

## Introduction

# On Dragons and Death Threats

## Telling New Menstrual Stories

In 2012 Petra Collins, an outspoken artist and activist, designed a t-shirt for American Apparel that depicted a hairy menstruating vulva with fingers spreading open the labia. As a piece of agitprop, this shirt successfully provoked a firestorm of angry responses. Deemed “outrageous,” “obscene,” and “disgusting,” with one news source calling it the “ultimate overshare,” the shirt never reached the shelves but nevertheless stirred up a frenzied social media battle about gendered double standards of obscenity (Collins 2013). In 2015 artist Rupri Kaur posted several menstrual-themed photos on her Instagram account in an effort to demystify menstruation. These photos included one of her lying fully clothed with menstrual stains on her pants and sheets and another that showed her feet covered in dripping menstrual blood while she stood in the shower. Citing violations of community standards, Instagram twice removed the photographs and deemed them obscene (Saul 2015). Clearly, menstruation is not yet ready to come out of the menstrual closet, even in a culture that has supposedly dramatically improved gender inequities since the sexual revolution and women’s movement of the 1970s.

Across the Pacific on the island of Komodo in Indonesia, menstrual conversations happen all the time and in the most public way imaginable, mostly to help women avoid being bitten by Komodo dragons. Because the dragons can smell blood (including menstrual blood) with remarkable accuracy and from great distances away—

causing them to aggressively pursue their targets—women who enter Komodo Island must sign waivers that attest to the fact that they are not currently menstruating; otherwise, government officials block them from entering the island altogether. These seemingly disparate anecdotes are but three of the many topics and stories about the contemporary culture of menstruation that *Out for Blood* examines.

Readers may ask, “Is there a *culture* of menstruation? A discourse of menstruation? Why does menstruation matter at all?” These questions form the basis of the necessary work that menstrual activists and scholars have taken up for many years. Half of the world’s population menstruates for large periods of their lives and yet surprisingly little scholarship has addressed the social meanings around this experience, let alone its potential as a site of gendered resistance. While a small (and fierce) group of feminist social scientists has studied menstruation for decades, too often their contributions have ended up sidelined by mainstream psychology and sociology. Dismissed either as something secretive, hidden, and taboo (and therefore too threatening to openly discuss and analyze) or disregarded as trivial and “silly” (and therefore not worthy of serious attention), the culture around, and discourses about, menstruation remain largely undertheorized and underexamined. When I talk openly about writing a book about menstruation and menstrual activism, I often hear (after some expressions of discomfort and amusement) two responses: “What’s that?” and “Why?”

## What Is Menstrual Activism?

Menstrual activism—or social activism that works to upset, challenge, and reverse impulses to silence and shame menstruating women—has many goals, tactics, and styles. It takes as its central premise the fusion between menstruation and anarchy (some call menstrual activism “menarchy”) and targets a wide range of social and political problems: the toxic substances in tampons and commercial menstrual products; increasing diagnoses of “premenstrual dysphoric disorder” (PMDD) and “premenstrual syndrome” (PMS); negative depictions of menstruating women in film, television, music, and popular culture; overmedicalization of menstrual cycles, including menstrual suppression; double standards in imagining women’s bodies as “dirty” and

men's bodies as "clean"; men's attitudes about menstruation and menstrual products; early menstrual education and messages of shame and taboo embedded in such messages; and a variety of other problematic aspects of contemporary menstrual culture.

Menstrual activism is both formal (e.g., Blood Sisters) and informal (e.g., individual women making menstrual art); it offers coherent, organized critiques and tactical interventions (e.g., working to pass a congressional bill on tampon safety), and it draws from organic and informal modes of communication and connection (e.g., women sharing first period stories on Facebook). It offers showy and artistic public displays (e.g., Spanish performance artists walking along public streets wearing pants stained with menstrual blood) and more private and subtle shifts of thinking (e.g., women embracing menstrual sex). It draws from the culture of punk and anarchy alongside the do-it-yourself aesthetic that arose in the early 1990s, just as it puts into dialogue diverse and sometimes painful social questions about bodies and identities. Chris Bobel (2010), whose work on menstrual activism stands out as exceptional, wrote of the possibilities of menstrual activism: "Menstrual activism helps us see what's at stake in the spirited debates about what to do about gender and the ongoing struggles to engage a truly racially, ethnically, and economically diverse movement of social change advocates around a common issue" (13). Menstrual activism offers multiple, diffuse, tactical, and intuitive forms of resistance, many of which this book considers in detail. It builds upon what we already know about the benefits of resistance, as those who rebel through activism on behalf of *any* issue have better physical health and more enjoyment of life (Rittenour and Colaner 2012), fewer eating disorders (Peterson, Grippo, and Tantleff-Dunn 2008), better mental health outcomes (Szymanski and Owens 2009), and more satisfying sex lives (Schick, Zucker, and Bay-Cheng 2008). I argue that *menstruation* and *resistance* go hand in hand, that menstruating bodies are always already infused with the potential for activism, solidarity, defiance, feminism, and rebellion.

