Rationalism Reconsidered / The Hidden History of AIDs in Australia / On Women and Religion

UNSW student magazine
In this painting for Tharunka Pink I have re-appropriated one of my favourite paintings, ‘Drowning Girl’ by Roy Lichtenstein. It is an iconic, universal image, usually captioned ‘I don’t care! I’d rather sink than call Brad for help!’ I wanted to build on what this caption suggests, that she is a strong independent woman that would rather die than beg a (her) man for help. In some ways this painting inadvertently suggests that she is weak in independence and thus death or weak in survival and thus succumbing to Brad.

My Pink version of this painting reflects a similar strain of ideas but in a way that positively reinforces female strength and embraces our femininity despite the backlash and difficulties we may face. Unlike Lichtenstein’s, my girl is not drowning. She is faced with the universal decision to sink or to swim and here with arms streaming through the Pink water, she chooses to embrace her femininity and swim through it.

To sink or to swim. In a way it is the difference between imposed femininity and negative gender roles versus ownership of womanhood, embracing and thriving in femininity despite the perceptions of the patriarchy. Imposed gender norms can either drown us or we can overcome them and take ownership of pink despite its connotations. So embrace your internal and external manifestations of Pink despite the difficulties, instead of denying it and sinking completely.

Tharunka acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land, the Gadigal and Bedigal people of the Eora nation, on which our university now stands.
DEAR READER

It was a somewhat daunting task, even as a woman, to choose one colour to assign to the women’s edition. With the scope and breadth of feminist history, combined with the seemingly infinite number of disparate and exhaustive efforts of activists and allies engaged in the ongoing fight for equality, it was a tricky choice.

With our editorial vision of championing diversity and encouraging urgent and challenging reflections, we arrived at the idea that the women’s edition would be assigned the colour pink on the basis of encouraging women-identifying contributors to create work that engaged with the two opposing forces: subverting and reclaiming.

In pink we have created a space for women to reflect honestly and openly about their bodies, their experiences and tensions that arise from both within and outside the intersecting cultures they belong to.

So much of maturing and learning to read the world through a gendered lens, I have found, is not only a very deliberate process of learning but also a very concerted process of unlearning and trying to grapple with the emotions that come with realising to some extent that you’ve been exploited in ways that become more layered the longer you preside over them.

However, I have found the bulk of my learning to navigate this has come from listening to other women, to asking questions, to encouraging women to reflect on the more challenging and silenced aspects of their experiences and sitting longer with ideas that are particularly difficult to navigate.

This edition has been deeply fulfilling to piece together. I can proudly say the work from each artist and designer is their own rich and immensely valuable vision. The ideas that were submitted were nurtured rather than unified under one ‘image of what it means to be a woman’ in order to adhere to our goal of fostering a broader and more diverse culture of acceptance and inclusivity.

Our contributors have covered everything from hidden histories of nuns, the philosophy of rationalism and empathy, and women’s intercultural relationships with religion. We’ve had a mix of memoir, opinion, sketching, poetry and photo essays that are all innovative and honest pieces that challenge us to grow and learn from each other’s experiences in different ways.

I want to dedicate this edition to all the strong women-identifying individuals in our lives, to the ones still learning to be strong, to the one’s who uplift one another rather than undermine, and to the ones who are still finding their voices.

Georgia Phillips
Managing Editor

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR
It felt strange – even wrong – editing this issue. As someone whose various intersecting identities have been historically subjugated and in-turn misrepresented for the benefit of political hegemony, I deeply believe in restoring and facilitating full autonomy to marginalised groups in constructing, promoting, and distributing their own representations. That is why, as someone who is a beneficiary of patriarchy, editing Tharunka Pink – the women’s issue – felt wrong. Truthfully, this position was given to me after a sudden change of editorial plans, so I acted in the only fashion appropriate to a situation like this; establishing an open and honest dialogue with writers that was cognisant of our differing experiential points-of-view, in order to treat the experiences of women with the same compassion and empathy that I would appreciate my own marginalised experiences be treated with by an outsider.

