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Hidden Histories of the Menstrual Body[1]

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This essay considers the cultural meanings of menstruation with specific reference to the politics and discourses of the body in modernity. It explores the ways in which modernity symbolically and physically contextualises menstruation and the impact this has on women's experience of living in bodies that bleed every month. An ethnographic description of a first Moon Ritual - in which the author participated - is recounted and discussed with particular attention to the meanings attributed to embodiment and spirituality. Notions of the sacred with regard to menstruation are pondered in the light of the ethnographic description.

> It is a vast robbery that we have been trained not to look at it [menstrual blood], to see it, to smell its earthiness through the pores. Taught that it's dirty, to hide it. Across the centuries, a terror-laden treachery toward "woman": more deeply, a crime against life. It is worth displacing this sacrilege (Mackie, 1997:24).

In a recent Australian movie titled *Me, Myself and I* there is a stand out scene that has the effect of engaging the viewer directly in the contemporary politics of menstruation. A young girl around 12 years of age, begins her first bleeding. It is a clearly traumatic experience even though it happens when she is at home and her mother is near by. It is clear that in this most important of life moments, her mother is unable to be of any real help to the young girl. The mother happens upon the girl in her bedroom when she doesn't show up for breakfast. As a viewer, we see with the mother, as she opens the door to find her daughter sitting up in bed, tearful and confused, with a collection of menstruating accessories laid out before her: pads, tampons, panadol, hot water bottles. This is a girl who has clearly been prepared and knows something of what is to come. What exactly it is she has been prepared for, and why this is not a moment for celebration, is the subject of this paper. But first to finish this story. The mother does her best to comfort the child and soon we see the

girl ensconced in the bathroom and trying to work out the confusing array of pads and tampons, and how to get them to work. The mother remains outside the closed door calling instructions and encouragement; trying to explain euphemistically how to insert a tampon into her vagina. The young girl is at a loss, having probably never inserted anything into her vagina, or at best only a curious finger. Finally, the girl gives up and resorts to the ugly and cumbersome 'surfboard', - euphemism for pad - and so begins her new life as a woman, alienated from her body, her sexuality and power, and resentful for being born female. The scene is shocking not only because we witness the conditions of a first menstruation - a taboo subject in western culture - but also because the mother cannot cross that threshold that would allow her to go into the bathroom and demonstrate on her own body how to use tampons, as well as touch the body of her daughter who now joins her in one of the most profound experiences of womanhood. The immensity of the bodily and emotional isolation as shared experience between the two women is a moment of deep insight. It is also a moment that is shared by millions of women, including myself where my first experiences with menstruation matched these of this young girl almost exactly, including my mother standing outside the bathroom door whispering a hopeless sort of encouragement while I messed around uselessly with tampons and lubricating gels. I want to know why that mother, why my mother, why myself, could not open the bathroom door, and why we cannot touch our bodies in the presence of each other.

The approach I want to take in this paper is not so much to concentrate on the sacred and profane dimensions of menstrual taboos[2], but rather to explore the social and symbolic conditions in which there is an identifiable body that menstruates. What do we know of this body, whose body is this, and what are the collective meaning structures which anchor this body in a cultural system? In considering these questions, it is immediately clear that what we do know of the menstruating body is dominated by the discourse of modern medicine which despite its claims to scientific rationality, consistently constructs this body and blood as 'other' – as dirty, pathological and requiring seclusion and management. It is also apparent that women themselves both in body and voice are often missing from these discourses. They have been written about, theorised, discussed, prodded, examined and cut open, but rarely do we hear first hand experiences of what it is like to bleed: the phenomenological story of being in a tactile body that bleeds – or doesn't bleed – once a month.

Drawing on the work of feminist cultural theorists such as Emily Martin and Elizabeth Grosz, and historians/philosophers Michel Foucault and Norbet Elias, I want to first situate the menstruating body in modernity and second consider both women's experience of bleeding as a way of assessing the effects of this cultural management in tandem with feminist re-imaginings of the menstrual body. Foucault argued that one of the effects of power in discourse is the marginalisation and silence of other histories, possibilities, ideas, truths, subjectivities and bodies. So, I am interested in excavating histories and stories which might reveal not only alternative

knowledges and bodies, but also the reasons why they must remain invisible.

Menstruation is of course not invisible. Indeed, it is something that is often discussed: women talk about it, sometimes in secret, but often not; we are surrounded by advertisements for the material accessories women require to manage blood flow; and the blood of women is a central concern of medicine and health regimes. It has identifiable niche markets producing commodities and ideologies, and institutionalised forms of health care. These forms of health care tend on the whole to be normative, scientific rationalisations of the menstruating body, and they regulate and constrict the ways in which this body can be spoken about. Moving to the margins of hegemonic discourse is I have discovered, a productive place to explore alternative expressions of women's embodiment and subjectivity. In particular, I want to recount an ethnography of a women's spirituality group in which I am a participant, and specifically a New Moon ritual which took place last year for a young girl who had just begun menstruating.

I: Menstruating in modernity

> 'Every taboo on something shameful has the potential for rebellion written in to' (Martin, 1992:97).

The Conditions of Bleeding

The work of Emily Martin (1992), feminist cultural theorist and historian, has contributed enormously to understandings of the economic and symbolic systems which structure the conditions in which women bleed. In her analysis of a history of women's bodies which included hundreds of interviews that she conducted with North American women, Martin confirms that menstruation in modernity is characterised by particular conditions.

In particular the bodies of men and women are constructed by metaphors that emphasize physiological difference. This is a relatively new understanding of physiology and did not emerge until the eighteenth century. For many centuries prior to this, ancient Greeks and Europeans believed that male and female bodies were structurally similar, where women's bodies were a biologically inferior version of men's bodies. What could be seen of men's bodies was assumed to be the pattern for women's bodies as well (Martin, 1992:30), so that women's internal reproductive organs were thought to mimic the penis and scrotum (Martin, 1992:27). The pre-moderns believed that men possessed more heat than women, and were therefore "more perfect": women were cooler which prevented their reproductive organs from extruding outside their body, a species wide adaptation that provided protection during pregnancy (Martin, 1992:30). Hypocrites argued that being cooler, women did not sweat like men – sweating aided the removal of impurities from men's blood. For women, menstruation allowed this process of removal of impurities (Martin, 1992:31).

