Introduction: Menstruation as Narrative

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Personal stories, urban legends, literature, media representations, and other kinds of narratives provide means of sharing information about menstruation, including what women and other menstruators should and should not do during their periods. For instance, no book has had more impact upon pubescent North American girls than Judy Blume's 1970 *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Girls growing up in the 1970s and onward, in a cultural milieu where they were encouraged to silence their questions and hush their bodies, had a protagonist with whom to identify and empathize. While *Margaret* has been updated to reflect changes in menstrual products, little has changed with respect to norms of menstrual silence.

In conceptualizing menstruation as narrative, we recognize story as a fundamental element of human culture. Any situation is a story, "a humanly constructed set of meanings that make sense out of phenomena" (Gadow 1994, 306). Every culture throughout history has used narratives to process, share, and remember life experience (Gottschall 2012; Hsu 2008). That includes experiences and knowledge of menstruation, menarche, and menopause. Stories—whether the personal narratives of menarche instruction passed from mother to daughter or sister to sister or the scripted, sterile, wooden speeches of menstrual education films of the mid-twentieth century—are more than language. Indeed, they are not merely words or symbols (Reinsborough and Canning 2010). The words, heeded and performed, become actions. Stories do more than describe the world—stories *make* the world. They are more than mere discursive structures; it is only through new narratives that extant cultural narratives can be reframed and altered. Activists and advertisers know this (Ganz 2001; Couto 1993; Kissling 2018); so do politicians and filmmakers (Day 2011).

Stories take many different forms. Although many Westerners conceptualize narratives as linear—with a beginning, middle, end, and point—that

structure is by no means universal. For example, there is the kernel story, a brief, unstructured capsule version or reference to a story identified in (Kalčík's 1975) study of women's personal experience narratives; and the interactive call-and-response practice common in African-American oratory, musical, and literary traditions (Asante 1998; Callahan 2001). And no general narrative can speak for everyone, especially when the goal is resisting and revising dominant narratives, such as the limited biomedical narratives (Gadow 1994) of the menstrual cycle. It is unsurprising, therefore, that research and exploration of menstruation narratives takes many forms and occurs both across and outside many academic disciplines.

The variety of approaches, methods, linguistic styles, national origins, and phases of menstrual life cycle in this section indicates the great breadth and depth of menstrual narratives and narrative analysis. Some stories are told through traditional sociological qualitative methods, collecting stories from interviews with community members and analyzing the stories with interpretive feminist frameworks informed by the participants' views. Among these are stories shared in private—for example, those revealed to Rothschild and Piya (Chapter 66) that were passed across generations of women in Nepal, and those collected by Singh and Sivakami (Chapter 70) that were shared among women in India. Other stories move between intimate partners, as those seen in Fahs' research (Chapter 69) who were discussing and/or practicing period sex.

Sharing stories through media is another narrative form; some are shared on screens in schools, seen in Ghanoui's analysis of twentieth-century U.S. menstruation education films (Chapter 67), while others are shared globally, like the menstrual stories of young Danish YouTubers presented in Andreasen's discussion of monstrous menstruators (Chapter 65). These media narratives are examined through critical lenses, considering historical contexts, ideology, and performance.

Some stories challenge the biomedical menstruation narratives that exclude and distort—for example, the growing awareness among activists, academics, and, increasingly, the general public that 'not only women menstruate and not all women menstruate,' which is articulated in Rydström's analysis of trans menstruation (Chapter 68). What some call 'queering menstruation' is gaining traction in various social, commercial, educational, and political spaces, as Guilló-Arakistain's challenge to menstrual normativity asserts (Chapter 63). While these two pieces incorporate ethnographic material, they also draw upon the language and methods of critical theory to construct new stories and definitions of menstruators. Bobel and Fahs (Chapter 71) also use a feminist, critical approach in their overview of menstrual activism in the United States, building a political history to ground their call for action.

Still other stories are told by voices that provide an unexpected perspective. Berkley Conner combines feminism and rhetorical analysis to show how period stories can be used as political tools in the online 'Periods for Pence'

campaign (Chapter 64). The varied personal experience narratives collected by Perianes (Chapter 72) remind us that family stories can serve as instruction, warning, and even entertainment.

We hope the menstruation narratives collected here—and their analyses—educate and entertain you, and in some cases warn you or inspire you.

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