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Jaśmina Kasenko

HEINRICH HEINE UNIVERSITY DÜSSELDORF (HHU)

KASENKOJASMINA@GMAIL.COM

Tracing Menstruation in British and American Culture. Strategies of Invisibilization, Stigmatization, and the Question of Im-Purity in Historical and Cultural Context

Abstract. Menstruation is a unlikely theme to be found in British and American literature and media because of its historical and cultural associations as something impure and *maudit*. The aim of this article is to present the reasons for such rare depictions and analyze the processes behind the omission of menstruation. I will sketch the history of menstruation in British and American culture, which will serve as a background to discuss the twenty-first century cultural understanding of menstruation. A Young Adult novel will serve as an example to show how the desired gender behaviours are consolidated and perpetuated by means of the novel addressed to young readers and what role menstruation plays in performativity of gender.

Key words: Menstruation, Purity, Impurity, Vocabularies, Power Relations, Otherness

We're told that Cecilia gets her period right before her suicide attempt, so the wedding dress might have some sexual connotations. Some orders of nuns have wedding ceremonies, complete with white gowns, in which they are joined to God as "brides of Christ." Being raised in a strict Catholic home, Cecilia may have also been playing with or attacking this idea.

Jeffrey Eugenides, "Virgin Suicides"

Introduction

Although intrinsically associated with fertility and motherhood, and thus construction of femininity and resulting power dynamics, menstruation is, nonetheless, an unlikely theme to be found in British and American literatures and films. The aim of this article is to present an overview of perspectives on menstruation, putting the theme into the framework of femininity, purity, education, and power dynamics. I will also analyze the reasons for infrequent representations of menstruation in Western culture.

I will organize the part of the article that touches upon the history of menstruation in an approximated chronological order. This will serve as a background for the twentieth and twenty-first century understanding of menstruation as a part of human physiology and as a social act. I believe that it is crucial to introduce the historical background, as the analysis of the history of the discourse exposes reproduced patterns and casts a light on the distinctive characteristics of the prevailing menstrual vocabularies. Following Judith Butler's findings about the performativity of gender, which are central to gender studies, I will later concentrate on the performativity of menstruation and its role in constructing and perpetuating the idea of desirable femininity (and potentially also masculinity). As a performative action it provokes re-negotiations of experiences and the possibility of their presence in the dominant discourse and other discourses.

When it comes to the vocabulary that I will use in the article, I would like to emphasize that menstruation is not uniquely attributable to cisgender women. In recent years discussions about transgender and transsexual persons experiencing menstruation have emerged. The discussions resulted in increased awareness of alternative experiences of menstruation. In the article I will try to do justice to these experiences by calling menstruating persons "menstruators." However, authors of some cited sources use the term "women", which I will leave unchanged. Similarly, I will use the term "women" in the section concerned with history from the lack of historical evidence and sources touching upon the alternative experiences.

I believe that the term "menstruation" might be misleading and, therefore, requires clarification. By menstruation I understand menstrual bleeding connected with the menstrual cycle. The phases of menstrual cycle are relevant to the discussion of menstruation, because the cycle is a process from which menstruation is not alienated. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 90% of American women experience some sort of recurring premenstrual symptoms. Persons who have high levels of stress or depression are more likely to suffer from the Premenstrual Syndrome than those who do not. The menstruator might experience a certain discomfort and pain, both in certain ways affecting their everyday life. Hence, menstruation implies not only an appearance of a vaginal discharge, but also a complex set of conditionings connected to Natureculture (Haraway 2014, 3).

Menstruation and the dominant discourse

The existence of menstruation enforces specific vocabularies, which imply two processes: firstly, the perpetuation and consolidation of cultural practices around menstruation through language, especially *parole*; and secondly, reception of these practices.

Roisin O'Connor cites the findings of an international survey conducted by Clue, a website and app allowing its users to track their menstrual cycle (www.helloclue.com). According to The study, the most commonly used expressions of menstruation include: "Aunt Flo/ Aunt Flow/ Aunt; Time of the month/ TOM/ That time of the month; On the rags/ rag/ ragging; Red tide/ river/ sea/ moon/ light/ army/ curse/ days/ dot; Code Red; Monthly visitor; Mother Nature; Lady time/ Lady friend/ Lady days" (O'Connor 2016). Nadia Okamoto, the author of *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement* (2018), continues the list with her examples, such as "Shark Week" or "Strawberry Week" (Okamoto 2018, 47). The colloquial register of menstruation-related vocabulary underscores the "naturalness" ("Mother Nature"), red colour of blood ("Red tide/ river/ sea/ moon/ light/ army/ curse/ days/ dot"), and the difficulty of the experience ("Code Red", "Shark Week"). A menstruator is seen as moody, unapproachable ("Shark Week").

