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**Gemma**  
Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree  
in Women's and Gender Studies



Education and Culture

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**Deconstructing *The First Time*:  
An Ethnographic Approach to The Myth of Virginity Loss**

Giulia Cerioli





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An Ethnographic Approach to The Myth of Virginity Loss**

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(Cover illustration made for the thesis by Gema Marín Méndez)



*Your blood has become their meaning. [...]. Neither you nor I severed. There is no need for blood shed, between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us, from us. [...] Don't tear yourself apart like that with choices imposed on you. Between us, there's no rupture between virginal and nonvirginal. No event that makes us women. [...]. Your/my body doesn't acquire sex through an operation. Through the action of some power, function, or organ. Without any intervention or special manipulation, you are a woman already. There is no need for an outside; the other already affects you. It is inseparable from you. You are altered forever, through and through. That is your crime, which you didn't commit: you disturb their love of property. [...] the fault only comes about when they strip you of your openness and close you up, marking you with signs of possession; then they can break in, commit infractions and transgressions and play other games with the law. [...] how can we find each other again? How can we touch each other once more? Cut up, dispatched, finished: our pleasure is trapped in their system, where a virgin is one as yet unmarked by them, for them. One who is not yet made woman by and for them. Not yet imprinted with their sex, their language. Not yet penetrated, possessed by them. Remaining in that candor that waits for them, that is nothing without them, a void without them. A virgin is the future of their exchanges, transactions, transports. A kind of reserve for their explorations, consummations, exploitations. The advent of their desire, Not of ours. How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them. [...]. How can we speak so as to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/experienced ...? How can we shake off the chain of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, rid ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, alive, from their concepts? Without reserve, without the immaculate whiteness that shores up their systems?*

When Our Lips Speak Together, Luce Irigaray, 1985.

## **Abstract**

This thesis analyzes the myth of virginity through the experiences of a group of my hometown friends and colleagues of GEMMA Master. Starting from the dominant heteronormative event of *the first time*, I identify and discuss the main assumptions, beliefs and symbols emerged in relation to the myth, trying to expose its contradictions and deconstruct its imposed, harmful truths, finally proposing what I deem should be primary within the discourses girls and women receive since their entrance into sexuality. The theoretical framework is developed through the analysis of virginity loss as a *ritual*, and of the hegemonic definitions of sex (as heteronormative, cissexist, phallo- and coitocentric, macho-oriented both in agency and pleasure) and love (as romantic), so inextricably tied together within the rhetoric of virginity and by this same one reflected. Through a chronological division of the themes: before-during-after *the first time*, I analyze *the wait*, thus the criteria through which participants identify the «right» person/moment, their expectations, fears and questioning related to *the first time*, and the preparation of the body. I proceed discussing the multiple lacks within the event of *the first time*: «experience» on sex, agency, pleasure and any other acts apart from penis penetration. The focus of the following chapter is constituted by the body and the beliefs of its change after *the first time*, whose discussion is developed mainly around the hymen, blood and vagina size. In this chapter, I also deal with the idea of *the first time* sex as a *contamination*, with references to the phenomenon of virgin's body erotization. This path is concluded with some alternative definitions proposed by participants in relation to *the first time*, together with persisting worries and difficulties they identified/experienced within non-heterosexual contexts (relationships and feminist/queer spaces), such as managing to eradicate coitocentrism and romantic love.

## **Resumen**

Esta tesis analiza el mito de la virginidad a través de las experiencias de un grupo de amigxs de mi lugar natal y colegas del Máster GEMMA. Empezando por el evento heteronormativo dominante de *la primera vez*, identifico y discuto las principales suposiciones, creencias y símbolos que emergen con relación a este mito, intentando exponer sus contradicciones y deconstruir sus verdades impuestas y dañinas, proponiendo por fin lo que considero debería ser primario en los discursos que las chicas y las mujeres reciben desde su entrada en la sexualidad. El marco teórico está desarrollado a través del análisis de la pérdida de la virginidad como *ritual*, y de las definiciones hegemónicas de sexo (como heteronormativo, cissexista, phallo- y coitocentrico, orientado al varón - macho - tanto en la

agencia como en el placer) y de amor (como romántico), tan inextricablemente imbricadas dentro de la retórica de la virginidad y reflejadas por esta última. Así, a través de una división cronológica de los temas: antes-durante-después de *la primera vez*, analizo *la espera*, o sea los criterios a través de los cuales lxs participantes identifican la persona/momento «justa/o», sus expectativas, miedos y cuestionamientos relativos a *la primera vez*, y la preparación del cuerpo. Continúo discutiendo las múltiples faltas durante el evento de *la primera vez*: de «experiencia» en el sexo, de agencia, de placer y de cualquier otro acto aparte de la penetración del pene. El enfoque del capítulo siguiente está constituido por el cuerpo y las creencias sobre su cambio después de *la primera vez*, cuya discusión se desarrolla principalmente acerca del himen, la sangre y el tamaño de la vagina. En este capítulo, trato también la idea de sexo de *la primera vez* como *contaminación*, con referencias al fenómeno de la erotización del cuerpo de la virgen. Esta ruta se concluye con algunas definiciones alternativas propuestas por parte de lxs participantes con relación a *la primera vez*, juntamente a unas persistentes preocupaciones y dificultades que ellxs mismxs identificaron o conocieron por experiencia propia en contextos non-heterosexuales (relacionamientos y espacios feministas/queer) como conseguir erradicar el coitocentrismo y el amor romántico.

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I would like to thank my parents, I am not sure they know how much how I love and admire them. Mum, I would not be here if I was not inspired by you in the first place, you are strong, smart and so interesting, you can basically do everything to me. Kindness is what can change the world and you are the kindest person I have ever met. And dad, even if I react brusquely to «being explained things», you really have some, especially the ones about revolutions, I want to learn from you. You set a first positive masculine example to me, by whom I never felt discriminated or oppressed for being a girl. I think everyone should be raised in an environment of equality, respect and curiosity such as the one in which you both raised me.

(Vorrei ringraziare I miei genitori, non sono sicura sappiano quanto li ami ed ammiri. Mamma, non sarei qui se non fossi stata tu ad ispirarmi in primo luogo, sei forte, intelligente e così interessante, per me sei praticamente capace di fare qualsiasi cosa. La gentilezza è quello che può cambiare il mondo e tu sei la persona più gentile che io abbia mai incontrato. E papi, anche se reagisco bruscamente al fatto che «mi spieghino le cose», tu ne hai davvero alcune, specialmente quelle che riguardano le rivoluzioni, che voglio imparare da te. Sei stato un primo esempio maschile positivo,

dal quale non mi sono mai sentita discriminata od oppressa in quanto ragazza. Credo che tuttx dovrebbero nascere in un ambiente di uguaglianza, rispetto e curiosità come quello in cui mi avete entrambi cresciuta).

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You are those wise, brave, interesting, funny and cool girls I have always dreamt to be friend of when I was feeling alone and misunderstood. With you out there, the world for women is a safer place.

Let's stick together.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Choosing the topic: virginity as a useful category for a gender analysis**

I remember I started to reflect seriously on virginity just a couple of years ago, questioning my assumptions, the images I have been instinctively associating to this term and the way I used to define myself, as well as the other women around me, through it. I was already defining myself a feminist and I was proudly convinced I was living my sexuality and emotionality with a strong emancipated awareness; I thought I knew how to have and talk about sex in a critical and disenchanting way, I thought I had deconstructed, maybe even resolved within my life, the influence of fallacious discourses on sexuality. How deluded I was. In particular, I remember reading for the first time a detailed explanation of the hymen<sup>1</sup>, around which is commonly constructed the idea of «losing»<sup>2</sup> virginity and realizing how much I was unconsciously taking for granted with regard to this entire topic; that was just the very small beginning. The profound interest for symbolical and taboo issues related to women's bodies and sexualities made me keep this reflection as one of the most surprising I had been engaging with, continuing, therefore, my research and reflection on the theme. During this last year of GEMMA Master, when I was approaching the elaboration of the final thesis, I started again to discuss actively with my colleagues the concept of virginity; it has been in a way fascinating to observe how even among a great part of them, highly trained women in the field of feminist studies, the category of virginity resulted to be challenged with such a late in comparison to other heteropatriarchal discourses. Consciously, in fact, we would never associate a woman's first penis-into-vagina sex with the idea of ceasing to be «pure» or of *giving away* something, but we still use without much hesitation the expressions of: «Virgin» and «Losing virginity»; in the same way, we would never degrade non-heteronormative sex, but a considerable part of us still hardly connect sentences like: «The first time I had sex» with a different «sex» from penis-into-vagina one. These immediate paradoxes appeared to me as a proof of how silently consolidated is the myth of virginity within our knowledges on sexuality, how it still actively interferes in our understanding and definition of it, even among my feminist acquaintances, even if we do not consider virginity, in any way, something valuable.

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<sup>1</sup> «Vaginal Corona: Myths Surrounding Virginity» is a great-success booklet published in 2009 by The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU), a non-profit organization mainly active in the field of reproductive health and rights, information on sexuality and relationships. This publication can be read online at the link: [http://www.rfsu.se/Bildbank/Dokument/Praktikor/praktika-Vaginal\\_corona2009.pdf](http://www.rfsu.se/Bildbank/Dokument/Praktikor/praktika-Vaginal_corona2009.pdf) [Accessed 3/08/2018].

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the Introduction/Recap and conclusions, I will use the term «loss» (and its various declinations) related to virginity, without the inverted commas. Although the idea of *losing* is constructed, the recurring presence of these words throughout the text could have weighed down its reading if I had written them in inverted commas.

Coherently with other critical writings on this topic, throughout the thesis, I decided to refer to virginity as a: «Myth»<sup>3</sup> since it embodies a highly symbolical and deeply rooted discourse within the Western cultural imagery, where it has been traditionally transmitted as an idealized and high-sounding tale; it is a myth sustained and made explicit by what I will later define as a *ritual practice (the first time)*, it establishes and fixes gender roles and heteronormativity.

Virginity has historically functioned as another patriarchal tool to commodify women's bodies: it has symbolized the parameter through which sanctioning women's worthiness as goods, proprieties to be transacted from fathers to husbands, it has controlled and shamed women's sexuality, reinforced heteronormativity, hetero- and cis-sexism. I argue that, more or less consciously, the dominant discourse on virginity, with all its implications, permeated the way in which my interviewees and I have discovered and perceived our own sexuality. Although it could be apparently judged as an outdated category, I am strongly convinced it is still worth it to discuss as it embodies a problematic and harmful trope affecting the way in which we shape our gender identities, our sexualities and related emotionalities; I claim it has contributed, together with other socio-cultural pressures, to fix (and fix together) our normative knowledges on sex and love and has discouraged us from undertaking a genuine and safe exploration of our bodies, pleasures and desires.

Nevertheless, conceptualizing the work, I often found myself wondering: isn't talking about virginity, even if critically, reinforcing the ideal itself of virginity? Am I paradoxically legitimating this concept while trying to debunk it? As I was suggesting, virginity does look just superficially as an ancient value; it looks as if it was a resolved theme, but not because it has been dismantled, just because it has been settled undisturbed in our understanding and definition of sexuality for much time. That is to say, instead of wondering the reasons for recovering a long-time buried issue, I would rather wonder the reasons why the issue of virginity has been buried for a long time. In this sense, the recovery of the norm (of virginity) should be intended here as a parodic quotation of it, an unfaithful repetition of its discourse by the ones who did not fit it, potentially subversive and destabilizing, contributing to a resignification that undermines the fundamental structure of that norm (Butler, 1996). The second answer to my objection arises from a methodological reflection: in my opinion, one of the most interesting aspects regarding the analysis of virginity is exactly the indissoluble interdependency and complementarity existing between the spheres of sex and love, sexuality and emotionality, that are reflected on and by the category of virginity. In the dominant discourse, the

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<sup>3</sup> Following the definitions of the online Treccani encyclopedia and dictionary, a «myth» is defined as (my translation): «A tale», «A fantastic narration [...] often with a religious and always symbolical value», that «legitimizes ritual practices and social institutions», «provides the models of the human activity that follows fixed policies of behavior» and whose «essential characteristic is that it is perpetuated in the tradition of a community»; it also functions as an: «Idealization of an event» and as «an ideal or ideologic representation of the reality». The full definitions can be read online at the links: <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mito/> and <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/mito/> [Accessed 3/08/2018].

«loss» of virginity represents a moment that deeply affects both our physical body and our emotions, as in this *first time* are projected the pressures of the hegemonic definitions of both sex and love. This sex is mainly heteronormative, cissexist, phallo- and coitocentric, macho-oriented both in agency and pleasure, while love is *romantic*, in all its dangerous implications I will later discuss. I claim that the construction of the myth of virginity necessarily requires both these categories together in order to legitimate its existence and empower its rhetoric; within the myth itself, in turn, the dominant definitions of sex and love appear in the most explicit way compared to other contexts. That is why I think this thesis could also represent an occasion to identify and analyze, through the specific category of virginity, the imposed meanings of sex and love.

Here follow my main research questions: how virginity (and its «loss») has been defined and experienced among the people with whom I have been sharing sexual and emotional knowledges? What are the main beliefs/symbols connected to it? Which are the main definitions of sex and love that depend and derive from the dominant discourse on virginity (within our specific context)? Can a critical reflection of our personal experiences expose and deconstruct the rhetoric on virginity, raising alternative perspectives on how we could intend and live our intimacy? Through a selected critical literature existing on the theme of virginity, I will both discuss and try to dismantle the main assumptions supporting the myth, proposing, on the contrary, what I deem should be primary within the discourses girls and women receive in this sense since their entrance into sexuality.

My hypothesis is that the collected accounts will reflect the stereotypical expectations of the myth of virginity, but at the same time, the concrete experiences will expose its contradictions, challenging the truths imposed by the myth.

Parody, demythologize and make space for creativity are the ultimate goals of this work.

## **1.2 Situating myself in the research: exposition of the self**

I remember the very first examination of this second year of GEMMA Master: we had to present to the class a personal paper and I was finding myself quite intimidated by this assessment system, since it was completely new to me; in fact, before that time, I was almost just used to be identified with a matriculation number in written or individual oral tests. I remember I was disoriented when two of my colleagues, Johanna and Roqayeh, on their turn to expose, started to *expose* themselves, showing childhood's pictures while narrating to us how the specific topic we had been addressing during that course had had an impact on themselves throughout the years until that moment. I was fascinated by something I was feeling instinctively so honest, visceral and brave, even if I could not help but

wondering, towards each of them: can she actually do the exam this way? Is it appropriate? Hasn't she prepared something *for real*? All questions that would have stopped myself from writing these pages if I had not had the opportunity to cross this path with such brilliant and powerful feminists who managed to provoke and thus change my perspectives.

At that time, in fact, «the personal is political» stood to me only for a set, catchy phrase I use to say, but whose concrete meaning I completely ignored, never thinking that «personal» could be mine own one. In this sense, this last academic year has represented to me a priceless moment of collective awareness, where starting from the safe network of a real *sorority*, I finally truly understood what «starting from oneself» could really mean with regard to the feminist approach; how the personal turns to be political and how I could research and create knowledge starting from my own experience and from the ones of the people I have closer.

Undoubtedly, this «talking about oneself» also revealed itself to be deeply painful and frustrating, as it coincided, for me and my closest companions, with coming-outs and the recalling of traumatic experiences; that was, though, the exact time I understood how essential was that talking about ourselves in a political way. It was inevitable, urgent, like an incessant and uncontrollable impulse, the impulse of self-narration (Cavarero, 1997), which was made explicit through processes of *autocoscienza*<sup>4</sup>, another term I used to study within feminist theory, but that now revealed itself to be tangible in the relational practices I shared with my friends.

En el grupo de autoconsciencia las mujeres se disponen a darse recursos, a intercambiar claves para cambiar, para avanzar en la vida en libertad. [...] Te reúnes para pensar, para dudar, para reflexionar en esas cosas que nos conmueven tanto. Este acompañamiento nos es necesario. A diario se nos mueven muchas cosas y no podemos quedarnos solo movidas. Necesitamos asumir con mucha responsabilidad lo que se nos ha movido, reflexionar, planificar, llorar lo que no hemos llorado, descargarnos de lo que nos pesa, crear condiciones para algo nuevo. Debemos de juntarnos, de asociarnos para reflexionar sobre las cosas personales que nos preocupan entrañablemente (Lagarde, 2001, p. 107).

During the conceptualization of the theme for the thesis, I realized I needed to answer some of the same research questions within my own life: what have I been defining as sex? In what way have I been affected by the paradigm of romantic love? Exploring my sexuality has led me to problematize the issue of «losing» virginity and made me realize how truly inexperienced and *vulnerable* I was, approaching an emotionality that had not to do with heteronormativity. The exposure of the self to

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<sup>4</sup> Adriana Cavarero (1997, p. 79-80, my translation) defines *autocoscienza*, a distinctive practice of the Italian feminist movement of the 70s, as: «The transformation of a widespread habit existing in the relationships between women into the more stable and organized form of the group. It is a space where the self-narration finds a political shared and interacting scene, created by women who exhibit who they are to each other».

the other, as I intend here vulnerability, becomes therefore a specific positioning, tool and expression of a feminist methodology, of that personal that once put into play becomes political. As Behar (1996, p. 14) puts it, vulnerability: «Has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake»; being *located* vulnerably means resisting the politics of closure and finality (Haraway, 1991). I actively (*vulnerably*) participated in the conversations, but always remaining a step behind others' narrations, theirs will be in fact the leading voices reported in this work. These people, who I will later introduce in detail, will be: closest friends from my hometown in Italy with whom I shared (first) discourses on sexuality, sexual experiences and relationships; and persons I have been sharing GEMMA feminist and academic experience with whom, as I was saying, I have been questioning preconceived labels, categories and knowledges, in a reciprocal and constant process of discussion and comprehension of our own identities. For the constant, ardent questioning, contesting and resisting, I will always be in debt with them.

### **1.3 Re-telling the stories: aiming for subjective and situated knowledges**

As I was remembering, I would not be writing these pages for sure if I had followed my instinctive objections on the adequacy and efficacy of self-exposure within the academic research. Anyway, my first doubts were just a coherent reflection of the mainstream attitude existing toward this alternative methodology, unconceivable as a valid one; in fact, as Behar (1996, p. 12-13) writes: «Throughout the most of the twentieth century, in scholarly fields ranging from literary criticism to anthropology to law, the reigning paradigms have traditionally called for distance, objectivity, and abstraction. The worst sin was to be “too personal” ». One should be *neutral* in order to produce scientific knowledge, but what does «being neutral» really mean? And who is considered able to produce this «knowledge»? Luckily, these questions rapidly replaced my previous ones. In this respect, as Sandra Harding (1987, p. 3) reminds, feminists have been the ones arguing that:

traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be “knowers” and *agents of knowledge*; they claim that the voice of science is a masculine one; that history is written from only the point of view of men (of the dominant class and race); that the subject of a traditional sociological sentence is always assumed to be a man.

Here «neutrality» discloses its most corrupted implication: the complicity with the androcentric hegemonic process of producing knowledge, a process from which women have been historically

alienated. Thus, as Teresa del Valle (2000, p. 31) claims: «El objetivo desmitificador, entonces no puede ser otro que construir una *nueva ciencia* a partir de la inclusión de la visión específica de nuevos actores sociales», una «renovación desde los márgenes» (p. 36) through which women's experiences are legitimated as new empirical and theoretical resources of knowledge (Harding, 1987).

