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Bound by blood: Sexism, speciesism and multispecies menstruation politics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/fty**Corey Lee Wrenn** 

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Abstract

Vegan feminist theory has argued that the oppression of women, other animals and nature is premised on a series of dualisms, especially that between civilized humanity and animalized nature. Politics of animality, in particular, have been leveraged for the purposes of otherization. This article argues that menstruation in the human species serves as a cultural marker of animality for women and other menstruators. The article finds parallels in the bloodshed of Nonhuman Animals in a patriarchal society, also a consequence of violent inequality and culturally hidden. This entanglement is relevant for critical menstruation studies, critical animal studies and vegan feminist theory in that menstruation troubles binaries between women and men, nature and human and non-human and human which are argued to serve in the maintenance of social inequality. Employing a vegan feminist lens, this article argues for a critical multispecies menstruation studies that interrogates the cultural meaning of blood loss as it is informed by exploitation, secrecy and sacrifice across the species barrier. The destigmatization of menstruation *and* animality is championed as necessary for deconstructing deleterious dualisms and improving the status of menstruating persons and Nonhuman Animals alike.

Keywords

critical animal studies, critical menstruation studies, feminist theory, vegan feminism, vegan studies

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Introduction

Menstruation has served as a potent symbol of women's incomplete humanity for many hundreds, if not thousands of years (Schiebinger, 2004), highlighting their animality in such a way as to justify ostracization, segregation and subjugation (King, 2025; Roberts, 2020).¹ It has been positioned as having been the root of female irrationality, an embodied social construction of female lack of reason and inferiority (King, 2020). It has also served as a marker of uncleanness and even moral failing. Those who menstruate are systematically made to feel ashamed, alienated and 'other' from the default, non-cyclical cis-male experience (King, 2025; McKeever, 2008; Piccoli et al., 2017; Sommer et al., 2015). Meanwhile, many who cannot menstruate – such as trans women, some non-binary or gender-fluid persons, menopausal cis-women, elderly cis-women or cis-women with certain disabilities – may be doubly jeopardized, framed as socially problematic or unproductive and made vulnerable to marginalization (Gunter, 2024). Bleeding may be a marker of alterity, yet as Persdotter (2020: 363) observes, *not* bleeding is also perceived as abnormal, pathological or unnatural: 'Women cannot escape'.²

Bobel (2020) introduces critical menstruation studies (CMS) as relevant for examining these links between embodiment and identity, including politics of race, gender, sex, class and ethnicity. CMS understands 'menstruation as a lens' for identifying and interpreting social relations and power (Bobel, 2020: 2). This article makes the case for a consideration of species as well. If the stigmatization of menstruation is premised on its alignment with animality, then it behoves CMS to actively consider species politics in the shaping of menstruation and the status of menstruators. Nonhuman Animals, whose life chances are also deeply influenced by species politics, also have a stake here. Although their bloodshed is of a fatal kind, it is dictated by patriarchal institutions all the same. The anthropocentrism of period politics is challenged by vegan feminism which argues that the systematic discrimination against women and other feminized humans is predictably entangled with that of fellow animals. The CMS 'lens', then, can only be sharpened by an attention to the multispecies condition. Nonhuman Animals, moreover, both animalized and feminized in their subordinated status, also have a stake in this theoretical expansion, such that vegan feminist theory will also benefit from overcoming the menstrual silence in its discourse.

Vegan feminist theory – an ecofeminist and intersectional body of feminist thought that considers how women, Nonhuman Animals and nature have been historically oppressed in comparable ways – suggests that these entangled oppressions are rooted in otherization and animalization as both material and ideological fodder for patriarchal domination. Vegan feminism also champions the acknowledgement of Nonhuman Animals who are too often overlooked in critical examinations of unequal social arrangements (Kheel, 2009). Although very few nonhuman species menstruate as humans do, menstrual politics impact them nonetheless. The femcare industry, for example, is notoriously deleterious to the environment, swelling landfills and polluting the habitats of free-living animals (Blair et al., 2022; Hand et al., 2023; Khorsand et al., 2023). Likewise, many menstrual, postmenstrual and reproductive products and procedures have relied

heavily on nonhuman vivisection (Barwick, 2015). As the pharmaceutical industry has medicalized menstruation and menopause, corporate-induced sexism and ageism further aggravate speciesism in the development of ‘treatments’ including ingredients that rely on vivisection (Dwight, 2007; Haraway, 2012). Most fundamentally, however, *the stigmatization of women and other menstruating people*, this article will argue, *is a dualistic issue, rooted as it is in the stigmatization of animality*. By delineating humans as civilized, controlled and distinct from nature, animalization has serious negative consequences for Nonhuman Animals and many other marginalized groups that are systematically denied human status. Perhaps the persistent stigmatization of menstruation has rendered this very important example of vegan feminist intersectionality – the shedding of blood – all but unexamined. This article addresses this oversight in critical menstrual studies (and vegan feminist thought) by examining the politics of periods as a site of misogynistic sexual control and enforced separation from nature for the benefit of the dominant class.

This article therefore bridges vegan feminist discourse with CMS, a field that acknowledges and embraces periods as both physically and conceptually ‘messy’ (Persdotter, 2020: 368). Although CMS draws on the symbolism of animality to understand the derogation of menstruation, it has yet to explicitly engage with Nonhuman Animals themselves. For instance, Weideger (1977: 181) notes that, ‘At menarche, a young woman learns that she is a tabooed creature’, while Persdotter (2020: 363) charges that ‘menstruation is a foil to femininity, to modernity, to the docile, controllable body’. Yet, neither consider that creatureliness (which draws on the symbolism of wild animals) and docile, controllable bodies (symbolism of domesticated animals) bank on the uncontested lowly status of Nonhuman Animals. Vegan feminism identifies the objectification of women and other animals as symbolically and materially related (Adams, 2025; Cudworth, 2011; Kheel, 2007) and one such connection lies in the societal secrecy regarding their bleeding. Female bodied humans must bleed to be capable of producing new life and Nonhuman Animals are made to bleed in order to sustain existing life, but this bleeding, if implicitly understood to exist, remains culturally censored.

