

Creative Encounters with Menstruation in Contemporary Latin American and Spanish Women's Writing

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Abstract

This thesis explores representations of menstruation in contemporary literature produced by Latin American and Spanish women writers. The study is motivated by the need to open up the subject of menstruation, in both literary studies and wider terms, and analyses works in which authors decouple menstruation from traditional, patriarchal conceptualisations in which periods are limited to the ambit of reproduction and defined negatively, as shameful, an embarrassment or a burden.

This study identifies contemporary works from across Spanish-speaking countries that engage with menstruation as well as detecting and analysing trends and approaches to menstruation and recurrent images associated with periods. This shows that menstruation, despite its taboo status, is a subject widely explored in women's literature in Spanish.

The four main content chapters explore the alternative imaginaries that question traditional representations, whether by displaying overtly subversive representations or through a more muted approach. These chapters are structured thematically around the axes of eroticism, trauma, transitions and rape, and demonstrate that menstruation can be conceptualised from a plurality of perspectives which avoid the traditional association with fertility. Moreover, the study demonstrates that menstruation plays a significant role within these texts. Therefore, this study also creates a corpus of 'menstrual texts', a term coined to refer to works which not only make menstruation visible but also make use of it aesthetically and assign to menstruation an important role within the narrative, including as a main theme, image or motif, plot trigger, and/or as a narrative device. The comparative chapters analyse a number of selected texts, namely: Diamela Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* (1991), Andrea Jekfianovic's *Escenario de guerra* (2000), *Solitario de amor* (1988) and other works by Cristina Peri Rossi, Marta Sanz's *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* (2013), Esther Tusquets' *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978) and Ana Clavel's *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007).

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Abbreviations and References

The full title of the texts —novels, short stories and poems— is provided in the first reference in each chapter. Later references appear abbreviated as indicated below (with the exception of *Escenario de guerra* and *Solitario de amor*, which are only abbreviated after quotations). Page numbers for quotations are preceded, when required, by the abbreviated form of the titles.

Clavel, Ana, *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* = *Las Violetas*

Jeftanovic, Andrea, *Escenario de guerra* = *Escenario*

Peri Rossi, Cristina, *Solitario de amor* = *Solitario*

—, ‘La destrucción o el amor’ = ‘La destrucción’

Sanz, Marta, *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* = *Daniela Astor*

Tusquets, Esther, *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* = *El mismo mar*

For secondary sources, the author’s surname is followed by the year and page number.

Bibliographical notes

The bibliography is divided into three sections. The first and second sections include the primary and secondary sources, and the third is a list of online materials cited in the thesis.

The contemporary nature of the study means that the thesis includes numerous references to websites. To avoid long footnotes with URLs, these online materials are not cited via the whole web address and date accessed, but identifiable by the word ‘[online]’. The full URL is provided in the bibliography.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Menstruation is a crucial aspect of women's lives and a salient feature of a number of texts from Hispanic contemporary literature. Nevertheless, these representations of menstruation have received little critical attention and one of the objectives of this thesis is to highlight this vacuum by exploring selected works by women writers, which also provide alternative imaginaries that question canonical conceptualisations of periods. To introduce the subject of menstruation in literature, this introductory chapter is formed by two parts. Part 1 frames the theme of menstruation in the context of current attitudes and changes in society, gives an overview of the scholarly attention to menstruation since the last quarter of the twentieth century, and sets the theoretical framework for the close analysis carried out in later chapters. Part 2 specifically deals with menstruation in the Hispanic context. This section not only introduces the texts selected for analysis and their contexts but also surveys Latin American and Spanish works which engage with menstruation, thus creating a corpus.

Part 1: Menstruation in Theory and Practice

As will be demonstrated throughout this section, menstruation is still a taboo which shapes not only women's identities and experiences, but also affects society as a whole, influencing ideas such as shame, health, sexuality and reproduction. Although, generally speaking, in Western societies beliefs that consider menstruating women as dangerous for crop production and the wellbeing of the community are no longer present, menstruation is still regulated through behaviours and restrictions. Furthermore, menstruation is generally subjected to a specific language through the use of semantic strategies such as metaphors and euphemisms. There is fear of mentioning the word 'menstruation' in public and sometimes even in private contexts, because it might be considered embarrassing. These regulations and attitudes that maintain a culture of shame and embarrassment around

menstruation are transmitted in everyday life, through social interaction, institutions and cultural products, and shape our experience. However, we are witnessing a period of change in which not only people from different walks of life dare to challenge the silence around menstruation in many different ways, but also the mass media are interested in covering stories, controversies, and debates in the news.¹ Despite the fact that exposure does not necessarily involve a change in attitude, opening up the subject of menstruation is the first step needed to see radical changes in the way menstruators and non-menstruators alike experience and react to periods. This thesis is therefore timely not only because of the need to open up the subject of menstruation from a critical point of view, but also because this research sheds new light on non-hegemonic representations of menstruation through texts that offer alternative imaginaries.

When I started my research in October 2012 the only common public allusions to menstruation in the UK and Spain were adverts for menstrual products such as tampons and sanitary towels. These adverts are characterised by the use of euphemisms (e.g. ‘for those days’), blue liquid rather than red to represent menstrual blood (Stein and Kim 2009: 2), ambiguity and the use of two specific scenarios: energetic physical activity, and white and sanitised spaces (Stein and Kim 2009: 137). However, since 2014, and especially since the beginning of 2015, there has been a turning point in that menstruation is much more visible in the public domain. Not only is menstrual activism on the rise, but also coverage of stories and news about menstruation in the media.² In addition, this change has also a strong international dimension thanks to social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest, which play an important role in the dissemination of news,

¹ By contrast, menopause has not had the same attention in the media. Rose George, ‘What Science Doesn’t Know about the Menopause: What it’s for and How to Treat it’, *Guardian*, 15 December 2015 [online].

² See Jessica Valenti, ‘Peak Period: Menstruation Acceptance Has Reached New Heights’, *Guardian*, 21 November 2015 [online]; Chitra Ramaswamy, ‘Bring on the Menstruation Revolution: “Donald Trump Is Going to Bloody Love it”’, *Guardian*, 10 August 2015 [online]; Abigail Jones, ‘The Silence that Still Surrounds Periods’, *Independent*, 25 April 2016 [online]; Emma Henderson, ‘Turkey’s Official Dictionary Calls Women on their Periods “Dirty”’, *Independent*, 3 May 2016 [online].

campaigns, and artistic creations.

Since 2014, Menstrual Hygiene Day has been celebrated on 28 May with talks, workshops, and events around the world. One of the aims of this initiative is to empower girls and women through menstrual awareness and to achieve recognition as an official United Nations day by 2020.³ In 2015 the campaigns ‘Stop Taxing Periods’, which aims to end the taxes on sanitary products, and ‘#TheHomelessPeriod’, which aims to get an allowance from the UK government in order to provide free sanitary products in homeless shelters, were launched and have been supported by the population and the media.⁴ Petitions to ban the ‘tampon tax’ have appeared in numerous countries,⁵ with various degrees of success in the UK, France and Canada (as of April 2016).⁶ In September 2015 endometriosis—a common but often overlooked condition—had coverage in the media,⁷ and as a result, charities dedicated to raising awareness of this illness reported ‘enormous response’ by women in the UK.⁸ In 2015 several stories went viral in the news and social media. Firstly, on 20 January, British tennis player Heather Watson explained that her disappointing performance in the Australian Open had been affected by her menstruation.⁹ Second, in March 2015 Toronto-based photographer Rupi Kaur posted a picture on Instagram that

³ ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, *Menstrual Hygiene Day* website.

⁴ *The Homeless Period* website.

⁵ Such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, Malaysia and Spain.

⁶ France has reduced the tampon tax rate from 20% to 5.5%, Canada has completely eliminated their tampon tax rate and the UK approved to axe the tax in March 2016, as well as forced the European Union to reach an agreement to ban the tax in EU countries. Laura Coryton, ‘Tampon Tax around the World: Where Does the UK Fit in?’, *Marie Claire*, 27 January 2016 [online]; Laura Coryton, ‘A Global Movement to End Tampon Tax. Period’, *Change.org* [online]; Alex Mierjeski, ‘European Union Leaders Announce Plan to Ban the “Tampon Tax”’, *ATTN*, 22 March 2016 [online].

⁷ Especially in *Guardian* because of its liberal orientation and focus on covering stories in an inclusive way, see, Gabrielle Jackson, ‘Endometriosis: 20 Things Every Woman (and Every Doctor) Should Know’, *Guardian*, 27 September 2015 [online]; Hilary Mantel, ‘Endometriosis Took my Fertility, and Part of Myself’, *Guardian*, 28 September 2015 [online]; Anon., ‘The Guardian View on Endometriosis: A Silent Source of Unnecessary Misery’, *Guardian*, 28 September 2015 [online], but also abroad, see Emilia Laura Arias Domínguez, ‘Endometriosis: guerreras contra el dolor y el silencio’, *Pikara Magazine*, 10 September 2015 [online].

⁸ Sarah Boseley, ‘Endometriosis Charities Report “Enormous Response” after Guardian Revelations’, *Guardian*, 2 October 2015 [online].

⁹ See Paula Coccozza, ‘Menstruation: The Last Great Sporting Taboo’, *Guardian*, 21 January 2015 [online]; Rachel Moss, ‘Heather Watson Puts Australian Open Defeat Down to her Period: But How Do They Affect Women in Sport’, *Huffington Post*, 21 January 2016 [online]; Charlie Cooper, ‘Australian Open 2015: Heather Watson’s Revelations is Turning Point for a Once-taboo Subject’, *Independent*, 21 January 2015 [online].

showed a woman lying in bed with menstrual blood stains on her sheets and nightclothes. The site censored the picture, arguing that the post did not follow their Community Guidelines, but was forced to approve the picture after Kaur's online reaction and support for her.¹⁰ Finally, in April, musician Kiran Ghandi ran the London marathon bleeding freely to combat menstrual stigma.¹¹ Articles on these issues quickly appeared worldwide in different media, denouncing, respectively, the lack of research into the menstrual cycle's effects on sport performance and the double standards in social media in that women are objectified on a daily basis but any reference to menstrual blood, especially in visual terms, is criticised or censored.

Social media offer a space to denounce sexism and two hashtags on Twitter about menstruation made the news in 2015: #PeriodsAreNotAnInsult appeared in reaction to Donald Trump's sexist comments,¹² and #repealthe8th was used by Irish women to tweet the Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny about their menstrual cycle in order to protest against Ireland's restrictive laws on abortion.¹³ In addition, social media also continued to enable people to share their experiences and empower others, such as young YouTubers and vloggers explaining how to use tampons to their peers.¹⁴

Despite the fact that advertisements for menstrual products still transmit traditional ideas of secrecy and how to avoid the stigma of leaking and staining, there have been some changes in the world of advertising and marketing. Women's health company HelloFlo, specialised in offering advice and menstrual products, launched their first video 'The Camp

¹⁰ See Radhika Sanghani, 'Instagram Deletes Woman's Period Photos – But her Response Is Amazing', *Telegraph*, 30 March 2015 [online].

¹¹ Natasha Hinde, 'Kiran Gandhi, Drummer for M.I.A., Runs London Marathon without Tampon to De-Stigmatise Periods', *Huffington Post*, 10 August 2015 [online].

¹² Trump was being interviewed Fox News' journalist Megyn Kelly about his recurrent sexist comments about women and he replied with another sexist remark, stating that she was asking these questions because 'she was mad for being on her period'. Philip Ross, 'Women Are Responding to Donald Trump's Sexist Period Comments with #PeriodsAreNotAnInsult', *Mic*, 10 August 2015 [online].

¹³ Claire Phipps, '#repealthe8th: Irish Women Tweet their Periods to Prime Minister Enda Kenny', *Guardian*, 6 November 2015 [online].