Coincidentally, both of the features I had the pleasure of editing largely focused on the intersection of women and religion, making them fantastically complimentary pieces. Within the wide array of issues discussed in Alessandra Giglio’s piece “On Women and Religion: the intersection between faith and feminism” she notably highlights, through various interviews, the way in which the condemnation of queerness by some religions can ultimately result in a feeling of disenfranchisement and alienation for queer people. In contrast, Isabel Smith’s piece, “The Hidden History of AIDS in Australia,” uncovers how Sydney’s nuns actually went against the condemnation of religion and society, and partook in illegal action to positively support gay and ‘at-risk’ communities during the AIDS crisis. Hopefully, Tharunka (and every other publication) will continue to challenge patriarchy by highlighting the stories of transgressive and subjugated women that have been erased from history, with the goal of ending this hellish structure that positivises women as lesser-than.

I asked myself, from where would I speak? What vantage point, location in experience, or qualified position could I possibly have to edit (let alone address!) any of the topics that were rolling in from our contributors for Pink? The oversights I have when it comes to the themes of feminism and gender are the same as any other man, but the one thing I have learnt from my many female teachers is that I should hold my tongue before I speak. I remember clearly Professor Joanne Faulkner explaining in our philosophy class Race and Gender two years ago, how racism operates as an invisible pressure and constant gaze to correct your own behaviour and conform to the ‘ideal ethnic’ who smiles and integrates into white society. This was a profound realisation for me as it captured how I felt so well, which no one outside of my shared experience could articulate or understand fully. What’s even more surprising when I think back to it, it was obvious I was to her larger point: that this is precisely how women feel as well, when it comes to their pressure to conform to gendered expectations, and live up to the ideals defined for them by our patriarchal society. It’s something which I’m not in any position to express myself as I have not lived it. My place rather is to sit at the feet of our women and be a student to their struggle. Pink has given me the opportunity here to learn from our brilliant female contributors. I’ve learnt from Linley of the hypocrisy of gender conventions, where feminism is rewarded yet also derided, and the taut relationship many women have with expressing their femininity for fear of reproach of being ‘too feminine’. Reading Crystal’s article, I realised the embeddedness of patriarchal frames of thinking which structure our society. I look forward to reading all our contributions, to see the realities of our writers which have been invisible to me.

When I was about eight years old I told everyone that my favourite colour was red, not pink, because I was adamantly “not a girly girl”. I wore my cap backwards for a while and liked to think of myself as a rough-and-tumble tomboy, despite being a painfully sensitive child most likely to be found quietly drawing pictures. I was really trying to say was this: I am smart and I am good at things and I deserve respect. I didn’t know it in so many words at the time, but a steady diet of early 2000s teen comedies (among other things) starring the “good, smart girl in a long-sleeved t-shirt” versus the “blonde bitch in a pink mini-skirt” and featuring “the blandest dude you’ve ever laid eyes upon” had concisely explained to me one of the fundamental messages driving patriarchal systems of power; your femininity defines your value as a commodity, not as a human being.

*Not keen on being reduced to a shiny plaything?*, asks Father Patriarchy. ‘No worries, darling, your alternate option is to simply eschew everything associated with feminism and womanhood altogether – basically do everything within your power to exhibit strictly typically masculine traits and maybe we’ll consider you.’

*Conditions apply: Must still meet minimum attractiveness standards, must shave legs, offer does not extend to those who are non-binary, transgender and/or women of colour, successes are disqualified if found to be emasculating by a jury of senior-level gatekeepers.*

I am no longer eight years old but I’m still sensitive. I’m soft, I like caring for people; I like baking; I am smart and I’m exhausted at living in a world that gives so little value to what makes so much of life worth living because it is unfortunately ‘too feminine’ to be of worth. Femininity and the experience of womanhood are by no means the same but both are beautiful, complex, human things that deserve more space in the world. In this issue of Tharunka, women writers, artists and thinkers come together to carve out that space - with everything from photography to sharp structural critiques - and explore together what it can mean to be feminine and what it can mean to be a woman.
The Women’s Collective at UNSW is a proud group of female-identifying students who have been meeting together for decades to combat political issues like; access to safe, affordable abortions, the gender pay gap, silencing of women of colour’s voices and many more. We’ve also fought against our own institution, UNSW, calling for greater support to survivors of sexual assault, developing programs to improve the representation of women in particular courses and in professorial roles, and, again, many more. While we have been successful in a few areas, a lot of fights started years ago are still being fought by staunch WoCo feminists today.