### Why Does Menstruation Matter?

With regard to *why* study menstrual activism and the culture of menstruation—in other words, why should we care?—my response

typically gets more personal. While many people in the United States believe that sexism has almost disappeared in contemporary society (for a compelling critique of this rhetoric, see Swim and Cohen 1997), most researchers have identified uneven improvements in women's lives (Acker 2006; Bettie 2003). Paula England (2010) argues that the last twenty years have seen many improvements in gender inequities in the workplace, but the practices of people in their homes and personal lives have resisted change in ways that directly (and negatively) impact women's lives. Women's bodies and sexualities, in particular, continue to face assaults in terms of safety, well-being, body image, and pleasure (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Fahs 2011a). In the midst of this, menstruation continues to exist as a silenced, disregarded, and at times abject or "disgusting" aspect of women's daily lives. Negativity about menstruation subjects women to ridicule, dismissal, and trivialization (see Donald Trump's attack on Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly after the first presidential debate of 2015 in which he asserted that she asked him tough questions because she "had blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever").

I have long studied subjects that others have called trivial or foolish or unworthy of scholarly attention. Typically, these subjects include aspects of bodies—particularly women's bodies, bodies of color, and LGBT bodies—that connect to themes of agency/autonomy, social justice, and discourses of social control. For example, I have studied, written about, and taught about body hair for many years and have argued that hair is far from a trivial matter; rather, it symbolizes much about people's relationship to identity, beauty, power, gender, race, class, and notions of "choice" (Fahs 2011b; Fahs 2012a; Fahs 2013b; Fahs 2014). Similarly, menstruation, another subject too often labeled as trivial, also reflects much about our culture's relationship to women and their bodies, disgust, abjection, ideas about power and control, and gendered double standards (Fahs 2011c). The body is, I believe, an especially productive site of knowledge, and as such, serves as a serious point of analysis for those who want to understand the exercise, and deployment, of power.

In July 2014, I had the surreal experience of watching my work on body hair get taken up by the machine of the Far Right news media. After years of teaching an extra credit assignment where I asked students to grow out their body hair (women) or remove body hair

(men) and write about the experience of engaging in nonnormative gendered body behavior, this assignment was “discovered” by conservatives and eventually discussed on air by both Rush Limbaugh and Fox News. I endured red- and feminist-baiting tropes and accusations of “ruining America” and being another Communist professor, and I received hundreds of pieces of hate mail claiming (at best) that I wasted parents’ money on their children’s education (notably assuming, of course, that parents pay for education, which is rarely true for my students who largely self-support their education, but I digress . . .) and that I demonstrated the failures and “idiocy” of women and gender studies. I also received hate mail calling me a Communist (and saying I ran a Communist training camp in my classrooms), a dyke, a whore, a (fat) bitch, and a cunt. (Clearly, the importance of studying vitriolic rhetoric about bodies and gender seemed ever more vivid to me during this experience, not to mention the painful links between homophobia and misogyny.)

As a result of this news coverage about my body hair assignment, I also received death threats. *Death threats.* Death threats because I wanted students to both think about, and actively engage with, discourses of body hair. I had to have a security team assess my personal safety (with some officials suggesting that the university install a “panic button” in my office), and I was suddenly immersed in emergency meetings, frantic phone calls, talks of patrolling my house for intruders, tech officials reading and analyzing my email for IP address patterns, revisions to my posted office hours, and new policies about student meetings and visiting faculty offices. Ironically, I also heard statements from top university officials reminding me that “this happens all the time to women faculty,” but usually it derives from one or two stalkers rather than the far more public and diffuse audiences of Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. *This happens all the time?* Well, enough that my university employs a full-time person to handle threats made to faculty (largely, I heard, toward women faculty and faculty of color). In total, while I certainly also received plenty of heart-warming affirmations toward, and fan mail about, my work from colleagues both in the United States and abroad, the symbolic and literal *danger* of writing about and engaging students about issues of women’s bodies became foregrounded to me in new and important ways.