Period pride advocate Emma Barnett³ (2021: 10) has argued that ‘periods really do lay serious claim to the label ‘final taboo’. This goes beyond men’s sexism, as women, too, are complicit in the cultural stigmatization of menstruation. As Barnett observes, women also police other menstruators on how they manage, discuss and deal with the process, usually enforcing a shaming and alienating statute of silence. ‘Most women don’t even want to talk about them with each other’, she continues, ‘because there is a deeply rooted idea they are a silent cross to bear, are vile and don’t merit anything more than a passing mention’ (Barnett, 2021: 10). This article speaks to a similar silence in the academic literature, as CMS maintains only a tenuous hold in the literature, and, despite its emphasis on bleeding, body politics and structural inequality, remains wholly absent from critical animal studies (CAS).⁴ Feminist contributors to traditional animal studies have noted the androcentrism of the field (Donovan, 1990; Probyn-Rapsey et al., 2019), and while ‘critical’ animal studies is premised on an intersectional examination of oppression and is deeply informed by feminism, it has failed to keep pace with a number of important theoretical and social advancements in gender politics (Irni et al., 2024). The tabooed topic of menstruation, overlooked despite

more than a decade of organized period pride activism, appears to be one of them. This article initiates this discussion in tentatively identifying some important intersections between the critical study of menstruation and Nonhuman Animals. It argues that the bleeding of Nonhuman Animals and menstruating humans is greatly shaped by patriarchal norms, symbolically supporting male superiority and materially impacting the wellbeing of feminized beings. The stigmatization and animalization of those who bleed is identified as functional for the maintenance of an unequal, patriarchal society, while the sanitization and silencing of this bleeding ideologically reproduce it.

Critical menstruation studies

Although feminists have been responding to outdated and sexist cultural and scientific interpretations of menstruation for many decades now, CMS has emerged more recently in response to a marked increase in attention to periods in the popular discourse in the second decade of the 21st century. CMS brings renewed attention to the inequalities, vulnerabilities and identity-shaping aspects of menstruation that transpire across individual, cultural, political, environmental and economic spheres (Bobel, 2020). Scholars acknowledge that the embodiment of periods has far-reaching impacts with complex, often unequal consequences. With femcare products often prohibitively expensive for some, this can lead to a gender education gap (and pay gap following them into adulthood) in both developed and developing nations, this being a cumulative result of the time in the classroom lost with each period (Bobel, 2020). The significant stigma that menstruation creates has contributed a physical, biological justification for gender and sex segregation. Menstruation has been wielded politically to prevent menstruating people, particularly women, from entering the work force, for instance, and it has also been used to demonstrate that they are less emotionally stable or cognitively fit for full participation in civic society. This cultural, economic and political segregation aggravates the perceived 'naturalness' of the gender binary.

To this end, menstrual politics also have implications for trans and non-binary identities, as prevailing cultural discourse of menstruation has tended to avoid the acknowledgement of menstrual and gender diversity (Frank, 2020; Persdotter, 2020). Unfortunately, the menstruation movement can often be observed replicating many of the failings of second-wave feminism in excluding trans folks (as well as other marginalized folks including people of colour and queer women) (Bobel, 2010). Yet, biology is always shaped to some extent by the social, cultural and technological, challenging gender essentialism and biological determinism (Hasson, 2020). Explains Weideger (1977: 139):

We are the species in which sexual behaviour is furthest removed from hormonal control. We are also the species that has demonstrated the greatest facility for conjuring up emotional constraints that are fully as limiting and confining as any physiological constraint might be.

The trans experience, aggrieved as it so often is and excluded as it may be from mainstream period discourses, is nevertheless useful in highlighting the fundamentally

constructed nature of biology. In addition to many material inequalities that menstruators face, menstruation matters symbolically as a marker of distinction, a point that trans and feminist scholars have underscored. Greer (2012) and King (2025), for instance, have observed that much of the early scientific research on the psychological and physiological distinctions between women and men centred reproductive differences. Given that humans are not an especially dimorphous species, this would have been functional for maintaining the myth of gender distinction needed to reproduce a gender unequal, patriarchal society (Barnett and Rivers, 2004; Schiebinger, 2004).

In any case, menstruation remains a biologically unique phenomenon in that it entails the shedding of blood naturally and (for some) relatively painlessly. It does not take the life of the menstruator, nor does it cause any serious harm or leave scars. There are many theories as to why some animals menstruate, none of which are conclusive (Bellofiore and Evans, 2019). Feminists have come to their own interpretations, generally understanding menstruation as spiritually significant, even magical (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978; Sjöö and Mor, 1991). Patriarchy's preoccupation with uterine activities likely emanates from androcentric religions that framed menstruation (and childbirth) as unclean, even evil, and certainly other-than-human (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978). With the coming of 'Enlightenment' in the early modern era, this distinction was further reified with androcentric conceptions of humanism whereby the realm of the mind, associated with life and spirit, would be attributed to men and masculinity, whereas matter, associated with the body with its supposed passivity, dumbness and eventual death and decay, was attributed to the female (Plumwood, 1993; Sjöö and Mor, 1991). Silvia Federici (2009) has also argued that the rise of capitalism would encourage a further degradation of women's status to facilitate their reproductive exploitability.

From these economic and political shifts would emerge a powerful patriarchal incentive to control the female body, animality and nature itself. The relationship that most non-menstruating men have with blood, ecofeminists have observed, is disembodied and characteristically aggressive. Men of many cultures have been expected to face bloody violence as a means of becoming a man and demonstrating their manhood. Indeed, Kheel (2007) theorizes that while women's puberty is marked today as a natural, passive experience of beginning menstruation, men's coming of age is often marked by active ritual, often involving the domination of other animals (such as 'hunting'). Theirs is not the peaceful, passive and mundane bleeding of girls and women, it is the brutal, active and ritualized bloodshed achieved through sacrifice and exploitation. 'Hunting', Nibert (2026: 22) adds, served as a 'military academy', socializing men into a conflict-based and deeply violent patriarchal system. Indeed, Nibert (2026: 20–21) argues that the persistence of 'hunting' into manhood serves as a powerful form of male bonding that nurtures and reproduces patriarchy by 'subverting [...] egalitarian relations'.