This view was still common in the seventeenth century. Another view expounded by the second century physician Galen and still in use in the eighteenth century, argued that menstruation was a shedding of excess blood (Martin, 1992:31). Where women could bleed through menstruation, so could men through blood letting. While menstrual blood was seen as 'foul and unclean ...[it] ...was not intrinsically pathological' (Martin, 1992:31) but rather a necessary part of the mechanics of maintaining a healthy bodily balance. The pre-modern body was based around a metaphor of 'intake and outgo' and maintaining balance between these forces. Blood and its movement around the body was an important regulator of excess and menstrual flow was seen as intrinsic to women's health. When women did not bleed, there were a great deal of remedies to re-establish this flow (Martin, 1992:31), as well as accounts of the movement of blood to other parts of the body. Singers, for example, were thought not to menstruate because their throats needed this excess blood in singing; and nursing mothers did not menstruate because they needed to convert blood into breast milk (Lacqueur, 1990:36).

According to Lacquer, by 1800 the long tradition of understanding the male and female body as fundamentally similar, and mediated by body heat, came under increasing attack from the new discipline of biology (cited in Martin, 1992:31). This attack was not isolated but connected to a wider revolution in the political and social order that challenged the notion that body heat was a viable basis for social organisation. The new social order de-stabilised the relationship between natural order and gender relations and asserted a new ideology that understood male dominance as grounded in biological differences. Men were dominant because they had naturally stronger bodies and minds. This notion – fostered by the new sciences such as zoology, physiology, anthropology and psychology – transferred this idea to social and political relations and contributed to the formation of the modern notion of the public and private spheres as naturally occurring and socially necessary: men in the public wage-earning spheres, women as mothers and wives in the private domestic spheres. Medical explanations of physiology and disease even utilised the images and metaphors of capitalist accumulation and consumption to describe physiological processes (Martin, 1992:30-1).

The loss of the metaphors of bodily similarity had the effect of untying the connected bodies of women and men and isolating the bodily processes of women as 'unique'. By the end of the nineteenth century menstrual flow was seen as 'soundly pathological resulting from a constitutional disorder accompanied by pain, irregularity, and systemic disturbance' (Martin, 1992:34). Blood is not only impure but its process is constituted as a debilitating disorder and this is accounted for in great detail in various medical accounts of the time.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Walter Heape, an influential Cambridge biologist described menstruation as '...a severe, devastating, periodic action...' which leaves behind '...a ragged wreck of tissue, torn glands, ruptured vessels, jagged edges of stroma, and masses of blood corpuscles, which it would

seem hardly possible to heal satisfactorily without the aid of surgical equipment' (cited in Lacqueur, 1990:221). Menstruation is medicalised as a productive system gone awry, making no products of use: it is, above all, failed reproduction (Martin, 1992:46), and at best the site of an ongoing open wound or abscess (Lacqueur, 1990:221, 222). This was a dangerous body: a body out of control because when women are bleeding they are not reproducing, not continuing the species, not providing a safe womb for a baby, and not providing a receptacle for male sperm. The medicalisation of women's bodies as pathological not only created a vast system of economically lucrative interventionist programs – women's bodies as sites of new technological and scientific developments – but was paralleled by a symbolic economy which read the body as a boundary system aimed to maintain social and political order.

The body in modernity

The German sociologist, Norbert Elias (1978), writing early in the twentieth century, explored the ways in which modern societies have become increasingly concerned at managing the ways bodies overspill their boundaries. This overspilling confirms an argument that modernity sets up specific parameters around the construction of physical and symbolic boundaries. In particular, the work of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva is relevant here as they explore bodies and bodily fluids as signifiers of self and influential in constructing the socially acceptable body (Rosengarten, 2000:92). Melissa Raphael (1996) argues that bodily boundaries can also signify the sacred body and community. Both Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Susan Bordo (1999), feminist body theorists, argue that the most desired and iconic body of (post) modern cultures is the solid, muscular, well defined and clearly bounded masculine form. This body is created largely through gym culture and is iconic in the sense that it refers to more than it actually is: it is a hegemonic body producing an ideal which usurps other body forms and which entails rigorous discipline in order to create and maintain. It is a body revered by both men and women alike.

This is not to argue that other body forms are not visible - what Grosz (1994:19) calls the field of body types - but they tend to be located in relation to hegemonic representations and will almost certainly be evaluated in terms of boundary tightness. Over-spilling boundaries with fat, mucous, blood, and so on, results in reactions of disgust, embarrassment and shame. Although postmodern consumer culture does to a certain extent allow for some spillage but only in certain contexts and only with some forms of bodily behaviour. And as Grosz (1994:142) states: the body is also never just 'the' body, but embedded in the major social formations of modernity and capitalism: class, gender, race and ethnicity. In Emily Martin's extensive study (Section 3: 1992), she identifies differential experiences of menstruation between working-class and middle-class women, as well as black women and white women.

Shame

A significant part of the success[3] of the internalisation of idealised body types is dependent on connections between bodies and emotions. In particular, shame is a powerful emotion for self assessment and regulation (Bartky, 1990:7; Elias, 1978). More than this, our experiences of shame and disgust are specific to the times in which we live. In modernity, the menstrual body in particular elicits feelings of shame and disgust particularly when exposed to the public sphere. Women learn to conceal menstruation through socialisation but with a twist: women must first learn what is the unspeakable and second how to make it remain hidden. In one of earliest menstrual rituals that I participated in, each woman was asked to tell their story of their first bleeding. Some women were told literally nothing about the event, but all of us were all told by our mothers that we were never to allow any menstrual blood to `show', especially to our brothers and fathers. Toilet bowls and seats, bathroom floors, chairs, beds, were to be scrutinized for drops or smears of blood; pads and tampons were to be carefully locked away; clothes were to be tactfully worn and scrutinized for stains; one was always to have extra clothes and pads in case of accidents; accidents were to be cleaned up as discretely as possible; and one was not to speak publicly about this event.[4] I will never forget as a young seven year old, the deep sense of embarrassment I felt, walking up the steps of our local railway station behind a woman with four small children and a stream of blood running down her leg.

