A Note from the Artists:

For the cover, we incorporated themes and ideas from this year’s winning essays, collaging together a spectrum of images into one cohesive whole. We used the chapel as a foundation, incorporating beetles with various-sized horns, Alvin Ailey dancers, stills from several Hitchcock films plus portraits of Hitchcock himself, one of Georgia O’Keefe’s iconic flower paintings, the symbol for V-Day, grazing deer, a Ford Taurus, and unvarnished depictions of Vietnam War Veterans. For the interior photographs, we kept the essays in mind as we walked around campus, capturing symbols that struck us—like a spectrum of shadows in the Saint Mary’s sun.
Judges

Jeff Chon
Philip Dow
Janette Duran
David Fujii
Anna Gates
Janette Duran
Caralinda Lee
Raina J. Leon
Aleenah Mehta
Tiffany Newman
Reyna Olegario
Colin Redemer
Ellen Rigsby
Sara Vander Zwaag
Welcome to this twenty-fourth edition of *Spectrum*, the journal of undergraduate writing across the curriculum at Saint Mary’s College of California. By publishing this year’s student award winners, we are celebrating the elegance of language and the practice of critical thinking through writing. We invite professors and students to use the pieces featured here as models for the power of language to construct knowledge—to facilitate the learning, expanding, and sharing of ideas. And we invite everyone, on campus and beyond, to sit down, pour a cup of tea, and enjoy reading the excellent work of Saint Mary’s student writers.

Sixty-seven students submitted work for this year’s contest. The quality of their writing made difficult the task of narrowing and then further narrowing the stack of blind submissions—a task accomplished through the long and serious work of our diverse panel of judges. We deeply thank the judges, the student writers, and the professors who guided these students to express themselves well on the page and to learn through the process of communicating. All of this work culminated in a short list of winning pieces that, together, represent well the broad variety of genres, as well as discipline-specific citation styles, across our curriculum. The four winning pieces and two honorable mentions—demonstrating skillful use of language and originality of idea—were written for courses in film, theater, dance, composition, biology, and Liberal Education for Arts Professionals.
Here is a brief note about each essay:

- **First Prize: Michael Niebuhr.** Debate abounds as to whether the female characters in Hitchcock’s films—particularly the film *Frenzy*—act as symbols of female passivity or as evidence of misogyny. Niebuhr’s “Hitchcock’s Tortuous Feminism” makes a compelling case for the latter.

- **Second Prize: Kathleen Esling.** Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* took the world by storm when it debuted in 1996, challenging women to both discuss and love their own biology. Esling’s “Vagina and Vajayjays: Reclaiming ‘Cunt’ through Theater” explores the effects—positive and negative—of this culturally significant play since its premiere more than a decade ago.

- **Third Prize: Hillary Hershenow.** What is it that propels an artist forward creatively—a desire to break new ground or an appreciation for one’s origins? Hershenow’s “Looking Back to Continue Forward: Dance’s Connection to Culture” unpacks the ways in which two choreographers mined the past for creative inspiration.

- **Best Freshman Essay: Kristen Thompson.** The Vietnam War officially ended in 1975, but for many veterans, the battle is still being fought. Thompson’s “The Land of the Lost: Examining the Roles of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Government Social Service in the Social Readjustment of Vietnam Veterans” explores the challenges that Vietnam veterans faced, and continue to face, including the government’s reluctance to acknowledge the gravity of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

- **Honorable Mention: Shannon Lowell.** Sometimes, size does matter. When it comes to the size of male beetles’ mandibles, natural selection allows for exaggerated growth. Lowell’s “The Origin and Evolution of Weapon Growth in Beetles” investigates the variation of weapon growth in male beetles, including size and location of mandibles, which play a role during sexual selection.

- **Honorable Mention: Heather Rikić.** In the late 1980s, the Ford Taurus was one of the most popular vehicles on the road. But that doesn’t mean each Taurus doesn’t have its own unique story. Rikić’s “The Flying Spud” chronicles the life of one such Taurus, aptly named “Aquarius,” and its effects on its owners’ lives.
Spectrum was created twenty-three years ago by English students and professors, who did not miss a year of publishing and championing the journal and contest. Now, the English Department has passed along the hosting of Spectrum to the new Center for Writing Across the Curriculum. CWAC staff members offer appreciation to everyone in the English Department for diligent and dedicated service to the kind of writing excellence that transcends disciplinary boundaries. We offer particular thanks in this transition year to Carol Beran, David DeRose, Gail Drexler, Rosemary Graham, and Sandra Grayson for sharing with us their time, practical wisdom, and creative ideas for the future scope of Spectrum.

This year’s contest and journal production is a collaborative project of all the CWAC staff members, who deserve applause for enthusiastic brainstorming about the design and purpose of Spectrum and for rolling up intellectual sleeves for hours of serious effort. When we took this on, we had no idea how much work it would entail. We did expect it to offer rich opportunities for both service and learning, which it has. Several writing advisers served alongside faculty members as judges, providing the perspective of student readers and strong writers who advise peers during one-on-one sessions all year long. Writing advisers also copy-edited, proofread, created graphics, and re-designed the journal. Administrative Assistant Jen Herrington managed the submissions, awards, printing, and other critical details. Writing Adviser Reyna Olegario created award certificates for the winners. Writing Coordinator Elise Miller, the Editor of Spectrum, worked with all the judges and took their insights into consideration when making the selections. The finalists were compiled based on their collective ability to teach and inspire writers of many disciplines.

We offer this journal with deep appreciation for the work of all writers and professors across Saint Mary’s College of California.

—Katherine Hengel Frankowski, Anna Gates, and Tereza Joy Kramer
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Alfred Hitchcock was an auteur whose oeuvre overflows with tortured female characters from every era of his career in the cinema. From the age of silent films (Alice in *Blackmail*), to the advent of black and white “talkies” (Rebecca and Alicia in *Notorious*), and on up through the introduction of color to the cinema (Lisa in *Rear Window*, Judy in *Vertigo*, and Melanie in *The Birds*), Hitchcock was extremely fond of placing female characters in situations wherein they are abused both mentally and physically, most often expressly by men. The director even went so far as to remark, near the height of his career, “I always believe in following the advice of the playwright Sardou...‘Torture the women!’ The trouble today is that we don’t torture women enough” (qtd. in Fawell 91).

This propensity for on-screen abuse gives Hitchcock a reputation among critics—somewhat paradoxically—as either a notorious misogynist or a director with immense sensitivities to the plight of women under patriarchy. The point around which this debate turns is the unmistakable ambiguity with which the director approached his portrayals of women: while Hitchcock frequently subjected his female leads to a gauntlet of torments at the hands of men, he frequently did so in a way that might...
leave an audience feeling an intense identification with and empathy for these tortured women. However, these same characters often end up appearing weak, passive, and even submissive as a result. In light of this, just what is the nature of Hitchcock’s portrayals of women? Misogynistic caricatures of women who are punished when they step outside their patriarchal bounds or sympathetic heroines enduring the oppression of the patriarchal system? This is a critical question in modern criticism of Hitchcock’s work. In fact, Robin Wood has said that “the opening question of my book *Hitchcock’s Films*, were I writing it today, would be the central question that haunts contemporary Hitchcock criticism in article after article: ‘Can Hitchcock be saved for feminism?’” (224).

The answer to Wood’s question by the community of Hitchcock scholars is far from unanimous. One group of critics, which includes Tania Modleski and Wood himself, argues that in presenting such misogynistic treatment of women at the hands of men, Hitchcock played against the prevailing sexism of his time, as opposed to condoning it—that is, by showing such gratuitous violence against women and making audience identification with those women so strong, the director was in effect satirizing misogyny instead of agreeing with it. In disagreement with this analysis are writers like Jeanne Thomas Allen and Hitchcock’s biographer, Donald Spoto, who take the director’s films more literally and argue that they embody, as an article by Allen is titled, “the representation of violence to women” (Allen 30). Both critics see Hitchcock’s torturous relationship with his leading female characters as an indication of the man’s personal desires (Spoto qtd. in Sklar 224.). In other words, residing within every male character who abuses Hitchcock’s on-screen women is a representation of Hitchcock himself.

A perfect illustration of the ambiguous, perhaps almost ambivalent, nature of Hitchcock’s abusive treatment of his female characters is present in one of the director’s last productions, the 1972 film *Frenzy*, which contains arguably the most grotesque depiction of male-on-female violence in the entirety of the director’s body of work, and the plotline of which (the mystery of the “necktie murderer” who rapes women before strangling them with a tie) is centered almost exclusively around such violence. For Spoto, the film is a “personal self-disclosure of the director’s angriest and most violent desires” (qtd. in Sklar 244), and the necktie murderer is the personification of a dark slice of Hitchcock’s psyche. However, the fact that the crime Hitchcock portrays in *Frenzy* is grotesque does not justify the logical jump to assuming that he both condoned
and desired the type of violence shown on screen. The truth is just the opposite—although Hitchcock subjects many of his female characters to a litany of emotional and physical torture, often at the hands of men, this fact does not indicate any personally held misogyny on the part of the director; quite to the contrary, in fact, Hitchcock’s sympathetic portrayal of his tortured female characters leads to increased audience identification with these women, and moreover, this viewer identification actually allows the director to mock and denounce the patriarchal perception of male superiority rather than advocate it.

That is not to say that Thomas’s viewpoint is completely devoid of logic, especially if one concentrates solely on the misogyny of the film. Besides the quite blatant displays of female-directed violence in *Frenzy*, several other instances of less murderous sexism appear during the movie. First, in the opening scene, a British politician is making a speech to a crowd on the edge of the Thames. In this speech, he claims that a new government program will rid the river of the “waste products of our society,” and he adds, “Let us rejoice that pollution will soon be banished from the waters of this river” (*Frenzy*). Almost immediately after this proclamation, a woman’s scream directs the camera to a long shot of a naked female body floating facedown in the river, linking it with the politician’s definition of “waste products.” Essentially, this scene equates the female figure with trash, which—just as litter must be expunged from the river—must be “tossed out.” Another example comes a short while later when two pub-goers are discussing the necktie murderer in a local bar. The female bartender hears the conversation, comes over to the two men, and asks in a hushed voice, “He rapes them first, doesn’t he?” to which one of the men responds, “Well, I suppose it’s nice to know that every cloud has a silver lining” (*Frenzy*), and the waitress smiles flirtatiously before departing. Here it seems that Hitchcock is advancing a sometimes-held view by men that women somehow want to be raped, that they “invite or deserve sexual victimization” (Modleski 114).

