The Female Stigma: Menstruation Attitudes in the Women's Liberation Movement

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In 1982, Ntozake Shange published Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, a novel about three African American sisters growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, set in the 1960s and 1970s.1 As the novel begins, the youngest sister Indigo, experiences menarche. Accompanied by her dolls, Indigo visits her neighbor Sister Mary Louise, a devout Christian who teaches Indigo how to be a proper Christian lady, explaining to her that it is part of a woman’s duty to “tend after the beauty in the world” including “the flowers and the children.”2 Sister Mary Louise then sees a pool of blood at Indigo’s feet and exclaims, “the Lord has called you to be a woman.” She turns this moment into a ritual to celebrate Indigo’s menarche experience by bathing Indigo in a “hot tub filled with rose petals.”3 Framing the experience as a sacred ceremony, she makes a wreath of flowers for Indigo and guides her to the backyard where “Indigo sat bleeding among the roses, fragrant and filled with grace.” The nun’s actions create an empowering and positive view of menstruation, emphasizing a connection between womanhood and nature. Mimicking Sister Mary Louise’s graceful approach to menstruation, Indigo returns home to gently clean her dolls and gives them woman-wise instruction “as she made each and every one of them a personal menstruation pad of velvet.”4 Passing down the positive views of menses to her dolls, there is the promise that Indigo will help her dolls transition into this special time in their lives as Sister Mary Louise helped her.

While Sister Mary provided an enlightening perspective, Indigo’s own mother’s reaction to her menarche experience, however, paints woman-

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2 Shange, Sassafrass, 17.
3 Shange, Sassafrass, 18.
4 Shange, Sassafrass, 19.
hood and menstruation as negative and troublesome. Indigo finds her mother to tell her the exciting news and asks if they could have a celebratory meal for her and her dolls. Her mother responds in anger and yells, “Indigo, I don’t want to hear another word about it, do you understand me? I’m not setting the table with my Sunday china for fifteen dolls who got their period today!” After telling Indigo to remove the velvet from between her doll’s legs, her mother instructs her to forget the celebration nonsense and worry about “white men with evil in their blood” and little boys “chasing after you for nothing good.” The healing haven Sister Mary created for Indigo is crushed by her mother. Indigo’s mother becomes the foil to the plot’s message on menstruation, though Sister Mary Louise sets the tone for how to perceive menstruation and womanhood. Through Sister Mary Louise’s actions, the author promotes a more empowering perspective on women’s bodies. Up against traditional ideas of menstruation and women’s bodies, Shange changes menstruation rhetoric to line up with second-wave feminist values and provides a positive way to think about womanhood.

The 1960s and 1970s created a sea change in how Americans thought about gender. Books like The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan and The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir encouraged women to create social change and resist patriarchal structures in society. The newly formed National Organization of Women pushed for legal change in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Equal Rights Amendment to prohibit sex discrimination. While new women’s liberation organizations emerged, a second-wave feminist movement was inaugurated as social and legal changes occurred. In many ways, feminists encouraged women to rethink women’s relationship with society, the workplace, families, their bodies, and themselves. The women’s movement also pushed back against harmful ideas on women’s bodies and menstruation, reflected in Indigo’s mother, while ushering in positive views on menstruation and women’s bodies as demonstrated by Sister Mary Louise. However, the utopian view of menstruation that Shange promoted in her novel did not emerge out of the second-wave feminist movement. This paper explores some of the mixed messages and legacies of the feminist movement and how feminists in some ways created positive messages for women, encouraging them to gain control of their bodies, sexuality, and join the workforce. Yet feminist messaging also reinforced oppressive views of women’s bodies and

5 Shange, Sassafrass, 20.
6 Shange, Sassafrass, 22.
menstruation, as they encouraged women to suppress and put menstruation in the background in order for them to be equal to men.

**Historiography**

When historians began looking at women’s history, they initially focused on women and women’s contributions to society, but then turned to asking deeper questions about male narratives on women’s bodies and womanhood. In the 1970s, women scholars began to identify the problematic nature of male-authored studies and medical expertise on women and women’s bodies.¹⁸ They explored how institutions and ideas shaped women’s lives and asked questions that moved us beyond the male narrative, ushering in attention to women’s issues and paying greater attention to women and gender in history. Among these ideas were menstruation and how it is perceived, through topics relating to the female experience such as sexuality, sexual development, and women’s health. For example, historians like Jane F. Gerhard, in *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought* analyzes second-wave feminists’ rhetoric on female sexuality and suggests how the movement improved women’s ability to gain control over their bodies and sexual freedom.¹⁹ In addition to sexuality, scholars have studied women’s health in medical reports and associated research to understand menstrual beliefs. For instance, in *The Modern Period: Menstruation In Twentieth Century America*, Lara Freidenfelds suggests that medical developments on women’s health, such as birth control, worked to suppress and reduce the exposure of menstruation in everyday life.²⁰ Other scholars have studied the rhetoric of sexual development in menstruation education. In *A History of Women’s Menstruation From Ancient Greece to the Twenty-first Century: Psychological, Social, Medical, Religious, and Educational Issues*, Glenda Hufnagel argues that some forms of menstruation education limit young women.²¹ To understand menstruation culture, other scholars

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have analyzed how the women’s movement has influenced beliefs about menstruation and the female body. More recent scholarship challenges how the second-wave feminist movement approached menstruation and the female body.