CMS has thus highlighted that bleeding, for many, is a fact of life, but the *interpretation* of that bleeding is culturally determined. Bleeding is a fundamental element in the construction of cultural distinction, determining status and access to resources. Likewise, the inability to bleed, as is the case for some trans folks, folks with disabilities, younger persons and older persons, can also be used in constructing biological narratives that are

also useful in upholding belonging or otherization. For marginalized non-bleeders, their lack of menstruation may be highlighted to interrogate their authenticity and justify their marginalization. For marginalized bleeders, however, their capacity to menstruate may *also* be highlighted to emphasize their otherness. In all cases, the dominant group (namely cis-gender men who are unable to menstruate) dictate the social meaning of the body and its functions in such a way as to ideologically protect and reproduce their social dominance. This emphasis on the corporeal is key, as aligning gender minorities, Nonhuman Animals and nature with 'the body' naturalizes their subordinate status in society as animalistic and, by contrast, accentuates men's very humanness. What remains, then, is to sit more closely with the body politic of bleeding and animality. What might be gained by more explicitly theorizing the cultural construction of humanity that remains embedded within narratives of nature and the body?

Vegan feminism: Theorizing women, other animals and animalization

Although CMS, in focusing on the physical expression of menstruation and its many interpretations, draws on narratives of biological otherization, it generally overlooks the social construction of species as fundamental to the stigmatization of menstruation. Indeed, feminist theory in general has failed to interrogate animality as it informs sex and gender despite its interest in countering women's dehumanization and disrupting dualisms and hierarchies (Adams, 1993). Vegan feminism expands this framework by explicitly troubling anthropocentrism (Adams, 2025), while recent work has begun to incorporate trans-inclusive and queer theories (Guenther, 2024; Irni et al., 2024; Whitley, 2024) to explore the ways in which the sexualized oppression of women and other animals extends to other marginalized sex and gender experiences. Although delinking sex from gender in vegan feminist thought is necessary to maximize the theory's inclusiveness and applicability (particularly as vegan feminism fundamentally challenges exclusion and discrimination based on biological categorization), some attention must be retained for sex-specific characteristics that have been historically wielded in gender-based oppression. Both women and fellow animals have been, in many cultures of the world and especially in the West, demarcated as lesser than, given biological and spiritual stereotyping that favours European white men (Schiebinger, 2004), and this hegemonic masculinity is maintained and reproduced through the subjugation and consumption of the feminine, women and other animals especially (Adams, 2025). Vegan feminism also heavily examines the politics of reproduction in drawing comparisons between human women and female-bodied other animals (Cudworth, 2011). Menstruation, as a leading marker of both femininity and reproduction, would seemingly find resonance in vegan feminist theory, but it has been all but overlooked.⁵

Without this critical vegan perspective, CMS maintains Nonhuman Animals as absent referents (see Persdotter, 2020; Roberts, 2020; Ussher and Perz, 2020), while feminist responses to menstruation that persist from second-wave narratives of the 20th century have reinforced anthropocentrism and effectively reified the patriarchally induced

separation between humans and nature. Sjöo and Mor (1991: 397–398), for instance, have critiqued the dualisms manufactured by patriarchal religion, problematizing its efforts to:

force a human de-evolution back to the primate state by controlling human reproduction as though it were the same as mammalian reproduction, and by denying the fact of human female evolution into a unique state, via the menstrual cycle, in which sex and reproduction can be separable.

Bleeding for oestrus-based species is comparatively slight and, in contrast to humans, indicates reproductive receptivity. These animals reabsorb unused reproductive material, while humans shed it. Human females, in other words, have evolved to be physically and psychologically receptive to sex throughout their entire reproductive cycle; menstruation has delinked sex from procreation. Again, the biological or evolutionary impetus for menstruation is still not fully understood (King, 2025), but this reproductive independence may have been key to social bonding and building stable social structures (Knight, 1995), a possibility that many second-wave feminists have heralded.

Feminists, in hoping to reclaim women's social status as society-advancing, creative humans, have marked women also as distinct from other animals *as well as* superior to them. Doing so, vegan feminism would counter, is to deny a more fundamental element of humanity: its animality. If, as Sjöo and Mor (1991: 398) assert, the delinking of sex and reproduction in human females has been key to the development of human society and from 'the beginning of human consciousness', what does this mean for other animals deemed less evolved than humans? Likewise, Shuttle and Redgrove (1978: 142) argue that the development of a menstrual cycle allowed humans to develop 'into a different order of being', an order distinct from other animals who maintain an oestrus cycle that incorporates periods of sexual disinterest. That said, many feminists have *also* exalted menstruation as a direct link between female bodies and nature, given that menstrual cycles loosely match the cycles of the moon. 'We do feel the lunar tides in our bodies', suppose Sjöo and Mor (1991: 191). Though many feminists have embraced a connection to nature as essential to their feminine distinctiveness, they have ultimately hesitated to reach so far as to embrace a connection to fellow animals in particular. Doing so may be perceived as a risky strategy given the historical association between women and Nonhuman Animals and the ongoing feminist struggle to secure human rights for women.

Humanity and its patriarchal project of civilization have striven for several hundred years to downplay this corporeality (Plumwood, 1993; Schiebinger, 2004). Shedding blood, sex and reproduction are distinctly animalistic behaviours, at odds with the rational, cognitive emphasis of an 'enlightened' society. Shuttle and Redgrove (1978) argue that menstruation thus came to mark women's innate evil, a blood pact with the devil that was renewed monthly. All manner of superstitions and taboos have been created to contain the menstruating person, many of which relate to fears that this animal connection can be abused to disrupt or taint 'livestock' and the production of animal protein. Across many cultures and religious practices, menstruation continues

to be associated with the ritual exclusion of menstruating people as unclean and marginal. Sex with menstruating people, as just one example of many, is most often discussed as disgusting, something to be avoided or, in some cases, even perverse (Barnett, 2021; Freidenfelds, 2009).