¹⁴ Daisy Buchanan, 'Meet the Period Vloggers Leading a Menstrual Revolution', *The Debrief*, 8 August 2014 [online].

Gyno' (2013) to advertise their menstrual kits for the first period from a fun perspective.¹⁵ In this video the words 'menstruation' and 'vagina' are pronounced—a rarity in advertising—by a girl who is an expert in menstrual management.¹⁶ HelloFlo's second video, 'First Moon Party', is also an example of the use of humour and avoidance of euphemisms, and had over 35 million views on YouTube in its first year.¹⁷ American start-up Thinx manufactures underwear designed to do away with the need for additional products such as tampons or sanitary towels, thanks to their patented technology of micro-layers.¹⁸ Their adverts stoked controversy and were briefly banned from the New York underground—the word 'period' appeared in the slogan and the images were evocative but not explicit.¹⁹ Thinx also have a campaign specifically targeted at trans men; they have an inclusive approach to periods by separating gender and menstruation.²⁰ American clothing manufacturer American Apparel produced the t-shirt 'Period Power' in 2013, designed by the artists Alice Lancaster and Petra Collins. The design exposes different taboos by showing an illustration of a hairy, menstruating vulva being masturbated.²¹ This example is different in the sense that here the shock factor plays an important role as a marketing strategy and the aim of the company is not specifically intended to promote discussion of periods in order to challenge stereotypes. Nevertheless this t-shirt provoked debate in the media. The risk with more coverage of periods—that at times could be seen as a period 'trend' depending on the context—is (extending) the exploitation of menstruation within the neoliberal system beyond the traditional market of tampons, towels, menstrual cups and pharmaceutical drugs. One example of commodifying menstruation is PMSBites, a

¹⁵ 'The Camp Gyno', *HelloFlo YouTube Channel* [online video].

¹⁶ Stein and Kim state that the first time the word 'period' was used in a TV advert (assuming they only refer to the USA) was in 1985 (2009: 4).

¹⁷ 'First Moon Party', *HelloFlo YouTube Channel* [online video].

¹⁸ Anon., 'Product Knowledge', *Thinx website*.

¹⁹ Sara Coughlin, 'Are These Ads Too Controversial for the NYC Subway', *Refinery29*, 27 October 2015 [online].

²⁰ James Michael Nichols, 'This Company Is Trying to Change the Way that Trans Men Experience their Periods', *Huffington Post*, 21 November 2015 [online].

²¹ Anita Hamilton, 'American Apparel's "Period Power" T-Shirt Lays Bare the Labia and Tackles a Taboo', *Time.com*, 8 October 2013 [online].

company based in Boston that delivers boxes of chocolate on your premenstrual days.²² By contrast, some companies' attention to menstruation is much more inclusive and respectful. This is the case of a company based in Bristol which made the news in March 2016. Their plan is to allow their employees to take time off when they are in menstruation-related pain in order to adapt work to their menstrual cycle, which, according to them, will benefit wellbeing and productivity in the long run.²³ Berlin-based app start-up Clue launched a period tracker in 2013 that stands out from other period apps despite the variety and prevalence of such trackers.²⁴ Their description of the app summarises the new open approach to menstruation:

[Clue is a] cycle tracking app that's confident, scientific and not pink. We create user experiences that are empathetic and positive, not filled with butterflies or euphemisms. Our goal is to give people a way to track and discover the unique patterns in their cycle, for every stage of life. (Clue: online)

Clue also surveyed 90,000 people across the world to gather information about issues such as euphemisms, access to information about periods, and the way periods affect school attendance.²⁵

At least three documentaries that focus on menstruation have appeared over the last few years: Diana Fabiánová's *The Moon Inside You* (2009) and *Monthlies* (2014) and Amit Virmani's *Menstrual Man* (2013). Many visual artists from around the world explore the subject of menstruation using different media, such as textiles (Carina Úbeda, Casey Jenkins, Johanna Falzone, Raquel Esquivas), illustration (Alejandra Alarcón, Raquel Córcoles and Marta Rabadán, Sara Morante, Claudia Carrillo), performance (Isa Sanz, Effy), photography (Concha Prada, Ana Elena Pena, Ana Álvarez-Errecalde, Rupi Kaur),

²² *PMS Bites* website.

²³ Kayleigh Lewis, 'Company Gives Women "Period Leave" to Make Them More Productive', *Independent*, 3 March 2016 [online].

²⁴ According to an article about fertility trackers published in March 2016 in *Guardian* these trackers 'are the most frequently downloaded kind of health app in the Apple Store', see Moira Weigel, "'Fitbit for Your Period': the Rise of Fertility Tracking', *Guardian*, 23 March 2016 [online].

²⁵ Anon., 'Talking about Periods: An International Survey', *Clue* website.

painting (Sarah Maple, Judithe Hernández), and ceramics (Ana Cruz and Maria de Betânia). Collaboration between activists and artists is also on the rise; projects such as ‘Become a Menstruator’ and collaborative exhibitions such as ‘Period Pieces’ (Gothenburg, Sweden, 2014), ‘Our Bodies Our Blood’ (Halifax, Canada, 2015), ‘Hic est sanguis meus’,²⁶ and ‘Widening the Cycle’ (Boston, USA, 2015) are examples of recent initiatives that aim to break taboos through street art and works of art.²⁷

Literary representations of menstruation are forgotten in this exposure, and one of the aims of this thesis is to reclaim what many women writers have been writing about for decades. Like many contemporary artists and activists whose intention is, among other things, to make menstruation visible in order to stimulate debates and challenge stereotypes around periods, the idea for the study was also, in part, conceptualised as a political stance. The objective of the thesis is to explore the representations of menstruation in contemporary Hispanic women’s writing and to argue that menstruation, despite its taboo status, is not only present in a large number of texts but also plays a significant role within the context of the texts, and even within the context of the whole *oeuvre* in the case of some authors (e.g. Cristina Peri Rossi and Marta Sanz). The ways in which menstruation is represented in literary texts gives us information not only about the status menstruation has in society (and in specific cultures) and how we relate to this bodily experience, but also about the ways in which menstruation is used from a literary point of view as a trope and image. In addition, menstruation can even be mimicked through language or the structure of the text (e.g. cyclical narrative). Moreover, some descriptions offer alternatives to common imaginaries such as connecting menstruation and procreation, as will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter. In the case of authors exploring new routes, the aims and effects are wide-ranging: writers may have a manifest desire to challenge traditional conceptualisations of periods, or may use it for narrative or stylistic purposes because of its shock value. The

²⁶ ‘Hic est sanguis meus’ is curated by Paola Daniele and has so far been exhibited in Paris, Berlin, Roma, Morano Calabro and Naples between 2014 and 2016.

²⁷ *Become a Menstruator* website.

selected texts offer different ways of thinking and re-conceptualising menstruation, which is an extremely important task in terms of opening up the traditionally limited menstrual imaginary. In addition, the thesis also points out the deficiency of scholarly attention towards the subject from a transnational and comparative perspective. Literary critics have not engaged in depth in the study of representations of menstruation in literature; when they have, the perspective has been broader, that is, not solely focusing on menstruation as a subject in its own right but, rather, as another theme to explore within a wider approach (e.g. Lavery 2005, Green 2007).

Scholarship on Menstruation

Critical attention to menstruation became part of the feminist agenda within the context of the second-wave feminist focus on sexuality and reproductive rights. Paradigmatic texts on women's health from a feminist perspective such as *Our Bodies Ourselves: A Health Book by and for Women* (1978) by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (1979) are examples of this turn towards female empowerment and autonomy regarding health and sexuality, and both include information—albeit concise—about menstruation. Monographs about menstruation also appeared at the same time. Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove's *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Everywoman* (1978) is considered the first survey of menstruation and is a comprehensive work that includes different sources such as health manuals, films, journals, folk tales, anthropological studies, myths, and religious texts. Moreover, their aim is to 'contribute to a refusal to acquiesce in what appears to be a conspiracy of silence' (1999 [1978]: 13), and the approach towards periods is inclusive: '[w]e show how a positive attitude to menstruation, including a better sexual one, opens many doors' (1999 [1978]: 15). In the same vein, Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton and Emily Toth published *The Curse: A Cultural History of*

Menstruation (1988), which also uses a similar wide-ranging mix of materials and sources. Emily Martin's eye-opening *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (1987) analyses the language used to describe the menstrual cycle and labour in medical texts, and looks into how women from different backgrounds—in terms of class, ethnicity, age, with/out children—in Baltimore (U.S.) regard menstruation and 'whether they have learned and adopted the medical model and the general cultural model or whether they have developed other kinds of models' (1987: 92). In 1988 Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb edited *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, an anthropological and cross-cultural study of menstruation with a different approach to what had been published before (i.e. analyses focused on the concepts of taboo and pollution). Instead, the authors in this book offered a nuanced vision according to which the taboo of menstruation 'is at once nearly universal and has meanings that are ambiguous and often multivalent' (1988: 7). They gave examples in particular cultures in which menstruation ensures women's autonomy and influence, an aspect previously disregarded. In the 1990s Judy Grahn published *Blood, Bread, and Roses* (1993), in which she claims that human inventions, behaviours and practices (e.g. cooking utensils, shoes, money, and calendars) have been influenced or are the result of practices around menstruation. Grahn explains the symbolic meanings of objects and practices by using ethnography, myth, and anthropological studies. Journalist Karen Houppert discusses subjects such as the way in which the secrecy around periods helps manufacturers of menstrual products because of a lack of regulation, and shapes women's attitudes towards their cycles in *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation* (1999). In the new millennium wide-ranging approaches to menstruation were analysed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert explores *Tractate Niddah*, the volume on rules and laws relating to menstruation in the Talmud, in her book *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (2000). Peggy McCracken's *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero* (2003) does not focus uniquely on

menstruation but menstrual blood plays an important role in the book and she carries out a comparative analysis of blood in gendered terms in the Middle Ages. Gillian Howie and Andrew Shail published the volume *Menstruation: A Cultural History* (2005) about menstruation and its role as marker of sexual difference in different cultures and periods of time. Elissa Stein and Susan Kim's *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* (2009) is an accessible book —using direct and informal language and many visual sources— which covers topics such as the development of menstrual products and advertising, medicalisation, ritual cleansing practices in different religions, and conditions related to the menstrual cycle such as endometriosis, metrorrhagia, amenorrhea and menorrhagia. Chris Bobel's *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010) explores different approaches found in menstrual activism and focuses on two groups: feminist-spiritualist menstrual activism and radical menstruation.²⁸ The most recent books about menstruation examine menstruation in cultural products: Lauren Rosewarne's *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (2012), Sarah Read's *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* (2013), and the collection *Letras escarlata. Estudos sobre a representação da menstruação* edited by Teresa Bermúdez Montes and Mônica Heloane Carvalho Sant'Anna and published in April 2016.

Monographs about the vagina and vulva have also been published recently (e.g. Blackledge 2003, Sanyal 2012, Wolf 2012, Rees 2013). These books provide an extensive and eclectic amount of information about the subject, such as changes in literary and artistic representations of the vulva across the world, with the intention of shedding light on less-known aspects of vaginas and vulvas and highlight their importance —and ubiquity—

²⁸ The first group includes 'menstrual activists who work to reclaim menstruation as a healthy, spiritual, empowering, and even pleasurable experience for women' (2010: 66), and the second comprises those who 'challenge not only the menstrual status quo, skewering in particular the commercial industry they blame for disease and pollution, but also the dichotomous gender structure at the root of gender-based oppression' (2010: 99-100). For radical menstruationists, '[a]ssumptions about *who* menstruates are [to be] challenged', and refer to people who menstruate as 'menstruators' (2010: 100). This term does not associate menstruation with womanhood. Therefore, 'menstruator' not only includes transgender men who menstruate, but also 'intersexual and genderqueer individuals' and 'expresses solidarity with women who do not menstruate' (2010: 12).

within the context of foundational myths from different cultures. Menstruation appears in these books although without receiving comprehensive critical attention.

