The Missing Period:
Bodies and the Elision of Menstruation in Young Adult Literature

by

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ABSTRACT
This thesis investigates the representation of bodies in young adult literature, using Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games as a contemporary case study. It probes the anxieties that abound in contemporary notions of the body, the ways we are comfortable discussing the body and what bodily issues cause disquiet. In particular, I argue that a close analysis of The Hunger Games reveals a concern about the relation between labor and the body, a relation that privileges productivity at the risk of alienating the embodied individual from herself. Chapter one uses Marxist theories to illuminate the ways in which the novel critiques consumer culture and dehumanizing labor practices. The emphasis on productivity is superlative within the text; the bodies found within it are essentially mined to produce consumer goods. Chapter two analyzes the elision of menstruation within the text itself and then the cultural norms that give rise to menstruation’s persistent absence in public discourse.

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To Matt and Julie: Trust your community. Drop the mic.
DEDICATION

To my mother. While some parents might ask if you have pocket money, my mom always asks if I have book money.
Introduction

Our materiality (which includes history, race, gender, and so forth as well as the biology and evolutionary history of our bodies and our dependence on the natural environment) impinges on us—shapes, constrains, and empowers us—both as thinkers and knowers and also as ‘practical,’ fleshly bodies. (Bordo 182)

Knights, space crusaders, and moody antiheroes ran amuck in the literature of my youth. An avid reader, I read from sunup to sundown and beyond; I devoured books, especially those featuring strong female protagonists, adventurers struggling actively to refashion the world into a more just and equal environment. To be sure, the novels I read shaped the woman I am today; they inspired in me a deep appreciation for gender equality that directly affects my understanding of and engagement with the world around me. This should come as no surprise. Literature is power.

Just as my penchant for courageous female dragon slayers inculcated in me the notion that women were strong—physically, emotionally, and mentally—so, too, did a curious elision mark my developing understanding of the world and my place within it. It began as I grew older and was wooed by the wave of vampire fiction still cresting in popular culture. Eventually, I noticed a peculiar absence, one that vampire fiction is particularly well suited to illustrate. Far from the monstrous vampires of yesteryear, contemporary interpretations of the vampire consist of a crop of misunderstood men who abstain from terrorizing villagers and instead simply pout habitually and sip blood. They are men entranced by the blood of their female love interests. For all of the emphasis placed on their peccadillo, for all of the drama that comes with their need to imbibe blood, one glaring oversight persists: the elision of menstruation. Why?

Menstruation exists. Women bleed. Yet, the world of literature, with the occasional
exception, ignores this fact. Once I became aware of its absence, I reviewed the books of
my youth and discovered that, even in literature aimed at young women, menstruation is
denied on the level of the narrative. A troubling fact, as this elision sends a detrimental
subliminal message that shapes the development of adolescents, especially young
women, as it potentially skews their understanding of their very own bodies.

Even a cursory study of American culture demonstrates a noteworthy schism
between the mind and the body. From Anne Bradstreet’s *The Flesh and the Spirit*, which
celebrates the division, to Whitman’s *I Sing the Body Electric*, which seeks to remedy it,
American literature has, from the very start, offered intriguing insight into our society’s
relationship with the body. We are bodies located in history and steeped in culture and to
suggest otherwise is foolhardy at best and corrosive at worst. Literature is one of many
cultural sites in which our conception of the body is actively constructed, and
contemporary literature taps into the conversation as it unfolds, rendering it a unique
locus of commentary. It reveals how we understand the body, how and what we as a
culture are willing to discuss. In particular, young adult literature is an especially
provocative genre as it helps shape the way that the adolescent thinks of herself even as
she is physically developing. Thus this habitual elision of menstruation is particularly
disturbing in young adult literature, as it fosters the taboo in a new generation.

In *Two Bodies*, anthropologist Mary Douglas asserts that “[t]he physical body is a
microcosm of society” that reflects a culture’s values (Douglas 80). Responding to
Marcel Mauss’ claim that bodily actions are steeped in culture and thus distant from
nature, Douglas argues for a recognition of two bodies: the social and the biological.
Douglas does not deny the influence of society on the body; rather, she acknowledges a
natural, biological body that is then ordered by society, thus creating a secondary social body. According to her, if there is something universal about the body, it is the interplay between these two bodies. In particular, the social body regulates the biological; take, for example, the suppression of bodily functions in public. The suppression of menstruation expresses society’s urge to deny the body; it also suggests a persistent devaluing of women and the female experience. This has grave implications for young adult literature, for if the elision of menstruation persists, then the genre risks reinscribing the taboo.

Young adult novels are a crucial ideological site actively navigating the boundaries between the social and biological body by disseminating cultural mores and norms. This study examines the presentation of bodies in young adult literature, using Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* as a contemporary case study. The novel is a tour de force actively engaging young readers. The extreme popularity of the novel amplifies the ability of young adult literature to impact an adolescent’s understanding of the body, making it an example of the genre that is particularly worth close study. Furthermore, *The Hunger Games* is preoccupied with the body; pus, vomit, urine, gaping wounds, all are present in the text. The novel illustrates both the ways we are willing to discuss the body as well as what we choose to elide.

Juxtaposed to the ubiquity of violence and blood found in the American media, the habitual absence of references to menstruation in public discourse signals an extreme discomfort with menstrual blood. Though the primary impetus for this project was to investigate the elision of menstruation in young adult literature, it is particularly difficult to examine taboo subjects. If the body is in truth a “microcosm of society,” then
analyzing menstruation alongside more familiar notions of the body provides an enlightening discussion. In the first section, I will discuss how *The Hunger Games* invokes a familiar, though still controversial, Marxist critique of the Western world’s entrenched consumer culture, a somewhat ironic criticism in a book with such noteworthy commercial success. The distorted bodies found within the novel act as a funhouse mirror reflecting America’s own complicated relationship with the body, and the hyperbolic consumerism and frenetic media system within the text parallel similar phenomena in modern American culture. Collins critiques consumer culture throughout the novel, exploring the detrimental effect such values have on the body and psyche.

In the second section, I first examine the elision of menstruation within *The Hunger Games*, which indicates our culture’s persistent taboo against frank discussions of menstruation. The entire premise of the series rests on violence. Death is a dominant theme, and there is an abundance of blood, murder, and mayhem. And yet, one form of bloodshed remains notably absent from the bloodbath—menstruation. While the body itself is denied its basic nature in the text, the series hyperbolizes the commodification of adolescent bodies found in our culture. Thus, a curious tension is born, a tension that mirrors our own culture’s hesitation and fascination with young bodies. While the text hyper-sexualizes the adolescent, it simultaneously denies menstruation, one of the most significant markers of young adulthood for women. Next, I analyze the culture of shame surrounding menstruation and offer analyses of representations of menstruation in two popular examples of young adult literature that directly address menstruation, Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.* and Tamora Pierce’s *Alanna: The First Adventure.*
Chapter One

Commodification of the Body: The Detrimental Effects of a Hyper-consumer Society

An action-packed dystopian tale with revolution at its root, *The Hunger Games* trilogy represents the bold new face of young adult literature. The series follows the gladiator style challenges forced upon teens in North America’s grim future. Following earth-shattering social upheaval and cataclysmic natural disasters a new country is born: Panem. Panem is a world characterized by constant surveillance, abject oppression, and ever-looming violence and starvation. A totalitarian government seated in the hyperbolically consumer-driven Capitol rules over twelve outlying districts. Each district is forced to produce a specific commodity to support the lavish lifestyle of citizens of the Capitol while the districts themselves languish in poverty, rendering *The Hunger Games* a classic tale of ‘the haves’ versus ‘the have-not’s.’

Ethical dilemmas with striking parallels to modern social justice issues abound in the text, for Collins consciously probes the fissures found in our own society. She picks at the wounds created by an economic system that allows for great disparity between groups of people, and, in doing so, offers a scathing critique of Western consumer culture. The hyperbolic presentation of a consumer culture found in *The Hunger Games* warns of the perils to be found if consumerism is followed to its extreme. The trilogy follows Katniss Everdeen, a young woman of sixteen living in this futuristic, post-apocalyptic America. Through her exploits the novel explores the impact of a consumer-driven totalitarian society on the body. The novel suggests that if the glorification of
consumer objects goes too far, humanity will suffer alienation from itself, alienation primarily reflected in how individuals interact with their own bodies.

In *Civilization and Psychosomatics*, Norbert Elias posits a crucial connection between the state regulation of violence and the prevalence of psychosomatic diseases. He proposes a linear progression of society that moves from more primitive societies marked by unregulated, reflex-driven violence to modern societies in which violence is regulated by the state. Though his linear presentation of social development, which seems to “naturally” march from less to more “civilized,” is simplistic, his theory offers a potential rationale for the state sanctioned violence in *The Hunger Games*. The state monopoly on violence is a significant theme within the series. The Capitol maintains its dominance by requiring the hyper-violent “games.” The titular games require two “tributes,” one male and one female adolescent, from each district. The ironically labeled tributes are then sent to fight to the death in a televised battle. Interestingly, even as it promotes violence amongst youths, the Capitol simultaneously believes itself to be the pinnacle of civilization.1 It would seem, then, that the Capitol is an exaggeration of Elias’ linear progression of society. Panem has followed Elias' civilization continuum to its extreme; the state’s monopoly on violence is so complete that it is able to force its citizen to commit violent acts. If the entire country of Panem were viewed as a body, then the Hunger Games, which pit the youth of Panem against

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1 In one telling scene, Katniss’ guide for her time in the Capitol congratulates her for being able to “overcome the barbarism of … [her] district” (Collins 74). In response, Katniss thinks, “Barbarism? That’s ironic coming from a woman helping to prepare us for slaughter. And what’s she basing this on? Our table manners?” (Collins 74).
one another in an annual fight to the death, is its sanctioned compartmentalization of violence, its psychosomatic symptom.

Panem is sick. The totalitarian government stymies the channels through which a body politic vents mass emotions—organized protests, rallies, marches, strikes, and public statements of discontent in the media—all are absent. Unable to express undercurrents of social turmoil, Panem has turned against itself. From the body politic to the physical landscape, the ramifications of a government with such extreme control reverberate throughout all levels of the country. The spectacle of the games may be the most dramatic illustration of Panem's illness, but the effects of the hyper-consumerist society also manifest significantly in the coercive labor system that affects the physical bodies of all citizens regardless of class, gender, or age. The tyrannical government seated in the Capitol enforces an exploitative colonial relationship between itself and the surrounding districts. In order to supply the Capitol with the material goods that it demands, the inhabitants of the districts must work to the point of exhaustion. They work as they starve, devoting time and effort to producing consumer goods instead of feeding themselves; they work until, in effect, they mine their very bodies to produce products. Symbolically, they transform into the very commodities they produce and offer themselves to the Capitol for consumption.

