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DOWN THERE

The Vagina Fallacy

JUN 27, 2013 4:45 AM - BY TONI BENTLEY

‘Why do Lena Dunham, Oprah Winfrey, Naomi Wolf, and Eve Ensler all have a vagina where I have a vulva?’ Toni Bentley goes down and shines the spotlight on women’s surprising, ongoing sexual shame.



Let’s play a game: black/white, yes/no, good/bad, right/wrong, penis/___ Did you say “vagina”? I bet you did.

Does it matter that our society uses ubiquitously, daily, the entirely wrong word for the female sexual center? And does it matter that many women (we expect you guys to get it wrong) appear not so much to use the wrong word knowingly, as slang, but to think that the wrong word is, indeed, the right word for this most vital part—after the brain—of themselves? How—and why—has this happened in a supposedly sexually educated country that rarely calls a man's testicles his penis? And what effect, if any, does this miseducation have on women’s actual sex lives? Most interestingly, what does this widespread fallacy tell us about the current state of 25th-wave feminism? I am not interested in this not because I am a writer obsessed with words but because I am a woman.

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JUN 3, 2014 11:17 AM
BY JOSEPH MAYTON



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The DSM-V has recently redefined FSD (Female Sexual Disorder) and given us the honor of an extra letter—FSAD (Female Sexual Arousal Disorder)—while adding some titillating “comorbidity” to our complexities; meanwhile, intrepid sexual investigator Daniel Bergner in his terrific new book, *What Do Women Want?*, has lifted the great rock under which resides not only the penultimate mystery to the founder of modern-day psychology—Freud didn’t know what women wanted because it was not what he wanted—but to every man since Adam met Eve. I’m talking about female sexual desire. But that rock is ever so heavy, and since this subject only gets about six minutes of serious study per century (unserious speculation is perpetually rife), I thought this would be a good time to pile on with my own personal peeve.

Bergner has uncovered such worrisome wonders as the fact that we women tire of you chaps faster than you tire of us (and you thought we were just faking that orgasm: we’re faking breakfast, lunch, and dinner), that women are just as sexually visual as men, that female orgasm’s elusive, and yet, paradoxically, multiple qualities, promotes, even demands, promiscuity—both to find the elusive one and then to prolong the party—and thus that monogamy suits women even less than it suits men. So Don Juan, put that in your pipe and smoke it. And then there’s my personal favorite, which should put a real dent in Big Pharma’s desperate search to profit from our displeasure with that billion-dollar little pink pill: that there is virtually no female sexual problem—hormonal, menopausal, orgasmic, or just plain old lack of interest—that will not be solved by—ta-da!—a new lover. Monogamy is the great pachyderm in the bedroom, the virus that has produced our much-documented “epidemic” of FSAD. Pfizer would do better to invest in gigolo bordellos (red velvet and lace please) while women could start adding notches to their garter belts. Oh, brave new world!

These are scary findings—not only will they underscore already rampant male sexual insecurity, but, if embraced by women as their biological destiny and moral right, would produce total sexual anarchy. Female monogamy would be history, the walls of patriarchy would crumble, and the world would flip upside down. But I have little hope of such glorious deconstruction. I am just interested, right now anyway, in one little word.

Why in this time of such relentless sexualization in the media, and ever-more detailed discussion and research on female sexuality, do women themselves persist using the wrong term for their own sexual arena? From sassy in-the-know Lena Dunham to Oprah Winfrey, mother to us all, to Naomi Wolf, feminist extraordinaire (she dedicated an entire book to the wrong place), to that smart lady Eve Ensler, they are all calling her their “vagina.” As a woman I am embarrassed by our ignorance.

Now, of course, one can indeed refer correctly to the vagina, meaning the relatively short, but expandable, passage of a woman’s sexual anatomy that connects the outside world to the inside one, its main purpose being impregnation through intercourse and, then in return, as the birth canal. But the vagina is only one of our many parts—it really is Grand Central down there — and while vital for reproduction it is somewhat secondary for female pleasure. How on earth did the poor little vagina, a single cog in the great female wheel, become the catchall for the whole shebang?

