



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN (RE)PRESENTING GENDER  
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# The Menstrual Imaginary in Literature

Notes on a Wild Fluidity

Natalie Rose Dyer

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# Palgrave Studies in (Re)Presenting Gender

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Natalie Rose Dyer

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*This book is dedicated to Marlene and my Mother.*

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## BOOK NOTES

In this book, I playfully elaborate a wild zone of feminist creative resistance with respect to women's animalistic procreative embodiment. Clearly trans men, trans women and non-binary people initiate artistic process in relation to vital flows of desire based in sexual difference, which are extremely important. My focus is on performing an affirmative re-reading of this aspect of becoming a woman as a means of identifying an anomalous strain of feminist fluidity, which threatens patriarchy, and has the authority to blow it apart. I address key arbiters of what I term the *menstrual imaginary* in a series of letters, including Sylvia Plath, the initiator of 'the blood jet,' Hélène Cixous, the pioneer of a conceptual red ink and the volcanic unconscious, and Luce Irigaray, the inaugurator of women's artistic process relative to a vital flow of desire based on sexual difference. I also undertake provocative against-the-grain re-readings of the *Medusa*, the *Sphinx*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Red Shoes*, as a means of affirmatively and poetically re-imagining a woman's flow.

## Praise for *The Menstrual Imaginary* *in Literature*

“As you take this remarkable journey through the feminist menstrual imaginary, Natalie Rose Dyer provides an innovative and energetic intersectional reading of sexual difference and menstrual activism. In an equally intriguing poetic intervention and a convincing argument, Rose Dyer outlines how menstrual activism subverts patriarchal power structures by embracing the specificities and creative potential the embodied experience of menstruation offers. Her concept of the ‘menstrual imaginary’ playfully and provocatively dismantles the overlapping systems of power colonizing the disorganized material flows of women’s bodies. This is a bold and extraordinarily perceptive rethinking of the feminist politics of corporeality.”

—Adrian Parr, *Professor of Public Affairs and UNESCO Chair of Water and Human Settlements, University of Texas at Arlington, USA*

# CONTENTS

Part I	What Is the Menstrual Imaginary?	1
1	Want to Start a Pussy Riot?	3
2	Revisioning the Wild Zone	33
3	Dear Sylvia: The Blood Jet Is Poetry	53
Part II	The Menstrual Imaginary Against-the-Grain	77
4	Dear Hélène: White Ink Versus Red Ink	79
5	Dear Julia: Writing Beyond Abjection	121
6	Dear Luce: An/Other Becoming Woman	163
Part III	Re-Imagined and New Menstrual Tales	191
7	Dear Marlene: Re-Telling The Red Shoes	193

<b>8</b>	<b>New Menstrual Tales: The Vulva Ring</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Conclusion: The Menstrual Future</b>	<b>233</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>241</b>

PART I

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What Is the Menstrual Imaginary?



## CHAPTER 1

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# Want to Start a Pussy Riot?

I recently visited The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and observed the enormous tampon chandelier created by Portuguese artist, Joana Vasconcelos. The opulent light fixture seemed to put a spotlight on the tampon as a patriarchally ascribed ‘sanitary device’ of the twentieth century, now almost a historical documentation of so-called menstrual hygiene. Each bullet-like hermetically sealed tampon looked to me like a little phallic thing for plugging up women’s clinically termed ‘vaginal cavities.’ The medicinal white, highly absorbent micro penis-like devices for stopping the detritus that would better run freely, perhaps onto an ecological pad, possibly into a silicon cup to be later emptied and reused, were elaborately strung together. The whole sculptural apparatus seemed to me both a glorification and a critical meditation on men trying to *get up there*. The artwork starkly demonstrated that despite the menstrual activism of the past two decades we are still encouraged to stopper up our cervixes on a periodic basis, lest the unseemly red matter of menstruation be allowed to appear in daylight (even despite the high-profile free bleeding movement). The tampon chandelier-relic featured as a kind of living representation of the menstrual taboo’s longevity—its penetrative power into the twenty-first century. And yet, if feminist pop-punk band *Pussy Riot* can openly celebrate the vagina in their song *Straight Outta Vagina* (2016) as a space of politically charged rebirth, particularly with respect to the revitalisation of women’s embodied voice in contemporary popular culture,

then how is it possible that menstruation is still taboo? And, more importantly what emancipatory imaginary already exists in literary and philosophical texts that depict menstruation as the good flow of the cunt?

