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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/uwsc20

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To cite this article: Hannah Taylor (07 Jan 2025): Making Privates Public: Radical Representations and Coalition-Building in The Vulva Gallery, Women's Studies in Communication, DOI: 10.1080/07491409.2024.2431327

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2431327

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN COMMUNICATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2431327

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Making Privates Public: Radical Representations and Coalition-Building in The Vulva Gallery

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of The Vulva Gallery, an online platform that posts illustrations of participants' vulvas to challenge heterosexist and white supremacist frameworks. This article examines the ways radical representations of vulvas can be employed to educate users and offer space for narratives, to build a kind of radical intersectional feminist coalition. As The Vulva Gallery provides illustrations that represent a wide range of identities and experiences that challenge heterosexist and white supremacist standards, the images have the opportunity to represent not only a broader range of embodied experiences, but raise consciousness and build coalition.

KEYWORDS

Vulvas; coalition; *Instagram*; sexual education

In 2023, labiaplasty—the surgical procedure that alters the aesthetic appearance of the labia—was the fastest growing cosmetic plastic surgery, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. People seeking this surgery are working to meet a specific beauty ideal, "which is generally characterised as symmetrical, hairless and with *labia minora* that do not protrude past the *labia majora*; namely a *vulva* which resembles that of a pre-pubescent girl" (Sharp and Fernando). For people without vulvas[1], this desire might seem trivial, but the cultural anxiety around the appearance of vaginas and, more accurately, vulvas is widespread and profound. In a poll of more than 3,600 women, nearly half (48%) had concerns about the appearance of their vulva. Of those, 64% were worried about the size and 60% about the shape of their vulva, with almost one-third (30%) worried about the color of their genitals (Williams). These beauty norms reflect a wider expectation placed on women's bodies that are specifically concentrated on vulvas. Namely, there is an unspoken assumption that the correct kind of vulva is small, tidy, and overall unobtrusive.

The impacts of this body expectation cannot be understated. As a result of this demand on people with vulvas, girls as young as nine years old are researching labiaplasty and over the past several years, there has been a global increase in girls under 18 (and even under 15) undergoing the surgery, demonstrating that this ideal is impacting the way young girls see and understand their bodies ("Vulva Gallery About"). The increase of interest in labiaplasty, and overall lack of diverse representation of vulvas, was the exigency for The Vulva Gallery, a website and *Instagram* account that

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has 760,000 followers. On The Vulva Gallery, community members send in pictures to be illustrated and posted to *Instagram* and a digital gallery. Many of the illustrations are accompanied by narratives that detail how the participants feel about and understand their vulvas. The page is interested in closing the gap between representation and reality, highlighting the need for image diversity in conversations of representations. Sam Hil Atalanta, founder and digital illustrator of The Vulva Gallery, cites this as the exigency for beginning The Vulva Gallery:

> One way to change the way individuals experience their bodies is to educate them, and others, about natural variety. Showing imagery of different body types, in many shapes, sizes, colours. Sharing information about anatomy and sexual health…This is why I started the Vulva Gallery, sharing one post a day on *Instagram* to celebrate our wonderful diversity and normalizing all shapes and sizes.

The Vulva Gallery resides at the nexus of social advocacy, representational politics, and art as both a mediation of very real bodies and a representation through illustrations to solicit material effects—disrupting of body norms and harmful discourses, encouraging individual bodily acceptance, and creating coalition alongside these lines of difference. As the vagina, and vulva specifically, is a frequently sexualized part of the female body through porn and other popular depictions of sexual acts, the representations in The Vulva Gallery offer a radical alternative that showcases the expansive body diversity present in vulvas, while also raising consciousness around heterosexist and racist discourses.

The potential for the political power of representations is the call I advance in this article. I argue that The Vulva Gallery functions as more than a site of empowerment, but as a radical space that builds coalition through a network of both shared experiences and difference. Specifically, The Vulva Gallery builds coalition through consciousness raising. What is present both in the illustrations themselves, and in the comments and paratextual material of the site, is a sense of catharsis, discovery, and finding joy in one's own body through very honest, comprehensive, and affectively laden discussions about vulvas. These discourses exist in stark contrast to more traditional discussions of vulvas that aim to present an ideal body—instead, The Vulva Gallery is attempting to intercept dominant representations and raise consciousness around vulva diversity. Beyond this, The Vulva Gallery works to create a network of experiences that allow users to challenge oppressive body norms, opening up the potential for intersectional consciousness raising and coalition-building.

This article examines the ways radical representations of vulvas can be employed to educate users and offer space for narratives, to build a kind of radical intersectional feminist coalition. As The Vulva Gallery provides illustrations that represent a wide range of identities and experiences that challenge heterosexist and white supremacist standards, the images have an opportunity to represent not only a broader range of embodied experiences, but also change people's perceptions of their vulvas and vulvas more broadly. Through this perception shift, many users challenge the systems of oppression that caused negative feelings toward their vulvas, developing intersectional coalitions that contest heterosexist and white supremacist frameworks. The Vulva Gallery radically subverts discourses about vulvas, shifting one narrative to many variant and embodied experiences. To begin this work, I first discuss work interrogating

representation of vulvas more broadly before discuss coalition-building more broadly. I then discuss the role that educational engagement and voicing affective narratives play in coalition-building.