The correct word for the entire area of the external female genitalia is “vulva”—you can say it, “vuhl-vuh.” How bad was that? Not hot enough for you? Of course not, it is the correct medical term—the only word even less sexy is “vagina.” Psychologist and bestselling author Harriet Lerner, who has published widely on the subject, calls this pervasive misuse of “vagina” for “vulva” “linguistic genital mutilation.”

This far-reaching misidentification is, I suspect, yet another sign of the insidious unconscious collusion by women in their own diminishment—of their sexual power and, thus, of any kind. So

A SHOT
Giving 300
Million Kids a
Shot

JUN 2, 2014 10:22 AM
 BY NATASHA BILIMORIA



Every year, one and a half million children die from vaccine-preventable diseases before their 5th birthday. The GAVI Alliance is working to save their lives.

now we get to the heart of the matter and an even more onerous word, the one that denotes the hard drive, the control room of Enterprise Vulva—the clitoris. In conflating the clitoris into the erroneous “vagina,” women are literally sidestepping themselves one more time, while, knowingly or not (both are bad, bad, news), toeing the male line. Men are so damn proud of their penises so why are women so seemingly afraid, so shy, of their powerhouse clitorises and back away with a vaginal stand-in? Why keep advertising the family room when the boudoir is just up the hall?

If you are concerned that in shifting the focus—thus emphasis and supremacy—to such a very miniscule organ, that the clitoris will not bear up under such scrutiny, have no fear. It has, finally, been scientifically established—mapped out in the lab and all that, as Bergner reports—that the clitoris, in fact, displays in itself the very essence of female guile in having two extended, internal reaching, four-inch (!!) wings, each curving around and behind the labia minora like a butterfly, culminating their massive reach around, yes, the vagina. So while this overused highway has relatively little feeling (necessary to mediate the pain of childbirth) for most of its length, it is a terrific co-conspirator and will happily participate with pom-poms from the bleachers in a sustained orgasmic victory. But, alas, the oversold vagina is only a lady-in-waiting at the court of the clitoral Queen. So while the clitoris has often been lost to both history and many a man, she is, in fact, not a small, hard to locate ingénue, but a large winged being. Is it not time to let her fly, orally, manually, even, er, verbally? If not now, when?

With her more than 8,000 nerve endings, twice as many as on an entire penis, and a higher concentration of pure feeling than in any other part of the human body, male or female—which, given our so-called higher consciousness, makes her the most sensitive organ in the entire universe—there may indeed be reason to fear the clitoris, not because she can't be found but because of what she might do once unleashed. (If by now you guys are feeling the strange inklings of clitoris envy I say, man-up and get with the program.)

If every woman started living her life with the knowledge and know-how of this immense sexual authority she has, well, some things might really start changing and the suggestion to merely “lean in” would be seen as the anemic, rather pandering, notion that it is. How long, girls, are we going to wait to get ours? Language, as our feminist forebears have stressed from day one, is important. You name it, you own it.

So how did penis/vagina become our accepted sexual model? It's simple: this dynamic is the reproductive model for human sexuality that, by chance, conveniently, includes male gratification. But it excises female pleasure in its equation, a conceptual clitoridectomy, an act we condemn in actuality as barbaric. It's the old yin-yang sans ying—just a bang for the yang but no ding for the yin.

Penis/clitoris is the homologous duo of actual equals in the house of pleasure. “Vagina” is a cop-out: avoid your vulva, avoid your clitoris, and you void yourself. While I don't have big hopes for the fast amelioration of the economic, political, medical, or relational issues facing women, is it too much to propose that we might, at least, move the whole discussion one inch forward?

Toni Bentley danced with Balanchine's New York City Ballet for 10 years and is author of five books, all named New York Times Notable Books. Her essay “The Bad Lion” appeared in Best American Essays 2010, edited by Christopher Hitchens, and she is a Guggenheim Fellow. The one-woman play adaptation of her erotic memoir, “The Surrender,” will premiere this August at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

COMMENTS

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MRMITHEN JUL 14, 2013

I have been pro vagina for many years now, dropping the word into conversations when appropriate and correcting peoples slang terms etc. But now I have learned that I should be using vulva. Whoops, sorry bout that, no worries, I'll make the switch.