The present thesis owes a great deal to some of these texts which, in conjunction with the critical works of renowned academics in feminist studies in Spain such as Mari Luz Esteban Galarza (2001) and Carme Valls-Llobet (2009) on anthropology of the body and women's health respectively, have helped me to frame menstruation within a wider scope. However, the scarcity of literary criticism around menstruation and, in particular within the context of the literary production from Latin America and Spain means that I have relied on broader approaches. Therefore, the thesis builds on existing feminist literary criticism and women's and feminist writing in the Hispanic sphere (e.g. Guerra Cunningham 1990, Mayans Natal 1991, Nichols 1992, Kaminsky 1993, Jehenson 1995, Brooksbank Jones and Davies 1996, Davies 1998, Olea 1998, Rodríguez 1999, López-Cabrales 2000, Castro-Klaren 2003, Henseler 2003, Redondo Goicoechea 2003, Nieva de la Paz 2004, Pertusa-Seva 2005, Pérez-Sánchez 2007, de Ros and Hazbun 2011), which, at times, touch on menstruation. The recent volume *Letras escarlata*, which explores representations of menstruation in Galician, Spanish and Portuguese literary texts and other cultural products, is an example of the attention to menstruation witnessed currently in different spheres of society. In their introduction the editors acknowledge that:

son pocos todavía los estudios disponibles sobre un tema tan rico y complejo como la menstruación, sobre todo si tenemos en cuenta que se trata de una cuestión de profundo alcance histórico, antropológico y filosófico, central en la definición de la feminidad y en la representación del género [...] Consideramos que es fundamental avanzar en esta línea de investigación, profundizando en nuestro caso en el campo de la literatura y los estudios culturales. (2016: 24-25)

Therefore, this thesis contributes to the integration of disparate approaches about menstruation on the basis of cultural representations in the context of Hispanic Studies.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This thesis builds upon the works of scholars in feminist and gender studies, anthropology, and trauma theory. In relation to gender studies this thesis especially draws on psychoanalytic approaches, because of their focus on women's psyche, development and experiences, and on poststructuralist and postmodernist currents, which aim to deconstruct boundaries, destabilise categories, and reclaim 'the body in both its corporeality and its desires, as the site of multiple subject positions' (Shildrick 1997: 172). The approach in this thesis is eclectic because of the application of a literary lens to menstruation, a subject which at first sight seems deeply rooted in biology. Therefore, I will be referring to theorists from different disciplines as appropriate. This section on methodology summarises the theories that frame the thesis and, in order to provide a better understanding of the adopted perspective, is divided into subsections.

This thesis demonstrates that representations of menstruation are not restricted to the hegemonic realms of reproduction or exclusively considered under the logic of abjection or disgust—as scholars tend to emphasise (e.g. Labanyi 1996). The texts show that there are 'leaks and flows' regarding traditional representations, and in this respect Butler's notion of performativity is useful to frame the thesis. Performativity considers gender as a continuing performance of interactions between bodies and discourses through the internalisation and repetition of acts, and 'it is [...] by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions' (Butler 1993: 10). In relation to menstruation, a process defined within a social context, we can apply the concept of performativity because we internalise and reproduce circulating discourses about menstruation—because we cannot live outside hegemonic norms—but also, through repetition of acts we open up fissures placing normalised conceptions about menstruation in crisis. As Butler puts it:

acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. [...] This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse. (1999 [1990]: 136)

Butler's notion of livable lives is also helpful because the ultimate aim of her criticism is to 'open up the possibility of different modes of living; [...] to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation' (Butler 2004: 4). Livability is a key concept in Butler's *Undoing Gender*, where she questions what makes a life bearable. She gives examples of the 'norms and conditions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself' bearing in mind that '[w]hat is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some' (Butler 2004: 8). According to Butler, '[t]he critique of gender norms must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death' (2004: 8). Here, she mainly refers to gay, lesbian, transgender, transsexual and intersex people, but the concept of livable life could be applied to any kind of individual or collective subjected to any kind of exclusion. The majority of the authors discussed here bring about symbolic transformations by considering menstruation as a subject that matters, and offering new reference points to readers, especially because the representations of menstruation in the texts counteract rigidity and reductionism. However, this process is complex and in constant negotiation and tension with more normative approaches.

Transgression

The concept of transgression is central to my thesis (and especially to Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, on eroticism and rape, respectively), not only for the fact that making menstruation visible goes against the dominant tendency to hide it and sanitise it, but also because to highlight those representations that pose a challenge to normative conceptions is one of the aims of this thesis.

Transgression, as sociologist Chris Jenks points out, is an important postmodern theme because of the desire to go beyond limits, whether ‘physical, racial, aesthetic, sexual, legal, national and moral’ (2013: 21). Ashley Tauchert highlights the extent to which transgression has become a prominent concept within academia, having become ‘a safe topic of the progressive intellectual’ (2008: 11). It is right that transgression is highly regarded in critical thought, especially in certain areas such as feminist criticism, but it is also a necessary task for the creation of what could be called genealogies of dissent, building on Foucault and Butler.²⁹ The invisibility of existing references and representations and the difficulties posed by menstruation to writing about taboos make the task of displaying representations which question traditional imaginaries crucial. Therefore, despite the fact that the concept of transgression in academia is overused, it is still a helpful notion for the purposes of this thesis because it enables us to consider what is traditional, common and the norm in terms of the menstrual imaginary, and confront it with alternative representations that make us question the status quo. Focusing on transgression also responds to political motives.³⁰ There is a drive that lies behind the project which comes from personal motivation; a desire to defy silences, to reveal examples that contradict or

²⁹ For Foucault, genealogy means ‘to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents’ (Foucault in Bouchard 1977: 146). Although Butler is criticised for not being clear about what she means by genealogy, as Alice Stone puts it, Butler considers that women have a genealogy in the sense that individual women identify themselves as women as a consequence of the overlap between the continuous interpretations of femininity and their own corporeal interpretation (Stone 2005: 13-4).

³⁰ I use the term ‘political’ taking the broader sense and spirit of the radical feminist phrase of ‘the personal is political’ of the 1960s and 1970s.

question what is considered normative, to interrogate where the limits are and why. To write about transgression is also attractive for academics in the sense that it is pleasurable because it generally implies breaking taboos, so it can be a playful, mischievous task.

Transgression operates at different levels in this thesis. Firstly, menstruation itself is considered a transgression in patriarchal societies because the ‘natural’ state is where blood and other fluids are contained (Brook 1999: 50), as will be seen. Second, the mere allusion to menses in literary texts could be seen as a transgression within the context of the social and cultural silence around menstruation. Lastly, the final level of transgression involves the representations of menstruation themselves in regards to the way they relate to conventional descriptions and normalised images and associations of menstruation and related topics. Such conventions are aligned with a wider symbolism that operates within discourses about fertility, virginity, transition to womanhood, illness, madness and even medical treatments, all of which are often defined from an androcentric perspective. Nevertheless, the same dialectic of transgression and limit is involved in all these levels. Therefore, it is necessary to sketch a framework for conceptualising transgression. This framework draws on a variety of approaches from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, sociolinguistics, and also takes into account reception theory.

Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966) sets out the basic notions for understanding transgression by using the dialectic between disorder and order and its relationship not only with society but also with the body. Her framework is useful for this thesis because not only is menstruation framed within this dialectic, but also literary representations of menstruation form part of this dialogue between disorder and order, in the sense that the representations can support a certain ideology that maintains the status quo or can question or subvert it. Dirt, according to Douglas, is disorder, that is, matter out of place (1984 [1966]: 35), which provokes a level of distress within a community, depending on its degree of tolerance. Similar ideas are ascribed to pollution, impurity, anomaly, ambiguity,

margins and transitional states. These concepts are opposed to order, social order, system and pattern. These oppositional values are the core of binary thought and work in a hierarchical way. Hence, within this dialectic, the group of concepts related to what is seen as undesirable for social stability are subjected to a variety of control mechanisms to create order, such as punishment, exclusion, separation or purification, and by contrast, conformity is rewarded in society (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 4, 114). This is because ‘disorder’ represents a danger to the system within a society/community in that it disrupts their symbolic system. However, disruption is necessary for ‘order’ to exist; an element is reinforced by its contrary. This tension is crucial to understand transgression because, similarly, transgression and taboo (or limits) have the same dialectic and tension: they are not antagonistic but depend on each other in order to exist; the same binary logic operates.³¹ Moreover, the conceptualisation of something as transgressive or taboo is also relative because it is bound to a concrete time, place and even situation, and thus changes (or can change) with time (Jenks 2003: 2-3). The popular belief in Hispanic culture of menstruating woman spoiling a mayonnaise sauce sounds anachronistic in the context of contemporary Spanish society, but it was a common belief in previous decades.³²

Transgression is different from subversion because subversion implies an ‘overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo’ (Jervis in Jenks 2003: 9), whereas transgression is more reflexive in the sense that it questions the power structures that enforce taboos (Jenks 2003: 9). However, transgression not only means exceeding a boundary; transgression affirms the boundaries that it simultaneously questions due to its mere existence. In Jenks’ words ‘[t]he transgression is a component of the rule’ (2003: 7). Thus, transgression ‘enables change while at the same time ensuring stability’ (Jenks 2003: 95). Transgression

³¹ The term taboo has changed from its origins in the Pacific islands, where Europeans found out that some people, especially women, were subjected to prohibitions under certain circumstances. The term then spread to other places in the world to designate a variety of situations, from fear of metaphysical powers, social affairs or practices or topics seen as disgusting, impolite or abusive, which should be avoided by a community. For Allan and Burridge taboo ‘refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts’ (2006: 11).

³² A quick search on the Internet shows that this belief is still being demystified online.

displays the limits and when this happens, when taboo and transgression meet, as Jenks puts it, '[t]here is an inevitable violence in the collision and a celebration' that 'derives from the perpetual threat of constraint or destruction presented by the other' (2003: 90). This description recalls Foucault's definition of transgression as 'an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses' (1977: 33-34). Foucault visualises the relationship between transgression and the limit in 'the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust' (1977: 35). That is to say, it implies a mutual relationship between both sides of the line and draws the attention to the idea of boundary-crossing. Thus, transgressive depictions aim to reveal the limits, to question pre-defined concepts, whereas subversion is more explicit in the sense that it overtly displays the reverse or contrary of normative attitudes, representations and views.

The distinction between transgression and subversion is exemplified in Chapter 2 with the works of Peri Rossi and in Chapter 5 with Clavel's novel. In addition, Chapter 2 also explores the idea of subversion being undermined to the point of normalisation as a result of repetition.

Reception Theory, 'Horizon of Expectations' and Counter-Narratives

In the context of literature the reception of different representations of menstruation is not uniform amongst readers in terms of their interpretation of transgression. Reception theory helps us to take into account the factors that influence the ways a literary text is interpreted, highlighting the role of readers as active participants in the process of reading. The intentions of the author are not sufficient to interpret the text because the way it is interpreted also varies according to the context of the text's reception (Jenks 2003: 8). The different interpretations that readers might make are due in part to what Hans Robert Jauss calls the 'horizon of expectations' (1982), which makes reference to the predisposition of

the audience to a certain reception through a series of indicators, such as how the text is structured, the language, degree of experimentalism, allusions to other works and the genre, which relates it to other works. These characteristics of a literary text, according to Jauss, stimulate 'a specific emotional attitude' in the reader because of the resemblance of the features to other novels the reader has read (1982: 23), and also lead/condition the reader to have certain expectations about the text which can be satisfied, surpassed, disappointed or refuted (1982: 25). However, these expectations are not universal in the sense that not everybody has the desire to read what is considered normative. This can be exemplified with the current prevalent fascination with counter-narratives, as Michael Bamberg points out (2004: 353). Counter-narratives challenge, in complex ways, dominant or master narratives in the sense that they are concerned with power and hegemony (Bamberg 2004: 362). The dialogue between counter and master narratives goes back to the dialectic between order and disorder, limit/taboo and transgression, and offer readers the possibility of alternative readings (Bamberg 2004: 362). In the context of the thesis, depictions of menstrual blood as erotic fluid are examples that counter the traditional discourse that considers menstruation as a burden, nuisance and polluting.