Representational Politics: What Can Showing Vulvas Do?

S. Hil Atalanta is not the first to be concerned about the impact of representations on people's perceptions of themselves. Feminist scholars, philosophers, and rhetoricians have long questioned the role of representations of women's bodies. Namely, many scholars have noted that the mandate to keep vulvas private is reflective of oppressive structures that act against women. Public displays of vulvas are then inherently subversive. For example, Michelle Hammers argues that public representations of vaginas (she is speaking specifically about vaginas) are key to understanding the shame and violence enacted upon women's bodies. In response to the popular play *The Vagina Monologues,* she states "if we cannot talk about the vagina openly, respectfully, and publicly, how can we ever hope to change the attitudes that underlie the violent and oppressive practices that are visited upon women" (Hammers 221). However, public representations of vulvas can function as more than a discussion of oppression. Shoniqua Roach discusses how acts of Black eroticism can be used to secure Black freedoms in the face of infringement of rights. Roach notes that while eroticism has been used to point out oppressive structures, scholars are less likely to point out the material, liberatory potentials of theses representations. I wonder, like Roach, if "critics have missed an opportunity to unpack the wider significance of 'pussy power' enactments" (10). In other words, aside from bringing attention to the oppressive nature of sexual politics, what can representations of vulvas do for people? Michaela Frischherz offers one explanation in her analysis of the art piece, *The Great Wall of Vagina* that is useful for understanding The Vulva Gallery. She argues that "dominant (representational) discourses, then, are instructive of social expectations but also serve as cultural sites through which women can begin to publicly dialogue about their bodies and experiences" (Frischherz 252). In making privates viewable to the public then, representations have the potential to "negotiate affective, embodied intensities that … build a kind of build a kind of collective, affective agency for women staking a claim to their bodies in public" (256). In other words, there is a radical political power in presenting not only marginalized bodies, but also in presenting a marginalized part of the body for public discussion and engagement. In the case of The Vulva Gallery, the sheer diversity of vulvas presented allows for a type of collective consciousness raising, drawing attention to the oppressive norms around vulvas and exploding those discourses toward a new, more inclusive approach to representation.

The illustrations in The Vulva Gallery do more than engage in representational politics—they have the potential to shape the world and peoples' understandings of it. Communication scholar Katrin Tiidenberg asserts in her analysis of selfies that "images play an important role in how we experience being in the world and increasingly, due to the ubiquity of online interaction, how we 'shape' our world" (Tiidenberg and Cruz 79). Similarly, Joel Penney "consider[s] how making one's political identity publicly visible with clear and legible markers is seen as transforming one's body into a visual rhetorical text that may have real political effects" (2319). Penney argues that

presenting a visible body is a "reality-defining gesture" that creates real political action (2320). In this way, making privates public online has the potential for radical political action.

The Vulva Gallery is not the first site to showcase diverse representations of bodies, nor the first to use these representations to lead to coalition. For example, Tee Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* took up alternative methods to inform people about their bodies and create solidarity among marginalized communities. First published in 1975 by Tee Corinne, a white lesbian artist and activist, the *Cunt Coloring Book* offered queer people a different avenue for learning about their bodies. Corinne says of the origins:

> In 1973 I set out to do drawings of women's genitals for use in sex education groups. I wanted the drawings to be lovely and informative, to give pleasure and affirmation. I organized the drawings into a coloring book because a major way we learn to understand the world, as children, is by coloring. As adults many of us still need to learn about our external sexual anatomy.

Corinne has explicitly stated that she "believed that reclaiming labial imagery was a route to claiming personal power for women" (369). The book, which combined both elements of play present in the childlike act and true to life pictures of sexual organs from a diverse range of bodies, demonstrates the potential of creating an inclusive space for representations and what it can mean for marginalized communities.

While the *Cunt Coloring Book* represents the political potentials of representing diverse vulvas, it did not have the affordances of a primarily digital distribution, nor the scope to attend to the racial, sexual, and gender identities now more openly discussed in mainstream discourses. What an analysis of The Vulva Gallery has to offer scholarship on is that it is both a radical representational site and a site of coalition-building—meaning that it allows users to see a diversity of vulvas and therefore raise consciousness around oppressive body norms. The inclusion of vulvas of all races, shapes, sizes, ages, connect users through a shared experience—having a vulva. Importantly, the site situates the illustrations as a place for exploration of knowledge, and in some ways, feeling, rather than a shared site of oppression. In this, scholars can see one potential for radical feminist coalition-building—representations that attend to difference but are grounded in a shared lived experience and consciousness raising. In other words, the representations are the foundations that buttress the coalition and the digitality of the site allows for further development of communities.