**Labor and the Body**

Today, over one hundred and twenty-nine years after the death of Karl Marx, the idea that laborers are often reduced to mere commodities is far from revolutionary.
Interestingly, for all of its noteworthy commercial success, *The Hunger Games* dramatizes several central tenets of Marxist theory, suggesting that the worker-cum-commodity remains a vital notion in our culture, perhaps because of our entrenched reliance on capitalism as an economic system. In *Estranged Labor*, Marx argues that “the worker sinks to the level of … the most wretched commodity” (Marx 3). Binary oppositions explain the untenable situation between the laborer and consumer. Labor produces “palaces” and “hovels,” “beauty” and “deformity,” and this inequality “casts some of the workers back into barbarous forms of labour and turns others into machines” (Marx 6). This is Panem: a world of intense disparity that reduces many to “wretched commodit[ies].” Vast, immutable social stratification characterizes the country, leaving the majority of its inhabitants to live on the verge of starvation while a small fraction live in a world of excess in the Capitol, a perverted paradise. Marx’s use of “beauty” and “deformity” predicts the physical damage suffered by the laborers of Panem as well as the virtual cult of beautification found within the Capitol, for to support the bacchanal culture of the Capitol, Panem forces an exploitative colonial regime upon the outlying districts.

The plight of District 12, Katniss's home district, exemplifies the parasitic relationship between the Capitol and the districts, the hyperbolic laborer and consumer. Katniss’ own neighborhood, which is “nicknamed the Seam,” (Collins 4) underscores the liminal space that the oppressed of District 12 occupy within the social structure of Panem. Exploitation dominates the relationship between the Capitol and the districts of Panem, much in the same way that traditional colonialism functioned. Each district provides a specific commodity to the Capitol, and, from the very start of their public
education, children are taught how to produce the commodities “needed” by the Capitol. District 12 is an area located in what used to be America's Appalachia region, and, unsurprisingly, it is responsible for providing the Capitol with coal. For generations, the people of District 12 have fallen lockstep into the path laid out for them by the Capitol. Forced to mine for coal, the only viable industry in the district, the bodies of those in the district have grown to reflect their subjugated status. They are “[m]en and women with _hunched_ shoulders, _swollen_ knuckles, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their _broken_ nails, the lines of their _sunken_ faces” (Collins 4, my emphasis). Just as the inhabitants of District 12 exploit the natural world for resources, so, too, does the Capitol exploit them. Work has warped their bodies and their “hunched shoulders,” “broken nails,” and “sunken faces,” mirror their vanquished agency.

Marx's theory of alienation clarifies the underlying dynamics that help suppress the will of the district laborers; he argues that labor estranges the worker from himself, for the product of the work is an object separate and alien from the worker. That the worker devotes himself to producing these alien objects in order to support himself prevents him from pursuing activities that would encourage him to grow as a human, and instead forces him to become “a slave of his object” (Marx 5). Caught in the cycle of producing to live and living to produce, the worker transforms into a mere “physical subject” (Marx 5). He remains trapped in a self-perpetuating system that only allows him the ability to live in the basest sense; “labour is _external_ to the worker … it does not belong to his essential being ... he therefore does not confirm himself in his work … does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his
mind” (Marx 6, original emphasis). Coercion supports the system, leading Marx to label this a form of forced labor.

The labor required by district inhabitants is more literally forced, as they exist in virtual imprisonment, both mentally and physically. As Marx theorizes, the caustic relationship between worker and labor spills over into how the worker engages with the natural world, rendering the environment “an alien world confronting him in hostile opposition” (Marx 7). An occasionally electrified fence circumscribes District 12, ostensibly to keep man-eating predators at bay and the inhabitants safe. In reality, the fence plays double agent and demarcates both the physical and mental restrictions placed on the subjects of the Capitol who inhabit the outlying districts that support its opulence. To the knowledgeable, the natural world surrounding District 12 offers a bounty of food and relative freedom. The fence offers no real physical hindrance to the determined. Yet, it is but a brave few who risk leaving the district. Further discouraging engagement with the natural world is the fact that the Capitol has deemed it illegal to go beyond the fence. In spite of widespread starvation and incessant oppression, few dare to cross the fence that is there “for their own safety.” Fear, fear of nonhuman predators, “the flesh-eaters … [the] venomous snakes, rabid animals, and…[lack of] real paths to follow” keep the subjects of District 12 safely within their Capitol prescribed lives (Collins 5). For the majority of District 12, the natural world has become a

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2 The Capitol’s urge to restrict access to the world beyond the districts reflects its need to control the population and subdue potential resources that would support a rebellion. Rumors of those able to escape the districts circulate continuously. Add to that the rumors of the infamous District 13, the sole district to rebel against the Capitol’s regime, and the root of the Capitol’s anxiety about curtailing access to the world beyond the districts becomes apparent. In an effort to minimalize the lure of rebellion, the Capitol periodically televises footage of District 13 as smoking radioactive ruins. As subsequent books show, however, District 13 is very much still thriving.
representation of the disconnect between laborer and the environment that Marx theorized.

In many ways, nature itself is an analog to the human body. As such, it is unsurprising that the negative relationship resulting from the labor system in Panem also creates an alarming relationship with nature. To summarize the essential relationship between man and nature, Marx writes: “Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature” (Marx 7-8, original emphasis).³ The dialogue between humanity and nature has been disrupted by the coercive labor system that is fundamental to Panem. The state sanctioned labor found within District 12 makes it virtually impossible for the majority of the inhabitants to gain either a healthy body or relationship with nature. Katniss is an exception to the rule in that she manages to engage with nature in a healthy manner, which leads to her developing physical strength. She then uses that strength in the Hunger Games to survive and eventually rebel against the Capitol.

Within the text, Katniss and the Capitol embody two opposing relationships with nature. While the Capitol exploits nature to suit its needs, Katniss avows a staunch affinity with nature, as demonstrated by her comfort within the wild woods surrounding her home district. As she notes early within the novel, she “never smile[s] except in the

³ Marx’s theories regarding the connection between man and nature participate in a long lineage of theoretical and philosophical work that explores the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Take, for instance, the American Transcendentalists, for whom nature was a fundamental aspect of the human experience.
woods” (Collins 6). Indeed, her very name—Katniss Everdeen—signals a connection to nature, for her first name is an edible plant she routinely harvests to feed her family, and her last name recalls the indomitable spirit of evergreen trees. Her rapport with the natural world is perhaps why Katniss is able to risk illegally leaving the district to hunt in the surrounding forest in order to provide food for her starving family. As a result, her time exploring and enjoying the natural world helps her develop a healthy body honed by physical exercise. Whereas the vast majority of District 12 lives in fear of the environment outside of the fence that curtails their world, Katniss ventures into the woods to feed her family and, in doing so, experiences a fleeting liberty. In this verdant space, Katniss develops both her own sense of self and the skills she will eventually use to survive in the Hunger Games. Tellingly, when she enters the arena for the games, which is in part a forest, she thinks that “[b]eing in the woods is rejuvenating” even given the life-threatening situation in which she finds herself (Collins 152). For her the woods take on an aura of American transcendentalism. Similar to Thoreau's urge to escape to Walden Pond to test his theories of self-reliance, so, too, does her decision to leave the controlled environment of the district and entering the forest offer Katniss a space to develop her agency and self-reliance.

Rather than capitulate fully to the oppressive regime masquerading as an earnest government, rather than becoming an effectual slave to the Capitol, Katniss instead walks in the woods. This gives her the physical and mental space needed to distance herself from the oppressive conditions of the Capitol. Significantly, it is only when she is beyond the fence and in the company of her confidant (a young man named Gale) that she allows herself to voice criticisms of the government, thus marking the world beyond
the fence as a potentially subversive space. Furthermore, venturing into the woods gives her access to a means of productive labor—hunting and gathering—that not only supports her and her family, but also gives her the goods to barter with in District 12's black market, thus further undermining the estranging labor system enforced by the Capitol. Engaging with (rather than exploiting) the natural world is validated within the text, suggesting to the reader that a healthy relationship with one’s own body as well as the world is predicated on a healthy relationship with the natural environment.

In contrast to Katniss' affinity with the natural world, the Capitol embraces artificiality over the natural. As she rides the tribute train into the Capitol, her first impression of the affluent splendor of the ruling city centers on its artificial character. She notes the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. All the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes, like the flat round disks of hard candy we can never afford to buy at the tiny sweet shop in District 12. (Collins 59)

Throughout the passage above, Katniss emphasizes the unnatural colors that are superlatives of themselves; the artificial colors are so intense that they inspire a negative bodily response from Katniss—“the yellows [are] painful to the eyes”—suggesting that there is a sinister element to their artificiality. Katniss observes the people of the Capitol as a foreigner might; she then distances herself from the citizens of the Capitol when she identifies them as akin to the candy she could never afford. Comparing them to a non-nutritious sugary treat suggests the people of the Capitol are similarly superficial, that they live in a world of indulgence and excess.
The willingness to modify the body and the world around them noted above also extends to how the Capitol interacts with nature. As a military tactic to end the rebellion that preceded Panem's birth, the Capitol created weapons out of insects and animals, willfully distorting nature to suit its power hungry ways. In one instance, the Capitol designed “jabberjays”—a species of birds that could mimic long passages of verbal communication. They were created to spy on the rebels and then return to the Capitol with strategic information. Realizing what the Capitol was doing, the rebel forces recited fallacious information for the birds to memorize. Once the flaw in their creation was discovered, the Capitol abandoned the jabberjays, trusting its creatures would die off in the wild. They did not. Instead, the birds bred with the mockingbirds in nature. As a result, a new species was born—the mockingjay. Thus nature triumphs and the Capitol and its destructive ways are denounced. The novel further marks the Capitol's destructive interaction with nature as reprehensible when the mockingjay becomes a symbol of the revolution (discussed in subsequent novels) in honor of Katniss, who wears it in the arena.

From a Marxist perspective, the forced labor supporting Panem's economic system is also the root of its illness. The very name of the country—Panem—recalls the infamous bread and circuses of the ill-fated Roman Empire, alluding to the oppressive nature of the country's government. The premise is simple: give the people food to eat and circuses to distract them, and injustice will be ignored and allowed to thrive. Panem, which means bread, represents the incessant struggle for sustenance that permeates all levels of society within the novel; the most obvious of which is the starvation suffered by those in the districts, which helps subdue their ability to resist. Even those with
enough to eat, however, are indirectly implicated in the nationwide paucity of food, for they stand by as countless others starve.

The spectacle of the games is the circuses used to distract the populace with the hopes of making them more complacent with their situation. For the inhabitants of the districts who risk losing their children, the games are a visceral reminder of their situation; they are a distraction in the sense that the games are a very real threat for inhabitants to focus on instead of directing their energy towards rebellion. Meanwhile, the people of the Capitol view the games as an entertaining spectacle, one that occludes the injustice of the situation. The disconnect can be felt in the very language used by the differing groups to describe the games. Right before she enters the games, Katniss is taken to a room underneath the arena to dress. The official name for the space is “the Launch Room,” a euphemism that those in the Capitol embrace most likely because the term frames the space as an exciting launch pad for the pending drama (Collins 144). For the people of the districts, the room is more realistically “referred to as the Stockyard. The place animals go before slaughter,” a term that both notes the brutal deaths the adolescents will suffer and also unconsciously alludes to the fact that the contestants are reduced to being no more than mere animals fit for consumption (Collins 144). They have been reduced to commodities and they are being consumed figuratively if not literally, for they are being used by the government to create a cruel “entertainment.” The disassociation between the reality of the games and the entertainment the citizens of the Capitol take them to be is so great that the arenas become “historic sites … Popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch the Games, tour the catacombs, visit the sites where the deaths
took place. You can even take part in reenactments” (Collins 144-145). “They say the food is excellent,” at these historic tours, or so Katniss laconically thinks as she waits in the Stockyard (Collins 145).