Clue's survey also indicates that 85% of American and 85% of British women feel comfortable talking about menstruation with their female classmates and colleagues, and respectively 32% and 35% of them feel comfortable discussing it with their male classmates and colleagues. Men are excepted from discussions about periods. Michael Richards, a lecturer in Applied Health and Social Care, speaks of his experience as a sexual educator: "The overriding responses [of boys and men to menstruation] tend to be that girls get moody or smell funny during periods, and in general, they want to evade talking about the subject because it is a 'girl's problem'" (Richards 2017). An advertisement of a Kotex product from 2010—a commentary on male response to menstruation—designedly features a provocative line: "I tied a tampon to my keyring so my brother wouldn't take my car. It worked." It is possible that boys' attitude towards menstruation is in part shaped by female reluctance to share menstrual experiences. The reluctance is, in turn, a result of inaccurate vocabularies preserved and perpetuated in culture—also by men whose knowledge of menstruation does not suffice for substantive discussions on female physiology.

Sources other than sexual education at school, from which men learn about menstruation, are the experiences of their mothers and sisters as well as sanitary products' advertisements. In the latter menstrual discharge is represented as a blue liquid rather than a red one or actual blood. This is accompanied by avoidance of words such as "bleeding," "blood" or "pain." According to Elissa Stein, co-author of *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* "you never see a bathroom, you never see a woman using a product. They never show someone having cramps or her face breaking out or tearful — it's always happy, playful, sporty women" (Kim and Stein, 2010). Sanitary products manufacturers are responsible for perpetuation of those practices around menstruation

that include its concealing. Like in the early twentieth-century, the sanitary products' market capitalizes on women's need of discretion and safety. Only rarely do the advertisements depict the difficulty of menstruation. They rather present a fantasy in which women experience it like any other day.

The question of taboo, ritual im-purity, madness– menstruation before the twentieth-century

As Christopher Knight notices, “[m]enstrual avoidances have never satisfactorily been explained. For most interpreters, such taboos are evidence of the oppression of women; menstruation is ‘unclean’ and the woman during her period must be secluded from all contact with society and public life” (Knight 1987, 13-14). Knight is the author of the “sex-strike” theory that states that women did not want to be touched and participate in inter-sexual interactions during their monthly bleeding and therefore they isolated themselves from men. Consequently, this has led to a shift in power relations and the emergence of patriarchy. Knight's book has a suggestive title—*Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*—implying that it is menstruation that is one of the central reasons behind patriarchy and patriarchal culture, because it has possibly provoked women's self-isolation from men.

One of the earliest references to the notion of menstrual impurity or uncleanness can be found in the Old Testament. The infrequent and equivocal biblical mentions concerning menstrual hygiene and sexual activities during menstrual bleeding state that a bleeding woman remains unclean for a period of time, that the uncleanness might be transmittable, and that sexual intercourse during her menstruation is strictly forbidden:

Whenever a woman has her menstrual period, she will be ceremonially unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her during that time will be unclean until evening. Anything on which the woman lies or sits during the time of her period will be unclean [...]. If a man has sexual intercourse with her and her blood touches him, her menstrual impurity will be transmitted to him. He will remain unclean for seven days, and any bed on which he lies will be unclean. If a woman has a flow of blood for many days that is unrelated to her menstrual period, or if the blood continues beyond the normal period, she is ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 15:19-33 New Living Translation).

According to the third-century Archbishop of Alexandria, Dionysius “menstruous women ought not to come to the Holy Table [...] nor to churches but pray elsewhere” (De Troyer 2003, 12) due to their ritual uncleanness. This rule resulted in the refusal of the women's ministry and in many cases still proves valid in 2019, as in the majority of Christian churches priesthood is reserved exclusively for cisgender men. Monthly bleeding exhibits the sex divide and conditions women's otherness, thus positioning the menstruator as an alienated other. The menstruators were not allowed to possess

the knowledge of the divine, which was available only for those who did not menstruate. It meant that—from the perspective of Foucault's power/knowledge couplet—the power and knowledge of the divine were monopolized by cisgender men (non-menstruators). It was a man through whom the divine could speak, and it was a man who translated the divine will.