While this anecdote demonstrates both the power of shame and the taboo of menstrual blood in the public sphere, there is also an argument that within the household, the private sphere which is supposedly constructed against the gaze of the public eye, run parallel lines of public and private where menstrual blood and accessories were to remain as invisible as possible. Working with young University students two years ago, I can confirm that not much has changed, except perhaps that – in this group at least as they were gender studies students – there is some understanding about the constructed-ness of the body, and this gives women more leeway to manouevre alternative understandings of their bodies. In one tutorial session, two young women who were presenting their research on menstruation, held up a pad with a red texta blotch stickytaped on to it. The symbolic importance of being unable to hold a real pad with real menstrual blood highlighted the taboo better than any words could ever have done. No-one in the room questioned the strangeness of this: the necessity of not exposing blood yet it being represented at the same time.[5]

Self-body fragmentation

Martin's interviews demonstrate that women experience a deep sense of fragmentation in relation to body and self perception. That is, self and body are experienced phenomenologically, as separate (Martin, 1992:79, 194). This fragmentation can be intensified when women's bodies are engaged in those experiences that expose the taboo: that is, giving birth, menopause and menstruating.

This is especially so where these are difficult experiences. Giles Deleuze provides a psychoanalytic understanding of this fragmentation in terms of 'phantasms', which aim to describe incorporeal elements operating on the surface of bodies (cited in Carrette, 2000:115). One's experience and understanding of the body is shaped and organised by the fantasy life of childhood, and this merging of body and fantasy combine to create 'the body' in experience. 'Real' experience is thus always mediated rather than direct (Rosengarten, 2000). For Foucault however, the body is positioned not with regard to psychoanalytic considerations but disciplinary regimes which engrave upon the body surface certain formations of power and knowledge. In modernity, restraint and discipline become located in the self (as well as institutions) and do not always require the intervention of external apparatus to discipline the body (shame is a good example of this) (Carrette, 2000:116). Both descriptions of body knowledge by Foucault and Deleuze are quite clearly visible in the opening scene from the movie: both mother and daughter are negotiating not only the docile body of the medical regime, but responding to the ideological forces which partially construct the girl's experience of her body.

This fragmented body-self is also addressed by the marxist art critique John Berger (1972) who argues that women rarely experience bodily unselfconsciousness because they are trained to be the object of a gaze: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The woman turns herself into an object' (Berger, 1972:47). The ocular regime that Berger describes confirms that women are constructed as a spectacle, and feelings such as shame and disgust, manage this process of objectification at the level of the individual.

This does not mean that experiences of body-self wholeness are outside the realm of experience, not that notions of corporeality can be reduced to questions of visuality alone. Indeed, the First Moon Ritual (documented below) can be read as an attempt to construct a sense of wholeness, and wholeness is a central paradigm of both the new age and alternative therapies discourses. Rather, it might be best to describe women's body experiences as contradictory where women's perception of their body is both as totally involuntary and outside conscious control (women will bleed whether they want to or not); and women as active and with control over their bodies (Martin, 1992:91).

Consumer culture and the menstrual body

Developing the idea of a fragmented image of self and body as functional to modernity, we can also see that such a body is functional to capitalism and in particular consumer culture which posits the self as always unfulfilled and incomplete. Consumption offers the possibility of a complete and fulfilled self in an ongoing, never ending cycle of desire and loss. Again, the menstruation is a site of contradiction in the sense that the invisible must be made visible in order for it to be consumed.

How does this work?

In the July 2000 Issue of *Girlfriend*[6], a magazine aimed at 13-18 year olds, a special section on menstruation confirms that the menstruating body is both a body in need of control, and a body that must remain invisible. The information part of the text – the 'article' – focused on the prevention of odour, how to wear tampons and how to remove blood stains; and was surrounded by ads for tampons and pads, virginal deodorants and beauty products. This included very particular markets with special pads for different days of the cycle: heavy, light, medium; night-time and day pads, and even G-string shaped panty liners for the big night out (the implication being that of course no girl would be in the middle of a heavy period for the big date). Most of the advertising concerned tampons utilising language that promoted a clean, contained body – tampons offer no smell, no leakage, no bulges, no washing on the line, and invisibility to both self and others. Their trade names include "Whisper" and come in discrete packaging offering convenience and hidden-ness. This is a very constricted notion of the body acceptable but offers relief from not only the uncontrollable and uncontainable, it also fails to interrupt the male gaze in the sense that women's body can be sexually available 100 percent time.[7]

While there is little doubt that advertising is highly influential, there are important questions here about the ways in which these messages are received. Are women making rational choices about what they buy and how they manage the menstrual taboo, or are they docile bodies responding to unconscious and ideological forces? Martin (1992) argues that they are both. She reports in her interviews that there was a good deal of negotiation around making systems work for women's benefit. For example, although women overwhelmingly reported their periods as 'a hassle' where work was concerned, many of them used the discourses of shame and invisibility to manage their working day when their periods were heavy (Martin, 1992:93-4). The work bathroom became a place of sanctuary where women could retreat to for rest and privacy without fear of reprisal (Martin, 1992:94-95). These brief moments of autonomy and control of bodily functions were important especially in institutions whose organisation of time and space is a constant denial of women's bodies and their particular needs (Martin, 1992:94).[8] One wonders whether the increasing popularity of the unisex bathroom will be a further incursion on the need for privacy around managing menstruation.[9]

II: Reimagining the menstrual body: a Moon Time ritual

Puberty for young girls in modern western cultures is marked by the beginning of menstruation as an entry into the reproductive reality that dominates cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman. According to both Grosz (1994:205) and Martin (1992), menstruation is not marked by a celebration of the sexual power of a young woman, but by its reproductive capacity. Becoming a woman is

symbolically and practically synonymous with the ability to bear a child. Blood flow is rarely considered as pleasure: its closest association is with injury, wound, leakage and dirt - each positioned as experiences of an out of control body. The mark of womanhood is therefore a body that produces mess and dirt. For Kristeva the link between menstruation and dirt constitutes a situation of abjection because blood is a fluid that pollutes:

> The representation of female sexuality as an uncontainable flow, as seepage associated with what is unclean, coupled with the idea of female sexuality as a vessel, a container, a home, empty or lacking in itself but fillable from the outside, has enabled men to associate women with infection, with disease, with the idea of festering putrefaction, not longer contained simply in female genitals but at any or all points of the female body. (cited in Grosz, 1994:206)

According to Kristeva, this is the second form of bodily abjection that a girl experiences. The first is the development of shame and disgust around the ways we learn to control the bowels. This process, which is about the regulation of bodily fluids and waste, is repeated when a girl begins to menstruate, re-energising the moral discourse of shame and disgust with the powers of contamination. But while excrement can be contained, menstruation cannot. Grosz argues (1994:207) that for women, their bodies are continual places of flow: women's genitals bleed, breasts leak and sprout; bodies run with red and white fluids, which are highly resistive to cultural practices and attempts at containment'.

At this point I want to consider the possibility that there are alternative practices and genealogies in which we can locate menstruation in general and in particular a girl's first menstruation. According to Foucault (1984) the will to truth and power produces hidden histories insofar as power can never exist in a vacuum of non-resistance. Resistance defines and confirms the existence of power relations, yet at the same time the will to certain truths veil other truths and perspectives. The psychoanalytic tradition also postulates the existence of other histories and other bodies, which lie mostly repressed but still exert considerable influence on our psyches and bodies. Kristeva's notion of disavowal and Freud's notion of repression are relevant here.

In the following discussion I am hoping to explore the contours of a specific hidden history and to say something of its relationship to dominant ideas of the menstrual body in modernity. It must be clear by now that I am not locating 'history' beyond the very recent past, rather I am wanting to suggest that we are now, in the present, witnesses to certain repressive regimes of bodies and knowledge, which silence alternative practices and therefore liberatory opportunities for women.

In discussing a First Moon ritual, I also want to consider a methodological issue around the use of ethnography for descriptions of western rituals. This emerges from an ongoing concern about how to write about the feminist rituals which I have observed and which constitute my own personal history, as well as the history of a

local community and a modern social movement – the women's spirituality movement. For myself, as both ethnographer and participant, I am asking the question: how do I translate this [and other] event[s].

Ethnography and Ritualization

The analysis of ritual in anthropology is informed by the assumption that ritual is an event separated in time and space from other domains of social practice, and thus marked by explicit beginnings and ends (Seremetakis, 1991:47)

The most common definition of ritual, which derives from anthropological surveillance of non-western religious practices, defines it as a series of public rites and performances fixed in time and space with a specific purpose of containing disorder and maintaining homeostasis (Seremetakis, 1991:48). This is certainly Durkheim's use of the term, who discussed Aboriginal rituals as ceremonies with specific boundaries and rules, designed to produce and maintain collective solidarity. Feminist anthropologist Claudia Seremetakis (1991:47) argues that such an understanding of ritual 'facilitates the translation of the ritual event to an acceptable narrative form, which is an essential device of anthropological discourse, and a form of western translation'. In other words there is a real danger that in focusing on certain ritual events, the wider contexts in which these take place can be lost or misconstrued. Hence the ritual as a linear event[10] can be seen as a cultural form associated with traditional (western) ethnographic practice, which makes intelligible to the western eye, certain translations of mimetic activity.[11]

How then can we locate separate ritual events within a broader context of time and place so that in transposing the women's menstrual rituals one would not re-inscribe a notion that the ritual was everything, rather than a contextualised event? Seremetakis (1991:47) uses the term **ritualization** in describing her own ethnography of mourning rituals in the Greek Pelopponese. Ritualization encompasses the multiplicity of contexts in which a ritual takes place and subsequently problematises the process of ethnographic narration. For the purposes of this paper, ritualization can be defined as the multiple practices and representations of menstruality across a variety of social contexts and practices, 'that do not have the formal status of a public rite' (Seremetakis, 1991:47). It moves the analysis of menstruation away from the idea of performances which tend to be 'fixed in time and space and re-situates it within the flux and contingency of everyday events' (Seremetakis, 1991:47). Such a concept is eminently suitable to menstrual rituals, as they tend to take place largely in the private sphere, are rarely recognised as important public rites, are an on-going feature of social life, and could include specific group rituals, individual practices among women during and between menstruating, as well as recognition and inclusion of the place of consumer practices as a site of negotiation and meaning.[12]

Seremetakis' challenge to the ethnographer and the aim of ritualization is to move away from clear-cut boundaries and understand rites as emerging from and

embedded in daily social practices (1991:48); and to move beyond the notion of beginnings as a simple function of methodological expectation to a fuller understanding of cultural reality.[13] What is made clear here is the artificiality of [menstrual] rituals. The beginnings and endings of rituals can be understood as fictions which play a narrative function but which can never contain the full meaning of the event itself or the experiences of bleeding. Or the way we write about them. This is what makes me feel slightly uncomfortable about the ways in which feminist ritual is often documented: that a ritual can somehow be definitive of new understandings around embodiment and self as if the narration of the ritual has some form of discursive power to create new meaning. Ritualization on the other hand proposes the idea that the rituals cannot 'contain the seepage of the cultural event to one time and one space' and can be re-positioned as one moment in a much broader diaspora, and where the artificiality of borders can work as strategic resistance within the greater diaspora' (Seremetakis, 1991:50). What I want to avoid then, is a constriction of the total meanings of menstruation into 'the narrative straight-jacket of the formal ceremonial beginning' (Seremetakis, 1991:50).

One way to accomplish this is to locate the ritual as one moment in a broader ethnography of feminist spiritual practices around menstruation. While I cannot give a complete account of this text, what I can do is to report on a First Moon ritual: how it was received by the young menstruant JEN and her mother SARI; as well as point to the ways in which it is situated in relation to other events and non-ritualised spaces. My aim in utilising the concept of ritualization is to be able to indicate the multiple ways in which menstruation is signified, referred to, and practiced, by JEN and SARI as well as the women's spirituality group of which they were part. Representing the broader boundaries of discourse might allow us to talk of all aspects of the conditions in which women bleed, including the more oppressive forms of the blood taboos as well as the moments of liberation. In a Foucauldian sense, it is an attempt to make visible as many claims to knowledge and power in specific discourses as possible and with particular attention on how certain knowledges and practices can foster alternative images and understandings of the menstrual body. This takes us back to Emily Martin's argument that sites of resistance can be found by looking at the collective sets of meanings around menstruation and how women can interpret these for their own use and understanding.