Coalition-Building as Interdependent Practice

The development of coalition is something that feminist scholars in communication and rhetoric have discussed at length. As a result, coalitions have many different definitions across groups and time. Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford defined a coalition as "… a group of distinct individuals who come together to cooperate in joint action toward a mutual goal (or set of goals)—not forever, but for however long it takes" (11). Black feminist activist and historian Bernice Johnson Reagon notes that coalition-building and action are often dangerous, stating that "most of the time you feel threatened to your core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing"

(356). She also notes that "coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets…" (Reagon 361). Similarly, Karma Chávez argues that a coalition is "a present and existing vision and practice that reflects an orientation to others and a shared commitment to change" (146). In addition, scholars note the coalitions are developed in community, they "are never produced singly or in isolation but depend on interaction" (Licona and Chávez 96). Coalitions require groups of people to rely on one another, engage with each other, and work toward positive change.

In many ways, definitions of coalition focus not on what they are but what they do. In this, I follow Deborah Gould in believing that

> Coalition provides a space to be and do together, and become differently as a result; to sense other possibilities, open toward the unknown, experiment, and learn from mistakes; to develop trust and practices of solidarity; and to build new collectivities and new worlds.

Gould is concerned with what coalitions can do for participants in these spaces, but that is largely dependent on the decided aims of the individual groups. I am also weary of the notion that coalition-building must happen in some version of the streets, or outside of the home, as that is limiting to disabled individuals who cannot gather in the same ways as able-bodied advocates. Instead, I ask scholars to imagine coalition-building as a sort of new world building, a disruptive act that is inherently subversive. But for coalition to begin to develop, community members must first be aware of their role in a larger ecology of oppression.

Interdependency is key to the development of coalition, regardless of the exact definition of the movement.[2] The type of coalition that The Vulva Gallery works to build is grounded in a network of experiences in the digital public. The affordances of Instagram allow users to share their experiences across differences to challenge heterosexists and white supremacist frameworks that place expectations on people's vulvas. Primarily, the pages constellate these experiences through educational engagement and affective narratives. The Vulva Gallery's focus on bodily accurate and diverse representation of vulvas shifts people's relationship to their own vulva. In addition, the page offers space for participants and users to voice their relationship to their vulvas through narratives. The attention to education and narrative is the foundation for the coalition-building on the page. As a result, The Vulva Gallery allows users to both explore their own vulvas and to speak publicly about and challenge the social pressures that create oppressive body norms, raising consciousness around vulva norms. Beyond this, the site explicitly challenges how we view vulvas, and in doing so, challenges racist and heterosexist frameworks.

Before continuing this analysis, it is important to mention that not all women have vulvas, and not all people who have vulvas are women. I use "female" in the sections where other researchers, such as Tiidenberg, have explicitly analyzed female-sexed bodies but will primarily refer to the individuals as "people" or "people with vulvas" to avoid incorrectly gendering the images mentioned in this case study. The site includes images of transmen, transwomen, women whose vulva is not viewed in sexual or reproductive contexts, altered vulvas, and more, offering a wide range of images to both study and engage. The diversity present in the Vulva Gallery is a way the page works to disrupt dominant representations, and not all embodied experiences with vulvas will be the same. In addition, I am intentional

on using the term vulva, though many of the scholars and participants in The Vulva Gallery I discuss use genitalia, vagina, and vulva interchangeably. Therefore, I do not change the language of the participants, though they may not be anatomically correct. I intentionally use the term vulva unless I am speaking about the internal canal. Mirroring the work of Atalanta, I hope that this intentional choice in language can work to clarify and destigmatize a part of the body that has been paid both too much and too little attention. In what follows, I explicate the method for analyzing at the contributions of The Vulva Gallery, before discussing the ways that education and affective narratives are employed to work toward an intersectional coalition-building.

Radical Representations: Intersectional Feminist Coalition in The Vulva Gallery

I first encountered The Vulva Gallery on Instagram, a platform in the Meta-verse that allows users to share images or video to either a closed network of followers or the public at large. The development of The Vulva Gallery is only possible through the affordances of *Instagram*. Primarily, actual images of vulvas online would be subject to content moderations and would absolutely be barred from the platform for inappropriateness. Therefore, the mediation itself is necessary for distribution, along with being a creative way to navigate *Instagram's* very gendered community guidelines.[3] The illustrative nature of the posts also demand a visual platform, and *Instagram's* focus on visual elements allows for the vulvas to be centered in coalition-building. As a result, this mediation allows for larger groups of people to access these images outside of platforms that are just about sexuality, sex acts, and less mainstream.

I followed communication studies scholars Alessandro Caliandro and James Graham's qualitative method for studying *Instagram*. As I was looking at a specific page, I did not look at hashtags, but rather the community and network established on the page. As Caliandro and Graham describe "using a qualitative approach informed by netnography, online participant observation, and visual content analysis" researchers of *Instagram* can analyze the importance of images beyond their meaning to individual posters (5). To complete the analysis, I then did a textual analysis of both the original posts and the comments of the posts, coding them for themes. I used Parsehub to scrape each of the pages and comments by date, read through them, and do a preliminary coding. I then sorted by theme, reaffirming that each post matched each theme. To further protect the identity of the marginalized community members, I further anonymized their posts, and do not cite specific images. Although the participants clearly consented to having their images posted online, it is important to note that they did not consent to having identifiable information discussed in this paper, and I honor their right to privacy.