## Telling New Menstrual Stories

Returning to the question, then, of why menstruation matters—and how women’s bodies inspire panic when not behaving in gender-normative, predictable, socially controlled ways—I argue in this book that we *must* take menstruation seriously. Menstruation provides the perfect platform through which to examine the synthesis of serious things: political identities (feminism, antiracism, queer subjectivities), body consciousness/knowledge, gender issues and identities, the insidious aspects of inequalities, and the possibilities inherent in activism and resistance. These themes weave in and out of the topics discussed in *Out for Blood*, particularly how people talk about menstruation (in therapy, in popular culture, with their partners), how menstruation is appropriated and distorted, various assumptions about menstrual distress, moral panics about menstrual blood, notions of menstrual contagions, the value of alternative menstrual products, menstrual art, and, most notably, the ongoing work of menstrual activists fighting to release menstruation from the jaws of capitalism and patriarchy. Further, menstruation represents a way for women (and menstruating men) to possibly have shared language, bodily connection, and perhaps even some solidarity with each other—all of which are in remarkably short supply today.

To achieve these liberatory goals, we need new menstrual stories, ones that adequately capture the ways that seemingly ordinary processes of the body can have extraordinary implications for social justice movements. How people resist the silenced and secretive discourse of menstruation opens up new ways to approach, think about, study, and manage (or not) menstrual cycles. In these essays, I question the phrase *feminine hygiene*, interrogate misperceptions about how much women bleed, showcase the conflicts of the menstruating male body and trans experiences of menstruation, turn an eye toward the global landscape of menstruation and resistance work abroad, and ask us to contemplate fantasies of rebellion. Here, too, menstruation becomes a litmus test, a metaphor, an intuitive “cousin” to other body and identity practices and questions such as body hair, queer identity, pregnancy and childbirth, sexuality, trans politics, and radical feminism.

*Out for Blood* asks a variety of important questions that have immediate relevance to contemporary studies of the body and menstruation: What do contemporary discourses of menstruation say, or not say, about the menstruating body, and how might these discourses expand or change over time? How does menstrual solidarity speak to

larger questions of political activism and feminist collectivism? How do menstrual anarchists resist, and what can their work teach us about our own bodies and the knowledges of the body? In what ways do our current tools and products for managing, tracking, and controlling menstrual cycles reveal particular assumptions about gender, sexuality, and power? How do women discuss their menstrual cycles in therapy, in the classroom, at home, and in public, and what does this show about the various modes of containment and expression that menstruation engenders? Why is menstrual discourse relevant to men, and what can trans men teach us about menstruation? How can the disgusting or abject qualities of menstruation signify new modes of understanding gender and the body? Finally, how can people learn and unlearn knowledge about menstrual cycles, and how can they fight back, resist, and reconstruct new menstrual stories both individually and collectively?

## Overview

Designed to move across multiple discursive spaces and modalities, this book features eleven essays divided into four distinct sections, with six longer essays and five shorter essays comprising the collection. Meant as a lively interdisciplinary interrogation about the contemporary culture of menstruation—sometimes more formally, sometimes less formally—the book moves through feminist theory, social science, psychotherapy discourses, cultural studies, trans studies, sexuality studies, and gender studies. These four parts include: Part One: *Theorizing Cycles and Stains*, two longer essays designed to connect menstruation to feminist theory; Part Two: *Dispatches from the Blogosphere*, five shorter essays targeting the relationship between menstruation and cultural stories/discourses; Part Three: *Blood on the Couch*, two longer essays about how psychotherapy clients talk about their menstrual cycles; and Part Four: *Menarchy and Menstrual Resistance*, two longer essays about menstrual activists and forms of resistance.

### *Part One: Theorizing Cycles and Stains*

I begin the book with two essays that fuse feminist theory with the study of menstruation. Chapter 1 (“Cycling Together: Menstrual Synchrony as a Projection of Gendered Solidarity”) draws upon controversial literatures on the biological theories of menstrual

synchrony—that is, the notion that menstruating women living in proximity eventually sync up over time—in order to analyze the reasons why women *want* to believe that they cycle together. I argue that women’s beliefs in menstrual synchrony function as a projection of gendered solidarity whereby they can create social ties and social bonds with women in spaces that largely prohibit such alliances. This essay draws from sociological theories of collectivism and political solidarity, biological and evolutionary science, and from feminist theories of “affective solidarity” to explore menstrual synchrony and its social and political implications.

Chapter 2 (“The Menstrual Stain as Graffiti”) uses Julia Kristeva’s classic philosophical text, *Powers of Horror*, to interrogate the meaning of the menstrual stain in relation to the abject. The essay looks at how the browning, decaying, provocatively gendered symbol of the menstrual stain (“blood-turned-to-death”) threatens to elicit panicky reactions by functioning not only as a material symbol of death but also as a highly gendered form of graffiti that attaches death to the decaying, feminine, female body. The essay asks: How does the process of “bleeding through,” of using the menstrual stain to (unwittingly) leave a mark, provoke and disrupt boundaries, borders, and bodily order? Further, what sorts of feminist resistances can be imagined in and through the menstrual stain as a transgressive representation of the abject?

