

Truth Scribbled in Blood: Women's Work, Menstruation and Poetry

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Inspired by Hélène Cixous's 'The laugh of the Medusa', this paper revisits a public uproar over menstruation in the workplace triggered by a statement from the CEO of New Zealand's largest body of private sector employers, that periods make women take more sick leave than men. The utterance triggered an astonishing outpouring of public discussion and writing about working while menstruating, as well as about productivity and equal pay. We discuss how a comment about women's periods ruptured the status quo of menstrual repression by using selected online posts rendered as poems. Then, drawing on Cixous and the idea of poetic rapture, we discuss women's online writing in tandem with feminist writing on menstruation. In our theoretical reflections we consider how poetry, menstruation and social media can 'make trouble' for regimes of power. We argue that menstruation should be a required topic for organizational studies.

Keywords: equal pay, menstruation, online communication, writing, Cixous

Rupture

Suppose that society is a lie, and the period is a moment of truth which will not sustain lies.
(Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978, p. 58)

In 2011 New Zealand erupted into a public furore about menstruation in the workplace. Women's episodic bleeding surged into the public arena and became the topic of workplace and domestic conversations and debate, dominating social media, television, radio and the print media. The explosive cacophony of opinionated voices about something usually repressed and suppressed in public discourse occurred because Alasdair Thompson, then the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Employers and Manufacturers Association Northern (EMA), the largest representative of private sector employers in New Zealand, commented in a radio debate about pay equity that women took more time off work because of their periods.¹

Alasdair Thompson
[Employers & Manufacturers' Association CEO]
'Let me get down to tin tacks here.
It is unfortunate,
if you like,
that men and women are different –'
Helen Kelly
[Council of Trade Unions President]:
[incredulous laughter]
'– they are.
The fact is,

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women have babies,
 they take time out of their careers
 to have babies.
 Women have
 – look,
 I don't like saying this,
 this is how contentious this is,
 but here's a
 fact of life.

If you really want to keep some
 statistics,
 look at who takes the most sick leave.
 Why do they take the most sick leave?
 Women do in general.
 Why?
 Because, ah,
 you know,
 once a month
 they have sick problems'

Now women return from afar, from always; from 'without', from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture' ... The little girls and their 'ill-mannered' bodies immured, well-reserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath! What an effort it takes — there's no end to it — for the sex cops to bar their threatening return. Such a display of forces on both sides that the struggle has for centuries been immobilized in the trembling equilibrium of a deadlock.
 (Cixous, 1976, p. 877)

In response to this public utterance a media fire-storm erupted. Social media including Facebook, Twitter, media websites and blogs lit up with outpourings of both outrage and support.

imagine
 feeling like somebody has taken a sledgehammer
 to your lower back and pelvis,
 while someone else
 is running a knife through your lower abdomen.
 On top of this,
 the stomach cramps mean
 that if you're not throwing up,
 it's only because you couldn't manage to eat anything
 in the first place.
 That's what a 'bad' month is for me
 and I have taken one day off in six years for it.
 I do what every other woman I know does
 I take some painkillers
 and go to work anyway
 because I might need that sick leave for something else
 cold, flu, virus, infection, whatever
 that might be contagious,
 and that I am NOT
 used to dealing with on a monthly basis.
 Alasdair Thompson has no idea how lucky he is
 not to be a woman.²

There was an immediate media response and public outcry, and in order to rectify the situation Thompson issued a public apology on a morning breakfast TV show, and then on *Campbell Live*, a popular evening news format TV show. In this show he said he was sorry several times, but he continued to claim that women took more days off because of their periods, a belief communicated with evidence from his own experience, and within an overall valorization of flexibility and individual productivity measurement. When requested by the interviewer, Mihingarangi Forbes, to provide some factual information about women's periods and sick leave he became agitated and angry and the interview disintegrated.

I emailed Mr Thompson directly
It was not so much what he said on the radio
it was his management of himself
after the event.

He was an absolute bully to Mihi
very threatening in his body language to her.
His management of himself was unwise
and unprofessional.
Stupid
stupid
man.

his comments about women in the work place
made me angry
on a deep,
cellular level.

This man is a sexist and a bully,
and I personally believe
that he should not be allowed to be in a position of authority
concerning any aspect
of how things are run in the NZ workplace.

The full and edited versions of the interview were posted on news sites and YouTube³ and the outpouring of highly charged commentary continued, not only about Thompson's comments, but also about the way the interview was conducted, edited and was being interpreted.

Sure, he's said some stupid things
But treating him like a fraudster or criminal
airing embarrassing segments
pressing for his resignation ...
Is it a coincidence the only reporters
covering the story are women?
Put a male onto the story
and let's see some objectivity!