Panem goes to great lengths to maintain control, and the system of subjugation begins early in the districts. The annual spectacle of the games illustrates and reinforces the power dynamics between the Capitol and the districts, and, like their parents before them, the Capitol reduces the children of the districts to the status of disposable commodities through the machinations of the games. The districts live with the constant threat of starvation, while the revelers in the Capitol eat to excess and enjoy the gladiator battle as if it were in fact a simple game rather than a struggle for survival. Every year each district is required to offer two of its youth as tributes to the glutinous appetite for entertainment in the Capitol. The use of the word “tributes” signals that the districts function as tribute states and are thus subordinated to the will of the Capitol. While the citizens of the Capitol approach the event with a certain gleeful mania, everyone across the country is required to watch. No one is exempt; during the games, “[a]t homes and community halls around the country, every television set is turned on. Every citizen of Panem is tuned in,” and while power shortages in the districts may be the norm, one can rest assured that “[t]here will be no blackouts” (Collins 124). Why? Because the games are an overtly oppressive tool wielded by the government to stymie resistance by emphasizing the impotence of the districts.

The rules appear simple; to win the game a contestant need only survive. However, the game is rigged. The tributes are selected by a random lottery system known as the Reaping, an apt name meant to remind the people that this is their
punishment for past rebellion and that they are “reaping” what was sown. “Reaping” also alludes to the commodification of the inhabitants of the district, for the term suggests that the tributes are being harvested like so many insignificant grains of rice. If economic circumstances were equal, each child would receive one slip of paper with their name on it for each year that they have been eligible for the games, for example, a twelve year old would have one entry, a thirteen year old two, and so on. However, economic conditions in Panem are far from equitable. Severe economic disparity marks not just the relationship between the Capitol and the outlying districts, but also the relationship between the citizens of individual districts. In a sinister move, the Gamemakers allow each adolescent to sign up for tesserae, which is a year’s supply of grain, in exchange for an extra entry in the lottery. Tesserae are cumulative, so each additional year poverty-stricken adolescents who accept tesserae are disproportionately likely to be selected for the games. In effect, tesserae allow the poorest children of Panem to sell themselves in order to survive, which encourages them to equate themselves with commodities on an unconscious level. Thus, the games begin long before a contestant’s name is drawn, and the ramifications continue long after. Those allowed to grow to adulthood suffer not only from ubiquitous starvation, but also from psychological trauma of the constant threat of each year's looming reaping. The games disrupt a healthy relationship between the mind and body as they take advantage of the dire economic situation that creates a starving population and encourages the truly desperate to sell their chances of maturing into adults.

Further underscoring their commodification by the games is the requirement that the tributes transform into mascots for their districts. Contestants vie for the affections of
the audience watching at home even as they fight for their lives. The fact that the Hunger Games are televised encourages a disturbing need to pander to the ever-present audience, a need often translated into maintaining one’s physical appearance. This is evident when the Hunger Games contestants are presented to Panem via the televised opening ceremony; a lengthy process that requires a professional team of stylists to prepare them. Traditionally, the adolescents are dressed in stylized representations of the commodities for which their district is known. Just before Katniss meets her stylist for the games, she describes:

> For the opening ceremonies, you’re supposed to wear something that suggests your district’s principal industry. District 11, agriculture. District 4, fishing. District 3, factories. This means that coming from District 12, Peeta and I will be in some kind of coal miner’s getup. Since baggy miner’s jumpsuits are not particularly becoming, our tributes usually end up in skimpy outfits and hats with headlamps. One year, our tributes were stark naked and covered in black powder to represent coal dust. (Collins 66)

Dressing the contestants as the commodities for which their districts are known creates an all too easy conflation of the human being and the commodity, rendering the body an abstract natural resource distanced from the embodied individual.

The system is designed to encourage and increase this initial distance. Before the game, each tribute is evaluated by the Gamemakers, who assign contestants a score based on their chances of survival. These scores are then used to help guide the audience as they bet on their favorites. Tributes are encouraged to tend to their physical appearance, for those able to present themselves in a favorable light, those able to package themselves as desirable products, are better able to secure sponsors. For while “[t]he Hunger Games aren’t a beauty contest … the best-looking tributes always seem to pull more sponsors” with the money and inclination to send potentially lifesaving
products (for example, medicine or food) to the contestants as they fight for their lives in the arena (Collins 58). Within the games, conforming to standards of beauty becomes a matter of life or death.4

The hyperbolic representation of consumer culture in *The Hunger Games* suggests that the pursuit of marketable goods leads to alienation from the body. For the inhabitants of the districts, who are the primary producers within the novel, the Capitol treats them as if they were natural resources rather than citizens, which is why those living in the city can be so cavalier about the games. The contestants are not real to them. Instead, the citizens of the Capitol interpret the inhabitants of the districts as virtually subhuman entities who exist simply to occupy their prescribed place in the economic system. The hyperbolic consumer culture necessitates that for some to enjoy a life of excess others must devote themselves to the production of consumer goods. As Marx discusses, such a narrow focus eventually results in the laborer's alienation from himself. The Hunger Games magnify this. The tributes' bodies are refashioned to be more appealing during the media circus preceding their deaths, and this is a logical extension of the exploitative relationship between the Capitol and the districts, a relationship that casts one group as the consumer and the other as the consumed.

*Consumer Culture and the Body*

At the other extreme of the binary that divides Panem's hyper-consumer society—the consumer and producer—are the inhabitants of the Capitol. The districts labor to

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4 This emphasis on appearances will be discussed at length later.
provide products, and the people of the Capitol live to consume them. In *Conspicuous Consumption*, Thorstein Veblen traces the ascendancy of conspicuous forms of consumption as status symbols that eventually replaced leisure as a mark of success. In his analysis of early twentieth century American history, he finds that “in the struggle to outdo one another the city population push their normal standard of conspicuous consumption to a higher point” (Veblen 41). The citizens of the Capitol follow this conspicuous form of consumption to an extreme until, just as the trauma of the coercive labor system is reflected in the bodies of the laborers, so, too, does the excessive consumerism of the citizens in the Capitol mark their bodies. Pageantry has become quotidian, and individuals go to great lengths to maintain physical appearances. From habitual age-defying plastic surgery to dying their very skin to fashionable colors, the inhabitants of the Capitol live in a stage of consumerism that has extended to make extreme body modifications the norm.

Marxist theorist Jean Baudrillard analyzes the Western world’s preoccupation with “perfecting” the body in *The Finest Consumer Object: The Body*. Baudrillard states, “If you don’t make your bodily devotions, if you sin by omission, you will be punished” (Baudrillard 278). This brief critique of the current widespread compulsion to perfect the body highlights the tangle of presumed agency and the influence of outside forces affecting an individual’s decision to conform (or not to conform) to idealistic conceptions of the body found in the media. Baudrillard argues that “propaganda” has led to a cult of the body, a cult that displaces religion in our increasingly secular world and places the body and the pursuit of its perfection in the place of the soul (Baudrillard 277). Furthermore, he argues that the way a culture conceptualizes the body mirrors the
way it understands an individual’s relation to almost everything else. He writes, “[T]he mode of organization of the relation to the body reflects the mode of organization of the relation to things and of social relations” (Baudrillard 277). According to Baudrillard, in a capitalist society the body becomes capital, an economic tool, “it is invested in order to produce a yield” (Baudrillard 279). What, then, becomes of a body trapped in a totalitarian, consumer-driven society?

Collins offers a thorough exploration of just this question in *The Hunger Games*. For those in power, life is a frivolous game. Extreme self-indulgence shields the denizens of the Capitol from the material suffering the rest of the country suffers, causing a parallel alienation from their very own bodies. Colorful body modifications mark the citizens of the Capitol. It is as if each battles to exceed the modifications of the last; take, for example, the team of stylists responsible for rendering Katniss “camera ready” for the games. Venia, Octavia, and Flavius display an array of creative alterations: “aqua hair,” “gold tattoos above … eyebrows,” “orange corkscrew locks,” “purple lipstick” and, finally, the pièce de résistance, “Octavia, a plump woman whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green” (Collins 61-62). Katniss’ dismissive interpretation of her stylist team says it all; to her they are far from human, and, instead, merely a “trio of oddly colored birds” to be humored (Collins 62). Her critique continues as she dissects their “silly Capitol accent;” she wonders, “Why do these people speak in such a high pitch? Why do their jaws barely open when they talk? Why do the ends of their sentences go up as if they’re asking a question? Odd vowels,

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5 Collins continues the Roman theme with the names of the stylists; Octavia and Flavius mean “eighth” and “yellow colored” respectively. The most direct reference to Rome is perhaps Venia, which is an abbreviated form of Lavinia, a figure in Roman mythology.
clipped words, and always a hiss on the s…no wonder it’s impossible not to mimic them” (Collins 61). Her disdain for the people of the Capitol is intense, signaling to the reader that such superficial worship of appearances is, in her view, morally reprehensible.

For the people of the Capitol, their incessant need to alter their natural bodies hyperbolizes Baudrillard’s concern, while also reflecting their distance from reality. Instead of acknowledging the oppression that is the foundation of their lifestyle, the citizens of the Capitol occupy themselves with gorging on consumerism, on ornamenting and altering their bodies to remain fashionable. Thus, the obsession with perfecting their bodies acts as a convenient distraction, a smokescreen obscuring social justice issues. The titular Hunger Games exemplify the lengths to which the Capitol goes to deflect attention from the injustice inherent in its society, which dehumanizes the inhabitants of the districts in order to relegate them to a subordinate position. As discussed above, the annual games are highly orchestrated social events designed to entertain the wealthy capitalists; each year the Gamemakers must invent new cruelties to inflict upon the tributes, for nothing is worse than the boredom that results when “the players freeze to death;” it is “very anti-climactic … all those quiet, bloodless deaths” (Collins 39).

Consumer Culture and Youth: Pressure to Conform and the Body

From the moment Katniss becomes a candidate for the games through the conclusion of the trilogy, she becomes a pawn in a revolutionary struggle for control over the country. While she lived in her home, District 12, Katniss roamed the
surrounding countryside, a transgressive space forbidden to the citizens of the district. Following the untimely death of her father, who was killed in a coal mining accident, she became the primary provider for her small family. To put food on the table, she trespassed into the surrounding woods to hunt for food. Though still restricted by the severe laws of Panem, Katniss was able to carve out a space for her own agency and her family's survival while in District 12. Once she enters the Capitol, however, the stylists, who, in effect, act as government agents, accost her and refashion her to suit the requirements of the televised games. In doing so, they attempt to impose a traditional gender narrative on Katniss.