In fact, this is also invoked by Rusk, the rapist serial killer in the film, when he violates Brenda: “Some women like to struggle” (*Frenzy*). By presenting rape as some kind of perverse upside to the necktie murders, Hitchcock undoubtedly projects a particularly vicious brand of misogyny into a film already steeped in violent sexism.

These examples do indeed appear to go against any positive feminist analysis of *Frenzy*; however, it is impor-
tant to remember that the above two scenarios are taken out of the overall filmic context; when seen in relationship with Frenzy as a whole, their actual roles in the message of the movie become clearer. Tania Modleski addresses this point in The Women Who Knew Too Much, her collection of feminist Hitchcock criticism, wherein she asserts that there is a strong connection between women and both food and poison, or “pollution” in the film (107). Indeed, the concept of woman-as-food abounds in the film in that, to Rusk, women represent nothing more than consumable objects. Both of the villain’s victims are associated with food: first, Rusk’s rape of Brenda begins shortly after he snatches the woman’s apple and begins eating it, and after the murder, Rusk picks up the apple ever-so-casually again and continues eating it as he strolls out of Brenda’s office. To Rusk, then, Brenda is literally the apple of his eye: he views her as a consumable body of nutrients. The same way the apple serves as dietary nourishment, Brenda serves as nourishment for the psychopath’s sadistic sexual inclinations.

Just before he advances on her, Rusk asks Brenda to go out to lunch with him, a proposal that Brenda accepts sheerly out of fear. It is at this moment that Rusk moves to rape her—as she is pinned by the murderer against the wall of her office, she says, “I thought we were going to lunch!” Rusk responds, “We are…afterwards” (Frenzy). What Rusk has not let on is that he is already at lunch, moving to consume Brenda, who is to him an edible object. Rusk even goes so far as to compare Brenda’s body directly to the fruit he sells, telling her, “You know in my trade we have a saying. We put it on the fruit: don’t squeeze the goods till they’re yours. Now, that’s me. I would never do that” (Frenzy). Rusk is, of course, using this line as an analogy; Brenda’s body represents the aforementioned “goods.” By placing Brenda and the fruit he markets on the same level, Rusk makes it clear that he thinks about Brenda the same way he thinks about the edible products he sells.

It is no coincidence that Brenda’s rape occurs almost immediately after her acceptance of Rusk’s lunch proposal. Since Rusk views Brenda as a consumable object that he must make his before “squeezing,” Brenda’s agreement to his proposition gives him the sense of ownership he needs to act against her. Frenzy is not the first time Hitchcock portrays such a situation; in Blackmail, Mr. Crewe’s attempted...
rape of Alice occurs because he takes Alice’s begrudged agreement to come up to his apartment to mean that he has rights to her body. Thus the woman is objectified into an object that can be “owned” when certain requirements are met. The Rusk/Brenda relationship in *Frenzy* is uncannily similar to the Crewe/Alice relationship in *Blackmail*: Rusk interprets Brenda’s response to his request as signification of ownership in which he has a right to violate her body because, in his mind, he has come to possess the “goods” that he wants to “squeeze.”

The same food-based association befalls Rusk’s second victim, Babs. Once again, Rusk is shown eating at the scene of the crime after Babs’s murder, and furthermore, he decides to hide the woman’s body by shoving her into a sack of potatoes, another reference to an edible commodity, essentially turning her into a foodstuff. Later in the film, when the inspector is recounting the facts of the murder case to his wife, he mentions that Rusk had to break the fingers of Babs’s hand (due to rigor mortis) to get at the monogrammed tiepin that she had grabbed during her murder. At this point in the recounting, the inspector’s wife cracks a breadstick in half, making a noise quite similar to the sound of Babs’s breaking fingers, which grotesquely connects her body to yet another edible commodity. The food-based perception of women in the film, then, does not just function within Rusk’s psyche but is pervasive throughout the film as a thematic element.

Frenzy’s second and paradoxically simultaneous conception of women, as Modleski states, reveals them as “poison,” or more fittingly, “waste-product” (107), in that the villain views women not only as “edible” commodities but as disposable ones as well. In the cases of two of his victims, Rusk throws the bodies away like one-use objects: he tosses the unnamed victim in a river, and he puts Babs in a bag to be taken out like trash (the ensuing scene wherein he retrieves his tiepin is eerily similar to a bout of dumpster-diving). The very nature of Rusk’s crimes point to his twisted mentality: by killing the women that he rapes, it is clear that Rusk considers his victims to be inherently useless after they have been “used.” And Rusk is not the only source of this way of thinking about women—the references to women as waste in the film come from multiple sources. The example of the politician speaking about “waste products” and “pollution” in the Thames, moments before the camera shows a female body in the river, applies equally well a second time here. And the two men at the bar who talk about tourists wanting...
to see London’s streets “littered with ripped whores” (*Frenzy*) also speak to the representation of women as disposable waste items.

Between Hitchcock’s diametric portrayal of women-as-food and women-as-pollution/waste, it is easy to form the opinion that the director is being overwhelmingly misogynistic in *Frenzy*; the truth, however, is just the opposite. In depicting such gross displays of sexism, Hitchcock is actually actively working against the prevailing patriarchal power system and “engag[ing] in the eminently moral art of satire” (Turner qtd. in Sklar 224). Indeed, Hitchcock’s ample use of shockingly excessive misogyny follows a fairly standard satirical tradition: he produces a world in which the values he satirizes are so excessively exaggerated and ubiquitous that their sheer repulsive power forces viewers to examine the similarities between their own worlds and the (supposedly) fictional dystopia of the film’s. Even though the degree of sexism and cruelty exhibited by Rusk is so extreme that it appears markedly outlandish, the foundation of his beliefs—that is, the sexual objectification of women—is relatively common even today, almost forty years after *Frenzy*’s release. Rusk is simply the embodiment of the more grotesque consequences of such objectification; in this way, Hitchcock does not endorse the brutal misogyny reflected in his film but works to show his audience the repulsive nature of sexual objectification through a character (or characters) who, while unarguably vile, do not actually step outside the lines defined by such sexism, leading viewers who hold such beliefs to question their moral makeup.

This point is further driven home by the fact that Hitchcock portrays Rusk as an extension of less violent sexism, a man who, in many respects, seems quite normal and likeable. The director’s villain is a man who is willing to help Blaney when he is down on his luck (shown by his giving Blaney both food without charge and a tip on horserace betting that is sure to get him a large return on his investment) and is in good standing with the local police and citizenry. The point that Rusk can represent any normal man is also emphasized when he repeatedly says to Blaney, “Bob’s your uncle!” (*Frenzy*). This British slang is used entirely out of its usual context in *Frenzy*—normally, the phrase’s meaning is akin to “and there you have it,” or “that’s all there is to it.” Robert (Bob) Rusk, however, uses it almost exclusively to either express the unconditional nature of his friendship or his departure from a situation. This is completely discordant with the true use of the phrase and, given Rusk’s secret but murderous nature, has completely different connotations. The
man’s words come across as Hitchcock himself speaking through Rusk, warning both Blaney and the viewer that “Bob’s your family, Bob’s your friend.” In doing so, Hitchcock makes the point that Rusk’s skewed moral compass and his objectification of women can apply universally—any man can be Rusk. According to Hitchcock, no man has the luxury of watching Rusk’s actions without having to examine his own actions.

This warning is made more tangible in the last scene of the movie when Blaney sneaks into Rusk’s flat to kill him. In this scene, we briefly have a trio of men—Blaney, the inspector, and Rusk—who neatly represent, respectively, Freud’s Ego, Superego, and Id. The implication of this is that the three characters can actually be seen as different points on the same misogynistic spectrum—that is, the three men aren’t really separate from each other but instead represent a single mode of thought that manifests in each of them with varying degrees of intensity. For example, the inspector seems to be aligned opposite Rusk due to his position as an agent of the law; his purpose is to bring Rusk’s crimes against women to a halt. Yet he has a few choice sayings that hint at an underlying sexism, like his remark to a police colleague: “These days, ladies abandon their honor far more readily than their clothes” (Frenzy). This statement is steeped in the usual stereotypes: first, the inspector touches on the belief that a woman who is sexual (at least outside of marriage) has thrown aside her sense of “honor” or decency. Second, by saying that women care more about their clothes than their honor, the inspector’s overarching statement shows that he believes women to be simpleminded and materialistic, concerned more with what covers their bodies than what happens to those bodies. Blaney, too, seems to have certain elements in common with Rusk, namely his predisposition to violence relating to women. When Blaney meets his wife in her office, there is an insidious undertone of possible marital abuse that occurs when Brenda says that when Blaney got angry he would, “Throw the furniture around” (Frenzy).

Furthermore, when the two are having dinner at Brenda’s club, Blaney delivers the seething line, “If you can’t make love, sell it. The respectable kind, of course. The married kind” (Frenzy), breaking his brandy glass in his hand. These two occurrences together show that the only exceptional difference between Blaney and Rusk is that Blaney takes out his female-directed anger on inanimate objects while Rusk takes his anger out on the women themselves. The two supposedly “good” men in the film are not truly so; they only represent lesser degrees of Rusk’s female-directed violence and misogyny.
Hitchcock’s purpose with Frenzy, then, was not to condone the type of behavior exhibited by the film’s male character. Quite to the contrary, the movie actively works against multiple variations of misogyny and sexual objectification by placing them on a single line that terminates with Robert Rusk. In this way, Hitchcock makes the point that misogyny on any level is relatable to Rusk’s crimes since the murderer’s perceptions of women are a sadistically satiric rendering of typical misogynistic beliefs and practices. In using a truly counterintuitive approach, Hitchcock is able to uphold the tenants of feminism precisely because he depicts them being violated.