Within this new knowledge, subjectivity becomes central in order to decrease objectivism (Harding, 1987) and become more objective (Behar, 1996), it functions as a political strategy to *re-tell* the stories, eroding and substituting the hegemonic tales that demand to fix normative definitions of the experience. Before discussing the re-conceptualization of objectivity within the feminist perspective, I would like to make a brief digression to clarify what I intend for: «Hegemonic tale» and «Counter-story», quoting the explication provided by Dresda Emma Méndez de la Brena (2016, p. 95) in her inspiring GEMMA Master thesis *Let me tell you our story: On how women in my family disrupt menstrual tales in the process of telling stories*:

Hegemonic narratives are based on uncontested versions of reality; that is, hegemonic narratives are based on fictive storylines with the sole purpose of becoming understood as legitimate knowledge, regarded as truth. In this sense, by using the term referring to 'hegemonic tales' I address the fictive features of male-oriented, dominant narratives that find sanctuary within this form. As such, the word 'tale' denotes the fictional attributes of these stories. Importantly, these fictive features of hegemonic tales are their major weaknesses. When a hegemonic tale is repeated, its fictional feature reveals that certain elements of the story "don't pull all together" (Nelson, 2001, p. 165), conceding spaces of resistance by questioning their veracity. This means that hegemonic tales are at the intersection of fictional discourses and the realities of experiences, creating tensions between them; making the role of a counter-story "to take advantage of that fact" (2001, p. 165).

A hegemonic tale can be defined as a *performance*, thus is an active doing (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014), «a reiterative practice that situates stories within the power of discourse, and, therefore, within social relations of gender, sexuality, class, race, age, and networks of power relations [...] which become internalized and taken for granted» (Méndez de la Brena, 2016, p. 93). However, this repetitive nature of hegemonic tales can also show a transgressive and destabilizing capacity to «expose, reveal, revise, and disrupt power and discourse» (p. 93); this possibility is represented by the creation of «gaps» and «fissures». The first ones can be defined as: «the crack between what a master narrative demands of certain people and what those people actually do or are» (Nelson, 2001, p. 165); they «create spaces "for alternate versions and visions that highlight the complexities of persons' lives" (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014, p. 8)» (Méndez de la Brena, 2016, p. 96). The second ones:

can be defined as “the poor fit between one master narrative and the others to which it is connected” (Nelson, 2001, p. 165), which become even more conspicuous when the larger narratives are juxtaposed to one another. The importance of these narrative fissures is that they expose the weaknesses of hegemonic tales. [...] Thus, a counter-story can emerge from these contradictory narratives. [...] counter-narratives, or counter-stories, contradict, expose, challenge, interrupt, or deny dominant discourses (Méndez de la Brena, 2016, p. 96).

Now, moving backwards to the feminist re-interpretation of objectivity, I cannot but quote Haraway’s theorization of the term (1991, p. 191-192) as *situated knowledges*. She argues for «a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing»; here, «the beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research. This evidence too must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence» (Harding, 1987, p. 9). That is to say: «The class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs and behaviors of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint» and thus: «The researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests» (p. 9).

For this purpose, I feel the need to situate myself, in order to situate the entire research itself: my voice is the voice of a white western (Italian) woman, sufficiently privileged to access and study in a prestigious Master’s degree; I identify as cisgender. Participants, whose complete positionings I will better introduce in the following chapter, are also all European (Italian/Spanish) and white, they are or have been students economically able to attend academic studies. The majority of us have grown up with a Catholic education. I feel the necessity to stress this positioning especially because a lot have been written on the theme of virginity (and this could constitute another proof of how there are still reasons to talk about it) within different socio-cultural and religious contexts; different experiences that cannot be considered represented, or completely represented, by the ones reported here (Zhou, 1989) (Spaulding, 1992) (Gay-Y-Blasco, 1997) (Parla, 2001) (Bakass, Ferrand, & Depledge, 2013). I am aware of the common, dangerous tendency of white feminists to homogenize women’s experiences, thus I want to affirm that my observations on virginity cannot be considered expression of a universal truth on the theme (Mohanty, 1988).

It is in this perspective that I think it is also significant to acknowledge how «in the West, virginity not only has a sexual orientation and a gender, it has a color» (Blank, 2016, p. 10), thus how, here, virginity represents a distinctive category applied in the conceptualization of *white* «femininity». When it comes to Black women, in fact, the *controlling images* created and applied on them by the



dominant ideology, since the slave era, do not comprehend any ideal or virtue of «weakness» and «softness», that have been instead characterizing the cult of the «true womanhood» (*the - white - angel in the house*), historically embodied by elite and middle-class white women (Collins, 2000). This means that if the latter «are to be weak, virgins, passionless, and kept on a pedestal as the flower of civilization, then there must be other women - strong, rapable or forced into prostitution, super-sexual, and held up as evil, immoral, lazy, and not quite human» (Harding, p. 97). As bell hooks (hooks, 1988) reminds, men have strategically defined Black women as naturally promiscuous in order to absolve the sexual assaults and rapes perpetrated on their bodies.

Furthermore, it is not just about being a virgin, but about being a: «Desirable virgin», which epitomizes the feminine ideal of purity:

the desirable virgin is sexy but not sexual. She's young, white and skinny [...] She's never a woman of color. She's never a low-income girl or a fat girl. She's never disabled. "Virgin" is a designation for those who meet a certain standard of what women, especially younger women, are supposed to look like (Valenti, 2009, p. 30)

Resuming: «It's only our perfect virgins who are valuable, worthy of discourse and worship» (p. 45). Obviously, this does not mean that virginity cannot be considered as an intersectional myth of oppression, which could affect and harm the lives of non-white women, because we have many proofs it does (and white feminists are also used to instrumentalize this argument sustaining how non-white and non-western women are even more oppressed by their cultures and religions); I just wanted to highlight that within the Western dominant discourse, Black women have not even been considered worthy to be subjugated to this myth, here: black women are loose women and there is nothing valuable about their virginity.

Going back to the discourse on vulnerability, another fundamental concern I feel to discuss briefly is the one related to the fact of being an ethical receiver of every participants' narrations. The beginning of the interviews coincided with many of my companions confessing traumas or deciding to talk explicitly about traumatic experiences we had already talked about, knowing now they would have been recorded for a thesis project. This has constituted one of the most problematic issue to me, since I kept wondering: who am I to receive the narration of their pain? To use it for some «thesis' aim» or even, on the contrary, to do not consider it pertinent and thus omit it? Did I push them in some way, even if it was a well-intentioned and unconscious way, to be *vulnerable*, to expose themselves? How can I finally resist a voyeuristic, scrutinizing eye (Behar, 1996) that objectifies intimate and painful memories? The fears of instrumentalizing or romanticizing these traumas still worry me. So, where to start? Firstly, I did not want to content myself with it, I honestly felt something precious was

coming out from our sharing, something I did not want to lose or be scared from, something participants were also confirming to be meaningful for all of us. Mari Luz Esteban (2004, p. 10) talking about her ethnographic research experience, gives an important suggestion on how to avoid this risk: «tomando a estas personas como agentes de su propia vida y no exclusivamente como víctimas de un determinado sistema de género y de una cultura corporal hegemónica [...]»; ceasing to relegate women to «victims», and better intend them as *survivors*<sup>5</sup> of patriarchal violence is central within feminist discussions on gender violence. It is on this that I want to focus as a key to overcome the previously-said possible impasse: the techniques of resistance and resilience, how these women dealt with their traumas without letting the traumas define them. This was what some participants unconsciously showed me during our talks, immediately managing to freeze my: «I am so sorry for what you have been through» or «You have been so brave» consolations. They do not need any of these. In the name of it, I hope I will not let them down.

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the common use of the term in substitution of «victims», especially within feminist spaces, everyone should be free to define a personal experience of violence through their own vocabulary.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Identifying the «community»<sup>6</sup>**

As I already mentioned, the people I decided to interview are some of my hometown friends from Italy and colleagues of GEMMA Master, for a total of eight persons: A., A., C., L., L., M., M., S.. The group of my hometown friends is composed by people I met throughout my studies, both during primary, secondary and high school, and during my Bachelor at the University of Bologna. They represent my most long-standing friends, with whom I kept being bonded even with distances and different life's paths, and as I was explaining in the introduction, I chose them as the group with whom I have been sharing (first) discourses on sexuality, sexual experiences and relationships. On the other hand, my GEMMA colleagues come all from my same academic year, and with them, I rapidly developed an incomparable honest and intense relationship. With some, I shared every single day of the past nine months, and as we always use to say to each other, they have embodied my actual feminist training: constantly questioning preconceived labels, categories and knowledges, in a reciprocal process of discussion and comprehension of our own identities.

We are all born between 1992 and 1994, and we are all Italian apart from A., who comes from Spain; we are also all university students (just some of us had recently graduated and started working). The majority of us affirm to have been raised with an effective Catholic education, although I can resume we all grew up within a general Catholic environment.

As it can be seen, M. is the only man I decided to interview, even if I would have liked to have more than one participating. Although I can count on a couple of close male friends, he has been the only one with whom I felt at ease to talk in detail about issues related to sexuality. I did not have doubts on the participation of a man within this feminist research, on the contrary, endorsing what Harding (1987, p. 12) claims, men:

can bring a feminist perspective to bear on certain aspects of some relationships that is valuable in different ways from the perspective women would bring to such relationships. I am thinking here of the “phallic critique” men could provide of friendships between men, or of relationships between fathers and sons, or between male lovers.

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Gair and Ariella van Luyn (2017, p. 1) define a «community» within qualitative researches as: «Any collective with similar experiences that together can be considered to make up a community under study. [...], qualitative research is research *with* and *for* such communities, rather than research *about* them».

Thus: «If men are trained by sexist institutions to value masculine authority more highly, then some courageous men can take advantage of that evil and use their masculine authority to resocialize men» (p. 12). It is (also) with these reasons that I decided to include a man's voice in the research, hoping for a direct testimony and perspective on the experiences of hegemonic and toxic masculinity, firmly tied to the discourse of virginity.

To conclude, with regard to gender identity and sexual orientation, fundamental elements in the research, at the time of this writing, all participants identify as cisgenders, among whom, four identify as heterosexuals, one as fluid, two as bisexual, one as gay and one as lesbian.

In the next paragraph I will better explain how I structured the interviews, but I would like now to make a brief clarification on the nature of each participants' contribution. During different moments of the talks, many of them showed me concerns on how messy and fragmented they felt their memories were (Gair & van Luyn, 2017); they wanted to tell more, and they wanted to be sure I would still be available to add extra-thoughts if something would have come up to their minds after the interviews. In this sense, I feel it is my duty to affirm that their narrations must be intended as dynamic, flexible, and open for a re-discussion from their point of view (Méndez de la Brena, 2016), as it should be taken into consideration that «their sense of identity may change over time thus in turn changing their narratives» (Gair & van Luyn, 2017, p. 2); my conclusions should be considered, in the same way, opened and not finished. I believe in the fluidity of identities and experience, thus I do not want to apply on us any responsibility of fixedness. I considered «vital [...] the importance of ensuring research problems emerge from the communities themselves» (p. 3), and it is why I committed myself in stimulating participants' doubts and suggestions for the research, maintaining an active communication during all the process of the writing.

A negotiation of our positioning and beliefs on the other, much beyond the formal elaboration of the thesis, also took place: I had to interrupt one of the participant, reminding her I do not identify as heterosexual, when she was generalizing both our sexual experiences with «us», and I have been called out by another one to realize I was still falling in heteronormative definitions of sex while I was making questions during the interviews. I needed the interviews not only to have concrete material to write about, but to be personally ready to write, I needed the people I interviewed to face my own assumptions on them and on the theme, to constantly re-adjust the analysis. It is in this sense that I feel I can claim this research has been carried out in a genuine partnership, a joint venture and a mutual exchange in which the parties have been sharing the construction of meaningful narratives and the production of new knowledges (Gair & van Luyn).

## 2.2 Setting up the interviews

The very first thing I want to clarify is that the recurrent word «interview» should be intended here as a conventional substitution for «conversation»; in fact, considering the familiarity of my bonds with all the people involved, I strongly intended (and it would have been impossible otherwise) to gather the data through dialogically-structured interviews. I previously prepared a set of questions, functioning as a silent guide and reminder of the topics I wanted to be touched; this list of questions has been broadened, changed and re-shaped during the process of the conversations. In fact, since the first encounters, many topics I had not been considering came up, and on the contrary, some of the ones I wanted to emerge were not well triggered by my questions; additionally, I had to re-set constantly some questions that, for example, appeared significant for a homosexual participant or problematic for another one who already told me a traumatic experience. That is to say, there are not conversations that overlap.

I interacted individually with each of the participants, asking for a place they felt at ease, recording, upon their approval, our conversations. The talks were almost all carried out in a convivial environment (Pink, 2015): sharing drinks, coffee, lunches or dinners, both inside my house in Italy and in Granada, and public spots.

Before starting the conversations, I thought it would have been fair and useful to prepare a brief presentation of my project to send to the participants, explaining briefly why I chose them and in what their contribution would have consisted. I also asked them, as an ethical compromise, if they would have wanted to change their names in the thesis, and one of the participants preferred to do that.

Following what Gair & van Luyn (2017, p. 4-5) affirm: «Lived experiences might not easily be captured in any form and multiple approaches to gathering stories may be needed»; thus, to facilitate and assure a more complete discussion of the themes, I thought it could have been interesting to ask participants to write, if they felt comfortable to do that, a summary about a specific experience, before starting the interviews. In this way, I expected them to have the time to reflect on their memories and develop thoughts that maybe could not have emerged immediately after an unexpected question, besides giving them the agency to create their own safe space where expressing private and maybe emotional thoughts. Being the myth of virginity inherently heteronormative, I identified this experience in: *the first time*, as it is intended in the dominant discourse on virginity, thus as the *ritual*

(as I define it in the following chapter)<sup>7</sup> of first heterosexual penis penetration; this has to be intended just as a starting point for the discussion, which, obviously, went and will go beyond heterosexuality. My proposal was not to be intended as a homework, or to constrict participants' accounts to compulsory key questions. Starting by the premise that there is not a right or wrong way to tell this experience, I encouraged them to use the language and form they preferred, without worrying about the fact of being included in an academic paper. Starting from these summaries, I proceeded to discuss the main themes emerged. I decided to *expose* myself to them too and write the summary, also to demonstrate my equal positioning in the conversations; sharing with them my own experience could reciprocate their trust in doing the same towards me and possibly let emerge other starting points for reflection. I eventually decided not to attach these personal accounts as I decided to filter what could have been interesting to the research and questioned it during our conversations; I will thus quote many of their written sentences, but without reporting all their summaries, as I want to avoid any risk of exposing who participated without reasons for the research.

I finally hope, as Gair & van Luyn (2017, p. 1) believe, that the choice of a narrative approach<sup>8</sup> «converges in the possibility of having microsocial and micropolitical effects through the collective local knowledges it produces».

## 2.3 Interpreting and categorizing material

In this paragraph, I would like to comment how I selected and decided to categorize the material emerged from the conversations, as it will be presented in the fourth part. To start with, I would like to say a few words on the issue of language and translation: I have been talking with all the participants in Italian, apart from A. (coming from Spain) with whom I have been talking in Spanish; obviously, all these exchanges had to be later translated in English for the writing of the thesis. As a Bachelor student in Foreign Languages, I have been trained to be aware of what the act of translation implies: nuances and losses of meaning constitute an almost inevitable side effect of the process; thus, even though I committed myself to my most accurate and responsible translation, I cannot underestimate the fact that this translation is mine, developed though the personal criteria of what I considered the best way to render participant's words into a different language. With regard to the practical transcription, I decided to use some of the instructions of Poland (2002), also recalled by

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<sup>7</sup> From now on, I will thus use: *the first time* (in italics) with this specific meaning.

<sup>8</sup> Gair & van Luyn (2017, p. 1) define qualitative research in terms of narration, affirming that «undertaking qualitative research is about making a choice to uphold narratives over numbers. It is about hearing, showing and amplifying narratives».

Méndez de la Brena (2016, p. 56), in order to maintain what I believed to be significant within the colloquial way of expression:

- Pauses (of less than four seconds) will be indicated with: «[.]».
- Words indicating expressive sounds of non-verbal communication will be inserted within parenthesis. For example: (laughing).
- Parts of the speech interrupted and overlapped will be marked by a hyphen and a (overlapping) parenthesis.
- Held sounds will be repeated, separated by hyphens. For example: No-o-o-o.
- Emphasis in the speech will be denoted with capital letters. For example: WHAT?

In addition, sequences of dialogues will be reported without spaces between each participants' sentence, while isolated sentences will be reported with a double spacing in-between one another.

As the author of the thesis, I also played a specific role in interpreting and representing participant's stories (Gair & Van Luyn, 2017), I write from a specific positioning and the identification of the themes together with their subdivision derives from the choice of a specific theoretical framework together with personal considerations. Speaking of this process, I want to highlight that not everything that came up from the conversations will be here, as I decided to filter what I considered relevant and interesting for my discussion; in this sense, I did not only consider relevant the most recurrent/common thoughts and experiences of the participants, but also the isolated ones, as again, this should be intended as a portrait of this specific group of people, which can probably reflect others, but that does not stand for a universal model of virginity-related experiences.

In brief, being virginity loss represented as a specific moment within someone's life, I decided to propose a chronological division of the themes: a «before» *the first time*, whose central concept will be *the wait*, where I will gather the criteria through which participants identified the «right» person/moment, their expectations, fears and questioning related to *the first time*, and the preparation of the body; a «during», where I will discuss the multiple lacks within *the first time*: «experience» on sex, agency, pleasure and any other acts apart from penis penetration; and a «after» analyzed with the focus of the body and the beliefs of its change after *the first time*. This discussion will be developed around different elements, such as, mainly: hymen, blood and vagina size. Here, I will also deal with the idea of *the first time* sex as a *contamination*, with references to the phenomenon of virgin's body erotization.

Finally, I decided to conclude this path with a sort of diagonal and crossing perspective on the discourse of virginity as it takes place in this work, beginning with alternative definitions some of the

participants proposed in relation to the idea of *the first time*. This last part does not present itself as a resolution of the questioning, but rather it drives the questioning forward, further, letting emerge persisting worries and difficulties within non-heterosexual contexts, such as primarily the rootedness of coitocentrism and the stronger persistence of romantic love, reclaiming them as essential challenges within feminist and queer spaces of refle(a)ction.



### **3. Theoretical Framework: dominant definitions of virginity, sex & love**

#### **3.1 Virginity loss as a rite of passage**

In this chapter, I would like to clarify some of the definitions proposed in the introduction related to virginity, together with the categories of sex and love that depend and derive from this myth; here, the aim will be to provide necessary interpretation's keys for what emerged during the conversations, discussed in the following chapter.