Vociferous public denouncement of Thompson continued, although he did have many supporters. However, many of his online supporters considered that women deserved less pay because of their reproductive capabilities and responsibilities (for children) more generally and/or defended him on the grounds that he was being vilified and victimized by feminists, unionists, politicians and other opinionated women. Women leaders, for example Jenny Shipley, the first female Prime Minister in New Zealand, were targeted:

I see Jenny Shipley is still gunning for Alasdair Thompson's
head to be delivered to her on a plate.
I don't know why she thinks
that displaying

excessive
 vindictive
 bitchiness
 is likely to improve the employment chances of women,
 let alone their pay rates.
 All she demonstrates is that women like her
 believe free speech should be punished
 rather than refuted
 with better arguments and evidence.
 Pathetic and
 somewhat evil.

Thompson's comment thus triggered a deep fracture line and initiated an intense and often ugly debate about women's menstruation and their productivity. This line was not women on one side and men on the other, and many employers immediately distanced themselves from being associated with the view that women's periods affected their productivity.

I am an employer
 and Mr Thompson
 DOES NOT SPEAK FOR ME!
 Full stop.

I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at; this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly.

(Cixous, 1976, p. 877)

There was a howl of outrage, but also many women internalized the implied criticism and responded with sadness, frustration and resignation when they admitted they had taken time off work during their periods and to look after their dependent children.

I agree
 that one's career is impaired.
 and therefore
 you are less likely to be paid well,
 and be promoted,
 because of absences to have children.
 It's sad
 but unfortunately true.

When women posters commented that Thompson was wrong they were called 'femi-nazis', 'harpies' and 'witches'.

Should have refused to apologize
 and toughed it out.
 The harpies
 and emasculated snags
 would have soon lost interest.
 Another victim of
 selective reporting
 and a media stitch up.

The public debate was polarized, vicious and divisive: Air New Zealand publicly withdrew their membership from EMA Northern (Puranam, 2011) and the EMA's Board struggled to distance themselves from the controversy (Bond, 2011). Eventually Thompson was dismissed from the EMA Northern.

So far we have provided an outline of events as they unfolded. In the following paragraphs we discuss some themes in public comments, in order to provide context to the intensity of feeling and the nature of the arguments that were mooted throughout this rupture of the status quo.

The initial comment that women take more time off work (than men) because of their periods confused many people because, whilst it seems to be true (women take time off work because of their periods), it is also nonsensical: women take more time off work than men because of their periods as men don't menstruate. It is very important to emphasize here the question is not *whether* women (all, some, none) take more time off work because of menstruation that matters most: it is what powerful people do with this claim and what they make it mean. In this case the implication was that periods make women less productive.

Thompson's initial comment offended many because it presented a negative and homologized view of women. Several women commented that they do not menstruate, and so they pondered where they fitted in:

I am a woman
who has had a hysterectomy
and so no longer have periods.
Where would I fit into Alasdair's world?
Would I be paid as a woman
(who menstruates)
or as a man
(who doesn't)?

The other problem was that there was an equating of menstruation with sickness, which is a pathological and distorted stigma (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013). Women implicitly and explicitly recognized this sexism in their online scribbles, rendered through disbelief, anger, but also humour, and they shared accounts of their own bodily experiences of menstruating, and pointed out that men took sick leave for different reasons.

Mr Thompson has the physical appearance of excessive drinking
note his eyes and nose.
Is he paid less because of lost work days
due to hangovers?
I am being tongue in cheek
however it does hold more water
than Mr Thompson's archaic
patronising
offensive
small minded
twaddle

Appalled that I have missed all this time off
that according to employers' most senior representative
apparently
I should have been taking throughout my working life.
Grow up you plonker.
There must be something real
you can find to whine about.
Yours,
female,
engineer,
and never having taken a day off sick in over 15 years.

Alasdair forgot to mention
that we should be paid less
because our brains
are smaller.

Blacks have smaller brains too.
P.S. I've never had a day off due to a period.
Although I'm feeling pretty ill right now.

Not all women have periods. Not all women take time off for their periods. Defenders of Thompson continued to argue that women take more sick leave because of their periods and cited 'evidence' in justification, for instance one piece of research is referred to in the following post:

Mr Pagani,
it is regretful that you have indulged
in ad hominem attacks
instead of looking at the actual facts.
'The economists Andrea Ichino and Enrico Moretti,
analysing personnel data from a large Italian bank,
found that female employees under forty-five years old
tended to miss work consistently on twenty-eight-day cycles.
Plotting these absences against employee productivity ratings,
the economists determined that this menstrual absenteeism
accounted for 14 percent of the difference
between female and male earnings at the bank.'
Levitt and Dubner,
Superfreakonomics,
2010, page 24

To be clear, the research quoted is not reputable or convincing to any but those who already believe women's periods impact on women's productivity (see discussion by Herrmann and Rockoff, 2012). Of course women may take sick leave if they have painful or distressing periods, but they more often just work through them, repressing and ignoring their bodies and feelings so they can maintain a façade of the male-body norm at work (Acker, 1990).