But if the opposite of penis is clitoris and the opposite of vagina is testicles, what is the opposite term for vulva?

LIKE REPLY

MTHRSOVA JUL 27, 2013

@MrMithen the opposite of testicles is ovaries :) the opposite of penis is clitoris, the opposite of scrotum is labia, the opposite of vulva would be a term for external male genitalia - i am not sure we have a word for that - we had better come up with one to be fair, doncha think, ladies and gents?

1 LIKE REPLY

RENATESTENDHAL JUN 29, 2013

This is the most hilariously funny and to the point article on the Down There I've read since good old feminist times (when Judy Chicago served 30 VULVAS on the table of her Dinner Party!). Brava, Toni Bentley. Wish you'd write a Broadway Musical about it to educate this backwards, puritanical country. I am a great admirer of your beautiful, elegantly written book "Holding On to the Air" and a culture and ballet critic for <http://scene4.com>. (This month: SF Ballet's retarded "Cinderella")! I can't wait to read and review your memoir.

At this historical moment of lesbian victory, I thought you'd like to join me in celebrating our two most famous lesbians of the 20th century: Gertrude and Alice who knew all about vulvas, clitorises and so much more -- all written down there there in ecstatic poetry by Gert herself. For their heavenly wedding I dressed them appropriately and am asking a prize question on Facebook: if you can guess whose dress Alice is wearing, you may win a copy of my photobiography "Gertrude Stein in Words and Pictures". <http://www.facebook.com/quotinggertrudestein/posts/533944753319915>

LIKE REPLY

NWOSLAVE JUN 28, 2013

Why do leftist detest reality? From the first statement to the last, it's all the opposite of reality. Let's just take one of the first statements, "that women are just as sexually visual as men."

So you're telling me that the giant corporations don't tap into this huge untouched market to cater to women's visual sexual longings because of some Victorian altruistic notion of women's purity? The very corporations that'll gladly kick puppies, steal grannies pension, pour any number of poisons down your throat, and starve entire nations for profit, won't pony up some beefcake for the ladies because they perceive women as pure? The fact is women simply don't buy porn. If

they did the corporations would be cashing in on it.

1 LIKE REPLY

KML9876 JUN 28, 2013

@NWOSlave I agree that if women just up and bought porn, of course it would be marketed to them. I think the issue is a little deeper than that. Most porn is pretty male centric, often times at the expense of the female. This fact makes it more accessible for a man. Also, there is a culture of porn for men, any man who says he doesn't have porn or doesn't like it isn't even believed. But if a woman likes porn it is an anomaly and makes her promiscuous. I think that's the point trying to be made.

LIKE REPLY

NWOSLAVE JUN 29, 2013

@kml9876 @NWOSlave

It doesn't have anything to do with "culture" It's biological. The corporation have repeatedly tried to market beefcake mags and gays are the only one who buy them. Any woman can go to any store and pick up magazines or go online and get porn and pictures of naked men, but they don't. What does sell to women is all those romance and vampire novels. The reason is because humans are biologically sexually dimorphic. Men look at images and fill in the action sequence with their imaginations. Women read the action sequence and fill in the visual with their imaginations. Unfortunately, reality is heresy to the new faith.

LIKE REPLY

THEKEY JUL 16, 2013

@NWOSlave @kml9876

The thing is that "beefcake mags" might just not be the type of porn that women want. As a woman who enjoys porn, I can say that Playgirl just seems silly to me. It seems campy, artificial, neither fiery and dirty nor smooth and sexy -- it's just some guy with a fake tan and a bowtie letting his penis flop around.

There have been studies done to determine heterosexual male vs. female sexual arousal, where a sensor was wrapped around penises and inserted into vaginas to detect blood flow, while participants sat alone in a room and watched a series of videos -- some of women or men in neutral scenarios (A woman doing yoga nude, a man jogging nude), some of women or men masturbating, some of heterosexual sexual scenarios, and some of homosexual sexual scenarios.

