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Essay Review: Blood Work: Menstrual Cycle Scholarship Comes of Age

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/chris_bobel/108/
It is an exciting time to be a scholar of menstruation. The public debate about menstruation has galvanised since 2015, through what lawyer Jennifer Weiss-Wolf defined as a ‘menstrual equity movement’, and social media has in recent years added to the debate through the #MenstruationMatters conversation, as well as Chella Quint’s #PeriodPositive campaign.1 Academic research has also kept up the pace. At the biannual Society for Menstrual Cycle Research conference in Colorado, June 2019, a record number of scholars from a wide range of disciplines shared and debated new research.2 The following three books will no doubt have formed part of the discussions, as their authors arguably contribute in various ways to the field of Critical Menstrual Studies—itself a term coined in forthcoming Palgrave MacMillan handbook of the same name.3

Feminist historian of science and technology Sharra L. Vostral has been interrogating the technologies of menstrual history since her milestone book Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology from 2008. In it, Vostral discussed how the menstrual product industry grew in scope and power from its origins in 1920s USA.4 In her new book, Toxic Shock: A Social History, she hones in on one of the most infamous events in US menstrual history, the Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) crisis of 1980 that endangered the lives of consumers who trialled the new Procter & Gamble (P&G) tampon brand Rely. This caused what Vostral defines as ‘an urgent epidemiological event’ (p.3) amongst the 70 per cent of women who used tampons in the 1970s in the USA. Troubled by the mythologies and power hierarchies still inert in this history, Vostral challenges the reader to look beyond the familiar warnings in menstrual product boxes and remain critical to the industry’s ‘whitewashing’ of this event (p.1).5 The complexities of this history are

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2The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research was established in the 1970s: http://www.menstruationresearch.org/ (accessed 8 July 2019)
3The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstrual Studies is forthcoming with Palgrave MacMillan in 2020. Both Bobel and Vostral are involved in this project.
5Vostral discusses race by pointing out that TSS would probably not have become such a media sensation if the victims were not mostly White US women.
admirably and competently told through Vostral’s use of framing devices: Feminist Technology Studies and an interdisciplinary approach to sources, methods and analysis. This is a necessary technique as Vostral finds P&G an unwilling source and has to convince key individuals who were critical of the multi-national corporation’s complicity to deposit their writings in a university archive for safe-keeping (an important activist and academic act that will benefit future scholars greatly). Despite the corporate silence, Vostral has found a wealth of information: from medical reports and research, to legal papers and media coverage. Her assemblage of sources is never forced, but rather presents a Donna Haraway-esque combination of biology, technology, culture and gender. For example, Vostral argues that the story is one about bacteria and technology (specifically the bacteria Staphylococcus aureus and the brand Rely) and that this combination is crucial to our understanding.6

Throughout the book, the author’s unflinching examination of the corporate environment that created the arms race for super-absorbent tampons amongst multi-national corporations in the late 1970s is an important corrective to the accounts of this history told by the industry itself. P&G and other leading menstrual corporations are shown to have been heavily invested in an aggressive and male-dominated competition to conquer the largely female market. Despite the money spent on research, little evidence of concern for consumers or women’s health emerges throughout this history, and Vostral convincingly reveals the shameful conduct of the corporations in her examination of their post-TSS actions, especially through lawsuits fought against sick or dead women’s families. In this way, Vostral effectively dismantles another myth: menstrual history is not just about women but has in fact been dominated by men in corporate positions for around 100 years. Knowing the complicated history of TSS strengthens both the history of technology and menstruation, but, equally important, it also empowers consumers more than the small insert warning of potential death in each tampon box purchased today. Vostral argues that the inserts are unhelpful, and I would add that her book should be the standard text on TSS, rather than the corporate one-liner found in consumer goods.

In Chris Bobel’s new book, The Managed Body, the story of Western domination over the menstrual conversation continues. Situating her research in the ‘Global South’ (a term Bobel analyses and problematises throughout), the book investigates how Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) invested in Menstrual Health Management (MHM: a term and concept tightly linked to the UN’s WASH programme) focus on the ‘technology-fix’ of handing out menstrual products over any other form of menstrual equity work. Bobel analyses 45 of 133 active MHM organisations, finding that 68 per cent are product-focussed (82 per cent of her subset) and that 42 per cent are run by Westerners (p.79). This, Bobel argues, does not solve all menstrual problems, but it does help the US-based menstrual product corporations maintain relevance and presence in new sectors of the world.

Bobel draws on interdisciplinary research as a framework, through her use of sociology, postcolonial theory, gender studies and the relatively recent critical debate about the ‘girling of development’ (p.30) from International Relations. With these tools she asks: How do the MHM NGOs frame their problems and solutions? Where are the actual girls in this conversation? Why do products remain such a core part of activism in the area? Backed by interviews with many of the key NGOs in the field, impressive and detailed close reading of the statistics used to support their work, and a critical institutional

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approach, Bobel convincingly shows that the ‘technology fix’ dominates and that much (but not all) MHM activity feeds into the idea of making ‘good girls’ who are ‘good for the economy’. More troubling still, Bobel investigates the colonial infrastructure inherent in many of the organisations and the prevalence of White women from the West in leadership roles. Bobel also reflects on her own role as a White US scholar throughout, although readers may question the amount of space dedicated to reflexivity if they are not used to this approach—nevertheless race does indeed emerge as a critical part of this narrative. The book asks many important questions about these tensions, notably: ‘Will the tireless efforts of thousands of earnest menstrual health advocates actually efface gender inequality or will they inadvertently align with the established rules of body-negative engagement that enable the persistence of the status quo?’ (p.31). Such questions need to be discussed amongst the growing group of scholars invested in menstrual research, and as frequently cited leader in the field, Bobel is providing fertile ground for debate and global collaboration. There are parallels here with recent work on the marketing of contraceptive products, thus making Bobel’s work and the growing literature on menstrual capitalism relevant to a larger group of scholars interested in the history and politics of reproductive health.7