My periods last 6 days
and I only receive 5 days sick leave a year.
5 days sick leave would not even cover
1 period that last 6 days and nights in a row.
I save my sick days
for when I have the flu
or a cold.

Having periods does not stop me from doing my job or work.
You have no right to pay women less for doing a 40 hours work week
the same as a man.
Women work too
believe it or not.
Not just men.

The issue over sick leave being taken because of menstruation was recognized by many women as being a generalization about their role as potential or actual mothers, with this being the real reason for the devaluing of their work and the pay gap. Research has shown again and again that women's reproductive capacities and bodies are the measure by which all women's worth in the labour market is defined (e.g. Acker, 1990).

Just because
I am capable
of bearing a child
and go through a cycle
every month
makes me no less of an equal to anyone else
it sure doesn't stop me working on
heavy machinery
and doing hard labour
with the rest of the men
I work with.

I strongly disagree
MR Thompson
Does he not realise he has just insulted his own mother
let alone the mothers of this nation,
shame on you,
if it weren't for us
you would not be here
MR Thompson
and maybe you should go back to where you came from
and be reincarnated as a woman
then you might begin to understand.
Double shame on you.

Thompson was chided for his views which were perceived as an attack on mothers. Women sometimes seemed bewildered that their role as mothers was a source of devaluing of their worth. One poster, with tongue-in-cheek, commented:

But the comment
that I found most interesting is that
women have children.
So, does that mean that men don't have children?
If that's the case,
then women should definitely earn more.

Another also saw irony:

I would like to know
why women are penalised
for ensuring the survival of the human race
when men around the world
are paid more for destroying it.

Several posters commented on the things that men might do more than women that involved using sick leave and pondered why this didn't lead to less productivity (including taking time off to watch sport and more alcohol abuse hence hangover days). As several people pointed out, sick leave provides a limited quota of days per year, usually five in New Zealand, so what did it matter what the leave was taken for?

I don't understand.
How does the cause of illness
Have anything to do with the sick leave ...
I mean
If you are sick you are sick

It can be for any reason
So why pay somebody less
Because their cause of illness
Is a particular thing?

Both men and women seemed outraged at the idea that patriarchal order still existed, although others spoke of it with resignation.

and that's why I hate the fact
that I'm born as a woman.

This brief comment resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's (2010 [1952]) existentialist belief that existence precedes essence, and hence one is not born a woman, but becomes one.

Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) in medical discourse is a disorder, often 'treated' with medication such as artificial hormones. This medicalized discourse around menstruation is coming under increasing pressure from cultural and social theorists using social constructionist approaches (Stein and Kim, 2009), who instead argue that menstruation needs to be understood in its historical, cultural, social and institutional contexts in relation to frameworks of discipline and control of the female body (Diamant, 1997; Repta and Clarke, 2013). As it becomes technically easier for many women to medically suppress their periods, the 'choice' to menstruate becomes a political act (Bobel, 2010).

One key text in this movement to more fully understand menstruation is 'Menstrual meditations' in which Iris Marion Young (2004) provides a menstruation-centred perspective, which normalizes menstruation and the 'bloody moods' that come with it for some women. She argues women as menstruators are socially oppressed on two main fronts: the shame associated with menstruation that 'compels girls and women to conceal their menstrual events' and 'the misfit between women and public places such as schools and workplaces, which often refuse to accommodate women's social and physical needs' (p. 98). Because of this social repression women learn ambivalence about work and the rhythms of public life as most women, at some time in their lives, feel a misfit between their cycling bodies, the demands of expected working activity, and the modesties involved in working. Women often report feeling their bodies as obscure and alien during their periods.

Young argues that in contemporary times menstruation has moved from being mainly conceived of as a medical issue to being framed as a hygiene issue. On the one hand girls are told they should take pride in becoming and being a woman, but on the other hand they must take pains to hide all evidence of bleeding as it is dirty and gross. Young argues that women need to unlearn menstruation as it is done in a patriarchal context, and to relearn the values inherent in menstruation from a women-centred perspective. However, Young also expresses some ambivalence in that she suggests men and their institutions will not 'learn' much from menstruation and so period repression will continue to be a fact of life. We suggest though that women's writing — public writing and academic writing — can bring menstruation openly into working life. We return to this point later in this paper as we argue that organizational studies must engage with the issue of menstruation.

I'm sure all of the commenters here know
at least one woman in their lives who is employed
and works hard for her money,
which she then uses to contribute to the lives of her children,
her parents
and her partner.
I am a woman,
who works so hard for her organisation,
and I never take sick days.
It absolutely shatters me
that no matter how diligently I work,

no matter how results-driven I am,
 no matter how much I contribute
 that I will never be as valued
 simply because
 I am a woman.