The biblical attitude resonated in Christian cultures, having a huge impact on the understanding of femininity, also in the anglophone world. In the Middle Ages, menstruation was attributed to the original sin, being a punishment for Eve's disobedience. According to Greg Jenner, "pain relief was not readily permitted by the Church: God apparently wanted each cramp to be a reminder of Eve's Original Sin. The fact that nuns—who were often fasting, or on drastically reduced diets—suffered such iron deficiency as to completely suppress their cycle merely highlighted to medieval thinkers how concerted holiness could, at least to their understanding, reverse Eve's error and bring a woman's body back into divine grace" (Jenner 2015). Menstruation was read as a symptom of female inferiority and defectiveness. Female body was a place of sin and necessary pain. The "peccable" women's nature could be tamed by starvation in the name of the (masculine) God.

The understanding of menstruation as a punishment for Eve's sin changed in the early modern period (sixteen to nineteenth-century), in which menstruation started being treated as a disease. Sara Read observes a striking paradox:

[A]lthough normal menstruation was considered a disease, a monthly sickness or illness, failure to menstruate regularly was also considered a disease, which physicians went to great lengths to cure. Such was the prevalence of the belief that the key to a woman's health was sited in her uterus that Lazare Riviere stated in the section of his anatomy guide devoted to women's health in the mid-seventeenth century that the womb was the source of 'six hundred miseries and innumerable calamities.' (Read 2008, 1)

Hence, a "disease" was considered an attribute of femininity. The secret of menstrual bleeding was yet to be discovered, but it was understood that the curse upon women is indispensable as it is a part of their "nature," paradoxically requiring protection in order to maintain the power balance.

Likewise, the Victorian attitude towards menstruation was shaped by the gendered Victorian morality and by failure to understand the biological processes behind it, as it was not fully scientifically comprehended yet. Researcher Kate Lister, who specializes in the history of sexuality, notes that in nineteenth-century Britain "as it was widely believed that women became unstable and were liable to madness during menstruation, the majority of prescribed 'treatments' were extreme and emphasised sedation" (Lister 2017). The temporal indisposition was an argument for women's inferiority. Menstruation was to be experienced in the domestic sphere and not to enter the public one. This attitude warranted the existing gender status-quo and once again positioned women as the Other, potentially prone to madness. The power of reason was hence still monopo-

lized by men, characterized by judiciousness, rationality, and robustness. In his lecture “Of Queen’s Gardens,” John Ruskin thus characterizes Victorian gender expectations:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering (Ruskin 1856).

Extrapolating: polarized femininity and masculinity only exist in relation to each other. Sedation, a recommended way to deal with menstruation, emphasized the domestic as the female sphere. A woman is not let into “conquest,” but assigned to channel her energy to “sweet ordering” in her house.

It was also in the Victorian era, however, that menstruation entered public health-related discussions, which opened the possibility of its capitalization in the centuries to come. Thus far, women would bleed in their gear or use hand-made clothes (in sixteenth-century England called clouts or rags) to tame the bleeding. In the Victorian era they started using sanitary belts and pieces of fabric or sponge. The beginning of the twentieth century observed the capitalization of menstruation, characterized by an expansion of sanitary products market and their increasing availability. Thenceforth, menstrual products were produced on a mass scale and advertised. Fueled by an assumption that monthly blood should not be seen nor discussed, the advertisements most often promised products that guarantee discretion. The manner in which sanitary products were sold exposed and asserted the culture of shame around menstrual bleeding. On the one hand, the products were considered a necessity, on the other, according to the researchers of The Museum of Menstruation, “the new sanitary napkin only sold well after women were allowed to put money into a container without speaking to a clerk, and to take a box from a stack on the counter.” The new protective item, the sanitary napkin, originating from the bandages of The First World War, was relatively expensive; menstrual hygiene was becoming a question of class.