Virginity is an extremely wide and loaded subject, «far from being a monolithic, universal, historical given of the human condition», it represents «a profoundly changeable and malleable cultural idea» (Blank, 2016, p. 8) that we created and disseminated through unnumbered areas of our Western thought<sup>9</sup>. At the beginning of my research, I was overwhelmed by the multiplicity of fields through which I could have analyzed the theme of virginity, I kept bumping into new discourses where the myth was the protagonist and I started to realize how complicated and insufficient it would have been to try to delineate the entire picture of it. To quote a few, the most dominant and spontaneous reference seemed to me the religious one, specifically the Christian discourse<sup>10</sup>, in which virginity constitutes the myth par excellence, embodied by The Virgin Mother (Warner, 1976), archetype of purity and chastity, paradigm of passivity and devotion. Here, the spiritually penetrated body of an underage Mary (without consent) results in her divine fecundation by will of the omnipotent God, and thus in her virginal childbirth, founding dogma that has functioned as a very smart double-trick, as on one hand it has irrefutably proved the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and on the other hand it has avoided the condemnation of Mary as an adulterer (Llurba, 2017). Shifting to a different field, a very interesting discovery to me, was realizing how the myth, keeping its religious aura, pervades the educational system and many of its practices proposed to young women especially in the context of United States, here: high-school's sex-education programs are still predominantly based on abstinence and *waiting* rhetoric, and, popularized since the beginning of the 90s, plenty have been the school peer groups (and young celebrities) encouraging the practice of Virginity Pledges (Bearman & Brückner, 2001), together with the widespread disquieting phenomenon of Purity Balls, where daughters *gift* their virginity to the fathers through the exchange of rings, promising thus to remain «pure» until marriage, while fathers vow to *protect* their virginity<sup>11</sup> (Carpenter, 2005) (Valenti, 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> For a complete and interdisciplinary analysis of virginity within Western history and culture consult Blank, H. (2016). *Virgin: The Untouched History*. Roadswell Editions.

<sup>10</sup> The myth of the union between a god and a terrestrial woman is not an originally Christian idea, since it can also be traced in the Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek-Roman mythology. (Llurba, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> As further resources, I suggest the viewing of *How to Lose Your Virginity* (2013), a successful documentary directed by Therese Schechter mainly exploring the Abstinence Movement, together with the phenomena of Virginity Pledges and

All this has been reflected and propagated by United States pop-culture's imagery, where the cinematographic industry (porn included) has been feeding itself with this obsession on virgins; huge is in fact the tradition of successful teen-series and movies with the myth at their core<sup>12</sup> (Carpenter, 2009).

Another fundamental perspective worth to be taken into consideration is, undoubtedly, medicalization. Medicalization is, in brief, a process through which human life events or deviant (to the norm) conditions/behaviors become defined and treated as medical problems (Conrad, 2007); categories among whom gender, race, class and sexuality constitute fundamental intersecting elements influencing processes of medicalization, that, as a consequence, result to shape and maintain inequalities (Bell, 2016). For example, women are systematically medicalized for issues related to ageing, menstruation and infertility. Here, the insistence on the hymen as the anatomical feature signifying virginity has legitimated violent practices of virginity tests (Parla, 2001) without any scientific validity (HRW, 2014), together with the development of a real market for hymen-reconstruction surgery (hymenorrhaphy) promising to *restore* virginity<sup>13</sup>, and even for artificial hymens containing fake blood<sup>14</sup>.

These references appeared to me as the most current and impressive ones, functioning with their resonance as a further confirmation of how, again, it still makes sense to talk about virginity.

What I decided to propose here, though, is focusing on the idea of the loss of virginity as a rite of passage, *the first time* as a ritual, which seems to be a constant, intrinsic characteristic of virginity. I will use the terms «rite» and «ritual» mainly as synonyms. According to the online Treccani dictionary<sup>15</sup>, in fact, a ritual is defined as what conforms to the rite, the rite considered as itself. The only nuance of meaning between the two could be identified as being the ritual: the structure of a specific rite, what includes the different formulas, gestures, movements composing the rite. That is why I referred to the abstract expression of virginity loss as a «rite» and to the concrete *first time* as a «ritual».

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Purity Balls, in the context of United States. Useful material can also be found on the documentary website: <https://www.virginitymovie.com/> [Accessed 16/08/2018]. I also recommend the more specific *The Virgin Daughters* (2008) directed by Jane Treays.

<sup>12</sup> *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* have been the ones most analyzed recently. I suggest the reading of McAlister, J. A. (2015). The Virginal Reader: Virginity Loss in the Twenty-First Century and Reactions to *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In McAlister J. A., *Romancing the Virgin: Female Virginity Loss and Love in Popular Literatures in the West* (p. 284-327). Macquarie University: Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Arts (PhD) and Allan, J. A., Santos. C. (2016), *The Politics of Virginity and Abstinence in the Twilight Saga* in Allan, J. A., Santos. C. & Spahr, A., *Virgin Envy: The Cultural Insignificance of the Hymen* (p. 1441-2108). London: Zed Books (Kindle Edition).

<sup>13</sup> It has been argued that in some cases hymenorrhaphy could be intended as an appropriation of the medicalizing process by women themselves, a strategy through which cheating the patriarchal imposition of virginity. In this perspective, I suggest the reading of Earp (2014).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.hymenshop.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/rito/> and <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/rituale/> [Accessed 16/08/2018].

During my readings I found various analysis of the experience of virginity loss, such as the ones focusing on its conceptualization as a gift, a stigma or as a step in a process (Carpenter, 2002; 2005), but it was the ritual the one immediately appearing to me as the most complete and explicative interpretation key for the theme. I was interested in the structural performative nature of the ritual, in which I argue it is placed the true power of, in this case, reproducing and reinforcing gender roles and heteronormativity at the base of the hegemonic definitions of sex and love; besides, interestingly, many of the participants themselves indicated me this path by referring autonomously to their virginity loss as rituals. The choice of interpreting virginity loss as a ritual becomes even clearer if we think of its positioning among other historically ritualized events: the wedding (first night) and the following exposition of the bloodstained bed sheet.

But let's start gradually.

Throughout history, virginity loss has been seen as a ritual of transformation from the social status of a «girl» (the etymology of the word itself comes from the Latin *virgo*, meaning a girl or non-married woman) to a «woman» (a future mother), it is supposed to represent an unforgettable, turning point in women's lives, leaving a permanent mark on both our bodies and personalities.

The online Treccani dictionary defines a «rite» as the complex of norms that regulates the development of a sacral action, it could be synonym of a ceremony or a code. Pedro Gómez García provides a deeper analysis of the concept in his essay: «El ritual como forma de adoctrinamiento» (2002), where he claims that the privileged space for the ritual is the body, thus this code is *embodied*, and transmitted by a series of acts, movements, attitudes that one must assume, and that are charged with specific cultural symbolism. The ritual comes with a prescribed preparation, which means that it is almost never spontaneous, unexpected or improvised. Its function is a sociological one, as it sacralizes and reinforces social structures, it creates and conforms identities within an established order (del Valle, 2000), and more importantly, it always puts into play some kind of power (Gómez García, 2002). With particular regard to its conceptualization as a «indoctrination», Gómez García (2002) affirms that a ritual:

Enseña que la vida tiene un sentido y cuál es el sentido que tiene, sea a escala cósmica o en la pequeña escala de un acontecimiento, situación o institución. [...] Aporta una vía de aprendizaje integral, personal y social. Modela la imaginación, las emociones, las pautas de comportamiento. La enseñanza de ideas es implícita, o colateral y complementaria (p. 10).

Coherently to Gómez García, feminist writers such as Hanne Blank and Mari Luz Esteban, link the concept of the ritual to the one of *performance*. Blank (2016, p. 101) defines «the ritual of virginity

loss» specifically as a «social performance», while Esteban (2011), discussing the *Pensamiento Amoroso*, defines the practices deriving from it as:

Rituales sociales, en definitiva, donde se enfatiza la heterosexualidad y donde (sobre todo las mujeres) aprenden lenguajes, técnicas y actitudes que tienen que ver con la presentación de una misma y con la educación de los sentidos, el movimiento y la ocupación del espacio, la comunicación. Todo ello aderezado con dosis importantes de artificio. [...] Una *performatividad* amorosa que se alimenta además de las referencias infinitas recibidas en la familia, la escuela, los espacios de recreo, la publicidad, el cine, la literatura, la música, la televisión (p. 50-51).

It is through this inherently performative nature that the persistence of the ritual itself is assured. «El rito es como una especie de teatro que representa siempre la misma pieza» (Gómez García, 2002, p. 8), it functions as a script, a choreography, organizing both the preparation of the «scene» and the development of the act, it fixes what must be done and what, on the contrary, cannot be allowed (in this case) in the development of *the first time*. The maniacal repetition, acting of these characters teaches to conform to what is culturally and socially fixed (Gómez García, 2002), being essentially here: heteronormativity and gender roles, at the base of the dominant definitions of sex and love. As I previously described happening within a hegemonic tale, performativity also allows the recognition of the rite of virginity loss through the continuous retelling, hearing and sharing of its story, resulting in the transmission of a mystical-kind, prepackaged imaginary to which aim for and adhere.

As is typical of rites of passage, the actual act or acts—in this case, first-time sex—are only part of the picture. The bulk of a rite of passage is the social acknowledgment of the transition. Both before and after the actual event(s) of first-time sex, we both prepare for and commemorate the transition, this entry into the world of the adult, by rehearsing expectations, fears, experiences, and lore “through the grapevine.” [...] Tales from the trenches provide models for those who have not yet lost their virginity, giving the uninitiated a selection of blueprints for the ways the experience is supposed to happen. They teach us what is considered desirable and undesirable, right and wrong. The social styles of our cultures and peer groups, reflected in the stories we tell, shape our understanding of what our sexual lives mean and are, including what we’re likely to say about our own experience (Blank, 2016, p. 102-103).

And more importantly, the number of these stories is a fairly limited one:

There are positive versions and negative versions, and variety in the details, but over a broad sample, virginity-loss tales are for the most part quite similar. Objective facts—what happened and how—are less important than communicating symbolic truths. The stories that we tell say less about what was literally

experienced than they do about how we felt about the experience, how we wanted to feel about it, and how our culture expects us to feel about it (Blank, p. 103).

To resume, performativity constitutes both an intrinsic feature of the ritual (of *the first time*), meaning the mechanical repetition of a specific code of gestures, movements and attitudes, and an extrinsic one, as the constant telling and re-telling of this tale is essential for the myth of virginity to survive and maintain authority as the norm of the experience. As I was saying in the introduction quoting Butler (1996), it is through the unfaithful, parodic repetition of its discourse by the ones who do not identify with it, that the norm can be destabilized and collapse; it is through what has been defined as *gaps* and *fissures*, uncontrollable flaws in the performativity of hegemonic tales, that we can transgress, discredit and finally make space for alternative perspectives and knowledges outside of the dominant discourse.

In the following two paragraphs I will take into consideration the dominant definitions of sex and love deriving and depending from the myth of virginity. As I said before, one of the most interesting aspects regarding the analysis of virginity is the indissoluble interdependency and complementarity existing between the spheres of sex and love, sexuality and emotionality, that are reflected on and by the category of virginity. In the dominant discourse, the loss of virginity represents a moment that deeply affects both our physical body and our emotions, as in *the first time* are projected the pressures of the hegemonic definitions of both sex and love. In other words, the myth of virginity necessarily requires both these categories, together, in order to legitimate its existence and empower its rhetoric. In turn, both the dominant definitions of sex and love appear within the myth in their most blatant way. Let's explore now the imposed meanings of these two categories.

### **3.2 The real (*first*) sex**

In the introduction, I claim that the hegemonic definition of sex related to virginity implies this being: heteronormative, cissexist, phallo- and coitocentric, macho-oriented both in agency and pleasure; to start with, let me explain better these tacit and intertwined restrictions.

In the dominant discourse, the loss of virginity is determined by a penis penetration of a vagina, until this milestone step, any other sexual act is conceptualized as being part of a «natural» path leading to this penetration, deserving a *just* before it: just oral sex, just masturbation, etc., playing thus the only function of anticipating and preparing for the *real* sex: penis-into-vagina sex (never «vagina-around-a penis» sex). The word itself «foreplay» (as it happens with «preliminares» in Spanish and other languages) means: «Pre-sex», what comes before sex, it is commonly perceived as a «warm up» or

as an extra of the intercourse. Assuming that penis-into-vagina sex is naturally going to happen as a consequence of what are perceived to be previous gradual steps completely ignores and mystifies the requirement of consent; it is in this perspective that women are also commonly judged to be «cock teasers» when they flirt or engage in sexual activities «eventually» refusing to have penis-into-vagina sex.

These discourses confirm the positioning of heterosexual (penetrative thus potentially reproductive) sex as the top-privileged one within the hierarchy of sexual activities (Rubin, 1984), resulting in the assumption that penis-into-vagina sex is the standard of all sexual activities, and finally contributing to fix that the heterosexual is the norm and the duty (Rich, 1980). This rhetoric completely erases the non-conforming experiences of bisexual, lesbian, gay, trans, queer and other non-heterosexual people or heterosexuals that do not practice penis-into-vagina sex (McKelle, 2013).

This vision is specifically bound to the other quoted definitions of phallocentrism and cissexism. It is phallogentric as it implies the presence of a penis as the essential driving force for the action: during *the first time*, it is through its penetration that we are taught the hymen breaks, sanctioning the end of our virginity. It is the penis that owns and exercises the active agency during all the intercourse: male pleasure is absolutely privileged both by sexual acts and positions. Speaking of which, it is interesting to notice that this obsessive priority given to penis penetration (which often does not stimulate directly the clitoris) disregards the fact that some women could more easily reach orgasm through other acts, contributing to the myth that women are «harder to please» or «frigid» (Weiss, 2015).

Furthermore, phallogentricism also supports a violent discourse as it potentially distracts, confounds one from recognizing and naming sexual violence, which many times do not imply penis penetration, but still constitute a rape. Limiting rape's narration and representation to this *real* sex invalids and marginalizes non-traditional experiences of rape (Ferguson, 2016). As better discussed in a while, this, together with the entire discourse of sexual purity reinforces rape culture (Valenti, 2008).

Moving forward, the previously mentioned insistence on the hymen (RFSU, 2009), within the hegemonic tale of *the first time* sex, excludes all the bodies except for the normative, cisgendered body of the female (Allan, Santos, & Spahr, 2016), thus it is in this sense that it is cissexist as it blends gender (being a man/woman) with genitals (having a penis/vagina); it assumes that everyone is a man or a woman and thus erases all those who fall outside of these boxes, such as transgender, non-binary and intersex people. It must be acknowledged that not all women have vaginas, such as trans and intersex women, and not all people with vaginas are women, such as trans men and non-binary people. Within the cissexist virginity discourse, sex is thus defined as «an exclusively heterosexual action performed by a biological male on biological female» (Blank, 2016, p. 12).

The discourse on cissexism makes even clearer how sexist is the myth of virginity, implying that only a female can be a virgin:

The male body has never commonly been labeled as being virginal even when it is, but rather as “continent” or “celibate”; even within the Catholic church, male renunciation of sex has been characterized as a matter of continence, not virginity. Additionally, virginity has never mattered in regard to the way men are valued, or whether they were considered fit to marry or, indeed, to be permitted to survive. As a result, virgins are, and always have been, almost uniformly female (Blank, 2016, p. 10).

The labels of «man» and «woman» assigned within the ritual of *the first time* reflect and feed specific expectations on the gender roles that each one must assume inside and outside this performance. Here, hegemonic and toxic masculinity<sup>16</sup> (Dworkin, 1981; 1987) (Gilmore, 1987) (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994) emerges as an inevitable issue of analysis. In fact, while a woman passively *gives away* her virginity, the man *takes* hers: «The power of owning comes from the power of self-defined as one who takes. Here the taking is elevated in significance: he takes, he keeps: once he has had, it is his» (Dworkin, 1981, p. 19). The use itself of the expression of: «Penetrating» and «Taking» reminds war’s dynamics, where women’s body seems to be intended as a territory for military conquests (Dworkin, 1987) (Herrera, 2017). The dominant assumption that the penis-in-vagina penetration of *the first time* will be painful fosters this idea of sex as an act of force (Thompson, 1990) (Friedrichs, 2016) (Weiss, 2017).

As Dworkin (1981, p. 23) powerfully resumes:

Sex, a word potentially so inclusive and evocative, is whittled down by the male so that, in fact, it means penile intromission. Commonly referred to as “it”, sex is defined in action only by what the male does with his penis. Fucking - the penis thrusting - is the magical, hidden meaning of “it”, the reason for sex, the expansive experience through which the male realizes his sexual power. In practice, fucking is an act of possession - simultaneously an act of ownership, taking, force; it is conquering; it expresses in intimacy power over and against, body to body, person to thing. “The sex act” means penile intromission followed by penile thrusting, or fucking. The woman is acted on; the man acts and through action expresses sexual power, the power of masculinity.

In this perspective, «positioning women as naturally nonsexual and men as innately ravenously sexual sets up not only a dangerous model that allows for sexual violence and disallows authentic female

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<sup>16</sup> To say that a particular form of masculinity is hegemonic means that it oppresses and dominates a gender order as a whole (Donaldson, 1993).

sexual expression, but also further enforces traditional gender roles - the main objective of the purity myth» (Valenti, 2009, p. 176).

Having said that a virgin can only be a female, it becomes clearer that the masculine counterpart of virginity is *virility*: «virile» and «virgin» symbolize the gendered complementary badges of honor respectively to gain and to lose for a man and a woman.

Rhetorically, the virgin's unbroken hymen is an attribute which stands for a unitary individual, and at that moment when chastity is proven, it defines that individual's gender as entirely and unambiguously female. Hymenal penetration also creates an unambiguously gendered male: it is the means by which a man makes known his virility to himself and others. Finally, hymenal penetration effects a radical transformation: the womb thus acted upon is transformed and can be made to realize its fertile potential and, by extension, that of the man (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 94).

Concretely talking, within our daily experience, this discourse on sex, structured through severe gender roles, is made explicit by the phenomena of double-standards and slut-shaming: «women are shamed for having sex while men are rewarded for it» (McKelle, 2013); we always lose something, possibly being this dignity, morality, virginity and so on, where men commonly gain charm, experience, success or even just fun.

Women have seen the power of their erotic and the voice of their sexual desire systematically appropriated, denigrated, suppressed (Lorde, 1984) (Tolman, 1994); they have been taught to be ashamed and constantly insecure about their genitals, disconnected from the pleasure deriving from their own touch of them (Irigaray, 1985).

Men's symbolic exercise of power over women's bodies through *the first time* sex can also be analyzed within the symbolic vision of sex as something that contaminates, leave traces on women's bodies: apart from the already quoted break of the hymen, a first penis penetration of a vagina is perceived as having the power to *dirt* the pure virgin body, marking it and thus sanctioning its possession, it is through this that the social order is reflected and maintained (Douglas, 1973) (Kristeva, 1982) (Dworkin, 1987). Furthermore, contaminating and possessing purity are highly eroticized ideals, whose most explicit example is represented by porn culture (Irigaray, 1985) (Valenti, 2009) (Blank, 2016). As will emerge, these traces left by penis-into-vagina sex can also be intended as the change of the size of a vagina as a consequence of this sex (Fabello, 2013) (Holland, 2017) (Scaccia, 2018).