In the event that we consider here, the veneer of menstrual repression was ruptured, albeit momentarily, precisely because of the nature of the digital media which provided endlessly reviewable videos online, leaving a permanent reminder and a trail of commentary from the public. The media enabled the public's voice to be heard, and it was not pretty, being a cacophony of polarized voices pitched in conflict with one another. Posts poignantly express the reality of living with periods and attitudes that force the suppression of periods in the world of work. Women need to work despite menstrual discomfort, and there is the added burden of the psychological impact of repression. The lack of understanding of the lived reality of being a woman led to eruptions of direct confrontation with other posters.

Anonymous

Having employed
 both men and women in business
 since 1973
 my experience
 has been that
 yes
 women take more time off than men
 on average.
 Most don't understand the financial costs.
 If you have to pay a day's sick pay
 and then have to employ a temp from an agency
 who will be less capable than the permanent employee
 the net result is either a break even
 or loss for that day's activity.
 Alas as most are employees and not employers
 the actual facts don't register.
 Some because they really don't get it
 and others like many posting here because they are
thick
stupid
morons
 Dislike 1

By Beth in reply to Anonymous

Good that you are prepared to use your name
 and stand behind your words.
 I assume that you are a man.
 If you have children
 do you take leave to look after them
 when they are ill?

Anger was often expressed in online confrontations. This anger was sometimes generalized out towards all 'men'. Women, in their anger, in the flow of their writing, often reached metaphoric epiphany.

We all know that blokes
 if they had periods
 would roll their own tampons

in some menstrual Marlboro moment
and go and log pine trees to prove how macho it all was
and then give themselves a monthly bonus cheque ...

Yep
I'm a mum
I work
I study
hell I get my period.
I wonder what his mum thinks
of the crap he just pulled
I think we deserve more money not less.
this guy does not think much of women at all
I guess he thinks we should be in the kitchen
cooking
cleaning
staying home with the kids
no complaints
I would really love to see this guy in the shoes of a woman
for at least a month
and see if he thinks we deserve less pay

Post writers, in the heat of their writing, in their 'moments of truth' (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978), when they felt no compunction about telling it like it is for them, combined emotion, reason and direct personal experience and poured it out onto the page. Singular direct experience, normally given no credence in empirical research which relies on large data sets and objective language, in the context of this debate had weighty viscous veracity.

45 years ago I worked as a proof-reader for what was then Whitcombe and Tombs. I was told that because I would (a) get married eventually and therefore have a husband to support me, and (b) take more sick leave than men because all women did, I could not be paid the same as my male counterpart. I was also denied membership of the dominant workplace union, the Printer's Union; the reasons given? I was a female and not doing a real printer's job.

I am not making this up.

So, reading Mr. Thompson's views, and some of the comments on this article, made me think I had been transported back to those days. He is of course entitled to his views, laughably sexist though they are; what does concern me is that his ludicrous attitudes may be reflected in his organisation's industrial relations position; these same attitudes are quite probably shared by other influential men both in the EMA and other key positions. Mr. Thompson has been foolish enough to air his appalling views in public; I'll bet there are many other like-minded blokes thanking their lucky stars that it was him and not them.

Women spoke out, from their own experience, with each story different but mediated through the common experience of having and dealing with periods. Women noticed the contradictions, the lack of logic and the implicit beliefs about women's value in the claims being made and responded by telling their own individual stories. The combined effect of numerous individual stories being told, all at once, in public forums, meant a larger 'social truth' was achieved.

Reading the posts, it is impossible not to be appalled, to laugh, to feel a connection; and to be moved by the writing from the gut and from the womb. Posts were ripe with pithy humour.

If i have a hysterectomy
can i get a 12% pay rise?
Like 2
Dislike 3

Women should get paid more ...
 they have to endure periods
 and giving birth
 Work unpaid for up to 18 years
 bringing children up
 All this to provide future consumers
 How about a performance bonus???

You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.

(Cixous, 1976, p. 885)

Menstruation is repressed in organizational settings; the only place women can be freely bleeding beings is on the toilet, the place where we defecate and urinate. Why is so little imagination and empathy expressed about periods in organizational contexts? Why is it so hard to imagine what it is like to be a woman that we are not allotted any institutional time or any appropriate space to be women?

In the posts we present in this paper women articulate their bodily experiences; they communicate the inescapable fact of their bodily knowing and in posts expel this knowing out into the world. Posts come from direct experience of facing the menstrual abyss whilst working; the bloody business of stopping crimson blood from seeping into public spaces, its emotional reminder of the body's failure to become pregnant (welcomed or not), its physical discomfort, and the need to hide it all. In expressing this bodily experience in words women articulate their knowledge of the world and of their bodies, and also their anger at the lack of empathy and compassion from others, and the unfairness and ironies of the productivity discourse.