Sexuality is a continued area of interest for feminist historians in recent scholarship about understanding and expanding the study of menstruation. Hufnagel identifies feminists in the women’s movement who advocated suppressing menstruation as a way to empower women’s sexuality and to provide freedom for them to explore their bodies. Building on Hufnagel’s work, in her 2001 *Desiring Revolution*, Gerhard suggests that the feminist movement promoted ideologies of female sexuality, improved women’s views of themselves, and fueled women’s desires to control their bodies. She identifies ways that oral contraceptives allowed women to more freely and comfortably enjoy their sexuality and gain control over their bodies and their menstrual cycles.

In addition to women’s sexuality, more recent scholarship explores women’s menstrual health and scientific methods, such as birth control, that feminists used to encourage menstruation management. Cutcha Risling Baldy, in *We Are Dancing For You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women’s Coming-Of-Age Ceremonies*, suggests that birth control was a tool to suppress menstruation and control the body so that it “would not leak, smell, hurt, cause anxiety, appear unfashionable or lose efficiency.” For Baldy, the movement did not empower women when it came to menstruation as it showed menstruation being about conforming to society’s expectations. Historians claim that feminists in the women’s movement submitted to a patriarchal society by hiding menstruation and that women’s health was largely ignored.

Feminist historians have also critiqued and unmasked attitudes about menstrual education. In particular, historians have outlined what menstrual education has looked like and have asked questions about how to change it. In *A History of Women’s Menstruation*, Hufnagel, for instance, argues that improvements to menstruation education have been limited. For Hufnagel, education does not mend the cultural taboo that

12 Gerhard, Desiring Revolution, 3–9.
13 Gerhard, Desiring Revolution, 4.
15 Baldy, We Are Dancing For You, 7.
surrounds menstruation, and that change in menarcheal education must begin by not asking, “how can education be changed?” but by asking “how can culture be changed?” Unlike Hufnagel, Freidenfelds shows some of the ways that sex education improved information on menstruation as feminists began playing a more prominent role in educating the younger generation.

As scholars outline menstruation beliefs in the second-wave feminist movement, some suggest that these beliefs complicated feminists’ contributions to liberating women. Drawing on feminist-authored sources, including magazines, medical reports, advertisements, and hygiene and educational videos in the feminist movement, this paper explores ways that feminists challenged traditional, harmful ideas about menstruation. Their work criticized traditional beliefs about women’s bodies and encouraged women to understand and explore their bodies, participate in the workforce, and use birth control to liberate their sexuality. Yet, in doing so, they also encouraged women to frame menstruation as something to be suppressed, minimized, controlled, and as an unnecessary inconvenience for women. Some feminist-authored sources targeted adult women while other sources targeted young women, with the hopes of teaching feminist values and changing how menstruation was perceived and taught. Both sources directed toward adult women and those directed toward young women show how feminist messages reflected liberating as well as oppressive attitudes about menstruation and women’s bodies.

“Not a Badge of Femininity”: Feminists Reframing Menstruation

While challenging traditional rhetoric on menstruation, feminists promoted reclaiming menstruation ideas that aligned with the women’s movement principles. Second-wave feminists framed the women’s movement to be about women taking control over their lives and promoted messages such as challenging medical views of menstruation, resisting reproductivity, pushing women to gain control over their bodies and write their own narratives. They also encouraged birth control as a way to explore women’s sexuality and provide flexibility and convenience in women’s lives, promoted menstruation as harmful, and supported women entering the workforce. These messages paved the contours of the women’s

17 Hufnagel, A History of Women’s Menstruation, 105.
movement and conveyed attitudes about menstruation that could later be seen as positive or problematic.

Traditional views of menstruation, created by male medical authorities, were directly challenged by contemporary feminist scholars in the women’s movement. In 1973, Vern Bullough and Martha Voght expanded the study of medical research about menstruation and the history of pathologizing women’s health in “Women Menstruation and Nineteenth-Century Medicine.” Their work entailed laying out traditional ideas on menstruation, such as the idea that women’s ovarian cells could not develop at the same time as brain cells and the idea of women needing to rest while menstruating to preserve their bodies.¹⁹ Physicians strongly encouraged women to rest while they menstruated and believed that brain work “destroyed feminine capabilities” such as menstruation and reproduction.²⁰ Vought and Bullough identified these views as especially harmful “political prejudices”; as they pointed out, ideas touting menstruation as limiting women’s capabilities were not based on scientific evidence or “medicine itself,” but on political and social beliefs.²¹ They hypothesized that if differences existed between menstruating women and men, then “[they] ought to show up on tests comparing motor and mental abilities of both men and women.”²² After analyzing the results of the study, they found the motor and mental curves between male and females “were indistinguishable when the notations of the menstrual periods were removed” and that menstrual periods had no effect on motor or mental abilities.²³ Bullough and Voght’s used their results to debunk male-authored theories and argue that traditional scientific and medically accepted beliefs of women’s menstrual cycles were not fact but harmful and oppressive myths.

