

Introduction: Menstrual Rhetorics and Girlhood Culture

Jen Almjeld and Sarah Hagelin

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Aunt Flo. That Time of the Month. The Curse. Crimson Wave. We've dedicated so many words—or sometimes none at all—to avoid naming a biological reality that affects roughly half of the population. Menstruation has long been shrouded in mystery, fear, and shame and when we bother to talk about it, we do so in coded language or in jest. Periods are rarely something taken seriously or discussed critically. Neither, unfortunately, are girls and their lived experiences.

This special issue brings together an often-marginalized topic—menstruation—and a group of people marginalized by both age and gender—girls—to consider ways an event often imagined as a rite of passage for girls has widely varying impacts based on differences in gender, race, socio-economic status, religion, familial history, and any number of other factors. The story of periods is not one story. Like so much feminist rhetoric, period rhetorics are embodied, intersectional, evolving, and controversial.

While menstruation is not directly tied to girlhood, as many trans and nonbinary bodies menstruate, popular culture generally links the two. As scholars interested in screens, and fond of discussing gender representations online and in media, we first came to this topic with the release of the 2023 adaptation of Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Our shared interest in film studies, feminist rhetorics, and social media spaces made us interested in evolving representations of menstruation as both liminal space between adolescence and adulthood and as a site of trauma and fear. Soon we were seeing periods and men-

Jen Almjeld is a professor of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. Her work centers on gendered rhetorics, in particular rhetorics of girlhood playing out on social media and other digital spaces and ways the cultural narratives of girlhood shape available identities for girls and female-identifying folks of all ages. Almjeld has designed and led afterschool and summer camp programs centering on girlhood and leadership and digital girlhood at three universities and her current book project investigates the narratives of fatness and femininity available to girls on TikTok and Instagram. Her work has appeared in *Girlhood Studies*, *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, *Computers and Composition*, and *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*. She is a past host of the Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference and current member of the Coalition Advisory Board.

Sarah Hagelin is a professor of English at the University of Colorado Denver, where she offers courses in film history, film theory, gender studies, and popular culture. She is the author of *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Pain, and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television* (Rutgers University Press, 2013), as well as essays in *Signs*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Her most recent book, co-authored with Gillian Silverman, *The New Female Antihero: The Disruptive Women of Twenty-First Century Television* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), was awarded the Susan Koppelman Award for Best Multi-Authored Book in Feminist Studies. She is affiliated faculty in the Women's and Gender Studies Program and works regularly with CU Denver's Center for Faculty Development and Advancement, where she runs mentoring circles for new faculty members.

acing female bodies everywhere. With the reboot of *Mean Girls* (Samantha Jayne and Arturo Perez, Jr., 2024) and the investigations of female subjectivity in *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023) and *Poor Things* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023), we see Hollywood grappling with bodies marked female. On the small screen, shows like *Black-ish* (2014-2022), *Sex Education* (2019-2023) and *Anne with an E* (2017-2019) include episodes focusing on first periods or discussing menstruation from the point of view of a young person. In fact, a recent viewing of the Netflix series *Pulse* featured a 9-year-old with toxic shock syndrome who, embarrassed to tell her parents she had started her period, got a tampon from older girls and left it in for days. Once you start seeing menstrual rhetorics and paying attention to what we tell kids about periods—that they are either magical and life-affirming or dangerous and threatening—you can’t unsee it.

Mainstream media has a long history of portraying menstruation as either terrifying and monstrous, as it is in *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), or as a joke that others women and girls while treating the male body as “normal.” The growing visibility of trans children and their fight for gender-affirming care further complicates notions of maleness and femaleness as related to menstruation and tied to biological sex, making the “period wars” an especially fruitful site for feminist cultural analysis at this moment. With legal and political battles raging around definitions of gendered bodies and childhood itself, feminist work on girlhood is necessary. Female-identified people of all ages, as well as trans and nonbinary folks, face increasing bodily surveillance and discrimination, especially given the recent right-wing takeover of all three branches of the federal government. Our bodies are being regulated in terrifying ways by courts and legislatures and the ability to menstruate is often central to debates about how bodies are gendered as well as which bodies “matter” (Butler, 2011). Importantly, how menstruation affects trans and nonbinary kids and adults is both central to such political discourse and also curiously under-studied. While our culture seems happy to surveil, sell to, and offer advice on a myriad of body issues for girls and women (weight loss, skin care, hair maintenance, etc.), talking about menstruation remains largely metaphorical and often stigmatized.

Nearly two decades ago, girlhood scholars Natalie Adams and Pamela Bettis explained that “Girls’ Studies scholars, who often draw from mass and popular culture in their research, are perceived as engaging in less-weighty feminist scholarship” (2005: 3). Just three years later, the *Girlhood Studies* journal was established in 2008 by Claudia Mitchell, Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, and Jackie Kirk and the journal remains dedicated to girls’ experiences, practices, and literacies. A decade earlier, rhetoric scholars worked to reclaim the literary contributions and literacy practices of women (Glenn 1997; Ritchie and Ronald 2001), but the relevance of girls’ texts as objects of study often received less consideration. This remains particularly true of menstruation literacies, practices, and depictions related to girlhood.