There is no doubt in looking at the Vulva Gallery that there is no one vulva, no one type of person who has a vulva, and that there is no one type of feeling that a person should have about their vulva. The Vulva Gallery serves as a case study for how feminist coalition can be built through acknowledgment of both shared experiences and difference. The work of the Vulva Gallery goes beyond inclusion to reach for radical representation. In the next section, I analyze how The Vulva Gallery used educational engagement and

narratives to create an intersectional coalition that challenges not only what vulvas are represented, but how those representations affect the world.

Disrupting Body Norms and Educational Engagement

The Vulva Gallery is committed to educating people about their vulvas, moving the work of the site beyond the representational. In doing so, the page encourages users to disrupt beliefs about body norms that are grounded in heterosexist, white supremacist frameworks. Not only are they able to see themselves in the diversity, but also they challenge their beliefs about what the "right" kind of body should look like. The work of the page, then, elicits material effects in individuals, but also creates a deliberative space to question larger social structures at the community level. Inherent to the mission of the creator is demystifying the vulva so that people can seek helpful resources to maintain their health. These images not only show that the hyper-feminized, almost childlike, vulva is not the most common or most pervasive presentation of the vulva, but also that through comfortability with the medical anatomy of the vulva, they can come to better understand themselves. Historically, "women have been found to be less likely than men to produce terms for their own genitalia (or for men's genitalia), [and are] more likely to produce euphemistic term[s]" (Braun 146). By attaching anatomically correct terms to the body, The Vulva Gallery works to close an education gap—something that is deeply needed in the United States.

Fears about how many young people come to know their vulvas are, unfortunately, well-founded. Pornography is perhaps one of the most controversial and common places where young people come to know genitalia. There are many claims, both in public and academic discourses, that consumption of porn can lead to having sex at a young age, sexist beliefs, and sexual aggression, but no longitudinal studies have shown this to be developmentally true (Lim et al.). What we do know, though, is that many young people engage with porn regularly and cite it as a primary way in which they learn about their bodies. A 2017 study found that 81% of men and 22% of women between the ages of 15 and 29 watch porn weekly, and almost all viewed porn as integral to their sexual education (Lim et al.). The 2022 Common Sense Media report supported the pervasive nature of pornography but found that 44% of teens reported that they encountered porn unintentionally (Robb and Mann 6). Porn is ubiquitous, then, and an important site that young people engage with to learn about their genitals—whether they intend to or not.

To that point, pornography can showcase diverse bodies—though many scholars argue that this is a complicated representation that relies heavily on the fetishization of marginalized people (Elman; Jones; McNair). Most mainstream pornography features conventionally attractive people with exceptionally symmetrical reproductive organs. Though there is a great potential within porn, its primary focus is not education or anatomy—it is for entertainment. In addition, and as many feminist scholars (Cawston; Kevin) have written about pornography, pornography can teach not only an extreme, and often violent, form of sexual intercourse, but also that there are normative bodies and ways to engage in sexual acts.

Perhaps less fraught but equally complicated are educational texts, such as puberty books. Outside of sexual education classes in school, and biology textbooks, puberty

texts are a near ubiquitous way that people come to know their bodies. However, these texts still present normed representations of bodies. Within puberty books, such as the best seller *The Care and Keeping of You* (1 and 2), illustrations of vulvas and female reproductive anatomy are white and symmetrical. Even more diverse texts, such as Robie H. Harris and Michael Emberley's *It's Perfectly Normal*, depict numerous anatomically correct vulvas and vaginas, but they are rarely diverse in ways other than race and hair. Most of the images are of thin women, and there is no noticeable discoloration or blemishes. There are no elongated labial lips or variation in size. There are no piercings (which could partially be explained by the young target audience of these texts) or differences in styling. Aside from the very natural variations in vulva size, shape, and color, there are countless medical conditions that may impact the appearance of a person's sexual anatomy—none of which that are accounted for in puberty texts.

I note these sites of sexual education not because they are teaching wrong or wholly damaging versions of human anatomy, just incomplete ones. There are no two sets of vulvas that look exactly the same. As a result, there is no way to comprehensively represent all bodies in our educational texts. But in displaying only one type of body—and one that adheres to a patriarchal, white, able-bodied, mindset—a type of norming occurs. This norming is exactly what The Vulva Gallery resists.

The goal of the Vulva Gallery, as described by the creator of the website and subsequent *Instagram* page S. Hil Atalanta, is expressly to change perceptions of vulvas within viewers through education. They state:

> By illustrating a wide range of vulvas in all shapes and colours, and opening up conversation about diversity, body positivity, and vulva-related topics I want to show that natural variety is a beautiful thing, and that the natural human body is something to appreciate instead of feeling ashamed about. (About)

Illustration, in this space, functions both as a method of presentation and a means of presenting exemplar. The vulvas are literally illustrated, in a very lifelike way, but still not a photographic depiction of flesh and blood on the screen—which is also how they are able to be posted online. In addition, the images illustrate the liminal state of the body. The images throughout the gallery and distributed on the *Instagram* page are similar in style, though they depict different bodies. Most of the illustrations are centered on the vulva, though a few throughout the page are zoomed out to include more of the torso.