While criticizing medical beliefs on menstruation, feminists also pushed back against traditional male narratives of preserving menstrual

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²⁰ Clarke, “Sex in Education,” 133.
health for reproductive purposes. Bullough and Voght addressed traditional ideas such as, “the female between 12 and 20 must concentrate on developing her reproductive system . . . the menstrual period is vital,” and found them especially harmful.24 In her 1975 article, “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?,” feminist writer Judith Ramsey challenges the rhetoric of linking menstruation and reproduction.25 She promoted gynecologists’ theories which stated menstruation has no “biological purpose for reproductive efficiency.”26 Feminists used this idea to reinforce liberation rather than reproduction for women and to instead explore themselves as individuals, as demonstrated in the 1970 issue of a feminist magazine, *Women’s Liberation Year 2: Can They Solve the Sex Hang-up?*, in which Dawn Macdonald supported women exploring their individuality and “not belonging child bearers at all.”27 Likewise, second-wave feminists encouraged women to put reproduction and menstruation in the background so women could explore and invest in themselves.

In addition to criticizing problematic traditional medical ideas, feminists also promoted gaining control of their bodies and their menstrual health. They created health collectives that explored women’s health issues and provided women’s narratives and experiences with their bodies. In these health collectives, feminists distributed more accurate information on women’s bodies that was based on women’s experiences, and they advocated for women to control their bodies and the narrative about women’s bodies. For instance, in “Women and Their Bodies,” a course on women’s health by the Boston Women’s Health Collective, feminist scholars shared their experiences, questions, and feelings and noted, “in matters of medicine and health, we offer a course to sisters in women’s liberation”; the course aimed to help women to understand various aspects of the female bodily experience.28 The health collective promoted the idea that, “it is imperative that we women know more about

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26 Ramsey, “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?” 44.


our own bodies and how they function.” Historian Wendy Kline, in her 2010 *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women’s Health in the Second Wave*, affirms how important it is for second-wave feminists and women to gain access to this information and argues that unless women gain this information, “there [will] be no equality.” Scholars of women’s health encouraged women to reclaim the right to control their bodies, to empower their bodies, and to better understand their sexuality.

Feminists also embraced birth control as another way to liberate women and their sexuality. In “Women and Their Bodies,” certain feminists saw birth control as a way to give women the choice whether or not to have children and indicated that “the pill might lessen depression and anxiety because the fear of pregnancy will be gone.” The health collective saw the pill as providing flexibility in women’s lives and space for women to explore their bodies and their sexuality. Historian Jane F. Gerhard, in her 2001, *Desiring Revolution*, asserts that in the 1970s, sex mattered most to feminists and thought of it as the source of women’s liberation and empowerment.

To enjoy more flexibility and sexual freedom, feminists also promoted birth control as a scientific breakthrough on managing and suppressing menstrual cycles. In medical research reports, feminists encouraged minimizing and suppressing menstrual cycles. For instance, in their “Effect of the Menstrual Cycle on Mood and Sexual Arousability,” Mary E. Luschen and David M. Pierce, second-wave feminist scholars in the field of sex and menstruation, encouraged women to use the contraceptive to “minimize menstrual pain” and the frequency of menstruation so women could explore their sexual liberties. Feminists marketed the idea that by minimizing menstruation, women could be free from the discomforts of bleeding. For example, Ramsey, in her 1975 magazine article, affirmed the idea of a gynecologist who said, “I tell my patients, ‘why bleed if you don’t have to?’ Most of them are delighted to be freed from menstruation once they understand that a period is neither part of the body’s cleansing mechanism nor a badge of femininity.” As demonstrated in these

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31 “Women and Their Bodies: A Course,” 69.
articles, many feminists framed menstruation as something that should be managed and minimized, not a “badge of women’s femininity.” These feminists often framed menstruation as having no significant role in womanhood and as something that should be managed to help women in their daily lives.\(^{35}\)

To better manage menstruation, second-wave feminists challenged the belief that women needed to have a regular menstrual cycle to preserve their reproductive and menstrual health and instead valued relief from the discomforts and inconveniences caused by menstruation through new management products.\(^{36}\) As an example, in her 1974 article in *Ms.* magazine, “Unmasking the Curse,” feminist writer and scholar Michele Landsberg claimed that new methods to manage menstruation helped relieve some “discomforts and inconveniences,” such as tampons, less bulky pads, and the pill, which could minimize the amount of blood coming out in a period.\(^{37}\) Following Landsberg, companies such as Playtex and Tampax advertised new products to help remove these inconveniences by developing new menstruation management methods, such as the tampon, birth control, and more comfortable and less noticeable pads, to help ease menstrual-cycle inconveniences.\(^{38}\) New management products made the menstrual period more comfortable and manageable, allowing women to be flexible and productive in their daily activities.