UNSW WoCo this year is committed to continuing these fights and seeing tangible change. We will be highlighting throughout the year different daily injustices experienced by women for merely existing or participating in the workforce, this includes decriminalising abortion in NSW, breaking down stigma around sex work (which a lot of uni students use to make money because it’s on your own time and profitable), combatting micro-aggressions that can lead to domestic violence and assault, educating people about endometriosis, and any other topics that you, the students, would like us to talk about in the open!

Our collective meetings are autonomous, and for Trimester 1, we meet every Thursday at 11am in the Women’s Room which is just down the stairs from WH Smith/The Grad Shop. The more female-identifying people involved, the more we can educate, support protests and make sure our voices are heard.

The Women’s Room is always open to female students and is stocked with tea, coffee, pads, tampons, panadol, books (a lot of lesbian novels, get on it) and other little treats too.

We hope to see you at the meetings and fighting alongside us!

Ruby Leonard
She/Hers
SRC Women’s Officer 2019

And join the private Facebook group under the same name to stay up to date with meetings, minutes and other available opportunities!
We are taught that logic and rationalism are essential to decision-making in our day-to-day lives; that we ought not be ‘clouded by emotions’ when strategising, planning and making important choices. This favoring of abstraction and rationalism over relational considerations towards others is directly tied to structures of masculinity and femininity.

While the former qualities are closely associated with the masculine and are widely celebrated, the latter are closely aligned with the feminine and devalued in a patriarchal society. The result is that women are relegated to doing the bulk of care-based work in society — work that is chronically undervalued.

These rigid gender norms and the collective preoccupation with rationalism works to the detriment of all in society and warrants a reconsideration of how we conceptualise the value of care-based frameworks.

Western societies tend to place individuals at the centre of any frame of analysis by emphasising individualism over collectivism. We are entitled to individual human rights, we strive for individual career advancement in order to achieve self-actualisation, we pursue individual self-interest — and the process of achieving these goals requires the application of reason and logic in our everyday inner calculus. We claim to make better decisions when we are ‘impartial’ and can extrapolate rules and standards that are considered to be universally applicable. Indeed, this is reflected in public institutions and the legal system, with standards such as that of the ‘reasonable person’ often being used to adjudge the actions of individuals.

While these systemic laws and values claim universality, they are in fact closely aligned to Western ideals of masculinity. In a 1982 study, ethicist Carol Gilligan studied the gendered process of moral development in children, finding that boys are taught to engage in rational deduction and abstraction as the end point of their moral development. These processes are therefore considered to be particularly ‘masculine’, but are transposed onto public institutions as supposedly neutral values. Gilligan highlights that teaching men to live by these principles can be detrimental to both the individual man and those around him; the emphasis on rationality often causing a dissociation from others’ feelings and concerns that can be isolating, psychologically scarring, and increase the likelihood of violent behaviour.

The emphasis placed on both individuality and rationalism in the Western world means that our relationships with others are often of low priority within our individual frameworks. This makes little sense; we are not born as fully-formed individuals capable of making rational decisions in social isolation; we depend entirely upon our parents to nurture us at birth and guide our development. Our identities and decisions are constantly influenced by those around us, and we experience a huge range of emotions in every facet of our lives as an essential part of the human experience.

To isolate individuals from the web of relationships in which we are situated is to ignore what fundamentally social beings we are, whose abilities to survive and thrive in the world depend on large part in the quality of our relationships with others. Individual and ‘rational’ frameworks of being consign relational and emotional considerations to the private feminine sphere, paving the way for men to exert power over women in the public domain. In direct contrast to boys who learn to employ abstraction and reason to guide their behaviour, Gilligan notes, girls are instead socialised to incorporate more relational considerations in their decision-making frameworks. However, these considerations are not then embedded into the dominant structures of society.