The question of how we can know who the audience of a text is is difficult to answer. We can guess that a text from a specific author could be read by a certain public, feminist readers would be more inclined to read texts written by feminist authors, either self-declared or considered as such within a feminist community, or by authors who do not form part of the canon due to their position of marginality (gender, class, race, context, sexual identity). However, to assume that a text will be read by a specific audience is simplistic. The lived experience of readers and their expectations will influence the way these texts are interpreted.

Literary works are not only read in the place where they have been published or where the author originates, and therefore different expectations of a text can arise in

different cultural contexts, and different representations can be subjected to a variety of interpretations. If we think about menstruation, we find that it is subjected to a mixture of opinions (e.g. burden, normal process, weakness)³³ and, therefore, readers (and audiences in general) will have different interpretations of menstrual representations according to their experience and positioning in relation to menstruation. These ways of interpreting menstruation can help us to think about what is considered transgressive and subversive and by whom. Moreover, as Jauss puts it:

The experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things [...] but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behaviour for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience. (1982: 41)

Menstruation

It is often argued that in patriarchal societies the female body is seen as the abject, defined by Julia Kristeva as that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous’ (1982: 4), and is linked to fluids, viscosity, something that leaks, that is open, that has no boundaries, and is characterised by excess (Grosz 1994: 203). Menstruation challenges the androcentric idea of conceptualising bodies as sealed and self-contained entities (Douglas 1966, Kristeva 1982, Brook 1999: 50-51), and is one of the main examples of taboo and abjection, as Barbara Brook points out (1999: 63). Abject elements are those substances that are ambiguous in the sense that they defy borders: these fluids traverse the body and can be inside or outside. Hence, this is why the concept of abjection is closely linked to transgression: both deal with the idea of boundary crossing. According to Kristeva, the fact that women are particularly associated with the concept of pollution is precisely because of their menstruation, and societies use this idea of danger to maintain

³³ As Bobel points out, even within feminism we find positions that move from thinking about menstruation as a burden (2010: 48) or as an almost spiritual experience that makes some women feel closer to nature (2010: 79).

social hierarchies and privileges (1982: 77). As Douglas puts it ‘some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order’ (1984 [1966]: 3). These conceptualisations of society and the dialectic between disorder and limits are crucial to understanding the way the body is imagined. The body is a symbol of society where its boundaries represent the same dangers as those that affect social order (1984 [1966]: 115). Thus, the regulations made on bodies are an ‘expression of social control’ (Douglas 1996 [1970]: 74). This could be seen in repressive practices of totalitarian regimes where bodies are subjected to systematic practices of cruelty that exercise social control and penalise or eliminate individuals who represent a ‘danger’ for the regime. Mass sterilisations, rape, purges, and deformation of body parts through torture are examples of the deployment of abusive mechanisms of social control on bodies. However, everyday practices in democracies also show similar principles, including control over women’s bodies through the criminalisation of abortion, exclusion from medical health of migrant populations, and reducing budgets that affect poorer groups most harshly.

The consideration of menstruation as a pollutant comes from the attempt to legitimise sexual segregation, on the discursive plane, and this has, as a consequence, material effects. Menstruation is regulated through rituals, behaviours (e.g. by considering menstruating women as vulnerable, ‘mad’ and ‘irrational’), restrictions (e.g. practising sport or having sex during periods), and is generally subjected to a specific language through the use of semantic strategies such as metaphors, metonymies, euphemisms and it-fication, that is, to refer to menstruation as ‘it’ (Allan and Burrige 2006, Pizarro 2014, Jackson and Falmagne 2013). There is a fear of mentioning the word ‘menstruation’ in public and sometimes even in private contexts because it is considered embarrassing. The recent work of Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler on menstruation builds on Erving Goffman’s concept of stigma as ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ (1976 [1963]: 13). These scholars argue that menstruation is a source of social stigma for women and this

approach exemplifies the current situation of menstruation (2013: 9) and makes clear why references to and the appearance of menstruation in cultural products is employed to shock audiences. As Chrisler points out, current discourses about menstruation emphasise the idea that ‘it is okay to menstruate as long as you do not mention it and no one knows you are doing it’ (2011: 202). Therefore, silence is a key factor in the preservation of the menstrual stigma. Chrisler states that ‘[m]enstruation is typically avoided in conversation [...] except under certain circumstances (e.g. in private with female friends and relatives, in a health education or biology class, in a doctor’s office)’ (2013: 12). These regulations and attitudes that maintain a culture of shame and embarrassment around menstruation are transmitted in everyday life, through institutions and cultural products, and shape lived experience (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 38, Newton 2012: online).

The selected authors subvert the menstrual stigma within this context of menstrual concealment because they offer excessive representations of menstruation. I use the term ‘excessive’ in the sense used by Elizabeth Grosz in her hypothesis about the ontological status of women’s corporeality. Grosz’s hypothesis is that female bodies have been constructed in the West as ‘a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment [...] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order’ (1994: 203). As Grosz points out, despite the fact that women have different attitudes towards their corporeality ‘there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions’ (1994: 204). These images are ‘common themes in literary and cultural representations of women’ and are used by women to represent themselves in these terms (Grosz 1994: 203). This thesis explores this description of women’s corporeality as a mode of seepage in the corpus of texts.

For this endeavour, the work of French feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous on ‘écriture féminine’ is helpful, despite the criticism branding their approaches as essentialist. This is because of the characteristics of the texts, in which corporeality and resignification of menstrual imaginaries play such an important role. The writers have a strong focus on language and the body, psychoanalysis, and the feminism of difference. These theorists consider that women’s experiences have been repressed in Western thought and therefore women should express themselves using a new language in order to ‘establish a point of view (a site of difference) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice’ (Jones 1981: 248). They argue that in order to confront phallogocentric discourses and practices—those that privilege masculine experiences and take them as the universal—acts of resistance must ‘take place in the form of *jouissance*, that is, in the direct re-experience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality’ that have been repressed (Jones 1981: 248). Irigaray and Cixous highlighted the need for women to express what their sexuality meant for themselves with a new language, creating in this way, a ‘site of difference’ and drawing attention to the existing misrepresentations and absences of female desires (Jones 1981: 248). Women’s psychosexual specificity is for Cixous that which can catalyse this new language (Jones 1981: 251). Cixous’ and Irigaray’s conceptualisation and description of women’s sexuality as diffuse, multiple and fluid is related to what they consider women’s writing (Jones 1981: 251-52). However, Cixous remarks that ‘to be signed with a woman’s name does not necessarily make a piece of writing feminine’ (1981: 52).

The approach of cultural critic Nelly Richard is also pertinent. According to Richard, the concepts of ‘escritura femenina’ or ‘literatura de mujeres’ have limitations and should be replaced by ‘la feminización de la escritura’ (1994: 132). She identifies two limitations: on the one hand, the concept presupposes that texts must be realist and

positivist, that is, they must display a certain authenticity in the representations of women, and therefore this fails when the narrative tries to destabilise narrative codes. On the other hand, 'literatura de mujeres' essentialises what is considered to be feminine 'sin tomar en consideración el modo en que identidad y representación se hacen y se deshacen en el transcurso del texto bajo la presión del dispositivo de remodelación lingüístico-simbólica de la escritura' (Richard 1994: 130). Instead, 'feminización de la escritura' does not make explicit the gender of the writer and also takes into account its capacity to deconstruct and open up meanings (1994: 133). This notion emerges from the crossing of feminine and masculine forces which are characterised by, in the first case, a semiotic drive and therefore a transgressive use of meanings and signs, and in the latter, a more rationalising force that is aligned with hegemonic discourses. The feminine entails, thus, the questioning of hegemonic representations imbued in a false universalism. In addition, this 'feminine' is conceptualised as a mobile identity and not a preformed and stable category; it calls attention to 'la materialidad discursiva de los mensajes que la ideología cultural dominante busca transparentar para hacernos creer que sus significados han sido fijados de una vez para siempre' (Richard 1996: 743).

Menarche and Menopause

The onset of menstruation, or menarche, and menopause are also pivotal processes that need to be analysed from a different perspective to the one used to frame menstruation. In these cases, the crucial factor is not related to the idea of seepage or leakage but, rather, to transition and limits. Menarche is considered the marker of the transition from girlhood to womanhood par excellence (Grosz 1994: 205). This identification can be seen not only in popular science but also in popular culture and everyday life. Health sciences divide up women's lives according to their reproductive (biological) potential; therefore, within this reasoning menarche is a crucial event that marks the possibility of pregnancy and the entry

into the realm of motherhood. Similarly, menopause is considered from the perspective of medical science 'as a case of the breakdown of authority: ovaries fail to respond, and the consequence is decline, regression, and decay' (Martin 1987: 172), and thus marks the transition to a new phase defined by the impossibility of reproduction. The symbolism of the life stages 'menarche-pregnancy-menopause' is deeply embedded in Western culture and these stages are constructed around the presence and absence of menstrual blood. The symbolism of these stages frames the whole way women's lives are represented and influences our conceptions of age and ageing (Dillaway 2005: 401, Osorio 2007: online).

Liminality, 'a state of being between states' in which individuals are considered vulnerable and dangerous simultaneously as studied in anthropology by Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and Douglas amongst others (Thompson 2010: 398), is helpful because it is closely related to the menstrual cycle in the collective imaginary. Individuals who start their periods or their menopause are regarded as in in-between stages. These stages are associated with ambiguity, and sometimes horror, because 'ambiguity is a character of statements capable of two interpretations' and therefore defies order (Douglas 1984: 37, 96). As Douglas says, 'what is unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition) tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean' and this is why 'transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or even be nowhere' (1996 [1970]: 97).

Within patriarchal thought menarche is taken as the marker of the transition from childhood into womanhood, separating the infantile body from the pubescent body; a separation rooted in a potential and hypothetical capacity to procreate. It is for this reason that menarche appears to be associated in the symbolic order with being initiated into (heterosexual, coital) sexual relationships, and therefore, menarche is linked with social anxieties about female sexual agency, which in the case of teenage girls is still widely considered a taboo (Sau 2000 [1981]: 197, 207; Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 22;

Jackson and Falmagne 2013: 381). Moreover, menarche is also symbolically linked with *machista* conceptions of the young female body as provocative: the dangerous female body. By contrast, menopause is defined through a biological conceptualisation, namely, as a stage of non-fertility. Menopause is also regarded as a transition in women's lives because it marks a cultural status change.³⁴ These issues are explored in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 in the novels by Sanz and Tusquets, and Clavel, respectively.

³⁴ This conceptualisation has not always been the same. As Sara Read points out, in early-modern England menopause was not considered a transition, but 'part of the aging process' (Read 2013: 171).

Part 2: Menstruation in the Hispanic Context

The Hispanic Menstrual Corpus

This section offers an overview of Hispanic texts that deal with menstruation and identifies trends and common topics or perspectives about the ways in which menstruation is represented. The main body of the thesis is the close analysis of six novels, but it is important to provide a wider context in order to frame the corpus and to highlight the number and range of representations of menstruation in Spanish and Latin American literary production. The decision to open up geographical boundaries and to use the Spanish language as the only criterion enables us to contemplate the subject of menstruation as a universal experience. By no means do I mean to make a claim about universality here, especially in relation to identity and related problems such as subordination and exclusion (Butler 1990). I use the term ‘universal’ in the sense of considering menstruation as a worldwide, common and specific process which adopts singular forms and is experienced in different ways depending on factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and age.