In addition to framing menstruation as an inconvenience, feminists promoted menstruation as harmful to women’s health and to women’s progression in the feminist movement. In women’s magazines, feminist authors wrote about menstruation as something that needed to be removed to liberate women. For example, Ramsey, in “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?,” supported the gynecological theory that menstruation was harmful to a woman’s health.\(^{39}\) She argued that regular


\(^{39}\) Ramsey, “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?” 44.
menstruation is unnecessary and proceeded to provide possible solutions for women to end their periods such as menstrual extraction, a hysterectomy, and the oral contraceptive pill.\textsuperscript{40} Like Ramsey, Landsberg, in “Unmasking the Curse,” argued that men have used menstruation as an “excuse to label women as the second sex” and an excuse to prevent women from working, as they claimed women were “unfit” to perform jobs due to hormonal imbalances caused by menstruation.\textsuperscript{41}

A chief aim of the women’s movement was trying to facilitate women’s full participation in the workforce. Some feminists encouraged women to push their menstruation needs to the background in order to be active in the workforce and society. For instance, Landsberg challenged popular myths about menstruation, such as if women can’t touch baby brothers, sisters, or plants while menstruating, or they will die. Or, if you pour milk it will turn sour; you can’t go out in the rain; you can’t participate in sports; and, if you go on a date, he can tell that you’re menstruating.\textsuperscript{42} These ideas, Landsberg argued, prevented women from going outside and being active in society. As she wrote, the best thing for a woman to help her period be more manageable “is to be active” and to “wor[k].”\textsuperscript{43} Landsberg indicated that menstrual pain and side effects should not affect a woman’s performance. Like Landsberg, Susan Edmiston, in her 1975 “Out From Under: A Major Report On Women Today,” encouraged women to be out working.\textsuperscript{44} She suggested that a domestic life may be convenient for women, especially when menstruating, but in order for society to believe that women are equal, they should be out doing what the men are doing.\textsuperscript{45} Feminists who reframed ideas about menstruation and women’s bodies created attitudes that in some ways helped and in other ways limited women.

Repercussions: The Good and the Bad

As second-wave feminists pushed back on traditional ideas about menstruation, they sought to liberate women from oppressive beliefs. For example, feminists challenged traditional theories written by male

\textsuperscript{40} Ramsey, “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?” 57–58.
\textsuperscript{41} Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 63–64.
\textsuperscript{42} Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 63.
\textsuperscript{43} Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 63–64.
\textsuperscript{45} Edmiston, “Out From Under,” 160.
physicians. Bullough and Voght’s 1973 article, “Women, Menstruation, and Nineteenth Century Medicine,” identified these theories as based on political prejudices against women.⁴⁶ Feminists promoted updated scientific information about women’s health, based on women’s experiences.⁴⁷ By addressing biases against women and menstrual health in the medicine field and promoting new scientific findings, feminists encouraged women to understand how such notions of menstruation falsely justified female inferiority. As feminists identified the non-scientific bases of medical practices, they encouraged women to form their own scientific understanding and take control over their bodies. Feminists believed this was a way to empower women to find their own knowledge of their bodies and to not let men continue to control the rhetoric about women’s health in the medical field.

Feminists also believed that changing the rhetoric of reproductivity and menstruation by promoting individuality was a way for women to gain control of their bodies and their lives. As birth control reduced the chance of reproductivity, feminists saw an opportunity for women to be able to explore their interests, their bodies, and their sexuality. The Women’s Health Collective celebrated that through birth control “women are given choices” about whether or not to have children or to get married.⁴⁸ In addition to moving away from reproductivity, feminists in the Women’s Health Collective were encouraged to discover their needs and understand themselves instead of settling down and having a family.⁴⁹ Although feminists explained that women still had a choice, they promoted that reproductivity should not be their only choice. With a focus on women’s agency, feminists saw individuality as liberating women and reproductivity confining and limiting women’s bodies.

Feminists also saw birth control as liberating to women as it allowed women sexual freedom and flexibility to fully function in activities and society. The Women’s Health Collective explained that the pill enabled women to explore sexuality without fear of becoming pregnant, which helped women to gain control over their bodies and sexual desires.⁵⁰ Feminists, such as Ramsey in “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?”, also framed birth control as a positive tool to help “spare a woman [from] the flow of blood.”⁵¹ Other feminists, such as Luschen and Pierce in their 1972 article in the Journal of

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Sex, discussed how the pill kept women’s hormones and effects in check and prevented any premenstrual and menstrual discomforts. These feminists saw birth control as improving women’s bodies and their ability to function and perform daily tasks while menstruating and lessening discomforts or pain. Freidenfelds, in her 2009 *The Modern Period*, explains how birth control for women in the 1970s, “alleviated much of the previous shame, confusion, discomfort and frustrating lack of control” over women’s bodies that menstruation caused.