At last, connected to all the previous definitions, we get to the label of «coitocentric». Deriving from the Latin, «coito» can be translated with «intercourse», which again stands for the penis penetration of the vagina, the already said nucleus of the dominant definition of sex. However, what the word



coito/intercourse seems to imply is a more complete vision of sex (no coincidence that dictionaries commonly define it as the *complete* sexual intercourse), meaning that it ties penis penetration to its ejaculation. Resulting in the prioritization of, again, male sexual pleasure, this idea of completeness supports the previously said conceptualization of sex as a path, made of different steps and degrees, leading to the true and full experience of it. This «completeness» is at the base of the coitocentric concept. The dominant discourse imposes that sex constitutes a *central* part of a relationship (of love), implying that monogamy is the standard of any relationship, that is to say: the other person of the couple must fulfill all our sexual and emotional expectations. It assumes that every kind of this sex involves a penis, a vagina and a contact between them (penetration preferably); some kind of sex that does not involve both participant's genitals is pervaded by the binary discourse of who gives/receives pleasure, which already makes it look as if there was a loss for one part and thus imposes and naturalizes reciprocation, reinforcing the opposite perception of intercourse completeness. What is more, broadening the discourse of men's ejaculation/orgasm to women's pleasure: although reaching the orgasm should be legitimately reclaimed as a full possibility especially for women (whose pleasure is so often left behind within heterosexual sex), placing and taking it for granted as the top-goal of any sexual activity could be reductive and problematic. Let's reflect for a moment on the language, it is quite common to hear or say sentences like: «We had sex X times last night», making the count coincide with how many times we or our partner reached an orgasm. This criteria through which sex is commonly considered concluded is confirmed and taken to the extreme by the phenomenon of *faking* orgasms, perceived by so many women as the only way through which making an unpleasant or boring sexual activity to stop<sup>17</sup>. Portraying (a screaming) orgasm as the sublimation of any sexual activity puts a lot of pressure, becoming itself «a source of performance anxiety» (Weiss, 2015): wondering if we will reach orgasm, if our partner reached it and even concentrating to reach one distracts ourselves and makes us think we are defective, *disempowered* if we do not live up to these expectations. An option could be devaluing this priority and embracing, enjoying each moment and sensation within a sexual activity, among whom there is orgasm of course, different forms of it, but a lot more also not worthy to lose (Weiss, 2016).

To conclude this section, I believe it is important to remind it is also fine to choose not to be, feeling or experiencing the sexual, and no one should be discriminated, pressured or made feel there is something wrong in them for it. On the contrary, I think that the experiences of, for instance, asexual

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<sup>17</sup> This also sheds lights on how orgasm is often felt as something we owe to the other person as an award of their performance, more than something belonging to us. Talking about porn representation of women's orgasms, Irigary (1985, p. 199) comments: «Those orgasms are necessary as a demonstration of masculine power. They signify the success - men think - of their sexual domination of women. [...]. Women are there as witnesses».

identifying people, can contribute to the elaboration of a more nuanced understanding on sexuality, disorientating and miseducating to the norm, one of my hopes for this research.

### 3.3 Romantic (*first*) love

Love has been the opium of women, as religion for masses. While we loved, men ruled<sup>18</sup>.

Also love, like virginity, as a mythical dimension (Herrera, 2017) and I had never thought about it before this year. In fact, critical writings on the hegemonic tale of love have constituted my main readings and field of interest during this last academic year, together with being the center of most of the daily conversations with my companions. I realized so late how this kind of love was «encarnado» (Esteban, 2011) by and within myself, how it has been working as a paranoia, even during my last emotional and/or sexual relationships, the ones, again, happening when I was already and proudly defining myself a feminist, thus supposedly conscious about these dynamics of oppression. I cannot declare myself free from it yet, but at least I feel I am learning how to recognize its symptoms. In this perspective, this thesis constitutes part of a long, and still in course, process of recovery from the intoxicating influences of the dominant, imposed definitions of love.

But let's start from a detailed explanation of it. Mari Luz Esteban, who has written a lot on the topic, affirms:

En la sociedad occidental de los últimos siglos se ha ido fraguando una forma absolutamente dominante de concebir lo humano y de representar los vínculos entre las personas, que denominaré *Pensamiento Amoroso*: un conjunto articulado de símbolos, nociones y teorías en torno al amor, que permea todos los espacios sociales, también los institucionales, e influye directamente en las prácticas de la gente, estructurando unas relaciones desiguales de género, clase y etnia, y un modo concreto y heterosexual de entender el deseo, la identidad y, en definitiva, el sujeto (2011, p. 24).

This «pensamiento amoroso» which is a «pensamiento hipertrofiado» (p. 24), is identified with the expression of: «Romantic love». This conceptualization of love has been defined as an ideology (Herrera, 2017), a regime that constitutes a functional, structural piece of the patriarchal system contributing to convert people in the complementary and hierarchical roles of men and women (Esteban, 2011). It is a ritualized process (Lagarde, 2001) (Herrera, 2017) both in the way we learn it

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<sup>18</sup> Kate Millet interviewed by Lidia Falcon for El País in May 1984. The full article can be read in Spanish at the link: [https://elpais.com/diario/1984/05/21/sociedad/453938405\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/1984/05/21/sociedad/453938405_850215.html) [Accessed 3/08/2018].

and in the practices through which we reproduce it, it is through the constant repetition, reproduction of its acts and discourses that we embody the normative performance of loving:

[...] como cualquier acción social e individual, involucra al cuerpo, ya que se compone de sensaciones, percepciones, expresiones, movimientos, gestos, actitudes, sentimientos, miradas, que articulan tiempos pasados y presentes y hablan de futuro. Desde aquí se puede mantener que la interacción amorosa está encarnada [...] (Esteban, 2011, p. 42-43).

The hegemonic tale of romantic love mythologizes heterosexual and monogamous relationships (at the base of the nuclear family). It teaches us that love is crucial in our lives, we need it to feel satisfied, complete, happy, it is what really moves our existences. Love is portrayed like a shelter, where we can be truly ourselves more than any other sphere of our lives (Esteban, 2011). To women, in particular, love has occupied the *heart* of the social configuration of the self, it is our mandate and our duty, our sublime objective (Lagarde, 2001); since childhood we, as women, are exposed to a restrictive, intensive socialization of love, in contrast to men, who receive one of passivity, becoming on the other hand active when it comes to the sexual (Esteban & Távora, 2008). As Clara Coria (2001, p. 72) interestingly remarks:

Cuando el varón es afectuoso y ama intensamente sin avergonzarse por ello suele ser ubicado en la categoría de «ídolo», mientras en iguales condiciones las mujeres son vistas como cumpliendo con lo que naturalmente les corresponde. Como si el amor fuera un sentimiento natural en las mujeres y excepcional en los varones.

In this perspective, according to Guiddins (1998, p. 38), for men: «El enamorarse fue un hecho estrechamente relacionado con el acceso a las mujeres, [...]. Los hombres han tendido a ser "especialistas del amor" sólo en lo que concierne a las técnicas de seducción o conquista».

Women have been historically described as emotional beings, with a natural inclination for taking care of the others; the idealization of the mother through the ideals of the maternal instinct, the maternal desire and maternal love, considered innate feelings constituting women's identities, undoubtedly fed some of the values propagated by romantic love (Guiddins).

Furthermore, beyond being a force that shapes and fix social gender roles and institutions, romantic love has been fundamental in order to organize the dominant economic structure and daily life; the romantic utopia has functioned as another consumer good and tool of social control benefitting the capitalist system (Herrera, 2001). There is an actual *industry of love* supporting Western economy, specifically oriented to the ideal monogamic heterosexual marriage and nuclear family that adopts

consumerism as a life-style (Herrera, 2001). Romantic and capitalist rhetoric has managed to fix domestic and family-care work (women have been relegated to) as natural and unproductive, thus turning it completely invisible and not in need of a remuneration:

[...] el amor es un amor que invisibiliza las diferencias de poder, que invisibiliza conocimientos y tareas (las mujeres cuidan porque aman, los hombres trabajan), distorsiona la bidireccionalidad de la reciprocidad e impide el reparto del trabajo y la riqueza (quien ama no puede pedir nada a cambio) (Esteban, 2011, p. 87).

In order to better comprehend the tale of romantic love I report to follow the main myths related to it, from Coll Blanco (2017, p. 10, 21):

- Todas las personas tenemos una media naranja: cada ser humano está predestinado a otro (el “*amor de nuestra vida*”) que nos completa. No puedes abandonar al “amor de tu vida” porque estás destinada a estar con él. Él es tu media naranja y ninguna otra persona podrá entenderte o quererte tanto como él. Es imposible que seas una persona completa y feliz sin él.
- El amor verdadero lo aguanta y lo perdona todo: Los malos tratos son perdonables si él te quiere, o si se arrepiente y te pide perdón. Tú debes ser comprensiva y perdonarle, porque en eso consiste el amor verdadero.
- Los celos son síntomas de amor: Es natural que él sienta celos y por tanto que pretenda controlarte y poseerte. Deberías alegrarte de que se comporte así, porque eso significa que te quiere.
- El amor es imposible de controlar e implica dolor (“Quien bien te quiere, te hará llorar”): El amor verdadero implica sufrimiento. El amor verdadero implica que tu pareja te haga daño. Si el amor no duele, no es amor de verdad.
- El amor todo lo puede y todo lo justifica: No importa la cantidad de dolor que te produzca tu relación, porque el amor verdadero es superior a ello y podréis vencer todas las adversidades. Lo más importante es que sigáis juntos.
- El amor romántico sólo se puede sentir hacia una única persona (la única forma válida de amor es monógama).
- Nuestra pareja debe satisfacernos en todos los aspectos, incluidos nuestros deseos eróticos, pasionales y románticos; el amor romántico debe conducir a una estabilidad institucional cada vez mayor hasta alcanzar el culmen del matrimonio y de la posterior formación de una familia.
- El amor romántico es algo absolutamente íntimo y no está influido por factores sociales, biológicos o culturales ajenos a nuestra voluntad.

Thus, romantic love owns a patriarchal power as it naturalizes and reinforces gender-based structures of power, consolidating an unequal social order. Romantic love is eventually unhealthy, unsafe and violent as it supports discourses of possession, it is *in the name of love* that we tend to mitigate, justify and naturalize exploitation, pain and violence suffered by women. Romantic love encourages relationships of «fusion», where we give up the development of ourselves as subjects (Esteban & Távora, 2008). And who could have ever thought we had to defend ourselves from something «romantic»? In fact, this represents the very subtle power of this myth: love has always been perceived and told as natural, innocent and genuine, a supernatural force that one cannot stop or control, neither criticize or negotiate. This also contributed to the delay and resistance in the critical analysis of love, as again, being this told to come spontaneously and unexpectedly, knowledge is not necessary, and one just has to give all of oneself and let go (Lagarde, 2001).

Love constitutes, above all, the only legitimation of any sexual encounter. In Gayle Rubin's theorization of *sex negativity* (Rubin, 1984, p. 150), the author theorizes: «Genitalia are an intrinsically inferior part of the body, much lower and less holy than the mind, the 'soul', the 'heart'», and, as a result: «All erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established». Here, love is one of the most acceptable excuses (together with marriage and reproduction) as sex can happen only inside of a committed long-term relationship of love. This idea of love as the only motivation that moves us women to have sex completely erases our sexual desires and search for pleasure.

The myth of virginity is inherently impregnated by this rituality, performativity of romantic love, being this essential to the construction and idealization of the myth itself. In fact, as it will be later explored, the restrictions to *the first time* result to be the same: we judge ourselves «ready» for the step of *the first time* mainly through the criterium of love (Ashcraft, 2006): we must choose someone we love, a person worthy to lose our virginity to, someone who in turn proves their love by waiting for us: «*true* love waits», where «true» shows how the discourse on emotions and love intersects with a regime of truth (Fernández Rodríguez, 2018). Love makes *the first time* a magical, special moment one will never be able to forget. It is so strong its influence that we look for a *first time* of love even if this love is not going to last, in fact, for a woman «even if this love ultimately fades, virginity loss can become a milestone she looks back on fondly» (McAlister, 2015, p. 48).

The overwhelming saturation of our intimate relationships with romantic love makes urgent a self-discussion and deconstruction; we must show, offer new possibilities and options of what love could mean, we must recognize and broaden our alternative nets and spaces of loved people/people that love us. Following Esteban (2011), I aim for the development of a suspicious, uncomfortable writing on love, that together with blasphemy and irony, constitutes an efficient condition for its subversion,

managing maybe, eventually, to free love from (this) romanticism and letting raise safe, original, passionate and empowering ethics of love for all of us.

To resume, in order to introduce the material collected from the interviews, I analyzed through this theoretical framework the dominant definitions of virginity, sex and love (as they are related to virginity). Among some brief references I considered more current and significant (Christian religion, popular culture, education, medicalization), I decided to focus on the idea of virginity as a rite of passage, *the first time* as a ritual. The ritual has been defined as an embodied code, transmitted by a series of acts, movements, attitudes to assume, charged with specific cultural symbolism; it comes with a prescribed preparation, thus it is almost never spontaneous, unexpected or improvised; it owns a sociological function, sacralizing and reinforcing social structures, creating and conforming identities within an established order. Here, what I wanted to highlight more has been the performative nature of the ritual, both in its intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics, that is to say: that mechanical repetition of a specific code of gestures, movements and attitudes, and the constant telling and re-telling of this tale especially within the peer group. This double-performativity is essential for the myth to survive and maintain authority, reproducing and reinforcing normative gender roles and heterosexuality, at the base of the hegemonic definitions of sex and love. The dominant definition of sex has been analyzed through its intertwined definitions as heteronormative, cissexist, phallo- and coitocentric, macho-oriented both in agency and pleasure; the idea of (*the first time*) sex as something that contaminates women's body has also been taken into consideration. Love, on the other hand, has been delineated in its «romantic» conceptualization, what more contributes to the idealization of the myth, constituting its greater restriction.

The next chapter opens the central exposition and elaboration of the material emerged from the interviews. As explained in the methodology, the themes will be developed along a timeline: before, during and after *the first time*.

## **4. Before-during-after *the first time*: collected experiences**

### **4.1 The wait**

#### **4.1.1 The wait for *the right person/moment***

This thing of virginity equals waiting. (M.)

The wait was the very first concept raised by the conversations, both in the meaning of waiting, and, more importantly, in its conjugation of: *making* wait; as M., one of the participants, clearly defines, it seems constituting an intrinsic feature of virginity, almost a synonym of it, a fundamental, defining stage in the process of its loss. Even before *the first time*, specific gender-dynamics of activity/passivity are set: making wait is a commonly expected desire and duty for a girl, something that could be whether accepted by the boy, or refused and possibly lead to his decision of breaking-up; the fear of the latter could result in girls silencing their feelings and thoughts when they deem these to be potentially disruptive for the relationship (Tolman, 1994).

Then there was also that idea, from their point of view, that if you were dating a girl who was a virgin, maybe they thought [...] who knows how much she's going to make me wait? (M.)

The fact that he had waited for me eight, nine months, meant to me that he wanted to do it with ME. (L.)

I was afraid that if I had told him listen, I don't feel like going forward, he would have told me listen S., then by! (S.)

The wait, here, easily reveals its supporting double-standard: it is what testifies, on one side, girls' morality and decency, while on the other: boy's true love, his being *the right one*. In this sense, it is important to notice that the labels applicable on boys matter, again, just to girls (they are the ones responsible for waiting until finding this *right one*), more than giving a moral judgement on boys themselves; they are not, in fact, shamed for their decisions, even if this means actively refusing to wait. This waiting-making wait rhetoric reveals its artifice perfectly in the following paradoxical memory of A., who did not feel the necessity of waiting, but on whom this was quite ironically projected by his boyfriend. Here, what is portrayed to be a natural female approach to virginity loss shows its performative origins: waiting is the very first behavioral imposition of the hegemonic tale of virginity, it is what firstly allows the idealization of *the first time*, constituting thus the prerequisite background for the event.

The thing is that, for what I remind, HE created all the drama around my virginity, because to me, like the first time I gave him a handjob, I wasn't that focused on thinking now I have to do this, I have to do that [...] no, for me, if after a movie we would have had sex, there wouldn't have been anything wrong. Instead, he had created all his movie in which he had to wait for me, so it was HIM the one who was blocking himself, it wasn't me, I mean, it wasn't me saying no no please I'm not ready to go on, I was super chilled, if the first night he would have told me let's do it, I would have probably said yes. I remember these scenes of him saying exactly to me no A., I don't want to do too much because I know you never did it [...] and I didn't get it, I mean, I didn't get it.

And again:

I remember this scene of him looking at me and saying A., if you don't want to do it I can wait, I will go crazy, but I can wait [...] and I thought [...] I had never told him I wanted to wait, I never said no. Each time we were getting there, he stopped. It was simply him to create all the wait.

Talking about the practical details of this wait, which were the times? Everyone remembers very strict rules defining *the right moment*:

And above all, at that time, I remember we had [...] maybe you wrote that too [...] we had times. I mean, there had to be a time. I remember we use to talk with A. [...] how much do you wait before doing it? Which is the waiting period? I mean, you must wait a year? You must wait two years? How long? It looked as if it was something, I don't know, something so [...] I mean sacred [...] that you had to wait. (M.)

I remember we waited three months before doing it, and after some time, when I told my mother I had had sex with S., she asked me when? And when I told her it was in October, she was scandalized that I had waited just three months [...] in my mother's mind I would have said no until six months or so. (A.)

Generally speaking, thus, it seems that the longer the wait, the closer you get to guess this *right time*. This is also confirmed by L.'s long-lasting relationship, considered by her friends the proof she was not a virgin anymore:

At that time my best-friend was F., who lost her virginity [...] I think it was also at 14, 15 years old, and she had a lot of relationships for her age, so on one side there was her judgment, and on the other my friends hadn't lost their virginity, but since I had been with E. for so long, they were taking for granted I had already done it [...] so they were always making digs, even openly in class [...] but I never talked about this with them, you know? I lived that as if I was a bit of a loser. With F. I never felt this judgment because I hadn't done it, but in my head, I thought oh man, she had already had so many relationships and I have been with E. for two years and still don't have any. (L.)



The normative formula of «waiting» equals «finding the right one», though, seems to be this strict just with regard to the social consequences inflicted to the ones deserting it, in fact, if we look at the clarity of its terms, strictness disappears in favor of a deep ambiguity; that is to say, *the right moment* appears quite impossible to guess right, since no matter how much one waits, there always seems to have a trap waiting for us too. For the ones who wait «too little», both with regard to the age and to the stage of a relationship, being judged «easy», «slutty» is the most predictable outcome.

I mean, the heaviest thing, apart from the fact that people didn't know how I had felt, was the fact that I had lost my virginity after a month and a half since we had been together [...] when maybe before I had had longer relationships, four months, you know? It was really the fact of the period, that I had done it in so little time, and you know it was something so valuable, it was a value that [...] oh God! (M.)

I remember I was paranoid that day because I kept saying to myself [...] 14 years old is too little, at least 15 could be a right age [...] at 14 years old I felt even dirtier, sluttier, I mean really dishonored, it was terrible to me, I kept saying to myself I had to wait at least until 15, but then it happened. (C.)

For the ones who wait «too much», on the other hand, virginity seems to become a sort of social weight, ceasing to be valuable and transforming one into a *loser* or, when it comes to girls: «The saint», «The prude», «The difficult», «The playing hard to get» one<sup>19</sup>.

I remember V., when she talked with me, she's two years older than me and she lost her virginity last summer [...] I mean, she felt a bit like [...] when we were talking about these things, she said [...] uh, I don't know what to say, we talked about it in a chilled way, not discriminatory like [...] you don't know [...] but sometimes there's this thing even when you have to talk about yourself [...] I remember she once made up she had lost her virginity. (M.)

At the time, it wasn't about wanting the perfect person anymore, I mean, before I was thinking about this, but then, actually, a sort of mechanism was triggered in which I had to shake off this weight of not having lost my virginity yet, so it has been different to me. (S.)

S. continues:

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<sup>19</sup> Between the 16th and 20th century, waiting «too much» could also result in one being judged to be ill. «The disease of virgins» also known as chlorosis and greensickness was in fact a popular diagnose women used to get in correspondence of a wide and vague range of symptoms; the main one was considered to be the lack of menstruation. The blood that did not flow out (deemed to be blocked by the hymen) was believed to putrefy, obstruct the body and weigh down the womb. Sex was deemed to be the cure, as a penis could «open up» the body and move/release the retained blood; coincidentally, thus, marriage and pregnancy were the treatment doctors prescribed women for this sickness (King, 2004), (Blank, 2016).