This overview is far from a definitive study of all such portrayals in literature written in the Spanish language. Nevertheless, this section will refute the idea that menstruation is a silenced subject in literature written in Spanish. In addition, the overview creates a framework for the subsequent close analysis and emphasises that they are not rare examples in which menstruation is explored; the texts are part of a wider corpus.

The survey is structured according to chronology and thematic similarities rather than geography. The geographical scope is substantial: nine countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Spain, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Uruguay) are represented. Following a geographical approach would detract from the clear thematic and chronological links that need to be drawn. This menstrual corpus is framed by more than sixty novels and short stories, and a brief overview of poetry is also included. It groups together contemporary texts written by women in which menstruation is mentioned. References to

menstruation could take the shape of a single mention, an indirect allusion or a whole text about periods. As some critics have pointed out, many women writers focus on female corporeality in order to decolonise patriarchal representations of women's lives and bodies (e.g. Richard 2004a: 27). This section will show that authors do have an interest in writing about menstruation (and especially from a first-person perspective). The results are varied, ranging from confirming or denouncing stereotypical depictions of periods, to offering more subversive portrayals that challenge traditional representations of menstruation. Moreover, this survey also shows that texts do follow similar thematic and chronological patterns. Similarities in the approach to menstruation reflect the influence of literary trends, contemporary feminist discourses, social concerns, and the political situation of the country in which the texts were written. This review not only focuses on menstruation, but also on recurrent themes that appear linked to menstruation in the novels, such as virginity, rape, abortion and sexuality.

The only examples from the 1950s are found in texts by Spanish writers, although these texts do not explicitly mention menstruation. As Catherine Bellver points out, the works by female writers of this decade, such as Carmen Laforet, Ana María Matute and Carmen Martín Gaité, are mainly examples of the *Bildungsroman* in which 'chicas adolescentes luchan por liberarse de la monotonía, la miseria, y las represiones de una realidad ensombrecida por las limitaciones de las múltiples consecuencias de la guerra civil' (2005: 36). However, despite the fact that these novels do not explicitly mention menses, there are references that can be associated with menstruation, and more specifically with menarche and sexuality. These texts not only echo fears about the feminine body, the incipient sexuality of teenage girls and subsequent restrictions imposed on teenagers, but also include a perspective directly linked to the realm of reproduction and references to other types of vaginal blood; for example, after being penetrated for the first time, as in Carmen Barberá's *Adolescente* (1957), or rape, in Elena Quiroga's *La sangre* (1952).

Carmen Laforet's *La isla y los demonios* (1952) is a story of isolation and teenage rebelliousness narrated by sixteen year-old orphan Marta and set in Gran Canaria. The novel explores Marta's experience of growing up and the conflicts that arise, influenced by fears about the feminine body and the role of women as mothers. As such, the novel highlights restrictions imposed on women. Menstruation is not explicitly mentioned, but there are references that allude to menarche and bodily changes, as well as ova ('Tienes dentro de ti semillas de muchos hijos que han de nacer; eres como una tierra nueva y salvaje y debes esperar como la tierra, quieta, el momento de dar plantas', 130). Similarly, in Matute's *Primera memoria* (1960) the narrator, Matia, recounts her transition from childhood into puberty. This coincides with both her move to an island to live with her authoritarian grandmother, her aunt and her cousin, and the start of the Spanish Civil War. The novel maps out the changes that Matia experiences in her teens, physical and psychological, such as unease, frustration, anxieties about growing up, and prejudices. Although menstruation is never mentioned, menarche is alluded to through adults' opinions of her, not only in terms of physical appearance (e.g. she has to make the effort to be pretty) but also in terms of behaviour (e.g. she is no longer allowed to spend the night with her male friends). Thus, menarche in the novel is explored indirectly through new restrictions imposed on Matia based on the idea of female danger, and recurrent motifs and images that support this reading.

Elena Quiroga's *Escribo tu nombre* (1965) is the first text in which menstruation is unambiguously described, albeit through euphemisms such as 'doler el estómago' and 'estar desarrollada' (250).³⁵ This novel follows the tradition started by post-civil war women writers, such as Laforet and Matute, who focused on the experiences of rebel adolescent protagonists, and is set during the Spanish Second Republic in a convent school for girls. Here, the protagonist discovers her sexuality and the restrictions placed on female bodies. In

³⁵ 'Estar desarrollada' alludes to the development of secondary sex characteristics which generally appears around menarche.

this novel, there is a critique of the euphemisms around menstruation and the influence of religion on how menstruation is experienced. This text also describes how to exploit periods; this is possible thanks to paternalistic attitudes towards girls according to which menstruating girls can avoid physical activities.

The first Latin American texts identified appear in the 1970s along with further texts by Spanish authors, and the approaches also widen as more experimental approaches emerge, influenced by the Latin-American Boom of the 1960s (which also influenced peninsular narrative, e.g. López-Cabrales 2000: 39). Mexican Rosario Castellanos' short story 'Lección de cocina' (1971) explores the life of a married woman who experiences the restrictions of a traditional marriage. Menstruation is mentioned within the context of the possibility of getting pregnant, and in addition, the image of bleeding red meat alludes to traditional images of loss of virginity. *La condesa sangrienta* (1971) by Argentine Alejandra Pizarnik is a novel based on the figure of Erzébet Báthory, who was known as the 'Blood Countess' for killing hundreds of young women at the end of the fifteenth century and start of the sixteenth century. The novel explores the ways in which the Countess killed her victims and used their blood to preserve her youth. Symbols related to young women's (and virgins') blood and their supposed properties, as well as topics such as pornography, authority, power and torture are described in the novel. Menstruation is not specifically mentioned, but there are implied motifs that are related to menarche and virginity, and typical symbology of fairy tales, such as the use of the colours white and red (Vaz da Silva 2007). Spanish writer Ana María Moix's short story 'Ese chico pelirrojo a quien veo cada día' (1971) describes the first period of the protagonist. It offers a detailed account of menstrual symptoms and the feelings that arise from them, as well as sociocultural beliefs, misconceptions, and restrictions associated with periods such as equating periods with womanhood and adulthood: 'no bañar[se] con agua ni demasiado caliente ni demasiado fría, no comer helados ni hacer gimnasia y sobre todo, no contar a nadie lo sucedido' (151).

Argentine Reina Roffé's *Monte de Venus* (1976) offers insight into menstruation from the perspective of the genderqueer protagonist Julia.³⁶ The novel explores Julia's uneasy relationship with her/his body at the time of growing up with traditional feminine characteristics. However, Julia considers menstruation apart from fertility, that is, as a process in its own right. Moreover, in *Monte de Venus* the first explicit mention of menstruation appears as both 'menstruación' and 'período' (44), and in terms of 'atraso menstrual' (144). Almost consecutively, Esther Tusquets' *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978) is the first peninsular text of this corpus in which an explicit term for menstruation is used. Although, as previously stated, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s authors include references of menstruation, in these examples there are no explicit mentions. *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* is set in the post-Franco period in Barcelona. The novel is a confessional narrative in which the anonymous middle-aged homodiegetic narrator leaves her husband after a life of unhappiness and alienation and has a fulfilling lesbian relationship with one of her students, Clara, with whom she is able to delve into her memories and accept herself. However, in the end she goes back to her husband. The exploration of menstruation and menopause along with the explicit treatment of female pleasure and lesbianism in Tusquets' first novel transgressed different taboos and underrepresented experiences and identities in 'mainstream' cultural products, and broke many silences regarding women's experiences.

From the end of the 1970s until the end of the 1980s there is an emphasis on portraying menstruation from the perspective of everyday life, in texts by the Chilean Lucía Guerra, and the Spanish writers Rosa Montero and Carmen Gómez Ojea. In Spain, there was a boom in women's writing after 1975 (De Ros and Hazbun 2011: 14) which was followed by an increase in the publication of erotic novels written by women, a forbidden genre during Francoism (Corbalán 2006: 60). The perspective of so-called 'menstrual

³⁶ Julia identifies herself in different ways in the novel, at times as a man, and sometimes as a 'masculine' woman.

management' is also found in novels by best-selling Latin American novelists such as Isabel Allende, Ángeles Mastretta and Laura Esquivel, although set in different contexts and exemplifying different styles. Concurrently, we also find novels characterised by experimentalism, such as Luisa Valenzuela's *Cola de lagartija* (1983), Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* (1988), and Carmen Boullosa's *Antes* (1989), as we will see.

The narrator of Rosa Montero's *Crónica del desamor* (1979), a journalist and single-mother, reflects the pressures of modern life during the 1980s in Spain from a female perspective. The narrator criticises discrimination, the different roles, double standards and new pressures that women have to deal with in the new post-Franco era, which are triggered by the lack of love, and the narrator's state of disillusionment. There is an emphasis on women's corporeality, and themes such as the pill, abortion and rape play an important role in the novel. Menstruation is a symbol of sexual difference and the narrator explores different ways in which it affects women physically and physiologically. The narrator portrays menstruation with a degree of realism, reflecting the everyday logistics of sanitary towels and tampons, discomfort and visits to the gynaecologist. Lucía Guerra Cunningham's *Más allá de las máscaras* (1986) is a confessional narrative in which the protagonist, an upper-middle-class journalist, shares anecdotes, experiences and thoughts about the situation of women as the consequence of having to write an article about Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*. Her life is changed and also her attitudes towards herself and towards others, and she is determined to fight for changes that empower women and break with false ideas of femininity. Menstruation is a recurrent theme in the novel: the narrator not only wants to talk about periods, how they feel, what the logistics are and how they affect women from different sociocultural backgrounds, and she also denounces the lack of empathy of men towards women.

Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), a bestseller and example of the Latin American Post-Boom (Swanson 2005: 98),³⁷ explores modern Chile through a family saga and from a female perspective. Virginity, rape, fertility, abortion are recurrent themes in the novel and, within this personal focus, experiences such as menstruation and menopause are also described. Menstruation is portrayed in the context of bodily changes during puberty and as a sign of womanhood. Menses are also explored through the lens of class in one episode in which a character explains that menstrual pain only happens to bourgeois women. Allende also writes about puberty and the possibility of starting to menstruate in the short story 'Niña perversa', from *Cuentos de Eva Luna* (1989). The lack of appetite of the protagonist is interpreted by her mother as a sign of growing up, although the reality is that it is a consequence of shock: she has found out that her mother has a lover.

Ángeles Mastretta's best-selling novel *Arráncame la vida* (1985) is set in the 1930s and 1940s and recounts the story of Catalina Guzmán, a woman who is married at a very young age to an authoritarian and *machista* General. This first-person narration focuses on the empowerment of the protagonist within an oppressive society and offers a detailed account of female experiences. This novel also explores feelings about motherhood, body image, alienation and societal expectations of women. Menstruation appears in different passages and from different perspectives (that of the narrator, her mother, her husband and her peers), and is portrayed as both an experience which does not give rise to shame and a painful process that makes the protagonist feel sad.