The most prominent difference between the images, and the one most often highlighted in the captions and stories, is the different sizes of the outer labia. For example, one image depicts a vulva from the front with a shaved pubic area. The vaginal opening is positioned forward on the pubic area, and the labial lips are visible looking straight on. The lips are elongated and wrinkled. They are also differentially colored. The narrative associated with the illustrations states: "I remember from an early age onwards I always felt unsure and a little bit ashamed of my vulva because of the size of my labia. The general consensus seemed to be that it is more desirable to have as little labia as possible" (December 20, 2023). Other images show vulvas with shorter labial lips, such as one image where the clitoris is visible in the illustration. The caption noted that the subject had been self conscious about her vulva, but stated that "Since

I've been looking at The Vulva Gallery I've been trying to accept myself, even though I've had the idea of getting a labiaplasty for years" (August 22, 2023). This demonstrates that the illustrations are not only education, but also greatly disrupt individuals' internal discourses about their bodies.

Furthermore, the vulvas demonstrate a wide range of pubic hair—some have hair dyed, faded, a lot, a little, in any combination—to show there are many ways to alter and present this part of the body. For example, one commenter posted on an image that showed various depictions of pubic hair. The image depicts a person with vitiligo with pubic hair in two different colors. Darker hair cover half of the public hair, and white hair covers the other half. The vulva lips are elongated and close entirely. The commenter stated:

> In the conversations I've had with people around the world there were many things they missed in their sex ed. books, and one of them was pubic hair. Learning about anatomy without learning about natural variations in pubic hair growth can make an individual feel insecure about their own genital area, especially if their vulva looks different from the pictures in the text books.

The commenter directly addresses the embodied impact of lack of education, and the difference that images can make. These educational, anatomy-based images can allow community members to better understand their individual vulvas and subvert the dominant narrative that there is one single version of a vulva that is acceptable.

The illustrations are in all varieties of skin tones and sizes. None of the images depict the exact same skin tone, a representation that exists in stark contrast to more traditional depictions of vulvas. Some have clear stretch marks and fat spots while others are thinner. Some have piercings and tattoos. Many have spots of skin that are darker or lighter than other areas. The illustrations depict blemishes and wrinkles, warts in some cases or cysts, showcasing that vulvas change over time or develop different conditions. The illustrations do not aim to capture a static vulva, but one vulva at a particular moment in time. One image shows a lighter skinned person with red-toned skin and hair. Their hair is drawn dense and curly, extended throughout the pubic area. A blue tampon strong is protruding from the vaginal canal (September 12, 2023). The caption of the post focuses on menstrual experiences, depicting the way the vulva looks at that moment, not in totality. As a result, these images clearly capture a moment in time, an organ at rest at a particular state rather than making a claim for the entirety of the vulva's being. This type of education exists in stark contrast to porn and more mainstream educational texts, as it is not about presenting a normative vulva. There are radical potentials in this. Instead of viewing one's vulva in comparison to a harmful norm, users could develop an individual relationship to their vulva, a shift that makes transparent the oppressive nature of body norms.

Other images are focused more clearly on instruction around the diversity of vulva presentation with different conditions. One such image shows a vulva in the case of uterine prolapse—a condition that occurs the muscles in the uterus are stretched or weakened, often through pregnancy, childbirth, ageing or in the case of certain conditions like endometriosis. In the illustration, dark, coarsely-drawn hair covers the pubic area, the skin around the vaginal opening, and towards the anus of a darker-skinned subject. The image shows a bright red cervix coming out through the vaginal opening.

Arrows point to each of the anatomical parts of the body, noting the different presentation of the cervix and its impact on the vulva. (February 23, 2024). The comments section praises these explorations of anatomy, noting that female-sexed anatomy is rarely taught in sex education classrooms in this amount of detail. Each of these posts contain several comments like: "I've never seen a cross section before! Thank you!!".

Building on this work, the website has an entire page dedicated to anatomical illustrations. These emphasize that there is no standard vulva, and that textbooks that present one type of anatomy can be damaging. The page states: "Not only can it be very enlightening to see it and get to know all its parts, but knowing your vulva is also very useful as you'll be able to observe possible changes throughout your life" (The Vulva Gallery). Viewing vulvas as part of a changing body is one way that the page not only challenges sexist beauty standards, but also shifts how users look at their own vulvas. This allows both space for radical difference and a common lived experience. Vulvas all may change differently, but they change all the same.

