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Of Blood, Bodies and the Limits of Empathy, or The Potential Hazards of Well-Meaning Make Believe toward Social Change

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Because I study feminist activism, I think a lot about HOW we generate awareness about issues, a necessary first time to mobilizing for change. Borrowing from Cynthia Enloe, it is our job to "take [the lives of the marginalized] seriously." [1] The methods we deploy to generate this awareness run the gamut, of course. For example, an ethnographer explores the lives of their "informants" through participant observation of people *in situ*. An Investigative journalist conducts interview upon interview with the people at the heart of the story. A creative writer publishes a poem that helps us 'see' a problem in a new way. Each approach, striving toward social justice, aims to capture the voices and "lived realities" of those disadvantaged (though that is often too mild a word) by social inequality, calling attention to the experiences dominant culture often ignores, trivializes or distorts.

As antidote to cold detachment, these cultural productions enable a glimpse into the life of someone else, typically someone cast as 'other.' When we imagine, even *feel*, the life of those oppressed, we cultivate empathy. And this feeling state can stretch us outside ourselves, setting the stage for outrage and then, hopefully, action.

For the last 10 years, my area of interest has been menstrual health and politics, so when I heard about British/Japanese designer and artist Sputniko's "Menstruation Machine", I sat up. "Menstraution Machine" is a curious metal device equipped with a blood-dispensing system and electrodes that stimulate the lower abdomen, thus replicating the pain and bleeding of a five-day menstrual period.

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[1] Enloe, C. H. (2013). *Seriously!: Investigating crashes and crises as if women mattered*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[insert image of Menstruation Machine]

Sputniko explains that as a student soaring high at the esteemed Royal College of Art, she felt like “superwoman” brought inelegantly back to earth each month by her period---the pain, the mess, the inconvenience, the body pulling in one direction while the mind pulled in another. What if non menstruators[2], her male colleagues, in particular, experienced this too, she mused. What would they feel? Like this? What would their art

[2] My language is intentional here. Not only women menstruate and not all women menstruate. Hence, menstruator. However, this fact does not elide the fact that the menstrual discourses are not shot through with gender. This makes the menstrual experience even more challenging for, say, transmen who menstruate and pre menopausal ciswomen who do not.

look like? What would the world look like? So, for her, "Menstruation Machine" is as much a playful glimpse into a cyborgic future as a shout into the void: *Hey! I am hurting over here. Do you see me? Do you hear me? Pay attention!*

This piece can easily be construed as feminist theatre, a kind of 'take a walk in our shoes' menstrual edition. That is, put on my bloody panties and see what it's like—then maybe, just maybe, the non menstruators among us will get a clue at what it means to have a period.

Now in my 38th menstruating year, I can relate, though I am left wanting. Of course, "Menstruation Machine" is not the whole package. While the device delivers cramp-like shocks and includes a tank that holds and dispenses blood, the blood does not drop, in unpredictable patterns, into your panties, soiling your favorite 'tonight's the night' pair. And there's no hormonal fluctuations. But even if "Menstruation Machine" were somehow modified to better simulate the monthly periodic shedding, it still only captures half the reality. While menstruation is a biological process, how we, as a culture regard the ebbs and flows of the menstrual cycle is deeply *gendered*. In other words, we can take the menstruation out of the girl, but we can't as easily take the girl out of menstruation.

I want to be clear here: We have bodies-- messy, smelly, sensual, imperfectly perfect vessels--but we need not be defined by them, even though we often are. Indeed, Sputniko's aim is to help us see a near future in which our biological processes are split off from bodies, where our flesh is not a cage. Where our gender identity is released from bones, organs, skin, hemmed in only by our imaginations. What a thrilling hack. [3]

This is where it gets tricky. How can we work toward such a wide-open world while still acknowledging that our embodied reality is so much more than hearts beating, feet moving (or staying still) food digesting, uteri contracting. Because, as we know. embodiment *itself* is socially constructed.

More specifically, the menstrual experience is shaped by an enduring taboo, norms of strict containment and a mandate of secrecy and silence—all of which reflect hegemonic femininity. The consequence of these forces is a kind of hush that suppresses a rich and necessary menstrual discourse. There's PMS jokes. There's shame exploiting tampon and pad ads. There's menstrual education (1 hour in grade 5. Anatomy and supplies, little more). This dearth of menstrual talk inhibits body literacy and empowered living. For better menstrual health, we need to be heard. *Hey! Pay attention!*

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[3] And I want to thank Sputniko for provoking me to think out loud in this way. This essay is neither a criticism of her nor her creative work. Conversely, it is a testament to "Menstruation Machine" achievement: to spur conversation about bodies, gender, technology and the potential of transcendence.

Because "Menstruation Machine," the shock- inducing blood -dripping machine only delivers the *partial* experience, the wearer may THINK they 'get it' when in fact, they do not. They may even feel entitled to speak for those whose menstrual lives are so much more than a monthly uterine event. They may feel authorized now to speak, more generally, menstruators.

This is a hazard. A big one.

In fact, I think 'imagine the other' exercises, what I suppose is not far from the 'make believe' games we played as children, can actually put *more* distance between us; it can diminish empathy and ultimately, undermine our success as activists. Buddhist nun Joan Halifax identifies three enemies of compassion: pity, moral outrage and fear.[4] I add a 4th: entitlement. I lose my empathic connection when I pity you, when I judge you, or when I see your world as a threat to my own. And I lose my empathic connection when I speak *for* you.

