmhouse” after the birth, but “Sorrow, repeating ‘thank you’ with every breath, declined,” instead saying she “wanted to rest and would make her own way”.³⁷ The two men do help with the birth, but Sorrow feels as if she really controlled herself for the first time: Sorrow “was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself. Twin’s absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter”.³⁸ Sorrow does indeed realize that Twin is not there, but she no longer needs her. Sorrow becomes a much more assertive woman: “Instantly, she knew what to name her. Knew also what to name herself”.³⁹ Readers never discover Sorrow’s baby’s name, as Sorrow’s only direct address to her child is, “I am your mother” swiftly followed by the assertion “My name is Complete”.⁴⁰ Complete does not want her daughter to grow up hearing that her mother’s name is Sorrow because of what happened to her after she was rescued from a

forsaken ship. Instead, Complete takes charge of her story and frames her own narrative around her motherhood, that is, around the fact that she is Complete now with her daughter. Just as biblical characters receive new names when they begin a new direction, Complete has abandoned her previous self and begins to tell her own story to her daughter.

Stories behind the origin of names become crucial to asserting maternity in all three novels. Condé deliberately places emphasis on the narrator's name in *I, Tituba, Black of Witch of Salem* in order to call attention to Tituba's project of claiming herself, indicating that this theme will surface in her novel. Ann Armstrong Scarboro writes in her Afterword that "[Condé's] use of the phrase 'I Tituba' shows us that Condé is claiming a life, an identity, for this woman in no uncertain terms...In putting 'Tituba' in the title, Condé emphasizes the importance of naming, of calling into being".⁴¹ Most crucial to "the importance of naming, of calling into being" is that Tituba herself participates in this, instead of someone else. As Patrice Proulx notes, "[t]he very title of the novel has provocative implications, inscribing Tituba, from the beginning of the text, within the space of a counterdiscourse".⁴² By claiming her name, long associated with diabolical witchcraft, and asserting her subjectivity not only through her name but deliberately connecting it with two other historically-denigrated identities, "black" and "witch," Tituba speaks against each of these forms of oppression. Though it is Yao who gives Tituba her name, having "probably

invented it to prove that [she] was the daughter of his will and imagination,” Tituba takes control of it and shows that she is not the product even of “his will and imagination,” and not Arthur Miller’s or Ann Petry’s either, but of her own.⁴³

Mama Yaya’s name also shows an assertion of subjectivity, as hers connects directly to the process of assuming maternity through storytelling, this time through the story behind her own name. Tituba notes, almost in passing, that “[Mama Yaya] was not an Ashanti like my mother and Yao, but a Nago from the coast, whose name, Yetunde, had been creolized into Mama Yaya”.⁴⁴ In the Yoruba language, Yetunde simply means “mother has come back,” usually used as a name after an elderly woman has died and a new female child has been born.⁴⁵ Her very name tells a story, informing the reader that this is a new maternal figure for Tituba, who becomes the nurturing figure she has missed for so many years. In fact, Mama Yaya’s first act as Tituba’s new mother figure is to foretell Tituba’s life story: “You will suffer during your life. A lot. A lot... But you’ll survive”.⁴⁶ Mama Yaya asserts her new role as Tituba’s mother through this knowledge of her future and continues in her maternal role by transmitting the cultural knowledge she herself has received from her cultural and spiritual ancestors, thus preparing Tituba for the struggles she will face.

Beloved contains several important naming stories, but it is Baby Suggs’ which provides perhaps the best example of using her name to assert her maternal connection. Baby

Suggs' naming story begins with the "storylessness" effected by slavery, as she responds to Mr. Garner's question asking what she calls herself by saying, "Nothing. I don't call myself nothing".⁴⁷ When Mr. Garner tries to guide Baby Suggs into accepting her slave name of Jenny Whitlow since her former husband's "bill of sale says Whitlow too," Baby Suggs rejects this by defining herself: "Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny".⁴⁸ When Mr. Garner inquires about her husband's name for her, she replies, "Baby".⁴⁹ Baby Suggs insists on keeping her name because of a pact she made with her husband that they would find each other if they each could, and so "how could he find or hear tell of her if she was calling herself some bill-of-sale name?"⁵⁰ It is, however, only after she successfully introduces herself to Janey in the Bodwins' kitchen as Baby Suggs that she begins to speak of her children's names. There is no thought about any of her seven lost children as Mr. Garner crosses the Ohio or on the way to the Bodwins' residence; it takes this act of self-assertion about her name to Janey in order to remember and realize her maternity. Notice how much she does remember, compared to her previous statement that all she can recall is that her oldest like "the burned bottom of toast":