The educational elements of the pages reach younger audiences, an important group who is still beginning to develop their relationship with their vulva. In a recent #communityquestion post, a 15-year-old asked about the texture of their pubic hair. Commenters responded, both validating the concern and offering solutions to the coarseness of the poster's hair. Another commenter, an 18-year-old, asked a question about the size of their clitoris. The community member noted that they felt uncomfortable with their vulva as a result. Over 70 people commented with affirmation, such as "you are normal!" and "there is no correct body." Some commenters offered advice, but most offered support. A few also commented that they noticed a gap in education around topics like this, stating "That's a topic that parents and school don't communicate to these children," and "Before the Vulva Gallery I didn't realize women had all these concerns about their vulvas." Moreover, the site distributes several "educational print sets" to be used in biology and sexual health classroom settings. These images are intended to not only educate people on the diversity that are present in healthy vulvas, but also increase comfortability with the body so that sexual and reproductive health issues can be taken seriously. It is clear through both examples that The Vulva Gallery educates its audience in multiple ways and through crowd-sourced knowledge, greatly subverting traditional discourses. It is on this final point that the participants are engaging in the interdependences of coalitional work. The individual illustrations do more than provide representations—they create space for new and subversive discourses about vulvas.

Consciousness Raising Through Narrative

While other representations of vulvas have demonstrated the potential of these kinds of illustrations, none have the affordances of a primarily digital distribution, nor the scope to attend to the racial, sexual, and gender identities now more openly discussed in mainstream discourses. Like Gould's notion of coalition, this opens space for deliberative possibility. In this, scholars can see one potential for radical feminist coalition-building—representations that attend to difference but are grounded in a shared lived experience. Beyond this, the site explicitly challenges how we view vulvas, and in doing so, challenges racist and heterosexist frameworks.

In addition, consciousness raising and interconnectedness of this coalition is created through the affordances of *Instagram*. In particular, the comments section allows the people to connect with the images and create further engagement with each other. In one post, the commenters validate the experience of the participant who states:

> Hello! I have vulvar papillomatosis. Basically papillae on my inner labia. My doctor suggested me to remove them as this might lead to infection when rubbed against. I wanted to know if anyone dealt with this and if so how? Thank you:)"

In response, many of the comments advise the person to seek a second opinion, or validate that they have experienced this, as well. One comment even notes "Oh my god I've had this my whole life and never knew what it was called." Similarly, captioned "Labia are sibling, not twins" received many comments that expressed relief. A commenter stated: "This looks so similar to mine!!!! I never stop loving these posts they have helped me reconnect with that part of my body." These spaces of interpersonal development allow for a greater knowledge of the self through other's experiences. The images provide a springboard for a clearer vision of the self. In this way, The Vulva Gallery allows for both a space to discuss vulvas and demonstrates the variety of vulvas and educates those that engage with the site. It is not just about seeing oneself on screen, but about knowing oneself better through the representation and how being in coalition with others may enable this.

The Vulva Gallery very much falls in line with work of feminist coalition-building, as it offers people with vulvas a space to recognize and validate their own embodied experience through images and illustrations, and in doing so, create a space that challenges oppressive structures and sense other possibilities for being. Primarily, the site does this through emotionally laden narratives. Narratives can serve as an important tool to not only contextualize the images, but also change their meaning. Sharon Yam echoes this argument in her analysis of the *Doula Diaries*. The series tells the birth stories of marginalized folks, but still only those that fit within a narrow margin of sanctioned parenthood—those that affirm the nuclear family and gendered norms. Yam argues that visual stories are particularly significant for marginalized communities because, as reproductive justice advocate Rickie Solinger explains, they recognize the storyteller as "real and whole, [and as] a person who must be heard" (qtd in Yam 22). In viewing images and visual narratives through the lens of intersectionality "rhetoricians can also begin to imagine ways in which rhetoric can help foster spaces for coalition across difference" (Yam 32). In other words, including a broader range of representations of embodied experiences can create inclusive spaces for change across differences.

The importance of narrative has also been part of previous public explorations of vulvas. *The Great Wall of Vagina*, a ten-panel plaster art piece by Jamie McCartney that displayed four hundred labial plaster casts, also employed narratives to contextualize the process for the people who chose to plaster their vulvas. Rhetorician Michaela Frischherz notes that

> The practice of highlighting narrative voices aims not only to listen to the voices of subjects who risk being objectified in and through the artwork but also to magnify the agential power of affective bodily linkages transported from private, isolating locations to public, shareable locations. (254)

In other words, it is through telling the stories of their vaginas that the participants were able to view themselves more as part of a larger affective community. These narratives, which were later published in a book, constitute a rhetorical practice that Frischherz calls "'voicing,' a practice which transports personal and isolating feelings of shame to the collective, the public, and the space of shared identifications" (254). The Vulva Gallery allows its participants to voice the complex emotions that accompany their vulvas—the shame, discomfort, joy, and curiosity that comes with having a vulva that looks and feels different from the norm that has been constantly presented. The participants are not only able to make their private feelings public, but also make transparent the white supremacist, heterosexist frameworks that create oppressive beauty norms.

Within The Vulva Gallery, narratives accompany each image and complicate their overall meaning. It is clear from the onset that the affective narratives are central to missions of the page. On the page titled "Personal Stories" on the website, Atalanta describes the importance of this:

> There's a lot of power in recognizing yourself in someone else's story, and thinking:" Hey, that's me, that's how I feel too!". Many of us aren't used to speaking about our vulvas, but it can be very helpful to know that other people have the same kinds of experiences or insecurities.