The First Moon ceremony

The women's spirituality group that I belong to in Newcastle has been meeting in various guises for the last 13 years. During that time, the group has experienced a fair degree of change in terms of membership and aims. However, about ten years ago we decided to close the [ritual] group and concentrate on developing an effective ritual life and the group has more or less remained the same since then. It is fair to say that the group has experienced enormous tension and struggle in working out

meaningful spiritual paradigms as well as re-scripting our understandings of spirituality, religion, divinity, reflection, self, body and community. The relationships between the women remain deep and close and at the same time scored by differences of understanding and opinion. The group certainly fits well within the broad definitions of modern western feminist spirituality movements. Over the 10 years it has been meeting, the group has established a 'history': it has built up a specific body of spiritually meaningful practices, iconic images and texts, artifacts, songs and beliefs which when taken together create a sacred space and a sense of community. As well as monthly rituals the group has also organised other rituals throughout the year including solstice celebrations, equinox rituals and Christmas and new year celebrations. These rituals include our families and friends in the wider community, and help to create continuity and normality around the idea of ritualising certain events and aspects of life. They are an important way in which we communicate and transfer our feminist values to our community and to each other.

Early in the life of our spirituality group we arranged a menstruation ritual where we all spoke of our first experiences of bleeding. I include a relevant section from the event:

> Six women gather around a low table in the lounge room of a suburban house. On the table are fresh aromatic garlands of spring flowers, several candles and a small glass vial containing menstrual blood from one of the women who is currently bleeding. At one end of the table, there is a high backed velvet covered chair, and on the ground before it sits an enamel basin filled with water and strewn with pale pink and yellow rose petals. A watermelon cut in half sits on the table just in front of the chair. At this point, the chair is empty and the women sit on the floor around the table. Someone lights the candles and a reflective silence descends upon the group. One by one, the women begin telling the stories of their first menstruation. These experiences are tellingly perforated with shame and guilt; of mothers exonerating young daughters to clean up after themselves; the importance of removing all traces of blood from the toilet and from clothes; of always being prepared and carrying pads around in bags, wallets, and so on; of quietly dealing with gushes of blood and hiding its movement from the outside world, especially men; of furtive backward glances - a continual surveillance of one's clothes for signs of blood; of making excuses for why you can't swim/dance/party/play - anything but the truth. For some women around the table, who are only in their mid 30s, they knew nothing of bleeding until the moment it begins: some women thought they were dying; others were lucky enough to find out from school friends; others so baffled they kept it a secret in case of punishment. Even the women who knew, had a knowledge grounded in medical discourse, a clinical, mono-cultural, linear knowledge that explained a woman's body in terms of its reproductive powers. As each woman shares her story, the impact of years of silence, of loss and grief, of profound cultural displacement, are overwhelming. Everyone is crying. Eventually, a song is sung, to the Goddess, reminding the women of some ancient powers that women might once have had, creating a space where a re-imagination of body and spirit can

> take place. One of the women moves to the chair and places her feet in the cool, scented water. She takes up the watermelon and lays it upon her lap. She looks at the other women and speaks some words to reclaim her body, her monthly blood, and sinks her mouth deep into the flesh of the melon. The juices run from her mouth and down her hands, into the water. With this comes a feeling of release and the women all laugh and clap. Each woman repeats this, until the water has turned red with melon juice, and faces, hands and feet are sticky and wet. The women stand and hug each other and slowly move into the adjoining room, where there is a table laden with a feast of red foods.

Following this ritual there was a lot of discussion over a number of years about how to challenge this embedded silence and shame around menstruation. Some women began deliberately taking time off work to spend the first day of bleeding in solitude - or bed, depending on how she felt! Those who couldn't manage this, attempted to ritualize the days of bleeding, becoming conscious of constructing the time and experience as sacred, surrounding oneself with sacred icons, taking especial care of one's body, plenty of warm baths, herbal tea, restful moments. One woman began building a menstrual hut in her back yard and we all had visions of menstruating together removed from the busyness of our families and daily lives - which never eventuated. We shared ideas and suggestions, recipes for making cloth pads, herbal teas and restoratives. In this, we experienced a sense of a collective sacred body as well as significant control over our understandings of being in bleeding bodies. But truthfully, it was a body nearly always contained by a larger reality over which we were in constant negotiation, particularly around how to make the taboo work for us. Much later in 1995, when we began thinking about our daughters and their bodies, this work took on more serious undertakings, and we began planning ways to teach the girls right relationships between self and body and spiritual life. At the time I remember that the girls, who were around the ages of 4-8, were becoming increasingly interested in popular culture and therefore vulnerable to the sorts of desirable bodies being peddled in this influential sphere. We decided to set up a special group that was centred around the needs of the girls and which could actively provide positive alternative paradigms for a growing self and body.

The Girls Group first met in the spring of 1996, when we went bush for 2 days in a secluded spot in the Upper Hunter valley.[14] We spent the time planning an initiation ritual that was based around the theme of moving from babyhood to girlhood. There were 4 girls aged between 7 and 9, and as well as their mothers there were two other women who were keen to be allies for the girls. One of these women had recently celebrated her Croning ritual on the same land, and which most of us had attended.