In this book, I playfully elaborate a wild zone of feminist creative resistance with respect to women's animalistic procreative embodiment, which is more important than ever. Whilst French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari identify a point of rupture from phallogocentric networks of power with their becoming woman of history, which is important, they delineate this trans-mobilisation of desire for a man. In these terms their becoming woman of history fashions a radiant transgressive sexuality, which is in fact not applicable to a woman per se.<sup>1</sup> My book calls for women to urgently de-colonise their biopsychical beings from phallic networks in accordance with their sexual difference, specifically menstruation. As French theorist Luce Irigaray apprehends, women can initiate artistic process relative to a vital flow of desire based in sexual difference, against the 'ruling symbolic,' or what has been referred to as a patriarchal authority, which brings about an important source of their emancipation. Certainly, an intersectional approach to reading what I term the *menstrual imaginary* is extremely important. Clearly trans men, trans women and non-binary people similarly initiate artistic process in relation to vital flows of desire based in sexual difference, which are extremely important. In this book I specifically focus on the menstruating woman who has historically been separated as a class pertaining to her reproductive difference, which has marked her dangerous, polluted and potentially hysterical, on the one hand, and magical, even sacred, on the other hand—exposing a dangerous binary at work in patriarchal cultures that must be overturned. Indeed, it is women's *flow* that has historically been most impeded, constrained and colonised globally owing to its anomalous character, which can be affirmatively re-articulated in relation to women's heterogenous embodiment.

Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Judith Wright, Anne Sexton, Rita Dove, Sharon Olds, Angela Carter—these significant women, among many others, have written poetry and prose about their relationship to the menstrual cycle. Yet, this important theme in women's writing has been largely neglected. The relationship of the menstrual cycle to women's subjectivity and creativity is rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated. While several theorists have sought to identify menstrual imagery and motifs in literary

<sup>1</sup>I give a highly detailed reading of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's becoming woman of history in Chap. 6 of this book.

texts, none have identified these texts as contributing to the formation of a *menstrual imaginary*. A menstrual imaginary offers a source of inspiration to women writers, poets and artists; it is an imaginary domain outside of language, which is drawn on and demonstrated poetically in writing, as well as in film and artistic practice, through references to blood flow, eruptions, as well as all animalistic procreative stuffs. In this book I specifically read literary and philosophical texts for evidence of a menstrual imaginary, including texts that have not previously been identified as menstrual texts, as well as present a series of new menstrual tales, which tends to situate my book as somewhat divergent to the emerging field of what Sharra Vostral terms ‘critical menstrual studies’ in her book *Toxic Shock: A Social History* (2018). And yet, *The Menstrual Imaginary in Literature: Notes on a Wild Fluidity* offer’s valuable new perspectives on menstruation that will likely expand the ‘critical menstrual studies’ field of enquiry.

As Chris Bobel, leading-light of the ‘critical menstrual studies’ movement, argues in *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010), the menstrual taboo still exerts power in society. It exerts power despite menstrual activism and the existence of the free bleeding movement. Free bleeding is a movement to not block, or collect, the menstrual flow. Most notably, in 2015, Kiran Gandhi ran the London marathon free of any so-called sanitary devices, such as tampons, pads or menstrual cups. Photographs of her blood-stained leggings went viral. In *The Independent* newspaper in the UK, Gandhi stated that ‘It would have been way too uncomfortable to worry about a tampon for 26.2 miles ... I ran with blood dripping down my legs for sisters who don’t have access to tampons and sisters who, despite cramping and pain, hide it away and pretend like it doesn’t exist. I ran to say, it does exist, and we overcome it every day’ (Gandhi quoted in Sanghani 2015, n.p.). Gandhi alerts us to the fact that choosing whether to use a tampon, a pad or a menstrual cup is a first world problem. Many people still don’t have access to menstrual paraphernalia, let alone enjoy the privilege of being able to choose which ones they prefer to use. And yet, whilst Gandhi’s highly public menstruation was applauded around the world and successfully unmasked menstruation as a bodily process that women, trans men and non-binary people certainly ought not to be ashamed of, her comments infer that menstruation is something we regularly ‘overcome’ (Gandhi 2015, n.p.). Does Gandhi’s free bleeding run also demonstrate that many women, trans men and non-binary people menstruate despite the fact that it’s commonly felt to be mostly an annoying and painful part of their lives



frequently associated with suffering, which they *overcome* on a regular basis?