Carmen Gómez Ojea's *Los perros de Hécate* (1985) is narrated in the first person by the protagonist Tarsiana, a middle class, independent woman with a very strong personality who, voluntarily enclosed in her house, tells anecdotes about her life. Her narration is

³⁷ There is a whole discussion about this claim because of Allende's use of magical realism—aligned with the Boom—and the focus on women's perspectives written by female authors, often used as a synonym for the Post-Boom. See Castellucci Cox (2003: 14-20) and Swanson (2005: 82-103). In this sense, Swanson characterises Allende's work as a 'key work of the Post-Boom', understanding the Post-Boom as a transition of the Boom, that is, in this case Allende 'embodies both, on the one hand, a relationship to and reorientation of the novel of the Boom, and, on the other, the trend towards readability, structural clarity, socio-political commentary and relative optimism' (Swanson 2005: 98).

combined with surreal and visceral episodes relating to herself and her friends with witty social criticism (e.g. abnegated motherhood, selflessness of some women, gender roles, sexuality, sexual education and abortion). She creates a genealogy of women who had a role in her life but avoids romanticised portrayals. She is subversive, defies conventions, and offers alternative versions to well-known stories and myths. In *La novela que Marien no terminó* (1988), Celia, a forty-year-old woman, starts writing a diary as the result of a small accident that immobilises her for a month and a half. Writing about herself, her family and friends, she depicts the changes in society in Spain from the second quarter to the last quarter of the twentieth century: sexuality, the pill and other methods of contraception, menstruation and abortion are topics that can be talked about openly. Gómez Ojea explores excessive female bodies in both novels and emphasises women's corporeality.³⁸ She depicts scenes with a great deal of blood: births, abortions, miscarriages, menstruation, and portrays abjection and disgust through surreal scenes or dreams. Menstruation is a recurrent subject and it is depicted from different angles: as a sacred sign, from the perspective of everyday life and from the perspective of men.

Colombian writer Albalucía Ángel has published at least two works in which menstruation is depicted. *Misiá señora* (1982) is an experimental feminist text that explores the identity of the protagonist, Mariana, a member of an aristocratic Colombian family in which her only possibilities are marriage and motherhood. The novel is divided into three parts that focus on different periods in Mariana's life (childhood, teenage years and adulthood, and finally Mariana's ancestry) and explore subjects such as rape, abortion, contraception, virginity, homoeroticism, androcentric medicine and gynaecology. Menarche is described in detail and menstruation is also mentioned within the context of reproduction and in the context of conversations between the protagonist and her peers, in which the differences between their upbringings are sketched out. Ángel's novel *Las andariegas*

³⁸ Above I use the term 'excessive' using Grosz's hypothesis about the construction of women's corporeality in the West as leaking and uncontrollable (1994: 203), as previously described.

(1984) can be considered a homage to Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969). This novel describes voyages of groups of women who travel through history creating a female genealogy to pay tribute to important female figures and reclaim their place from an androcentric 'History'. These voyages intermingle mythological and real characters, times and places and transform myths through a particular use of language. Menstrual references appear in relation to menarche rites and sharing knowledge about menses and natural processes. Luisa Valenzuela's *Cola de lagartija* (1983) is a fictionalised account of El Brujo, Isabel Perón's Minister of Social Welfare, in which his violent practices during Argentina's Dirty War are described. Menstruation is mentioned in two passages. Firstly, we encounter the euphemistic reference to 'andar con luna', and it is considered as a hindrance to travel. Secondly, menstrual blood is alluded to in the context of violent bleeding: 'corre ya un río de sangre y no precisamente de una sangre menstrual, contaminada' (259). Reina Roffé's *La rompiente* (1987) is an experimental, fragmented and ambiguous novel that explores the process of writing in the context of censorship and exile. Menstruation appears in the last two pages of the novel 'as a means of imagining a productive solitude and as a point of departure from which to produce an active, explicitly female subjectivity' (Tierney-Tello 1996: 169).

In Cristina Peri Rossi's *Solitario de amor* (1988), one of the texts analysed in this thesis, the anonymous, homodiegetic, cross-gendered narrator recounts an interior monologue that revolves exclusively around his lover, Aída, and his obsession with her. In this context of fixation with her body and secretions, menstruation is explored as an erotic fluid. In the 1990s Peri Rossi published three texts in which menstruation is a recurrent element: the poetry anthology *Otra vez Eros* (1994), the collection of short stories *Desastres íntimos* (1997), and the novel *El amor es una droga dura* (1999). Nicaraguan Gioconda Belli's *La mujer habitada* (1988) narrates two stories set during the Spanish Conquest, and the insurgencies in Central America in the 1970s respectively, which centre on the subject of

women's emancipation. Menstruation is mentioned in the context of pregnancy, and also in terms of the way menstruation affects one of the characters: she feels sad, sensitive and needs empathy. Belli also published the poem 'Menstruación', included in *El ojo de la mujer* (1991), in which the poetic voice explores the traditional stereotypes about menstruation, such as feeling closer to nature and out of control.

Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* (1988) is narrated from the point of view of a twin sister and brother who have an incestuous relationship from the moment they are in the womb. The novel allegorically explores the Chilean dictatorship and female writing within a context of a patriarchal society and censorship. Blood is a recurrent image in the novel and menstruation is mentioned in the context of its lack and therefore, as a sign of pregnancy, and the way the twin sister experiences her periods in distress. *Antes* (1989), by Mexican writer Carmen Boullosa, is a fragmented novel about the traumatic transition from teenager to adult experienced by the homodiegetic narrator. This process is portrayed as her death, which mimics the conceptualisation of this change as the death of the girl as part of the transition into womanhood. Menstruation appears at the end of the novel with the narrator's menarche to represent the moment when the protagonist dies (a real or metaphorical death).

Laura Esquivel's bestselling novel *Como agua para chocolate: novela de entregas mensuales, con recetas, amores y remedios caseros* (1989) is set in the Mexican revolutionary period. It is a novel that intermingles love and gastronomy through the lens of magical realism. The novel focuses on the life of Tita and it is narrated by her great-niece. Tita is presented as a 'rebel against repressive family codes, but actually this rebellion comes from her desire to conform to traditional notions of femininity' (Lavery 2005: 47). The references to menstruation are linked to fertility. Menstruation in the novel signals non-pregnancy and requires 'medidas adecuadas' (173). Almudena Grandes' *Las edades de Lulú* (1989) is an erotic novel that explores the sexual life of the homodiegetic narrator, Lulú. Lulú's menarche is the trigger of the plot because the way she experiences her first period

has an impact on the way she lives her sexuality as an adult, that is, through non-conformity. For Lulú's mother, menarche is associated with danger because she associates periods with sexuality. She is worried because she thinks that Lulú could become sexually active. This is precisely what Pablo is attracted to, the supposed non-conformity of Lulú's actions during her menarche. Lulú also reflects on virginity and the disillusion she experiences when she does not bleed the first time she has penetrative sex.

The approach of portraying menstruation from the perspective of everyday experience continues into the 1990s with Lucía Etxebarria's novels. The female narrators of these novels chronicle changes in society, new pressures and difficulties with an emphasis on corporeal issues (e.g. the pill, abortion), and they also tackle discrimination against women and rape. Menstruation is a symbol of sexual difference and there is an emphasis on describing how it affects women physically and physiologically. Their female narrators portray menstruation in a realistic way, reflecting their everyday experience: sanitary towels and tampons, cramps, and visits to their gynaecologists. *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* (1997) is written in the style of a confessional narrative in which Ana explores women's identities in contemporary Spain, focusing on herself and her two sisters. Each of them possesses a distinct personality and style of life and they suffer from various social ills, such as alienation, male violence, control over their bodies, medicalisation, drugs, and depression. The relationship between them had always been problematic but once they decide to face their problems and be the protagonists of their own lives they discover that sorority is possible and they can be reconciled. Ana raises awareness of issues such as amenorrhea, endometriosis and gynaecological and medical procedures, scientific positivism and social acceptance regarding medical treatments in relation to reproductive health. *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (1998) is about the life experiences and changes of Beatriz, a young woman from Madrid who explores sexuality, fasting and anorexia, drugs, and relationships in a destabilizing environment. Her parents send her to Edinburgh so she

can break with a routine of self-destruction and continue her studies. There, she meets Cat, a lesbian woman with whom she falls in love and thanks to whom she is able to take control of her life and confront her past when she goes back home. Menstruation is not only described in the context of the pressure around ideals of femininity and body image, fertility and virginity, but also in terms of the everyday logistics of using tampons.

Pilar Pedraza's *La pequeña pasión* (1990) is a fantasy novel in which the female narrator begins to mix reality, dreams and visions when she discovers that her husband has a lover and her friend has committed suicide and returned to 'life' as a vampire. This novel depicts the body in a visceral fashion, through wounds, fluids, mutilations and a corpse, while menstruation appears in the context of transgression. When the narrator menstruates she challenges norms: 'yo era insensible a cualquier prohibición, porque cuando tengo la menstruación no existe para mí más regla que la de mi sangre de mujer' (133). Blanca Álvarez's *La soledad del monstruo* (1991) is a noir novel about the miserable existence of Baby, a self-declared ugly and obese, lesbian protagonist who hates everybody including herself, and whose alienated life occurs in marginal spaces where interpersonal relations are unhealthy. Driven by the killing of an acquaintance and the desire to find the culprit, she experiences changes in the three days that follow coinciding with her menstruation, in which she meditates on all the things from the past and present that make her feel like a monster. Ana Rossetti's anthology of erotic short stories, *Alevosías* (1991), includes a mention of menstruation, 'regla', in 'Siempre malquerida', and allusions to vaginal blood both as a consequence of breaking the hymen during sexual exploration in her childhood in 'La noche de aquel día' and as a consequence of rape in a vicarious way in 'La cara oculta del amor'.

The nameless female narrator-protagonist of Diamela Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* (1991), one of the texts selected for analysis, explores themes such as female subjectivity and desire, marginality, alienation and violence in the context of the Pinochet dictatorship. Menstruation is the main image of the novel and it is represented from multiple

perspectives: eroticism, solidarity, violence, and death. The short story 'Yo a las mujeres me las imaginaba bonitas' by Chilean Andrea Maturana is included in *(Des)encuentros (des)esperados* (1992) and explores innocence, ignorance and astonishment from the perspective of a girl. As a consequence of the menarche of her sister, the protagonist is shocked when she faces the incongruities of her mother's discourses and actions regarding menstruation, womanhood and society's expectations and behaviour towards women. She rejects growing up to avoid having to suffer discrimination and violence. Through her young eyes she questions the relationships between sanitary towels and being a woman, between being a woman and being beaten, and between menarche and sexuality, between menstrual blood and feeling ashamed. *Recóndita armonía* (1994), by Spanish writer Marina Mayoral, is set during the Spanish Second Republic and the Civil War and explores the lives of two girls in transition to their teenage years in a convent school for girls. Key themes in the novel are sexuality, homoeroticism and friendship. Menstruation is a recurrent subject: menarche and the following periods of one of the protagonists are described, and restrictions during periods are demystified offering a healthy vision of menses. This vision results from two contrasting opinions about menstruation that appear in the novel: that of the priest, who is very open, and that of the nuns of the convent school where the protagonists live, which is closely linked to sin and danger.

The experimentalism of authors such as Luisa Valenzuela, Eltit and Boulosa in the 1980s is also present in the 1990s with authors such as Chilean Eugenia Prado and Colombian Orieta Lozano. Lozano's *Luminar* (1994) is a novel about the process of writing in which eroticism and the female body are central subjects. The novel could be described as a 'féminine' text in Cixous' terms; it is challenging, postmodern, highly corporeal, blending the real and the imagined. Blood is a recurrent image, and other motifs stand out, such as the moon, flowers and vampirism, alluding to menses and women's sexuality and in which the process of writing is compared with a haemorrhage. Eugenia Prado Bassi's *Cierta femenina*

oscuridad (1996) is written as a drama with three characters that embody different conflicting archetypes: a submissive woman who accepts a condition of inferiority, a liberated woman and a *machista* man. The dialogues between them make the submissive woman start questioning gender roles and the idea of femininity and she manages to escape from views of the female body which are mediated from biological and reductionist perspectives. Although not experimental in style, Beatriz Pottecher explores marginality in *La isla de los perros* (1994). The homodiegetic narrator retells the events that happened in her life after moving from Madrid to London at nineteen to have an abortion. This novel explores themes such as disgust, sexual abuse, BDSM, porn and gore films, the absence of paternal and maternal figures, dehumanization, depravity, feminism, and normalised violence in society. Within this context of violence and the focus on bodily fluids in the novel, blood in general terms is a recurrent image. Menstruation is mentioned in three passages regarding adverts for sanitary towels, amenorrhea and heavy periods, and at the end of the novel it provides an excuse for the narrator to escape from a life-threatening situation. Almudena Grandes' short story 'La buena hija', from *Modelos de mujer* (1996), explores the theme of the mother-daughter relationship. Menstruation is briefly mentioned by the narrator to justify her losing control after an incident with her mother.