The tethering of relational frameworks to conceptions of femininity manifests itself as a societal structure in which women do the majority of care-based work in roles that are both unpaid and chronically undervalued. Women also make up the bulk of the paid workforce in care-based roles such as nursing, aged care, and primary school education. Approximately 90% of Australian nurses are female, and there are pervasive reports to indicate that nurses are highly likely to feel underappreciated, underpaid and overworked.

Furthermore, women do the bulk of unpaid care-based work in society and the value of this work is not at all reflected in economic figures. Unpaid care work includes caring for children, nursing sick family members, completing essential chores such as household shopping, all for the benefit of communal life. It also includes emotional labour spent making relationships work and keeping families emotionally healthy and happy.

A study by the Victorian government last year estimated that women did the vast majority of the state’s unpaid work, and estimated that work to be worth $225 billion. These care-based activities essentially function as the glue that holds society together, yet are treated as activities that are naturally and easily undertaken by women as a reflection of what are
A study by the Victorian government last year estimated that women did the vast majority of the state’s unpaid work, and estimated that work to be worth $205 billion.13 These care-based activities essentially function as the glue that holds society together, yet are treated as activities that are naturally and easily undertaken by women as a reflection of what are societally understood to be feminine ideals.

By incorporating this framework, both the benefits and the burdens of care-based work can be shared more equally. The ability to draw on these different modes of being and consider different approaches to resolving issues may also allow individuals to become better-integrated overall. Apart from benefiting individuals, the world has much to gain by taking care-based insights more seriously.

Imagine a world in which everyone embraced care across all spheres of society. In public policy-making, these considerations could manifest in social welfare policies that do more to protect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society, such as the homeless or refugees. In the workplace, these considerations might manifest in greater diversity at all levels of leadership, due to a greater sense of tolerance and empathic solidarity towards one another regardless of race, gender or class. In law, these considerations could manifest in the imposition of positive obligations on individuals to rescue others. Ultimately, we must realise that it is not the job of women to care for all in society; when we all care, we all benefit.
Amber Hammad is a multi-disciplinary art maker, who works around the notions of appropriation, attire and the Muslim female body. Born in Pakistan, she now lives and works in Sydney, Australia. Currently she is an MFA HDR Candidate at UNSW and a recipient of the RTP scholarship. She has exhibited her art works extensively in South Asia as well as in the USA and Italy.

Alessandra Giglio

River of Smoke
Archival Inkjet Print on canvas
H: 61 cm x W: 46.6 cm

On Women & Religion:

the intersection between faith and feminism
I’ve been wanting to discuss women and religion for so long but haven’t known how to articulate it. Australia is regarded as a secular country. According to Dr Renae Barker, a law lecturer from UWA, our society’s religious pluralism means that “religious belief is just one option for both the state and its people.”

However, as a practicing Catholic, there are times I find myself torn between these two worlds: the religious, and the secular, especially when it comes to the bigger issues like abortion.

There’s hardly ever a clear-cut answer and I’m not one to blindly follow whatever dogma is out there. I find that people are generally pretty open-minded since faith is a personal choice, but sometimes it feels like I am perceived as a certain ‘type’ of person. In trying to figure out how I come to terms with the various conflicts between religion and secularism, spirituality, queerness, feminism and culture, I sought out female-religion and secularism, spirituality, queerness, feminism, and multi-faceted, with varying degrees of

of people wouldn’t consider Aboriginality as a religion; in my opinion this is because the cultural group and the religion share the same name so it can be hard to differentiates. Other responses from my interviewees demonstrated that religiosity cannot be generalised; all religions are highly nuanced and multi-faceted, with varying degrees of beliefs, practices, and adherence that is dependent upon your community, location around the globe, and personal experience. The variations in religiosity mean that sometimes the gaps we find between the religion we were raised with, and our understanding of the world as we grow and learn, may or may not be able to be bridged. I personally struggle a lot with accepting the Church’s stance on certain subjects, though I still pray and attend mass as I feel like change can and will be made.

Samantha, 24, said her experience within her Catholic community was that, “we don’t pick and choose from the Church’s teachings, we follow everything,” which ultimately caused her to break away from the Church when she came out as queer, despite wanting to maintain a spiritual life.