Feminists also saw that creating and promoting new methods to manage women’s menstrual cycles liberated and helped women to function more easily in their daily routines. For instance, Landsberg’s “Unmasking the Curse” (1974) taught that menstruation management practices enabled women to perform any job or duty that a man could do, even while menstruating. She explains that the innovation of the tampon specifically has been “one of the greatest liberating factors in many women’s physical lives, outside of the birth control pill.” New menstruation management practices gave new shape to the menstruation rhetoric as Landsberg expresses that despite “authorities” who claim that menstruation causes women to be “unfit to be an airline pilot, athlete, or anything other than a drudge, experts are finally proving that a woman’s actual performance is very little affected by the cycle,” menstruation should not hold women back in their daily routines anymore. Her message to women suggests that there are more efficient ways to manage menstruation cycles that will help women participate in society, provide comfort, flexibility, and convenience for women’s lives.

Encouraging women to be in the workforce became a key part of the movement as feminists saw this as improving women’s positions in society. 1970s feminist scholars like Landsberg saw suppressing the menstrual cycle for women to be in the workplace enabled women in the movement to move towards equality. Moreover, modern scholars like Freidenfelds argue that forcing menstruation to be in the background of “self-presentation” and “bodily sensation” enabled the women’s movement to produce a “wealthier and more equitable society” with men and women taking an active role. Second-wave feminists saw that downplaying women’s expe-

54 Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 64.
57 Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 64.
periences with menstruation and placing women in the workforce became steps towards liberating women from their domestic lives.

Although feminists intended to liberate and empower women, in some ways their framing of menstruation reinforced oppressive and problematic ideas about women’s bodies and menstruation. Indeed, the women’s movement became, in part, about suppressing menstruation and conforming to the male body and male ideas. For example, Luschen and Pierce, in “Effect of the Menstrual Cycle on Mood and Sexual Arousability,” discussed how some feminists used birth control to reduce the menstrual cycle and be free from the “discomforts” of menstruation. Other feminists, such as Ramsey in “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?,” pushed to “safely abolish” menstrual periods, so women could do everything that men do. In some ways, feminists made the women’s movement about making the female body act like the male body, and, in order to be liberated, there was no place for menstruation in the women’s movement. The movement became about suppressing menstruation, by any means, in order for women to be equal and liberated.

Suppressing the menstrual cycle became a recurring message promoted by feminists, which created problematic views and attitudes of menstruation. For instance, Landsberg’s 1974 “Unmasking the Curse” emphasized the need for women to suppress their bodily experiences and place themselves in the workforce. Similarly, Edmiston’s 1975 “Out From Under” suggested that “working, being active and fit” would help women feel better while menstruating. These feminists proposed minimizing the experience and significance of menstruation in a woman’s body in order to achieve equality. Minimizing the menstrual cycle minimized the relationship and experience a woman has with her body. Reducing and suppressing that cycle suppresses a woman’s body and the role it plays in what makes her a woman. Wendy Kline’s 2010 Bodies of Knowledge claims that feminists positioned the female body “at the center of the women’s liberation movement,” but Landsberg and Edmiston promoted pushing the menstrual cycle in the background for women to be liberated. Scholars like Freidenfelds, likewise emphasize that methods to suppress menstruation such as birth control actually put “menstruation and all of its hormonal effects in the background, suppressed, and hidden.”

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60 Ramsey, “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?” 44.
61 Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 58.
63 Kline, “Bodies of Knowledge,” 99.
64 Freidenfelds, The Modern Period, 8–9.
feminists in the movement sought to liberate women by reducing their periods, some messages of menstruation promoted the suppression of women’s bodies as they encouraged women to hide and minimize their menstrual periods from society.

Ironically, many of the expert feminists turned to male doctors’ and male gynecologists’ ideas on menstruation, which conflicted with second-wave feminists’ goals of moving away from male narratives on women’s bodies. Ramsey’s “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?” cited male gynecologists’ ideas that claim menstruation as “harmful to women’s health” and proposed to her readers to remove the menstrual cycle altogether.65 While supposedly asserting new ideas about menstruation, men continued to control the narrative of menstruation as feminists, like Ramsey, conformed to male ideologies and male control over women’s bodies. While other scholars claim women made “real gains” toward women controlling their bodies in the women’s movement, Ramsey’s reliance on male narratives of menstruation and the promotion of removing the menstrual cycle suggests this was not the case.66