Rosamaría Roffiel's *Amora* (1997) is considered the first openly lesbian novel in Mexico (Foster 1991: 114-8). This feminist novel is about sorority between a group of feminist and lesbian friends who share their experiences. The novel demystifies homophobic prejudices and criticises discrimination. In this context menstruation appears as a conflictive process: some women consider menstrual blood to be disgusting, particularly in relation to sexual practices, and as a trigger of madness, while the protagonist's thirteen year-old niece portrays menses as a natural and normal process. The short story 'Silvina' from *Mujeres al teléfono y otros cuentos* (1996) by Paraguayan Mabel Pedrozo recounts an episode in the life of teenager Silvina in which she goes home with a box of condoms that the Ministry of

Health had distributed at school. The short story mentions menarche and associates it with fertility and a curse on women's lives. Lucía Guerra's short story 'Antes del nombre', from *Frutos extraños* (1997), is about the process of the narrator's own conception: from the stages of her mother's ovulation until her birth. It is described from a female point of view and influenced by the symbolism of a spiritual feminism which emphasises motifs such as the moon goddess, ova, sisterhood, and the ritual journey and eternal cycle of the menstrual cycle.

Since the year 2000, along with accounts of menstruation as part of everyday life, other approaches are explored which can be categorised in different groups: menstruation connected with trauma, demystification of periods, representations of menstruation in a purely subversive way, phenomenological approaches to menstruation, and menstruation as the element that structures the text.

Firstly, menstruation is explored in the context of trauma and the necessity to go back to the 'origins' and confront the effects of war and dictatorship (e.g. Andrea Jeftanovic, Luisa Valenzuela). Jeftanovic's *Escenario de guerra* (2000), one of the texts analysed in this thesis, is a combination of drama and diary told from the perspective of the adult protagonist, Tamara, who recalls episodes from her childhood and the early 1990s. The novel explores the effects of trauma on identities and their embodiment, and real and metaphorical migrations. Menstruation in this novel is the vehicle that channels trauma between individuals. The homodiegetic narrator of Valenzuela's *La travesía* (2001) is an Argentine anthropologist living in New York who sees herself forced to look into her past, the past of her home country during the dictatorship. Blood is recurrent in the novel, and menstrual blood is present in different ways, including in subversive and erotic images. The process of writing and corporeal writing is important in the context of the novel, and there is a change in the protagonist's way of writing: first from a male point of view and later, in a more liberating way that takes into account her own desires.

Secondly, menstruation and other related topics are explored from a demystifying perspective with peninsular authors such as Marta Sanz and Gómez Ojea. Sanz has published four novels since 2006 in which menstruation appears. Sanz's *Susana y los viejos* (2006) is a novel about old age, illness, and death in which disgust and scatology are recurrent themes. The body is explored in detail and menopause and menstruation are mentioned in three passages. The longest reference describes the way one of the characters deals with menstrual pain. Sanz's *Lección de anatomía* (2008) is a novel with an autobiographical tone that focuses on the childhood and teenage years of the narrator-protagonist. The main themes explored in the novel are bodily processes, the male gaze and female sexuality, the influence of different women on the narrator's development, memory, and the Spanish transition to democracy. Menstruation is explored in two passages. The first is a detailed description of the narrator's first period and the other appears in the context of physical education lessons in school. *Amour fou* (2013) is a novel narrated alternately by former lovers, Lala and Raymond and in which she is spied on by him, knowingly. Once more, it is a novel that interweaves the personal and the political and which engages critically with Spanish current affairs and subjects such as violence at the hands of the police, impunity, precariousness, and different conceptions (and distortions) of love. There are four passages in which menstruation is briefly mentioned. The longest reference alludes to the menarche of one of the narrator's school friends and focuses on the idea of liminality, a recurrent theme in Sanz's works. *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* (2013), one of the selected texts for analysis, intertwines a first-person narration and a documentary about cultural products and the world of celebrity during the Spanish transition to democracy. The voice of the first-person narration belongs to Catalina, a Spanish woman born in 1966 who relates her life as a twelve-year-old girl in the middle of a double transition: her personal transition as an adolescent and in the wider Spanish *Transición*. At the same time, Catalina is the director of the documentary. The novel focuses on physical changes during puberty and

incipient sexuality, and demystifies menarche as the key marker of the transition into womanhood. The narrator of Gómez Ojea's *Ancila en los fuegos* (2005) is a woman who recalls her childhood and adolescence during the last years of the Francoist dictatorship. The main focus of the novel is on sexuality and particularly on questioning the limits of social norms regarding sexual practices. Recurrent themes are asexuality, 'perversions', voyeurism, paedophilia, masturbation, homoeroticism and lesbianism. Menstruation is described in the context of menstrual restrictions and their demystification.

Thirdly, menstruation is depicted in a purely subversive way in Elvira Navarro's *La trabajadora* (2014). This novel explores the way in which job insecurity and precariousness resulting from the Spanish economic crisis affects mental health. The menstrual passage is the start of the novel: it is the story of the narrator's flatmate when she moves back to Madrid; the first thing she does is to publish an advertisement in a newspaper looking for someone to perform oral sex on her while menstruating and on the night of the full moon. Menstruation here is depicted in a subversive way because it aims to shock readers: menstruation exemplifies a 'scandalous' situation. However, given the fact that this character is portrayed as suffering from mental illness, this passage also alludes to the association between menstruation and madness.

Fourth, accounts of menstruation that focus on menstrual management include novels by peninsular and Latin American writers such as Dulce Chacón, Etxebarria, Zoe Valdés and Najat El Hachmi, and the first novel by Argentine Inés Acevedo. Bestseller *La voz dormida* (2002) by Dulce Chacón is a historical novel about the stories of a group of republican and communist female prisoners during the Spanish post-war period until 1963. The book describes their experiences in prison: their strategies, the relationships they enjoy, the everyday life inside and outside the prison, including the stories of their relatives and the community they build to survive and to keep fighting for their ideals. The narrator describes the logistics in prison regarding cloth pads, mixed feelings about menstruation, and the

solidarity between women. In this context, menstruation is seen as less private than outside prison. In addition, there is a brief mention of menopause in one passage in which a woman who wants to have children stops having periods just before she is released from prison. Etxebarria's *Un milagro en equilibrio* (2004) is written as a diary in which the narrator, as a consequence of her pregnancy, describes her turbulent past and present and writes from an anti-essentialist perspective about her personal experiences of pregnancy, breastfeeding and the physical and psychological impacts on herself. Despite the focus of the book, menstruation is not linked to her own experience but rather she reflects on so-called premenstrual syndrome and alludes to a potion containing menstrual blood used by a witch from Elche to attract men. Zoe Valdés' *La cazadora de astros* (2007) intertwines two stories: the story of Zamia, a Cuban writer working in Paris who decides to write about the Catalan surrealist painter Remedios Varo, and the story about Varo herself. Recurrent themes in the novel are labour, domestic violence, rape, and rejection of growing up. Within this context there are frequent allusions to blood, and menstruation is described in detail at the end of the novel: premenstrual symptoms are explored, and the novel culminates with a description of the start of the period. Najat El Hachmi's *El último patriarca* (2008) is a story about a family which lives between Moroccan and Catalan cultures, and whose protagonist is the father of the narrator, an authoritarian and abusive man. The novel explores themes such as virginity rites, rape, contraception, girls' incipient sexuality and masturbation, body changes and body image, homoeroticism, and gynaecology in Spain. Menstruation appears in the context of comparing different perspectives from Moroccan and Catalan society, such as menstruation as a taboo, and the prohibition of tampons. Inés Acevedo's *Una idea genial* (2012) is a fictionalised autobiography in which the process of the narrator's own conception is described, as well as her menarche. Her first period is narrated in the chapter 'El peor día de mi vida' where she explains her rejection of growing up and bodily changes,

and where she explores the difficult relationship she has with her mother and her body: at that time the narrator starts suffering from anorexia.

Menstruation is the axis of Spanish writer and screenwriter Roxana Popelka's short story 'La zanja', from *Tortugas acuáticas* (2006) and Ana Clavel's *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007). 'La zanja' is about the childhood of the narrator-protagonist, who adopts roles traditionally associated with manhood in order to impress and feel more accepted by her father. The crucial point in the short story is the moment in which she starts menstruating and flushes her bloody sanitary towels down the toilet to hide them from her father, blocking the pipes and creating a ludicrous situation. The narrator of *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007), examined in Chapter 5, is a doll maker who creates and commercialises preadolescent dolls undercover for paedophilic customers, and for himself. Through these dolls, they satisfy their desire to rape girls without legal consequences. He becomes the target of a secret association whose aim is to put a violent end to his endeavours. Menstruation is crucial in the novel because the menarche of the narrator's daughter triggers the plot, and blood is the main feature of the dolls, which bleed when penetrated.

Lastly, we have Eltit's *Mano de obra* (2002) and the first novel by Spanish philologist Belén García Abia, *El cielo oblicuo* (2015), which fall outside the categories enumerated this far. *Mano de obra* explores neoliberal practices in the context of a supermarket in which poor working conditions and dehumanization affect the health and integrity of the workers. Images of blood are recurrent, highlighting the dangers of the workplace, and the menstrual passage refers to the unexpected and excessive period of one of the employees. The description of her menses is used as the ultimate image of degradation and lack of freedom within the capitalist system. *El cielo oblicuo* is a first-person narration of a subject who suffers because she cannot have children as the result of myomas (uterine tumours). This text is conceptualised as a healing narrative and also plays

tribute to literature written by women such as Mary Shelley, Clarice Lispector, Silvina Ocampo, and Pizarnik by using their voices on the subject of (non-)motherhood. The uterus is experienced as a monster, a place in which everything —tissue and words— turns into a cyst. Menstruation is the reminder of the false promise, in this case, of the possibility of motherhood: she menstruates but cannot bear children.

Although poetry is not the focus of the thesis, it is important to highlight that in addition to authors previously mentioned such as Cristina Peri Rossi and Gioconda Belli, there has been an increase in the production of poetry with an intimate and visceral tone.³⁹ Poet, translator, journalist and editor Luna Miguel (Madrid, 1990), whose work is an example of so-called alt lit,⁴⁰ writes about menstruation, entrails and illness in her poems and articles. In addition, she edited the anthology *Sangrantes* (2013), which is an eclectic compilation that includes poems written in Spanish by renowned female writers such as Peri Rossi but is mainly the work of new young poets such as Berta García Faet (Valencia, 1988), Clara Bueno (Madrid, 1990) and Sandra Martínez (Valencia, 1995). Although in this anthology bleeding is interpreted in a broad sense, blood is limited to women's blood written by women, and thus includes references to experiences such as menstruation, birth and illness. Young poets, such as those anthologized in *Sangrantes*, are very active in online literary magazines such as *KoKoro*, *Les Noveles*, *Specimens*, zines such as *Sara Mago*, their own personal blogs, and publish in small independent poetry publishing houses such as La Bella Varsovia (Madrid), Origami (Cádiz) and El Gaviero (Almería). Such is the case of new writers like Carmen Juan (Alicante, 1990) who published her first book of poems *Amar la herida* (2014), after having won the VII Pablo García Baena Prize for new poets. *Amar la*

³⁹ Given the intimate nature of poetry, my hypothesis is that menstruation has been an explored theme in poetry for decades. However, for time restrictions I have not been able to track down earlier references.