Works Cited


Michael Niebuhr graduated in 2012 with an English degree, plus a minor in Biology. Niebuhr won a Spectrum award during each of his four years at Saint Mary’s College of California; his writing also appeared in the college’s undergraduate literary journal, Riverrun. Although he currently considers writing his primary art form, Niebuhr also is a musician and has performed as a pianist in the Student Recital Series. He also has performed on the college’s stage, as Monsieur Diafoirus in Oded Gross’s adaptation of Moliere’s The Imaginary Invalid and as Katurian in Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman.
“We are worried about vaginas,” a trio of women announce at the beginning of The Vagina Monologues. In an attempt to empower women, Eve Ensler created this performance piece as a one-woman show. She wished for all women to learn to love their vaginas, and when her show was well-received, she founded V-Day in 1998 to help spread her message. Now a global phenomenon, V-Day is a celebration held worldwide. Many women flock to join V-Day, eager to celebrate the empowerment that comes from saying, “Cunt!” in front of shocked bystanders. While The Vagina Monologues is very fun, does the “fun” eclipse its efficacy? It is still unclear to what extent Ensler’s monologues have changed society. Ensler takes an essentialist’s stance, defining women as vaginas. In taking this approach, she weakens her argument and upsets the feminists made—namely, that women should not be defined by their biology. Although Ensler gives women a language, allows them to acknowledge pleasure, and heals many by creating these monologues, her work does not do enough to help women to fully accept their agency.

It is true that many feminists feel that Ensler is doing a great social good with her monologues. Michele Hammers of Loyola Marymount University argues that the vagina itself is regarded as impolite; she states that before Ensler, vaginas were not socially acceptable. No one wanted to talk about them, and they became taboo. Sharon Sabotta, director of the Saint Mary’s College of California Women’s Resource Center, comments that Ensler
provides a language with which women may now speak about their problems. William Calderon, a student who works at the Women’s Resource Center, has attended every V-Day celebration since his freshman year. He agrees that the title itself is off-putting for many people, saying, “The Vagina Monologues. It’s about vaginas. The word will be said. If you don’t like it, don’t go.” Hammers further explores this idea of a women’s language:

Ensler’s monologues render taboo topics such as menstruation, masturbation, sexual abuse (of different kinds), and female sexual pleasure and orgasm both visible and speakable: visible through the staged performances that display female bodies and speakable not only through these performers, but also through the various discourses in both public texts and in private conversation that circulate around the Monologues.¹

Hammers argues that by displaying issues usually kept quiet, Ensler makes it permissible for women to finally speak about themselves. Ensler created this language for women because she saw the problem of the word “vagina.” She acknowledges that the word “vagina” is “a totally ridiculous, completely unsexy word,” going so far as to call it “an infection at best, maybe a medical instrument.”² Though she is happy that women are willing to talk about their “down theres,” Ensler is disappointed that people cannot use the word “vagina.” In the preface to the 10th Anniversary edition of The Vagina Monologues, Ensler opens by writing: “‘Vagina.’ There, I’ve said it. ‘Vagina’—said it again…I say it because I’m not supposed to say it…”³ The word “vagina” is not a bad word, and yet no one wants to use it. Through her monologues, Ensler acknowledges that women must be able to take back the word before they can be whole.

In addition to helping women name their vaginas and speak about them, Ensler’s monologues allow actors to reveal that there is such a thing as a female orgasm—in fact, Ensler instructs actors to simulate multiple orgasms throughout the show. The idea of pleasure is discussed thoroughly, and Ensler does not shy away from graphic details. For example, in “The Woman Who Loved To Make Vaginas Happy,” a lesbian dominatrix, who enjoys drawing moans from her clients, describes the different kinds of moans she elicits such as “the clit moan (a soft, in-the-mouth sound)...the Grace Slick moan (a rock-singing sound), the WASP moan (no sound)...the uninhibited militant bisexual moan (a deep, aggressive, pounding sound)” and more.⁴ This section is just as explicit onstage as it is on the page. The dominatrix goes on about all of her styles, props, sexual poses, and prowess. Hearing these words makes them much more powerful—not only is the word “vagina” being taken and used freely, but

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¹ Hammers, “Talking About ‘Down There.’”
² Ensler, The Vagina Monologues, 5.
³ Ibid., xxxxiv-xl.
⁴ Ibid., 110-111.
it is also being spoken onstage. By putting this conversation in such a public forum, Ensler manages to make women’s issues real and tangible.

By making women’s pleasure real, Ensler allows women to claim and define themselves. Srimati Basu of the University of Kentucky explores the ways in which Ensler heals women. “One is left with the sense that…unlocking the repressed will heal all.” Women listening to The Vagina Monologues are granted the permission to take back the word, use it, and save themselves. The word “vagina” has been granted healing powers by Ensler, and it has worked for women worldwide. It has been said that Ensler’s works manage to “challenge realms of culture and tradition as well as state institutions.”

Listening to this piece, women realize that they have the right to control their own bodies. Women learn that their vaginas are beautiful and that they need not be ashamed. In hearing these healing words, women are able to reclaim their agency. Many feminists cling to Ensler’s piece, pointing out the good it has done, the changes she has made, and the lives she has saved. They state that she is helping the cause, giving women power, and reaching out to women across the globe.

While Ensler is reaching out to many women, other feminists critique the piece for not doing enough to liberate women. Kim Q. Hall of Appalachian State University questions The Vagina Monologues, noting that Ensler’s piece is essentialist. It joyously proclaims that women are their vaginas. “My vagina, my vagina, me,” the English businesswoman from “The Vagina Workshop” says reverently at the end of her speech.

In finding her clitoris—in “becoming” her clitoris—she finds herself. Only then is the woman in the monologue comfortable. Hall wonders, “Is it possible to celebrate the female body without reinforcing the terms of sexual difference at the core of heteropatriarchal structures of oppression?”

In celebrating womanhood for the sake of womanhood, Ensler is highlighting the differences between men and women. Susan E. Bell and Susan M. Reverby, two professors who participated in two different productions of The Vagina Monologues, also take issue with Ensler’s simplification: “…There are problems with using the female body for feminist ends.”

While having a vagina is not something to be embarrassed about, Ensler is focusing

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6 Ibid., 37.
solely on this difference. Ensler treats women’s vaginas as their personalities, asking questions such as “If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?” or “If your vagina could talk, what would it say, in two words?”11 She encourages women to think of their vaginas as themselves, writing a monologue entitled “My Angry Vagina” in which a woman rails against the cruelties committed against vaginas. “Vagina motherfuckers,” the woman says, thinking about the “army of people out there thinking up ways to torture [her] poor-ass, gentle, loving vagina.”12 This woman identifies completely with her vagina, treating it like her most expressive self. She describes how her vagina sees and experiences the world:

If my vagina could talk, it would talk about itself like me; it would talk about other vaginas; it would do vagina impressions...My vagina helped release a giant baby. It thought it would be doing more of that. It’s not...It wants sex. It loves sex. It wants to go deeper. It’s hungry for depth. It wants kindness. It wants change. It wants silence and freedom and gentle kisses and warm liquids and deep touch. It wants chocolate. It wants to scream. It wants to come. It wants to want. It wants. My vagina, my vagina. Well...it wants everything.13

This woman speaks about her vagina as though it holds all of her agency. It wants things; it claims things; and it does things. In order to help women acknowledge their vaginas, Ensler encourages them to see their vaginas as their entire beings. This woman is her vagina, and seeing how full the being of this vagina is, there is no room for the speaker to be anything else.

Bell and Reverby continue their critique: “Generations of feminists have argued that we are more than our bodies, more than a vagina or ‘the sex.’”14 They agree that it is problematic for Ensler to attempt to empower women by defining them by their biology. Rhonda Blair, a theatre professor at Southern Methodist University, claims that feminism is antiessentialist,15 the opposite of Ensler’s work. With Ensler’s essentialism, women are diminished. Women are much more than a vagina—they are entire beings with thoughts, dreams, and agency (along with vaginas). By reducing women down to only a vagina, Ensler is taking away this agency. While they must acknowledge our vaginas (and not treat them like outside things, like “black holes” drifting in space as the businesswoman does in “The Vagina Workshop”), they also mustn’t forget that they are also human beings, not sexual organs.

Hall has another issue with the monologues, arguing that Ensler “reinscribes...systems of patriarchy.”16 She states that, since many of the monologues have to do with heterosexual

11 Ensler, The Vagina Monologues, 15, 19.
12 Ibid. 69.
13 Ibid., 72-73.
14 Bell and Reverby, “Vaginal Politics,” 434.
16 Hall, “Queerness, Disability,” 100.
relationships, Ensler is reinforcing the heterosexual norm. While there are several “lesbian” pieces, most of the pieces have to do with women struggling to please their husbands. In “Hair,” for example, a woman deals with her husband’s sexual tastes: “My first and only husband hated hair. He said it looked cluttered and dirty. He made me shave my vagina.” This woman shaves in an attempt to satisfy her husband, and when it fails, they go to therapy. The therapist appears to be on the husband’s side, and she sends the couple home to mend. Even after being mistreated in the therapy session, the speaker lets her husband shave her (“a therapy bonus prize”), and he cuts her in the process. As a final insult, the woman learns, “He never stopped screwing around.” It is only after all of this heartache that the woman comes to realize “that hair is there for a reason…you have to love the hair in order to love the vagina. You can’t pick the parts you want.” Her man controls her; it is only after he leaves that she learns her own power and beauty. While this self-realization appears empowering at first glance, she follows everything her husband wants until the end. Where is her agency?

In another monologue titled “Because He Liked to Look at It,” a woman explains why she hates her vagina: “I was one of those women who had looked at [my vagina] and, from that moment on, wished I hadn’t. It made me sick. I pitied anyone who had to go down there.” She is disgusted by it until “Bob” comes along. He is a man who loves vaginas, and he stares into hers for almost an hour before sex. At first embarrassed, the woman begins to enjoy the gaze: “I began to feel beautiful and delicious—like a great painting or a waterfall.” Because of this one man’s gaze, the woman learns to love her vagina. While she jokes that she knows this is the “wrong” way to love her vagina, she can only come to love it through a man’s intervention. A man needs to teach her the beauty of her own vagina. If she is her vagina, as Ensler argues, why does she need a man to show her this beauty?