Menstruation and girlhood – sexual education, menarche and omission

In the twentieth-century, the emergence of cinema and television meant that these media started to play a significant role in education and perpetuation of values. Intended as a source of information for teenage girls and simultaneously an advertisement for Kotex products, a 1946 Disney short film called *The Story of Menstruation* features a young girl experiencing menarche. A female narrator explains the physiology of what is called “a flow.” “Don’t dramatize yourself,” “No matter how you feel, you have to live with people,” “Stop feeling sorry for yourself” are some of the suggestions

for adolescents. The film's authors emphasized the regularity and normalcy of menstruation, encouraging young girls to continue their everyday activities at the time of their menstrual bleeding:

The best possible insurance against trouble on those days is healthy living every day. And that's the story. There's nothing strange or mysterious about menstruation. All life is built on cycles, and the menstrual cycle is a normal and natural part of nature's internal plan for passing on the gift of life (*The Short Story of Menstruation* 1946).

At the same time the film asserts how crucial it is not to show any sign of weakness. In the words of the narrator, "it's smart to keep looking smart." The film gives directions of how experience and perform being a girl or a woman. In the words of Roxana Elena Doncu, who capsulizes Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

That gender is performative means that it is built on the correct repetitions of gendered behavior. As Butler remarked of Foucault, subjectification (and gender) are a never-ending process that depends on the correct repetition of socially approved behaviour. (Doncu 2017, 334)

Representations following the pattern of the Disney's film reproduce and thus inurate certain attitudes towards menstruation as an approved behaviour that conditions the social construct of femininity, especially if they are addressed to young people. This behavioural expectation is, however, contradictory. In an article discussing sexual education in American schools, Dacia Charlesworth points out two relevant paradoxes. Firstly, she notes that:

biologically, menstruation is important but that culturally, a menstruator must behave as she would any other day and ignore her [...] cycle, thus negating the importance of menstruation [...]

and secondly that:

biologically, the menstruation is natural and normal but [...] culturally, a menstruator must do everything she can to keep anything relating to her [...] cycle concealed, thus negating the naturalness and normalcy attributed to menstruation. (Charlesworth 2001, 1)

The Short Story of Menstruation exemplifies these paradoxes. On one hand, the film emphasizes the normalcy of menstruation, on the other, it encourages girls to keep "looking smart" and not show any sign of weakness, by invisibilizing their menstrual cycle.

The first novel of Stephen King, *Carrie* (1974), illustrates how disobedience to this "invisibilization rule" is punishable. The titular character suffers from heartless taunting from her peers. Never informed about what menstruation is, Carrie has her first

period in a school bathroom, in front of other students, which triggers their hostile reaction. Initially, even Carrie's teacher does not sympathize with the girl. Carrie admits in hindsight that her teacher's indifference has led to severe consequences. After her first period, Carrie discovers that she has supernatural powers, running in her family in the female line. The suffering of both menstrual symptoms and embarrassment is the price for her psychic powers. She later uses these extraordinary abilities in a confrontation with her oppressors during prom night when they douse her in pig's blood. Menstruation is a source of her power but comes with a certain price.

The two paradoxes are contested in Floria Sigismondi's film, *The Runaways* (2010), in which menarche is shown as working to re-establish female bonds. *The Runaways*, a girl-band story, in which the opening scene introduces a protagonist, Cherie Currie. A drop of her menstrual blood is dripping onto a pavement and blood stains are running down her thighs. The scene moves to a bathroom, where Cherie and her twin sister, Marie, discuss the first menstruation. The latter takes off her underwear and hands it to her sister. This gesture can be read as reaffirmation of the sisters' bond through their mutual understanding. Marie concludes, "You're a woman now." The idea of menarche as a symbolic passage into womanhood is later confirmed by Cherie's first "adult" experiences, as in the course of a few upcoming weeks she experiments with what she believes to be "adulthood"—a chain of "first times"—a kiss, a sip of alcohol, and drugs. Detrimental effects of her actions exhibit how physical maturity does not necessarily equal adulthood.

Both Carrie and Cherie acquire specific sets of abilities, which can be attributed to their discovery of femininity and reaffirmation of their inner strength. The first menstruation lies at the root of the subsequent development of these two protagonists. Menstruating makes the quality of their strength different from the masculine one. While Carrie learns about her supernatural powers, Cherie uncovers her musical talent. They both operate in the spheres attributed to men (or boys): Carrie expresses rage at school which systematically suppresses feminine anger; Cherie enters the world of music as a part of the first girl-band. They both break the "invisibilization" rule and gain the confidence to follow the paths that they choose. Once the menstruation becomes a public experience, the imperative of the invisibilization disappears.