Thus, for vegan feminism and CMS alike, period politics are deeply relevant given that the stigmatization of menstruation is premised on the stigmatization of women's animality. Bourdieu (1984) has argued that social distinctions, including gender difference, can be reproduced by facilitating differential habituses. Greater status tends to be placed on social tastes and behaviours that are removed from their base functionality and association with animality. The cultural (and academic) silence on menstruation thus likely reflects cultural norms set by patriarchy as most men will never menstruate. More than this, menstruation, at monthly intervals, challenges the supernatural premises of the patriarchal rationalist project. That is, the passing of blood may serve as a reminder of women's association with the natural world, but it also serves to remind that humans, like other animals, are products of basic reproduction. Periods are an all but inescapable link between 'civilized' humanity and the biological evolutionary system, a system that centuries of religious doctrine have worked to obscure. The cultural norm of concealing periods (and childbirth, for that matter) works to differentiate humans as something above Nonhuman Animals, something more divinely designed. Conversely, open menstruation, a marker of both basic reproductive functionality *and* animality, is tied to women as a measure of distinction and lower social status. Menstruation, in other words, offers little cultural capital in an androcentric society.

The historical belief in hysteria further supports the animalization of menstruation in denigrating, pathologizing and otherizing the female body (King, 2025). Diagnoses of hysteria were applied to all manner of physical and psychological ailments (real or perceived) that afflicted women, those related to wombs in particular, and were effectively employed to scientifically demonstrate women's animalistic inferiority, justify their control and retard their social progress (Stein and Kim, 2009). Good husbandry, as with any other chattel, was thought to be an effective antidote. Greer (2012), for instance, has charged that widowed and unmarried women (essentially 'unhusbanded' women) were especially vulnerable to charges of hysteria. But this could also be said of any women who express any sort of independence or resistance. Agency is believed to be a distinctly human characteristic, one that differentiates humans from other domesticated animals. Refocusing on the irrationality and abnormality of the female body through politics of hysteria thus secures their subjugated status. Disparaging women for their 'bitchiness' and overall contrariness also illustrates this intersection of sexism and speciesism in prejudicing women's physical and emotional expression (Adams, 2025; Collard, 1988). Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) continues to be wielded against women in this way: 'it must be that time of the month'. PMS is a relatively common response to rapidly changing hormones (Direkvand-Moghadam et al. 2014), but androcentric cultural interpretations have been 'picking up where the outdated diagnosis of hysteria had left off' (Stein and Kim, 2009: 69). Cultural stories about human menstruation are not only related to the symbolic animalization of women; there are physical connections as well. The painless, living wound of the menstruating uterus is regulated, to an extent, by the painful, killing

wounds necessitated by ‘meat’ and dairy production. It is known, for instance, that diet is related to menarche, such that menarche begins several years earlier in modern society (Weideger, 1977). Diet also shapes the *quality* of menstruation (and menopause). For instance, plant-based consumption is believed to ease menstrual discomfort (Stein and Kim, 2009).

Feminist theory has exhibited a rather paradoxical relationship with ‘nature’. While, on one hand, it is often interested in eschewing patriarchy’s emphasis on civilization, development and humanity’s estrangement from the environment, it is, on the other, deeply uncomfortable acknowledging the very animality that links all humans to the environment and its biological influences. A historical legacy of intense discrimination and institutional violence against women that has been premised on their supposed underdevelopment as humans likely accounts for this. However, if feminist theory hopes to fully appreciate the cultural construction of sex and gender, it will need to account for the role of human animality in shaping the menstruator’s condition as well as the systematic human relations with fellow animals. Both of these directly inform the cultural interpretation of menstruation and the commandeering of menstruation in the reproduction of social stratification. Vegan feminism calls for a radical confrontation with this latent theoretical and cultural speciesism, suggesting that an active acknowledgement of animality will more clearly resist the more pernicious aspects of patriarchy’s colonization over the lifeworld and nature itself. Furthermore, a conscious examination of menstruation – as an animal function that both distinguishes humans from other animals *and* emphasizes their sameness with other animals – invites new theoretical conceptualizations of what sex and gender mean, or could mean, within the larger framework of species politics.

The entanglement of human and nonhuman bleeding

With regard to these intersections, the underlying narrative of sacrifice that many of the aforementioned vegan feminists have identified in explaining both oppressive cultural norms around menstruation and human–nonhuman relations is key to reconsider. Some anthropologists and feminists have suggested that menstruation was once a very sacred element of prehistoric gynocentric spirituality, likely fuelled by the rich symbolism it offered (Knight, 1995; Sjöö and Mor, 1991). Menstruation is comprised of blood and tissue,⁶ a necessary blood sacrifice in the continuation of the species, but it also represents life-giving capabilities. Traditionally (and in some cases, even today) menstrual blood has been collected and used as soil fertilizer. In early spiritual practice, Nonhuman Animals were also sacrificed for this purpose. The shedding of lifeblood through slaughter was deeply symbolic, and although elements of the ritual will have varied across cultures, it was generally believed necessary for the regeneration of life (Harden, 2013; Janowitz, 2025). Patriarchal religion gradually usurped and eventually replaced goddess worship by assimilating or stigmatizing elements of the practice to elevate male power, a practice that began with the advent of ‘hunting’ several thousands of years ago (Nibert, 2026) but gradually sealed with the elimination of women’s social power and status in the early modern era (Federici, 2004). While female-bodied persons gave life to the community by ovulating, birthing and breastfeeding, male-bodied persons

found they were able to give life through the killing of other animals and the exploitation of the land (Luke, 2007). 'War is [cis-]men's response to women's ability to give birth and menstruate', speculate Sjöo and Mor (1991: 193): 'women's blood rites give life, [...] while men's bloody rituals give only death'.

The superiority of patriarchal bloodshed banks on the repression and degradation of women's. Even today, the consumption of animal flesh remains a central sacrificial element in the patriarchal system. 'Red meat, with its symbolic association with blood, particularly is viewed as a manly food', explains Kheel (2009: 2), because 'meat functions as a symbol of a masculine conquest over nature'. While this rich symbolic understanding may seem remote to the average human consumer, it is nevertheless the case that strong gender stereotypes continue to inform diet. Indeed, the consumption of some visceral animal flesh products entails an acknowledgement of and confrontation with the mass exsanguination that is animal-based agriculture. 'Steaks' are often consumed as a performance of masculinity (Adams, 2025), while chickens' wings are also male-coded and ubiquitous offerings in masculinized spaces such as sports bars and tailgate parties (Veri and Liberti, 2013).