By identifying women as vaginas, Ensler jumps into what is colloquially known as raunch feminism. This newer branch of feminism, explored by Ariel Levy in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, regards how women dress and portray themselves in the modern age. This form of feminism declares that the girls on *Girls Gone Wild*, porn stars, women who want to be porn stars, and women undergoing elective plastic surgery are doing so because they are empowered in their

If she is her vagina, as Ensler argues, why does she need a man to show her this beauty?

18 Ibid., 11.
19 Ibid., 15.
20 Ibid., 54.
21 Ibid., 57.
22 Ibid., 62.
sexuality. This assertion is problematic because women have used men’s behavior as the standard to which they must adhere rather than creating their own criteria for empowerment. Women can act like men in their sex lives, sleeping with anyone and as many people as they like. These same women may also dress like strippers because it is “empowering.” According to raunch feminism, when a woman chooses to dress in a slutty manner, she isn’t bowing down to the male gaze. Rather, she is celebrating her sexuality. While it is important for women to feel empowered, it is possible for women to go so far into sexual expression that it becomes ridiculous. There is a huge difference between accepting and loving your vagina and being no more than a vagina. Unfortunately, “2007 was the year of the vagina…That year Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Kim Stewart, Kim Kardashian, and Britney Spears were all photographed without their underwear.” Female celebrities, in order to gain more airtime and publicity, flashed paparazzi.

It appears to have become a badge of honor, an exclusive girls’ club. Margaret Schwartz, the observer of this phenomenon, explains, “Each [celebrity was] anxious to expose…what came to be known in slang terms as the vajayjay.” Schwartz makes the point that being able to say the word vagina is not enough. Women must ensure that they do not become their vaginas (essentially, women must not follow Ensler’s advice to the letter). She explores this thought, stressing that “women who ‘flash’ their vaginas are part of the problem, either spoiled or unstable or both; women who can say vagina are hip, in control, and sexually liberated.” Evidently, all it takes to show a vagina is poor judgment.

How can women learn this difference? It is in this context that Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of wishing to identify with, rather than identify as, comes into play. Women must be able to identify with their vaginas and accept them, but these starlets should not only be walking, talking vaginas. They do not appear empowered by Ensler; rather, it appears that they are taking the mode of sexual empowerment to mean “I can do whatever I want,” setting poor examples for other young women. They render Ensler’s message moot as they follow the letter rather than the spirit of Ensler’s law. By flashing the paparazzi, these starlets ruin the effectiveness of Ensler’s message.

Thinking on Ensler’s advice and Schwartz’s observations, modern women have a problem. Ensler, while giving

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23 Schwartz, “Horror of Something to See.”
24 Ibid.
women a language with which to discuss their vaginas (themselves), also undoes much of what feminism has been trying to do for the last fifty years. By writing a piece in which women simulate many different orgasms onstage, she invites the objectification of her female actors. She is contradicting the assertions women made during second-wave feminism as they fought to be seen as individuals with agency. There was a large split in feminism in the 1960s over the issue of women and sex. “Suddenly, pornography became the enemy…sex in general became the enemy!” says Candida Royalle, a sex-positive feminist then, a director of adult films geared to adult viewers now.”26 Ensler is digging all of this back up with her assessment that women are their vaginas. If women follow what they see and accept that they are their vaginas, they have missed the point. How empowering is it to be the next Britney Spears, who is so free with her sexuality that she allows her vagina to be photographed “accidentally” six times in one weekend? Is it truly empowering to “have waxed vaginas…push-up bras or

[breasts] ‘enhanced’ into taut plastic orbs that stand perpetually at attention?”27 By becoming female sexuality personified, women are losing their agency.

There is no doubt that Ensler helps women. She grants women a way to speak about their vaginas and their pleasure. She opens the door for feminism to take a funky, new approach to reaching out to others. She began a worldwide phenomenon that raises money for women’s health, agency, and safety around the globe. Even so, The Vagina Monologues is imperfect. Many women still cannot say the word vagina without blushing or mumbling. There are still a great many synonyms for vagina that are “less embarrassing” to say. There are women who refuse to be labeled as their vaginas, and there are women who think it’s empowering to flash their vaginas as often as possible. Her work helps a great many women, but more must be done to help women understand and enjoy their liberation to the fullest.

She opens the door for feminism to take a funky, new approach to reaching out to others.

26 Levy, Female Chauvinist Pigs, 49. 27 Ibid., 63.
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**AUTHOR BIO:**

Kathleen Esling wrote this paper at the end of her sophomore year and tinkered with it throughout her junior year. Kathleen is majoring in English and minoring in Theatre.
Dance is in a constant state of progression. Choreographers have a tendency to rebel against the familiar, creating new and exciting movements that show intricacies previously undiscovered. But how can dancers continue to be creative without remembering what brought them to the present? Jiri Kylian and Alvin Ailey certainly create vibrant and innovative pieces, but they make sure to recognize their origins and connect past complexities to contemporary issues. While the works of Nederlands Dans Theater and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater showcase different technique and focus, they contain a very unifying element; Kylian’s *Whereabouts Unknown* and Ailey’s *Revelations* both focus on dance’s anthropological roots, stressing cultural connections and a constant awareness of the past to see where the arts can go in the future.

*Whereabouts Unknown* sheds light on its appreciation of past cultures from the moment the curtain rises. A rectangular pool of light appears slightly stage left with a woman running in slow motion on the upstage diagonal. Her posture suggests great speed as her upper body tilts forward, and her arms alternate swinging in front of her, but the reality of the slug-like speed of her limbs and her inability to travel juxtaposes the expectation of the movement. With the run being set in slow motion, there is a contrast established between continuing forward and being stuck in place, which relates directly to Kylian’s message of the past. This dancer wants to travel forward and progress, desiring to reach
new expectations and defy boundaries, but that cannot happen until she realizes the importance of her past within the present. She remains stuck until she can make the connection to her cultural roots and recognize that every element of the past plays its role in modern day. The choreographer sends a deliberate message with his first image, sharing his stress on anthropological roots with his audience. If an artist is unwilling to connect his or her current desires with those of long ago, very little progress will be made creatively. There is a connection within all of us that “traces back to the ‘whereabouts’ of our existence,” and this prolonged run exemplifies that immediately (Kylian 7). With this single image, Kylian sets up the importance of past cultures and displays their constant influence on artists and the artists’ ability to create in modern day.

The contrast of innovative modern dance to the ancient props and supplemental pieces that these dancers interact with provides a link to both worlds, showing that the events of yesteryear are highly relevant to the current times. A male dancer enters the stage wielding a large spear, spinning it rapidly over his head and incorporating thrusting actions with the prop into his movement. When he is not whipping the instrument around himself, he holds onto it tightly as he executes high vertical jumps with a somewhat twisted body and bounds across the stage with low, yet explosive, leaps. The differentiation between the animalistic and instinctual hunting movement and the physical and technical choreography ties the world of anthropology and dance together. The dancer switches from a highly trained dancer to a natural-born hunter, showing no bias to either character, but demonstrating both as powerful and influential. The movement associated with the past and present version of this character reveals strength with its sharpness and attack, and the transition and blend between the two sides is so smooth that it is as if one cannot exist without the other. This primal man exists within this modern dancer, and both sides of his being must be portrayed if he is to be fully understood and able to reach his full creative capacity. The ancient and ritualistic hunting motifs combine with the “vivid and inventive [dance] vocabulary” to establish an understanding “not just to our anthropological past but to dance’s 20th century history” (Murphy). By creating a scenario where both past and present cultures can be viewed in one concept, the choreographer displays the importance and interconnectedness of the two. It suggests that, though the world has come quite a long way from its origins, native and prehistoric being still lies within and
contributes to daily actions and artistic creativity more than might have been previously realized.

The physical journey through time is also represented in Kylian’s dance within the trajectories of the dancers and their journeys through the space. The upward curve of the left corner upstage limits and challenges the dancers' relationship with their space, and this unique setting indicates a constant progression of time and a forward motion into the future. A group of five men run full speed onto the stage, sliding with legs and arms wide until they come to a complete stop. They leap and turn quickly in complete synchronization, saving their biggest and highest movements for the most accentuated and vibrant notes in the music. The men take one last big leap and continue to run up the inclined stage, but just as they are about to reach its peak, they gracefully rebound and trot back down the incline, gaining speed to execute a finishing slide. The space’s representation of time shows their constant advance within the present as they run up the slope, but they always return to that lower and simpler part of the stage, remaining connected to their roots and executing their most complex and intricate dancing in the area that represents the past. Their connection and technique is strongest when they are relating to their cultural source, which ties directly into Kylian’s emphasis on the past within the arts. Dance must constantly connect to origins within its history and various cultures, and such a mentality about the art will result in a “journey into their world to discover our world” (Kylian 7). The Whereabouts dancers that partake in this process learn about themselves in relation to a bigger picture, recognizing that their best dancing occurs only when they are able to appreciate their roots. This unrestricted attitude can only result in an expansion of the understanding of dance and its cultural connections, leading to a more well-rounded dancer, performer, and creator.

Alvin Ailey places heavy emphasis on the connectivity between past rituals and modern dance, especially in relation to African tradition and culture. There are specific sections of Revelations, such as “Take Me to the Water,” that recount traditions of the native, African country as well as a history within America to show the importance of these times within the black dance culture. A woman holding a white umbrella contracts and ripples her spine, creating a wave-like image throughout her body that seems to have no choice but to billow through her arms as well. This undulation not only connects her to the spirituality
of the scenario but also takes her back to traditional African dance. The ritualistic roots of African dance run deep, and Ailey’s inclusion of original movement connects the dancer back to such customs. It gives the movement a deeper meaning by suggesting its connection to the origin of a culture. Not only does Ailey give a nod toward his ethnic roots but he also includes the more recent past of Africans within America and the traditions that resulted from this new culture. The dancers clasp their hands in prayer and saunter forward and back, seemingly initiating from the hips, to create a fluid and smooth traveling step. This walk imitates the group baptisms within the black churches of early America, the easy saunter suggesting a wade through water. By connecting creative movement to a past pedestrian one, Ailey creates a broader world of vast cultures and traditions. “He drew upon his ‘blood memories’ of Texas…as inspiration” for Revelations, stressing the importance of these events and specific actions within African American society (Cal Performances). By deliberately including motifs of both his ancient African heritage and his culture’s American past, Ailey brings an entirely new awareness to their issues, desires, and rituals as seen through time. He broadened the understanding of his vast culture when he took the time to appreciate his roots and their role in the artist he became.