Grace, 22, was born into a Muslim family but stopped practicing at around 15 years of age, and now considers herself to be an atheist. She became, as she described, “disillusioned as I saw that none of the stuff that was preached to me aligned with any of my world views…particularly my political views.” It may be the case that our formative experiences with religion don’t turff us spiritually, leaving us yearning for something else.

Rory, 23, born and raised in Brazil in a very Catholic environment, found that her spirituality aligned more with Buddhism. She said, “growing up… I had negative religious experiences. I did not relate to the religion that was around me and could not find answers that fulfilled my questions.” It should be noted that to engage with the spiritual is defined as “the quality of being concerned with the human soul or god as opposed to material or physical things,” meaning being spiritual isn’t tantamount to following a religion.

Jacinta, 18, is a practising Muslim, and spoke of the harassment she experiences from wearing the hijab. She said, “I’ve been wanting to discuss women and religion for so long but haven’t known how to articulate it. Australia is regarded as a secular country. According to Dr Renae Barker, a law lecturer from UWA, our society’s religious pluralism means that, “religious belief is just one option for both the state and its people.””

Over time, after having moved away from that school and that area, Josie’s perception of religion moved from those negative experiences to an understanding she described as, “open-minded and positive.” Although not a practising Christian, she is part of a religious, Christian family who repeatedly about is whether religions are inherently patriarchal, whether that is a socio-cultural influence, and if there is a conflict between feminism and religion because of this history? Looking at the role of women in Buddhism, Jesuits Mission, Tenzin Palmo, a Buddhist nun, speaks about the positive progress that has been made in the roles of women in Buddhism. However, there are those who “are in opposition… to full ordination.”

The Catholic Church has the same struggle; while many women hold prominent roles of power in the Church, they cannot be part of the ordained clergy. In the Islamic tradition, “many Muslims see the Qur’an and hadith as a defence for their arguments against sexism, not as a stumbling block to women’s liberation.”

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Lydia is an illustrator/design student/writer/sub-editor of a little magazine called Tharunka whose illustrations and drawings currently reflect one’s relationship with one’s own body and the serenity in the body’s ability to bend and run and bulge and sprout. In all aspects of creativity, Lydia is passionate about highlighting systemic issues and always willing to be the angry feminist at the party.

Alessandra Giglio is a 6th year arts/(sometimes)law student whose huge Italian, Catholic family are the reason she has to apologise for speaking so loudly. She is majoring in English literature and trying to be a serious writer...but mostly thinks about melted cheese.

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question, “how can a woman who is rejected by her religious tradition, simultaneously exist within its patriarchal structure, and how can a woman, who rejects problematic dogmatic interpretations, claim to maintain a religious identity?”

Gina Messina, a Catholic Feminist scholar at Ursuline College in Ohio, explores this concept. She argues that feminism is about equality, about the eradication of all oppressions - sexism, racism, homophobia – to name just a few – which are, “deeply intertwined.” If religions are “founded on the principles of love, and inclusion, liberation and social justice...These are all consistent with feminist practice.”

The fact that most religions have a patriarchal structure is undeniable. Whether or not religion is inherently patriarchal and oppressive is a more complex question that would require some thorough theological and historical examination by an expert. Dominant socio-cultural norms over centuries, where patriarchy already existed, may have perpetuated this social construct, and the belief in a higher-being may have justified skewed interpretations of sacred texts. Regardless, progress is being made across the world in the move to eradicate these oppressions. It is slow, but it is happening, and demonstrates that religion, too, can change for the better.

So, to conclude – how do we, as women living in a secular, democratic western country, reconcile any secular values with our religious and spiritual beliefs? I would argue that it takes work, prayer and discussions with yourself and others for you to truly decide what your personal values are. Viewing the world through a religious or spiritual lens can be a beautiful, fulfilling experience. However, we shouldn’t allow our differences in beliefs to become a source of antagonism or hate between us. The one common thing uniting all religions is that at their core, they teach love, peace, compassion and forgiveness, and these are values that we can all agree we need in our world now more than ever.