As feminized means of community support and mutual care were undermined in new patriarchal orders, vegan feminists have supposed that the violent blood shedding of Judeo-Christian masculinity would be exalted as spiritually superior in an effort to normalize a conflict-based and deeply unequal social system. Likewise, the perhaps less spectacular and more mundane non-violent blood shedding of menstruation and birth, thought a succumbing to the body and nature rather than a triumph over it, may have been stigmatized as dirty, unclean, taboo and in need of secrecy in order to disempower women and facilitate their exploitation. 'The criminalization of women's control over procreation', Federici (2009: 93) adds, 'is a phenomenon whose importance cannot be overemphasized, both from the viewpoint of this effect on women and its consequences for the capitalist organization of work'. To this point, vegan feminism has argued that the debasement of Nonhuman Animals for men's economic gain – namely in shift to 'hunting' and later the institutionalization of domestication under agrarianism and land privatization under capitalism in support of 'wool', 'meat' and dairy production – coincided with the debasement of women, also for men's economic gain. Logics of speciesism, furthermore, have directly informed sexism with regard to perceived marketability, controllability and inferiority of body and mind, and patriarchal ideology has been a powerful component in naturalizing this perception (Nibert, 2026).

Menstrual taboos, too, have naturalized patriarchal rule, argues Mason (1993: 85), in that they 'created a mystique that empowered men and elevated their prestige'. Daly (1977) has noted that this inferiority is often bolstered by notions of impurity. This secrecy, CMS scholars have argued (King, 2025; McKeever, 2008; Piccoli et al., 2017; Sjöo and Mor, 1991; Sommer et al., 2015), is more than a demonstration of patriarchal power and attempt to humiliate individual menstruators; it also has an isolating effect that alienates menstruating persons from one another, even undermining familiarity and trust with their own selves. In effect, menstrual secrecy undermines collective power and contributes to the devaluation of female-bodiedness (Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs, 2013). In a similar way, Nonhuman Animals and human interactions with them are also

subject to politics of purity. In ancient times, Nonhuman Animal sacrifice was subject to a wide variety of regulations to ensure their purity and subsequent suitability for ritual objectives (Harden, 2013). The cultural distaste for ‘mystery meat’ and the damnation of horse flesh discovered in the Western food supply are modern examples of this, as is the rising popularity of ‘organic’ and ‘clean’ meat (Stanescu, 2019).

The femcare industry has followed suit with this interest in purity by highlighting the naturalness and sustainability of its products (Connory, 2021). Sea sponges, for instance, are marketed as a ‘natural’ and ‘sustainable’ alternative to tampons (Stein and Kim, 2009). The use of these carcasses is ethically questionable as it involves killing sea sponges (who are animals, not plants) and it also increases the risk of infection for the human user. Removing them from the sea environment, furthermore, has consequences for the health of the ecosystem, especially coral reefs (many sea sponges are now farmed, but this practice comes with its own ethical and environmental considerations). Hormonal replacements such as Premarin, furthermore, rely on the intensive confinement of pregnant mares to extract their concentrated urine as well as the untold suffering of millions of vivisection victims ‘sacrificed’ in product development. These drugs promise to restore the menstruator’s human vitality but do so through the suppression of the animal other.

Given their shared object status, women, too, have been ‘cultivated’ as test subjects (Vostral, 2020: 674) in sometimes dangerous testing procedures for products that were often dangerous themselves. As a result, nonhuman females who also menstruate are vulnerable to serving as replacements. The spiny mouse, for instance, has been targeted not just as a menstruator but also as a species closely related to the house mouse, the standard species already constructed as appropriate for laboratory research. Relieving humans from invasive experimentation is argued to outweigh the poor reliability of animal-based research (Bellofiore and Evans, 2019). That is, women’s purity is prioritized, protected by transferring their suffering onto other animals who will be sacrificed in their stead, even with full understanding that the sacrifice will be lethal for these mice and unlikely to solicit a satisfactory scientific solution. Drawing comparisons between biologically female women and Nonhuman Animals, as vivisection attempts, may also aggravate essentialism as it ‘echoes age-old conceptualisations of women as closer to animals and nature than men’ (Karu, 2024: 261). Vegan feminists might draw on this oppressive cultural entanglement between women, nature and fellow animals in framing their resistance to vivisection, but doing so could have the unintended consequence of reinforcing human supremacy and further denigrating Nonhuman Animals and nature by comparison. Vivisection is instead rejected in recognition of nonhuman sentience and the right to bodily autonomy, with an explicit interrogation of vivisectionists as patriarchal agents who enact the sacrifice of these sentient beings in their quest to master nature and achieve status (Collard, 1988; Luke, 2007). To this point, there may be lessons to be learned from the trans community as it interrogates the bioessentialist conflation between menstruation and womanhood. Vegan feminism would also resist the bioessentialist tendency in feminism to exalt periods as uniquely human, as this claims making reproduces human superiority and animal otherness. That spiny mice (as well as some shrews and bats) menstruate challenges the biological distinctiveness and supposed

evolutionary superiority of humans, but vivisection and its corporeal control over feminized bodies in the great masculinized project of human progress and mastery over nature, reinstates it.

Thus, the control and technology of modern life that Freidenfelds (2009) identifies as impacting the social experience of menstruation is also impacting the social experience of Nonhuman Animals. ‘Breeders’ and ‘farmers’ have made ovulation their business, for instance, most notably in the manipulation of laying hens. Almost all hens are kept in cages to facilitate full human control over their bodies and reproductive behaviours. By withholding food, water and lighting, humans can force chickens to moult between egg-laying cycles (Davis, 2019). In fact, the reproduction of a variety of female species is manipulated in order to encourage reproduction, growth, lactation or some other bodily process or product that can be monetized. The highly sensitive eye stalks of female shrimps, for instance, are crushed or removed to encourage them to reproduce (a procedure euphemistically referred to as ‘eyestalk ablation’). Doing so is thought to alter their hormonal system and blindness, of course, creates permanently dark conditions which also trigger their bodies to ovulate (Uawisetwathana et al., 2011). This is particularly important in stressful, unhealthy factory farm conditions where most sentient beings instinctively resist reproduction or are otherwise too sick to reproduce. Another example can be found in modern caviar production, which does not involve natural passing of eggs. Female fishes (often sturgeon), also housed in intensive factory-aquafarms where their living conditions, bodies and access to food are manipulated to maximize roe yields, are electrocuted or vivisected to manually remove eggs (Sicuro, 2019).