Great God, she thought, where do I start? Get somebody to write old Whitlow. See who took Patty and Rosa Lee. Somebody name Dunn got Ardelia and went West, she heard. No point in

trying for Tyree or John. They cut thirty years ago and, if she searched too hard and they were hiding, finding them would do them more harm than good. Nancy and Famous died in a ship off the Virginia coast before it set sail for Savannah. That much she knew ...she knew their names. She knew, and covered her ears with her fists to keep from hearing them come from [Mr. Garner's] mouth ⁵¹

She remembers each one of her children's name, which is much more than "the oldest" who liked burnt toast. Indeed, she actually lists what happens to all of them and where they probably are, except for the two who, wisely in her opinion, ran for freedom.

Characters frequently use stories of personal maternal origin in order to understand larger community history, which in turn feeds their identity. That Florens loves listening to Lina's stories stems directly from her attachment to Lina as her mother figure, and Lina obliges often. Florens "listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories" which consisted of treachery and witchcraft, but "[e]specially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters". ⁵² One story attains this desire more than any other, and it was "a favorite" of Lina and Florens: the eagle story. ⁵³ Lina's story is analogous to both Florens' own origin story and the origins of the colonized community as a whole: someone took her from her mother, and someone took her mother, and entire peoples, from her African motherland.

In the eagle story, a female eagle brooding on eggs hears, along with the rest of nature in a valley, the deafening and destructive cry of a man atop a mountain who sees the scenery and declares “Mine,” an echo which disrupts the ecosystem and actually cracks one of the eagle’s eggs.⁵⁴ Attacking the man in order to protect her young, the eagle swoops in on him and he hits it with his stick. Battered, the mother eagle “falls and falls” over the entire valley until “screaming, she is carried away by wind instead of wing”.⁵⁵ The main evil is “the evil thoughts of man,” and his rapacious gaze, which could be translated to the capitalistic and imperialist attitudes of slavery and colonialism.⁵⁶ The cracking of the egg which results from the cry of “Mine” symbolizes the splintering of family and maternal connections that occurs under the system of slavery and colonialism. The stick the man yields can easily be read through a psychosexual lens as a phallic symbol, and it is the method by which he removes the mother from her eggs. That Lina tells this story shows that she has recognized the destruction resulting from “displacement... destruction...sin...men,” and so reclaims the story in order to satiate both her own and Florens’ “motherhunger,” which is “to be one [a mother] or have one.”⁵⁷ Lina assumes that role for Florens, and asserts her role through this story. Florens loves this story because it helps explain her own mother’s action, and although it removes agency from the mother eagle, it shows Lina beginning the process of enunciation necessary to begin forming maternal connections.

Tituba's beautiful "Lament for my lost child" follows this same pattern, asserting maternity in a personal way whose meaning could be expanded to suggest her entire community's experience.⁵⁸ The lament essentially tells the story of a woman whose moonstone drops into the river and she sits by the waters bemoaning her loss, clearly visible from the banks. When a hunter comes by her, he attempts to help the speaker but "dived and was drowned".⁵⁹ Reading the poem as being specifically about Tituba's aborted child, the moonstone stands not for the child she loses, but instead for the maternal connection instead and for the completion it could have provoked in Tituba, as "[t]he moonstone symbolises [sic] our being in its entirety".⁶⁰ Wearing a moonstone allegedly "strengthens our intuition and our capacity to understand," "evoking tender feelings and safeguarding the true joys of love."⁶¹ Because of these deeper meanings of the moonstone, it is more likely to mean the love between a child and a mother than just the child him or herself. The inability of the hunter, "[w]ith his bow and arrows," to rescue the moonstone perhaps indicates that violence and aggression are not viable paths to attaining the moonstone, as the repeated and entirely failed attempts at rebellion on Barbados show.⁶² The solution to regaining the moonstone may, in fact, be this very lament. Tituba refuses to forget her child, and seeks to understand a viable solution through this story. What does it mean to lose a

child under these circumstances? How can that connection be regained? Of what purpose is this lament itself? The lament asks these questions, and so Tituba maintains that she still sees her child despite his or her being gone, thus still claiming the title of mother. Tituba immediately teaches the lament to Betsey Parris, child of her owner and a quasi-daughter figure, as Tituba plunges her “up to her neck in a liquid to which [she] had given all the properties of amniotic fluid” in order to save her life from her illness.⁶³ Pairing the lament with this amniotic liquid serves to underscore its importance to Tituba’s maternity. Tituba sings the lament “for Dorcas as well, daughter of a woman who had accused [Tituba] so unjustly” of being a witch, because Dorcas asks “Do you know where my mother is?”⁶⁴ Dorcas Good has lost her mother and Tituba has lost her daughter; this is just another instance of Tituba using her story to help assert maternal connections, even for women who harmed her.