Each month menstruating women are faced with the cycle of life and death which they experience monthly through much of their adult working lives. This direct bodily reminder (a knowing) directly challenges the systems of knowledge that increasingly regulate the labour market and its official 'objective' productivity discourse. In the following discussion we explore how menstruation, poetry and the use of social media can act to destabilize the 'truth regime' of individual productivity discourse in the labour market.

Rapture

Cixous has written that 'Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason' (1976, p. 879): she argues writing is at one with the phallogocentric tradition which, like an enormous machine, has been turning out its 'truth' for centuries. Phillips *et al.* (2014) have recently drawn attention to the significance of Cixous's thought in challenging masculine orthodoxy in organizational contexts as well. Cixous's philosophy of writing rests on understanding the very essence of writing in relation to orthodoxies.

In explanation, writings — inscribed black marks on blank things — are symbols or abstractions representing artefacts, actions and experiences, which through their very nature create a space between thought and words; between thought and body. There is a gap between the thought and the word on the page (or the screen). In the space and time between individual thought and its sharable representation in becoming the word, it is moderated through the political, social and cultural knowledge regimes that decide and organize what is known, what can be said, how it can be said, and to whom. Two relevant points are developed in the next two paragraphs; the medium for the black mark on the white page; and the interactive social process involved in words' becoming.

Historically 'truth' is facilitated in the mode of writing's message; first images, then handwriting, and then printed material and now digital communication. In its construction knowledge becomes a thing, an object. Words, singular representations of knowing, make experiences symbolic things, words, which can then be written on a page. Words create a grammatical split between subject and

object, and this split is entirely a function of language, not ‘reality’ per se. This split is entirely culturally and socially constructed, but western empiricists almost always forget its origins as ‘a wholly unnoticed metaphor for the separation between “real” subjects and “real objects”’ which then becomes ‘a Cartesian separation between the knower and the object of knowledge in the epistemology of empiricism’ (Shapiro, 2012, pp. 21–2). The language of productivity represents exactly this concept of language, and is now a dominant discourse and represented in many formal organizational texts — the law, regulations, workplace contracts, strategic plans, research, and statistics. Western empiricism, which has its own specialized technical language and processes of dissemination of knowledge, often involving writing papers and policy documents, fixes objects in time and space, thereby creating a static reality. Empiricists write about things as though they really are separable from us, but the human linguistic practices which reified the objects in the first place are rendered invisible and irrelevant. When objects are thus reified within a grammatical trope for knowing, human practices can become a series of still and silent lives, which are forced into the background (Richardson, 1990).

In the event of concern in the present paper, the discourse of productivity and its fundamental disconnect with the subject of women’s bodies was first spoken in a radio interview, then in the newspapers and then on television. Each utterance was using the spoken word, then transcribed into a lasting, permanent medium (transcribed text, comments and conversations in social media, online videos). The fundamental embodiment of the speaking act is laid bare in the traces of these more emergent and fluid communication practices. Insight into how speech utterances and reason are inter-related is provided by Kleist (2004 [1715–1759]) in his essay ‘On the gradual construction of thoughts during speech’. He notes how clarity often comes through the act of speaking to another person; ‘I believe many a great speaker to have been ignorant when he opened his mouth about what he was going to say ... But the conviction ... made him bold enough to start’ (p. 406). Clarity, according to Kleist, comes in the unexpected conversations that force a rethink of words as they emerge from the mouth or the pen. With the conversation and with challenges to utterances eventually comes the clarity. Reason, in this perspective, is a co-relational and social construct, garnered through conversation and the checks and balances that come with wrongly believed or poorly thought through convictions being tested in face-to-face or pen-to-pen interactions.

Feminist writers such as Cixous and Kristeva have pondered long and hard the question of women’s nature as embodied beings in relation to the written word. Their concern is that words’ abstraction from the body creates conundrums for women as embodied beings as by placing the pen on paper, by abstracting thought we ourselves (as women) somehow become something we are not, alienated from ourselves as corporeal, emotional beings. Writing for women is thus an existential issue. To explain using an example: in writing the words ‘uterus’ or ‘menstruation’, that part of our body (uterus), or time and space bound embodied experience (menstruating), becomes separated out from our body and our experience, in these cases into word-marks representing medicalized discourses of the body. But, it is only through language, through its ‘ordering effects’, that the uterus and menstruation can be reintegrated back into our experience through language. Thus language itself — words and the medium they are expressed in — is a key site for women’s political action.