Then, talking with you and with the other girls, you were all saying you already had a boyfriend, I mean, it really felt like I was less, I was saying to myself [...] what am I missing? All the other girls know what it's like to do this thing and I don't, I mean, I was feeling myself behind, a loser because I still hadn't lost my virginity, so I was really rushing for it.

This idea of the weight is also confirmed by how L. expresses her virginity loss as a liberation:

It was more like going over a huge stumbling block, you know like an obsessive thought, saying ok, now that I did it, I am freer.

As Allan, Santos, & Spahr (2016, p. 97-98) writes: «Virginity is seemingly caught forever in this double bind, in which it is something revered and wanted, yet ridiculed and unwanted»; the possibility of choosing made available is just a reduced, deceptive one, since whatever path one decide to follow, we will always end exposed to some kind of penalty and censure. The trickery of virginity rhetoric is confirmed by the fact of this being commonly defined by exclusion: «We define virginity by deciding what terminates it, what virginity is not» (Blank, 2016, p. 9), it «is defined not by doing, but by not doing. [...] Virginity becomes a reification of an absence: “never having sex” is turned into something tangible, a valuable object» (McAlister, 2015, p. 15). It becomes «obvious only in the moment of its obliteration. We usually describe our own virginities starting from the point at which we ceased to be virgins at all. [...] Virginity is because it ends» (Blank, 2016, p. 96-97), meaning that reclaiming a value in virginity is possible only when we lose it, when we are not definable virgins anymore. The dichotomy of the virgin/whore emerges interestingly from the anecdote of A., where the two labels appear as interchangeable insults directed to her during teenage:

I remember when I was 10, 11 years old, when I realized how virginity was so related to the fact of being popular or not. I remember I was a super shy kid and we were staying at my grandma's beach house, and I was with this other kid who was overweight, I was redhead together with another girl, we were the rejected [...] and there were some girls who were a couple of years older than me, a group of popular girls, and I remember they once invited me to hang out with them just to laugh at me [...] and we had planned to see each other with some guys at the beach and then at some point they asked me [...] but are you a virgin? And I said yes, and they [...] but how could you still be a virgin at 11 years old? And so they started to make me feel super bad for the fact that I was still a virgin [...] they were virgins, it was a way of laughing at me even if they knew they were themselves virgins! And then the opposite thing happened when I went to nuns' secondary school, and I was like the red one, the *partigiana* [...] the devil, but the devil they were making fun of, because I was super stigmatized for being left-wing in that school [...] and I remember that some older girls started to say I was a whore, so the contrary [...] before I had been refused for being a virgin by some girls that, even if they were also virgins, I wasn't for my own choice in their mind.

As I was mentioning, the criterium of the wait appears to be firmly tied, dependent to the one of love, in the sense that waiting was the proof of a serious commitment and making wait was the test trough which confirming if the other person *truly* loved us, thus if, in particular, he was *the right one*. Love was what ultimately gave one the green light to have sex for the first time.

And who was the right person to have the first time with? (G.)

At the time it was the person that you really loved. (M.)

The first time I had sex I was 17 years old and my girlfriend was the one I considered at the time the love of my life. (M., written summary)

Love was even perceived as the only inherently safe space where sex can take place:

I remember J., that with this guy, she was like I love him so much, he loves me so much [...] it was all played around love love love, while I remember I used to perceive as traumatic, I didn't have friends telling me directly, but when I heard a rumor about a girl who had had sex in an environment that wasn't one of love, I perceived that as a violence, and with love I intend a stable relationship with someone who had told her that feels something for her. For example, my seaside town, I lived it as a traumatic environment from the sexual point of view, I heard these stories about girls that [...] the typical story was she got drunk and they had sex on the beach, and I always saw her as the victim, I saw it as an act of violence. If it happened as a casual act it was violent to me and probably it was him forcing her, the only relationships I saw like ok, that's good, even if I didn't understand them completely as [...] I don't know, they were very abstract in my mind, but the only ones were those happening inside the safe space of love. (A.)

And even if this love does not last, it remains fundamental in the choice of *the first time* (McAlister 2015).

I should have done it with M. [...] He was the very first guy I fell in love with. (S.)

Even looking back and knowing that the relationship would have gone that way? (G.)

Absolutely yes. (S.)

What emerges from the previous analysis is that the perception and definition of «being ready» for the step of *the first time* is dependent on this having waited, which, as participants delineated, automatically stood for having found *the right person*, the one who truly loved them. In its article «Ready or Not...? Teen Sexuality and the Troubling Discourse of Readiness» (2006), Ashcraft discusses the role assumed by readiness discourses in making sense of teenager's sexualities. The author refers to it as an unexamined concept that «prevents adolescents and adults from having

meaningful conversations about sexuality» (p. 328), it derails, «limits the transformative potential of these conversations» (p. 332); «being ready» permeates the discourses on virginity loss, but it is never really explored or deconstructed in its assumptions. Like virginity overall, it is also mainly defined by exclusion, what readiness and being ready is not: *not* having waited an (unidentifiable) amount of time and *not* being with someone who loves us, it thus «turns out to have little to do with you, your state of mind, or your desires and everything to do with the other person's» (p. 337). In this perspective:

For example, many of these studies have documented the pervasive silences around female desires. Although girls are given frequent instructions on how to say “no”, the information is rather sparse when it comes to what to do if they wish to say “yes” (Fine, 1992). This lack of information reinforces dichotomies between “bad” girls who want “it” and “good” girls who do not. With little positive acknowledgment of the ways in which they might enjoy sex or their sexuality, girls are left to decipher these feelings on their own, wondering if they are the only ones who have them. Discourses of romance and virginity further bolster the dichotomies between “good” and “bad” girls. Girls who allow intimacy without receiving “good treatment” are labeled bad girls (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Likewise, virginity discourses promise sexual and emotional safety to “good” girls who wait to “give it up” until they find “true love” or at least a “special someone” who cares about them (Sapon-Shevin & Goodman, 1992). Faced with these complex social scripts, girls “spend enormous amounts of time trying to save it, lose it, convince others that they have lost or saved it, or trying to be ‘discreet’ instead of focusing their energies in ways that are sexually autonomous, responsible and pleasurable” (Fine 1992:39) (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 329).

What is more, «the readiness discourse is bolstered by dominant representations of male sexuality as predatory and female sexuality as naive» (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 338), it thus contributes to reinforce dangerous stereotypes on women's and men's «natural» attitudes toward sexuality:

The idea is that women are supposed to do all they can to limit men's access to female sexuality [...], and men are meant to do all they can to convince women otherwise. This sets up sex a sexual dynamic that assumes women don't want to have and therefore need to be convinced to do so - and that this “convincing” is a natural part of seduction (Valenti, 2009, p. 173).

Ashcraft (2006) claims that this default invocation of readiness «fosters unrealistic expectations for sexual encounters and prevents teens from asking important questions when these expectations are not met - questions that might lead them to interrogate patterns of inequity» (p. 329), it can also «silence talk about the more relational aspects» (p. 335) «or power-laden dynamics» (p. 340) of sexuality; suggesting that everything will go well if you wait until you are «ready», or that there can be harmful consequences if you are not, can lead to «self-blame if these expectations are not met» (p.

340).

Finally, this formula can prevent one from considering other explanations for why a particular encounter might have gone awry. Without the easy access to the explanation “I was not ready”, individuals might entertain other explanations. For example, perhaps it went awry because of problematic ideas about gender-roles, sex, or relationships. As such, defaulting to the readiness formula can prevent people from asking important questions about how scripts of masculinity, femininity, race, class, and sexual orientation might contribute to these interactions – questions that might ultimately challenge these reproductive processes (p. 337)

These «serious-consequences» discourses are often employed by adults when speaking with girls about their sexuality, the most common and numerous messages received by girls when becoming sexually active are actual warnings. This dominant habit might be interrupted by encouraging them to speak out about their sexual desires without making them feel unworthy for this, listening and answering to their questions and fears (Tolman, 1994); it might re-position sexual desire as a source of empowerment (Tolman, 1994), recover the erotic from its systematic corruption and turning it in a source of power and information within girls and women’s lives (Lorde, 1984).

To close this first section, I think it is worthy to mention how, at the end of the wait, once found and proved the *true* love, the event of *the first time* tends to be rigidly planned and organized, since, as defined: a ritual never comes unexpected. Almost every participant confirms, in fact, they knew it would have happened that specific day, and whether it was just felt or explicitly fixed, a possible change was hardly negotiable.

Always the rationality, the fact that it isn’t a spontaneous moment, but it’s a prepared moment. I must do it, I will probably do it tonight, it never comes from a spontaneity. (L.)

One day, the 15th of October, he proposes me to have lunch at his place after school. I accept and I tell my mother who looks at me and says [...] you know what it’s going to happen, right? (A., written summary)

So, one day A. had invited me to his house and we basically know that we would have done it. (L., written summary)

That day we were at my place and we’d been buying two pastries with the scooter, then we had moved to the countryside right outside my house on the hammock, and I remember he threw down a cliff, into the brambles, my pen, that summer I had been in a cruise and I had taken this pen that I was keeping with affection I don’t know why, and I felt so bad. Now thinking back about those moments, I understand that was the first sign of a series of violent and abusive acts [...] but despite this anger, we had decided we would have done it and so we had to do it that day. (C.)

#### 4.1.2 Expectations and fears: exchanging tales with peers

As previously defined, the hegemonic tale of virginity ensures its survival and authority through a widely branched performativity: both before and after *the first time*, it is constantly re-told, heard and shared within the peer group; before, during the wait, symbolical expectations and fears constitute the most echoing discourses, shaping a specific model of the experience of virginity loss.

Speaking of which, I would like to start with what M. and A. remind. M.'s experience with regard to the exchange of virginity loss tales is clearly impregnated by the issue of masculinity, or, more precisely, the social acknowledgment of it:

There were someone among my friends telling how the first time had been, and I think that these stories were often made up to look cooler, so sometimes it was a very romanticized idea by the boys too, like, I took her at my place, my parents weren't there, we put some music, we made it on the sofa, these kind of stories, that could have been true maybe, I mean, it was all so perfect, you know? So I tried to repeat my friends' stories.

He also writes (summary):

I felt the weight of responsibility, the one of losing my virginity and being good at make her come, so feeling myself legitimated as an effective male, I felt overwhelmed by anxiety just to think I couldn't live up to that assignment.

Sexuality functions as a social index of masculine reputation (Gilmore, 1987), «the weight of responsibility» a man must fulfill in order to be recognized in these terms by his peers; in this sense Gilmore (1987, p. 4-5) argues that: «The masculine experience of sexuality becomes broadened conceptually to encompass a triad involving two men or groups of men and a woman, who is reduced to an intermediating object». M. remembers *the first time* was important to him mainly because:

I could have told it to all my friends, we could have talked about it, I would have been one of the firsts of the group doing it, a sort of responsibility.

«The virgin» have historically represented a pure exchange value among men: «She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. In this sense, her natural body disappears into its representative function» (Irigaray, 1985, p. 186).

This responsibility, again, of not failing the expectations and thus the legitimization of the peer group is ironically reminded by M. in the story shared after his *first time*:

Obviously, I gilded the pill [...] it had gone super great [...] then I indulged their questions, like, did she give you a blowjob? Su-u-u-re! (laughing).

A., on the other hand, refers to this space of narrations and transmission of virginity loss tales as a «genealogy», but where, as a lesbian, she was not allowed:

A genealogy, because I don't think that a genealogy arises only from generational spaces of time, but also within the same generation, because with my friends, I know who lost virginity in time, it was as if each one turned to be the godmother of the other [...] then there was one who never got there, because I never got there. For example, I remember my friend A. who lost her virginity super late at 25 years old, and it was like a taboo no one could talk about. It was strange because it was like a narrative was created, where there were characters, and then she was the spinster, she was like the nun, and I was the witch. I always talked with A. because we were the ones who had eliminated men from our lives, from very different points of view, so just because she didn't like to touch herself or do anything sexual, and to me it was the fact that I was afraid of penises [...] so it's really interesting because it was a genealogy in which some of us didn't take part.

As for M., through the space of the peer group, in this case a group of heterosexual friends, specific gender roles were applied and sanctioned:

I remember how you were informed by your friends, and how I have never been recognized as the passive one in some situations [...] I don't know if I can say it, because I should reflect on it, but it comes to my mind [...] the interesting thing is the duality between masculinizing me a lot and already fixing me as a super masculine person because I am a lesbian, and on the other side, at the same time, infantilizing me and feminizing me when the talk was around sexual relationships. So, with regard to a sexual relationship I was infantilized since I hadn't lost my virginity, but then, as a romantic figure, and simply in relation with another body, I was seen as super masculine and violent.

And she clarifies a bit later:

Infantilized because, yes, every time they were talking about men, sex, there were always those laughs *oh nena*, very paternalistic to me [...] because I was someone who still hadn't understood what sex is.

Let's now start analyzing which were the main expectations and fears shared within the peer group about *the first time*. (1) *The first time* would have been a perfect, magical moment full of emotions:

You really imagined a movie thing, we are alone with the candles [...] I mean, I projected myself on your first time [...] those ideals [...] I used to say oh my god, how beautiful! (M.)

Oh god [...] I used to imagine it as a sort of feeling of completeness [...] I imagined I would have felt complete. (C.)

And above all, especially for my friends' tales it seemed so amazing, for example you at the time with the petals. (S.)

S. also reminds:

Sometimes hearing my friends there were tales, like, it was the most exciting moment of my life!

(2) Love was not only expected to be confirmed, but also to grow between the two people after *the first time*:

For sure we thought it was something that would have strengthened everything [...] two people already loving each other crazily, so much in love, and the fact of doing it for the first time it would have taken the relationship to the top [...] it would have been a love [...] beyond everything, right? (laughing). (M.)

I thought it would have made us grow up, both as a person and as a couple. (L.)

On the other hand, one of the most common fear resulted to be (1) the later slut-shaming judgments by other people:

I think that what scared me so much was the judgment of the others [...] since in my class the judgments of whore were dropping so easily. (A.)

That was one of my biggest fears [...] the fact that it would have been heard, told [...] that I was a slut for everyone [...] the worst thing in the world [...] now I'm not even able to explain to you this huge pain regarding this fear that [...] now it seems to me so ridiculous. (C.)

The most significant fear, though, is the one represented by the conviction that (2) *the first time* will hurt (and will make you bleed). Almost unanimously the presence of pain within virginity loss tales was confirmed during the conversations, and present in a way where peers «almost seem to be scaring each other off» (Thompson, 1990). I report to follow what some participants remind:



I was so scared by the pain. (L.)

I expected the pain that one link to bleeding [...] one use to bleed when something it's hurting a lot. (L.)

A friend of mine said that it had been the biggest pain of her life (laughing), she wasn't to take seriously, in general everyone obviously said that the first time would have hurt a bit. (S.)

Thinking back to what a friend told her after her *first time*, M. affirmed to have been afraid since:

She told me she suffered a lot, that it had hurt so much to her.

And intertwined with the issue of pain, L. reminds the issue of bleeding:

I used to think [...] when I'll have sex it will be something huge, I'll lose liters of blood!

To start with, Blank (2016, p.111) affirms: «No book on virginity could possibly omit a discussion of blood and pain [...] pain and bleeding have been so strongly associated with virginity loss that we scarcely speak about first-time sex without talking about them». Let's focus on pain for now.

As I mentioned, experiencing pain during a first vaginal penetration of a penis seems to be perceived as absolutely normal. But is it? Starting from the assumption that pain is considered a natural consequence of a «torn» hymen (later discussed), *Vaginal Corona: Myths surrounding virginity*<sup>20</sup> (RFSU, 2009, p. 9-10) reports that:

Since the vaginal corona isn't a brittle membrane the sensation when you first stretch out the mucous tissue folds - whether you're inserting a tampon, masturbating or having penetrative sex - is a highly individual experience. Some women feel no pain at all, while others, with a thicker vaginal corona, have reported some pains. There may be minor ruptures in the mucous folds that hurt, and sometimes there may be a little bleeding. For a woman to enjoy vaginal intercourse - regardless of how many times she has done it and what is being inserted in her vagina - she needs to be aroused and lubricated (wet). If she is tense and has difficulties to relax, it may hurt more. It doesn't matter whether it's her first, second or tenth time. It's important to recognize the key role played by a woman's clitoris in sexual arousal and enjoyment.

So, painful sex is not false, it could happen for various reasons (quite different from the ones commonly assumed, often based just on the fact of having a vagina), such as «underlying medical conditions, issues related to gender confirmation surgeries, past experiences with pain or sexual assault» (Friedrichs, 2016) «lack of arousal or comfort» (Weiss, 2017)... but this is not the point. The

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<sup>20</sup> The term vaginal corona is used as a synonym for hymen.

point is that expecting pain, normalizing it as a default, unquestionable and even romantic (Weiss, 2017) experience inherent to *the first time* sex is unfounded and problematic. Blank (2016, p. 111-112) argues that:

We look for blood and pain in virgins because we attach enormous symbolic meaning to these things. Depending on one's viewpoint, blood and pain can be understood as symbolic of virtue, morality, sacrifice [...] women seem to positively revel in gory (and in some cases clearly exaggerated) details of how much it hurt and how much they bled and suffered. While some cast losing their virginity in the light of romantic sacrifice or "proving their love", others frame it as evidence that sex inevitably makes victims of women or as proof that sexually active women deserve to suffer. [...] The message is clear: blood and pain equal virginity loss, virginity loss equals blood and pain. On some level, it seems as if our culture believes that women should bleed and suffer when they have sex for the first time (p. 111-112).

In the paragraph «Hegemonic Tale # 2: Vagina Horror and Virginity Loss», Méndez de la Brena (2016, p. 82) refers to these recurring messages as: «Horror tales»:

Horror tales always do something. They can scare, traumatize, or even paralyze our ways of interpreting certain events. [...] The danger of those tales is that once they are transmitted, they have repercussions for how young women relate to their bodies. The vagina and virginity are ambiguous states that have several implications for how women's bodies are socially situated between male desire and male denial, the order and the chaos, ritual and symbolism, and the sacred and the profane. And when mothers pass on their own anxieties, their daughters take them for granted, causing permanent fear, shame, and disgust for their own bodies and sexualities.

«Perpetuating this idea that sex will hurt is also a good way to control female sexuality» (Friedrichs, 2016); it contributes to put shame on women's bodies and it fails to give voice and explore the real and significant conditions potentially causing painful sex.

Women and femmes have been socialized to always put their partners' pleasure first and view their own as a nice, but optional side effect of pleasing others. With that socialization, painful or pleasureless sex may not seem like a big deal. It can feel like if you've accomplished the "goal" of getting your partner off, the sex has been a success. So, de-normalizing painful sex goes beyond learning about anatomy. It requires changing our priorities. It requires that we revise our standard for good sex to include pleasure and no pain (unless it's wanted) for both parties. It requires that we embrace having a vagina as an experience that opens the door to pleasure and no more pain than any other body part. (Weiss, 2017).

To conclude this part, I think it is important to highlight how the abundant exchange among peers' group often does not correspond to the same level of communication within the family on issues related to sexuality; someone in fact remind:

Neither to me nor to my brother they have ever talked about sex, contraception, prevention [...] never anything. (L.)

I talked to my brother. My mother tried to talk with my brother, but seeing how hard it seemed, delegated it to my father, who has been completely incapable of talking or even just listening to my mother asking him to talk with my brother [...] I don't see, I don't hear [...] better a girl getting pregnant than talking about this! (L.)

I think talking about it explicitly changes things [...] something I never had within my house [...] it was always my mother telling me [...] I had my first time with your father [...] but still it was a taboo issue. (S.)