### *Part Two: Dispatches from the Blogosphere*

The second section of the book includes five short essays derived from my work on the menstrual blog *Re:Cycling*. These pieces are designed as brief, sometimes provocative and controversial, and often politicized pieces about a range of topics related to menstrual culture and discourse today. Chapter 3 (“In Praise of Cycles”) posits that capitalism and contemporary norms and practices of people’s work lives have largely destroyed the intuitive and positive understandings of cycles, particularly with regard to the body, mood, seasons, and cycles of work. Chapter 4 (“‘Feminine Hygiene’ and the Ultimate Double Standard”) unpacks the history of the phrase *feminine hygiene* and its implications for women’s bodies as dirty or in need of management.

Building on these essays, chapter 5 (“Adventures on Komodo Island”) recounts my story of visiting Komodo Island, Indonesia,

where women must declare their menstrual status to government officials before entering the island. The chapter examines not only the cultural conversations around menstruation in this part of Indonesia but also explores the implications of having such public conversations with my group of travelers from Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

The final two essays in this section address themes of menstruation, technology, and history. Chapter 6 (“Menstruation according to Apple”) provides a critical look at recent technology that tracks menstrual periods and the various assumptions embedded within these apps (e.g., pregnancy as good, periods as inherently distressing). Finally, chapter 7 (“Collateral Damage: Throwing Menstruation Out of the Museum”) examines the way that coming-of-age narratives in a museum dedicated to Native American cultures have largely ignored menstruation even while other rituals and bodily practices garner attention. This chapter questions the various stories associated with menstruating girls and women and how our menstrual coming-of-age stories are obscured by political and artistic claims of “decency” and “obscenity.”

### *Part Three: Blood on the Couch*

Part 3 emphasizes the unique intersection between menstruation and psychotherapy by drawing on a series of case studies with former clients. Chapter 8 (“Blood on the Couch: Disclosures about Menstruation in the Therapy Room”) focuses on disclosures about menstruation from three different female patients in order to explore how menstruation functions as a taboo, a mode of alliance with the therapist, an expression of personal distress, and a way to understand more salient problems with family members and body image. Ultimately, I argue in this chapter that women experience strongly paradoxical feelings about their menstrual cycles, seeing them on the one hand as a source of intense distress and, on the other, as a site of resistance and emotional expression. Chapter 9 (“The Menstruating Male Body”) draws from my work with three female-to-male (FTM) trans men in therapy who discuss their menstrual cycles and the various stressors and traumas of menstruating. Unworking notions of male and female bodies, questioning the inherent meanings and symbolism of menstruation, and working toward seeing menstruation as potentially masculine or

genderqueer all helped to underscore the power of menstruation to make and remake gender.

#### *Part Four: Menarchy and Menstrual Activism*

I end the book with two essays that explore the work of contemporary menstrual activists and the ways that they fight back against shame-based menstrual culture, inspire new thinking about menstruating bodies, and reimagine individual and collective efforts to engage in menstrual anarchy. Chapter 10 (“Raising Bloody Hell: Inciting Menstrual Panics through Campus and Community Activism”) features the work of undergraduate menstrual activists and the various menstrual panics they incited for the Arizona politicians who found their work “obscene.” The chapter highlights the role of seemingly simple acts of rebellion—for example, raising awareness about the toxicity of tampons, asking drivers to “honk if you love menstrual sex”—and their far-reaching consequences and implications. Chapter 11 (“Smear It on Your Face: Menstrual Art, Performance, and Zines as Menstrual Activism”) features the work of menstrual artists, public menstrual stunts, and menstrual zines to outline a future vision for menarchy, including new spaces for menstrual activists to invade, new projects to undertake, and new ways to move menstruation out of the “menstrual closet.” This chapter concludes the book with a playful romp through the performative fantasy and hyper-reality of menstruation today.

Ultimately, this book of essays aims to provoke discussion about how to cultivate and circulate new menstrual stories, ones that affirm menstruation as a complicated, potentially powerful, sometimes distressing, always provocative space of self-understanding and collective meaning-making. By asking new questions (“How do people talk about menstruation with their female therapists?” or “What assumptions underlie the design of period tracker apps?”) and featuring new voices (e.g., zine writers, European menstrual activists, artists using menstrual blood in their work, Komodo Island government officials), the cultures and discourses of menstruation become more vivid, rich, and varied. Further, links between the body and the tactical deployment of power (and resistance to that power) appear in poignant ways when studying menstruation, making it all the more urgent and

compelling as an entry point into practices that cultivate social justice. The study of the body is necessarily messy; I hope we can collectively revel in that messiness, find new ways to understand ourselves and each other, and attach the experiences of our bodies to a fierce and shameless politics of resistance, rebellion, and revolution.