The popular media certainly seems to side with the notion of menstruation as something that must be *overcome*—a painful episodic event in the lives of predominantly women. In series two of the award-winning comedy television show *Fleabag* (Two Brothers Pictures, 2016–2019), Phoebe Waller-Bridge in her role as Fleabag shares a martini with a business woman named Belinda, played by Kristin Scott Thomas, who delivers a lengthy monologue specifically on women’s biological function as culturally definitive, bringing with it a world of suffering, particularly with an emphasis on cyclical pain. She says:

‘Women are born with pain built in. It’s our physical destiny: period pain, sore boobs, child birth, you know. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives. Men don’t. They have to seek it out. They invent all these gods and demons and things just so they don’t feel guilty about things, which is something we do very well on our own. And then they create wars so they can feel things and touch each other. And when there aren’t any war’s they can play rugby. And we have it all going on in here, inside. We have pain on a cycle for years and years, and years, and then just when you think you’re making peace with it all what happens? The menopause comes, the fucking menopause comes, and it’s the most wonderful fucking thing in the world! And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot, and no one cares! But, then you’re free, no longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You’re just a person in business.’

Fleabag responds: ‘I was told it was horrendous’ [referring to menopause].

Belinda counters: ‘It *is* horrendous, but then it’s magnificent.’

I have to admit I was a bit gutted by this exchange because I otherwise think Waller-Bridge’s *Fleabag* to be rather transgressive. And, although I’m certainly not wishing to deny the accompanying pain of menstruation, breastfeeding, childbirth and menopause, which certainly occurs to varying degrees, I wouldn’t want to neglect to mention the creative upsurge many women, trans men and non-binary people encounter in relation to their animalistic procreative embodiment. In this book I focus on revealing a highly valuable strain of anomalous desire available to women, specifically in relation to menstruation, which is linked with creativity and feminist activism.

In his article ‘Blood Ties’ Duncan MacMillan tells us that French/American artist Louise Bourgeois believed ‘Menstruation ... is your best,

most creative time. It is a blessing' (Bourgeois quoted in MacMillan 2008, 75). Similarly, in my experience menstruation and ovulation has offered a gateway to imaginary realms, birthing an infant has been a euphoric experience and breastfeeding has been exceptionally calming and even pleasurable. In fact, raising children can inspire an unparalleled upsurge in creativity, as well as garner new divergent perspectives on human life. In their book *Woman's Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image*, Joan C. Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo argue that despite the persistence of the negatively infected taboo on menstruation and indeed on the entire reproductive body:

Women with positive attitudes describe menstruation as natural, healthy, an experience that bonds them with other women, a source of pride, a sign of maturity, "proof" that they can become pregnant, and an (often welcome) indication that they are not pregnant (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1980; Marván et al. 2006; Repta and Clarke 2013). Some women report positive changes across the menstrual cycle including increased sexual desire (around ovulation and premenstrually), feelings of sexiness and self-confidence (around ovulation), increased creativity (during menstruation), affectionate feelings (at ovulation and premenstrually), and bursts of energy and activity (premenstrually; Chrisler, Johnston, Champagne, and Preston 1994; Englander-Golden, Sonleitner, Whitmore & Corbey 1986; Moos 1968; Ripper 1991). ([2017] 2018, 102)

I won't deny the challenges I have faced in menstruating, birthing, breastfeeding and raising children, which has at times been extremely confronting and painful. Yet, I've continuously undergone a metamorphosis of sorts in order to meet the challenges faced in relation to my animalistic procreative embodiment, which I've come to revere as a rather magnificent force that I harness as a woman. Still, it's hard to deny that many girls and women don't embrace their menstrual cycle, partially on account of the associated pain and discomfort, as well as on the notion that there's something to *overcome*. Of course, it's important to investigate why many trans men and non-binary people may also choose not to embrace their menstrual cycle. Whilst it is outside the scope of this book to answer this question, I'd like to suggest that there are probably many overlapping reasons for their rejection of the menstrual cycle relating to this notion of something to *overcome*, which are shared with women.