Cixous, committed intellectually to writing as a form of communication, writes her way through this dilemma in her essay ‘The laugh of Medusa’ (Cixous, 1976). The essay is both a model for women’s writing, about women’s writing, and a challenge to the notion that there is women’s writing. Cixous wrote eloquently of women’s necessary embodied multiplicity and infinite imaginary possibilities. Kristeva has also noted how women, in and of themselves, have an embodied multiplicity that contains a fundamental challenge to systems of representation: ‘A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language — and it has always been so’ (Kristeva, 1987, p. 254, cited in Höpfl, p. 90).

Cixous proposes a poetic method for ‘troubling’ the processes that confine her:

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their

bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement.
(Cixous, 1976, p. 875)

Cixous implies through her own writing and explicit arguments that women's writing should be infused with libidinous desire and thereby break the codes that negate women (in writing); the strategy is to challenge inscriptions that contain women through poetical writing and other methods of disrupting text. She does not suggest there is a universal women's 'truth', but she does imply that women will not be everything they can be, will not unleash all of their potential, unless they insert their libidinous, desiring, bodily consciousness into writing as a becoming practice. What techniques does Cixous use to do this? She plays with words to keep the reader off-kilter, suggesting other interpretations, de-anchoring words' natural-seeming flow, which have become 'channelled' through habits of use. With libidinous energy, metaphor and wit, words can suggest other realities, and bridge the reader self-reflexively to awareness of writing's role as creator and destroyer of worlds.

Dorothy Smith (1995 [1990]) explains that the world as experienced everyday by women is embedded in patriarchal knowledge discourses and these dominate our consciousness; in the case we are considering, it is productivity discourse. Smith argues that knowledge as we know it is mired in masculine paradigms because they hold the power of dominant institutions; so women's experience is 'vanished' (Smith, 1988). Smith argues that because 'reality' as we experience it is organized in and through patriarchal discourse, the 'everyday world is problematic for women'. Thus, in the everyday world as we normally experience it menstruation is repressed and suppressed in organizational life as the working productive subject has no body, although actually, he has a male body with no uterus (Acker, 1990). In the incident we write about in this paper, this explanation is turned-on-its-head as everyday women (i.e., bleeding women) are problematic for the world, and especially for productivity discourse, because women's experience directly challenges the epistemology of productivity discourse which is disembodied, runs according to clock time, and at the level of productive labour is measured by individualistic criteria.

Smith, in her notion of the 'everyday world as problematic for women' provides an example of strong suspicion flowing through feminist writing about general scientific/academic and business discourse; traditionally this writing has negated, misunderstood, repressed and/or trivialized women's experiences. Science and business discourses are littered with their ignorance of women's lives. In response to the silencing of women's voices in science, post-structural feminists in particular have developed reflexive linguistic strategies to 'talk back to power' and disrupt masculine discourses. Kristeva's writing for instance is imbued with a self-conscious sense of displacement with the world of academe with its highly abstract wordiness, a sensitivity exacerbated by her personal physical marginality, transience and multi-linguistic abilities and her strategies have influenced post-structural feminist and post-colonial writers (Höpfl, 2012).

Feminist scientific writing often uses metaphor and fiction to communicate women's experiences more accurately. The aims of this writing is to authentically and transparently present women's realities and, at the same time, through writing, unhide women's exclusions and repressions and forward their political and ethical concerns. For instance, and of direct relevance to the present paper, Laurel Richardson has written extensively, reflexively and eruditely about how writing stories can add to understanding of human endeavour in all its intricacies and complexities and has experimented with ways to disrupt codes of knowing in research that exclude multiplicity and becomingness. She has 'transformed an in-depth interview into a poem, field notes into an ethnographic drama, a discussant's response paper into a co-written non-unified voice film script, a conference paper into a "responsive reading" and a book review into a pagan ritual' (Richardson, 1994, p. 7).

In the present paper we have re-represented posts as poetry, because they sounded like poetry already. Re-representing comments as poetry, we believe, is truer to their original form than content analysis can be (we have coded as well) (Sayers and Jones, 2013). Poetry, like posts, can have direct immediacy. These posts have been spoken out of women's bodies; they are written honestly, connecting bodily experience to individual experience through writing as the posters try and

comprehend and disagree with the discourses confining them. Thus the comments are often charged with righteous anger.

Poems exist in the realm of making (mimesis) rather than knowing or doing. Literary poems are consciously constructed through literary devices such as sound patterns, rhythms, imagery and page layout to evoke visceral emotional, embodied, memory experiences in the reader. Kristeva argues poetry sacrifices theology by which she means poetry beaks into the 'civilized space' of representation 'making a shambles of solemnity' (Bedient, 1990, p. 807), primarily by exploiting and augmenting the semiotic chora with which language is already charged. Semiotic chora are pre-linguistic elements like rhythm, breath impulsion, intonation. Poetry is, or at least can be, a language arising directly from the body, from experience, and evoking the body, and can thus 'trouble' abstractions of disembodied discourse.