Similar portrayals of menstruation as a source of feminine power are, nonetheless, rather infrequent. Film and literature addressed to teenagers most often do not feature menstruation at all or present it only sporadically. Omission of the topic of menstruation in young adult novels (YAD) has been problematized by L. A. Evins. In her essay, Suzanne Collins' trilogy, *Hunger Games* (2008-2010), serves as a vivid example of exclusionary practices. Katniss Everdeen, 16-year-old protagonist of the novels, lives in one of twelve districts, all of which are subordinate to the Capitol, the first district. Every year each district sends young tributes, one girl and one boy, to take part in Games, which are intended to commemorate the world's unification. The tributes fight to death on a big arena and are filmed and streamed live to all the districts. Katniss becomes one of the tributes and eventually rebels against the Capitol.

Blood is present in some of the most explicit descriptions of fights and battlefields, and the word “blood” appears 32 times in the first part of the series:

It's late afternoon when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead tribute. The fighting must have finally stopped [...]. They never collect the bloodbath bodies until the killers have dispersed (150).

Such explicit depictions could suggest that the novels will also present the ways in which Katniss deals with the experience of menstruation under these difficult circumstances. Menstrual blood or the symptoms of menstruation (or the Premenstrual Syndrome) are, however, absent from *Hunger Games*.

This absence is even more apparent, taking into account that Katniss is very aware of her body: “My heads throbs with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints” (2008, 165), “Discomfort turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain through my chest.” (171), “My forehead hurts along the knife cut, but after three days the bleeding has stopped.” (308). She describes her injuries and how they make her feel, but never, even briefly, mentions her menstrual cycle.

There are, however, novels that depict menstruation in a detailed way, such as a 1970 book by Judy Bloom, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.*, featuring a 12-year-old protagonist whose adolescence forms the background for her search of affiliation to a single religion.¹ Being born to a Christian mother and a Jewish father, Margaret does not feel she belongs to either of these religions. She restively waits for her first period and experiences various insecurities concerning puberty and her sense of belonging. These parallel experiences, delivered by a first-person narrator, are central to the emotional reality of the character. Their relatedness surfaces when Margaret, having got her first period, screams: “I know you're there God. I know you wouldn't have missed this for anything! Thank you God!” (Blume 2013, 171). The juxtaposition of *sacrum* (faith, religion) and supposed *profanum* (“impure” menstrual blood) was a reason for a frequent critique of the book and its removal from some libraries across the United States. However, this adjacency provokes an insight into the understanding of im-purity; the sacred becomes a part of a continuing cycle of the profane, the borders are constantly being re-negotiated.

The practices around menstrual hygiene are described in detail:

‘Margaret, she said, would you get us a sanitary napkin, please?’ I must have given her a strange look, because she said, “From the dispenser on the wall, dear. Nancy is menstruating.”

‘Does she always act like that?’

‘It's her first time’ (Blume 2013, 123).

¹ At the beginning of the novel Margaret is 11.

Blume's novel touches upon capitalization of sexual education. A representative of a menstrual hygiene company is invited to Margaret's school to teach about health and menstrual management². The lesson starts with a film screening:

The narrator of the film pronounced it menstroo-ation. 'Remember, the voice said, 'it's menstroo-ation.'

The film told us about the ovaries and explained why girls menstroo-ate. But it didn't tell us how it feels, except to say that it is not painful, which we knew anyway. Also, it didn't really show a girl getting it. It just said how wonderful nature was and how we would soon become women and all that. After the film the lady in the grey suit asked if there were any questions.

Nancy raised her hand and when Grey suit called on her Nancy said, 'How about Tampax?' Grey Suit coughed into her hanky and said, 'We don't advise internal protection until you are considerably older.' (Blume 2013, 111)

Margaret is not willing to accept this explanation. She understands that the lecture is intended as an advertisement. In this passage, Blume comments on the institutionalized operationalized capitalization of female body addressed to young girls before they start menstruating. School plays a crucial role in these practices. Exposing how such practices do not prioritize women's mental and physical health, but rather consolidate attitudes of elision, the novel shows the possible ways of reappropriation of menstruation. This is probably best exhibited when Margaret starts noticing that the representation of menstruation promoted by the capitalist system (by the means of school) does not answer to her personal experience of being a young woman.