The mothers in *I, Tituba, Beloved*, and *A Mercy* do not gain subjectivity just for women, but for both sexes. Both of these authors concern themselves not just with women, but with a larger community suffering from nonhistory, which includes men. In fact, the men seem to be the ones prompting subjectivity in these women, providing the spark necessary for them to start their stories. Condé warns that “I don’t see myself as portraying the relationship between men and women” and even repeats herself within the same paragraph:

“I won’t say that I’m portraying the relationship between men and women”.⁶⁵ While recognizing Condé’s insistence, readers should nevertheless recognize that Tituba certainly receives help from a few males in her life in respect to her subjectivity. Iphigene provides the best example of a male who helps Tituba achieve maternal subjectivity. Though he is not biologically Tituba’s son, she still sees herself as his mother and so should the reader. His first words to Tituba are “Mother, O mother, you’ve come back! I thought you had gone forever!” evoking Mama Yaya’s actual name of Yetunde and its meaning; Tituba herself calls Iphigene both her “son and lover.”⁶⁶ Tituba and Iphigene form what Kristin Pitt calls an “intentional community, a collective social unit established through the conscious and voluntary decision of its members. These members generate their own narratives about their relationships to each other, and inevitably such narratives rely upon creative, interactive uses of history and memory”.⁶⁷ Pitt proposes the idea of “intentional community” as a method by which formerly-dispersed groups can reform their communities, and indeed Iphigene manages to help ascribe even more subjectivity to Tituba by spreading her story to the rest of the island. Tituba already has much power in the community since “[she] had become a legend among the slaves, far more than [she] possibly could have imagined,” but Iphigene tells her that it is her word and her story that will spark the final revolt: “Mother, I know by name and by plantation all those who would follow you. We only

have to say the word.”⁶⁸ Tituba can use her story, and the power accrued from it, to attempt real revolutionary change, thanks to Iphigene’s machinations and spreading of her story.

Though *A Mercy* focuses on female community and subjectivity, even in this novel men help to begin and form subjectivity for mothers. As hypocritical as Jacob is when he contends “[f]lesh was not his commodity” because he does not openly participate in the slave trade, he does recognize the validity of Florens’ mother’s wishes by agreeing with her and taking Florens to his home as payment.⁶⁹ His decision to take Florens may have broken up a family, but hearing Florens’ mother’s story in the concluding chapter about Florens’ conception through rape makes Jacob’s decision seem like the right one: “I don’t know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them...They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below”.⁷⁰ This action was necessary to prevent her daughter from experiencing the same fate, especially as Florens’ mother explains to her that “[y]ou caught Senhor’s eye,” making the need for Florens to escape from her owner, Senhor, urgent to her mother.⁷¹ When the mother heartbreakingly says “It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human,” readers see that *A Mercy* has actually been the story of the consequences of a mother’s nearly-impossible choice done for her daughter’s sake.⁷² Florens’ mother gives the mercy, not Jacob and not even God.

Though Jacob immorally gains Florens as a slave in the process, her mother gains an ounce of agency through this selfless act.

Of the three novels, *Paul D* best epitomizes this idea of male stimulation of female subjectivity, as his appearance at Sethe's house, 124, truly begins the plot action of *Beloved*. Caroline Rody says Morrison "here creates a man whose entry into the house of fiction starts a rush not just of female tears but of female autobiography," or, as Morrison writes, "[w]omen saw him and wanted to weep— to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too...that way past the Change of Life, desire in them had suddenly become enormous, greedy, more savage than when they were fifteen, and that it embarrassed them and made them sad."⁷³ Essentially, women want to tell him anything and everything that they feel they cannot or should not say. For Sethe in particular, he shows this kindness by literally and metaphorically taking the weight of her breasts in his hands: "Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it...What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands".⁷⁴ His alleviation of her burden allows her to speak and remember freely. Sethe begins "smelling the stolen milk" from her sexual assault as Paul D holds her, but it is this support, both literal and metaphorical, that permits Sethe to plunge back into her memory, a prerequisite before she can finally speak her own story, that is,

to begin her process of enunciation.⁷⁵ After Sethe plainly tells Paul D “I don’t go inside,” he lovingly and genuinely offers:

Sethe, if I’m here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, ‘cause I’ll catch you, girl. I’ll catch you ‘fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out. I’m not saying this because I need a place to stay. That’s the last thing I need...when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn’t the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life, girl. A life⁷⁶

This touchingly beautiful offer manifests Paul D’s role in *Beloved*. He is there to allow Sethe to do what she needs to do in order to rememory and remember, and then to grow from those experiences, and hopefully “make a life.” Rody’s point that Paul D’s arc in the novel “gestures at a further transformation: the reconstitution of the black family after a time of devastation” seems spot-on, but notice that even Paul D realizes that Sethe must acknowledge her own story and tell it before this can begin.⁷⁷

Readers can see Morrison and Condé also partaking in the act of gaining subjectivity through storytelling, just like their characters. Rody writes that “the historical project of the novel [*Beloved*] is in a profound sense a mother-quest, an African-American feminist ‘herstory’ that posits a kind of ‘mother of history,’” and she argues that Morrison

is “seeking to regain her [the mother], to heal historical separation, to know the story of the mother history forgot”.⁷⁸ Because of this perceived desire for the mother, Rody then sees the character of Beloved as Morrison’s “surrogate” and “a marvelous figuration of the woman writer’s struggle with and desire for the face of the absent past, for her matrilineage, for the lost mothers she would rewrite”.⁷⁹ Morrison writes in her “Introduction” to *Beloved* that she was particularly concerned with parenting as she was formulating her novel, as “[a]ssertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal,” and that the story she heard about Margaret Garner’s maternal decisions inspired her.⁸⁰ Morrison tells these stories as part of her “reimagining of her ancestral community”; she tries to find the lost mother in history through these stories.⁸¹ That *A Mercy* ends with Florens’ mother’s plea to “Hear a tua mãe” shows exactly toward what that novel works: the mother’s story.⁸ That Florens’ mother, and Florens herself, uses Portuguese when referring to the mother shows that they can only speak of the mother in the language and terms of their oppressors, their owner Senhor in this case, but that they can still overcome that language to find a maternal connection. Morrison seems to be questing to the same goal, to hear her and give voice to her ancestral mother despite this challenge of having lost the ancestral mother’s language and customs.

Similarly, *I, Tituba* “marked an important step on the path to self-discovery for [Condé]” as she writes the story

of a Caribbean antecedent, someone with whom she feels a “strong solidarity”.⁸³ Condé “emphasizes the importance to the Caribbean woman of creating a new space for herself through a (re)creation of origins,” both for herself and for Tituba.⁸⁴ “Maryse Condé does not merely retell Tituba’s story; she recreates it to new purposes,” which is Condé’s search for her own Caribbean female heroine.⁸⁵ Condé appropriates Tituba’s actual history to this mythological reworking of history. Ironically, the only historical document in the novel, Tituba’s deposition during her trial, really constitutes a lie and a deception by the recorders of history, the Puritan men and women putting her on trial. By entirely subverting history and gaining her own subjectivity over that too-rigid past, Condé “uses the lost past to dominate the present and open the future to new directions”.⁸⁶ Condé herself says that “[w]riting *Tituba* was an opportunity to express my feelings about present-day America,” indicating her true project: using the past herself to challenge the current status quo, built on the systems and structures from Tituba’s day.⁸⁷

Morrison and Condé write their own histories of their community, gaining subjectivity in much the same way their characters do: through storytelling. By explaining their origins, the characters in *A Mercy*, *Beloved*, and *I, Tituba, Black of Witch of Salem*, can begin to achieve some power over its telling and the effects that story has. Each text takes a seemingly negative action of the past—murder, abandonment, witchcraft—and makes it the very vehicle

by which the mothers achieve some power: Sethe makes her own decision about Beloved, Florens' mother helps save her daughter from the horrors of rape and sexual assault, and Tituba becomes a legend in Barbadian folk song due to her spiritual abilities. Morrison and Condé will never be able to find the full mother in history, as slavery and colonialism have systematically and almost entirely annihilated much of the matriline and African history in general, but their reimaginings of that history attempt to give voice to the "sixty million and more" who lost theirs.

¹Edouard Glissant, "History-Histories-Stories," in *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), 61.

²*Ibid.*, 87.

³*Ibid.*, 64; Ann Armstrong Scarboro, "Afterword," in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1992), 199.

⁴*Ibid.*, 203; Glissant 1999, 187.

⁵Scarboro 1992, 204; 199.

⁶Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), xvii.

⁷Glissant 1999, 66.