Within a context of the girls having some experience of feminist ritual and the women being deeply committed to an ongoing practice of ritual and spirituality, we came together with ideas and resources. During this weekend we also thought out a series of rules, not only for the successful functioning of the weekend, but on the basis that the group might continue and to establish values which would foster right

relationships between us, and in particular contradict some of the forms of alienation that mothers and daughters tend to experience. Some of these rules included the following: girls had to be seven years old before they could come to the weekends; we would work, eat and sleep together for the whole weekend away from public concerns and our daily lives; and the women would not speak to each other about our "busyness" or "life matters", but concentrate wholly on the girls and what they needed and wanted. The girls were absolutely delighted with this last rule and used it extremely well in getting us all to play endless games of their choice, read them stories, and accompany them on adventures and excursions. Over the last 5 years some of these adventures have included: bush walking (or bush running); cycling; swimming in icy cold river water; jumping off a cliff into icy cold river water; and attempting to swim across a dangerous beach swell (we didn't make it but at least we tried). The women tried to encourage and model the adventure side as much as possible as a way past socialised feminine passivity, and the girls were keen, in fact they often initiated these adventures. This was balanced by plenty of out-loud reading (mostly mythic stories of the goddesses, feisty women and Indigenous Australia); a great session on body painting for both girls and women; singing and exuberant dancing; plenty of craft, and of course the preparation for the initiation ritual. It became clear that the girls themselves experienced a special bonding between each other, and after the first year two more girls joined and the girls began to want to spend time with each other, either reading quietly or playing loud and wild card games. Since that first year, the girls have elected to all sleep together in the same tent or room. They had no trouble telling the women what they wanted and when. A number of the women, including myself, experienced in the weekends a strong sense of a space 'outside' of patriarchy, where we were not constantly having to organise our bodies and minds around busy work schedules and households; where we could sing our goddess songs without looking over our shoulders; and where we could set up rituals without needing to privatise them in certain rooms in our houses, as the locations we choose were invariably houses or camping sites owned by friends or family. The ritual celebrating babyhood to girlhood was very special and as new girls have joined the group, they also undertake this particular 'initiation' ritual. The artifacts associated with the ritual, which include a name stick, ribbons and length of material, are brought along each year and displayed where all can see them. This year, in Spring, two more girls will join the group and so we will experience the initiation ritual once again, adding to our deepening sense of a group history and ritual continuity.

As you can imagine the first ritual celebrating menstruation was one that we women were eagerly anticipating and to which we had discussed with each other and the girls to some extent. Recalling the positioning and politics of the menstrual taboo in western modernity – that is, it is both repressed and visible, and operating under specific conditions – it's worthwhile noting that these broader conditions constructed the outer rim of the Moon ritual. Its possibility is at once a consequence of being able to speak and think about menstruation as a physical and spiritual form, as well as the

fact that the ritual is a private affair, on two counts, the first being that spirituality is largely privatised and individualised in the West, and secondly that public rituals around menstruation do not exist. The private secular rituals that do exist (recall the young woman in the film above) are often couched in highly negative terms and nearly always involve strong socialisation around how to conceal the menstruating body (as discussed above). This locates the First Moon ritual – politically – on the periphery of a recognisable celebratory public event. Both Melissa Raphael (1996) and Claudia Seremetakis (1993:2) discuss the periphery as a productive site capable of generating alternative forms of sociality and space, particularly for women managing the split between public/private. Julie Marcus (1992) also discusses the value of periphery in her analysis of religious rituals among Turkish women where marginalisation provides spaces in which women can gather to pursue their own religious agendas as a form of sanctuary in a patriarchal society.[15] Both definitions are relevant here.

The First Moon ritual certainly produced 'effects' on the periphery. It generated a lot of interest and energy not only among the women and girls but also in our wider community and friends, and especially the family of the young menstruant, JEN. Her father, who was not present at the ritual, did most of the cooking for the party afterwards, and various friends had already given her presents acknowledging her new bodily state. It also involved the participants in a form of narrative censure, in the sense that we had to be careful who we talked to about the ritual and what we said about it. The ritual which was in planning for a number of months was certainly one of the important events celebrating the first bleeding but was certainly within a broader process of learning to be a menstruant. JEN's mother SARI said[16]:

> '...to some extent the process of preparing for the ritual was really important because we really just focused on what she [JEN] wanted...I very much wanted to plan it together as her mother...that was really important...it was hard work making it all come together...

JEN also confirmed the value of ritual for herself:

> I thought it was really good for seeing it [menstruation] for what it really was rather than just a hassle...that there are other aspects to it like letting go and stuff...I had a lot of fun...I thought I'm grown up now...it wasn't so much starting my period that mattered, it was more being acknowledged of starting...

The ritual was held in a suburban house in Newcastle on a hot afternoon in early December, 1999. After everyone had arrived, the 5 girls present were sent into the back yard to play and do craft work. The women, who on this occasion numbered the spirituality group as well as a small band of special women friends, taped to the wall poems and bites of text that were especially chosen, and which JEN would read when she re-entered the house.[17] The women retreated to the main bedroom and the ritual began with the traditional Wiccan practice of closing the sacred circle, calling

the four elements and focusing collective attention onto the feminine divine. The bedroom had been lavishly decorated and included many of the items that the group had come to value including goddess icons, flowers, crystals, incense sticks and so on. After the preliminary rites were complete, a bell was rung and the JEN left her friends in the back yard and entered the house. She spent time reading the texts on the walls in the living room – one of which was a poem written especially for her by her mother – before proceeding to the bedroom where the women waited in meditative silence and also anticipation. She was certainly nervous when she pushed open the door and peered into the quiet but full to bursting room. It was a tremendous moment for some of us as we recognised that this was the first time that one of our daughters was actually witnessing first hand the ritual space, which we have re-created over the years. There were several parts to the ritual which included, a special reading of the Motherpeace Tarot cards, gifts and blessings thoughtfully chosen and given to the young woman, the singing of songs, a special story, and the sharing of stories about bleeding. These stories were not the medicalised narrative, but women's phenomenological accounts of being a menstruant; what it felt like, what they did, how they managed, and what they hoped for this young woman. The blessings she received contained mixed messages regarding her transformation into a woman: her reproductive capacity (you can have a baby now); her initiation into the ritual group and a new level of spiritual awareness; as well as blessings for a good and full life. It is worth noting that the conflation of menstruation with spiritual initiation is a very powerful opportunity for the young woman personally as well as the handing on of the group traditions. The young woman not only remained focused and attentive but was clearly loving every minute of it. It went for well over an hour and reluctantly ended with the younger girls losing patience in the back yard, banging on the doors, wanting to know what had gone on and when the party would begin. Like other initiation rituals, the young girls were met with silence on the details as well as a promise that their turn would come.