The men responded most to the female neutral video, female masturbation, lesbian, and heterosexual videos. Women responded highly to all scenarios EXCEPT the male neutral video. This highly, highly suggests that, while most heterosexual men are aroused at the female body as a whole, heterosexual women are aroused primarily by the erect penis, not just some beefcake's beefy bod, which is why beefcake mags fail so completely and utterly.

After the participants watched the videos, they were also made to fill out a questionnaire to determine how sexually aroused they thought they were. The men generally hit pretty close to what their physiological reactions suggested, whereas the women were on average totally missing the mark -- they rated their arousal as much lower than their physiological reaction suggested, which could mean a series of things, but

seems to suggest that because women don't get big ol' obvious erections and are generally kept in the dark about their bodies (The point of Toni's article), they just don't really know how to rate their arousal.

Anyway, if you look at the way the porn industry is currently expanding, there's all sorts of feminist porn out there, not to mention the lovely project, Make Love not Porn, that have women clamoring for more. Most porn is directed by men, which is why it hasn't really attracted the lady crowd -- because most men just kind of don't understand what it is women are aroused by. But as there are more female porn directors, there will be more female porn viewers with their needs being met.

LIKE REPLY

MOMJONES JUN 28, 2013

As long as we're being technical, let's use the legal description for government jamming a ten inch plastic stick with a bulb end into your vagina and past your cervix to look for a zygote clot the size of a pin head. Legally, any foreign object, including a man's appendage, stuck into a woman without her permission is rape. To use vulva or clitoris indicate pleasure. Rape is forced entry; a crime of violence. It is never pleasureable except to republicans.

LIKE REPLY

BRIDGETTEMACBRIDE JUN 27, 2013

I always love to use the word 'vulva'. It has such a rich sound to it. Then again, I'm hung up on words.

1 LIKE REPLY

JOHNDIAZ JUN 27, 2013

I am ready to get blasted for the following, but men are rarely wrong in this regard, because we almost never use the medical terms of vagina or vulva. That and "vag" are women's words, and are fairly new to the popular lexicon. All of my lesbian friends now refer to their private parts as "vag". Men generally refer to their penises as "dicks" and the female genitalia as "pussy". Pussy covers the whole shebang and not just the birth canal and most men I know don't consider those as curse or dirty words (we have more crude terms for that, which I personally never use). Men may lose all rational thought when confronted with female genitalia, but at least we use a slang word that covers the whole kit and kaboodle.

2 LIKE REPLY

GR8XPECTATIONS JUN 27, 2013

Incidentally, on this clitoris issue, I understand where Tina Brown is coming from. When female sexuality, and female sexual pleasure, has been denied, dismissed, subjugated, and used to control, the recognition and celebration of the clitoris and the powerful pleasure it can provide is certainly a kind of victory.

Where the author is mistaken is in the presumption that this pleasure is at the root of power. It's just not. And, while women often criticize men for "thinking with their peckers", an alternative wherein women "think with their clitori" is NOT superior.

1 LIKE REPLY

GR8XPECTATIONS JUN 27, 2013

I'm a woman. I'm even a feminist. And I'm not quite sure what the author is talking about.

This business about promiscuity equaling freedom? Hedonism might be fun, and commitment

may pose its challenges, but I'll choose the intimacy and stability of monogamy any day....because my brain and my heart are at least as important to me as my (hope the author appreciates this:) vulva.

As far as replacing "vulva" with "vagina"... I've never loved the sound of either word. Always wished the parts of my genitalia had prettier names. But IF women and men don't actually know the difference between the word for the internal canal and the word for the external genitalia, then how is the conflation of words relevant? If they knew the word vulva was appropriate, and THEN chose only to focus on the part that receives the penis, then I could see her point. But to most women, when (if) they talk of their vaginas, they're well-aware of the powerful clitoris (which, incidentally, I also wish had a prettier name).

And back to the issue of the clitoris: I happen to frickin' love mine. But my center of pleasure is NOT my center of power. And the immensity of my capacity to feel physical pleasure is NOT the same thing as authority, sexual or otherwise. There's not some kind of a contest where the one with the most nerve endings, or the one who feels the most pleasure gets to be king of the mountain.