⁸*Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁹Morrison 2004, xvii.

¹⁰Glissant 1999, 65.

¹¹Homi Bhabha, "Global Minoritarian Culture," in *Shades of the Planet*, eds. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 191.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss'," *American Literary History* 7:1 (1995), 99.

¹⁵Morrison 2004, 324.

¹⁶Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Vintage International, 2008), 3.

¹⁷Patrice J Proulx, "Inscriptions of Female Community and Liberation in Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba sorcière*," *Europe Plurilingue* (1997): 148.

¹⁸Michelle Smith, "Reading in Circles: Sexuality and/as History in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*," *Calaloo* 18 (1995): 603

¹⁹Jeanne Snitgen, "History, Identity, and the Constitution of the Female Subject: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," *Matatu* 3 (1989): 61.

²⁰Proulx 1997, 152.

²¹Morrison 2004, xvi-xvii.

²²*Ibid.*, 27-28.

²³*Ibid.*, 6

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Morrison 2008, 189.

²⁶See, for instance, *A Mercy*, 119 or 161. The scenes from the forest during Florens' trip to the blacksmith or in the blacksmith's home are particularly good and complete descriptions of this phenomenon.

²⁷Maryse Condé, I, Tituba, *Black Witch of Salem*, trans. Richard Philcox (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1992), 1.

²⁸Proulx 1997, 148

²⁹Ibid., 6-7.

³⁰Ibid., 6.

³¹Morrison 2004, 74.

³²Rody 1995, 103.

³³Ibid., 26.

³⁴Ibid., 37.

³⁵Ibid., 242.

³⁶Morrison 2008, 155.

³⁷Ibid., 155.

³⁸Ibid, 157.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 158.

⁴²Scarboro 1992, 213-214.

⁴³Proulx 1997, 151.

⁴⁴Condé 1992, 4.

⁴⁵Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶"Motherland Nigeria: Names and Origins," *Motherland Nigeria*, <http://www.motherlandnigeria.com/names.html> (3 December 2009).

⁴⁷Condé 1992, 9.

⁴⁸Morrison 2004, 167

⁴⁹Ibid., 167.

⁵⁰Ibid.Ibid., 168.

⁵¹Ibid., 169.

⁵²Morrison 2008, 72.

⁵³Ibid., 72-73.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., 73.

⁵⁶Ibid., 72.

⁵⁷Ibid., 71; 73.

⁵⁸Condé 1992, 55.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰"Moonstone - English." International Colored Gemstone Association <http://www.gemstone.org/gem-by-gem/english/moonstone.html>(1 December 2009).

⁶¹"Moonstone-English," 2009.

⁶²Condé 1992, 55.

⁶³Ibid., 63.

⁶⁴Ibid., 114.

⁶⁵Scarboro 1992, 208-209.

⁶⁶Condé 1992, 160; 170.

⁶⁷Kristin Pitt, "Resisting Colony and Nation: Challenging History in Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière... Noire de Salem*," *Atenea: A Bilingual Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 27 (2007), 15.

⁶⁸Condé 1992, 160; 161.

⁶⁹Morrison 2008, 25.

⁷⁰Ibid., 191.

⁷¹Ibid., 195.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Rody 1995, 103; Morrison 2004, 20.

⁷⁴Ibid., 20-21.

⁷⁵Ibid., 21.

⁷⁶Ibid., 55.

⁷⁷Rody 1995, 103.

⁷⁸Ibid., 105.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Morrison 2004, xvii.

⁸¹Ibid., 110.

⁸²Morrison 2008, 196.

⁸³Scarboro 1992, 199.

⁸⁴Proulx 1997, 149.

⁸⁵Scarboro 1992, 213; 199.

⁸⁶Ibid., 193.

⁸⁷Ibid., 203.

Iota Iota Iota: Undergraduate Gender Studies Honors Society

Iota Iota Iota, or Triota, is an Undergraduate Honors Society composed of sophomore, junior, and senior class Gender Studies majors and minors. Formed in 2006, Triota represents the Gender Studies Program's top students as demonstrated by their overall academic performance. All members have earned at least a 3.5 GPA in Gender Studies and cumulative GPA of at least 3.0. Members of Triota act as liaisons between the Gender Studies Program faculty and administrators and the Program's students, continually identifying ways to improve the academic quality of the Gender Studies experience for Notre Dame undergraduate students. *Through Gendered Lenses* is their main project throughout the year, but members of Triota also represent and promote the Gender Studies major and minor at various campus events and host a study break each semester during finals week for all undergraduate majors and minors.

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