As well as being a linguistic means by which the body can be brought back into language, poems can be highly morally charged. Because poems concretize emotions, feelings and moods, and thus recreate experience itself to another person, poetry can give an issue credibility, especially if an issue's emotional content is derided in rational discourse as illogical (as moods in menstruation are). A poem shows another person how it is to feel something. Even if the mind resists, the body responds to poetry. Poetry is felt as well as read. No text is effective if it leaves the reader dead inside.

Writing involves many grammatical, aesthetic, ethical and rhetorical decisions. All language, including 'mainstream' writing, makes these choices as no writing practice is ever a 'true' representation of an objective reality as all knowledge is socially constructed (Richardson, 1990). Consequently we 'come clean' and admit our own paper is an artifice. We chose posts that sounded to us like poetry and then framed them, seeking at least a feeling of the *écriture féminine* in online writing because we wanted to show that 'everyday' women can talk back to power given the opportunity; women's writing is not just for intellectual feminists.

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded — which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.

(Cixous, 1976, p. 883)

Women's experiences in men's world of work — and the debate and posts show just how much the masculine body still dominates in the paid world of work — are characterized by tension, hybridity, difference and self-reflexive activity. In the posts rendered as poetry provided in this article these tensions manifest as ambivalence, disbelief, humour and anger. Posts are individual acts of writing, but can they be more than this?

The Thompson affair also points to social media and its potential for women's collective action to trouble power. Bleeding monthly is something women have in common that is deeper than class, ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality or any other identity configuration. Unionists, women working in all sorts of roles and of many ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds, business people, managers and journalists, all purged their thoughts online more or less at the same time on the issue. Richardson argues that people who belong to a particular category (in this case, women) can develop consciousness of a kind, and can galvanize other category members through the telling of the collective story. People do not even have to know each other for social identification to take hold; the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life. 'It provides a sociological community — the linking of separate individuals into a shared consciousness' (Richardson, 1990, p. 129).

Writing online during this event is writing as a method of discovery; a way to test experience, share and find out about commonalities that exist in the world. It emerged spontaneously, as consciousness was raised into writing as a political act, albeit fleeting and sometimes only a few words long. Writing as 'language-in-use' can 'word-the-world' into existence (Richardson, 2001, p. 35) and in this case it forced a public and powerful figure out of his job.

It may be that readers see the interpretation of this event given in this paper as fanciful. Certainly any consequence was not the direct result of only blog posts online: feminists, unionists and pay equity advocates have been working hard in the background and in contradiction to predominant discourses for decades; and conversations happened everywhere in many other forms as well — over the water-cooler, in corridors, over dinner, business lunches, in cars, over the internet, in front of the television. New Zealand was in thrall to this event for over a week, a long time to be talking nationally about women's periods. Although we have focused only on online posts, we believe our re-representation of the event captures something of the national mood, at least the way we experienced it as feminist researchers ourselves. The sudden national conversation about periods was astonishing, because menstruation is never discussed in organizational life. This silence is a sign of violence of a sort is occurring. This process of silencing is accomplished by millions of women's daily actions in 'managing' menstruation at and around the workplace.

There are signs of a new desire to create 'a feminist theoretical understanding of menstruation' (Patterson, 2013, p. 3). We have already cited work from a special issue of *Sex Roles* in 2013 on 'Positioning periods: Menstruation in social context' (Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs, 2013). Patterson's thesis (Patterson, 2013) suggests that feminist attention has focused on pregnancy, abortion and contraception because they are clearly linked to explicit political issues of women's reproductive health and freedom. She proposes that new academic theorizations of menstruation can draw inspiration from developing feminist grassroots menstrual activism, the 'remarkable alliances formed by women's health, environmental, and consumer reports movements [which have] created a foundation upon which new forms of menstrual political praxis [have] materialized' (p. 75; and see also Bobel, 2010: 210).

There is a notable absence of writing about menstruation in organizations, and research on the topic tends to be confined to the clinical and public health literature. It is interesting that the one paper we were able to identify addresses the very topic raised by Thompson — menstruation and absenteeism (Herrmann and Rockoff, 2012). As we mentioned earlier, it is very important to remember that the issue is not *whether* women (all, some, none) take more time off work because of menstruation: it is what powerful people do with this claim, what they make it mean, and the price that women must pay. After all, this story begins with a claim that women do not deserve equal pay because they menstruate. In this paper we have just started — via a discussion about menstruation, writing and equal pay — to pull at the threads that wind between menstruation, work and organization. Research on related topics — pregnancy, childbirth, illness and injury at work — provide some ways to frame the working body and its vulnerabilities and exclusions. But we argue that menstruation is different, because it is stigmatized and silenced in writings about work and organization in distinctive ways, along with its corollary, menopause. There are some beginnings of research on menopause (ARCSHS, n.d.), linked to wider interest in ageing bodies at work. Menstruation must be a required topic in organizational studies, not only because of the practical ways it can be problematized by, and counter-problematize 'business as usual' by being recalcitrant to predictable linear, non-cyclical 'productivity', but because of its links to the profound and unconscious othering of woman. We might imagine a world where women rule: how might menstruation then be acknowledged as a fact of organizational life, an open topic of discussion and even affirmation and support?