Further reading and positive representations of menstruation

While menstruation generally tends to be absent from literature and film, it is a subject of both scholarly and mainstream publications. There are novels addressed to a wide international readership, including Susan Kim's and Elissa Stein's *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* (2009) and very recent (as of March 2019) *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement* (2018) by Nadia Okamoto that improve the visibility of menstruation and invite public discussion centered around the taboo. They constitute a bridge between literature and activism.

² The novel touches upon the menstrual management, as the female characters discuss various types of menstrual "protection." Due to this, it has been updated to answer to changing market of sanitary products. The newer editions include different sanitary products than the original version.

Several organizations, initiatives and movements have emerged across the globe, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States. The year 1977 marks the founding of the Society of Menstrual Cycle Research, an interdisciplinary Colorado-based group of researchers in multiple fields, including social studies and medicine (<http://www.menstruationresearch.org/>). The British Betty for Schools aims at improving the quality of sexual education (www.bettyforschools.co.uk). The Period Positive initiative, advocates for menstrual equity (<http://www.periodpositive.com>), The Real Period Project fights with menstrual stigmatization and shame (www.realperiodproject.org). “Period positivity,” which encourages people of all genders to talk about menstruation, is a part of the “Body Positivity” movement. An example of a “period positive” action is public exposition of menstrual blood. In 2015 Kiran Gandhi, a Los Angeles-based musician, ran the London Marathon without taming her menstrual blood. She provoked a worldwide discussion about menstrual management, hygiene and taboo, which is one of the postulated outcomes of the movement.

In the field of visual art, the theme of menstruation inspired Judy Chicago, a visual artist active since the 1970s, whose works were intended to “validate overt female sexuality in the art community” (Kochrane 2015). She is an author of pieces such as *Red Flag* (1971) and *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972). *Red Flag*—Chicago’s photographic lithograph—presents a female perineum. The composition includes pubic hair and a hand pulling out a bloodstained tampon in a focal position. This unprecedented representation drew public attention to the experience of menstruation, and posed questions about the possible ways to tame the menstrual discharge.



(Chicago 1971)

Final thoughts

In 1948 Natalie F. Joffe in her article “Vernacular of Menstruation” stated that “the nature of the words for menstruation in a given culture may illuminate the prevalent attitudes toward the subject” (Joffe 1948, 181). The primary aim of this article was to synthesize the most significant directions of the menstrual discourses and point out the useful vocabularies, as, according to Joffe, language reflects the understanding and attitudes towards a subject. I do not claim it to be an exhaustive one; there is still room for research and further discussion, but, foremost, the inclusion of menstruation in the present-day culture.

Then, there are questions that still deserve a thorough examination and attention. They include the history and availability of hygiene products and their sustainability in ecological terms, missing school because of menstrual symptoms, or homelessness and menstruation management. I believe that these issues could and should be subjected to a public discussion and represented more frequently. This presupposes not only portrayals of menarche, but also depictions of the processes of menstrual cycle, including the symptoms of the Premenstrual Syndrome. At the same time, I would like to advocate for discontinuance of reproducing the image of a menstruator as a faint, aberrant Other.

The invisibilization of menstruation is a prevalent characteristic of the cultural panorama of the twenty-first-century Anglophone culture. In the upcoming years, I hope to see menstruation in social—mainly mass-culture—contexts appearing more frequently, in particular in media addressed to children and teenagers. Even though the initiatives concerned with popularization of sexual education and normalization of an image of menstrual blood exist and gain an increased visibility, menstruation does not appear in all cultural contexts and is almost absent from the dominant discourse. The paradigm of its irrelevance prevails and is a cultural landmark of the British and American culture of the twenty-first century. I would like to finish my essay with the words of Meredith Guthrie, who reminds one that “Women’s everyday practice of concealing menstruation begins even before [...] cycles start, and continues throughout [...] fertile years. Before we can help girls (and women) feel better about their bodies as a whole, we need to help them find more constructive ways to think about menstruation” (Guthrie 2007).

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