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Gyno Girl: Power, Practice, Podcasting

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Introduction:

(Thanks for coming, blah, blah, blah): Okay, so to set the scene of this big old project, it's best if I start with a couple stories...

1. Recently, my friend and I went to hear Roxane Gay speak. As we traveled to the show, our conversation turned to gender and sexuality (as is often the case when you're beyond excited to hear an influential artist and queer woman of color speak)—my friend went to say something along the lines of: 'it's like, I have a vagina, get over it' but whispered the word "vagina." I couldn't help but chuckle, it was just the two of us in the car but it's something that felt all too familiar—whispering my body like it's a dirty word, like the reality of its existence is offensive to those around me.

Barbara Kingsolver challenges how society uses words like "dirty" to stigmatize matter: "Our words for unhealthy contamination—'soiled' or 'dirty'—suggest that if we really knew the number-one ingredient of a garden, we'd all head straight into therapy... We're like petulant teenagers rejecting our mother. We *know* we came out of her, but *ee-ew*(10)."

2. Alright, story two—At the beginning of year, my project advisor asked me, what theoretically seems like the most straightforward question: What is Gyno Girl doing?

I, being the fabulous student I am, responded by asking: have you ever watched the Punk Singer?

Ya'll just saw a bit of the documentary "The Punk Singer" on Kathleen Hanna and the punk group, Bikini Kill. At the time, the best way I could describe what Gyno Girl is doing, was by pointing to Kathleen Hanna's "Girls to the Front."

Talk briefly about girls to the front.

These stories might seem unrelated, and to some degree, they are. But they both underpin or, better, illustrate what my honors project is all about, and the ways in which I hope it continues to grow.

Gyno Girl is a women's health podcast, produced with the aim to simultaneously stimulate and de-stigmatize open dialogue on women's health. Podcasting as a medium creates a space for practicing open dialogue on women's health. I want women to hear other women *talking* about women's health - I want women to be walking around in public with other women's voices in their ears openly sharing their experiences getting a Pap Smear, signing up for health insurance, or getting the birth control shot in their butt.

Each episode of Gyro Girl, then, is a space for women's voices and experiences to be heard - and rather than sitting and listening to a lecture, it's as if listeners are joining a conversation. For example, in the Pap Smear episode, listeners hear the voices of at least 9 women - these women share their experiences with their first Pap Smear exams and instead of these experiences being presented as individually isolated "examples," their voices and experiences are overlapping/weaving into one another. This opens up the women's health dialogue and invites listeners to join in. **PLAY.**

So, relatively quickly, what I want to do here is try to explain the ways this project has pushed me to reflexively reframe so much about the ways I tend to approach scholarship. That is, I'll talk about the differing practices this medium pushed toward. Then I hope to tell you about the ways this project has worked as a kind of gathering, helping others connect up in new and exciting relationships. **SLIDE.**

Practice:

Podcasting as a medium provides marginalized people with a space where their voices can be heard - despite the fact that in 2013 men hosted 70 percent of the world's 100 most popular podcasts, "podcasting, with its low barriers to entry and opportunities for experimentation, has been a much-anticipated space for media democratization since the early 2000s. It has the ability to elevate the voices of people often left out of traditional print and broadcast journalism (Madison, *Bitch Media*)." These elevated voices include women: "Since the dawn of radio, women have worked behind the scenes as producers, editors, and researchers. But recently, women are finally becoming more visible (or, audible) in hosting roles." Alix Spiegel of *Invisibilia* states, quote, "We got the skills and then we just decided, fuck it, basically. We just decided, we can do this (Madison, *Bitch Media*)."

The concept for Gyno Girl started forming after my 21st birthday when my mother told me it was time to get a Pap Smear—Or, was it when I experienced my first menstrual cycle— I was alone in the downstairs bathroom, staring at the red. Being the age of landlines, I used one of our portable house phones to phone home, desperately willing my mother who was upstairs talking to one of my teenage male cousins, to answer: "Rosa? I'm sure the cat's doing something very cute, but I'm talking with M. You can bring the cat upstairs" Click—Or, was it when I was younger than 11 years and stood in front of the bathroom mirror, pushed in my right nipple, and then spent the next 5+ years of my life believing I'd caused the little pucker at its tip, believing I caused the little pucker and it was something that was wrong with my body and my health. I spent the next 5+ years believing, because it seemed like a better option than telling someone I'd been young and curious and engaged the presence of my body— (The point is that this project emerged from the ever-changing and entangling relationship most women have with materiality, particularly our own bodies.) **SLIDE.**

"Vital materiality better captures an 'alien' quality of our own flesh, and in so doing reminds humans of the very *radical* character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman. My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human... The crook of my elbow, for example, is 'a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria... In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are 'embodied.' We are, rather, *an array of bodies*...(113)."

And podcasting creates space for this array of bodies.

To a certain extent over the past several years I've tried to separate my "self" from my body. In doing so, I found myself with numerous unanswered questions about my body and health and deeply rooted anxiety regarding my body— Okay, now maybe some of ya'll are thinking: "deeply rooted anxiety regarding your body? What does that even *mean*, aren't you being a tad dramatic?" Look, I get it -- that's a refrain that's cycled through my own brain for years, discrediting the growing disconnect I felt with my body. Though, in all honesty -- the weight of carrying the belief that somehow *my* vagina is wrong, whether that's the hair, the shape, the scent, the discharge, *whatever*-- the weight is real.