In addition to problematic narratives on menstruation, tensions arose among feminists on how to challenge suppressive narratives on menstruation. Not all feminists promoted problematic views of menstruation and women’s bodies. Some challenged suppressive narratives in more fundamental ways. In the “Women and their Bodies” health collective, some feminists criticised the women’s movement ideas of birth control and indicated that birth control prioritized “making a profit” and making money off of “women’s ignorance.”67 While some feminists promoted birth control as one of the keys to liberate women in the movement, others recognized that it suppressed the menstrual cycle and constrained women’s bodies. Feminists like Paula Weideger, in her 1977 *Menstruation and Menopause: The Physiology and Psychology, the Myth and the Reality*, also recognized that suppressing women’s menstrual cycle did not liberate women’s bodies. Weideger states, “The substance of a woman includes her monthly bleeding and her monthly cycles. If women are to experience life fully, this reality must be reclaimed.”68 Feminists like Weideger and those in the women’s health collective identified harmful messages of menstruation and challenged this narrative in effective ways. However, problematic

narratives of menstruation clearly became the more promoted and accepted narratives in the women's movement, which insinuated negative and oppressive attitudes of menstruation.

Despite the legal and social advances feminists made towards women's liberation, some women referred to the menstrual cycle negatively and viewed themselves as weak. “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?,” for instance, surveyed females’ attitudes of menstruation and demonstrated women referring to their monthly periods as “the curse . . . the sickness . . . the wrong time of the month.” The survey suggests that attitudes of menstruation and women’s bodies did not liberate women’s views of themselves. Ramsey argued to eliminate menstruation, a physiological function of a woman’s body, as a solution to the problem. But removing the menstrual cycle would mean removing a key role of a woman’s femininity and having a female body become more like the male body. As feminists restructured the menstruation narrative to liberate women in the movement, they encouraged negative beliefs of women’s bodies and womanhood by suppressing the menstrual cycle and set up the idea that becoming like the male body would help liberate women. While feminists desired to step away from traditional, harmful views of women, they reinforced patterns of oppressing women’s bodies while praising men’s bodies, as the menstruation stigma remained unresolved.

Naturally a Girl: Instructing the Younger Generation

Second-wave feminists also sought to change menstruation education for young women. Traditional instructions to teenage girls taught that menstruation could be used as an excuse to sit out of gym class or rest at home. Johnson & Johnson’s Personal Products Division Naturally a Girl, an educational video distributed to sex education classes in the 1970s, emphasized the idea that menstruation is not something to hold a girl back. While earlier social hygiene films told girls to not swim and rest the first few days of getting their periods to prevent “getting chills and catching a cold,” Naturally a Girl showed young girls as actively participating in class, sports, and activities, and then cut to older women working

in their professions.\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Naturally a Girl} encouraged young women to be active, even while menstruating. Through newer menstrual education videos, feminists sought to raise young women on second-wave feminism ideas, such as promoting young women to be active.

\textit{Naturally a Girl} also taught young girls to embrace their developmental years and their “newfound femininity.”\textsuperscript{72} While earlier menstruation education films taught that menstruation is “a curse,” 1970s films taught that menstruation “is natural” and can be something to “look forward to.”\textsuperscript{73} Like educational films, 1970s fictional novels targeted towards young women also reinforced positive menstruation attitudes. Menstruation is heavily underrepresented in novels and literature at this time, but as part of the push back, feminists reframed menstruation attitudes in books such as Judy Blume’s \textit{Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret}.\textsuperscript{74} The story is about Margaret, a young girl entering womanhood, going through developmental changes. Throughout the book, Margaret welcomes her period and is excited to become a woman. The author encourages young women to think of menstruation the way Margaret does, to embrace the changes that occur in their bodies.

Feminists also promoted what they deemed as appropriate ways to act and appear when menstruating. Companies such as Playtex and Tampax developed new menstruation management strategies at the turn of the second-wave feminist movement by, which feminists promoted as tools to give young women and women more flexibility and activity in their daily lives.\textsuperscript{75} As part of these management products, feminists marketed “menstrual etiquette,” promoting products such as the tampon, thinner pads, and the pill as methods to help minimize leakage and provide comfort during a potentially painful week of menstrual flow.\textsuperscript{76} In a feminist magazine, Playtex advertised their new deodorant tampon and compared it to other generic companies with non-deodorant tampons. While promoting its product, Playtex emphasized the importance of “protection,”


\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Naturally a Girl}.

\textsuperscript{73} Molly Grows Up; \textit{Naturally a Girl}.


“odor,” and “comfort” for a woman when menstruating and explained it provided women the safety of preventing leakage, absorbing menstrual blood, and smells, as the tampons came scented to hide any unwanted menstrual smells. Naturally a Girl also advertised menstrual management products such as Makers of Modess Sanitary Panties, Stayfree mini-pads and maxi-pads, Modess tampons, and Carefree tampons that enabled young women to appear socially acceptable when menstruating. With this new “menstrual etiquette,” feminists framed menstruation as able to be managed properly and thoroughly to prevent public view and exposure.