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
I’d lose my feet in soil and mud
the ground beneath would stay there, still
I’d grow quickly alongside the grasses
unstoppable, all over and between

I’d hold the sun to my skin
I’d breathe nothing but sky

and I’d do that now
but for your eyes

will decomposition
give me back to me?

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The Hidden History of AIDS in Australia

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Isobel Smith
On the way to an excursion in Kings Cross, a teacher at my all-girls Catholic High School pointed out needle exchange set back in the wall of a fire station. She told us a story about the Sisters of Charity, the order which founded our school, whose charitable history they were incredibly proud of.

This story wasn’t about serving lunch to the impoverished of the great depression, or educating the children of convicts. This story was about the AIDS crisis and how the nuns had fought to establish the first needle exchange and safe injecting room in Australia, one of the first in the world.

She briefly explained that this had been extremely controversial, and that they had even been told directly from the Vatican to stop. I was fascinated, and surprised. To me, this story exemplified the kindness and outreach of the Sisters of Charity, which the school tried hard to instil within us. I was frustrated that in many other places, the experiences of these men and used terminology and imagery that they could relate to. As Neil Blewett noted, “if you were really to get at the gay community you had to use language, material, which would be very difficult to put the governments imprumun on.”

The QLD health minister at the time was very morally conservative and did not share the prevention focused views of his federal counterpart. So, another unexpected group stepped up to plate to solve the problem. The Mercy Hospital in Brisbane was run by the Sisters of Mercy, who, like the Sisters of Charity, were founded by an Irish woman and had a strong focus on social and revisionist activities. They founded our school, whose charitable history they were incredibly proud of.

Throughout the mid to late 1980s, Fred Nile, a Christian minister and NSW politician, appeared regularly in the media. He proclaimed a strict Christian morality and stirred up a fear of AIDS and gay men. The other Christian minister and NSW politician, appeared regularly in the media. He proclaimed a strict Christian morality and stirred up a fear of AIDS and gay men. The other extreme was the ‘Australian Response’, a model for the rest of the world.6

Against this background of moral panic, the Australian response was something for Sydney to be proud of. It’s a story of working together to fight off a terrifying disease, and it’s a story of a great success. It’s the sort of story, which, if it were not so gritty, could be held up as a shining example of Australian camaraderie, egalitarianism, and common sense over propriety.

programs led by those in the most at-risk groups.7 The fact that these groups – gay men, sex workers and injecting drug users – existed at the outskirts of mainstream society and were steeped in stigma presented a significant challenge in combating the disease. Mainstream society saw a disease of immorality which could not affect them, and would not have looked fondly on the government ‘promoting’ illegal and ‘immoral’ activities.8

While St Vincent’s Hospital led the illegal campaign to distribute clean needles for injecting drugs, the government soon got on board, quietly supporting a system of needle exchanges in the epicentre of the Australian AIDS crisis – Kings Cross – as well as a program where drug users were sent out to the suburbs with bags of condoms and clean needles to distribute to peers.9

The health minister also commissioned groups of gay men to run safe sex campaigns to promote condom use by men having sex with men. This strategy meant that the materials produced were relevant to the experiences of these men and used terminology and imagery that they could relate to. As Neil Blewett noted, “if you were really to get at the gay community you had to use language, material, which would be very difficult to put the governments imprumun on.”

As the crisis began to ramp up in Sydney, sex workers working on the streets saw from patterns around them that they were at high risk from the new untreatable STI, and quickly organised. The Australian Prostitutes Collective, the world’s first sex worker united group, recognised all sex workers on the streets to demand condom use from clients. With federal funding, they went to the brothels, and bargained with them to implement compulsory condom use. Their efforts were extremely successful. The number of Australian cases of HIV contracted by a man from a female sex worker, elsewhere a significant means for contracting AIDS, remains to this day zero.10

The 2007 ABC documentary Rampant sums up the situation well, “while stories of plague ran daily in the papers, government was funding gay men to run explicit erotic campaigns about anal sex, sex workers to reform practices within illegal brothels, and the supply of clean needles for injecting illegal drugs.”11

Overall, through seemingly disparate groups working together – nuns and social and revisionist officials coming together with the gay party scene, sex workers, and illegal drug users – Australia was able to effectively tamper the spread of HIV.