Menstruation, then, may be a primarily human phenomenon, but trans-inclusive CMS has emphasized that essentialist narratives exclude a variety of menstrual experiences beyond that of cis-women. Likewise, vegan feminism has pointed to an even broader reproductive experience that may be invisibilized by the feminist focus on human menstruation. Historically, it is clear that feminized groups of many sexes, genders and species have been impacted by blood politics and sacrificial expectations. Although feminism has thoroughly documented women’s historical progress as it has been advanced or restricted by menstrual rituals, norms and taboos, it has failed to adequately consider the ongoing blood sacrifice that humans exact from trillions of nonhumans each year, especially female-bodied animals whose reproductive capacities are especially prized. The gendered nature of this speciesist sacrificial system is only underscored by the predominance of men in the operation of institutions (including vivisection and the production of ‘meat’, dairy, birds’ eggs) and the greater gravitation of men to the consumption of these sacrifices as they seek to meet their own gender role expectations of strength as prowess through the domination and killing of feminized bodies (Luke, 2007).

Sanitizing blood

Feminist theory may overlook these systems of sacrifice, on some level, as a consequence of the overwhelming invisibility under which they operate. Yet, feminism has distinguished itself in its ability to make visible the invisible, theorizing that inequality feeds on this obscurity to reproduce unresisted. The obfuscation of menstruation exemplifies

this, but a vegan feminist perspective would argue that the obfuscation of violence against fellow animals serves the same end. Indeed, there are literal blood ties in this intersection. The very physical matter of being – blood – is ever present and yet ever concealed. Feminism has resisted this concealment, arguing that complicity with the patriarchal norms that regulate the visibility of blood authorizes inequality to persist and reproduce unchallenged. Vegan feminism suggests a similar process at work with nonhuman bleeding, suggesting that making visible the bleeding of Nonhuman Animals has the power to disrupt the normalcy of hidden oppressive structures, inviting critique and challenging their legitimacy.

Furthermore, a vegan feminist CMS encourages a more fundamental challenge to the concealment imperative that human menstruators confront, that being their very animality. As women have struggled to obtain human rights and improve their status in a human supremacist patriarchal society, their inherent and inescapable animality as *homo sapiens* seems to be the most protected secret of all. But breaking the silence on human animality might inform a more humane and politically necessary cultural comfort with bodies of all kinds. Acknowledging animality might, as a consequence, also entail an acknowledgment that, despite the many real and varied species distinctions, *the capacity for suffering and the potential to thrive is a shared one among all sentients*. The following sections explore this line of reasoning, identifying a number of ways in which CMS has challenged the dehumanization of menstruating people in an effort to uplift their status and wellbeing, but in doing so, has abandoned some of the most vulnerable feminized bodies, those of Nonhuman Animals. Embracing animality rather than denying it could potentially expand the CMS effort to dislodge bioessentialism and invite a theoretical development towards that which is more inclusive of social and cultural experiences beyond that of the human. First, it must contend with and overcome the stigma of animality that has inhibited this synergy.

The menstrual concealment imperative

Psychologists have noted that menstrual stigma not only contributes to the lower status of women but also deteriorates their psychological and physical wellbeing (Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs, 2013). Across the decades, efforts to hide menstruation, what Wood (2020: 327) terms the ‘menstrual concealment imperative’, are implicitly linked to social disempowerment. Mobilized in the Progressive Era, rationalization, systemized education and scientific advancements have all informed these efforts to control and conceal the body. This cultural impact, Freidenfelds (2009) argues, has remained stubbornly intact across several waves of feminist activism and counterculture. From interviews with Americans of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, Freidenfelds could observe a relatively consistent discomfort with menstruation as well as a persistent belief that it informed women’s emotional and physical weakness. A survey of Australian advertising across the 20th century, furthermore, illustrates how periods were also medicalized as though in need of treatment or cure (Connory, 2021). Barnett (2021) and Quint (2021) have also critiqued femcare advertising for its role in intentionally aggravating feelings of shame and disgust with the menstruating body, especially for

the purposes of commodifying. Femcare industries, they note, peddle resolution through discreet packaging, whispering advertising discourse and blue liquid in lieu of menstrual blood. More importantly, this invisibilization has allowed for capitalist enterprise to control the dialogue to the effect of obscuring the bloody and often uncomfortable realities of menstruation. Explains Gruen (1993: 69): ‘Western cultures have perverted the need for cleanliness in order to provide manufacturers with profits, subjugate women and further distance man from nature’ and these industries ‘perpetuate the notion that “dirt” and “natural odors” must be controlled and eliminated, and that it is women’s job to do this’. ‘Thus’, she concludes, ‘women have been placed at the boundary between nature, with its “contaminants,” and civilized sterility’ (Gruen, 1993: 69).

In fact, many markers of animality are discouraged of women in the West, including pubic hair, fleshy labia and vaginal odour (Greer, 2012). Men, on the other hand, have been historically epitomized in the Western humanist project as the height of human evolutionary triumph; and perhaps as they are safe in this superior status, men are subsequently encouraged to embrace some markers of animality. Many men ‘take a pride in smelliness and hairiness, as part of their virile rejection to prettiness’, Greer (2012: 43) comments. This is, for men, a kind of animal drag, an explicit adoption of animal roles for the purpose of exaggeration, namely the exaggeration of differences in sex type characteristics and gender roles. The *essence* of animality, however, is ultimately reserved for women in an effort to naturalize their supposed evolutionary stuntedness and rationalize their persistent social inequality and vulnerability to violence. Ussher and Perz’s (2020) qualitative research with preteen menstruators illuminates the menstrual intersection with animality, finding that animal metaphors are regularly employed by their interviewees. These are often body focused and entangled with anti-fat attitudes (sometimes related to menstrual bloating). Sexism, speciesism and anti-fatness converge, they find, to create the ‘monstrous feminine’ (Ussher and Perz’ 2020: 263). Indeed, monstrousness, which emphasizes the evil and grotesque aspects of nonhumanity, finds considerable resonance in a culture of period stigmatization as menstruation blurs a number of physical and ontological boundaries. It is internal flesh made external, a marker of wildness in an otherwise civilized society and, of course, a visible symbol of animality attached to an otherwise rationalized and cultured human figure. In blurring the boundary between humans and other animals, menstruation makes monstrousness and this monstrousness animalizes (Andreasen, 2020).