The centrality of stories to allows not only catharsis for the person voicing their narrative, but also for others in the community to identify with. The importance of narrative is reaffirmed with every post. Each image that is designed to share a story includes the note: "This is a watercolour vulva portrait based on a photo of a real person, shared with mutual consent, together with the vulva story she/they wanted to share with you." The relationship between the image and the story shared alongside it is important to the ways that the page facilitates an embodied understanding for its community members.

Narrative sharing often creates a sense of catharsis and clarity for the people sharing. For example, one featured narrative discusses the ways that a positive relationship with their vulva led to a more positive relationship with their body. They stated, "there is so much to love about myself, my vulva is only the beginning. There's so much to love about yourself. This is just the beginning." In other words, they come to appreciate and love their body through viewing and reflecting upon these images of vulvas. Each post features a different image of a vulva with the personal story of the participant. Many of the posters discuss the development of self-love for their bodies as a practice that was mediated through their posting about struggles. Here are two excerpts that speak to the roadblocks that people overcame through telling their stories:

> I got physically cured from vaginismus in 2015. But only a year and a half ago, I feel mentally healed as well. When the physiotherapist cured me, I could have sex with my body, in theory. In real life, I had to go through a longer and harder healing process on the mental level.

Similarly, another poster expressed a journey of emotions that came from sharing their stories:

> Taking this photo and sharing it has made me feel very uncomfortable but also very free. This is the first step in loving myself and letting go of the shame that I'm so sick of feeling.

In these, and other posts, we can see that the images are not a static capturing of a body. They have material impacts that allow the people to uncover a clearer relationship with their body, one free of shame of the discomfort endemic in a culture that constantly oppresses female-sexed bodies. This new possibility created through the narrative is both a new type of discourse around vulvas and one where they become attached differently as a result. In other words, there is a consciousness raising that happens through the telling of these narratives.

However, these narratives do not only provide space for individual catharsis, but actively challenge racist, heterosexist frameworks as a coalition. First, the illustrations allow users to see their vulva outside of established norms, which many queer users noted was a positive experience. One nonbinary poster commented that they have "recently become enamored with the fact that [they] have a vulva, which, as a non-binary individual, has taken [them] a long time to come to terms with." A portrait of a vulva described the importance of separating their anatomy from their gender during their transition, stating:

> I can engage with my vulva, both sexually and in an everyday sense, in a way where it doesn't feel like a mark of femaleness, but just a beautiful part of my body. But I know that's not the case for everyone, and as a member of the trans community I know how privileged I am to have that.

In other words, the narrative and accompanying images creates a space to parse out their different identities. In response to the above post, a commenter noted that viewing that portrait worked to "help reclaim [their] confidence that had been stripped by society and clouded with shame, and [they] hoped add to the vulva diversity depicted here in hopes it brings comfort to others who do not always feel comfortable with or like their vulva."

The exploration of different bodies directly challenges racist and sexist assumptions about how vulvas "should" look. For example, many posters talked about feeling uncomfortable with the darker color of their vulva. The racial identity of each of the participants isn't part of most of the narratives, but many of the darker skinned individuals note that their skin color played a part in their discomfort. For example, one darker-skinned illustration was accompanied with a narrative that focused on discomfort with the color of their vulva. They noted: "I know I can't be the only one experiencing this, it's just difficult not to feel that way sometimes. I feel incredibly alone in fighting this" Another individual narrative noted: "I do want to bleach my vulva as I'm not fond of the color and maybe that'll help me appreciate the appearance to some degree." The thread on the post had over 400 comments of support and challenges to the discomfort around the color of her vulva. Some community members said, "My first reaction to seeing the painting was "incredibly beautiful Vulva!" And especially loved and was in awe of the color of her." Others engaged in discourse in the ways that we talk about vulvas; one commenter called the illustration exotic, and another replied, "Hey, I think you mean well, but you probably should avoid the word exotic when referring to a black person or their bodyparts." This exchange represents some of the consciousness-raising that happens among community members. Members educate each other on some of the nuances of privilege that are further stratified based on race. These open-ended discourses about colorism and bodies not only offers members

the opportunity to learn from mistakes, but to challenge each other to reimagine discourses around race, identity and vulvas.

Individuals of different gender and sexual identity were also able to reimagine discourses around their vulvas, creating space for coalitional development through community and consciousness raising. In another post, a transgender person explicitly discussed the political power of sharing their story:

> I am a post-op transgender woman. This is my vulva, crafted from formerly male genitals. My outer labia are made of what used to be my scrotum. My clitoris is made from the glans/tip of the penis, and retains all sensation. My vagina itself was made by the surgeon cutting a channel through my pelvic floor muscles, then lining that incision with the skin of my penis shaft. Of course my urethra had to be repositioned, as well.
>
> I try very hard to educate people about transgender women when I am able. I educate formally on transgender awareness. Each semester I speak at a local community (2 year) college, speak more or less annually at a nearby university, and have driven as far as 1,400 kilometres round trip to speak at universities on the western coast of the United States. Generally, especially in the university setting, people greet my story with support. However, I would be lying if I were to tell you that everybody does so. I feel as though I need to work to create the world I wish to live in. And as my daughter has recently come out as lesbian, I'm working to make the world a better place for her, as well. Despite what the world is being shown by the "leader" currently in power here, there are many of us desperately trying to make this world a better place, not worse.