In one disturbing scene, Katniss suffers the ostensibly beneficial ministrations of her makeover team. She thinks to herself,

I’ve been in the Remake Center for more than three hours and I still haven’t met my stylist. Apparently he has no interest in seeing me until Venia and the other members of my prep team have addressed some obvious problems. This has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair. My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and part of my eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. (Collins 61)

This gross parody of our culture’s obsession with makeovers (in particular, hair removal) illustrates just how little control Katniss has over her body, for this is not your average makeover. It is a full production in the “Remake Center” designed to overhaul Katniss, to repackage and prepare her for the pending media frenzy that is the Hunger Games. Tellingly, the “obvious problems” her stylists catalog as they review her body are those ordinary traits of the body. Hair, dirt, and uneven fingernails, the normal wear and tear of a body, are vilified in an attempt to create the perfect consumer object.
referenced by Baudrillard. Prior to her visit to the Remake Center, Katniss is au natural. She is comfortable with and in nature and, in the eyes of the Capitol, she is more or less naked, for she eschews the body modifications necessitated by life in the Capitol, where the hyper-consumer is the norm.

These efforts to remake Katniss are designed to make her more palatable for the television consumer of the Capitol, and the language of consumption runs throughout the passage above. The agents of the Capitol pluck Katniss clean and offer her up to Panem as a “bird, ready for roasting” (Collins 61). There is an all too ready willingness to exploit her body to fit their ideas of what a suitable body should look like. Baudrillard notes a similar inclination to “mine” the body in one’s effort to perfect it. He states that the urge “to form it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world” establishes the body as “colonized virgin ‘territory’… exploring the body like a deposit to be mined” (Baudrillard 278). While in Baudrillard’s discussion, the exploitation is at least superficially to “extract … visible signs of happiness, health, beauty,” Collins’ work suggests the adverse ends that result from valuing such “perfection” (Baudrillard 278). For in pursuit of their ideal, the stylists treat her body as an inanimate blank canvas, thus denigrating the human experience.

Anne McClintock’s historical review of the role of soap in imperialism, *Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising*, illuminates the makeover scene. According to McClintock, soap is an imperial tool that reasserts racial, economic, and gendered boundaries. It was not until the Victorian age, a time when imperialism was in full swing, that soap became a “necessary” commodity. In response to the altering social dynamics, “[s]oap offered the promise of spiritual salvation and
regeneration through commodity consumption, a regime of domestic hygiene that could restore the threatened potency of the imperial body politic and the race” (McClintock 272). McClintock argues that soap acted as a purifying and civilizing element. As such, the emphasis on “scrubbing” Katniss’ becomes an effort to remove her from the uncivilized state that comes from living in a district. At the close of the scene her team of stylists echoes this sentiment when one states, “Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!” (Collins 62). The ritual cleansing transforms her into an acceptable, that is to say consumable, contender fit for television. Just as the Hunger Games were designed to remind the districts of the Capitol’s supremacy, so, too, does the cleansing frame Katniss as inferior to the clean and civilized citizens of the Capitol.

The parody of America’s materialistic culture found within the makeover scene illustrates the detrimental effects of such cultural values in a consumer-driven society. The commodification of Katniss in the scene above parallels another potential illness in our culture—the urge to perfect the body. The pursuit of “perfection” forces young women to adopt unhealthy habits in order to achieve the impossible ideal found in the media. The novel caricaturizes the absurdly unnatural images of bodies found in contemporary advertisements that establish this unattainable ideal. As the scene above illustrates, there is a profound anxiety regarding the pressure Americans feel to conform to standards of physical beauty. In Twilight Zones feminist culture critic Susan Bordo also critiques our culture’s preoccupation with physical appearances. Bordo argues that “[t]here is a consumer system operating here that depends on our perceiving ourselves as defective” in order to sell products created to remedy the “defect” (Bordo 42). The need to address “obvious problems” in the makeover scene echoes Bordo's discussion of
defects, suggesting that the emphasis on consumerism within the Capitol is at least partially responsible for the so-called defects found with Katniss' body.

A similar distrust of pre-packaged beauty ideals is seen in Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* (2005), a contemporary young adult novel that explores this anxiety in depth. The novel takes place in a futuristic world in which everyone undergoes plastic surgery upon his or her sixteenth birthday; the purpose of the surgery is to make everyone equally “pretty.” Mirroring our culture’s obsession with youth, there are five developmental stages in the book: early childhood, uglies/adolescence, post-operation pretties/young adults, middle-pretties/adults, crumblies/middle-age and older. Each stage is monitored, and as the body ages it is carefully ushered into a graceful, wrinkle-free maturity. The least valued stage throughout the entire process is that of the “ugly,” which includes all those that have yet to reach sixteen and undergo surgery. During this awkward period, the body is despised. Instead of referring to each other by their names, “uglies” refer to each other by sobriquets that identify and exaggerate their largest “defect.” Have an above average nose? Enter adolescence in this world and you are now known simply as “Nose.”

Westerfeld plays with the idea Bordo noted; she states that “our surgeons have become Pygmalions of total self-transformation, advertising the slightest deviation from the cultural ‘norm’ as a problem needing to be solved, an impediment to happiness” (Bordo 52). Within *Uglies*, surgeries around the world are guided by the decisions of the Morphological Congress, which “decide[s] what the next generation … [will] look like” by analyzing “graphs and averages and measuring people’s pupils when they looked at different faces” in order to determine a statistically supported beauty ideal (Westerfeld
262-263). The goal is simple: uniformity. The invasive surgery is on the same conformity continuum discussed in the makeover scene of *The Hunger Games*. Whereas the stylists satisfied themselves with superficially altering Katniss’ body, the teens in Westerfeld's novel undergo surgery that reshapes them to fit the idealized norm. Both novels probe the pressure to conform to bodily standards felt by adolescents in our culture, suggesting that this anxiety is pervasive. Collins’ criticism of the media-fueled spectacle of the games marks her concern regarding the pressure to conform to beauty standards promoted by the American media, and through Katniss' denouncement of the stylists, Collins encourages the reader to adopt a similarly skeptical stance towards the media's influence over beauty.

*Consumer Culture and Youth: Gender and the Pressure to Conform*

In addition to the concern with the emphasis placed on conforming to standards of beauty, the makeover scene simultaneously reveals a distrust of non-normative gender expressions (i.e. Katniss' “excessive” body hair), which are viewed as effective failures by the stylist team. The makeover scene parallels American society’s hegemonic heterosexuality and its accompanying gender norms. The team plucks, scrubs, and dresses Katniss to better fit a “traditional” gender narrative, one inherently tied to the body and predicated on overt sexuality. In their attempt to make Katniss fit for TV, the stylist team forces her to adopt traditional Western signs of femininity, thus transforming her body into a battleground.

Katniss is a tomboy. She is the primary provider for her family. She hunts, is adept with a bow, dresses in a masculine fashion, and is stoic à la John Wayne. Early in
the series she states that she never wishes to marry or have children; she unabashedly rejects markers of typical femininity. Barbara Creed’s *Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys, and Tarts* emphasizes the import of society in the construction of bodies. Her discussion of the tomboy figure is particularly intriguing, as she identifies it as a common trope that helps reinscribe traditional gender norms. As Creed notes, the tomboy is a threat that must be neutralized because “her image undermines patriarchal gender boundaries that separate the sexes” and because “she pushes to its extreme the definition of the active heterosexual woman—she represents the other side of the heterosexual woman, her lost phallic past” (Creed 111). If the tomboy’s tale does not end in a heterosexual marriage, she remains a viable threat to the patriarchal social order. If Creed’s work is used to interpret the makeover scene above, then Katniss becomes subject to a government-sponsored gender crisis, for social pressures are directly reshaping her expression of gender to better fit society’s ideal to neutralize her threat to the social order and to make her a marketable commodity for the spectators of the Hunger Games.

Katniss' transformation from a capable young woman into a vacuous representation of femininity is perhaps best illustrated during her televised interview preceding the games. At home in District 12, Katniss habitually wore functional clothing that allowed her to hunt and gather with ease. Her gender transformation began with the Reaping, when her mother gave her a blue dress to wear for the event. Though lovely, the dress she wore in the district cannot compare to the gorgeous gown she donned for her interview. Even Katniss is impressed by the effect of the dress. When she sees herself in the masterpiece, she thinks,
The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels. Because my dress, oh, my dress is entirely covered in reflective precious gems, red and yellow and white with bits of blue that accent the tips of the flame design. The slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire.

I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun.
(Collins 120-121)

The extravagant clothing disrupts Katniss' understanding of herself, so much so that she labels herself a “creature … from another world.” The stylized woman she confronts in the mirror is far from Katniss' usual gender representation. The repetition of “I am” at the end of the passage is an attempt to assert a sense of identity following the alienation from herself Katniss feels at the beginning of the scene.

Later, during her interview, she displays the dress to the audience. She spins on stage for the crowd, pandering to them in a bid to win their sympathies and potentially their sponsorship. Though the gown initially woos Katniss, she eventually resists it and the normative gender expression it represents. When she reflects on the experience later she deems herself a “silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress. Giggling. … Silly and sparkly and forgettable” (Collins 136). Her disdain is significant, for while the media may exert an undue amount of influence over youth, pressuring them to conform to set gender narratives, Collins suggests that resistance is possible. The stylists saw her female body and sought to assert an idealized female gender representation on her. That Katniss resists their presumptuous urge to refashion her identity acts as a powerful model for young readers unduly pressured by cultural forces like the media to conform to gender norms.

Collins further destabilizes the power of the media to influence gender norms through Katniss' primary love interest in the novel, Peeta Mellark, the male tribute from
District 12. Peeta is a strapping young man who has loved Katniss since they were both children. Like Katniss before him, Peeta exhibits non-traditional gender traits, the most noteworthy being his passion for cake decorating. During the brief survival skills training sessions that precede the games, Katniss and Peeta visit the camouflage station. During their time practicing camouflage techniques, Peeta reveals that he is the artist responsible for the cakes his family's bakery “display[s] in the windows. Fancy cakes with flowers and pretty things painted in frosting” (Collins 96). Katniss and her family may be far too poor to ever purchase one of Peeta's edible works of art, but that does not stop Katniss and her sister from routinely visiting the cakes, for “[t]here’s little enough beauty in District 12” (Collins 96).

Within the ruthless realm of the games, Peeta's skills appear valueless, and Katniss at first ridicules Peeta’s artistry during their time at the camouflage station. She says, “It’s lovely. If only you could frost someone to death” (Collins 96). Just as the stylists used the games as an opportunity to reinforce traditional gender norms, so, too, do Katniss' words seek to diminish Peeta's accomplishments. However, both Katniss' and Peeta's non-traditional gender expressions prove to be invaluable resources that save them in the arena. While Katniss' wilderness skills and prowess as an archer make her a formidable contestant, Peeta's cake decorating ability successfully camouflages him from his fellow predatory tributes.