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For me, the cramps start one week prior to period proper. A slight spasm felt in my uterus, sometimes accompanied by a ripple of pain running through my nether regions. I think to myself: ‘Ah. It begins.’

Alert now, I count the days down until I think my period will eventually make its appearance. Sometimes I’m right. Other times I’m wrong. If I remember to, I wear a pad on the day that I think that it’ll finally begin, hoping to protect myself against the oncoming tide. Other times I don’t and, boy, do I regret it.

Most of the time, I really don’t get to choose at all. Neither does my mattress cover. I can never truly pinpoint or calculate the specific date my period is going to come each month and the moon charts and smartphone apps that promise to show me the rise and fall of my hormone levels don’t apply to me nor my body it seems.

Estrogen. Progesterone. It never fails to amaze me that these little hormones are the forces behind our monstrous menstruating experiences each month. And the one that we can blame for all the pain? Prostaglandin. I learnt that from the information manual in my Naprogesic packaging.

For those of you who don’t know what cramps feel like, listen closely. Listen hard. Imagine a fist reaching down into your lower abdomen and mercilessly squeezing the internal organs that live down there (including your uterus, your kidneys and your intestines both small and large). Your uterus is trying to push back at the same time, causing an immense tension that can be described as the worst pain a woman can feel short of childbirth. These cramps, more often than not, are supplemented with bloating, back pain, nausea, and the occasional irregular bowel movement. Is it really any wonder that us women have our ‘moods’?

Really, my menstruation experience has been defined by a series of moments.

The moment that you want to exercise to help alleviate the cramps but your craving for donuts is too strong.

The moment when you sneeze and feel blobs of coagulated blood erupt from your vagina and you gag at the sudden gooey warmth collecting between your legs.

The moment when you know you’ve been using the same pad or tampon for too long and try, surreptitiously, to feel your butt every few seconds for any sign of leakage.

The moment when you definitely do feel the leakage through the fabric of your pants and, depending on whether you’ve brought a jacket to tie around your hips or not, resign to the fact that today is not your day.

The moment when you try your hardest to rip open your pad or tampon silently in a public bathroom,
I complain about my periods so much that I forget the ways that these monthly bleeds have shaped my identity as a woman. The good, the bad, the funny, and the downright embarrassing - who would I be without the trials my body has brought me each month? Who would I be without my fellow menstruating sisters who have given me tampons and painkillers, who have shared their own excruciating and bloody stories?

but fail, letting everybody know that you’re on ‘that time of the month’.

The moment when the time comes to replace your pad after hours of sitting in a pool of your own blood, doing the classic cowboy strut to the closest bathroom, only to find the sanitary bins filled to the brim, red-stained pads poking out of the lid. So what do you do? Proceed to stuff some more filthy cotton into the microcosmic landfill site, of course.

The moment when you’re cramping so badly in class but you don’t want to ask anyone for painkillers because you’re embarrassed by your own bodily functions.

And finally, the moment when you’re posed with that inexplicable question.

‘Is it - is it that time of the month again?’ asks your brother, your father, or your boyfriend, with an air of condescension. You’re so mad at the question that you start to think that he might be right. It would be so easy to blame everything on this thing that you can’t control.

At this point, another important question pops into my mind: if an energy drink can give you wings, why can’t all pads?

How about sex on your period? Been there, done that. It may feel icky to some but there’s really no shame in a little blood and extra lubrication is never a bad thing. Just remember to use a towel - a dark one at that.

Thankfully I’m able to give a shout-out to the feminine hygiene industry that previously posed a significant dilemma for those of us who made the mistake of being born with a vagina. After a long and grueling fight to lift the tampon tax, almost every sanitary product company has reduced prices by 91 per cent - a win for women with periods everywhere. That bright yellow tag I saw in the hygiene section at Woolworths announcing tax-exemption for female sanitary products felt like a trophy for our victory.

I have come so far in accepting menstruation as a topic worthy of discussion. So why am I still dreading the day my vagina spasms, hating the pain and discomfort that each month brings me?

We’re biological clocks. One period, one egg down. One egg down, one step closer to freedom.