The use of a community within Ailey’s signature piece symbolizes the relationship that artists feel toward the past occurrences and traditions of their backgrounds that suggests the wide-reaching effects of these pasts in both the dance and cultural worlds. The most climactic and powerful scenes occur when a large group of dancers is executing the same movement, suggesting that the issues being raised affect every individual of that particular culture and are thus highly important to address. “Pilgrim of Sorrow” begins with a large group in a triangle formation. The dancers move slowly and articulately, making sure they carry the whole motion through every extremity in their bodies. They dance entirely in unison, save for a few moments of dispersal, but the group always comes back to execute the movement together. Every member of that group is going through the same spiritual and cultural struggle, and a community image only aids in the importance of the message. It shows just how far the issues of spirituality in a new world reach, and with Ailey taking the time to investigate such struggle and apply it to many of his dancers, he raises his artistic ability to a new level. He focuses on his ancestors and their happiness and joy, suffering and sorrow. Ailey’s goal was “to create a poetic autobiography about moving from
the past into the future, acknowledging one’s cultural heritage as part of creating one’s own identity,” and by applying this heritage to a community of dancers, he applied it to the African American community as a whole (Banes). These hardships affect the entire ethnic group, and African Americans today still feel the repercussions of such struggle. In creating a sense of community, Ailey displays the extensive effect of a past culture in a present society.

Kylian’s and Ailey’s recognition of the importance of the past allows them to transcend the expectations of dance and move into a creative realm that had yet to have been discovered before they ventured upon it. They had no intention to create futuristic movement or entirely new ways of dancing, but instead they focused on the foundations of dance and the foundations of certain cultures to create something new. They went back to the basics to increase their creativity as opposed to overdoing it with concepts that tried to reinvent dance and its origins. Societal histories and the basis of cultures can no longer be seen as a hindrance in progression, but can instead be viewed as a catalyst—a means to improvement, expansion, and invention. A reflection of the past may just be that element that sends an artist into a future of endless possibility.

Works Cited

AUTHOR BIO:

Hillary Hershenow graduated in 2012 with an English degree, plus a minor in Dance, and headed off to study law. She enjoyed combining her love of dance and writing to further examine the genre of dance criticism.
The eyes of Charlie are upon him. The soldier feels their invisible threatening glare penetrate his skin through the dense brush. Bombs explode in the distance, rattling the ground beneath his feet. Bullets wiz through the air. He must run to safety, find his comrades. Running desperately for his life, the soldier chokes on the thick, moist air that inhabits Vietnam’s humid jungles. The dense jungle grabs hold of him, and the soldier stumbles to the ground. Fearful, he searches for the menacing eyes of “Charlie” the enemy. Suddenly, the terrain shifts. Lying on the floor, the soldier realizes he is no longer in Vietnam, but the concrete jungle of New York City. The eyes upon him are not Vietcong, but concerned bystanders. The bombs are merely cars backfiring in the overcrowded New York streets. Charlie, the jungle, Vietnam—they are hallucinations within the soldier’s mind; yet, these flashbacks are hauntingly real and terrifyingly familiar. The Vietnam War ended more than thirty-five years ago, but the war still rages on within his mind.

In August 1975, the Vietnam War was declared over, and American troops were brought home, leaving behind Vietnam and its treacherous jungles. Yet, the horrors of war had already sunk its claws deep inside the psyches of thousands of soldiers. Their greatest battle would be resuming life as it once was, after experiencing life as it should never have been. Just like The Vietnam War, societal readjustment was a war that thousands of Vietnam veterans would lose. While the volatile nation tried to forget its embarrassing defeat in a “morally ambiguous war”...
(Rotter et al.), it also ignored the needs of those who fought in the battle. As a result, thousands of Vietnam veterans have experienced great difficulty and have failed to readjust to American society. Many Vietnam veterans became homeless, suicide rates escalated, and substance abuse became even more pervasive. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) continued to fester and build beneath the surface, while the government dismissed both its existence and seriousness. Ultimately, time healed some of the Vietnam veterans’ wounds and many veterans were eventually able to reintegrate into society, find jobs, get married, and have children. Nonetheless, forty years after serving in the war that ripped America apart, thousands of Vietnam veterans are still struggling and being ignored by the very government and nation for which they fought. The American government continually fails to assist and serve the individuals who have served our nation. Therefore, due to the government’s failure to recognize the seriousness of PTSD and to provide sufficient social services, thousands of Vietnam veterans have been unable to properly readjust to civilian life after the Vietnam War.

Prior to the Vietnam War and following World War II, communism was the United States’ greatest enemy. Meanwhile, the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia was the country’s biggest threat. Every effort was taken by the American government to prevent further expansion of communism into Southeast Asia after both China and Cuba were overtaken by what the U.S. viewed as the evils of socialism. Both China and Russia assisted the now-communist Northern Vietnamese as they sought to overtake the somewhat-independent government of Southern Vietnam. For over ten years, the United States had been sending troops to help assist Southern Vietnam’s fight. In 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the presidency for the recently assassinated John F. Kennedy as well as the burden of what to do with Vietnam. Despite overwhelming evidence on the precarious situation of Vietnam, Johnson decided to carry on with the war for fear of communism spreading further. This decision led to America’s most polarizing war and became one of “the most disastrous of all of America’s undertakings over the whole two-hundred years of its history” (Kennan qtd. in Rotter et al.).

As the war progressed, so did the nation’s disapproval for all that was taking place in Vietnam. Millions of dollars were spent annually on a war that was dividing the nation—a cause most Americans
believed to be merely secondary to far more pressing issues at home, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Anti-war protests filled city streets as death tolls abroad continued to rise and civilians fought the draft at home. Thousands of men who opposed the war were drafted and forced to fight. Some men chose to flee to Canada to avoid the horrors in Vietnam. Images of murdered villagers, innocent children screaming and running away from burning homes, and other atrocities began to flood the U.S. media. Americans could not believe what was taking place in Southeast Asia. Yet, none of these images compared to the reality the Vietnam veterans were facing every day in combat.

The jungles of Vietnam were alien territory for U.S. soldiers and came to embody hell on earth. Soldiers were forever paranoid and on the lookout as lush foliage prevented soldiers from easily spotting their enemies, the Vietcong or “Charlie.” Agent Orange, a dangerous pesticide, was poured over the treacherous Vietnamese terrain and its inhabitants in order to defoliate the military’s greatest adversary: the jungle. Other horrific forms of chemical warfare were utilized, most notably, napalm. Napalm adheres to its target and burns all that it touches, all too often “frying to death…women, children, helpless peasants and other noncombatants in South Vietnam” (Rodsolsky 38). Death by napalm is physically agonizing, and all too often innocent South Vietnamese or U.S. soldiers fell victim to the lethal chemical. An ambush could last for days and combat became more psychological than ever. Charlie was everywhere. No one could be trusted. Men and women in battle came to accept the “terror and pain [and]…chaos of guerilla fighting in which even a child could be your killer” (Poppy). The intensity of war and combat heightened until finally, in 1972, the United States began pulling troops from Southern Vietnam and sending them home to America. In August 1975, South Vietnam’s capital, Saigon, fell to the communist forces of Northern Vietnam, the last of the American troops were evacuated, and the United States experienced its first defeat.

Although many Americans were glad to see the end of the Vietnam War, there were no celebrations at the war’s end or recognition of the war’s soldiers. Rather, a collective amnesia emerged as neither government nor society “wanted to talk or think about their nation’s longest and most debilitating war—the only war the United States ever lost” (Rotter et al.). Both the war and the soldiers were collectively ignored. There were no “welcome home” parades as there had been for returning WWII soldiers. Frequently when the Vietnam veterans were remembered, they shouldered primary blame for the
horrible atrocities of war. Soldiers became ostracized and characterized as drug abusers or violent, inhumane beings. Furthermore, the United States’ government was reeling after spending an estimated $167 billion on the war (Rotter et al.), and Vietnam veterans’ benefits and assistance were either slashed or terminated. The soldiers came home to this emotionally charged and volatile society, one which ultimately led to the “dehumanization of the Vietnam veteran” (“Are Vietnam Veterans”). Decades passed before the government began to truly comprehend the difficulty Vietnam veterans face in readjusting to civilian life and the seriousness of their greatest obstacle, PTSD.

Despite the numerous difficulties facing Vietnam veterans upon their return home, some argue that many of them successfully readjusted to civilian life and that their current problems cannot be directly linked to their time of service. Actually, many individuals within the United States’ government believe that, despite how horrific the war was, the experiences of Vietnam veterans have shaped and molded individuals who are “inclined to work through their problems” rather than suppress them (McFadden A1). As Max Cleland, Vietnam veteran and former Head of the Veteran’s Administration, stated in an interview shortly after the war, the “average Vietnam-era veteran is a guy who’s really tougher and stronger and probably ultimately more motivated or capable than his peers” (“Are Vietnam Veterans”). Furthermore, most Vietnam veterans are offended at the oft-cited statistics on homeless veterans. They will be quick to point out that, of the nearly three million soldiers who served in the war, approximately one percent is actually homeless (Heeney A18).

Other critics quickly point to the Veterans Administration (VA) and the long-standing benefits it has provided to the country’s servicemen. They do not believe that the veterans have been forgotten, but rather that the government is doing all it can to properly provide for its service persons through its VA services. The aptly titled Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill) provides veterans with funds for education and other living expenses. Other government services include homeless shelters, job-assistance, and disability benefits. Max Cleland further states that the government and VA employ every source necessary when assisting veterans, especially those who are disabled.

We do everything from the time the guy gets out of the military-hospital bed. We put him in one of our health-care facilities if he needs it. When he gets well…we will have him in educational training-vocational rehabilitation for the disabled guy. We pay for his books, fees, tuition—everything. If he’s seriously disabled, we’ll buy him a specially adapted house, we help him in the purchase of a car, and so forth. (“Are Vietnam Veterans”)

Samuel A. Tiano, director of the regional VA office in Honolulu, notes that, regardless of services provided, some people will always want more than is
given, and unfortunately, some will still fall through the cracks (Witteman). According to men like Tiano, the Vietnam veterans’ inability to readjust to society is not due to a lack of governmental assistance, but to the veterans’ failure to capitalize on the resources provided.