In *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010), Bobel points out that what is not examined in popular culture is

‘[w]hy, exactly, do nearly all women hate their periods more than other bodily processes?’ (7). Bobel finds statistical evidence to back up this claim: ‘a 2003 study found that one third of women surveyed indicated that they would eliminate their periods permanently if they could’ (7). Bobel’s assertion that many women hate their periods is important. In her most recent work *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (2018a), Bobel updates this claim:

Negative views of menstruation are so powerful and pervasive; many women report that, if possible, they would eliminate menstruation altogether. In a study by Andrist et al. (2004), 59% of women report that they do not want to menstruate monthly and one-third say they are keen to never menstruate again. This option is available through some oral contraceptives and long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), such as IUDs, that suppress menstruation, though the research on their safety fails to provide clear findings. In spite of potential long-term health risks, many women do choose to suppress their menstruation or, more accurately given how the drug works on the body, stop their menstrual cycles altogether. This serves as a potent indicator of cultural views of menstruation. In short, it is a nuisance to be eliminated at any cost. (12)

Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo also discuss the growing popularity of ‘menstrual suppression’ with a pill in their book *Woman’s Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image*, which they argue is driven by the dominant notion of menstruation as a disorder ([2017] 2028, 108). Whilst the notion that many girls and women dislike their periods so much that they’d like to eradicate it altogether is very concerning, and is likely attributable to a dominant concept of menstruation as disorder in patriarchal societies, Bobel’s call for women to contest the negative cultural attitudes towards menstruation through activism is equally significant.

In her article ‘Menstrual Pads Can’t Fix Prejudice,’ written for *The New York Times*, Bobel points out that ‘The period is finally having its moment,’ despite ongoing prejudice against menstruation globally (Bobel 2018b, n.p.). In *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (2018a), Bobel gives the example of ‘Pad Man,’ and the accompanying twitter campaign, alongside an upsurge of articles in the media, which she argues heralds a global shift in attitudes towards menstruation.

In April 2016, the popular US news weekly, *Newsweek*, made history when it published a cover story about menstruation. With the catchy title, ‘There Will Be Blood: Get over It’ in huge white letters against a crimson background, a tampon (unused, of course) is pictured beneath the type. While *Newsweek* compellingly made the case that ‘The Fight to End Period Shaming Is Going Mainstream,’ (Jones 2016) other high circulation Western magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *The Atlantic*, ran similarly robust features. Around the same time, *NPR*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Al Jazeera* published stories on a variety of menstrual topics, including menstrual art, efforts to remove the sales tax on menstrual products, emerging menstrual care technologies such as ‘smart tampons’ (no, I am not making this up), legislation requiring independent testing on menstrual care products, and arguments both for and against menstrual leave in the workplace. (2–3)

And yet, providing better menstrual hygiene products, albeit an important issue, is not going to overturn prejudice against menstruation, which still persists (Bobel 2018b, n.p.). I’m particularly drawn to Bobel’s emphasis in her recent work on menstrual activism and the growing notion of menstrual embodiment as a site of ‘power, pleasure and potential,’ which I would add has a capacity to dismantle patriarchal networks of power (2018a, 5). In fact, we ought to champion girl’s burgeoning sexualities, in addition to women’s ongoingly developing sexualities, specifically with respect to menstruation, which is affirmatively rooted in animalistic procreative embodiment and can be linked with imaginary transpositions.