In *The Hunger Games* Collins critiques the negative effects of consumer culture on the body. Through the plight of the oppressed barely surviving in District 12, she explores the ramifications of a labor system that privileges the final product over the worker. This reduces the laborer to a disposable commodity, a tool of the larger economic
system, and the emphasis on production alienates him from himself and the world around him. He is consumed by the system. At the other end of the spectrum is the consumer, who also suffers a parallel alienation from herself. The hyperbolic consumers found in the Capitol epitomize the wealthy within a capitalist economy. As such, though they live in constant revelry, the denial they embrace towards the injustice of the games and the economic system that supports their lavish lifestyle marks a disconnect from reality that borders on delusion. Furthermore, the preoccupation with body modification ubiquitous among the inhabitants of the Capitol signals a willingness to “mine” the body in order to perfect it. In this way, the body is at risk for exploitation within the Capitol and the districts, thus the text frames the body as a tool used for gain on both sides of the binary of the hyper-consumeristic society.

The Hunger Games: Notes from the Real World

Foundational to this project is the ability of literature to consciously and unconsciously shape the reader's understanding of the world about her. Throughout The Hunger Games Collins presents exaggerated renditions of issues found within contemporary society. The extreme popularity of blockbuster novels like The Hunger Games effectively creates a large-scale reading community. Unsurprisingly, enterprising educators are capitalizing on the audience built in part by the marketing wizardry behind a blockbuster like The Hunger Games. As a review of published lesson plans demonstrates, the novel inspires dynamic classroom reading communities that actively analyze ethical dilemmas found in the text, ethical dilemmas with striking parallels to modern social justice issues. Educators predominantly focus on issues of morality that
challenge passive reception of the violence found both in the novel and the real world.

Amber Simmons, in particular, presents a thorough and cogent examination of how *The Hunger Games* connects with social justice issues in *Class on Fire: Using The Hunger Games Trilogy to Encourage Social Action*. Simmons offers real-world corollaries to the following themes in the series: hunger, wastefulness of consumer culture, child prostitution, forced labor, child soldiers, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. Critical literacy theory underpins her argument; she advocates teaching students to actively question their world so that they can then take direct action on pressing inequities within their very own communities and the world at large.6

Though the novel is inspirational, one cannot overlook how the market capitalizes on the novel’s appeal by offering a variety of tie-in products, which run the gamut from necklaces and towels to shirts, mugs and, of course, the film adaptation. To a certain extent, such commercialism is to be expected. However, some of the products appear to blatantly disrupt the rebellious stance the novel takes against consumerism. Take, for example, China Glaze, a nail polish company selling a line of “Capitol Colours.” Collins may criticize the hyper-consumerism of the Capitol, but it appears that the market is not above capitalizing on the culture of artificial candy colors and body modifications in the novel to sell makeup. In a perhaps more disturbing move, the CW Television Network has announced that it will soon be showing a Hunger Games inspired reality TV show in which “12 teams of two are provided no food, water, or shelter, but must compete in a

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6 Another noteworthy lesson inspired by the text is *Hunger Games: What Are the Chances?* by Sarah Bush and Karen Karp, which uses the Reaping to help students learn about probability. Also, an edible plants workshop offered by the Fort Whyte nature center in Canada captures the novel's ability to inspire real-world action. In the workshop, participants hunt for plants, brew medicinal teas, and shoot arrows. The workshop builds upon the themes of self-reliance and environmental ethics found in the book and instills a healthy respect for nature found in the novel.
game where they’ll rely on their physicality, survival skills, and hunting skills to endure their conditions, capture one another, and ultimately win a huge cash prize”
(blog.cwtv.com). As the network targets a young audience, the potential implications of such a gross misinterpretation of the social critique found within *The Hunger Games* is significant. Though literature has the power to influence the development of adolescents, such influence is heavily mitigated by the surrounding culture.
Chapter Two

Menstruation and Young Adult Literature

The sad fact is that menstruation—the process, the images, the word itself—is as unspeakable and undercover as it ever was … [A]lthough you can watch buckets of fake blood merrily spooling out of heads and torsos because of fists, bullets, knives, car accidents, grenades, bombs, breaking glass, garrotes, machetes, falling buildings, swords, laser beams, airline crashes, or hungry mutant zombies, rarely will you ever see a single drop as a result of menstruation. (Stein and Kim 2)

Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation (“menstruation”) as proof that only men could serve in the Army (“you have to give blood to take blood”), occupy political office (“can women be aggressive without that steadfast cycle governed by Mars?”), be priests and ministers (“how could a woman give her blood for our sins?”), or rabbis (“without the monthly loss of impurities, women remain unclean”). (Steinem If Men Could Menstruate—A Political Fantasy 159)

A Disturbing Absence of Blood: An Exploration of Menstruation in The Hunger Games & Battle Royale

The elision of menstruation within literature and popular discourse is potentially detrimental to the development of adolescents, especially young women, as it negatively skews their understanding of their bodies. Such elision may not be intentional, but it is ubiquitous and worthy of study. Complacency characterizes our culture’s menstruation taboo; however, such complacency is no longer acceptable given recent scientific advances, which will be discussed shortly. Given the prevalence of the taboo, one might wonder why The Hunger Games merits singling out simply for not representing menstruation within the text. However, the novel is a compelling case study for the elision of menstruation in young adult literature for several reasons. To begin with, the novel has a violent premise that leads to the deaths of its adolescent characters. The annual Hunger Games is a bloody media frenzy that parallels our culture’s thirst for violent entertainment and reality TV, and Collins consciously explores our fascination
with common, “acceptable” forms of bloodshed that are so prevalent that they are practically banal. In doing so, she simultaneously reveals our discomfort with that much-maligned blood that flows naturally: menstruation. The novel’s violent premise plays upon our culture’s willingness to be entertained by bloodshed even as it effectively denies the existence of menstruation, which perpetuates the taboo. This has wide-ranging implications in a young adult novel with a teenaged female protagonist who is, in effect, forced to menstruate offstage.

The absence of menstruation is especially worth exploring when one compares The Hunger Games (2008) to the Japanese film Battle Royale (2000), which predates The Hunger Games and is based on a novel by Koushun Takami of the same name. Both The Hunger Games and Battle Royale share several parallels in plot, including a gladiator reminiscent fight to the death among adolescents on an isolated playing field. Interestingly, Battle Royale does not shy away from menstruation. Instead, it capitalizes on it to give the film a sense of verisimilitude and to increase the drama of certain scenes.

Battle Royale takes place in a futuristic Japan suffering from severe unemployment rates and intense intergenerational conflict. In order to rein in the spreading conflict, the government enacted the Battle Royale law, which annually sends

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7 Collins has publicly stated that she first thought of the premise for the series while watching TV and flipping channels between reality TV shows and footage from the Iraq War.

8 The strong parallels in plot and themes between The Hunger Games and Battle Royale led to a controversy in which many accused Collins of basing her work on Battle Royale. However, Collins denies having known of the series before she wrote the novel.

9 Students don’t just disobey their teachers, they stab them. And the teacher later takes his revenge by killing two students. Indeed the first on screen murder in the film goes to the teacher; he throws a dagger into a student’s forehead.
an entire middle school class to an isolated island to kill each other. Only one can
survive. The film follows one unlucky class as they are drugged, bussed, and dropped
off on the battlefield. When the students arrive at the island they watch an orientation
video that parodies Japanese pop culture. The young woman in the video is excessively
cheerful, dressed in neon orange, wears excessive jewelry and light glitter in her
makeup, and frolics about the screen with large weapons. Her uncanny mien is
menacing given the circumstances. Towards the end of the video, just before the
students file out of the classroom to meet their fate on the island, she makes an oblique
reference to menstruation when she says, “The girls might need personal items so you
can take them.” Thus she reminds not just the young ladies but also the audience that
some of the women will inevitably be menstruating throughout the drama about to
unfold. Though brief, this reference is powerful, for it tacitly allows periods a place
within the world of the film, thus undermining the habitual taboo that surrounds
menstruation in many cultures.  

Later, menstruation acts as the smoking gun in a very dramatic moment in which
two female students fight to the death. Hirono deduces that Mitsuko killed her friend,
Megumi, because as Hirono says, “[I] [f]ound a tampon in the toilet. Megumi wasn’t
having hers. You started yesterday, right?” Though neither reference represents a
thoughtful discussion of menstruation (and the association with accusation in the latter is
certainly problematic), each reference demonstrates that the topic need not be anathema.
These scenes open a critical discursive space for menstruation, for acknowledging its

10 Though menstruation may be viewed differently in Japan as compared to Western cultures, there is
evidence to suggest that menstruation has a taboo nature in Japanese culture too. Take, for instance, the fact
that menstruating women are not allowed in Japanese Buddhist temples.
existence is the beginning of engaging with it outside of the monopoly created by the femcare industry, which will be discussed at length shortly.

In contrast to Battle Royale, menstrual blood is unwelcome in The Hunger Games, even as violent murder abounds. The absence is especially odd given Katniss’ otherwise remarkable awareness of her body. Early in the games, she charts the effects of dehydration on her body. She thinks to herself, “Morning brings distress. My heads [sic] throbs with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints. I fall, rather than jump from the tree … Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong … But my mind seems foggy” (Collins 167). Even in a state of “distress” Katniss is attuned to her body, as evidenced by the ill feeling lurking on the edge of her consciousness. In light of Katniss' awareness of her body, the elision of menstruation in the text illuminates a cultural anxiety weighting the term. However, ignoring menstruation does not make it disappear; instead, it casts the process in a negative light and denies the young reader positive representations of menstruation that might help her come to better understand her body.

The Taboo Body: Menstruation, a Culture of Shame

Disquiet has long characterized relations between Western society and the body, a disquiet that encourages the active suppression of discussions of bodily functions like menstruation. A dark aura, the result of centuries of shame and negativity, surrounds the term, constructing our understanding of the process and encouraging the elision of menstruation in popular discourse. Periods are not fit for polite conversation, and the longstanding taboo surrounding menstruation restricts the pathways through which
young women learn about it, which then directly shapes how they understand the process and, ultimately, themselves as women. The de facto prohibition against frank, public discussion of periods leaves few avenues for disseminating and studying our culture's interpretation of menstruation. There are two widely available means for analysis. The first is language itself, and the second is the dominant voice in the discourse of menstruation: the femcare industry.