The experience of M. shows how this lack of communication can be reflected within the relationship with the partner before and during *the first time*, such as her consent completely going ignored:

So, the only thing I wanted to do [...] I didn't want to talk [...] I was feeling so [...] violated [...] I don't know, so bad [...] so I just said to myself [...] enough, sleep! You know when you tell yourself you're going to wake up and never really happened [...] so I slept. The morning after, we woke up and he was [...] I think he didn't realize how I felt in that moment [...] because he hadn't even asked me anything, anything except for here's a condom, do you want me to put it? And I said yes, it was the only thing coming out of my mouth [...] I was hoping he would ask me do you want to keep going? Are you sure? [...] maybe I couldn't have been able to answer [...]

She continues:

Because my first fear was God I don't want to do it, the second one, when he penetrated me was God we're not safe, you know? I mean, I hoped he would ask me something and I hoped my body or my subconscious would answer and react on impulse.

Without the intention of fixing any guilty/victim roles or commenting M.'s experience as a model of the consequences of a lack of education and communication on sexuality and relationships, I think her account on *the first time* can be meaningful to a wider reflection: the creation of a safe space where openly dialoguing about consent, and especially about recognizing the various signs that could communicate someone is not consenting is the absolute priority for the beginning of any sexual activity, whether it is the first or the thousandth one, both within a relationship, school and families,

since the youngest age. We should keep teaching ourselves that the lack of a «no» is not a «yes», that «deducing» consent is not having received consent, that, above all in this case, «love» or simply being in a relationship is not an alternate, special pass for having sex. It is also because of these assumptions, that many people, unintentionally and unconsciously, still end up raping (Ridgway, 2012).

#### 4.1.3 The questioning during the wait: am I a really a virgin?

A virgin was confirmed by participants to be commonly defined as a girl who never had a vaginal penis penetration; nevertheless, the label did not go completely unquestioned before each participants' *first time*.

Masturbation was one of the main worries to the *unpenetrated* body:

A virgin was a girl that had never had sexual intercourse with someone, but here I wonder, what does it mean? It means that a virgin who didn't have sexual intercourse, could touch herself? Could she have intercourse with herself? (M.)

I remember that when I started to masturbate I asked you if I had lost my virginity. (S.)

Another fear I had was that I used to masturbate, already since years, penetrating myself with objects, and it was great, and I was afraid I had lost my virginity by myself. (C.)

I have always thought I had already lost my virginity before having sex because they guy I was dating before A., I remember once after he had masturbated me I lost some blood, so probably the hymen had broken. I don't know if it's actually possible, but I have always thought it this way. (L., written summary)

For the same reasons, menstrual tampons were also perceived to be a threat to remain *intact*, and thus by many avoided:

I remember my aunt used to tell me tampons were for older girls. (L.)

I have always thought virgins couldn't use tampons because of the hymen blocking the hole. I started to use them right after I had lost my virginity. (C.)

Whether they implicitly constituted a risk for the hymen (L.) or on the other side around, the hymen could not make possible their complete entrance (C.), they represented, together with masturbation, a transgression to the symbolic order of virginity, a risk for the virgin's sacred body (Méndez de la Brena, 2016).

Beyond the intentional insertion in the vagina of something other than a penis, various are the activities commonly quoted as accidental ways of losing one's virginity, such as bicycling, horseback riding and gymnastics.

Intriguingly enough, the idea that such straddle-legged activities constitute a threat to virginity shows up in sex education texts to this day. Despite the lack of any actual studies in the literature regarding whether horseback riding, gymnastics, or riding bicycles might have a particularly high rate of damaging women's hymens, virtually every contemporary writing about virginity aimed at teen girls is duly equipped with a disclaimer that says something along the lines of "many girls tear or otherwise dilate their hymen while participating in sports like bicycling, horseback riding, or gymnastics" [...]. But astonishingly, given the near-complete lack of hard evidence to support their inclusion, the odd mantra "bicycling, horseback riding, and gymnastics" shows up again and again (Blank, 2016, p. 221-222).

Coherently to what Blank affirms, answering to the question: «Can the vaginal corona break when you ride a bike or a horse? » the RFSU (2009, p. 12) writes: «No. Since the vaginal corona isn't a brittle membrane, physical exercise doesn't affect it. The vaginal corona is located 1-2 cm inside the vaginal opening - in other words, entirely within the vestibulum». Nevertheless, regardless of its damage or not, virginity should not be proved, and should not be proved by the hymen.

Another perspective of this discourse is the example of avoiding penis-into-vagina sex in order to «preserve» virginity, doing anal-sex was considered an option in this sense:

He defined himself a virgin because with K., at least for what I had understood, he had done it just anally, so she was a virgin too, got it? (laughing). (M.)

Anyway, the biggest implications affected rape-survivors. How did, and still does, the virginity myth influences girls who have suffered a sexual assault before *the first time*? How does it shape perceptions on their own bodies and sexuality? C. answers with regard to her story:

When I started to think [...] we have been together for a while, maybe he could be the first one, I love him, that triggered my panic, because thinking about the first time made me come out all the discourse of the violence, and then when my friends started to talk about how it worked, I was feeling extremely dirty, I felt I knew things I shouldn't know, in my head I kept repeating that it had been a violence, but I actually thought [...] you had already done it and you're pretending you never did, as if this was your first time. That coincided with the fact that his mother had said I was a slut because I was 14 years old and I was his son's girlfriend, re-opening all the trauma [...] it's true, I am a slut I am dirty because I had sex at 12 years old [...] so I was feeling like shit, filthy, unworthy.

Being convinced, wanting to tell his boyfriend about the violence was not the priority, she felt she *had* to tell him because omitting it would have meant lying about the «authenticity» of their *first time*:

My obsessive thought was [...] I can't have sex with him without let him know this thing, it's fundamental, so at the end I told him.

The patriarchal idealization of first penis penetration of a vagina as an unforgettable, unique moment transforming women's bodies and personalities also in the sense of making us lose innocence (thus becoming guilty) and degrading our worthiness, completely bypasses, trivializes the priority of consent issues within discourses on sexuality, it supports and perpetrates the harmful rhetoric of slut-shaming and victim-blaming. As Valenti (2008, p. 299, 301) clearly puts it: «The purity myth - the lie that sexuality defines how “good” women are, and that women's moral compasses are inextricable from their bodies - is an integral part of rape culture», it «not only enables sexual violence against women, it forgives it and renders it invisible». In this perspective, challenging and trying to dismantle the concept of virginity could maybe play a role in the fight against the shaming rhetoric perpetrating violence on those who have suffered sexual assaults.

#### **4.1.4 Preparing the body: shaving**

Closing this first section on the wait before *the first time*, I thought it was worthy to mention the essential preparation of women's own bodies: shaving.

I remember when I started to take the pill and I had to tell my mother, she was kind of shocked and she told me [...] I knew it because you're always shaving [...] and I felt like so bad. (L.)

It was summer, so generally I was already shaved, but before I had shaved better because inside myself I was saying [...] it could happen, there could be the possibility [...] but I wasn't ready. (S.)

That idea of feeling yourself presentable [...] I shaved my legs, the armpits [...] it was unconsciously a mechanism that made me more available to sex. (L.)

In the dominant representation of women's bodies, the removal of body hair is a requirement, and the ones not meeting this expectation are judged embarrassing, dirty until disgust; no surprise that most of the women of the group remember shaving as a precondition for *the first time*, as in the preparation for the ritual, the body, together with the person, the moment and the scene had to be only *the right one*. Women can freely decide whether to shave or not, rightly opting for what makes us feel more

comfortable with our bodies, but what cannot be denied is the dominant beauty standard we are all encouraged to fit, which does influence our perceptions of «being at ease» with ourselves; that is to say, even if the quoted women affirm to shave regardless of an upcoming sexual activity, they also show a specific concern and attention for shaving when there is one; what should impress here is how, again, something is felt primary and independent of our possible will of having or not having sex.

## 4.2 The lacks during *the first time*

### 4.2.1 Lack of experience on sex

In this first section related to the development of *the first time* I wanted to concentrate on the concept of experience. Reflecting the representation of the virgin the quintessential of inexperience (in contrast with the sexual active woman commonly defined «experienced» as a synonym of «slut»), almost every participant admits having felt this way during their *first time*: not knowing how to have sex, what to do. Many of the participants remember this concern as the primary thought during the act, they did not want to give a disappointing *performance*, and above all they had a specific idea of what sex would consist in: penis penetration, mainly in the way shaped by movies and porn imagery. Some kinds of sex came by default as inherently demeaning, such as male oral sex, mostly perceived as putting women in a role of submission.

Consider that when we did it I had no idea of what to do, but it was like I didn't want to let him down, I mean, it was like a mechanical thing since I was thinking to some movies or porn I had watched, you know? These kinds of bullshits, I didn't want to let him down with my performance. (S.)

The things I knew about sex were whether wrong or they weren't the focus. More than from my friends, I had constructed my idea through the movies, they were taking their clothes off, penetration, and everyone reached orgasm. (L.)

I remember I didn't know what I was doing while I was practicing a cunnilingus to her and I didn't dare either to ask her to give me a blowjob as it seemed to me sort of a porn fantasy. (M., written summary)

Do you remember I haven't given a blowjob for so long? Neither to A., because I've always seen it like a submission thing. (L.)

Interestingly, someone recall a sort of manipulation of the «experienced» label, in order to, in their cases, avoiding contraception.

Did you use some kind of contraception? (G.)

No because he was defining himself expert. (S.)

I immediately asked him to put a condom and him, asshole, tells me that the first time the condom is not necessary. (A., written summary)



What is worthy to discuss, in my perspective, is how «experience», commonly intended as a knowledge acquired in the field, within the specific case of *the first time*, already weights in its fundamental principles before the concrete development of the act. The experience participants anxiously feel lacking is a practical, strictly heterosexual experience of sexuality, more than simply on sexuality: for instance, having «trained» our bodies and senses through masturbation or non-penis-into-vagina sex is not considered that relevant at this point. We just expect to see our internalized gender roles to be concretized, put on the scene. It seems as if this discourse on experience represents a further performance of heteronormativity, contributing to fix the scripts of who must do what. As Blank (2016, p. 196) resumes: «No woman may be considered sexually real by herself, [...] it is only through the sexual action of a male partner that her sexuality is truly summoned into being», her *experience* starts from this moment.

Within this discourse, I talked with some participants about the first approaches to same-sex partners after having been in heterosexual relationships; here, this supposedly acquired experience cracks:

Something I really want to talk about, for me and you, is the reconceptualization of the idea of being experienced [...] able to understand, to flirt [...] this wasn't part of me, it was part of myself as heterosexual. I remember we used to say we were illiterate at first, because being experienced was a performance too. (G.)

G., it took me so long to trust my instinct! If now I think to all those times there was a flirt, something with some girl and I didn't recognize it because I couldn't trust myself and I couldn't trust my instinct! I thought about all this after the years and I linked everything. (C.)

Yes, totally. There was even the fear of stretching out your hand to touch him, to do anything [...] yeah, total inexperience [...] also when I started to have sexual relationships it was like learning everything again from zero. (M.)

Inexperience turns to be antonym of experience in the sense that it potentially cannot incorporate or prescribe any gender roles or dynamic to assume within the sexual act, it is the result of an unlearning process of normative sexuality, finally perceived by some as an empowering condition within their non-heterosexual first times:

It's because of it that I say that with L. there wasn't any dynamic of power. (C.)

And do you think it depended from the fact that it was a lesbian relationship? Or not? Do you think it coincided with your moment of self-awareness? (G.)

I think it was both, you know? Because if you remember, in the same period, I was having sex with that guy, and I didn't feel this thing [...] I felt I had to fit a role, and I didn't fit it [...] a performance [...] I used to do exact movements, gestures, it was like I was following a script. (C.)

Because I also remember you were saying that with M. you didn't feel any sexual dynamic of power, right?  
(G.)

You know what? Here it's the experience playing a role. Conceptually, I feel way freer, I feel able to follow more my instinct, to do what I want [...] but when it comes to practice [...] I mean, with this guy, I still felt trapped in a role and I couldn't feel completely myself, I still felt like the female, who sucks it because she must. On the other hand, the fact is that with a woman, the thing we have said so many times, I don't have precedents, I don't have an imagery [...] and on one side this thing is terrifying when you're approaching, but on the other side, G., it's revolutionary! I mean, I was there and I didn't have the slightest idea of what I had to do, of which one was my role, and on the other side a person that assumes no role [...] I mean you do what the fuck you want to do! (C.)

As C. reminds, realizing how our perceptions of being experienced are often biased and reductive can be scaring, but it can also show the power of undressing ourselves from dominant sexual and gender roles, opening new possibilities where sex can be so many different things that it becomes impossible to answer the typical «How do I do it?» question. Deserting the compulsory path of sex, constructing and training our own personal experience and confidence could allow us to live our sexuality in a more equal and less anxious way.

#### 4.2.2 Lack of agency

As I frequently mentioned, *the first time* is structurally characterized by a general passive role imposed to and internalized by women, meaning that they are not encouraged to express or explore what they feel like during the intercourse, while men must guide and give dynamicity to it.

A. exemplifies the typical answer I collected:

Do you remember to have been in any way active? (G.)

No-o-o-o, at all. Completely passive. I've been under him and I think I didn't do anything, I think I stayed still. (A.)

Guiding *the first time* is not only a privilege, in fact, as M. witnesses, it was a real «mission» to accomplish; within his relationship, he had to be the one knowing how that all worked.

I remember she saw me in difficulties and, despite of this, she told me that fulfilling the mission of penetration was my duty, she said to me something like I'm not the one down there, how could I know?  
(M., written summary)

Women's passivity is also well symbolized by the total priority given to male active sexual positions: like A., in fact, everyone in the group who had a heterosexual first time, reported the intercourse happened almost just in the missionary position (man on top of the woman). Here, S. constitutes an exception, daring to go out of the imposed script:

I remember when we did it and I moved on top of him and he told me [...] oh look at her, acting like the innocent girl, and then look!

Whether or not one could find them comfortable or pleasurable, on-top women's positions undoubtedly imply an active agency of the latter; here, women are able to control most of the movement: the depth, the angle, the speed. The kind of sanction S. was exposed to in reply shows two elements: on one hand, it confirms how *innocence*, as inherent to virginity, results to be reclaimed only when, in some way, we lose it; on the other, it makes clear how manipulative is this entire discourse on being innocent/no more innocent (thus a «whore») with the aims of shaming and punishing even the smallest active sexual decisions of women. In other words, we cannot be «moral actors», «we're defined by what we don't do - our ethics are the ethics of passivity» (Valenti, 2009, p. 25).

Notions of activity/passivity become even clearer when I listened to the experiences of same-sex relationships, here agency reveals its tie with the act of penetration, impeding the previously said potential of breaking heteronormative roles within non-heterosexual relationships:

I link the idea of losing virginity to the first time she fisted me. I think that was the moment where our positions and roles got more materialized [...] because I never got to fist or penetrate her [...] so the relation of who would have been the one penetrating was established. (A.)

A. also discusses:

If you think about it, when you penetrate someone it's like you're taking something off of them [...] you're putting the penis inside, but it comes out with something that you keep, that person's virginity for example [...] and you feminize and infantilize that person in some way. In a sense, you are the productive part proposing it to the reproductive one who has no kind of agency, it's just receiving.

With this regard, Dworkin (1981, p. 23) writes that:

Fucking requires that the male act on one who has less power and this valuation is so deep, so completely implicit in the act, that the one who is fucked is stigmatized as feminine during the act even when not

anatomically female. In the male system, sex is the penis, the penis is sexual power, its use in fucking is manhood.

This discourse obviously opens the one related to the example of gay penetrative sex, where, through the rigid definition of who is «the passive»/«active» one, issues of masculinity become central.

Let's say that I'm included among the ones who lost their virginity for the common sense, and I lost it two times because, I mean, I have been both the top and the bottom (laughing). (M.)

And he later adds:

Something I had problems with was being the bottom one, I mean I waited several months, maybe for internalized homophobic ideas I saw the fact of being bottom as a total submission, as I was less of a man, now I do like it.

Having linked agency to penetration, I continue this discussion with the following part, where not only is penetration delineated as inherently active in the intercourse, it also represents, following the phallo- and coitocentric impositions, the intercourse itself, leaving no space for any other sexual activity or pleasure.

#### **4.2.4 Lack of pleasure and of any other acts except penis penetration**

Almost all the women in the group say they used to practice other kinds of sex before *the first time*, they were enthusiastic about that and they did not feel something necessarily missing.

We were having the so-called foreplay since time, we touched each other, not the oral sex, we were rubbing one against each other, and I liked it so much, it was really something erotic, I felt sexual pleasure, in a sweet way, it was perfect to just have that. (C.)

However, when *the right moment* comes, the majority of them admitted to not have practiced any different act except penis penetration. As L. reminds, it was like everything outside from it had nothing to do with that moment, with *real sex*:

I had always practiced oral sex and I liked that, but I didn't do it the first time, because it wasn't spontaneous and because in my imaginary sex was related to penetration with him on top and her below, that's it, it's

funny because I had the experience of something, but when I was about having sex I didn't do that because I thought it wasn't pertinent.

This is made even clearer by non-heterosexual relationships, where the absence of penis-into-vagina sex makes wonder, but also opens the possibilities of what having sex could mean:

During the first weeks, the first month, we were giving each other blowjobs and masturbating, and my boyfriend saw it as if we hadn't had sex yet, in fact we talked and he was telling me do you think we made love? Yes of course we made love, we're naked we're here trying to give pleasure to each other, to me this is making love [...] it was still connected to penetration then. (M.)

With L. we make out so intensely that to me that is sexual. (A.)

And always in relation to this, talking about another relationship A. affirms:

Even if the genitals aren't touching, it's not necessary to have sex in a normative way, that it's even putting on one all the pressure on how you must do it.

*The first time* is also described as completely lacking pleasure:

Neither I bled, nor I felt the slightest pleasure. (L., written summary)

I mean, physically talking, I never felt anything the first times. (L., written summary)

With regard to this discourse and the previous one, A. and C. were the ones spontaneously defining it as:

A ritual, there was nothing outside penetration. (A.)

A rite, and had nothing to do with pleasure. (C.)

Speaking of which, later in the conversations, the theme of faking orgasms came to my mind in specific relation to *the first time*, in a way that could constitute an interesting starting point for a deeper reflection: although every woman in the group who has been in a heterosexual relationship confirm to have very frequently faked orgasms, they say they would have never even thought of faking during *the first time* (I asked them if they faked or thought about faking pleasure in general). Within this perspective, at least with regard to my group of participants, women's sexual pleasure

seems not pertaining to *the first time* until this point. That is to say: women learn quite easily and rapidly to fake orgasms and pleasure (thus I think it is not convincing to object there is an actual time, later in a relationship, when women learn to fake), we are both used to do it to make a boring or unpleasant sexual activity to stop, to please or arouse the partner... whatever the reason, this pressure is high, but apparently not in *the first time*. Here, none of the women asked about this was worried of giving the impression of enjoying that sex. Without going straight to conclusions, this detail suggested me that *the first time* functions as such a strict and symbolic ritual that might not even include one of the most specific pattern of women's heterosexual performances during sex; or instead, this could also be intended as a compulsory silence, proving that lack of experience women still need to confirm at this time. Anyhow, the lack of pleasure is not received with much surprise or interest, as this does not qualify in any way the ritual. In this sense. it is love, again, what mitigates and blurs this lack:

You wrote that before, he had said to you he loved you, for the first time. I remember that my first time with M. it was everything like I love you, I love you too [...] like, we're doing something it's not giving me any pleasure [...] – (G.)