The glaring absence of assistance in the treatment of PTSD has drawn many critics. The government and VA, however, are quick to point out that treating PTSD and providing services for it is not as easy as it might appear. Although patients can fit the criteria for PTSD, the disorder cannot be bio-medically proven. Even though PTSD stems from an experience of a traumatic nature, such as the Vietnam War, the VA argues there are too many factors that can lead to PTSD aside from serving in war. Sufficient evidence to suggest a direct correlation between the disorder and war is, in their eyes, not concrete evidence.

Another case against PTSD is that all too often the disorder does not manifest itself until years, even decades, after military discharge. In 1993, one of the first studies conducted by the Stanford Medical Center on homeless veterans and psychiatric disorders discussed this issue. Roughly sixty to seventy percent of homeless veterans did not experience substance abuse or homelessness until at least a decade after their discharge date (Winkleby and Fleshin 30). Researchers concluded that it was “unclear whether higher prevalences of...disorders among veterans are a result of risk associated with military service or with other personal, social or economic factors” (Winkleby and Fleshin 35). Yet, both researchers concluded their study by noting that there was an evident absence in governmental medical service that would assist with the veterans’ PTSD and other psychiatric problems. Therefore, further studies must be conducted in order to draw sufficient conclusions on the matter (Winkleby and Fleshin 35). Initially, this study’s findings appear to favor the government’s view that PTSD cannot be directly linked to service in the Vietnam War. What the study subtly highlights, however, is the government’s inability to provide adequate social services for its Vietnam veterans and the unfortunate consequences the war has had on those veterans’ lives.

Many years passed before the government began to truly understand the gravity of PTSD. Numerous veterans’ services were grossly ignored because the disorder simply, “did not exist.” In 1980, the American Psychological Association (APA) deemed PTSD an official term to explain a psychological disorder rooted from a traumatic event.
or experience (Kulka et al. v). This diagnosis came five years after the end of the war in Vietnam. The APA describes trauma as an event “outside the range of usual human experience…that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone” (Poppy). For years the disorder was given unofficial names such as “shell-shock” or “battle fatigue,” as war-weary soldiers returned home and struggled with their experiences at war. Since there was not an official or technical term for the symptoms of PTSD until 1980, it technically did not exist. A primary reason for this dismissal was the stigma behind the disorder. War is the duty of men. Men are tough; they carry out their orders and get things done. Therefore, flawed logic has led many to believe that if one is unable to deal with the brutalities of war, then one is not a man but merely the cowardly shadow of a man. What this mentality fails to address is that not all people are psychologically cut-out for war, nor can a person quickly forget the sights and events that occur during combat. Unfortunately, because of these stigmas, speaking about these struggles or even honoring these veterans who psychologically suffer from their service was, and in many ways still is, frowned upon. Even after bio-medical diagnosis from the APA, the government delayed its recognition of PTSD as an actual psychological disorder. Ultimately, this had devastating and long-term consequences on Vietnam veterans’ ability to readjust to society.

By 1964, when men and women began coming home from Vietnam shaken by the trauma of war or life-altering injury, soldiers struggled with the newfound task of readjusting to civilian life. Although all the signs and symptoms of PTSD were apparent, the disorder did not technically exist for another fifteen years, further putting off much needed treatment. Without these sufficient psychological services available, PTSD began to manifest itself into various forms of self-destructive behavior. Substance abuse of alcohol, heroin, cocaine, and LSD rose tremendously among Vietnam veterans as they sought to suppress and/or hide their psychological turmoil (Poppy). The prevalence of substance abuse and the inability to socially connect eventually drove many soldiers to the streets as they lost their homes and jobs. Struggles for Vietnam veterans only increased. Several studies conducted after the war estimated that the total amount of suicides after the war, 59,000, had exceeded the number of soldiers who actually died during the war, 58,000 (Poppy). Many other deaths were less direct, but were drug-related. Steve Bently, a Vietnam veteran who continues to struggle with PTSD, is the first to state that, even if no hard data exists on suicide...
rates and service time in Vietnam, he still has “known more men who have died since they got home than were killed in Vietnam” (qtd. in Poppy). While these individuals were taking their own lives due to untreated PTSD, others retreated back into the jungles. Soldiers like Nash A. Miller, a former helicopter door gunner, fled to the jungles of Hawaii shortly after returning to the United States (Witteman). The jungle is now their home. These “bush vets” have set-up camp surrounded by the bush, weapons, and booby traps to try and “control... an environment that once terrified them” (Witteman). This environment and experience terrified thousands of Vietnam veterans—they could not successfully readjust to American life without proper assistance. Yet, once the war ended, these soldiers were forgotten about as quickly as the war. Not only did they fail to receive recognition for serving in a war they were drafted to fight in, but they also failed to receive proper treatment and were forced to “coexist with an undigested trauma, or to try to suppress it” (Poppy).

While these individuals were taking their own lives due to untreated PTSD, others retreated back into the jungles.

On the heels of the APA’s official PTSD diagnosis, several studies came out legitimizing the struggles Vietnam veterans were facing in readjusting to civilian life and the imminent need for government social services to combat these issues. The first study took place from 1973-1980 and was conducted by several Vietnam veterans with the assistance of private grants and sponsorship from the National Institute of Mental Health and the VA. Conclusions stated that “exposure to combat [in Vietnam] had a direct relationship to current abuse of alcohol and drugs as well as...medical troubles and stress-related emotional problems” (McFadden A1). With the new PTSD diagnosis, in addition to these findings, many felt there was finally a clear directive “for programs to be developed to meet the continuing needs that Vietnam veterans have that result directly from their military service” (McFadden A1). Yet, the government still failed to provide for its veterans. In 1981, the Reagan Administration cut all funding to the few nationwide outreach centers that were provided to assist Vietnam veterans with psychological counseling. These were also the only elements to survive the 1979 veteran’s bill (McFadden A1). Nonetheless, even when pressure did mount to maintain sufficient psychological services, they were only meant to be temporary. Finally, in 1983, Senator and committee member of Veterans Affairs, Alan Cranston, proposed a definitive study to Congress that would solidify proof of the seriousness of PTSD among Vietnam veterans. He maintained hope that additional services would “emerge to help Vietnam veterans and others who continue to suffer as a result of being traumatized in service to their country”
The study was titled the “National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study” and was to be carried out by the APA’s leading psychiatrists. Cranston and other Vietnam veterans noticed that Congress did not want to focus on long-term solutions, but rather felt the war, and its resulting effects, was over (Kulka et al., xx). Nonetheless, the senator knew that responding to these glaring issues was a controversy that Congress could no longer ignore. Congress approved the study only in hopes that it would be the concrete evidence they needed to finally disprove the significance of PTSD and its correlation to military service (Kulka et al. xx). Results proved the contrary: time may have passed, but the wounds of thousands of Vietnam veterans were failing to heal.

The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) provided irrefutable proof of PTSD’s existence and of the powerful hold it has taken on the lives of Vietnam veterans. The study looked at men and women of all ethnicities within three different categories: Vietnam era civilians, veterans who served, but not in Vietnam, and Vietnam veterans. Vietnam veterans were also evaluated further based upon their level of “high war-zone stress exposure” (Kulka et al. xxvii). Three major conclusions were drawn from the study: 1) The greater the veteran’s involvement in combat, the greater their rate for PTSD and other psychiatric disorders. 2) PTSD increased the rate and/or likelihood of substance abuse and other mental disorders. 3) A majority of veterans felt the VA did not provide social services, but even if they did, veterans were unlikely to utilize them due to their lack of trust in the government (Kulka et al. 97). Veterans with high war zone exposure had lower levels of happiness and higher levels of PTSD, social isolation, homelessness or vagrancy, and substance abuse compared to Vietnam era civilians (Kulka et al. 142). Overall, the study concluded that roughly fifteen to twenty percent of Vietnam veterans had, have, or will experience some form of PTSD in their lifetime (Kulka et al. xxvii). However, this is the one statistic of the NVVRS study that has been proven incorrect. Today, nearly thirty percent, or over 830,000, Vietnam veterans suffer from a substantial form of PTSD (Poppy). This is a highly significant number of individuals who have been forever affected as a result of sacrificing for their country—a country that chose to ignore their needs as though they simply did not exist.

Following numerous studies such as the NVVRS that legitimized PTSD and the obstacles Vietnam veterans face, the United States government eventually started to provide national psychological outreach centers in addition to VA benefits for those suffering from PTSD; however, many vets feel the “damage...has [already] been done and much of it may be
irrevocable” (McFadden A1). Essentially, ‘too little, too late.’ Furthermore, those who seek assistance from the government, most frequently from the VA, are turned away. Vets are repeatedly sent away because their PTSD cannot be definitively linked to the Vietnam War. Raymond Scurfield, a Vietnam veteran and therapist, explains the process: “The institutions regard the individual as guilty until proven innocent. You have to prove how screwed up you are and how much your being screwed up is related to a particular event of trauma” (qtd. in Poppy). Even then, veterans are still turned away. One such veteran, Adrian Yurong, was denied benefits because his job description, radar operator, was deemed not sufficient enough a duty to have caused his PTSD (Witteman). Such behavior from the one government body that is set in place to support its veterans discourages the ones in need from seeking further assistance (Aeppel 3). As a Vietnam veteran candidly put it, “You must be willing to put up with total bullshit to get help” (Witteman). Unfortunately, this has led to heightened political alienation among Vietnam veterans who fear ‘the system’ and bureaucracy of the VA (Johnson 408), and as a result, thousands continue to fall through the cracks.