The world I (and maybe you, dear reader) live in, that is, the post industrial, neoliberal late capitalist global North (and especially my particularly messed up corner, the USA) is especially hostile to empathy for two interrelated reasons. For one, here, we place a very high premium on INDIVIDUALISM, inspired by our 18th century enlightenment roots and perfected par excellence through norms of masculinity, among other things. That is, our identities are based on what makes us each unique, about what we can do as hard working, rugged individuals, but we don't stop there. We like to cast ourselves in opposition to others. The boundary between you and me is rigid and we hold it up like a shield against the unknown.[5] And it limits empathic connection.

This context enables us to see how certain attempts to create empathy may, in fact, produce a particular disconnection—both on interpersonal and emotional levels. want to proceed by looking at a few examples of design intent on enabling empathy, examples like "Menstruation Machine", but slightly different, too, such as Blind Cafes, "Crip for Day," the Empathy Belly, and so.

These "experiments" are not new, of course. Take for instance John Howard Griffin's 1961 *Black Like Me.* Griffin underwent a series of injections to darken his skin then rode Greyhound buses for 6 weeks documenting his life in the Southern US, passing as a

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[4] https://www.ted.com/talks/joan_halifax

[5] I've heard this cultural love affair with contrasts labeled DICHTOMANIA, though I can't trace a source. We are dichotomaniacs when we exaggerate the distance between two things, often two parts of a larger whole, and then, we typically use that distance to justify oppression....man / woman, white /of color, straight /queer. It's a trick that ignores tremendous human diversity, not to mention potential

black man. The book that resulted was a shocking expose of what it meant to be black in 1960s USA.

In 2011, the US blockbuster hit, "Real Housewives of New Jersey"'s Melissa Gorga donned a fat suit for the TV show, "Entertainment Tonight."[6] It was another tired publicity stunt disguised as, according to the network "special report on fat, discrimination" and famewhoring."

At best, contrivances like these produce a series of quaint realizations that black people and/or fat people have been lamenting and research has been documenting for decades. We don't need a white man to speak for people of color. We don't need a thin woman to speak for fat people. We need to listen to those who experience race and/or size discrimination EVERY DAY, speaking their truths, demanding an end to racism, to fat oppression, to social injustice based on identity or shape or size or color.

After all, a day of experience, a quasi experience at best, is *not* the experience. The very temporality is a limit. You know it will end. You know you will soon get your life back. And, especially when the switch is to a less privileged reality, from able bodied to disabled, from white to, black, from thin woman to fat, when the exercise concludes, you feel lucky, maybe blessed, and perhaps, if you are honest, relieved.

Whew! Thank god I am not black! Thank god I am not fat.

But Isn't some access to another's reality better than nothing? When the attempt it to see into, to feel into, the life of someone marginalized by what sociologists call their social location, into a human space socially disadvantaged by identity or experience, or both, it is already hard enough to be heard (and that's usually because the powerful aren't listening). But the remedy is not your voice....the fix does NOT mean I want YOU to explain ME to someone else. And I certainly don't want YOU to explain ME to ME.

Here's a final example. As part of a piece he wrote for Vanity Fair in 2008, Christopher Hitchins subjected himself to waterboarding. After 16 seconds, he withdrew. It was too much. He titled his piece, "Believe Me, Its Torture." Believe YOU, Mr Hitchins? Did we need to believe YOU to justify our outrage at state supported torture?

Wasn't the word of torture victims enough? Why do you—or anyone else- need to embody such atrocities in order to take them seriously?

Would I feel differently if Hitchins endured a longer session? 24 seconds? 2 minutes ? Would I like it better if he did not have the option of withdrawing at all?

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[6] http://www.melissagorga.com/video/melissa-gorgas-fat-suit-transformation/

No

I don't want to chase better and better simulations and rely on them as a means to close the gap between us. I don't want to live in a world where embodiment of the other is a requisite for empathy. Imagine that world. I don't feel what you feel, so I don't care. I don't want to live there. Do you?

Before I became a professor of Women's & Gender Studies, I served as the director of a campus Women's Center, and as part of that job, I designed and delivered sexual assault awareness trainings during college orientations. In those trainings with new students—most of them pretending to be too cool to acknowledge their vulnerability-- I'd ask the students to picture the 4 women closest to them. "Today, about 1 of out 4 women experience sexual assault at some point in their lifetime," I'd explain. Dramatic pause. And then I'd go in for the kill: So which of the 4 women in YOUR life will be sexually assaulted?

I shudder at that exercise now.

Sloppy science aside, I don't do that exercise anymore. Because I don't want to perpetuate the notion that something horrible has to visit our own lives for it to matter. Isn't is bad enough that *somebody's* girlfriend, sister, mother, aunt is raped at such alarming rates? Isn't rape bad enough regardless of the biography of the victim?

I am not arguing against seeking empathy, against seeking connection. Rather, I join my wise friend menstrual warrior David Linton who, suggests, we aim for *accepting* and respecting the embodied other, we strive to appreciate our own selves in relationship *with* others. This is quite different that casting ourselves against "the other", the one we pity, we judge, we fear, the one we dismiss because we think we understand. The one we try and fail to speak *for*. When a non menstruator wears Sputniko's "Menstruation Machine", the experience is partial but we might mistake it as total. What's missing is the experience *beyond* the biological, the cultural construction of the bodily process which in most cultures boils down to deep shame about the unruly undisciplined body. It is this shame that puts menstruators on constant leak alert and why our menstrual products are called sanitary PROTECTION. "Menstruation Machine" might help someone "feel the pain" but it fails to enable that same person to 'feel the shame"

Thus, maybe we are better off with*out* the tools, the though experiments, the "imagine if..." exercises. Maybe we increase our chance at connection when we strip down to our vulnerable, raw, unmediated humanity.

Perhaps it is enough to encounter each other, and say, with the utmost sincerity*, I hear YOU. I see YOU. I AM paying attention.*