In the contemporary U.S., a woman’s ability to be “aware down there” is compromised and challenged by discourses that disavow female genitalia. As a result, many women learn to habitually disinvest in their vulvas, and inhabit a sexual body image that is constructed solely through the penetrative and/or reproductive goals and discourses of their cultural interlocutors, including gynecological medicine. For many women, the individual experience of vulvar pain marks the first and only time that they have encountered their external genitalia outside of these profoundly social practices.

This talk will use the lived experience of vulvar pain to draw connections between physiology, perception, and behavior, and will delineate how the female body image is obliged to its cultural milieu. Neuropsychologists define the body image in terms of mental construction, sense perception, and the social relationships in which bodies are immersed. As an anthropologist who is influenced by both cultural studies and clinical medicine, I will suggest that we think about the body image as a space where cultural affect meets bodily practice.