We ought to do this in the face of continuing ‘menstrual concealment’ first diagnosed by Karen Houppert in her book *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation* (1999), and reconfigured by Bobel as a ‘menstrual mandate’ that circulates in patriarchal cultures (Bobel 2018a, 9):

The culture of concealment sets in motion what I think of as the “menstrual mandate”—the expectation that menstruation should be silent and invisible. The mandate directs action. Keep your menstrual status to yourself. Hide menstrual care materials. Deny your body, buck up, and move on! The mandate requires vigilant menstrual stain management and creative concealment of products before, during, and after use. It also suppresses discussion about periods except in certain company and under specific conditions. The menstrual mandate is a gag order. (Bobel 2018a, 9–10)

A key task today is for girls and women to radically bring the biopsychical reality of their fluids into the realm of culture creatively. Following Bobel's call for ongoing and renewed menstrual activism, I believe that what will overturn the ongoing menstrual prejudice is when women writers and artists fight back, tell their own stories, depict their menstrual imaginaries as 'good blood,' which is sometimes marked by pain and discomfort, but which frequently brings with it a flood of creativity. It is important to point out that creativity is a complex and nebulous phenomenon, which can also be tied to menstruation. In seeking to explore a link between menstruation, creativity (most notably the poetic) and feminism found in literary works, authored by mostly women, in this book, I certainly do not intend to set up a new ideal of *femininity*. Rather, I am attempting to build up a concept of women's creativity that sits comfortably next to many other concepts of women's creativity across class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference and so on. I am also hoping to start a Pussy Riot!

### THE ESSENTIALIST DEBATE

A Pinterest search on menstrual humour is extremely revealing. Jokes potentially shed a lot of light on social taboos. In his book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Sigmund Freud points out that jokes happen when the conscious mind allows the articulation of a truth that a society would otherwise repress or forbid (5). The first menstrual joke that caught my attention whilst looking on Pinterest signposts men and patriarchal culture as the root of women's troubles, albeit problems condemnably pointing to women's mental and emotional instability, specifically relative to their apparently troublesome reproductive bodies. The joke states: '**Menstruation, Menopause, Mental** breakdowns, notice how all women's problems begin with men.' Another joke depicts a cartoon of a worried fifties blond bomb-shell type who is sweating profusely, whilst commenting in a talking bubble under the heading PMS (premenstrual syndrome): 'I'm fine. I hate you. I love you. I want ice-cream. Come here. Get away. Oranges?' Women are represented in the joke as excessively changeable, emotionally unstable and confused prior to their menstruation. But, the most illuminating joke for me on Pinterest shows a small material pouch with a few tampons and sanitary napkins poking out of the top. The red type on front of the pouch states: 'Vampire Teabags.' The notion that women regularly undergo metamorphosis to become animal,

touch on a liminal zone of ‘nature,’ although without any control on their own part, and therefore veer towards monthly monstrousness, is the inference here.

Of course, there has been a long patriarchal history of aligning women with the ‘natural world’ and the animal in order to determine women biologically and reduce them exclusively to the role of reproducer of the species, particularly in order to represent them as other in negative terms. As ecofeminist Ellen O’Loughlin warns in her chapter in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), ‘overemphasis on women’s biological connectedness to nature and woman/female as a singular symbolic category can leave out the many important differences among women and the many ways women’s various oppressions are related to the domination of nature’ (147). Notwithstanding the obvious and varied differences among women that *should* be celebrated, menstruation also links women, connects them with trans men and non-binary people who menstruate, and further associates them with the animal and indeed the entire ecological system on planet earth in ways that can be deemed to be affirmative, rather than reductive. Anne Walker points out in *The Menstrual Cycle* (1997) that:

For many writers, it is the bloodiness of menstruation which links it with ‘nature’ rather than ‘culture’. Nature is seen to be uncivilised, governed by biological impulses and ‘red in tooth and claw’. Humans are supposed to overcome this through intellectualisation. However, it is harder for women to separate themselves from their biological selves in the same way that men can because of their repeated blood loss. (11)

As Walker points out, blood is a powerful and meaningful symbol for humans and the perception of menstruation is that of blood loss, when in fact menstruation is far more than that; it is partially broken-down uterine lining, mucus from the vagina, or cunt, other fluids, along with a small amount of blood (11). Yet, it is this central notion of blood loss that resonates in patriarchal societies and has frequently been interpreted negatively as inferring a gendered *female* wound.