Both Vostral and Bobel retain an eagle-eyed focus on the menstrual product industry throughout the engaging chapters; specifically its complacency in creating menstrual poverty, stigma, mis-education and taboos historically and today. As Bobel puts it: ‘menstrual products accommodate stigma by more efficiently hiding the reality of biological process’ (p.205). For her—‘[u]ntil MHM chooses to reframe, its efforts are held hostage by the dominant cultural narrative of gendered body negativity and market-based solutions that privilege consumption over social change’ (p.32). Unfortunately, Bobel does not have any luck with institutional access either. E-mails to P&G and others ‘ran dry’, and other important corporations do not even make an attempt to reply to her questions. This again shows that until menstrual product corporations open up the communication channels to independent researchers, there are still gaps in our collective knowledge about these powerful entities.

The book is a timely, important and provides a fascinating read about contemporary feminism, activism and capitalism. It should be noted that Palgrave MacMillan have also valued this book quite highly and that a forthcoming pocket edition will make this important scholarship available to groups beyond academia, such as the NGOs Bobel no doubt seeks to reach.

In From Hysteria to Hormones, the power and myths surrounding reproductive technology continues in the analysis of natural and artificial hormones. Communication Studies scholar Amy Koerber builds on the work begun in her last book, Breast or Bottle: Contemporary Controversies in Infant-Feeding Policy and Practice.8 Then, Koerber examined recent debates about breast versus bottle-feeding and contextualised this through a wide range of sources, methodologies and analysis. In From Hysteria to Hormones, Koerber, like Vostral and Bobel, blends history, gender studies and critical communications studies, this time to explore how debates about hormones have limited and created possibilities for people in recent decades. The book offers a feminist lens on this science-

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8Amy Koerber, Breast or Bottle: Contemporary Controversies in Infant-Feeding Policy and Practice (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2013).
dominated discourse and suggests that the rhetoric of science remains a fruitful topic for communication scholars to critique, deconstruct and analyse. As in Vostral’s work, Koerber shows how medical rhetoric in particular often fails to account for cultural, social and ideological contexts. This is done very convincingly in the parts of the book that seek to show the reader how debates one might assume are over, such as the Victorian concepts of ‘the wandering womb’ or ‘hysteria’, are alive and well in contemporary Western medical discourse about women and hormones. Both old and new mythologies harm women, argues Koerber, and she calls for more critical literacy about hormone research, scientific narratives and ideas about hormones as fixed.

The case of Pre-Menstrual Syndrome (PMS) and the menstrual cycle ties Koerber neatly to the Critical Menstrual Studies perspective, and this is another strength of the book. However, Koerber does not cite the extensive literature that critically examines PMS, nor does she explore Katharina Dalton and the ‘creation’ of PMS in the mid-twentieth century. As a scholar of menstruation, one cannot help but wish that this instance in history was given as much focus as the more male-dominated instances of PMS. Nevertheless, Koerber manages to show how the discourse on PMS was always cultural and social, as well as steeped in assumptions of gender, pain and fertility. Throughout the book, Koerber convincingly shows how history and politics influence the debate about hormones, and how this has serious knock-on effects in the everyday lives of people experiencing any hormonal unrest, from menstruation to menopause, to gender transition and medical issues.

For anyone who might think that menstrual scholarship is mostly about women, blood and stigma, these three books will make readers reconsider. From institutional and economic critique, to technology and patent history, to International Relations, psychology and rhetoric, the authors prove that menstruation is a topic that invites multi- and interdisciplinary investigation. Furthermore, all three books are rooted in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectional feminism in their interrogation of the overlapping issues confronting various groups.9 This is most notable in the ways that gender shapes conversations and power hierarchies about menstruation, but Vostral and Bobel also comment on race, class and disability throughout, whereas Koerber’s investigation into rhetoric and hormonal mythologies show how changing ideas about biological sex has both harmed and liberated people who identify as women. The authors’ common interest in exploring the complexities of identities in their various investigations is also interesting because they emerge from radically different scholarly traditions. As such, they also provide guidance for colleagues trying to introduce intersectional feminist theory into their own interdisciplinary work. For example, Vostral inserts gender theory throughout her history of menstrual technologies in the long tradition of Haraway. In Bobel’s work, feminist economic theorist Nancy Fraser echoes in the author’s concern about the appropriation of menstrual activism. And Koerber’s work draws on scholar of technology and health care Nelly Oudshoorn’s argument that hormones changed the world by disrupting the traditional biological trajectory of gender (p.3). By building their theoretical frameworks on theorists and scholars from several disciplines, the authors present the reader with an interesting blueprint for academic work on gender. Although each book presents groundbreaking histories and asks new scholarly questions, their foundation is shown to lie in long-standing debates about gender, and indeed academic research. It should not

escape readers’ notice that all three books present the troubled legacy of research about women, through the botched and corrupt corporate work on TSS, in the misuse and invention of statistics in arguing for the need for menstrual products in the Global South and in the fantasies about hormones and hysteria dismantled by Koerber. By investigating their own academic field’s histories and troubles, the authors thus present a more honest and helpful way of furthering their own scholarly traditions.

In summary, these three books complement each other despite drawing from different academic fields, methodologies and theoretical frameworks. This is surely one of the strengths and wonders of menstrual and reproductive cycle scholarship—namely that this field is broad, open, truly interdisciplinary and growing. These examples also show the enormous scope and potential for future research, as each author asks questions of their readers, urging them to think clearly, carefully and creatively about menstrual scholarship as it moves into its next phase.

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