The post also garnered over 300 comments of support, many of which noted that the gallery has helped them challenge their own assumptions about what vulvas should look like, such as "This has helped me see that our society's idea of beauty is erasing what beauty really is: our many differences." One comment noted that this had led them to a new mantra: "Standing up for yourself, for the people around you, for the society you wish to have." In accompanying the images with narratives, The Vulva Gallery gives space for participants to voice not just their relationship to their vulvas, but their relationship to some of the power structures that act on their bodies. The consciousness raising within the community allows for coalitional development, as members are actively encouraged by both the illustrations and each other to question the dominant discourses around vulvas. The project is not just a practice of inclusion, but actively challenges the frameworks that lead people with vulvas to develop shame and insecurity. It is from this place that the site builds intersectional feminist coalitions grounded both in shared experience and difference.

Conclusion: Radical Possibility

In addition to the coalitional power of making privates public, a few things about The Vulva Gallery are revolutionary. First, in using vulva rather than vagina, the site places an emphasis on biological language in addition to engaging in representational politics. Historically, the vulva has had a wide range of nicknames, most of which serve to further stigmatize vulvas and genitalia more broadly (Braun and Kitzinger; Bramwell). While many of the scholars discuss the representational potential of art like the *Vagina Monologues* and *The Great Wall of Vagina*, less attention has been given to the radical interventions in education that public depictions of vaginas and vulvas can make. The

Vulva Gallery, then, serves two purposes—representational and educational. The Vulva Gallery does both, aiming to teach people about their own bodies and provide a broader range of images of vulvas for viewers to see themselves in. Second, and like the work done with the *The Great Wall of Vagina*, The Vulva Gallery is able to create an affective community through the affordances of *Instagram*. The functions of the platform facilitate a type of engagement that allows users to not only learn from others, but also interrogate the structures that create beauty norms. Finally, many representations of vaginas and vulvas have existed across a clear binary of gender and clear expectations of race. Importantly, many of the conversations about the power of showing vaginas, vulvas, and other genitals have existed along a gender binary. The work of The Vulva Gallery pushes the boundaries of not only what should be considered in public displays of vulvas, but who is allowed to be in that space. In that way, the intersectional representational politics of The Vulva Gallery are quite radical. Beyond that, The Vulva Gallery moves past representation and works to build coalition through engaging users in educational content and offering a space to voice their relationship to their vulva.

Despite what I have argued throughout this article, the work of sites like The Vulva Gallery are not uncomplicated. The community and page I have looked at here is relatively free of harassment and trolls, a rarity in online spaces that have an explicit mission toward social justice. There are also limitations to what an *Instagram* page can do because it is always, on some level, representational. The illustrations will never be able to show the nuance of flesh and blood vulvas and the vast variations possible in them. Moreover, because individuals have to submit their narratives and vulvas, the success of the page is partially dependent on the people who are able to encounter and engage with it. In other words, because of the platform, there are limits to the full expanse of difference that The Vulva Gallery can represent. Because of the nature of social media, once posted, images can shift, change, and evolve in unpredictable ways. As a result, scholars must continually refer to the question of who is controlling the image, if an image can be controlled, and who controls the dominant interpretation. Who has the power to define how and why a body is being presented on screen? How much control does a person have over that mediated image? Although affinity groups such as The Vulva Gallery can create spaces where types of radical exploration can take place, not all spaces are able to stay so insular.

None of this is to say that the page does not have marked material impact. *Instagram* allowed for a development of community that subverted shameful feelings toward one's vulva, while still maintaining privacy. This kind of coalitional development is especially well-suited for the digital world. People were able to explore their privates publicly through representation, and in doing so, shift their perception of the world around them. The Vulva Gallery demonstrates how attention to difference can create coalitions based on a shared narrative that challenges oppressive structures. When people can accurately learn about their bodies and develop more healthy relationships with them, it can be lifesaving. The comments of this page are filled with members stating the paradigm shifting impact of seeing not only their own differences, but the differences present in other bodies. It is through this that the page develops a coalition based on the similarity of difference. Every person on the page has a story to tell about their vulva—and that is a uniting and shared narrative in and of itself.

Notes

1. I speak more to this in the literature review section, but I distinguish between the popular but often incorrect usage of the term vagina and vulva throughout the article. I use vulva unless speaking to the specific internal canal of genitalia, but many others I quote use vulva and vagina interchangeably.
2. Another version of this would be Sophia Maier, V. Jo Hsu, Christina V Cedillo, and M. Remi Yergeau's concept of fractal interconnectedness, a "theory-in-motion" that aims to illustrate the "distinctiveness and interconnectedness of trans disabled and LGBW experiences."
3. For more on this see the work of Sarah T. Roberts and content moderation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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