In fact, women’s menstrual cycle has come to signify what French theorist Catherine Clément states in her essay ‘The Guilty One’ (1986), is a split between nature and culture thought to bring about disorder and wily animal disturbance, which patriarchal cultures have historically sought to

defend against, and keep under control. Clément cites French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in relation to Amerindian mythic patterns:

“Women’s periods, their uncontrolled flow, too close to nature and therefore threatening,” are the *stabilizing* element through which runs the split between nature and culture: simultaneously the rule and the unruly (règle/règles). A natural and dangerous order, always open to the possibility of lasting, turning into a cataclysm; hence, perceived by culture, by men who take on its value, as disorder. (Lévi-Strauss cited by Clément and Clément 1986, 28–29)

And yet, this so-called dangerous menstruating woman at the crux of what has been deemed a nature/culture divide potentially takes on new value when she articulates her flow in affirmative terms, against a discourse of disorder. In fact, women can critically re-evaluate the discourse that is produced in relation to their animalistic procreative embodiment and override a regressive binary historically imposed on them under patriarchy.

In *Her Blood Is Gold: Reclaiming the Power of Menstruation* ([1993] 2008), Lara Owen argues that menstruation is an animalistic flow that gives rise to creative abilities shared by many women.

Periods ... are wild and basic, raw and instinctual, a bloody and eternal aspect of the female—and no amount of ‘civilization’ will change that. My period is a monthly occurrence in my life that I have in common with all women who have ever lived. Women living in caves twenty thousand years ago, priestesses in palaces in ancient Egypt, seers in temples in Sumeria, all bled with the moon. The first woman who made fire might well have had her period at the time ... If menstruation is a highly creative time for women psychically and spiritually, who knows what gifts humankind has been brought by women during their menses. (Owen cited in Walker 1997, 5)

Owen’s work highlights the fact that menstruation reminds patriarchal cultures of our close links with the animal that societies have historically wished to deny, and which is a major reason for the lingering taboo on women’s menstruation. Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo back up this claim in their book *Woman’s Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image*, stating that: ‘Menstrual blood, childbirth, and breastfeeding can serve as reminders of the animalistic nature of women’s bodies and trigger fears of

mortality' ([2017] 2018, 96). They astutely make a further link between animalistic menstrual fluids and death, which I'll explore later in this book.

Indeed, why should women be deterred from aligning their bodies with the procreative bodies of non-human animals with whom they have much in common, specifically in relation to the creation of new life? When a woman menstruates, she evacuates her blood and other fluids out of her vagina, or indeed her cunt, like a tiny birth. When she gives birth, if she chooses to, she experiences the extreme opening of her uterus, surrendering her blood, piss, and shit, alongside other fluids and fleshes, in the bringing forth of a life. Similarly, when a woman mothers, if she chooses to, she opens up the borders of her body to give milk, to encounter a baby's mouth, skin, to take in the smell of her new born, to clean up its urine, shit, vomit and all of the fluids of so-called defilement.<sup>2</sup> These human procreative functions shape the human animal and are related to those of many non-human animals, such as the mammal who nurses her young with milk from special glands, and in some cases even has a placenta, which feeds her offspring during pregnancy. To argue that woman's role as co-creator, incubator and nurturer of new life aligns her with the animal world is not to collapse women and animal together. Rather it is to encourage and affirm that the human is also a species of animal—a fact that patriarchal cultures have attempted to deny in order to assert man's difference from and power over nature. For many women the acts of reproduction and birth are a source of affirmative creativity. Certainly, encouraging women to tell their stories in relation to their cyclical flow directly challenges the negative stories of sexual difference that has proliferated globally. It is in these terms that a menstrual imaginary is potentially a powerfully affirmative poetic voice on women's animalistic procreative embodiment, which is similarly a space of feminist resistance and activism.

## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

French theorist and writer Hélène Cixous's avant-garde rendering of a 'free-flowing' poetic writing, which echoes the situationists, surrealists and post-structuralist writings of French theorist Jacques Derrida, elaborates animalistic procreative embodiment in affirmative terms (Suleiman 1991,

<sup>2</sup> I give a detailed reading of abjection in Chap. 5 with respect to the work of Julia Kristeva.



x).<sup>3</sup> Although Cixous doesn't explicitly explore the menstrual she does focus on liberating an access to writing based in maternal embodiment in terms of a conceptual 'white ink,' related to mother's milk, that is also highly related to a conceptual 'red ink,' albeit which is hidden, or subsumed in her writing.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Cixous has been chastised for writing maternal embodiment. Some critics argue that her engagement with maternity implies 'a return to the certainties of biology, and the "naturalness" of motherhood' (Shiach 1991, 20). And yet, Cixous's speculation that through birth women enjoy a heightened embodiment is valid. She depicts a sexual difference that is drawn through her own personal narrative, which liberates, and has the effect of positively renewing women's identity and writing practice against inherently phallogocentric modes of representation. She offers an imaginary of a woman's procreative embodiment as wild poetics, albeit which is not necessarily for everybody (Moi 1985, 121).<sup>5</sup>

In her 1985 text *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, feminist theorist Toril Moi argues that Cixous's ideas on what has been deemed a 'feminine imaginary' are politically naïve, specifically as they seem to be restrained within a Lacanian paradigm. Moi writes:

Such an emphasis on the Imaginary can explain why the writing woman enjoys such extraordinary freedom in Cixous's universe. In the Imaginary mother and child are part of a fundamental unity: they are *one*. Protected by the all-powerful Good Mother, the writing woman can always and everywhere feel deeply secure and shielded from danger: nothing will ever harm her, distance and separation will never disable her. (117)

But, perhaps Cixous's privileging of the mother's voice subversively responds to a world in which the father's voice has been privileged far too long, and as such her writing seeks to redress the balance. Moreover, I would add that if a woman's writing is sometimes characteristically

<sup>3</sup> Cixous takes post-structural theorist Jacques Derrida's concept of 'logocentrism' that refutes the claims to truth of the 'historico-metaphysical epoch,' which has informed language, and the sign, and adapts it to reveal how discourse has come into being through male symbolic economy.

<sup>4</sup> I give a detailed reading on the critical proposition of red ink, which I detect in Cixous's writing in Chap. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Toril Moi's critique of what she terms Cixous's 'utopian vision of female creativity' denies the importance of resuscitating an affirmative rendering of the maternal (Moi 1985, 102–121).

emotional, or highly imaginative, or intuitive in style, then this can be seen to be the privileged right of women, as well as men, trans men and women, and non-gendered people who choose to write in this way on account of being a complex human being. It is reductive to exclude women from such writing on the basis of essentialism. It is also reductive to exclude the menstrual from writing and indeed creative practice more broadly.

French theorist Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (1982) that the menstrual substance has historically threatened man's power over the symbolic because it stems from the maternal body and signifies a dangerous sexual difference that has been safeguarded against. In my view, it is an affirmative reappraisal of this animalistic procreative aspect by women writers, poets and artists, which potentially challenges and overturns a damaging strain of phallogentrism prevalent in patriarchal cultures. For in post-Christian society (or at least in secular societies no longer rooted in the language and assumptions of Christianity), it seems possible that the patriarchal abject might be challenged and overturned by women writers, poets and artists through ascribing their own animalistic procreative embodiment, and specifically menstruation, in far more affirmative terms. And so, what is abject, referred to by Kristeva as 'the twisted braid of affects and thoughts' that a *man* writer, poet or artist confronts, need not be so alien or indeed horrific for a woman writer, poet or artist (1). Rather, a woman writer, poet or artist may alternatively encounter affirmative libidinal surges, which recall a maternal sphere where 'meaning collapses,' since this wild zone of human animalism can potentially be poetically drawn on to reframe what it is to be a woman in the twenty-first century and, indeed, radically re-ascribe sexual difference (2). Certainly, the recognition of the menstrual imaginary can reiterate and affirm a woman's links with animals and ecological systems towards the affirmative reframing of women's sexual difference culturally.

It simply makes sense that a new wave of feminist activists aligned with an emancipatory politics of women's animalistic embodiment might justifiably identify and destabilise a virulent fascistic agenda at work globally (in the patriarchal paradigm) by authoring subversive stories, which explore the complex multiplicity of becoming a woman. Of course, French theorist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that language creates gendered subjects, insofar as we are conscripted into a symbolic order, which privileges the masculine over the feminine, in the ongoing forging of sexual difference and subjectivity. Lacan writes in *Jacques Lacan Écrits: A Selection*, that 'It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the