While promoting menstruation as something to be managed, feminists also presented the idea to young women that menstruation was an unnecessary part of their sexual development. Like Ramsey’s “Is Menstruation Really Necessary?,” Louise Fitzhugh's fictional novel, The Long Secret, is about three young girls approaching menarche who wish to remove and “cure” menstruation. Fitzhugh was one of the first to present menstruation in a fictional novel and portrays menstruation as an unnecessary function of a woman's body. Two of her young female characters, Harriet and Beth, learn about menstruation through their older teenage friend, Janie. Armed with her age and experience, Janie tells her younger friends that menstruation is good for reproductivity, but she doesn't have plans to have children herself and said, “I’m working on a cure for people that don’t want babies, so they don’t have to do this.” Janie is determined to find a cure “one way or the other if it’s the last thing I do” and simply doesn’t care for it. Fitzhugh portrays her ideas of menstruation and women through Janie who is a strong and confident woman that aspires to be a career woman. While the feminist movement aimed to promote women in the workforce, Fitzhugh dedicated her novel toward explaining that menstruation needed a cure so women could work, and little girls could strive to be working women instead of domestic mothers.

Empowering or Hindering Young Women?

Some feminists saw their menstruation rhetoric as a way to empower young women to be a part of the movement and to improve menstruation attitudes for young women approaching menarche. Feminists thought

77 Playtex Deodorant Tampons, “This Month. Next Month.” 32.
78 Naturally a Girl.
80 Fitzhugh, The Long Secret. 94.
81 Fitzhugh, The Long Secret, 97.
that by raising the next generation on principles such as being active, working, and managing and controlling their bodies and menstrual cycles, they could move the women’s movement forward and foster perceptions of women as an equal sex.82 When promoting educational videos such as Naturally a Girl, feminists sought to improve the previously limiting menstruation narrative and turn it into a narrative that could empower young girls to understand and embrace their changing bodies. Similarly, Blume’s novel, Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret, promoted menstruation as being a sign of womanhood that should be celebrated, as demonstrated by Margaret who cried tears of joy and celebrated with her mother when her period came.83 Feminists, like Blume, sought to empower menstruation and adolescence for young women and comfort young women’s fears and uncertainties that surround sexual development.84

Promoting menstruation etiquette was also seen by feminists as creating flexibility, comfort, and convenience for women transitioning into womanhood that would enable women to be active and take part in the feminist movement. Ads such as Playtex Tampons demonstrated how menstruation could be manageable for young girls and didn’t have to slow them down in their activities.85 Second-wave feminists saw menstrual etiquette as providing comfort and convenience for young women to do their daily activities and be active. They promoted the idea that young women didn’t have to change their day-to-day lives because they were menstruating. Feminists indicated that new menstrual management methods such as the tampon, pads, and the pill could lessen young women’s fear of their bodily changes and prioritized being involved and active, even while menstruating.

Although feminists sought to improve young women’s attitudes and education of menarche, in some ways their strategies hindered young women’s experiences with their bodily changes and reinforced negative views of menstruation. Despite the changes to menstruation education that feminists brought forward, feminists promoted menstruation as necessarily secretive and concealed, which confused and inhibited some women’s attitudes. For instance, in her 1993 “The Day I Became a Woman,” Sandra Silver, interviewed a number of young women about their experi-

82 Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 58.
83 Blume, Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret, 148.
85 Playtex Deodorant Tampons, “This Month. Next Month.” 32.
ences with menstrual education in the 1970s. One girl said, “I was angry and confused, despite all the instructions I had received. I was the only girl in a family of six and resented this final proof that I was different.” Carefree Tampons and Naturally a Girl also promoted menstruation management products that would conceal menstrual flow so “nothing can leak through or show” and be kept hidden from their peers. In many ways, feminists promoted rhetoric that attempted to convey positive views of menstruation but, at the same time, focused on concealing and hiding a part of women’s bodies, which in some ways limited young women’s views of their bodies.

In addition to keeping menstruation secretive and concealed in sex education courses, feminists also limited dialogue about menstruation outside of the classroom. Freidenfelds, in The Modern Period, suggests that when second-wave feminists altered menstruation education, many mothers left it to the education system for young women to understand their developmental changes in their bodies. Carlen Joyce Thomas, a teenager during the women’s movement, discussed her menstruation learning experience, explaining the limited rhetoric and dialogue of menstruation she had at home. Rather than teaching and discussing what menstruation is, her mother simply gave her Blume’s Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret; she meant it as a source for information and told Carlene to search for any questions she might have, but a conversation never followed. Amanda Chen also reflected on her lack of conversations with her mom about menstruation. She recalled: “I think she assumed that we’d learn it at school, and it would get taken care of.” Landsberg’s 1974 “Unmasking the Curse” encouraged mothers and fathers to watch educational films to help transition conversation about sexual development from school to home. If the experiences of Thomas and Chen are any indication of how the transition went, they tell us that menstruation talks did not happen in the home between mothers and daughters during the women’s movement.