From the supposed objectivity of medical language to vivid colloquialisms, the language used to define, interpret, and discuss menstruation highlights how our culture stigmatizes menses. In The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation Delaney, Lupton, and Toth examine euphemisms and other aspects of “pop culture … because they are anonymous … [and] are much better clues to mass psychology, to what ‘the people’ think;” in effect, popular culture acts as a litmus test for our society (115). Their discussion of slang terms for menstruation illuminates the various words people resort to in an effort to avoid voicing the taboo. Pause for a moment and consider the sheer variety and abundance of terms available: the crimson tide, the red river, the curse, the painters are in, on the rag, my communist friend, Aunt Flo, that time of the month, and, simply, feeling unwell. The list goes on. At first glance it may appear that the numerous choices in diction suggest that society is open and willing to discuss menstruation. However, “[t]he monthly euphemism … is an evasion of menstrual reality, a denial of menstruation achieved through renaming the unmentionable. Positive expressions are not yet part of the menstrual vocabulary” (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 118). And, indeed, they do not yet exist more than two decades after the expanded edition of their impressive review of the topic.
Today, the Internet offers a unique perspective on the evolution of menstrual slang. In particular, UrbanDictionary.com is an enlightening catalog of contemporary language. The site is a true testament to democratic values; visitors to the site enter definitions to words they believe should be included in the open access dictionary, then other visitors are invited to voice their opinion as to whether or not the definition is accurate by clicking a thumbs up or thumbs down next to the entry. As of March 4, 2013, five entries appear under “menstruation.” The first and third entries (which are in truth the same entry posted twice) attempt a definition of menstruation that is reminiscent of medical language. The other three, however, reinforce the negative stereotypes infusing the term. The second entry defines menstruation as “a bloody waste of Fucking [sic] time;” 275 site visitors agree while only 109 disagree. The clarifying line beneath the main entry explains the poor pun in the definition: “menstruation—no time for sex.” The easy dismissal of menstruation found in this “definition,” which emphasizes the effects on the menstruating woman’s (perhaps male) partner is echoed throughout the entries. The fifth definition offered by the Urban Dictionary community defines menstruation as “[a] vile beast that takes over ones [sic] girlfriend, turning her into a freakish werewolf that will howl at you annoyingly no matter what you say, and be a rotten bitch to boot.” Here, the latent sexism in the second entry is readily apparent. Comparing the menstruating girlfriend to a werewolf, a mythic monster that transforms into a crazed wolf every month, illustrates a timeworn urge to vilify women because of menses.

Somewhat reassuringly, only 81 visitors deemed this entry a thumbs up, compared to the 120 that voted it a thumbs down.
For its part, medical discourse also participates in encouraging a language of shame to describe menstruation. In *Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause* Emily Martin traces the interpretation of menstruation as “pathological,” a belief that became firmly established by the nineteenth century (Martin 20). According to Martin, the high regard hierarchies receive in Western culture may be partially responsible for the dark halo illuminating menstruation. From the government to the work place and sports teams, hierarchies organize our social relations; the rationale behind this is that hierarchies are believed to be both efficient and productive. The esteem productivity receives in our culture leads to a privileging of bodily systems that produce something of “value.” With such an understanding, menstruation becomes “production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap” (Martin 29).12 Women transform into failed machines that “are in some sinister sense out of control when they menstruate” (Martin 30).

The loss of control highlights a fear of the body taking precedence over the mind, of our animal nature dominating. As such, the innate process of regeneration key to menstruation is glossed over and the focus is placed on failure, failure to maintain “control,” to become pregnant, to take up one’s designated role as mother and wife. Martin’s analysis of medical language used to describe the process demonstrates a pronounced and deeply rooted aversion to a woman’s monthly bloodshed. Words like “‘degenerate,’ ‘decline,’ ‘withdrawn,’ ‘spasms,’ ‘lack,’ … ‘weakened,’ ‘leak,’ ‘deteriorate,’ ‘discharge,’ and … ‘repair’” delineate the process, framing it in an

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12 In contrast to ejaculation, which creates viable sperm.
unabashedly negative light that precludes a positive interpretation and exposes otherwise unvoiced cultural views of menstruation (Martin 31).

The long list of negative words used to characterize menstruation reads more like a list from a fatal disease than a monthly process that is a defining feature for many women. To so adamantly characterize it almost as if it is a disease, one made worse in that it leads to a loss of control, fosters the aura of shame surrounding menstruation. Though many might defend the language, citing how the inner lining of the uterus is in fact shed and does cause side effects, Martin adroitly addresses potential critiques of her argument by comparing menstruation to the periodic shedding of the stomach lining, a necessary process with key parallels to menstruation that is instead described as a process of “renewal” and cleansing (Martin 34). Though menstruation is a natural process, even those discursive spaces that we believe (or at least hope) are objective stigmatize menstruation, thus revealing the deep and prevailing taboo.

The long contested relationship between the body and the mind has been the fodder of intellectual debate for generations. With technological and medical advances, the debate left the halls of the academy and entered the realms of the everyday. Take, for instance, the advent of artificial hormone treatments designed to suppress menstruation (i.e. Seasonale), which sparked a controversy. Today, a woman has a heretofore unheard of choice—whether or not to menstruate. She can “take control” of her body; her mind can override her body’s natural inclinations. But to what effect? While proponents contend that such medical advances liberate women, opponents worry that the side effects are not yet fully known. Worse yet, the culture of shame that surrounds menstruation shapes the debate, potentially marking the literal suppression of
menstruation as a reflection of American society’s negative view of it, which often leads to a figurative suppression of menstruation. But where does this culture of shame come from?

With refreshingly frank language and a healthy dose of humor, Elissa Stein and Susan Kim set about exploring the menstrual taboo in *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation*. In addition to the noted negativity of medical language, Stein and Kim offer several convincing possibilities as to why menstruation is taboo; they write, “[W]e have the sneaking suspicion that these seemingly unshakable convictions of ours actually arise from centuries of calculated shame, moderated by money—with a dash of internalized objectification thrown in for good measure—as well as a genuine, centuries-old fear and suspicion of female body processes” (Stein and Kim 8). Strong support for this is found in the persistent insistence that runs throughout Judeo-Christian religions, which, to this day, suggest that a menstruating woman is unclean (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 37-42). For its part, modern history proves that this “centuries-old fear” is thriving.

If the goal of psychoanalysis is to uncover hidden truths in the unconscious, then Delaney, Lupton, and Toth’s review of how psychoanalysts have interpreted menstruation demonstrates that Western society has a deeply ingrained and perhaps unconscious “fear and suspicion” of women, which perhaps leads to a devaluing of them. Take, for instance, the fact that defecation is a recurring theme in psychoanalytic ruminations on menses, rendering menstrual blood, it would seem, akin to voiding one's bowels\(^\text{13}\) (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 75). Another creative interpretation of menstruation

\(^{13}\) It would seem that this connection between menstruation and feces persists. Kissling finds further proof of it in a 2003 ad for perfumed tampons. To describe the ad, she writes: “A full-page image shows a laughing woman seated at a bar, interacting with two men. In the upper right corner of the page is a small inset photo of a seated infant wearing only a diaper and a clothespin on her nose. The phrase “Pads don't
offered by some psychoanalysts is that menstruation represents a form of female castration, a monthly Technicolor reminder that woman is not male, but instead an inferior being (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 77-78). The attempt to understand menstruation through psychoanalysis probes the miasma of the taboo, revealing latent power structures designed to shame women into a complacent view of patriarchy. Thus some psychoanalysts reflect our culture’s tendency to demean menstruation, which exacerbates the negative connotations surrounding the very word.

The corporate world has long capitalized on the undertones of shame surrounding menstruation in its efforts to sell menstrual hygiene products. As Stein and Kim demonstrate in their analysis of advertisements for feminine hygiene products, the industry is all too willing to use fear (of leaks, odors, detection, etc.) to sell products, a concerning fact given that ads create a “powerful ideological realm with sociocultural consequences beyond the corporate bottom line” (Kissling 9). In Capitalizing on the Curse, Elizabeth Arveda Kissling argues that menstrual product ads help construct modern notions of femininity (Kissling 13). In summarizing Kate Kane's discussion of “freshness” as a trope in ads, Kissling notes that “the very existence of a category of products labeled 'feminine hygiene' transmits a belief that women are dirty and in need of special cleansing products” (Kissling 12). It is only with the aid of these products that women are able to defend their “clean, pure femininity” against the stain of “menstruation, [which is] the visible sign of woman's status as Other” (Kissling 10).

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14 The recurring emphasis on an ideal of femininity as “clean” and “pure” harks back to the nineteenth century's cult of domesticity. The parallel between the two is intriguing, as modern menstruation education
Ads are culpable in this process of constructing women as Other, since advertisements are “a modern form of mythology” that help shape cultural norms and values; specifically, the emphasis on secrecy in menstrual ads encourages women to deny their bodily processes and to objectify themselves, to render themselves an inoffensive, sanitized representation of femininity (Kissling 20-21).

One could yet argue that “a pad is a pad is a pad,” as one feminine hygiene industry informant noted while discussing the difficulty of advertising a product whose essentials rarely change (Kissling 12). Of course, the history of advertising menstrual hygiene products paints a very different picture. Though themes of hygiene and secrecy are perennial favorites, the shape of the message reflects greater social movements. When women went to work during World War II, feminine hygiene products followed; advertisers emphasized the reliability of their products, and “[a]ds called them women (i.e., adults), rather than girls; the language stressed utility and purpose and the ability of women to assume responsible and competent positions” (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 130). With the end of the war era, returning soldiers displaced women from the factories and relegated them to the home. The advertising of hygiene products followed suit and shifted the narratives it used to sell products. Whereas before women were valued within the ads as capable workers, a review of post-war ads reveals that “[w]hen women are less needed in the work force, their IQ automatically decreases” and previously complex storylines in ads are reduced to vague words supporting the product, thus illustrating the important role menstrual product ads play in publicly defining femininity (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 131). For decades, hygiene has remained a central focus of the ads.

frames the process as a matter of hygiene rather than sexuality in part to protect the sexual innocence of young women, which was a predominant concern within the cult of domesticity.
At first glance, the emphasis on hygiene appears benign. However, hygiene is never simply a matter of cleanliness. Rather, how a society interprets the notion of “clean” inadvertently reveals a culture’s values and the accompanying underlying power dynamics. Anne McClintock’s historical review of the role of soap in imperialism, *Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising* provides insight into the issue by problematizing the notion that hygiene is an uncomplicated pursuit of sanitation. As noted above, it was not until the Victorian age that soap became a “necessary” commodity that helped defend threatened social boundaries. Worth noting is the fact that the first mass-produced menstrual product was made in the late 1800s, concurrent with the emphasis on soap as a necessity. There are obvious parallels between soap, tampons, and pads—all enforce the hygiene imperative. In doing so, feminine hygiene products function like soap and affirm threatened social boundaries.

Echoes of this are found in the “American way to menstruate” that early twentieth century immigrants encountered when coming to the country (Jacobs Brumberg 18). The new world way to menstruate is particularly interesting as it emphasized the “middle-class sanitary ideal” (Jacobs Brumberg 18). Thus it reasserted the economic dominance of the middle class by redefining menstruation as a consumer endeavor and established hygiene as a key factor in managing menstruation. Redefining menstruation as a matter of consumerism established the feminine hygiene industry as a leading voice in menstrual discourse; it also redefined menstruation. Whereas previously menstruation was understood as a matter of fertility, and thus linked to sex, the feminine hygiene industry shied away from this connection to sex and instead focused on cleanliness. Consequently, “menstruation came to be seen as primarily a hygienic issue” (Kissling
This displaces the potentially empowering aspect of menarche, which is a marker in a young woman's development, and instead casts women once again as unclean.