Respectability politics

Menstruation is further marked by class and race, as hygiene, cleanliness and respectability permeate menstrual discourse. By the mid-20th century, the femcare industry had expanded rapidly, with a variety of douches, vaginal soaps, bleaches, disinfectants and disposable napkins and tampons marketed to menstruators with appeals to middle-class values and aspirations. Meadows-Fernandez (2018) observes an added element of alterity and inferiority assigned to menstruating persons who are not white, amplifying self-alienation and anxieties around cleanliness. Period pride, in other words, may be a white privilege. Reusable napkins became markers of poverty and otherness, as did

odour. Vegan feminists Ko and Ko (2017) have noted that class and race have been central to the construction of the human, and it seems here that white middle-class consumption has become one way to mark the menstruator's humanness. Indeed, menstruators are implicitly compared to domesticated animals as femcare advertising has historically centred men's sexual entitlement. For instance, advertisements often shamed menstruators into purchasing sanitary products with portrayals of jilted women whose vaginal odours disrupted marital affairs. Virginal girls, furthermore, have been discouraged from using tampons for fear of adulterating their sexual intactness for a future husband (Stein and Kim, 2009). Conversely, these same products were promoted amidst folk tales that an uncontrolled period might render the menstruator vulnerable to predation.⁷ Perhaps this symbolic alignment between female bodies and other domesticated animals accounts for the subgenre of period pornography, what Stein and Kim (2009) identify as a variant of sadomasochistic vampire play but what Barnett (2021) identifies as a performance of male dominance in confronting the heightened disgust that menstruation adds to the already devalued female body.

There are racial and ethnic variations of period stigma. Not unrelatedly, given the disproportionate targeting of Black and Brown peoples, carceral logic also intersects with period stigma. Bekah Topaz, for instance, was arrested for violating the curfew imposed during the George Floyd protests in the United States. 'I wasn't even protesting', she explains, 'I was just going to buy tampons'. Evidently, her explanation held no weight with her arresting officer who insisted, in her words, that 'I have no excuse to not know when my period is and that being unprepared isn't an excuse' (Topaz, 2020, deleted Tweet). Bozelko (2020) mirrors these concerns, arguing that prisons intentionally humiliate female inmates by withholding sanitary products as a reminder of the control held over their bodies. Roberts (2020) agrees, noting their gratuitous exposure to both discipline and objectify them. Indeed, research with inmates finds many reporting that they feel animalized. This could become a point of resistance. Irish political prisoners in the years of the Troubles infamously utilized 'dirty protest', intentionally embodying their animality in response to human rights violations experienced in British prisons. For female-bodied prisoners, this included sitting with their menstrual blood (Weinstein, 2006). As these Irish protests illustrate, the carceral experience is itself an animalizing process as it confines individuals to cages and strips their ability to move freely or even practise basic hygiene. Periods can inform penalization, and penalization is often predicated on controlling wild, dangerous and disobedient animality. Visibilizing periods, then, can serve as a powerful protest to naturalized inequalities and oppressions.

Slaughterhouse politics

Just as the human female's bleeding is expected to remain hidden, so is the bleeding of other animals whose once wild, dangerous and disobedient animality has been all but obliterated by domestication. They languish in this carcerality, imprisoned in feedlots, piggeries, aquaculture tanks and battery cages, all bound for eventual slaughter. These bleeding bodies, too, are culturally managed. Potts (2017: 19), for instance, identifies the predominance of 'meat culture'⁸ as 'the tangible and practical forms through which

carnist ideology is expressed and lived' as manifest in 'representations and discourses, practices and behaviours, diets and tastes that generated shared beliefs about, perspectives on and experiences of meat' (Potts, 2017: 19–20). Likewise, the societal discomfort with speciesism and subsequent invisibilization of nonhuman suffering has allowed capitalists to shape the discourse, and advertisements for 'chicken' and 'beef', cows' milk, chickens' eggs, bees' honey, 'leather' and so on are completely void of any blood or suffering. Well-practised and heavily funded evasion tactics and patriarchal storytelling are utilized by those involved in the slaughtering of other animals to reframe coercion and domination and protect the palatability of nonhuman bodies (Alexis, 2019). Nonhuman Animals exploited commercially are most often depicted as clean, healthy and happy, usually in open, natural spaces or in the arms of loving farmers (if living Nonhuman Animals are even shown at all) (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Wrenn, 2017). Similar to the treatment of menstruation, there is an androcentric, human supremacist system of sanitation designed to manage and control the animality of Nonhuman Animals culminating in a complete absence of blood or detritus of death in meat culture.

Nonhuman Animals specifically bred and 'raised' for food consumption, of course, meet the most obviously bloody fate at the end of a bolt gun to the brain or blade to the trachea, oesophagus and carotid artery. In many religious slaughtering facilities, such as halal, these animals meet their sacrificial end without stunning and writhe in their pooling blood as they die, unable to breathe or cry as their necks have been halved. Slaughterhouses are kept well out of sight from the average observer, witnessed almost exclusively by slaughterhouse workers and the animal victims themselves. That said, slaughterers and sanitary workers who enact hundreds of these blood sacrifices a day and whose job it is to slop the blood and entrails with scalding water and toxic chemicals (that substantially lend to slaughterhouse work as one of the most dangerous and lethal professions in the Western world) are *themselves* just as unseen (Dillard, 2007). Almost none of this blood makes it to the consumer. Animal bleeding, physical evidence of nonhuman animality and capacity to suffer, is sanitized by humane labelling, misleading advertising and speciesist tropes that deny nonhuman personhood.

