Menstruation Matters: Introduction to Representations of the Menstrual Cycle

Article *in* Women s Studies · January 2011

DOI: 10.1080/00497878.2011.537981 · Source: PubMed

CITATIONS
23

READS
5,103

2 authors, including:

Chris Bobel
University of Massachusetts Boston
42 PUBLICATIONS **608** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Women's Studies, 40:121–126, 2011

ISSN: 0049-7878 print / 1547-7045 online
DOI: 10.1080/00497878.2011.537981

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

MENSTRUATION MATTERS: INTRODUCTION TO REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

CHRIS BOBEL
U Mass Boston

ELIZABETH ARVEDA KISSLING
Eastern Washington University

Would you wear your own menstrual blood as lipstick?

Probably not—few women would. But that's what made Ingrid Berthon-Moine's photograph of a young white woman doing exactly that such an arresting image, and a compelling illustration for a recent *Guardian* article about menstrual activism.

Along with Berton-Moine's collection of photos of women with shocking red lips ("Red Is the Colour"), Kira Cochrane's October 2, 2009, essay discussed Chella Quint's *Adventures in Menstruating* zine; Rachel Kauder Nalebuff's *My Little Red Book* collection of menarche (first period) stories; a post on the popular U.S. website Jezebel about a forgotten tampon; Giovanna Chesler's film, *Period*? *The End of Menstruation*; and Chris Bobel's new book, *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, are examples of contemporary menstrual activism.

As Cochrane notes, these texts share a common theme not only of menstruation but of talking about and revealing menstruation, shattering age-old taboos of secrecy regarding female biology. Sometimes the former is more shocking than the latter, as the reader comments in *The Guardian* attest. But talk about menstruation we must, and not merely to challenge taboos and restrictions.

Because menstruation matters. And so do the ways we talk about it, write about it, and illustrate it.

Address correspondence to Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, Women's & Gender Studies Program, Eastern Washington University, 207 Monroe Hall, Cheney, WA 99004. E-mail: ekissling@ewu.edu

Philosopher Kenneth Burke asserted that an essential part of what it means to be human is our capacity to use symbols (491); our world is created by our ability to communicate via language and other forms of representation.

> But can we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol-systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our "reality" for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? (Burke 493)

When he wrote that paragraph in the early 1960s, Burke could scarcely have imagined the complexity of our "symbol-systems" today; our reality in the twenty-first century is shaped not only by books, maps, magazines, and newspapers, but e-mail, websites, television, films, texting, and the interaction among these diverse media. The "clutter of symbols" is nearly overwhelming—and even more important to deconstruct.

Burke's clutter of symbols seems even more powerful today; in Stuart Hall's more contemporary formulation, "Nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse." Shared cultural concepts and contexts give meaning to representation. From a feminist perspective, structures of language and habits of representation are among the pillars that hold up the kyriarchal system,* within which we live. These representations include more than sexist stereotypes in advertising and hyperthin models in fashion magazines, but the language we use—and do not use—in addressing the minutia of everyday life.

Menstruation is a reality in most women's lives for about forty years. It is an issue that touches one-half the world's population intimately and directly. The American Academy of

---

* "*Kyriarchy* – a neologism coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and derived from the Greek words for "lord" or "master" (*kyrios*) and "to rule or dominate" (*archein*) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination . . . Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression." (Qtd. In Rachel McCarthy James, online).

Pediatrics acknowledges the menstrual cycle as a vital sign of endocrine health and reproductive status, and recommends that physicians encourage patients to chart their cycles (American Academy of Pediatrics 2247, 2248). In addition, endocrinologist Jerilynn Prior's research has shown how ovulatory menstrual cycles are linked to the bones' ability to accrete minerals and thicken; estrogen and progesterone interact and act toward optimal bone health during women's whole life cycle. Suppression of ovulation—which is exactly what happens when women take hormonal birth control—can even lead to early osteoporosis.

But, more generally, a focus on menstruation is part of a complex and enduring feminist project of loosening the social control of women's bodies, of working to move women's bodies from object to subject status—something absolutely foundational to a host of contemporary issues, from human trafficking to eating disorders to sexual assault.

It may not be obvious at first (perhaps because we are socialized to not look too closely *down there*) but attention to representations of the menstrual cycle reveals how women internalize destructive messages about womanhood including notions of our bodies as messy, unruly things (yes, *things*) that need to be tidied up, medicated, plucked, smoothed, and trimmed. This exhausting (and expensive) quest for the perfect body, not only drains resources and cultivates frustration, it also displaces the search for good quality information about how the body works and how to keep it healthy and strong.

Research into the social dimensions of the menstrual cycle and other aspects of the gendered commodification of the body (and this applies to everyone of course, not only biological women) leads us to ask some tough questions about what we take for granted. What can we learn about our cultural value systems when we examine contraceptive marketing, gynecology text books, doctor–patient interaction about menopause? And what do these investigations teach us about trends in plastic surgery, body dysmorphic disorder among teen boys, and the global popularity of skin lightening creams? Who benefits from these values-in-practice? Who suffers?

It is in the service of those questions that we have assembled this collection of work about representation of the menstrual cycle. We included research articles, poetry, artwork, personal

essays, and book reviews of recent scholarship on the menstrual cycle, highlighting three studies that were presented at the 2009 meeting of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research.