In "Something Happens to Girls": Menarche and the Emergence of the Modern American Hygienic Imperative, Joan Jacobs Brumberg traces the rise of the femcare industry as the leading voice in menstruation education. While our understanding of menstruation may at first appear as an immutable constant, Jacobs Brumberg debunks the assumption that our culture’s interpretation of menstruation is stable and universal. In contrast to the past, when menstrual information was largely taught indirectly through intergenerational interaction and peers, contemporary menstrual education is a byproduct of the marketplace. The burgeoning emphasis on hygiene began around the turn of the last century and the rise of consumer culture decentered the role of community in transmitting information about menstruation and helped establish institutions—doctors, then schools, and, finally, companies—as the primary means of transmitting credible information. By the mid-twentieth century, the field was further narrowed; as Jacobs Brumberg states,

By the late 1940s and 1950s, menstruation was owned by neither mothers or doctors; in fact, the rites of passage for American girls were clearly in the commercial realm, where they centered on consumer activities such as the purchase of sanitary products, high heels, lipsticks, and ‘training bras.’ (Jacobs Brumberg 34)

The focus on consumerism as a key component of acknowledging maturity displaces menarche’s potential to be a full-fledged cultural rite. Instead, adolescents suffer from a dearth of informal, community-centered informants and must largely rely on the flimsy information distributed by the advertising world, which surrounds women with representations of menstruation that capitalize on shame.
The paradoxical relationship between the secrecy promoted in feminine hygiene product ads and the impetus for advertising, which requires that a company loudly proclaim the benefits of its products, creates a curious tension. Ostensibly, these ads open a valuable discursive space in which menstruation can be explored. However, given the monetary motivation of the company, it is in their best interest to maintain a conservative stance towards the taboo so as not to alienate potential customers. In doing so, they have traditionally reinforced the taboo by limiting the ways they discuss menstruation to vague, inoffensive terms focused on hygiene. The taboo nature of menstruation allows the femcare industry to monopolize the message sent to and received by women, especially adolescent girls, and the predominant message in the industry is that of the hygiene crisis. As Stein and Kim discuss, the femcare industry dominates modern menstruation education, producing videos and pamphlets destined for health classes. From the classroom, to ads seen in magazines, on TV or the Internet, adolescents are inundated with representations of menstruation that are at best merely negative and at worst actively corrosive to their self-esteem. This then, is the culture that gave rise to The Hunger Games, which witnesses the wholesale slaughter of adolescents while overlooking menstrual blood.

*Hygiene Crisis in Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.*

The literary landscape is virtually devoid of representations of menstruation. Even young adult literature, which targets an audience on the cusp of menarche, is strangely silent on the topic. Rather than creating a space to celebrate young women's femininity, a place to learn about their pending maturity, current and traditional American young
adult literature rejects its potential to support young women and instead projects cultural values that potentially inculcate shame in the young reader. Furthermore, the elision of menstruation signals a persistent devaluation of the female experience. Bloodless literature mimics not a bloodless world, but a bloodless culture, a culture determined to deny a basic bodily reality.

Of course, menstruation is not entirely absent from Western literature. Indeed, with its connections to female sexuality it is too dramatic an event to be completely ignored. From Edmond de Goncourt’s *Cherie* (1884) to Stephen King’s *Carrie* (1974) and beyond, Delaney, Lupton, and Toth offer a concise overview of the history of menarche in literature in *The Curse*. Their study reveals an unsurprising gender divide: while female authors portray a variety of perspectives on menarche “as a source of shame, knowledge, failure, surprise, conflict, and achievement,” male authors are transfixed by menarche and present it as “cataclysmic” (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 182). *Carrie* exemplifies this trend with its “cosmic unleashing of the Primal Flow” (Delaney, Lupton, Toth 181). Fortunately, King’s was not the only voice speaking of menarche in that era; menarche witnessed a (relative) surge in popularity as a literary theme in the 1970s, an upswing that was short lived.

Mention renowned author Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.* to a packed room and chances are that several will smile as if encountering an old, half-forgotten friend. For women of all ages, Judy Blume’s classic tale of an adolescent girl on the verge of menarche helped guide them through puberty. Young

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15 Judy Blume is fastidious about the punctuation of the title; as Richard Jackson relates, “There is no comma before God, and there is a period after Margaret. There is no comma before God because Judy felt very strongly that there was no distance between Margaret and God” (Weidt 49).
women searching for information wrapped in a solid story read *Margaret* to this day. We live in a world of instantaneous access to a deluge of information right at our fingertips; that the book remains a force in the ever-changing landscape of cultural forces influencing adolescent girls over four decades after its original publication date is truly incredible. Few books possess such power. What makes the novel so heady, at least in part, is its ability to tap into the curiosity and anxieties of its readership. An engaging first-person narrator, Margaret, echoes the concerns of her real-world counterparts. Young women who read the novel are privy to a frank, accessible narrative driven by the concerns of twelve-year-old Margaret. The epistolary nature of the text allows the reader to viscerally experience Margaret’s joys, anxieties, and curiosity.

It is a groundbreaking novel that helped establish Blume as “not only the most popular children’s author in the United State . . . [but] also the most censored” (Weidt 23). According to Maryann Weidt's study of Judy Blume and her work, it appears that what makes Blume most appealing and relevant to youth is also that which garners her censure from the adult community. Weidt states that “the objections generally focus on three areas: sex, which in the mind of the censor includes masturbation, menstruation, sex education, and actual sex; ‘strong language,’ . . . and ‘lack of moral tone’” (Weidt 26, my emphasis). In spite of the efforts of menstrual education to separate menstruation from sex, those who object to Blume's frank treatment of the subject (i.e., parents, school boards, religious leaders . . .) are keenly aware of the connection and feel compelled to restrict access to *Margaret*. The motivating fear appears to be that the novel could help educate adolescents about their bodies and encourage sexual activity.
The urge to remove Margaret from libraries speaks to the power and influence of the written word.

While Blume’s willingness to engage with the menstrual taboo is laudable, her treatment of menstruation is far from problem free. There is an easy, uncontested conflation of hygiene products and menstruation within the text. Limited access to information about periods curtails the avenues available for Margaret and her friends to learn about the impending changes they will experience. One of the rare, consistent, and accessible means of information for the young women in the novel is hygiene products. This grants de facto power to hygiene products; it transforms them from an admittedly complicated cultural artifact into a virtual fetish. Habitual trips to the drugstore “to inspect the sanitary napkin display” are not uncommon for Margaret and her friends (Blume 135). Though she routinely “inspects” the products, she maintains a wary distance. This distance reveals that Margaret and her friends feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, suggesting that on some level they believe that they are trespassing when they travel down the feminine hygiene aisle, gaining knowledge to which they have no right.

Though she has yet to have her first period, the lure of the mystery, the half explained phenomenon that is menstruation, proves irresistible. After a falling out with God, Margaret decides to act out, to disobey some unwritten rule and do the unthinkable: buy pads. She braves the checkout line manned by a teenage boy and takes her package home to explore. Blume writes:

I opened the box and took out one pad. I held it for a long time. Then I took the pink belt out of its box and held that too. Finally I got up and went to my closet. It was dark in there ... I got the pink belt around me and attached the pad to it. I wanted to find out how it would feel. Now I
knew. I liked it. I thought about sleeping in my belt and pad that night, but decided against it. If there was a fire my secret might be discovered.
(Blume 137-138)

“Now I knew,” she thinks to herself. In Margaret’s premenarcheal mind, menstruation grants instantaneous maturity and access to a secret society of women. A certain social caché accompanies menarche and assigns rank among her friends: those who menstruate rank higher. When Margaret’s desire for knowledge leads her to don the pink belt, she experiences the closest approximation of menstruation she can imagine. Tellingly, it is the tool sold to manage menstruation that predicates this rough imitation, thus exposing the conflation of menstruation and hygiene products within the adolescent mind.

Furthermore, the threat of discovery imbues the scene with drama. The urge to literally closet herself, the uneasy feeling that she is in some way delinquent, signals a paradoxical reality found throughout the novel and in society at large. Lamentably, it is the premenarcheal adolescent who most needs information about menstruation and who is often excluded from it. What information she does receive is heavily mitigated by the femcare industry, which is notably biased.

Like her real-world counterparts, Margaret experiences what passes for sex education provided by the public school system. As part of the curriculum, a representative of Private Lady Company, a fictitious business created by Blume presumably for the sake of lampooning the entire ritual, visits Margaret’s school to teach the girls about menstruation. The woman is only known as Gray Suit within the text, and she takes the stage with the commercial interests of her company thinly veiled by a veneer of altruism. She is ostensibly there to educate the young women about their bodies. However, as her very name suggests, she is an anonymous avatar of the larger
femcare industry and its bottom line-driven ethos. Margaret, and thus the young adolescent reader who is Blume’s audience, is not to be fooled. She notes that Gray Suit speaks with a “smooth” voice “like a radio announcer’s,” thus equating her with the media (Blume 96). Margaret then goes on to directly and adroitly note that the entire presentation-cum-lesson was “like one big commercial” (Blume 97). To fight back in the only way that makes sense in a consumer-driven interaction, she makes a “mental note never to buy Private Lady things” (Blume 97). Of course, though Margaret here denounces the blatant consumerism of the Gray Suit, she is not immune to the pressure to consume disposable feminine hygiene products. Interestingly, they become a fetish for her, and she refers to them by their real-world brand names. Thus, though Blume critiques the blatant consumerism, she reasserts the power of the feminine hygiene industry by allowing the conflation of menstruation and hygiene products in Margaret’s life.

A Bloody Knight: Menarche in Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness quartet

The publication of Margaret coincided with a surge in feminism that helped create a discursive space for public discussions of menstruation; the feminist milieu perhaps encouraged other pioneering authors to tackle the taboo. Thirteen years after the publication of Margaret, acclaimed young adult author Tamora Pierce published her first novel, Alanna: The First Adventure. The novel helped Pierce earn the 2013 Margaret Edwards Award from the American Librarian Association, a tribute recognizing an author’s “significant and lasting contribution to young adult literature … helping adolescents become aware of themselves and addressing questions about their
role and importance in relationships, society, and in the world.” Strong female protagonists with feminist inclinations populate Pierce’s oeuvre, inspiring generations of young women. The *Song of the Lioness* exemplifies Pierce’s dedication to feminist ideals; the quartet traces the trials and triumphs of Alanna, a young woman desperate to escape her fate of becoming a genteel lady in an Arthurian reminiscent world. She dreams of one thing: becoming a knight. In the series, society enforces strict gender norms built along the lines of Rousseau’s well-known gendered spheres. Rather than accept her culturally determined “fate,” the adamant Alanna is not dissuaded from her dream, and through clever machinations manages to hide her sex throughout the years required to become a knight. Through Alanna’s adventures, Pierce tacitly encourages young women to do the same, to struggle against glass ceilings and gender binaries that restrict self-actualization.