Contextualising the moon ritual

The moon ritual is a socially reflexive practice as well as functioning as a metacommentary on the social order. It does this by positioning menstruation and the bleeding body differently to public culture, and in particular acts to re-inscribe this body within a sacred terrain. It stands against shame, but not necessarily invisibility, attempting to utilise the power of the taboo as a sacred force of female sexual energy (Raphael 1996:167). While it certainly doesn't render the forces of shame and disgust impotent, it does suggest others way to imagine the self-body relation. For example, when asked if she experienced menstruation as a hassle JEN replied:

> JEN: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! Sometimes I wish I never had it...it's a real pain...because you're always having to change your pad...and wash out your

> undies...I don't look forward to it much...

But she also articulated a sense of feeling different especially after the ritual:

> JEN: yeah, if it wasn't for that [the ritual] I would just hate it [period] by now...all the memories, poems, blessings, I loved that bit... I thought it was really good for seeing it for what it really was rather than just a hassle...

The Moon Ritual can be seen as a local site of struggle against broader forms of power. It utilised an economy of media drawing on meaningful relationships between physical and symbolic artifacts, including song, silence, laughter, tears, food, and text. Indeed, the artifacts themselves act as, 'material narratives' (Seremetakis, 1991:3) of certain genealogies. For example, the presence of flowers signifies an association with the discourse of nature as containing feminine spiritual presence and power. The pottery goddess sitting next to the flowers could just as easily represent this discourse, although the inflections are slightly different: the re-emergence of a nature-based ancient form of a feminine divine in contemporary feminist spirituality. Certainly, the signification of power relations, texts and genealogies is as problematic as it is empowering. Essentializing discourses associating women with nature have been the target of strong feminist critique and anti-evolutionist arguments, and makes these symbols a site of contestation over their value and meaning: do they re-inscribe oppressive gender stereotypes or offer positive representations of femininity? I'm not attempting to answer this question, but rather to raise it and offer it as a site of on-going contradiction. It was clear for JEN and SARI that the goddess as a figure of divinity, of out-there-ness is quite real. JEN said that after the ritual the '...goddess sort of became more real...I could like believe in her more'. This confirms her deep interest in the women's understanding of the goddess which she specifically requested be a part of the ritual.

The other material narrative that needs to be mentioned is that nearly all of the ritual objects are taken from the everyday world. Unlike Durkheim's (1976) account of sacred ritual objects as totally other to the objects of the everyday, the women move with their sacred objects between ritual and ordinary space. Most times, the everyday space becomes the ritual space (the lounge room, the classroom, the bedroom, the bush), liminally playing between space, body and time. The source of the everyday, the ordinary and the domestic, as sites of women's ritual life reflects not only where women are socially located, but positions them against the dominant site of public religion. Again, this is a contested site for women given the location of the home as outside the realms where value and wealth are produced. The home, traditionally associated with child birth and nurturing, is, again, normatively located within the realm of the natural and therefore outside sociality. In the ritual, the bedroom took on a special significance for SARI:

> SARI...my room, I felt like it was imbued with essence for days and days

afterwards...

And JEN also said that her favourite bit of the ritual was '...being in mum's room'.

Finally, the ritual can be read as a powerful moment in a young girl's growing up where her 'new' body is deeply affirmed as a source of wonderment and mystery as against the rationalist medical imaginary. JEN's mother SARI described it as an experience where JEN said all the things that she wanted – in the ritual – and then asked for them:

> SARI: ...what I really want for her is to develop a sense of who she is and what she wanted...even though I got a bit embarrassed about what she wanted...you know this long request of what she wanted people to do... and I thought these women are really busy...but I didn't try and stop her... well if that's what you want work out how you get it...

For JEN, she clearly has special relationships not only with the women in this group but with the other girls. Where she feels she has to hide her menstruation from her school friends – 'Oh we don't really talk about that stuff...the topic just never comes up...' – she is happy to discuss it with the other girls and is eagerly awaiting the next menstruation event.

Conclusion: fluidity, flow, and the sacred

In conclusion, it seems to me that there are both social and mythical spaces in which resistance and re-imagination of the menstrual body is taking place. Science tells one story about women's bodies, but the experience of women testify to another.

There is little doubt that women live in two separate space/time zones: one organised by the forces of capitalism and scientific rationalities and the other by living in a body that flows in cyclical motion and whose affects cannot be easily contained (Martin, 1992:197-8). Living in both suggests clash and struggle. At worst this struggle manifests as a fraught contradiction where the technologies and ideologies of medicine and consumerism constrict the possibilities of embodiment on the one hand and offer moments of difference on the other. JEN's experience of menstruation as both a hassle and an opportunity for self understanding confirms this. Emily Martin (1992:xii) provides another example when she reports on a new device for measuring menstrual flow in which women will be able to 'collect' their menstrual blood, and which comes complete with calibrating marks to show how much flow they have produced. One can see the double possibilities here. On the one hand a further medical management of the menstruating body increasing the possibility of examination, measurement, intervention and docility by establishing norms around levels of acceptable blood outflow, colour and texture encouraging self regulating processes outside of the clinic. On the other hand, such a device offers women the chance to gain direct access to their blood to use for alternative purposes, such as celebration of

their menstruation, potential for spiritual rites and ritualization, the possibility of tactile engagement with menstrual blood: tasting, touching, exploring the viscerality of blood over the days in which it flows. Self regulation can become self reflexivity.