We begin this interdisciplinary collection with the scholarship, first with "Anthropological Fantasies in the Debate over Cycle-Stopping Contraception," by Laura Jones, anthropologist at Rice University. Jones looks at how anthropological discourse is co-opted both by medical professionals and menstruators alike in discussions about the use of cycle-stopping contraceptives as a means to eliminate periods. Jones is particularly interested in how these discourses promote a paradoxical notion of an idealized hunter-gatherer woman, using what she terms "paleo-rhetoric."

In "'Not Done Yet?! . . .' Women Discuss the End of Menopause," Heather E. Dillaway and Jean Burton, sociologists at Wayne State University, present the striking contrast between the linear representation of the stages of menopause in medical discourses and the non-linear, experiential representation of menopause in the language of a group of racially diverse middle-aged women—including several who have undergone hysterectomy. Their in-depth interviews demonstrate that it is not enough to critique biomedical representation: we must build upon those critiques to develop representations that are authentic and meaningful to those whose lives they describe.

Andrea Bertotti Metoyer and Regina Rust, sociologists at Gonzaga University and University of Illinois–Chicago, respectively, undertook a detailed content analysis of the contraception chapter of some of the most widely used gynecology textbooks in the United States. Their findings, "The Egg, Sperm, and Beyond: Gendered Assumptions in Gynecology Textbooks," replicate and extend Emily Martin's classic work on the portrayal of the egg and sperm in medical texts. Bertotti Metoyer and Rust show how much—and how little—has changed in the intervening thirty years, and extend the lens of gender to the portrayal of cervical fluid and semen.

In her essay, "I, Being Born Woman and Suppressed," Heather Corinna, Executive Director of Scarleteen and Director, CONNECT, Washington, presents a thorough defense of menstruation and the need to represent it vividly in the social context of increasing advocacy of menstrual suppression. Lacy Hale shares her menarche story in poetry, showing both her own and her parents' ambivalent reactions to this milestone, and Chella Quint

uses the poetic form to imagine a world in which teens were not embarrassed but amused and proud of menstrual stains.

We also feature a sample of the dramatic artwork created with menstrual blood by Vanessa Tiegs and our cover features the provocative photo of menstrual-blood lipstick by Ingrid Berthon-Moine. Both artists have provided brief statements about their work that demonstrate the power of artistic media to re-present the body.

Demonstrating the vitality of the burgeoning subfield of interdisciplinary menstrual studies, we are also pleased to include four reviews of recent books about menstruation and women's health: Mary Jane Lupton reviews Elissa Stein and Susan Kim's *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* (2009); Nancy Fugate Woods reviews Jerilynn C. Prior and Susan Baxter's *The Estrogen Errors: Why Progesterone is Better for Women's Health* (2009); Lara Freidenfelds reviews Sharra Vostral's *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (2008); and Jennifer Ball reviews Lara Freidenfelds' *The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth Century America* (2009).

We are grateful to all of these contributors for allowing us to publish their work in this special issue of *Women's Studies*, and we thank those who submitted work for our consideration. It was gratifying indeed to see the richness and diversity of research on the menstrual cycle, and we hope to see many more special issues like this one in the future.

We are also grateful to all of the reviewers who helped us evaluate these works: Karen Carlberg, Giovanna Chesler, Mindy Erchull, Jessica Gunson, Dorothy Hawthorne-Burdine, Chris Hitchcock, Donna Huddleston, David Linton, Marianne MacPherson, Maria Luisa Marvan, Zahria Meghani, and Peggy Moloney. More gratitude is due Yvonne Flack, who encouraged this collection and tolerated a lot of procedural questions from us.

And of course, we have a debt to each other. This was truly a collaborative project, and neither of us could have completed it alone.

Works Cited

American Academy of Pediatrics. "Menstruation in Girls and Adolescents: Using the Menstrual Cycle as a Vital Sign." *Pediatrics* 118.5 (2006): 2245–2250.

Berthon-Moine, Ingrid. "Red Is the Colour." MA Photography, University of the Arts, London. 2009. Web. 4 September 2010 <http://www.map2009.co.uk/Ingrid_Berthon-Moine/>.

Burke, Kenneth. "Definition of Man." *Hudson Review* 16.4 (1963/1964): 491–514. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 September 2010.

Cochrane, Kira. "It's in the Blood." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited. 2 October 2009. Web. 4 September 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/oct/02/menstruation-feminist-activists>.

Hall, Stuart. *Representation and the Media*. Lecture by Stuart Hall. Dir. Sut Jhally. Media Education Foundation, 1997.

James, Rachel McCarthy. "Why I Use That Word That I Use: Kyriarchy, Kyriarchal, and Not Patriarchy." *Deeply Problematic*. 23 August 2010. Web. 4 September 2010 <http://www.deeplyproblematic.com/2010/08/why-i-use-that-word-that-i-use.html>.

Prior, Jerilynn C. "What does the menstrual cycle tell us about bone health?" Paper presented The Menstrual Cycle is a Vital Sign®: A Scientific Forum. New York Academy of Sciences, New York. 21 September 2004. Presentation.