-- I actually stopped writing this presentation at this point and said out loud "this is such a weird thing to talk about at an Honors Thesis Presentation, but my god this, this is part of my practice and so much at the heart of why this project actually matters.

So, podcasting is an audio based medium that provides space for conversations and marginalized voices to be heard -- great, that's all fine and dandy, but there's more to it. Podcasting engages both the body and mind in non-dichotomous ways. I mean this in the sense that the mind/body dichotomy presented throughout the ages is a false dichotomy and podcasting engages it as such. **SLIDE.**

Communication scholar, Lisbeth Lipari writes, "The Euro-American philosophical tradition has tended to separate mind and body, thought and emotion, but as recent advances in neuroscience and biology are demonstrating, such separation is an illusion— mind and body are deeply interconnected, if they are even two things at all. So, following this idea, what if our ears aren't really in our heads, but are our whole body. What if our entire body is one giant listening organ, one great resonating chamber...so when we listen, our bodies vibrate with the sound waves pulsing toward and then through us (31)" What Lisbeth is saying is huge— it's a recognition of the vital materiality I discussed earlier, it's a recognition of the power in listening—but that doesn't mean I had to engage in this practice for *Gyno Girl*. I guess I could have practiced another medium for this project... **PLAY.**

But, the podcasting medium is essential for *Gyno Girl*. Through podcasting, as sound studies scholars Comstock and Hocks state, through the "materiality and movement of...voice, boundaries between nature and culture, exterior and interior, public and private all become permeable (170). The kind of writing I'm participating in here, the kind of writing Boyle describes as "an ontological act" is a different practice than writing an essay: **PLAY.**

When I podcast, like Boyle says, I "enact a sense of myself as a being in the world...when writing is practiced as an act of being, it opens up possibilities...a writing not only as a *way of being* but as a *way of becoming* (538)." **What this means to me...**

We can read the word “vagina” all day long, but when it comes time to actually saying those words, well, it’s not a part of our practice— it’s uncomfortable. We whisper. As *Gyno Girl* shows, there are real impacts to that “discomfort.” Podcasting as a practice of writing, is also a practice of being— when I record these conversations, and weave these experiences and voices together for a podcast, that practice emerges alongside the practice of me standing in front of you today and openly talking about women’s reproductive health.

The structure of the podcast creates a space for these topics to be engaged as the entanglement that they are—they are not a linear argument, I do not start each episode with a thesis. They are conversations, explorations— they are dialogue between many people, a dialogue that has been missing. This is not something that can be recreated through writing as text. Where would be the voices?

Podcasting becomes part of people’s practice, as they walk to and from class, as they ride the bus— they can listen to, their bodies can *listen* to, women saying things like... **PLAY.**

Here, again, through the “materiality and movement of...voice, boundaries between nature and culture, exterior and interior, public and private all become permeable (C&H, 170). These voices become part of our practice, and as our practice changes to include our bodies, the “discomfort” with recognizing our bodies begins to ebb. The voices gather us from a place of isolation, into conversation. **SLIDE.**

Okay, now let’s talk about...

Relationships:

I was talking with my dad on the phone just a few weeks before this presentation, and expressed to him that element I was most anxious about, was sharing some of my personal experiences like the ones you just heard and he told me, “you know you don’t have to share everything, you can protect yourself.”

So, first of, all thanks dad. Protect myself from what? This presentation is part of the practice that’s emerged with *Gyno Girl*. **PLAY.**

In production, *Gyno Girl* emerges through asking questions -- asking all the questions I’ve had, or didn’t even know I had, but didn’t think were appropriate to ask. I get to ask women to share their experiences with women’s health, and these women often refer me to other women or propose new questions and ideas -- It’s a network that grows out of curiosity and conversation. **SLIDE.**

SLIDES:

- Publicly discussing my own reproductive health -- sharing about getting Paragard IUD -- with that process I've seen more folks reach out to talk with me about their bodies and health. **SLIDE.**
- Folks reaching out to me to tell me they're at their annual appointment, getting IUDs, asking about birth control, etc.

You know what's joy - Reading a post on facebook of a gal (who at that point, I'd maybe talked to *once*) publicly asking her friends to provide her with more information on different types of Birth Control **SLIDE.** -- RAD already, right? Well, it' gets radder: I ended up commenting on the post about the non-hormonal IUD known as the Paragard **SLIDE.** and bringing some other female friends of mine into the conversation who I knew would also be happy to share their experiences (and the only reason why I knew that is because of Gyno Girl).

This gal who'd made the post originally, then proceeded to privately message me for weeks, **SLIDE.** asking about different Birth Control and specifically the IUD. I had the opportunity to be a part of her pre and post process of choosing a new method of birth control. She messaged me as soon as she'd set the appointment for IUD insertion, **SLIDE.** the day of after she'd gotten it in, and several days later asking questions about the recovery process. Honestly, maybe this doesn't jazz you but damn - I get so jazzed talking about it.

Honestly, I'd convinced myself that it was really weird for me to have the questions I had, and that I should feel embarrassed/ashamed for having them -- which all really affected my relationship with my body. It's like *Gyno Girl*, this practice, these relationships, have been a long sustained moment of recognizing and acknowledging the existence of my body. I don't mean this in some silly overly profound way that's meant to play up some unending hardship I've gone through - so don't let that be the take away because that's not what I'm trying to say here. But, that said, I do really want to emphasize that this isn't nothing. **SLIDE.**