89 Freidenfelds, The Modern Period, 62.
90 Freidenfelds, The Modern Period, 63.
91 Freidenfelds, The Modern Period, 63–64.
92 Landsberg, “Unmasking the Curse,” 64.
Even in second-wave feminist homes, young women were left confused about their menstrual cycles and had to find information for themselves.

Feminists promoting menstruation etiquette also conveyed problematic attitudes towards menstruation culture, as menstruation etiquette supported concealment and secrecy. Companies like Playtex and Tampax promoted parameters of acceptable behavior to teach young girls that menstruating should be “invisible” and protected from the sight of men and the public. Menstruation management advertisements suggested that young women should conceal their periods physically and socially, to prevent embarrassment or shame. Scholar Karen Houppert, in her 1999 *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo*, affirms that feminists created menstrual etiquette through ads, movies, young-adult novels, and women’s magazines that led women to self-consciously hide their unopened tampons in the bathroom and to feel ashamed if they smelled or leaked when menstruating. Menstruation etiquette revolved around preventing menstrual blood from showing, smelling, and being discussed in conversation and complicated positive breakthroughs of new menstruation management practices as feminists promoted menstruation being ostracized from public view.

In addition to promoting problematic views of menstruation etiquette, feminists also portrayed menstruation as something to be concealed and even cured. For instance, Fitzhugh’s *The Long Secret* portrayed menstruation as unnecessary through the main character, Janie. Janie voices her disgust over menstruation to the two other girls, saying that it is “icky” and “has absolutely nothing to recommend it.” Janie also deemed menstruation as something to be cured and “done away with” as she explains her desire to “end it.” Fitzhugh promoted a negative perspective on menstruation that can be harmful for young women approaching menarche. In short, some feminists promoted and encouraged menstruation to be a stigma and something that hinders women. Instead of empowering and liberating women’s bodies, they promoted shaming this bodily function and constraining women’s bodies. The menstruation rhetoric, marketed by second-wave feminists, in some ways perpetuated a negative view of women and young women’s bodies as menstruation was presented as needing to be cured, concealed, and hidden.

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93 Playtex, “This Month, Next Month,” 32; “Tampax,” 40.
New Blood, New Perspectives: Conclusion

The menstruation rhetoric in the second-wave feminist movement has influenced menstrual attitudes in society today. Contemporary feminist scholars continue to attempt changing menstruation rhetoric for women and young girls to embrace their menstrual cycles as part of their femininity. For instance, Hufnagel, in her 2012 *A History of Women’s Menstruation*, promotes menstruation as a positive experience to be celebrated like any other life development experience such as births, weddings, and deaths, which are “greeted with formalized rituals to mark the change in life status.”\(^7\) Like Ntozake Shange’s example of Sister Mary Louise celebrating Indigo’s womanhood in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, we also see celebrations of the menstrual period happening in contemporary culture, where women throw “period parties,” wear red clothing, and participate in tribal “coming-of-age” ceremonies, as a way to destigmatize the event.\(^8\) In popular culture and most women’s lived experiences, however, menstruation remains largely something to hide.

In various companies, menstruation is still marketed and encouraged to be hidden and concealed from public view. For instance, like Tampax Incorporated’s 1972 ads that emphasized their tampons as “invisible” to others, Tampax Compak in 2015 also created a tampon applicator that easily “opened silently for full discretion.”\(^9\) This suggests that discretion and hiding your menstrual period remain important in menstruation rhetoric. Similarly, Softcup’s advertisement for their disposable menstrual cup in 2015 promoted that “you can menstruate and have sex,” as the Softcup was designed to hide your menstrual cycle, “to keep him from


knowing” and go about your sex life. Softcup’s proposed idea to hide your menstrual cycle from your sex partner indicates menstruation being a social stigma and asserts that hiding your period will give you a more enjoyable sex life.

The menstruation management narrative in the past and present demonstrates how concealing and hiding menstruation is still a part of everyday thinking. Journalist Julie Beck in her 2015 book, Don’t Let Them See Your Tampons affirms how blood is only visible and acceptable behind “closed doors” as “women’s public bathrooms have special trash cans in the stalls so feminine products can be disposed of neatly and privately.” How does this influence women’s relationships with their bodies if the media and the public encourage suppressing, concealing, and hiding a part of their bodies? In The Body Project, scholar Joan Jacobs Brumberg suggests that women in contemporary times are “more vulnerable than ever before” as culture reinforces the body to be “an all-consuming project” and damages women and young women’s internalized perceptions of themselves. Being a woman is “riddled[ed] with uncertainties and complications” that society has yet to unfold in menstruation rhetoric, yet society defines how women are allowed to think, talk, and feel about their menstruating bodies. Menstruation continues to be marked with shame and silence despite, and perhaps in part because of, second-wave feminist ideologies.

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