Adams (2025) has observed that Nonhuman Animals are usually only acknowledged in Western culture as absent referents, omnipresent and yet invisible throughout society as made possible through intense objectification and segregating systems of rationalization. The managing of nonhuman bleeding provides evidence of this. To buttress ideological boundary making between humanity and animality, the bodies of Nonhuman Animals are butchered, fragmented and sanitized before distribution to grocery stores and restaurants. Blood, hair, eyes, noses, tongues, toes, tails and sometimes even bones are removed so as to fully erase the person and the animal from which the food object derived. Rendered unidentifiable fibrous masses, these once-persons and their animal being are often even further invisibilized with heavy processing, seasoning, crumbs and batter, sauces and toppings. 'Chicken breasts', 'minced meat', 'steaks' and 'drumsticks' rest clean and bloodless under plastic wrapping, inspected and labelled to assuage any consumer fears of contagion or decay amidst the corpses. Packaged smartly to hearken green pastures and sunshine, devoid of heads or faces that might

detract from the fetishized commodities. The fear, the stabbing, the bolt gunning, the gassing, the electrocuting, and the spilled blood are expertly whisked away.

Conclusion: Confronting bloodshed

Patriarchy has constructed a complex system of blood politics whereby sexism, speciesism and the control over feminized bodies is normalized, while attention to the bleeding of both menstruators and Nonhuman Animals is discouraged and redirected. The association between menstruation and animality has, I have argued, been historically wielded in such a way as to cast doubt on the mental stability, bodily purity and evolutionary completeness of women. As rationality is considered the key demarcation of humanity from other animals, menstruation has – with its embodied nature and perceived capacity for cognitive corrosion – marked menstruators as less than human and more animal-like. The persistence of menstrual stigma despite several waves of feminist activism suggests that there is something uncomfortable about acknowledging and reclaiming the animal body in a movement long committed to advancing the humanness of women and gender-non-conforming people. From a vegan feminist perspective, the liberation of animality itself would be to the benefit of women, gender non-conforming persons, low-income persons, older persons, Nonhuman Animals and all manner of social groups that have been marked as cognitively, corporally and evolutionarily ‘other’ as a measure of social control. Shuttle and Redgrove (1978: 29) agree, charging that patriarchal culture has so detached women from their own bodily processes and rhythms that their independence can only be found in ‘understanding of one’s nature rather than repression of it’.

Blood, whether it is human or nonhuman, menstrual or non-menstrual, is a life force that flags a shared sentient existence between humans and fellow animals. Stemming the bleeding, so to speak, in popular and academic discourse has perpetuated harmful period stigma. It also negates the bloody reality of trillions of Nonhuman Animals killed for food and other products and overlooks a shared desire to live with bodily integrity as a potential point of solidarity. Period pride might align with veganism in its challenge to the objectification of feminized bodies and the reduction of individuals to their reproductive parts and products. It might also embrace the vulnerability that menstruation can create, with all its shifting of hormones and flesh, or even the pleasure it can bring in delinking sex from reproduction. Reclaiming animality, in other words, opens up new ways of being that are not restricted by patriarchal controls or devalued by patriarchal norms. The development of CMS has been, in large part, a response to the outdated 19th- and 20th-century menstruation narratives, many of which actively contributed to the reproduction of harmful binaries and other ideologies of oppression. However, in failing to adopt a vegan critique, CMS may be replicating the very exclusionary discourses it aims to dislodge. The demarcation between Nonhuman Animals and menstruating humans, vegan feminism argues, is not so hard and fast, and the historical and cultural entanglement of both groups has much to inform a critical understanding of blood, sex and gender in the 21st century.

Both nonvegan and vegan feminist theory, in fact, might benefit from a closer examination of how the statuses of women and other animals are similarly managed by violent patriarchal maintenance of blood flow. Quinn (2021) has observed that veganism is often charged with monstrousness as it destabilizes what it means to be human in advocating a peaceable multispecies coexistence. In doing so, veganism confronts the horrors of modernity but also imagines utopian possibilities. It may be that a vegan lens could reclaim human animality from the deleterious impacts of patriarchal, anthropocentric, capitalist-orientated society and re-envision the ‘uncivilized’ wilderness from which all life once emerged as a space of coexistence, community and corporeal autonomy in which each is guided more by cycles, rhythms and negotiations than by force and coercion. A vegan CMS sits with the messiness of nature and, in doing so, aims to relieve women and other animals alike from the stigmatizing otherness.

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Notes

1. Menstruation may even demonstrate a kind of superanimality given that so few other species menstruate with comparable volumes relative to body size. Indeed, as Gloria Steinem (2019) once pondered in *Ms. Magazine*, if (cis-)men could menstruate, heavy periods would likely be used to bolster status and power.
2. I sometimes maintain the term ‘women’ to refer to menstruators, but primarily only in the context of a historical association between the two and the systemic discrimination of cis-gender women based on their expected menstrual capacities. Nonhuman Animals, too, are often invisibilized in this discourse, and, as a result, I refer to them with capitalization as a political measure of recognition.
3. Barnett is the first woman on UK television to announce she was menstruating at the time of broadcast, an off-hand decision that ignited a media storm.
4. Much of the critical animal studies literature is vegan feminist in nature, however vegan feminism as a distinct theory also finds roots in ecofeminist thought (Wrenn, 2027).
5. As of this writing, I am not aware of any scholarship in the vegan feminist field that substantially explores menstruation.
6. We might even speculate as to the meaning of menstrual cramps; for those who menstruate without pain, this may have only intensified the magic of passing blood and tissue without experiencing harm. For those who did experience pain, this could have emphasized the miracle of bleeding without sustaining any long-term injury despite the considerable discomfort that menses bring. Given the variety of causes associated with menstrual cramping

(including environmental influences, genetics and nutrition), it is possible that early humans, if not experiencing variation in degrees of discomfort that are similar to modern women, would not have experienced any discomfort at all, or, conversely, could have experienced much *more* discomfort. I was not able to find any research on the prehistory of menstrual pain, although some research has indicated records concerning the phenomenon as far back as the Renaissance (even in the past few hundred years, the symbolic meaning of this pain has changed considerably) (Stolberg, 2000).

7. According to the North American Bear Center (n.d.), this myth led the National Park Service to produce cautionary pamphlets directed at menstruators and encouraged the US Forest Service to bar its female employees from forest duty during menstruation.
8. Although ‘meat culture’ is the obvious parallel, Nonhuman Animals bleed (and die) in a wide variety of human supremacist institutions too many to discuss here, such as dairy and egg production, vivisection, zoos, companion animal shelters, etc.

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