Of the nearly 830,000 Vietnam veterans who have or continue to experience some form of PTSD, over thirty-five percent of those veterans are currently homeless (Kulka et al. 143). These individuals lack any form of governmental medical care because they suffer from a mental disorder or substance abuse problem, which is grounds for immediate denial of any veterans’ benefits. Nevertheless, what the government fails to address is that many of these individuals are suffering from these conditions as a direct result of their PTSD, the very same disorder the government denied until nearly fifteen years after the Vietnam War ended. and a disorder that fails to receive necessary treatment because of the prevailing stigma attached to it. “For many homeless veterans, residual emotional and psychological effects of war are what led to their unfortunate circumstances” (Srinivasan). There has been some government funding towards assisting nonprofit groups that provide for homeless veterans such as the American Legion Homeless Veterans Housing Project. For years now, the group has been renovating old buildings in order to establish shelters for veterans. On April 8th 2011, the government cut all funds to the
project in addition to $75 million for additional homeless veterans’ benefits (Srinivasan). The same senior policy makers who felt it was necessary to slash funds from services that assist the very people “who lay their lives on the line each day for this country” (Srinivasan), also felt that it was necessary to continue governmental funding of NASCAR. Ironically, the million-dollar funding goes towards promoting individuals to join the armed services. How can the U.S. government seek to recruit individuals to serve their country when they have failed time and again to serve and provide for those very same individuals when they need it most? As surviving Vietnam veteran Michael Cowan puts it, “If a nation is going to suit up its young men and send them to war, it should be prepared to take care of them afterward” (Witteman). The United States’ priorities need to be drastically shifted, and Vietnam veterans must start receiving proper recognition.

The government’s failure to properly honor Vietnam veterans or recognize PTSD immediately after the war led to the inability of thousands to properly readjust to post-war civilian life. Most importantly, the United States government’s continual lack of necessary social services, lack of cooperation in providing proper veterans’ benefits, and lack of recognition of Vietnam veterans has created the perception that these veterans are not worthy of the hero’s honor or assistance that so many other U.S. veterans have been awarded. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. was the first true step taken to recognize the sacrifice so many of these men and women made for their country. Over 58,000 soldiers died in service to their country for a war most did not want or choose to fight. The memorial was the first major act of recognition for Vietnam veterans. But building the wall is not enough. Max Cleland served in Vietnam and lost three of his limbs in a battle at Khe Sanh. He continued to serve his country as a U.S. Senator and as head of the VA for over twenty years. Yet, it was not until Cleland left the VA that he truly began to understand the plight of the Vietnam veteran in America. Even Cleland, who appeared to be a well-adjusted individual, continued to suffer from PTSD (Henneberger). His true moment of peace and healing did not come until he was finally recognized for his greatest sacrifice.

Midway through there came a point that lifted me up and changed my world. Obama was speaking of those ‘who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom…For us they fought and died in places like…
Normandy and Khe Sanh,’ my heart skipped. I couldn’t believe he said Khe Sanh. It was an amazing moment for me to finally get recognition, almost 41 years later to the month, for the battle that had changed the course of my life…it made me feel like my sacrifice mattered after all. (qtd. in Henneberger)

For Max Cleland and thousands of Vietnam veterans, the government’s failure to recognize PTSD was so problematic because it was a failure to recognize the incredible sacrifices they made for their country.

The Vietnam War may be over, but the nightmares still remain for thousands of Vietnam veterans. They returned home to a society that did not welcome them and sought assistance from a government that largely ignored their needs. The American government and society remain ambivalent on serving or honoring these brave individuals who sacrificed so much for our country. Vietnam veterans must not be characterized as the lost souls of a lost war. America should start recognizing these individuals’ sacrifices by providing adequate veterans’ benefits and psychological services, but most importantly, by telling them, “Thank you. Thank you for serving our country in a war too brutal to fathom. Thank you for serving in a war that rendered you permanently disabled, physically and emotionally. Thank you for sacrificing so much, when we have given you so little in return.” Then and only then can these veterans truly start to heal from the emotional and psychological wounds amassed while serving in the Vietnam War. The war may be over, but now, let the healing begin.
Works Cited


AUTHOR BIO:

Kristen Thompson is an Art History major and a Theology minor. She plans on working in the museum field. When she graduates in May 2013, she will be the first in her family to go to or graduate from college! And a month later, she will be getting married!
Douglas Emlen (2011) defines sexual selection as “an evolutionary history of intense competition by males over access to a limited number of reproductive females” (p. 149). Throughout the natural world, we see numerous examples of traits organisms have evolved that give them an advantage in this never-ending competition. One example of such an organism is the male beetle, which uses its horns or mandibles as weapons to fight off competitors and win the right to mate with the female. The bigger the horns are, the greater the general reproductive success of the male, so directional selection occurs, and it is common to see horns of seemingly ridiculous proportions compared to the male’s body size (Emlen, 2011). The concept of sexual selection gives us the basic reasoning behind the presence of the exaggerated horn growth we see in so many beetle species, but it leaves many questions unanswered. As Emlen (2000) states, “Understanding how development affects the expression of morphological traits should help explain the evolution of those traits” (p. 2). This paper will explore several dimensions of beetle horn characteristics and evolution, including factors that influence their initial growth and development, reasons for horn variability that may help explain the morphologies and lifestyles of different lineages, and mechanisms that may
contribute to setting an upper limit on the runaway growth of horns.

One of the first questions to arise in the study of beetles and their horns is how those weapons of sexual selection got to be so big in the first place, relative to male beetle body size. A similar question occurred to Gotoh et al. (2011), and they collaborated on a study to examine the biochemical explanation behind weapon growth and attempted to relate it to evolutionary mechanisms. The study focused on the growth of mandibles as weapons of sexual selection in stag beetles, but the results can be applied to the horn growth of horned beetles. Gotoh et al. (2011) indicates that similar developmental processes involving epithelial proliferation and complex skin folding in the prepupal period have been observed in both mandible and jaw growth. The basis for this study came from pre-existing knowledge that juvenile hormone (henceforth referred to as JH) plays an important role in the general body growth of beetles during their development in the prepupal period with higher concentrations of JH causing overall larger body size and an even more pronounced effect on increased mandible growth (Gotoh et al., 2011). The study also notes that beetles raised under conditions of high nutrient availability spent more time in developmental stages and were able to reach larger sizes as adult males with significantly larger mandibles. Therefore, it seems logical that high nutrient contents may facilitate the activity of JH, allowing it to cause increased growth in male beetles; indeed, the study acknowledges that JH has been suggested to respond to nutrition levels as a regulating factor (Gotoh et al., 2011). In other words, an increased nutrient level during early development results in higher concentrations of JH and an eventual larger mandible size. To bring this into an evolutionary perspective, though this is not addressed in the study, females may preferentially mate with males who have access to greater nutrient pools or better food sources so that their offspring will be able to grow enlarged mandibles to their fullest extent. Finally, the study needed to provide evidence that JH is the factor that directly increases the mandible size of adult male beetles. They accomplished this by treating larva with JH analogs and observing corresponding increased mandible growth. However, it was discovered that the JH analog needed to be administered specifically during the prepupal phase to cause disproportionate mandible growth compared to body size; otherwise, it simply caused overall
increased body growth. Therefore, it was concluded that during the prepupal phase, mandibles showed increased sensitivity to JH concentrations in male stag beetles, resulting in disproportionately large structures as adults (Gotoh et al., 2011). Again, we can apply this finding to evolutionary theory: Nutrient levels activate phenotypic plasticity that allows for variation in mandible size, which can be greatly exaggerated by high JH concentrations. Therefore, evolution may be acting to select for the trait of phenotypic plasticity to allow the mandibles, and perhaps horns in horned beetles, to grow larger when conditions are ideal. Additionally, large male mandibles may be an indicator that the male possesses increased JH activity that he could pass on to offspring, making him more attractive to females for that reason. Further experimentation to test these theories would be very informative.

Next, we move on to consider the great variation in horn morphology and the connection this may have with variation in the lifestyles of different beetle lineages. We see beetles in all kinds of environments and habitats—the spread of different species and populations is incredibly diverse. In his essay in our textbook, Douglas Emlen (2011) also notes that there are several distinct possible morphologies of horned beetles in that horns may grow from different places on the bodies of different beetles. He investigates whether there is any correlation or possible causation between these two kinds of variation among beetle lineages: lifestyle (especially focusing on habitat) and morphology. Emlen identifies the three main horn morphologies as growing from the back of the head, the front or middle of the head, and the center or sides of the thorax. He uses a phylogeny to demonstrate that exaggerated beetle horns of all three morphologies have arisen independently multiple times throughout the genus Onthophagus’ evolutionary history (Emlen, 2011). This highlights the significance of the morphological differences and indicates that there must be an explanation behind the trend, because the traits would not be so frequent just by random chance if they were not being acted on or favored by natural selection. His experiments determined that the horns themselves did not serve different purposes based on their location on the beetle body, which then led him to consider a different explanation for the correlation between habitat and horn type: Different horn types may have varying costs to the beetle depending on its habitat. His findings indicated that the prepupal period, during which horn growth occurs (the same period identified by Gotoh et
al.), was also the time of development for all other primary adult structures, most importantly eyes, antennae, and wings. The “prepupa” is not feeding during this stage, so energy for structure growth was drawn from a predetermined and limited nutrient pool (Emlen, 2011). Using artificial selection to grow populations with the biggest horns, Emlen found an energetic tradeoff in the development of horns and the development of nearby anatomical structures. Different taxa grew their horns in different locations, and each location was associated with a specific tradeoff that decreased the size of a specific adult structure. Horns on the back of the head resulted in smaller eyes, impairing vision. Horns in the front of the head impeded antennae growth and therefore the process of olfaction. Horns on the thorax correlated with smaller wings, negatively impacting flight capabilities (Emlen, 2011). Based on the habitat of the beetle, any of these tradeoffs may be more costly than others, so Emlen compared his findings with the known habitats and lifestyles of the beetle species he was experimenting with. He discovered that nocturnal beetles, who needed full eye functioning to see at night, had lower instances of horns on the back of the head. Beetles who lived in low-density populations and needed to fly great distances had lower instances of thorax horns so that their wings could grow fully. Finally, beetles in dry, arid, or windy habitats showed low instances of horns on the front of the head so that their olfactory abilities were not impeded by stunted antennae growth (Emlen, 2011). Emлен’s study has clear evolutionary implications inherent in his methods and results—the evolution of these exaggerated weapons of sexual selection has not been random. In fact, they seem to be so important to beetle lifestyle strategies that instead of simply doing away with horns, natural selection has “found” a way to preserve them in multiple taxa without having a significant negative impact on survival. This is achieved by distributing the horns so that the most important adult structures for that species or population can remain fully functional, minimizing the effects of the tradeoff on fitness while still allowing beetles to reap the sexual benefits of possessing huge horns to win females and reproductive opportunities.