I understand the history and pervasiveness of the subjugation and/or neglect of female sexual pleasure (and female sexuality in general), both in intimate relationship and in societies at large. And I reject it. I believe the author and I agree on that. But I'm not really sure what to make of most of this article.

8 LIKE REPLY

ECONPIE JUN 27, 2013

Now those are thoughts of an obviously highly intelligent, articulate, thoughtful woman who has a lot of experience in this world. It's too bad TDB can't hire more women of gtr8's caliber

1 LIKE REPLY

GR8XPECTATIONS JUN 27, 2013

@Econpie Aww... you're sweet. Thanks, Econ

LIKE REPLY

ECONPIE JUN 27, 2013

Unfortunately I'm rarely sweet in my TDB comments. Tina Brown is a smart woman - so often she choses the "People Magazine" route instead of substantial writers and thinkers. If you haven't written professionally in your life its too bad - you have obvious talent.

2 LIKE REPLY

GR8XPECTATIONS JUN 27, 2013

@Econpie Naah... here's the problem with me: If you give me a blank page, I got nuthin. I do a decent job or responding to what others say or write. I try to be thoughtful in my perspective and my comments, and while I think critically and write concisely, I'm not all that original.

1 LIKE REPLY

SMEW JUN 27, 2013

@gr8xpectations Very well said. TDB should ask you to write a rebuttal.

LIKE REPLY

MRMITHEN JUL 14, 2013

I think Vulva, Vagina and Clitoris are awesome sounding names. The more you use them the better they get :)

LIKE REPLY

ECONPIE JUN 27, 2013

I'm always amazed how immature women like the author are. And how uninformed and dishonest they are with themselves. Like little boys arguing whose dad is bigger than who. Isn't it beyond absurd that it takes a man - Bergner - to teach them and validate them?

LIKE REPLY

SCOTT D JUN 27, 2013

7 billion in world population says 'it just works - it's not magic'

LIKE REPLY

DANALT JUN 27, 2013

Is there a point to this article? If so, I would like someone to tell me what it is.

2 LIKE REPLY

MYBETANOIRE JUL 4, 2013

@Danalt Don't say vagina, say vulva.

LIKE REPLY

STEPHANGREGOR JUL 8, 2013

@mybetanoire @Danalt I'm not stupid; I love the English language; I have for most of my life respected women far more than I do men; I do my damndest to see the person as superseding my brain's inevitable judgements of persons; I appreciate the efforts of well-meaning, educated people to clarify and educate, but suddenly I feel quite stupid. I'm with Danalt: what is the point here?

Is it not the case that our mind's tendency to equate the label with the thing has been the cause of much of the stupidity exhibited by the human race? Whatever we call a thing or event, isn't it nothing more than a convention that allows us to go on to structure relationships between things and events? A marker, a sound that might have been a completely different sound. What if we inherited the word from a different source? A 'yoni' doesn't care whether you think it a vulva or a vagina.

Yes, vagina refers to an internal component, and vulva to the thing that a large number of men see in their minds when thinking of women. But this essay is a big big stretch. Does anyone think it would make any difference if we all began using the 'right' term tomorrow, all of us?

LIKE REPLY

JEFFREYGEEZ JUN 27, 2013

Itch Itch Itch- one that never can be scratched, it's in those tight "genes"

LIKE REPLY

WORMTOWNSPAWN JUN 27, 2013

i feel like such an a\$\$\$. all this time I've thanking the powers that be for my girl friends p ssy .

2 LIKE REPLY

MMOO JUN 27, 2013

Yes yes yes! I've been banging on for years about this to friends. Constantly correcting and educating them when the wrong reference is used. Here's to re-education and bring the fabulous clitorus to the forefront. Vulva, vulva, vulva, vulva, vulva!

LIKE REPLY

STEPHANGREGOR JUL 8, 2013

@Mmoo Yeah, and I'm always haranguing people about the appalling misuse of apostrophes.

LIKE REPLY

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