Though representations of menstruation in literature remain rare, Pierce offers a compelling scene in which Alanna experiences menarche. While Blume portrays menarche as the consumer-driven rite of passage that is the threshold a girl must pass to enter womanhood, Pierce’s tale revolves around angst. Alanna lives, quite literally, in a man’s world. As a page training to become a knight, she lives, eats, works, plays, and fights surrounded by men and boys of all ages. Menstruation is a relatively alien concept, even though her childhood nurse once informed her about the “fertility cycle,” a phrase that clearly links menstruation to sex, and the subject is so far outside of Alanna’s realm of possibility that she completely forgets (Pierce 136). So, when she wakes up one morning with her first menses staining her sheets, she reacts in a muddle of confused panic. Pierce writes:
It was the fifth of May. Alanna awoke at dawn, ready for another session with Coram’s big sword. She got out of bed—and gasped in horror to find her thighs and sheets smeared with blood. She washed herself in a panic and bundled the sheets down the privy. What was going on? She was bleeding, and she had to see a healer; but who? They were men and the bleeding came from a secret place between her legs. Hunting frantically, she found some bandage and used it to stop the red flow. Her hands shook. Her whole body was icy with fear. (Pierce 132, original emphasis)

The scene is a snarl of confusion, panic, and shame, all centered on the experience of her femininity. Every morning, Alanna awakes before her normal duties to practice sword fighting with a grown man’s weapon so that she may build her strength and stamina. On top of the already strenuous load placed on her as a page, these extra duties remedy self-identified weaknesses and help prepare her to compete physically with her male peers. Her body is a means to an end, a tool that needs to be sculpted into a capable fighter. In the passage above, menarche interrupts the rigid narrative of Alanna’s struggle to achieve equality and respect as a male. In doing so, it reinforces Alanna’s latent disgust with her body, which is, after all, the impetus for the grand charade that requires her to lie to friends and family alike. The drama of the scene springs from Alanna’s “horror” and “panic” at finding a “red flow” issuing forth from her genitals. Significantly, the blood comes from a “secret place” that goes unnamed in the text, further distancing her from her femininity and marking her sex as an uneasy reality within the text. For the uninitiated, Alanna’s intense reaction makes it all too easy to envision an unstoppable and monstrous red tide of blood. Thus, though Pierce strives to present women as equal to men and capable of the same physical prowess and adventures, there is a disconnect between this feminist inclination and the presentation of menarche.
Consequently, when Alanna’s body gives her incontestable proof that she is indeed female, she panics. Interestingly, though her panic and menstruation are inherently linked, the panic is not a direct response to menstruation. It is an unconscious, embodied reaction to what she perceives as an injury to her genitals; the shameful part of her body that she must keep hidden and secret in order to achieve her knighthood. This suggests to the young reader that menstruation is indeed a negative phenomenon forced upon her by an unmindful body. Adventure, quests, swordplay—these are the words that characterize life as Alanna wants to live it, and, because of the sequestering of the genders in her culture, femininity and agency as she understands them are mutually exclusive. When a healer explains to Alanna that the blood is natural and cyclical, Alanna unequivocally rejects the idea and vows to use her Gift (magical healing powers) to cease menstruating. It is only after the healing woman reminds Alanna that this is not possible and could cause Alanna great harm that she gives up the idea. Though she accepts her menstruating body, her initial rebellion against the idea of menstruating again signals to the young reader that periods are indeed negative.

The scene in which the healing woman discusses menstruation with Alanna is worth examination as it simultaneously educates Alanna and the adolescent target audience of the novel. In contrast to sex education courses like that lampooned in Margaret, Pierce depicts a frank intergenerational discussion between Alanna and the healing woman, the voice of reason that balances Alanna’s panic. Rather than skirt the role menstruation plays in human sexuality, the healing woman addresses it head-on and clearly links menstruation, sex, and pregnancy. She asks Alanna, “Did no one ever tell you of a woman’s monthly cycle? The fertility cycle? … It happens to us all. We can’t
bear children until it begins” (Pierce 137). Far from the grave situation Alanna feared, the healing woman’s calm demeanor establishes menstruation to be “as normal as the full moon” (Pierce 137). Eventually, Alanna grudgingly accepts the idea of menstruation and asks, “What do I have to know about this—this thing?” The dash is significant; along with her refusal to name menstruation, the dash indicates that for Alanna her period is an alien “thing” that must be managed, an unwelcome reminder of her femininity in a culture where women are marginalized. In response, the healing woman patiently informs Alanna of the basics: “Your cycle comes once a month, and lasts five days or so. Bathe each day. Bandage yourself, of course. The cycle will not come if you lie with a man and he gets you with child” (Pierce 138). Throughout the scene Pierce negotiates a balance between informing Alanna of her newfound fertility and framing menstruation as a normal. To her credit, she does not rely upon scare tactics to emphasize the connection between pregnancy and menstruation. True, when Alanna asks if menstruation will slow her down, the healing woman does warn her that it will not, “[s]o long as you stay out of men’s beds. A babe will certainly slow you down” (Pierce 138). However, the healing woman makes a point of informing Alanna that sex is pleasurable and even goes so far as to offer her a charm against pregnancy so that she might enjoy sex without worrying about an unplanned pregnancy.

Alanna’s experience with menstruation is interesting, for while the text earnestly attempts to portray periods in a positive light by directly discussing them and countering Alanna’s initial dismay, the series falls prey to a common pitfall for those young adult authors willing to discuss menstruation. The series is four books long, yet Alanna’s menarche is the lone noteworthy representation of menstruation in the series. For many
young adult novels, after menarche a veil of silence descends on the topic of menstruation. It is as if the taboo on menstruation can only be lifted to inform young women of the phenomenon.

*Margaret* and *Alanna* represent the limited ways that we are prepared to discuss menstruation with young women through young adult literature. On the one hand, *Margaret* packages periods as a consumer endeavor whose purpose is to maintain a clean, pure female ideal as it is threatened by a bloody hygiene crisis. On the other, *Alanna* first acknowledges the angst that may beset young women as they physically mature and then frames the process as a matter of fertility; this directly links menstruation to sexuality, an often troublesome connection that encourages health education courses to gloss over the connection so as to not to spoil the sexual innocence of young women. Each text also limits its discussion to menarche and then falls silent.

In *If Men Could Menstruate—A Political Fantasy* Gloria Steinem explores the hidden political ramifications of menstruation alluded to in *Alanna* and indirectly represented by this silence. Steinem’s facetious questions illuminate the power differentials rooted in our culture’s mistrust of the menstruating woman. By depicting the opposite of reality, Steinem is better able to critique the culture of silence and shame surrounding it. The image of men bragging about their periods while utilizing government sponsored sanitary supplies is laughable only because, in truth, women menstruate in silence and at great cost—financially and emotionally—to themselves. This is echoed in *Alanna* when the healing woman says to Alanna, “‘You’re female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that’ ” (Pierce 137).
Concluding Thoughts: A New Era for Menstruation?

Take a trip down the feminine hygiene aisle of your local drugstore and you will find a plethora of slight variations on the same essential product. To appeal to a younger market, Kotex launched its U by Kotex line, which is sold in sleek black boxes with vibrant accent colors. The product line also includes an intriguing marketing campaign. Rather than the oblique references to periods that are the paradoxical norm, U by Kotex aims to “break the silence,” “bust a myth,” “change the message,” and “spread the word” about menstruation. The official website, UbyKotex.com, invites visitors to speak frankly and openly about menstruation. The site features four young women activists who act as role models; they publicly confront the taboo and encourage others to follow their lead. Take, for instance, Kat Lazo, a New York City blogger focused on feminist-centered social activism. Humorous diatribes and direct questions characterize Kat’s style. Her goal is beautiful in its simplicity; she wants to break down the “ironclad culture of silence around the topic of vaginas.” She implores others to begin conversations about vaginas, and, as of April 21, 2013, over 2,000 conversations have been started in response to the U by Kotex campaign.

This is a heartening sign. The active participation of young women with this marketing campaign suggests that there is an earnest desire to tackle the taboo. While the site is, in truth, an extended advertisement, the monetary motivation behind this message of female empowerment is quite reassuring. The feminine hygiene industry is a bellwether for American perspectives on periods. Kotex, a successful leader in the industry, would not jeopardize its bottom line by investing in a risky venture. Could it be that we are entering a new era of discourse and sentiments about menstruation?
The evidence suggests that we are indeed entering an era in which the long unexpressed desire to discuss menstruation will be satisfied. Two thousand nine saw the publication of *My Little Red Book* by then eighteen year-old Rachel Kauder Nalebuff. *Red Book* chronicles over 90 firsthand accounts of menarche. From the 1930s to 2007, the text includes stories from several generations; though the stories differ in tone, mood, and content, they all share a common goal: to share personal experience with menstruation. The collection began after her overeager mother shared the humorous tale of Kauder Nalebuff’s first period with the entire family. In response, the women of her family shared their own first times. It was then that Kauder Nalebuff “realized that there was a whole generation whose stories would never be told unless someone did something. And so, for the sake of posterity, [she] decided to commit social suicide and started asking about first periods” (Kauder Nalebuff 4). *Red Book* is a powerful example of women taking menstruation into their own hands, recording it in the annals of history as it actually happened.16

There are other strong counterpoints to the taboo circulating in our culture, take, for instance, the work of multi-media artist Vanessa Tiegs. In response to the culture of silence, Tiegs directly confronts the shame surrounding menstruation by using her own menstrual fluid to create positive representations of periods in her art. In doing so, she undermines the tendency to disembold the individual, to deny basic bodily functions. Instead, her art encourages the viewer to not shy away from menstruation, an empowering notion for women. While working on her master’s degree in women’s

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16 This same urge to reclaim menstruation from the taboo is also seen in the growing number of women who use and make alternative menstrual products, including reusable pads.
spirituality, Tiegs created Menstrala, 88 paintings created over the course of three years using her menstrual blood. In *Period: The End of Menstruation*, a documentary that explores the modern period from a variety of angles, Tiegs discusses the desire to frame menstruation in a positive light that inspired her to use the products of her body in her art. In an artist’s statement written for Women’s Studies, she states that, “[her] Menstrala collection affirms the hidden, forbidden, bright red renewal cycle and embraces the wonders of womanhood” and that she chose a visual medium as “[i]t’s too easy to joke about menstruation because it’s hidden” (Women’s Studies 222). Her art undermines the taboo by directly confronting the viewer with that which is habitually suppressed. Through Menstrala Tiegs offers an unambiguously positive counterpoint to the negativity surrounding menstruation in American culture. As Tiegs herself states in *Period*, her aim is not to “shock” the viewer. Rather, her goal is to counter the habitual demeaning of the body, and to instead celebrate menstruation.

From U by Kotex’s campaign, to Rachel Kauder Nalebuff and the inspiring work of Vanessa Tiegs, there are several forces actively working to subvert the norm and transform periods into a valued experience worthy of sharing. The elision of menstruation in young adult literature skirts the central tension between the mind and the body that ripples throughout all levels of our society: the privileging of the intellect over the perceived base, animalistic nature of the body. Today, however, the tides are turning. The entrenched misogyny evident in menstruation’s absence is losing ground. While this has more obvious benefits for women, it simultaneously signals that the habitual distrust of the body is weakening. Now it is time for literature to follow.
Works Cited


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