The final remaining question deals with how natural selection is able to limit what could easily turn into a runaway increase in horn size. Sure, the energetic tradeoffs described above play a role, but why are horn and mandible sizes limited to what we see in beetles today? An important consideration, highlighted in a study by K. Okada, Katsuki, Y. Okada, and Miyatake (2011), is the tradeoffs that are involved in life history traits. This study posited that “the evolution of exaggerated traits is predicted to affect male life-
history strategies,” and studied, “whether increased investment in exaggerated traits can generate evolutionary changes in the life-history strategy for armed males” (p. 1737). One tradeoff addressed is the competition within components of an individual during development for obtaining maximum nutrient allocation, as identified by Emlen, which can result in morphological effects. Previous studies, such as one done by Kotiaho (as cited in K. Okada et al., 2011), have shown that weapon growth has been associated with negative impacts on life history traits due to both horn and mandible growth, but this particular study focused primarily on the effect of exaggerated mandible growth. However, the main focus of this study was on life history tradeoffs, measured primarily in the rates of pupal survival. The main experiment created three “selection regimes”: one subjected to directional artificial selection for large mandibles, one for small mandibles, and one control regime. The small mandible regime showed significantly increased pupal survival compared to both the control and large mandible groups, and the long mandible regime showed significantly lower pupal survival than the control and short mandible groups (K. Okada et al., 2011). It is important to note that this trend was only observed for males, while females showed no significant trends. This allows us to attribute the difference in male pupal survival to mandible growth, because this is a characteristic unique to males, and it supports the concept that females preferentially allocate their energy stores to investments in reproduction. These results suggest that a genetic predisposition to grow large mandibles necessarily requires less investment in the physiological costs of surviving to adulthood, an indirect negative effect on a primary life history trait. Males from the large mandible regime were found to hatch sooner, which may represent a life-history compensation mechanism because this would have given them first access to mating with the females, but this trend still did not outweigh the negative effects on pupal survival (K. Okada et al., 2011). Other evidence that smaller horn size may be preserved by natural selection comes from a review article written by Emlen (2000). He introduces the idea that males with smaller horns can sneak around a large-horned male guarding the entrance to “his” female’s dung tunnel by digging a side tunnel that intersects the female’s tunnel below the ground.
easier and less conspicuous navigation of the hijacked tunnels (Emlen, 2000). In this article, Emlen presents the idea that male horn growth is triggered during development once the beetle reaches a certain body size, presumably moderated by JH activity—above this threshold, the male will have horns and below it, he will not (Emlen, 2000). I suggest that this provides evidence that, below this threshold, it is actually energetically favorable to refrain from exaggerated horn growth because the “sneaking” lifestyle will be easier with a smaller body size. It is clear that natural selection has imposed several constraints that act to limit the extent to which horn and mandible growth can become increasingly exaggerated.

Ultimately, it is evident that weapon growth in both mandibles and horns is a very important evolutionary component of the beetle lifestyle. The size of these weapons has become increasingly exaggerated for use in sexual selection to secure reproductive opportunities, and the biochemical mechanisms behind their growth allow the weapons to become large enough to win fights against other males for access to females. Altering the horn location based on the specific lifestyle and requirements of a taxon or population can minimize energetic tradeoffs involved in exaggerated horn growth, but there are some absolute upper limits on how large these weapons can become relative to body size based on life-history strategy tradeoffs. Still, we can be sure that beetles will continue to exhibit these weapons for a long time to come.

References


Shannon Lowell studied biology and played volleyball for Saint Mary’s College of California for four years. She graduated in 2011 with a Biology degree, plus a minor in Spanish, and headed to Creighton University for medical school. Her favorite activities include playing and coaching volleyball, reading, cooking, and doing yoga.
In the early 1980s, on the brink of financial ruin, the Ford Motor Company assembled Team Taurus (McGirt 101). The team, comprised of almost four hundred engineers, designers, and marketers, was tasked with the critical job of saving the Ford Motor Company by reinventing the family car (McGirt 101). Using unconventional methods in the design and manufacture, as well as a staggering three billion dollars, Team Taurus was victorious (Flint 58-62). In 1986, its first year of production, the Ford Taurus was named Motor Trend’s Car of the Year (Jaroff and McWhirter 58; McGirt 101). Within twenty years, there were 7.5 million Taurus automobiles on the road (McGirt 101)—one of which belonged to my family. In 1989, my family purchased a Taurus and named her Aquarius. We spent the next thirteen years and 220,000 miles destroying the auspicious automobile Team Taurus created.

The Ford Taurus was named for the astrological sign of the wives of the top men who designed it (Holusha 35). It seems fitting then, that my family’s Taurus was named for the astrological sign of my mother—the wife of the man who purchased it. Aquarius’ service to our family started out nobly; she initially occupied the coveted spot in our garage (the other parking space was occupied by whichever “Do It Yourself” (DIY) project my parents were avoiding that season). My family was blown away with what we saw as Aquarius’ space-age technology: she was our first car with power windows, power door locks, and a V-6 engine. Aquarius could take off like a rocket (it seemed to us) from a stoplight, comfortably accommodate my sister’s and
my gangly legs in the back seat, and blare, in stereo, Casey Kasem on the way home from church—we, as a family, could not have been more impressed.

Families across America were falling in love with the sleek new look of the Ford Taurus. Auto industry critics, who opposed the car’s rounded shape, likened the Taurus to a “jelly bean,” a “flying spud,” and a “gel tab” (Jaroff and McWhirter 58). Despite the jabs, consumers flocked to dealerships to get behind the wheel of the latest automotive trend. Therefore, when my parents purchased Aquarius in the late 80s, it seemed like suddenly everywhere we looked there was another Taurus—the innovative design had truly become ubiquitous. In fact, Ford Taurus was the best-selling automobile for three consecutive years, and nearly all other carmakers were attempting to incorporate some aspect of the Taurus’s popular design (Jaroff and McWhirter 58). Even with the prevalence of Taurus automobiles and Taurus look-alikes on the road, we never had trouble spotting our car in the mall parking lot. Shortly after Aquarius’ first season with us, her weekly soft-cloth carwash and strict fifteen mph speed limit on the gravel roads that led to our home were replaced by layers of corrosive winter salt and high-speed trips down paint-chipping county roads. In the way that dog owners know their animals by the markings on the pets’ coats, we knew, from a great distance, the numerous rust spots and dents that marked Aquarius.

Alas, Aquarius was not destined to have smooth rides down paved and sun-dappled country lanes like the Taurus automobiles in the television commercials. Instead, Aquarius careened down the road, hitting deer as she went. In one brief and hectic moment, with the help of a doe, my mother redesigned Team Taurus’s “softly rounded contours” on Aquarius’ front end (Jaroff and McWhirter 58). The deer, unfortunately, did not survive. When we heard about my mother’s accident, my father and I packed a lunch and headed for the site where my mother was waiting for the sheriff with Aquarius and the deer. My father and I ate our lunch beside the road, next to the driveway of a nearby house, quietly listening while my mother spoke with the sheriff. The sheriff, assuming that my father and I had come from the nearby farmhouse with a packed lunch to lay claim to the doe, suggested that we ask “this lady” before we assumed we could take her road kill. After my father explained to the sheriff that “this lady” was his wife, we—my father, my mother, and I—loaded the deer into Aquarius’ trunk and headed off to a Father’s Day fish fry. The deer spent the rest of the hot
day decomposing in the trunk. Though we kept her for another decade (Aquarius, not the doe), Aquarius never smelled the same after that day; every time the heat rose, anyone sitting in her could smell the poor deer all over again. I imagine hauling road kill to the butcher was not what Team Taurus envisioned when they aimed the Taurus’s sophisticated “European look” at attracting “younger, better educated, more affluent buyers” (Holusha 35).

In the end, like an aging beauty queen with perky silicone breast implants, Aquarius had parts on her that were not age appropriate. When Aquarius’ windshield-wiper motor gave out (despite my ignorant protests that I could probably get by without it), my father took Aquarius to her home away from home: Mort’s Wayside Garage on Highway 3. She was given an embarrassingly aggressive windshield-wiper motor that, even when running on low speed, caused the wipers to chip the paint on the side frames of the windshield, startling anyone who happened to sit in her front seat on a rainy day.

Aquarius eventually moved with me to Chicago where she demonstrated strength in spite of her age. For two brutal Chicago winters, she ferried me and as many of my friends as she could hold around the frozen city, and she spent the summers collecting parking tickets under her turbo-charged windshield-wipers.

For many years, Aquarius was my family’s trusty steed, waiting patiently in the driveway for us to call on her. During her years of loyal service, she delivered us safely and comfortably to various national parks, relatives’ homes, ballet recitals, swim meets, homecoming games, grocery stores, and the occasional emergency room visit. She absorbed into her plush interior countless conversations, curses, badly sung show tunes, and tears. Aquarius survived two teenage drivers, several deer collisions, dozens of ice storms, and the loss of a wheel somewhere in central Indiana on New Year’s Eve, 1999.

Yet, when it became clear that she would no longer be able to accommodate our demands, her title was signed-over to a friend at a party for the equivalent of sixty dollars in alcohol. Over the years of my childhood, my parents doted on, and then destroyed, several automobiles, yet my favorite will always be our Taurus. No other car left my family with so many memorable moments and comfortably forgettable journeys as our beloved Aquarius.
Heather Rikić

Works Cited

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Call for Submissions for Spectrum 2013:

Writing: We welcome submissions of any genre of writing produced as part of an undergraduate class, of any discipline. Please submit via e-mail to waccenter@stmarys-ca.edu, with Spectrum 2013 in the subject line, or in person to the Center for Writing Across the Curriculum, Dante 202. Please include the writer’s name, the professor’s name, and the course number. Writing may be submitted by the student writer or the student’s professor.

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The deadline for both writing and art submissions is Dec. 31, 2012. The work may have been produced any time during the 2012 calendar year.