Recently, girls and periods turned out to be a rich space of inquiry for Almjeld and the 20 undergraduates in her fall 2024 Feminist Rhetorics course when they created an exhibit for [Girl Museum](#). This virtual museum, founded in 2009 by Head Girl and historian Ashley Reemer, is run by a global team dedicated to “advancing girls’ rights today [and] sharing stories that celebrate girls and their contributions” (“Impact”). In

a collaborative assignment about girls and menstruation, the students created the Girls.Period exhibit which went live in May and covers biological processes of the menstrual cycle, popular—and often harmful—representations of periods, pink tax implications for menstruation, and the myths and shaming associated with periods. Without much direction, the 18 cis-female and two cis-male students intuitively understood both to the power of personal, lived menstruation experiences as well as the lack of real information available to menstruators, the casual shaming and disgust levied at menstruating bodies, and the discomfort most feel in discussing the topic.

This issue is a scholarly contribution to these sorts of discussions centered on girls and periods. The issue features eight articles that consider girlhood and menstruation from a variety of perspectives: in young adult literature, in online teen magazines, in healthcare, in activism, and as deeply personal, embodied experience. We see this issue creating space to talk seriously, critically, and from multiple perspectives about an experience steeped in cultural and political misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

The issue brings together scholars from different disciplines, each of whom investigates a unique aspect of menstruation in the social worlds of menstruators. An incredibly well-researched piece by **Lindsay Toman** and **R Hunsicker** offers an important overview of legal and medical barriers facing trans youth, particularly those dealing with often-unwanted menstruation. The piece positions menstruation as both a trigger for devastating gender dysphoria as well as a potential tool for gender identity affirmation for some menstruating trans youth and offers up menstruation as a point of connection for multiple genders, including cisgender women and girls, trans boys and men, and nonbinary people. Using one-on-one interviews with parents, healthcare professionals, and 10- and 17-year-old trans boys and nonbinary (AFAB) adolescents, the study examines how menstruation impacts gender identity construction, as well as explores young people's experiences navigating menstruation-related conversations with healthcare professionals. Amenorrhea (the absence of menstrual periods) is one of the health complications Toman and Hunsicker explore. It is also the topic of **Molly McConnell's** creative nonfiction essay investigating the liminal spaces of disordered eating and girlhood. This moving and insightful autobiographical account traces the ways the absence of a period may serve as a “red line” for knowing when disordered eating had gotten out of control. This embodied tale considers ways periods might serve as physical and emotional signals when things might be amiss and the role menstruation plays in some people's self-perception and sense of worth.

Shifting to information available to menstruators, **Melissa Stone** and **Hannah Taylor** consider the role of menstruation manuals—produced both by companies marketing menstrual products as well as activists and education experts—in the physical and social development of girls, particularly in regards to menarche (one's first menstrual cycle). In particular, the authors consider menstruation manuals' “complicated existence as artifacts that can at once be helpful apparatuses for discovering one's body and norming devices that position menstruation management as a one-size-fits-all experience.” Taylor and Stone see such manuals as agentic texts actively shaping girls' lived experiences of menstruation and offering limited options for the “becoming of girls.” In a similar vein, **Risa Applegarth** compiles an archive of 17 digital menstrual activism

toolkits from a variety of organizations—educational, religious, activist—and makes a powerful case for the way these resources scaffold and support the embodied performances of young activists. Using the rhetorical genre studies concept of *uptake*, Applegarth suggests that these toolkits can empower activists of all ages to gain embodied expertise. This expertise, with its roots in experience, vulnerability, and agency instead of the more conventionally-valued academic training and age, allows girls to claim their identities as activists and as agents.

LA EL connects social media and filmic representations of menstruation to an explicit social justice schema, exploring menstrual justice in the context of Gaza, using a disability justice framework to call for an end to occupation and the ungendering of menstruation. Analyzing a variety of social media posts alongside the 2021 film *Farha* (Darin J. Sallam), this groundbreaking essay suggests that both the rhetorics and representations of menstruation cannot be separated from a demand for justice for all people. By elevating Palestinian voices on social media, EL contests the silencing of those who suffer under occupation. And, by insisting that (contra the commonplace description of menstruation as the onset of womanhood) menstruating girls are children, not women, they combat the erasure of Palestinian childhood so endemic in Western media. The relationships between childhood and menarche are also at issue in **Olivia Kumiko McDuffie's** essay on the 2022 animated film *Turning Red* (Domee Shi) in conversation with the 1976 puberty-horror classic *Carrie* (Brian De Palma). McDuffie's insightful reading of these films shows that while both films associate the menstruating body with fear and abjection, adolescent protagonists Carrie White and Mei Lee also find in menstruation a source of primal power. This timely essay argues that *Carrie's* central character succumbs to power as destruction while *Turning Red* offers a different, hopeful vision. This vision places menstrual communities at the center of a more positive form of representation for menstruators of all kinds.

Kelsey Hawkins considers the way negative associations with menstruation—stigma, shame, fear—shape the affective experiences of those who menstruate. Weaving memoir-esque feminist memory-work and critical discourse analysis, this innovative essay analyzes the online magazine *Rookie Mag* (2011-2018), uncovering the ways that “period talk” among and by girls allows young people to “do” menstrual girlhood. Hawkins highlights girls' digital rhetoric practices, which help them push back on gender norms and reimagine their relationships to the menstruating body. Such depictions and “period talk” has shifted over the years, and much of it has not. **Sarah LeBlanc** and **Kate White** consider generational shifts in depictions of periods in their fascinating textual analysis of popular girl-centric books and films from the perspective of Gen X MotherScholars both studying menarche and also simultaneously preparing for this moment with their own Gen Alpha children. This important contribution elucidates the messages popular media offers menstruators, particularly in ways menarche, or the onset of one's first period, is positioned as competition, as shared practice between women and girls and one hidden from boys and men.

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