While the Thompson affair was at first remarkable because of the outpourings it provoked, the more shocking legacy is the revelation of how menstruation, the common experience of nearly all women, saturates their working lives yet is hidden. It is physically hidden by women in their daily working practices and it is excluded from our discussion of these lives. It is simply assumed that the topic is unspeakable, that women must deal privately with any physical and emotional cost to themselves. As we have argued, this silence is a sign of violence. It is a cause of suffering in itself, alongside the physical and emotional suffering that women suppress in order to do their jobs. This violence extends to the field of organizational studies. This paper resists this violence by writing against this silence, and it incites others to do likewise.

The rupture caused by this event has now died down and periods are out of the public eye again.

Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers. 'Common' nouns are also proper nouns that disparage your singularity by classifying it into species. Break out of the circles; don't remain within the psychoanalytic closure. Take a look around, then cut through!
(Cixous, 1976, p. 892)

Nevertheless despite the fact periods are again repressed in public discourse, the incident reverberates still (Keall, 2013) and was cathartic. One astonishing capacity of this event was its binding power between many women no matter their socio-economic or political persuasion. Temporary, fleeting, fragile alliances were formed between the political left and the right and other groups normally in ideological conflict around a common bodily experience; becoming and being a woman. Despite the multiplicities of women, the identity differences, the differences in pay and income and political persuasion, all women have women's bodies.

It must be said in closing that Mr Thompson's dismissal must be regarded with some cynicism and certainly not as a victory for women. Periods are again back off the national agenda along with equal pay. Divisions between women have reasserted themselves along lines of political persuasion, socio-economic status and ethnicity. Nevertheless, there lingers something impressively cathartic about the whole affair, and the incident, we believe, at least demonstrates the potential of online writing in political consciousness-raising.

We finish with a post we found particularly poignant and moving; it is not even about menstruation, nor from a woman, because productivity discourse impacts on families, not just women, and as many posters pointed out, men also have children and feelings, and experience moods.

I'm a crap employee.
I take sick leave when my family is ill.
I often have kids in hospital
and have to stay overnight with them.
I have spent the night in hospital
and then gone to work the next day
when my wife comes in to relieve,
but I can only do that for so long
and I inevitably end up catching something spending
that much time in hospital.
I think it's sad
that society in general
can't accept
that things aren't perfect for everyone
and that some people
can't be the perfect corporate drone
working 12 hour days,
7 days a week.

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Notes

1. Radio NZ, 'Alasdair Thompson [Employers and Manufacturers Association] ...' A transcript of the radio debate retrieved from Kiwipolitico blog entry 'Enough rope', <http://www.kiwipolitico.com/2011/06/enough-rope/> (last accessed 26 June 2014).
2. Hypertext links to websites where comments have been turned into poetry can be found below. Readers can go directly to these websites and get a sense of the context in which comments were posted. Comments were printed off at the time of the event and may no longer be available online. It is not possible to trace individual authors from their online pseudonyms. The only change to posts has been to make them 'look' like poetry: centre them, put breaks in the lines, and sometimes edit for brevity. In a few cases spelling has been corrected to make a post less confusing for the reader. All emphasis, e.g. CAPITALS, to express anger, is in the original.
 1. TV3 News, *Women earn less due to periods – EMA boss*. <http://www.3news.co.nz>
 2. John Pagani's blog entry 'The dinosaur world of Alasdair Thompson', <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national-politics/blogs/john-pagani-left-leaning/5183450/The-dinosaur-world-of-Alasdair-Thompson>
 3. NZPA, *National Business Review*, 'Thompson issues unreserved apology over period comments', <http://www.nbr.co.nz/article/thompson-issues-unreserved-apology-over-period-comments-ck-95924>
 4. Brian Edwards' 'Media' blog, 'Dishonest journalism from Campbell Live and why Alasdair Thompson should refer it to the BSA', <http://brianedwardsmedia.co.nz/2011/06/should-alisdair-thompson-complain-to-the-bsa-you-be-the-judge/>
3. The full interview can be seen at http://www.3news.co.nz/Alasdair-Thompson---full-interview-with-Campbell-Live/tabid/367/articleID/216251/Default.aspx#.UpJscNJ_N8E (last accessed 26 June 2014).

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