Or so I tell myself.

I complain about my periods so much that I forget the ways that these monthly bleeds have shaped my identity as a woman. The good, the bad, the funny, and the downright embarrassing - who would I be without the trials my body has brought me each month? Who would I be without my fellow menstruating sisters who have shared their own excruciating and bloody stories?
You’re born, the blanket that swaddles you, pink. The cards and balloons fill the room, pink. Your first outfits, all pink.

It’s easy for us, as women, to reject traditionally feminine interests or traits, especially when they’re constantly being put down and devalued. It’s a difficult line to tread between pursuing genuine interests and aiming to subvert gender norms… or just avoiding judgement. We’re both rewarded and derogated for performing femininity. It’s positive that we always try to look pretty, but negative to love makeup. It is expected that we should be emotional beings, but reprehensible to be hysterical or angry.

You arrive at preschool and people start asking your favourite colour. Every other girl’s is pink… so you pick purple or red or anything else. Just to be different to other girls.

There is, of course, great risk in tying attributes and preferences to genders. We limit ourselves, and each other. We fail to meaningfully engage with the world, and propagate the gender binary and associated roles. We place pressure on transwomen to prove their femininity. We reduce ourselves to being either masculine or feminine, rather than complex beings that vary, evolve and contradict. Despite the many ways I reject femininity, I simultaneously feel the pressure to lean into it. To find a sense of belonging in the dichotomy set out for us.

Blue may still be my favourite colour, but I don’t resent pink anymore. It encapsulates all the strong women around me. The young girls who are braver than I was. The trans and non-binary folk who are searching for their truth. The men who are unafraid to challenge norms. Pink is powerful and liberating. It will teach us to balance acceptance and rejection, to stop giving a damn what others may think.

Linley Briggs is in her final year of Commerce & Science. At any given time, you’ll find her being a film snob, giving advice, and drinking iced coffee. Linley loves writing about being a woman, mental health, and travel. Her life goal is to be paid to give her opinion.

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Window Stills

I hope to show through these photos the contrast between what is stereotypically associated with being a girl or woman and the more unique and expressive reality of what being a woman is. I wanted to represent, as best I could, how women subvert tradition and embrace femininity and womanhood in different ways.

Jemima Waddell
Hi there!

My name is Angela Griffin and I am your SRC President for 2019. I am at the head of a team of 25 dedicated students who were elected at the end of 2018 to be your student voice with the university, with Arc and in any other relevant area. For those who don’t know, it’s the SRC’s job to fight on behalf of students to ensure that our university provides its students with the best quality of education, a safe and equitable learning environment, and fun! We represent both undergraduate and postgraduate students and we are dedicated to ensuring that UNSW is the best place possible.

If you are a person who is passionate about changing our university for the better, you could do nothing better than join an SRC Collective! SRC Collectives meet once a week to discuss problems they see on campus and make plans on how to improve UNSW. We have a collective for every interest so please come along:

**Mondays**
10am Queer Collective, Queer Room, Chemical Sciences Building
1pm Education Collective, Mezzanine Level, Arc Reception

**Wednesdays**
4pm Ethno-Cultural Collective, SRC Ethno-Cultural and International Space

**Thursdays**
11am Women’s Collective, SRC Women’s Space
2pm International Students Collective, SRC Ethno-Cultural and International Space
4pm Welfare Collective, SRC Welfare and Disabilities Space
5pm Students with Disability Collective, SRC Welfare and Disabilities Space

**Fridays**
11am Environment Collective, Mezzanine Level, Arc Reception

This term the SRC is focused on your experience with trimesters. We want to know everything about your experience - the good and the bad. If you have something to say on this matter please email me at srcpresident@arc.unsw.edu.au.

Other things we are focused on this term include: UNSW divestment from fossil fuels, the creation of a bullying and harassment reporting portal, the improvement of club and society training, physical and online accessibility improvements for disabled students, engagement in the Stop Adani movement, more accessible counselling services, engagement in the abortion decriminalisation movement and many more!

Email the relevant office bearer for more information on their collective:
Want to Contribute?

Send your stories, ideas & other submissions

tharunka@arc.unsw.edu.au