At best this struggle engages us in alternative understandings of corporeality and subjectivity (Grosz, 1994:203). It is here that I situate the Moon Ritual and would want to explore further the relationship between these kinds of sacred social practices and feminist imaginings of the incorporeal dimensions of female embodiment. For example, feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (in Grosz, 1994:204) proposes a metaphorics of fluidity. She argues that women have an inherent fluidity - an ontology of the fluid body. For Irigaray a body which seeps and flows may be a necessary moment in the process of woman's 'becoming'. Iris Young discusses the way in which fluidity befuddles the Cartesian dualism which encourages solid [masculine] embodiment fluids (in Grosz, 1994:204). She says, 'Fluids unlike objects, have no definite borders; they are unstable, which does not mean that they are without pattern. Fluids surge and move, and a metaphysic that thinks being as fluid would tend to privilege the living, moving, pulsing over the inert dead matter of the Cartesian world view...' (cited in Grosz, 1994:204). Elizabeth Grosz talks of a 'field of body types', constructed through the prisms of class, race, and gender suggesting multiple forms of embodiment, and freeing the imagination from the imprisonment of a constricted corporeality. Emily Martin (1992:xv) presents the idea of the flexible body, where the female body with its ability to alter its state monthly from ovulation, menstruation, pregnancy could be the prefect exemplar of the always changing body. Instead of women seeing themselves as stolid and stationary, with definite boundaries, a flexibility offers a metaphoric understanding of bodily experience around change and flux.

In the broader picture of women's struggles against fragmentation and internalised oppression, and the search for a holistic sense of self and body; for autonomy and dignity; it might be that the efforts of feminists engaged in the processes of exploring sustaining and meaningful spiritualities, will engender new forms of embodiment and sacrality. The effects of this can hardly be guessed at but as Penny Magee (1995:117) has said: to recast sacrality, into regenerative and productive forces, is a dangerous undertaking whose results are unknown but will almost certainly cause disorder.

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Notes

[1.] I wish to thank Ruth Barcan for her very generous and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and Marion Maddox for her thoughtful response to the conference paper.

[2.] This is taking a different tack to more direct questions about purity, pollution and the generation of the sacred. In deliberately not fore grounding the question of where the boundaries of the sacred lies, I am hoping that an approach that concentrates on the conditions in which women bleed, the cultural meanings attached to menstruation, and the technologies of power that construct the modern body, will in fact inform the spiritual meanings that women derive from their experience of menstruation as bodily and cultural systems. Spiritual feminism has sought to re-locate and re-sacralise women's bodies largely through the discourse of thealogy (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998;79; Raphael, 1996:Chs 4 & 5), and while I am close to this literature I want to contextualise the body on a slightly different terrain. European and Anglo history records various taboos around menstruation: menstruation blood could cause meat to go bad; wine to turn; and bread dough to fall. In some places, women could not touch milk or fresh meat, and were required to separate themselves from men (Martin, 1992:98). In the traditional monotheistic world religions, Jewish, Christian and Islamic women have or do negotiate specific practices around menstruation. Jewish women mark their cycle with a ritual bath, the *mikva*, and are sexually unavailable to their husbands during this time (Joseph, 1990:4). Christian women for the large part are met by silence although there are remnants of pre-modern 'churching' rituals following childbirth. Menstrual taboos, whether productive or negative, signify the contours of sacred and profane (Radford Reuther, 1990:10) and numerous writers including Melissa Raphael, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Emily Martin and Judy Grahn have emphasised the radical potential and alterity that menstrual taboos can provide especially in terms of respite from daily tasks.

[3.] It might be argued that this 'success' is always partial and always contingent on the existence of resistance to dominant body images and viewpoints.

[4.] Emily Martin's interviews confirm this experience (1992: Sections 3 & 4).

[5.] This certainly does not mean that women have not shared menstrual blood. Emily Martin (1992:107) discusses a small number of girls whose friends and mothers had sat with them in the bathroom showing them the concrete details of using tampons, pads and methods of mopping up blood.

[6.] Girlfriend Magazine, July 2000, Pacific Publications, NSW 75-79.

[7.] Marsha Rosengarten's article (2000) provides an analysis of numerous tampon and pad television ads.

[8.] In the early days of industrialisation (19th C) this was far more difficult as sanitary conditions in factories were horrendous and the toilet might be little more than a hole cut into a plank over a river (Martin, 1992:95).

[9.] I once worked in a building that had a unisex bathroom and some of the women insisted that

of the three toilets, one should be designated for men, and one for women, on the basis that men often "miss" the bowl and make a mess. This is a fascinating example of inscripting public/private, male/female, practices into small spaces which appear on the outside to be gender free. And - following on from Martin's research findings - a woman-only toilet could provide some sort of sanctuary space, especially for menstruating women.

[10.] Seremetakis refers specifically to the ethnographic work of Hertz, Van Gennep and Aries (1991:48).

[11.] The contradictions that western women anthropologists must have experienced as menstruants themselves, living within certain culturally specific menstrual codes, whilst their own menstrual practices were determined by a different set of regulations and taboos, thousands of miles from where they were living, must have been fascinating.

[12.] Seremetakis (1991:47) argues that: "It is from ongoing and discontinuous everyday experience that certain events and signs are specified and then organised into an ideological system that inscribes death as a cultural form. The death ritual in inner Mani cannot be treated as discrete narrative, insofar as it has no clear-cut beginnings and ends of spatial-temporal locus. The ceremonialization of death emerges gradually from the background of everyday social life and never fully fades back into it".

[13.] "The ethnographic narration of ritual is assumed to be contingent on the insertion of the observer into the performance as a participant, coextensive with the sequencing and duration of the event. This coextensiveness is a metaphor for the fieldworker's appropriation of the culture as a totality. To be separated from the initiation of the ceremony was to be separated from my own process of initiation into the local culture. To attend the beginning of a ceremony was in some sense to witness its structural origins. The elusiveness of the beginning perpetuated the tensions of relative outsiderhood and cultural distance. I soon realised there was no official beginning to the death ritual in Inner Mani" (Seremetakis, 1991:49).

[14.] This ritual is discussed further in McPhillips (1998).

[15.] Michael Taussig goes as far to say that defining boundaries as not at the edge of the periphery, the fatherest points from the centre, but as core, where "rather than thinking of the border as the farthermost extension of an essential identity spreading out from a core, this makes us think instead of the border itself as that core." (Taussig, 1993:150-151).

[16.] This research included interviews with the mother and daughter involved in the Moon Ritual, and were recorded by me during the early months of 2000.

[17.] As is quite common in women's rituals and which both Seremetakis and Julie Marcus discuss, the house is a liminal site of both sacred and everyday occurrences and the boundary between the two is often carefully marked out by ritual objects and activity.