(overlapping) But we love each other! (laughing). (M.)

## 4.3 After: the body

### 4.3.1 The wound: penetration-break of the hymen-bleeding

I decided to choose the body as the focus of this fourth chapter since it presented itself as the most affected part of the individual after *the first time*, letting emerge many interesting starting points for reflection. While emotionally, different appeared the feelings after the loss of virginity: a disappointing liberation (L.), an unexpected indifference (M.) to what should have caused a compulsory change (C.), a loss (S.) or a sense of being grown-up and «cool» (L.), the majority and most recurring ones resulted to be feelings strictly related to the body and its change, both regarding the perceptions of the self and of the others.

I didn't feel more of a woman, quite the opposite, shifting from having to not having an orgasm [...] to me that was just annoying, a true disappointment, you know? I felt so stupid, but I felt a part of me was liberated, in the sense that peer pressure had gone down a bit. (L.)

I remember once we got back to school after the holidays, and I commented [...] we looked at each other and we said [...] so I'm not a virgin anymore [...] whatever (laughing). (M.)

I felt I had made a necessary step in my life, because I imposed myself it had to be so [...] in the sense that the cultural discourse on the first time had been so heavy that yes it had to change me and thus it did, I mean, the performative discourse par excellence, I didn't have choice. (C.)

My mother had also always described it to me as a personal treasure, you know? Something to give to a special person, but to me it wasn't like gifting virginity to someone you truly love, it was a loss [...] in my case it was like losing something. (S.)

I felt super cool, like an adult. (L., written summary)

Within *the first time*, the loss of virginity, caused by a (painful) penis penetration of a vagina, is considered to be tangible on women's bodies since it coincides with the break of the hymen and a consequent bleeding. In this section, I will analyze both the hymen as the signifier of virginity, and blood as the evidence of hymen's break and virginity loss. To begin with, I report part of the conversation with S. representing a quite symbolic example of why I decided to metaphorically refer to the sex of *the first time* as a «wound». Remembering our young teen talks on the theme:

I remember I didn't even know what labia majora and minora were, which was the hole for the pleasure, the one [...] I knew nothing. (S.)

I think we were really young, but I remember you told me [...] so when the penis goes in [...] it creates the hole? I mean, you had no idea there was an actual hole that was being penetrated, you were saying that somehow the penis gets there and [...] – (G.)

(overlapping) I didn't think it was the same one! You know? I used to think there had to be another one! That was how informed I was, can you believe that? (S.)

«The penetration is implicitly conceptualized as a cutting into, a sadistic, slicing entry» (Dworkin, 1987, p. 239) and S.'s grotesque, concrete conviction of it does not seem that absurd if we look at it in the perspective of a wider and authoritative set of anatomical misconceptions existing around virginity loss. Let's start discussing them.

Commonly explained as the hymen's «break», «laceration», but also as the «loss» (M.) or «perforation» of it (L.), virginity loss is sanctioned by the effect that a penis penetration exercises on this part of women's bodies.

Then obviously, at the physical level there's this break of the hymen. (S.)

From the physical, anatomical point of view [...] that it wasn't always true as we read in *Cioè* (laughing) which said that, for example, there wasn't always the loss of the hymen [...] that sometimes you could break the hymen but still remain a virgin because being a virgin commonly meant not having had sex, which at the time it was to me a vaginal intercourse, a vaginal penetration. (M.)

I've always thought about it and I don't know from where it comes. I've always wondered why do we think this? I knew that you lose blood and the hymen was perforated. (L.)

This infamous hymen, what is actually? How is characterized? Where is located? And more importantly, what happen to it during a vaginal penetration? First of all, the real bodily function of the human hymen appears unknown, and it is probably just «a remnant of fetal development» (RFSU, 2009, p. 8), with the words of Blank (2016, p. 34): «The only thing truly noteworthy [...] is the significance we've attached to them»; in fact:

We too very rarely have any inkling that our hymens exist. It seems much more probable, given the importance human beings attach to virginity, that our awareness of the hymen came into existence the other way around. In other words, we became aware of hymens because we are aware of something we call virginity. We found the hymen because we found reasons to search women's bodies for some bit of flesh



that embodied this quality we call “virginity,” some physical proof that it existed. Humans are not alone in having hymens. We’re merely alone in knowing it, and in having given ourselves a reason to care (p. 24).

The hymen is located at the entrance of the vagina, not deeply inside of it (Blank, 2016) and even if it is commonly just classified as «intact» or «torn», it actually comes in multiple sizes, colors and shapes:

It consists of folds of mucous tissue, which may be tightly or more loosely folded. It is slightly pink, almost transparent, but if it’s thicker it may look a little paler or whitish. It may resemble the petals of a rose or other flower, it may be carnation-shaped, or it may look like a jigsaw piece or a half-moon. In the vast majority of cases, it is elastic and stretchy (RFSU, 2009, p. 6).

Therefore, instead of what is commonly imagined, the hymen is not a stiff, uniform barrier sealing the vagina. In fact, if it be so, how could menstrual blood flow outside of the body?

The hymen type that seems most common in the popular imagination is actually one of the least common types of hymens in terms of what actually occurs in women’s bodies. Many people imagine that the hymen actually covers the entirety of the vaginal opening with an unbroken expanse of skin, [...]. Hymens like this do exist. The condition is called imperforate hymen, and it is considered to be a minor birth defect. It is caused when the canalization of the vagina does not quite finish going all the way through the body wall, and instead of having a vaginal opening, a layer of skin remains over the place where the opening should be. [...]. Because it makes menstruation impossible, imperforate hymen is corrected surgically. A hymen with no opening is a bug, not a feature (Blank, 2016, p. 36).

Being consisted of elastic folds of mucous tissue, the hymen cannot be «broken», «lacerated», «lost» or «perforated» by a penis or any other object penetrating the vagina, «when the mucous tissue is stretched, minor ruptures sometimes develop and may smart a little. These soon heal, usually within 24 hours» (RFSU, 2009, p. 13). What is more, it has been demonstrated that hymens change their shapes naturally during a person’s growth:

Between birth and age three, and in some cases again between ages three and five, hymens can go through quite a bit of alteration in shape and size. These changes take place painlessly, silently, and virtually unnoticeably, without the girl in question [...] being any the wiser or noticing any change. [...]. The best way to think of it is that like other body parts, the hymen continues to develop after birth, and this means that sexual penetration is absolutely not required for a hymen to be different or look different from one day, one week, or one month to the next. This calls into question the very notion of the “intact” hymen: if the hymen can change all by itself, can we ever accurately call it “intact” or “unaltered”? (Blank, 2016, p. 38).

RFSU (2009, p. 8) adds to the previous ones other possible circumstances of hymen's change:

Giving birth through the vagina changes the vaginal corona appearance, smoothing or stretching it out and making it less visible. In older, post-menopausal women who haven't given birth vaginally and don't have regular penetrative sex, the vaginal corona may close up again.

But let's move now to the main belief related to the hymen and virginity loss: the bleeding. Almost all participants made an explicit spontaneous reference to blood in their recollections, commenting whether the presence or the absence of it; later, during the conversations, everyone confirmed the highly symbolical value of «proof» they were attaching to bleeding.

Then I didn't lose blood, and this reinforced even more my idea of [...] oh my god I'm disgusting. (C.)

She didn't bleed, and this thing made me suspicious, because to me the fact that she hadn't bled meant she could have done it with someone else [...] later I retracted this thought as I knew she hadn't had relationships with anyone, but in that moment I was disappointed I hadn't had the physical confirmation. (M.)

When she fisted me and blood came out [...] at the beginning we weren't realizing what was going on, but then it was a satisfaction for both of us, because on one side we had lost our virginity together and it meant she was appropriating my virginity and she was losing it too as before she had lost it with a man, so she was earning more power than the one she already had for the fact that I didn't take hers, which is another myth. So it hurt, but now I recognize it was lived by both of us as a satisfaction, because it was proving an act of love. This is a real relationship because we are establishing both of our roles. (A.)

Discussing the theme, Blank (2016, p. 90) herself evokes the metaphor of the wound by saying that: «For literally thousands of years, Western culture has presumed that first sexual intercourse creates a wound in a woman's body. Blood is evidence that this is an injury, a thing that is inflicted upon women by men»; the hegemonic tale of virginity teaches us that when a woman loses her virginity, the hymen breaks and as a consequence she bleeds, this blood is the ultimate proof of her loss of virginity.

What always fascinated me about this, is how the blood coming out of a vagina, systematically described and perceived as an embarrassing or even scaring, always disgusting, because dirty and malodorous, waste (Méndez de la Brena, 2016) is transposed into an extremely celebratory level when we are taught about virginity loss experience. A man loves blood when this: «flows according to his own techniques» (Irigaray, 1985, p. 200). The shameful, unhygienic and to be hidden blood flowing during menstruations is a blood emphasized here as the highest symbol of purity, sacredness, and historically exposed to public recognition, when is a penis what supposedly provoked its leak.

But, do women really bleed as a consequence of a vaginal penetration? According to RFSU (2009, p. 11):

The vast majority of women don't bleed. No matter what their vaginal corona looks like, fewer than half of all women bleed when they penetrate their vagina for the first time. Of those who do bleed, few do so because the corona was tight; instead, there are other reasons. If you were not sexually aroused, but rather tense, nervous and too dry, minor ruptures may develop in vaginal corona and may bleed. But this has nothing to do with how many times you've had sex.

Again, apart from misogynistic, hetero- and cissexist, the attempts to legitimate the virginity loss tale through effective bodily consequences, such as a break of the hymen and bleeding, are completely inaccurate. In fact: «Looking at a man's penis and a woman's vagina, it's equally impossible to tell whether that person has ever had sex. Neither a gynecologist nor a sex partner can tell whether you've had vaginal, oral, anal or manual sex. No-one else can detect whether you've had sex»<sup>21</sup> (RFSU, 2009 p. 17). In this sense, surgery promising the reconstruction of the hymen and the consequent bleeding are quite problematic, through this procedure:

a couple of stitches are inserted on each side of the vaginal corona. The stitches should have dissolved by the time of the patient's wedding and shouldn't be detectable by anyone else. However, it is not possible to sew a membrane in place, to recreate something that never existed. Doctors say it's like "stitching butter" because the tissue is soft and elastic. The stitches themselves rarely cause bleeding and may be discovered if the woman is forced to undergo a gynecological examination prior to her wedding. The stitches may also fall out as soon as the patient leaves hospital. [...] Bleeding upon penetration cannot be guaranteed. (RFSU, 2009, p. 19-20)

### 4.3.3 Beliefs on the change of the body

Through the various readings, I realized how the idea that a sexual activity must alter the body pervades the general discourse on sexuality, and virginity, especially, is full of these references:

The idea that masturbation causes blindness, pimples, or hair on the palms is one manifestation of this theory. When we hear through the grapevine, or read in books, about the loss of virginity being somehow

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<sup>21</sup> With regard to the cases of sexual assaults, RFSU (2009, p. 20) writes: «Although you can't tell from looking at a vaginal corona whether it has been penetrated, if you've been the victim of a sexual assault it's possible to find traces of your attacker. It's therefore critical to seek medical care as soon as possible after the incident, and not to wash yourself. The injuries that doctors record and the samples they take can be used as evidence in court».

visible in the look in a woman's eyes, the way she walks or sits, in the shape or size of her breasts, or in the curve of her hips or buttocks, we are hearing the same thing (Blank, 2016, p. 80-81).

S. and A. remind:

I still remember the thing [...] I remember the day after, I was at the supermarket and it seemed to me I was even walking in a different way. I was walking and thinking [...] I'm not a virgin anymore [...] as if it was such a crazy thing, it was like I thought the others were noticing it I swear, as if they looked at me differently. (S.)

I tried not to look other people in the eyes because I'm scared they would discover my secret. (A., written summary)

What is more, historically, the only forms of evidence of a woman's virginity have considered to be found in her body, apart from the discovery of the hymen, multiple and quite ridiculous were the ways popularized to test women's purity: from her physical reaction to smoke and lettuce, to the size of her neck and head (Blank, 2016). As previously said, just a woman's body is considered able to prove an intercourse, as virginity only matters on her body.

The most interesting aspect, though, recollected through the talks have been the discourse on the change of the size of a woman's vagina once begun to practice penis-into-vagina sex. The rhetoric of the virgin's tight vagina against the whore's loose vagina:

Oh God now it comes to my mind another huge fear of mine regarding the rumors, it was an insult my male friends were always using because I remember they were always making terrible comments on girls, that I thought had nothing to do with me because I was different, I was special, I was their friend [...] and I was so scared this thing could assimilate me to the other females, and talking about me in the way I knew they talked about the other females [...] oh god terrible! (laughing) I was scared they would say my vagina was loose [...] it was the worst thing they could say together with the fact of being a slut, I mean, it was complementary [...] I was really scared about this. (C.)

I remember a lot of guys telling me [...] this girl's vagina is too loose, that one too tight [...] and maybe it was a block, but to them it was just too tight, you know? It happened to me many times that someone told me as a compliment my vagina was tight [...] like, it's good with you because you've got it tight. Now it came to my mind S., who was staying with this C. before me, who apparently had had already a lot of relationships, she looked much older [...] and I remember that in my mind he hadn't had sex with C., and I remember that when he told me he had I started crying, it was a terrible thing because it meant he hadn't done it just with me [...] and C. was the one I knew and I saw her like a rival, and I remember I kept having

an obsession for this C. after months [...] and once he told me her vagina was loose, that she was experienced, like, who knows how many guys she fucked [...] and she was a girl with a loose vagina. (A.)

There was absolutely this very strong belief. I mean, I remember that during all the school trips there were talks about this girl, who I don't know if ever existed or if she has been the same one since fifty years until now, and they always say she was putting one fist, two fists inside of her vagina [...] actually I think it was also an expression like, she's got a tight vagina [...] to talk about a girl who's not giving it away [...] I don't know, is it just in my mind this expression? (laughing). (L.)

As reported, virgins' vagina was perceived to be tight, as still untouched, almost unopened, while a «loose» one was the undeniable proof of sexual promiscuity, it was a sort of fixed expression to shame a girl even knowing nothing about her sexual history. Aware of the sexism implied in this tale, it was interesting to find evidence of how also inaccurate and misinformed is the idea of vaginas losing tightness as a consequence of penetrative sex. Vaginas work like a muscle, so they stretch (when one gets aroused or has to give birth) and return into their original state (Fabello, 2013). Holland (2017) and Scaccia (2018) specify that only age or childbirth can cause a vagina to slightly lose some of its elasticity, but nevertheless, vagina's muscles will not stretch out permanently. If a vagina is perceived tight during intercourse it could mean it is not well aroused, maybe the person would need more stimulation or just communicating. Again, taking for granted that a «tight» vagina means something like sexual purity and that penetrative sex will permanently impact women's genitals, not only is misogynistic and false, but it also distracts from having fully pleasurable sex and recognizing if there is something psychologically or physically causing a block. Furthermore, we should be aware that each body is different, and while some women could report feelings of tightness/looseness with regard to their vaginas, they should never be taught this is abnormal or degrading.

Trans-activist Riley J. Dennis proposes on the online magazine *Everyday Feminism* a very interesting discussion starting from the same premise, I report to follow part of the video's transcription<sup>22</sup>:

So, here's the thing, trans women, who have had surgery, also have vaginas – but those vaginas operate a little bit differently. For one, they require dilation, which means that you have to like, put a device in you to keep it stretched out or else it will close back up again. For trans women, having sex is like an imperfect, semi-substitute for dilation. It's not a complete substitute, but it can definitely help with the dilation process. In the case of trans women, you actually want to be having more sex, or masturbating with things that can keep your vagina a little bit looser. When you talk about vaginas, and you're all worried about them getting loose and stuff, think about the trans women who are worried about their vaginas just getting tighter. Yes, trans vaginas are vaginas. They count. I promise you.

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<sup>22</sup> Available at the link <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/05/myth-of-loose-vaginas/> [Accessed 31/07/2018].

It is also interesting to notice that, while women are commonly told to worry about how small their vagina must be, men are thought to do the same and opposite with regard to how «great» is their penis size and length.

The still rooted myth of loose vaginas constitutes another tale of horror women are told about their bodies. As it has been delineated, vaginas are systematically associated with filthiness, pain and decay, especially when it comes to sex; looseness constitutes just another way of controlling and shaming women's sexuality and perceptions of our own bodies, it not only suggests our genitals will change for having sex, but they will change in a way that will make us undesirable, somehow broken. Many are the examples of medicalizing processes related to this myth, apart from the many products available to «tighten up» a vagina, interesting phenomena are the ones related to medical interventions and surgeries such as *the husband stich* (Murphy, 2018), labia- and vaginoplasty, included among the procedures of the so-called vaginal rejuvenation.

#### 4.3.2 The contaminated body

Throughout the previous chapters, it has been delineated the idea of how girls' virginity loss determines their spiritual growth into *womanhood*, coinciding with the loss of their purity and innocence; anyway, the fundamental event of *the first time* will be proved and later recognized, above all, by the traces this will leave on their bodies, such as the already discussed break of the hymen and a (just begun) loose genital tightness. Being asked what comes to her mind hearing the terms «virgin» and «virginity», M. was the one bringing up the theme of contamination:

At the time, maybe virginity was really purity [...] like a virgin mountain covered with snow that thus hasn't been stained with anything [...] I mean, even the idea of being stained is present, an unstained virgin, something pure that hasn't been touched yet. (M.)

The wide subject of contamination related to genitals and sexuality can be approached from different perspectives: on one hand, vaginas, especially when the social impositions of how a vulva should look like are not respected, are described as dirty, smelly, obscene (Dworkin, 1987), they, together with their fluids, cause abjection as a possible site of contamination (Kristeva, 1982). In the case of virginity though, the idea of contamination as a danger seems to be completely overturned into a resource through which men exercise and earn symbolic power over women's bodies. In «Pureza y Peligro: Un análisis de los conceptos de contaminación y tabú» (1973, p. 170) Douglas affirms that: «Las hembras son correctamente consideradas literalmente como la entrada a través de la cual puede

adulterarse el puro contenido», virgin's body is the pure, blank and untouched page waiting to be initiated, marked, contaminated by the first penis penetrating the vagina. The potential contact between the semen, totem of men's power<sup>23</sup> (Dworkin, 1987), and a woman's vagina together with her genital fluids, sanctions this initiation and leaves a mark on the female body; quoting again the words of M., this mark is, more specifically, a «stain», which contributes to the construction and constant legitimation of the gender-based hierarchy of power.

Thus, the unambiguously 'female' and 'male' identities of bride and groom depend on intercourse and the exchange and transformation of essences and separable bits: semen, the penetrated hymen and hymenal blood among them. Momentarily, an archetypal masculinity and femininity are created and revealed through interaction. Through the sex act, gendered identities and an act of domination are temporarily, but literally, embodied (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 90-91).

In this sense, the idea of contamination, of dirtying, is employed to reflect and maintain the social order, the gender roles imposed to men and women, it is instrumentally invoked in order to support moral values (Douglas, 1973); «it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules» (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Within virginity loss, though, the implied dirt becomes more than a side-effect of the contact, and it turns to be a sort of a signature allowing men to reclaim the possession of that body (Dworkin, 1981; 1987), here contamination is an intentional, desired and celebrated outcome from which they are completely immune<sup>24</sup>: «He can use semen to make her dirty but it ennobles him» (Dworkin, 1987, p. 236), to a woman: «Being dirt, dirty, is one dimension of her worthlessness, the mark of a base inferiority» (p. 216). This further shaming rhetoric does not remain circumscribed to symbolic discourses: «The self-disgust, feeling dirty, is an outcome of sex often remarked on [...] being clean means being chaste» (p. 230); speaking of which, A. is pretty clear commenting her feelings after *the first time*:

I felt bad, dirty.

And later, during our conversation, she even adds:

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<sup>23</sup> Dworkin (1987, p. 237) analyzes the symbolic values of semen and ejaculation in relation to the concept of «dirt». With reference to porn the author comments the recurrent image proposed here, where: «Semen is spread all over the woman's face, a man or men ejaculate all over her body», by saying that: «To ejaculate is to *pollute* the woman».

<sup>24</sup> Throughout history the virgin's body has been at the center of another huge myth, specifically connected to contamination/immunity, the one commonly known as: «The virgin cleansing myth». Having sex (in this case penis-into-vagina sex) with a virgin was believed to cure a person suffering from STDs, who could have in turn passed the illness to the virgin (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002), (Epstein & Jewques, 2009), (Blank, 2016).

I mean, when I went out the house of S., I thought all the passers-by were looking at me and thinking I was a dirty person.

To «dirt» a virgin's body does not just legitimate men's power and ownership over it, it also represents an arousing prospect, it is «an eroticized dirt» (Dworkin, 1987, p. 240).

I think he was aroused by the idea I was a virgin [...] I mean, I think he was feeding his desire of being the one owning my first time. (A.)

And about the fact of don't using the condom the first time because it wasn't necessary [...] do you think he really believed that? (G.)

No no [...] I think he was excited of being the first [...] I mean, I think he was getting aroused at the idea of doing it without the condom [...] he was aroused by the idea I was pure and chaste and he could penetrate me. In fact, he simply penetrated me without it then he came out and he put the condom [...] so it was a second, really just got in [...] so his idea was really [...] I must be the first one penetrating A. [...] really like leaving a mark. (A.)

The sexualization of the body of the virgin is widely confirmed within our culture, «not only is the seduction of a virgin a widespread idiom which conveys a notion of essentialized, almost heroic virility, [...] the very essence of maleness» (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 89), purity also represents a quite pursued sexual fantasy, «is the desired norm, it's fetishized. And sexualized. (Valenti, 2008, p. 301).

The erotics of virginity are the priorities of patriarchal sexuality writ large. In eroticizing virginity, youth, physical nubility, ignorance, inexperience, fragility, and vulnerability are objectified from the perspective of someone who, by definition, is none of these things. The erotic charge of sex with a virgin rests on the interplay of the sexual aggression of an experienced partner and the sexual submission of a virginal one. It champions sex as a vehicle for completion and transformation, and it insists that a person who has sexual access to a woman automatically claims or colonizes her, body and soul (Blank, 2016, p. 196).

Porn culture represents the most blatant example, being not only connected to the purity myth, but similar to it, in the sense that it comically «reveals an image of women that is strikingly similar to what purity culture would like women to be» (Valenti, 2009, p. 87); it actually even «underscores these patriarchal priorities» of purity and it does it by insisting on those features that better render the ideas of inexperience, innocence and «natural» pubertal beauty (Blank, 2016, p. 196). Blank (2016, p. 196-197) analyzes in detail how the virgin body is commonly represented in porn:



The women whose images make up so much of virginity porn have skin that is youthfully flawless and fair. Their makeup is subtle or nonexistent. [...] There is an emphasis on small breasts, slim hips, and pert buttocks. Models' hair is usually worn long but in styles typical of childhood, either left hanging and unadorned or, in what has become a virgin-porn cliché, schoolgirl styles like pigtails, ponytails, or braids. Pubic hair is generally trimmed or shaven, both by porn industry standard and because there appears to be an expectation, [...] perhaps because she is not a "real woman" yet [...].

Virgins are portrayed as obviously passive, insecure and frightened, their grimaces obey to the already mentioned expectations of *first time* pain, obviously related to the assumptions on vagina's tightness. Among her *Questions for the pornographers*, Irigaray (1985, p. 201) includes the reflection:

Passivity, and more specifically penetration, are always represented as painful. Pain as a necessary component of pleasure: that of the male who penetrates, that of the male or female who is penetrated. *What fantasy of a closed, solid, virginal body to be forced open* underlies such a representation, and such a practice, of sexuality? In this view, the body's pleasure always results from a forced entry-preferably bloody-into an enclosure. A property?

All this is combined with a progressive sense of awakening and eagerness of virgins' sexual desire towards the man. To resume: «These fantasies transgress nothing. They are fantasies of male mastery and female conformity» (p. 199).

Concluding this part, some particular passages of the conversations with the participants came to my mind; in the discussion of sexuality outside of a relationship, such as casual sex or masturbation (watching porn for example), some mentioned «feeling oneself dirty» as something to consciously look for in order to get free from the weight of purity discourses. Even if this perception keeps lying on moral assumptions of what is «good» (clean) and «bad» (dirty) sexuality, I think it constitutes an interesting example of appropriation of a patriarchal rhetoric, confirming at the same time the prominence of this feeling within women's experience of sexuality.

L. and I reported the same feeling respectively starting to watch porn and having casual sex.

It also opened me a bit to the idea of what perversion could be, to that thing we were saying about feeling oneself a bit dirty, a bit impure, and I never felt bad for this. (L.)

I remember I kept repeating myself, you must shake off the fact of having had it just with M., as if I wanted to dirt myself a bit, substituting the sensation that with the first person I had it with, I was the one giving, leaving something. (G., written summary)

## **4.4. Definitions to replace, challenges to keep.**

### **4.4.1 Alternative first times**

I would like to lose virginity performing in a different way, the one where you decide when you're losing it. (A.)

To conclude this work, I decided to dedicate a last brief chapter to what emerged as alternative proposals through the conversations regarding the definition of *the first time*; combined with this, I highlighted the issues, linked to the discussed dominant definitions of sex and love, some participants raised as problematic, because contradictory and hard to dismantle beyond the dominant heterosexual context, in other words: what overflowed, has been reflected within their non-heterosexual relationships and experiences within feminist/queer spaces. Let me premise: this is not a conclusion, more than the ones raised by the participants and me could be the possible definitions to replace, the contradictions, challenges to keep, thus I better intend this last section as an exposition of first results of a training in progress, results that go beyond the discourse around virginity even if they have been triggered here by this specific discourse.

Starting with «the first times», I found myself asking some participants whether they would substitute the idea of their virginity loss with another moment worthy to be celebrated in their experiences, both sexually or emotionally, something that they might felt positively changed them. I asked this question clarifying they did not necessarily have to answer and thus choose a «more significant» moment, as again, I just wanted to train the possibility of choosing ourselves how to define our own experiences, and definitely not encouraging another first «step» to be either imposed or idealized. Many were the answers placing pleasure and orgasm at the center of a reevaluation of a sexual act, as this could function as an empowering criterion through which defining it a worthy «time» to remember, able to change positively the perceptions on one's own body. Pleasure, many times said to be experienced outside of committed relationships, turned to be an alternative option of sex legitimation outside, for instance, the net of romantic love.

It could be instead the first time you reached an orgasm with someone regardless of penetration [...] maybe this could be the righter answer. (L.)

Well, the first time I had sex with J. and I had an orgasm [...] I was always dejected, and I had this sense of morality afflicting me [...] and then was WOW! It was the first time I enjoyed it, the other times they were

asking me did you come? And I was like, yes yes, we're done [...] that time, instead I told him to stop for a moment because I didn't know what was going on I swear! (S.)

To me it was a first time for the feelings of my body, feelings I couldn't control, with S., the first time I was enjoying foreplay, something I had never proved before, I thought I was frigid. (M.)

For sure when I had an orgasm. (L.)

I remember I celebrated the fact a man had made me feel an orgasm. (A.)

The first orgasm I had having sex, I had it with D. (G.)

But by saying having sex, you still mean penetration – (C.)

(overlapping) Sorry, it's true! You're right! FUCK! (G.)

What is perceived as empowering by these participants, me myself included, should not be free from analysis, in fact, many of the previous answers present sex as a synonym of vaginal penetration, thus intending orgasm as the one reached through this specific sexual act. Undoubtedly, as previously discussed, our answers show a reclaim of pleasure as a fundamental element of any sexual activity, pleasure that especially women have been taught to disregard and deprioritize in favor of male partners' one, bypassing and justifying our lack of it through the romantic rhetoric. I believe the enthusiasm we used to describe our new bodily sensations should be pursued, but also freed from its resisting anchorage to phallo- and coitocentrism. As a result, I decided to keep coitocentrism as a first fundamental challenge regarding the discourse around sexuality.

#### **4.4.2 Coitocentrism**

As defined in the theoretical framework, coitocentrism encompasses and goes beyond phallocentrism, implying that the «complete» and «real» development of sex can only happen through the contact of the genitals (penis penetration of a vagina as the privileged one). My first open question is: can't we think about sex happening without the presence of any of the genitals? Can we broaden our definition of it by including what we feel sex is for us, regardless of which of our body parts is touching each other? Going beyond coitocentrism means trying to give a yes to this question. Also pointed out in the theoretical part, coitocentrism reinforces its idea of completeness by positioning orgasm, seen as the only legitimate form of sexual pleasure, as the end of sex, and here comes my second pending question, especially after the previous answers given by many of us: can't we think about a sexual

activity without the obligation of reaching, culminating and concluding it with an orgasm? Going beyond coitocentrism, again, means trying to resist this pressure.

Coitocentrism prescribes sex as an essential, central part of a relationship, and it is thus supported by monogamy: our partner must be the only one, satisfying all our expectations of sexual and emotional fulfillment. Coitocentrism finally takes for granted all people identify as and experience the sexual, and *the* sexual as it has been delineated, suggesting that individuals or partners who do not have sex, or that have it in a non-normative, unrecognized way, lack something, are abnormal or repressed. This reflection, focused on the issue of orgasm, interestingly emerged in A.'s experience within feminist and queer spaces, making it even more central for a feminist discussion:

This is linked to the issue of orgasm and the sexualized queer parties, spaces that also perpetrates a sexual hegemony who excludes asexuals or simply who has a different experience of sex. There's a double-face in the sense that I do think orgasm is something to reclaim since it always belonged to male perspective on sex, but at the same time, don't position it as if it was the end of everything, because what is happening is that sex is positioned as an act of liberation while there are some people who live it in a different way, so, for example, when I walk in a space of sexual liberation in some way you're pushing me to feel sexual in a way I don't feel myself. I mean, is it a contradiction to reclaim orgasm but also to reclaim it is not compulsory to reach? Yes! But it is a contradiction that must exist.

#### **4.4.3 Persistence of romantic love**

The other main challenge I identified already was and keeps being now the one of romantic love. Especially me and my GEMMA companions we have been trained, whether by our studies or personal experiences, to identify, discuss and deconstruct these dynamics mainly in relation to heterosexual relationships; outside of these, though, not only do they keep existing, they even seem harder to recognize and dismantle. Being asked if, in their opinion, romantic love dynamics are easier to avoid within non-heterosexual relationships or if they are in the same way reflected upon them, non-heterosexual participants answer:

I think it's the same thing actually, I'm even more scared about that, because I think it's harder to resist [...] at least for the tools I have. I have elaborated romantic love within a heterosexual couple [...] violence [...] I had important experiences that made me set limitations, resistances, in the sense that I can identify a man's abusive behavior from a sight [...] now things are different, I'm scared I don't have the tools anymore to recognize what could hurt me, to not minimize. (C.)

Of course it's reflected [...] for how hard we try to come out of this net it is always inside of ourselves and there's nothing we can do, it's always that logic of possession of the other, the respect, the faithfulness.  
(M.)

With another reference to feminist spaces, continuing with the example of orgasm, A. says:

For example, if I were in a heterosexual relationship and I went to like five assemblies where orgasm is proposed as a liberation, it could maybe trigger something in me like the fact that maybe my boyfriend doesn't care about it and who knows maybe leaving him. Now, if I go to an assembly where I never find arguments on women taking the male roles and I don't realize that maybe my girlfriend never let me touch her or the contrary, I won't ever be able to break this role of power because I'll never have this reference within the assembly.

The reflection of coitocentrism and romantic love experienced by participants outside of the heterosexual, and inside feminist spaces adds to our deconstructing discussion the complication of being these dynamics less easily identifiable when they take place here. «Starting from oneself» resounds thus again as a necessary positioning, where, as feminists, we must broaden to ourselves the suspect of assimilating and perpetrating oppressing discourses, together with demanding, especially within feminist spaces, the representation and discussion of dynamics of oppression outside heterosexual models.

## Recap and conclusions

This thesis born from my interest in the myth of virginity, an apparently outdated and resolved issue that instead rapidly revealed itself to be still significant and interesting for a gender analysis.

Even among many of my feminist Master colleagues, the firsts with whom I talked about the theme, many assumptions related to the myth resulted to influence the way in which we use to refer to sexuality, or, at least, have been deconstructed with some late compared to other heteropatriarchal discourses. The «loss» of virginity commonly represents a moment that deeply affects both our physical body and our emotions, thus it also appeared to me as a useful topic through which analyzing, at the same time, the hegemonic definitions of both sex and love, so inextricably tied together within the rhetoric of virginity and by this same one very explicitly reflected.

My interest for this theme coincided with the recognition of the value of self-exposure within feminist academic research, which led me to choose the interviews/conversations as the method through which collecting knowledge starting from subjective and situated experiences. Participants have been the people with whom mostly and most significantly I have been sharing discourses on sexuality, sexual experiences and relationships: my hometown long-standing friends and colleagues of GEMMA Master.

Starting from the event of *the first time*, as it is intended in the dominant heteronormative discourse, I identified and discussed the main assumptions, beliefs and symbols emerged in relation to the myth of virginity. In order to introduce the material emerged from the interviews I developed a theoretical framework within which I analyzed virginity loss as a *ritual*, and the hegemonic categories of sex and love, indissolubly tied together and upheld by each other within this myth: starting from *the first time*, sex without love will always be considered socially unacceptable and harmful for women. At the same time, a *true* relationship of love will have to contemplate sex, in its most normative form and of course, reproductive aims, to be socially legitimated in these terms; through *the first time*, in fact, sex is sublimized as a vehicle of transformation, growth for the individual and its relationship, proof of love, stabilization and completion of the monogamic couple.

Dividing the themes along a chronological structure, I started from *the wait*, first performance imposed to those girls who decide to become sexually active. The wait functions as a social determiner for the girl in question, it is crucial for her identification of *the right person*, the one who *truly* loves her and because of this, waits for her. The messages girls receive with regard to *the first time*, about waiting until being «ready», are permeated by romantic love and form part of a wider warning communication they are exposed to when it comes to their (entrance into) sexuality:

everything will go well if you found someone that loves you, but you will have serious consequences if you will just *give it away* to anyone else. The formula of the wait also fosters unrealistic expectations on sex, culturally loaded expectations that could go completely unquestioned or lead to self-blame if they are not met. Proceeding with an overview on the most common expectations and fears with regard to *the first time*, the space of the peer group resulted to be the privileged for this exchange, it carries the necessary power for creating and fixing normative narrations about sex and relationships and it owns the authority of recognizing, validating and also consigning masculine roles. Inside these nets, expectations on the feelings of «completeness» and love, proved though the event of *the first time*, are emphasized, while, at the same time, horror tales creates and legitimate fears of mainly pain and bleeding. Both expectations and fears are aimed to idealize the event into an almost mystic archetype, making it look untouchable, independent from any circumstance, unnegotiable, uncriticizable and unchangeable. The abundance of these exchanges among peers has not been reflected in an equal communication within the family or the couple. This part continued with the doubts related to the self-definition of «virgin», accompanying many of the participants before their *first times*, such as the ones regarding: masturbation, the use of menstrual tampons and histories of sexual assaults. I concluded mentioning shaving as the compulsory preparation of women's own bodies before (*the first time*) sex. Already at the end of this first part, many have been the proofs of the dangerous nature of the myth: the total concentration on love discourses in the definition of readiness and identification of *the right person/moment* completely deprioritizes, shift the focus from the fundamental issue of consent, in particular undermining the capacity of recognizing it; the celebration of first penis penetration as something unique, unforgettable, that changes women's body sanctioning its value completely ignores and aggravates the already common victimization and shaming of the ones who have suffered a rape.

The second chapter of this fourth part lists what participants identified as missing in the event of *the first time*. First among all, the «experience», a biased and sometimes also manipulated concept, through which women's confidence and desire is tied and limited to the heterosexual performance of sex. The idea that women are somehow outside, ignorant of *the* sexual experience, until they get to penis-into-vagina sex is blatantly sexist and heteronormative, it contributes to the assumption that there is one way to have sex and we have to learn it, specifically from a man. The successive identified lack of agency is undoubtedly connected to this first lack. *The first time* wants us passive and following, it sanctions our smallest active sexual choices while at the same time it attaches to the act of penetrating an inherent symbolical masculinity potentially embodied outside of heterosexual penetration. Penis penetration is also conceived as synonym of the intercourse itself, being *the first*

*time* almost completely lacking any other act outside of this penetration. Male pleasure is, as a result, totally prioritized.

In the following chapter: after *the first time*, I chose the focus of the body. I started with the idea of the sex of *the first time* as a wound, connected to the beliefs of the break of the hymen and its consecutive bleeding, which I tried to analyze and debunk. I continued with the beliefs related to a physical change after the first time, with particular reference to the horror tale of the vagina losing its virginal tightness as a consequence of sex. I concluded the chapter analyzing the idea of sex (of *the first time*) as a contamination, also with reference to the phenomenon of the erotization of the virgin body, whose popularity is confirmed by the mainstream porn imagery.

To conclude the work, I decided to start from alternative definitions of «first time» proposed by some of the participants, which contributed to identify few contradictions I decided to include among the «challenges» to keep as a priority within feminist discussions, both with regard to the considered categories of sex and love: the difficulty of eradicating coitocentrism and the persistence of romantic love outside heterosexual contexts.

As I expected in the introduction, the collected accounts have in a great part reflected the stereotypical expectations of the myth of virginity, the concrete experiences, though, let emerge and gave the possibility to challenge its imposed truths. What I was not expecting was the amount of such how harmful messages around virginity we have been exposed to and affected us, both with regard to the construction and reinforcement of our gender roles and heteronormativity, both with regard to the perceptions of our own bodies. The truth was that participants had so much to say about how virginity made room in their experiences.

I am now convinced a discussion of the myth of virginity is not at all outdated or resolved, since it keeps contributing to shape gender roles, gender dynamics, normative ways of defining and experiencing sex and love; it reinforces stereotypes and inequalities, discriminatory, false, and above all harmful. The entire rhetoric on virginity puts communication on consent on a secondary plane, idealizes the first penis penetration ignoring the case in which this is a violence and renders invisible, justifies violence itself through the discourse that pure girls wait and look for the true love while easy girls give it away and potentially «ask for it». The discourse of virginity encompasses some of the most shaming horror tales on women's bodies: something inside us will be broken, deformed and dirt, sanctioning our having been «signed» by someone. In the ritual of *the first time* we are required to be completely passive, our pleasure neither deserves to be faked such ignored it is. A critical discourse on virginity is a priority because a priority is an education to the entrance into sexuality that is equal, inclusive, safe, consented, careful to the desires and agency of young women, free from the constant warnings of bad consequences that could potentially fall on their lives and bodies, free from



the obligation of romantic love. Talking about virginity is still important because it is important to broaden, make inclusive, and why not, creative, our discourse on what sex is, on when we are having it for the first time if we still want to use this expression, until the only thing lost will be our myth of virginity.

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