⁴⁰ Alt lit, 'alternative literature', refers to a literary movement born in 2010 in social media such as Tumblr and Twitter. The works of alt lit writers is mainly published online. Despite its loose characteristics in terms of style, the main feature is that alt lit writers use 'every form from instant messenger and text message logs to essays, image macros, tweets and Tumblr blogs' creating a community of writers and reaching new audiences for poetry. See James Bridle, 'Meet the "Alt Lit" Writers Giving Literature a Boost', *Guardian* 29 June 2014 [online]; Andrew Morrell, 'Who is Alt Lit?', *University Wire*, 2 June 2014 [online].

herida is an exploration of experiences during childhood with a focus on the body. Menarche and confusion in regards to body changes which are lived as monstrosities play an important role in this collection.

Selected Menstrual Corpus: Texts and Contexts

Robert Eaglestone's manifesto about the study of contemporary fiction perfectly describes the process of researching literary representations of menstruation:

because of the 'openness of our archive' we [contemporary fiction academics] choose the themes – terror, perhaps, or trauma – and then find books that explore these themes [...] This (brutally brief) description of the critical process reveals a difference in approach between those contemporary texts around which a critical debate has grown up and those which exist in a critical silence. (2013: 1095)

The selected texts for the thesis are Diamela Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* (1991); Andrea Jeftanovic's *Escenario de guerra* (2000); *Solitario de amor* (1988) and other works by Cristina Peri Rossi; Marta Sanz's *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* (2013); Esther Tusquets' *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978); and *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007) by Ana Clavel. Despite the fact that not all of them exist in a critical silence as such, a critical silence applies to their representations of menstruation.

These texts are written by women and, although not every author uses a female narrator (Cristina Peri Rossi's and Ana Clavel's texts have a male narrator), all of them have homodiegetic narrators and the confessional tone is extensively used. In these novels the themes of finding and understanding oneself are recurrent and this tone enables authors to explore intimate experiences and issues such as 'growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle', common subjects also found in the genres of women's autobiography (Smith and Watson 1998: 5) and feminist confessional texts

(Felski 2005: 86).⁴¹

It is common that female writers state that they do not want to be labelled as feminist despite the fact that their work reflects, with the limitations of generalising and homogenisation that this entails, feminist concerns.⁴² The feminist label might imply, as Catherine Davies says, that ‘they should write in a certain way and attract only a certain type of reader’ (1994: 6). The same occurs with women’s writing or feminine writing, much debated subjects because of their connotations. As Mary Green affirms, such categorisations presuppose a determined way of writing and the restriction to certain genres and topics, and she argues that this ‘is merely a ploy by publishing houses to achieve vast sales, and results only in essentialising “woman” and ghettoizing female authors and their female readers’ (2007: 12). The selected authors —self-declared feminists or not— have an interest in exploring women’s corporeality and experiences generally hidden in Western thought. However, I have avoided texts that only approach periods from the perspective of the logistics of having periods and have chosen texts that redefine menstruation in the sense of escaping the traditional association of menstruation with fertility. Instead, my corpus explores menstruation and its relationship with four themes, which are the ones that structure the chapters: eroticism, trauma, transitions and rape. The selection of texts has been made not only because they include the subject of menstruation but also because they can be considered ‘menstrual texts’. I coin this term to refer to texts in which the role of

⁴¹ Drawing on Rita Felski’s analysis of the characteristics of feminist confessional texts, there are traits of both main types of texts in my novels. The selected texts are, on the one hand, ‘episodic and fragmented [...] to emphasize its status as reflecting and contingent on lived experience, rather than as a self-contained literary artefact [...] like a diary in which the ‘author records the details of daily events as they occur’ (2005: 86) but also, on the other hand, these texts ‘emplo[y] a structure based on retrospective narration [with which] it becomes possible to focus on those moments which have been revealed as turning points in the development of a life story’ (2005: 86). Clavel’s novel differs from the rest because it is a confessional narrative in the sense that the male narrator makes a confession, which implies that he ‘wishes or even needs to reveal something that is hidden, possibly shameful, and difficult to articulate’ (Brooks in Herman, Jahn and Ryan 2005: 82), but also tries to seduce readers (Foster 1987: 4).

⁴² This attitude has been changing in the last few years thanks to feminism’s resurgence, and greater visibility in both activism and culture. Artists such as Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Jennifer Lawrence, Ryan Gosling, Lena Dunham form part of a wide-ranging list of self-declared feminists within the context of mainstream culture. In the literary sphere writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*We Should All Be Feminist*, 2014) and Caitlin Moran (*How to Be a Woman*, 2011) are examples of this turn.

menstruation is significant within the context of the plot or the dynamic of the text, for example, when menstruation is the main motif or the catalyst of the story (e.g. *Las Violetas son flores del deseo*). Moreover, menstrual texts can also reflect this characteristic through the structure and language used (e.g. *Vaca sagrada* and *Escenario de guerra*), which mimic menstrual flow and cyclicity. Therefore, these texts not only include references to menstruation, but also have menstruation embedded in different ways.

Diamela Eltit

Diamela Eltit was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1949. Novelist, academic, performer and active political dissident during the Pinochet regime, Eltit is a multifaceted author. Eltit studied at the Universidad Católica de Chile and at the Universidad de Chile (Eltit, Burgos and Fenwick 1994-5: 336). She was cultural attaché in Mexico between 1991 and 1994. She has held numerous academic posts as writer in residence in North American universities: Brown, Washington, St. Louis, Columbia, Berkeley, Virginia, Stanford, Johns Hopkins. She is currently Global Distinguished Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at New York University,⁴³ and was Visiting Simón Bolívar Professor at the University of Cambridge during the academic year 2014/15. She formed part of the *avanzada* scene (*Escena de Avanzada*), a term coined by cultural critic Nelly Richard that refers to the Chilean movement in between the neo- and the post-avant garde that emerged in the years following the *coup d'état* in 1973 (Richard 1994: 37).⁴⁴ The *avanzada* scene represented a radical change in the Chilean artistic panorama at the moment when cultural products were subjected to censorship, and when the regime's neoliberal and free-market policies stopped

⁴³ Profile of Diamela Eltit, *New York University Creative Writing Program in Spanish* website.

⁴⁴ According to Richard, the *Escena de avanzada* brought together artists from different disciplines 'around intense ruptures of languages whose *deconstructive* and *parodic* accent strongly clashed with the *emotive-referential* tone of militant culture' (Richard 2004b: 44). This scene is characterised by 'su empeño por replantear el arte mismo y su capacidad expresiva dentro de un sistema represivo; ser una forma que apostó a la creatividad como fuerza de ruptura con dicho orden imperante; una práctica que además intentó reformular el nexo entre arte y política fuera de toda dependencia con los modelos ideológicos bipolares (representados por las opciones izquierda/derecha), y que, finalmente, insistió en anular el privilegio de lo estético como esfera desvinculada de lo social, libre de responsabilidad crítica respecto de las estructuras de poder' (Pino-Ojeda 1999: 250).

the financing of the arts, leading to an abrupt and drastic decrease in artistic production which previously had been supported by the state (Nelson 2002: 43, Oyarzún 1987-88: 304, Richard 1987). Eltit was also a founding member of CADA (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte), along with the visual artists Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo, the sociologist Fernando Balcells and the poet Raúl Zurita. This collective of artists-activists was established in 1979 and aimed at interrogating the relationships between politics and art through performances (that they named ‘acciones de arte’) in non-normative places such as public spaces or brothels (Tompkins 2006: 105).

At the time of writing (2016) she has published ten novels: *Lumpérica* (1983), *Por la patria* (1986), *El cuarto mundo* (1988), *Vaca sagrada* (1991), *Los vigilantes* (1994), *Los trabajadores de la muerte* (1998), *Mano de obra* (2002), *Jamás el fuego nunca* (2007), *Impuesto a la carne* (2010) and *Fuerzas especiales* (2013). She has also published short stories, articles in journals such as the *Revista de crítica cultural*, and four essays: *Crónica del sufragio femenino en Chile* (1994), *Emergencias. Escritos sobre literatura, arte y política* (2000), *Puño y letra* (2005), *Signos vitales. Escritos sobre literatura, arte y política* (2007). She also published a documentary book on love and madness with the photographer Paz Errázuriz, *El infarto del alma* (1994) and the book *El padre mío* (1989) which had been previously developed in collaboration with the visual artist Lotty Rosenfeld between 1983 and 1985.⁴⁵

She has received several prizes and scholarships such as the beca Guggenheim (1985), the Premio José Nuez Martín (1995) and the Premio Iberoamericano de Letras José Donoso (2010).

⁴⁵ For extensive information about Eltit’s works see Anon., ‘Diamela Eltit’, *Memoria Chilena: Biblioteca Nacional de Chile* [online].

Cristina Peri Rossi

Cristina Peri Rossi was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1941. She is the granddaughter of Italian and Spanish immigrants, and was raised in a working-class family (Dejbord 1998: 52-53). She started a degree in Biology but after two years changed to Comparative Literature at the Instituto de Profesores Artigas in Montevideo (Dejbord: 219, Pérez-Sánchez 2007: 115). She taught in Uruguay for eleven years until she went into exile in Barcelona in 1972, just before the *coup d'état* in Uruguay. She had been very active politically in her home country; she was a militant in left-wing groups and worked for the left-wing periodical *Marcha* until it closed down in 1965 (Dejbord: 53). She continued her political activism in Barcelona, fighting against the Uruguayan and Francoist dictatorships, and as a consequence she was stripped of her Uruguayan nationality in 1974. She went into her second exile in 1974 and stayed in Paris for nine months (Boullosa, Pollack and Peri Rossi: 82) before returning to Barcelona, where she obtained Spanish nationality (Dejbord: 63) —she had to wait until the end of the Uruguayan dictatorship in 1985 to recover her Uruguayan nationality (Pérez-Sánchez 2007: 118).

She is a prolific writer, and has published, to date, five novels, thirteen poetry anthologies, fifteen short story collections, as well as three essays on literary criticism, and has translated works by various writers, including Monique Wittig, Charles Baudelaire, Clarice Lispector and Guy de Maupassant. She has also written and writes for newspapers and magazines such as *El País*, *El Periódico*, *Diario 16* and *La Vanguardia*. She has taught literature and has been Visiting Professor at universities across the globe. She is a tireless LGBT and feminist activist, and this is reflected in her texts through the breaking of taboos, her critiques of patriarchy, and the use of ambiguities to destabilise identities.

She has been awarded numerous prizes, particularly for her poetry and short stories. In Uruguay, at the beginning of her career she was awarded the Premio de los Jóvenes of the magazine *Arca* in 1968 and the Premio *Marcha* in 1969 (Pérez-Sánchez 2007: 115). More

recent awards include the Premio Internacional de Poesía Rafael Alberti (2000), the Premio Internacional de Poesía Lowe (2008) and the Premio Internacional de Relatos Mario Vargas Llosa (2010).

Chapter 2 explores texts by Eltit and Peri Rossi. Both authors suffered the consequences of *coups d'état* and subsequent dictatorships in their home countries, Chile and Uruguay. However, the consequences of the dictatorships were different in terms of how they affected the writers and their work. Eltit stayed in Chile during the Pinochet regime until she went to Mexico as cultural attaché in 1991, whereas Peri Rossi went into exile just before the *coup d'état* in Uruguay in 1972. During the dictatorships in their home countries they continued to write (and perform in Eltit's case), and encountered different challenges in relation to their works which are critical of authoritarianism and censorship. In exile, Peri Rossi's active left-wing militancy and criticism, and her works continue to shock in Uruguay where even her name was banned in the media until 1985.⁴⁶ By contrast, Eltit's works were never censored because she was able to disguise her subversive content; censors never saw anything subversive in her writing (Pélagé 2000: 74).

The reception of their works was also varied. Both are acclaimed authors and have won prizes by international foundations, and both have been subject to scholarly attention. Eltit affirms that the reception of her literary works is marked 'por lo minoritario' and that despite the fact that her novels have been translated into English and French, broadening the readership of her works, she is 'fuera de los circuitos comerciales en los momentos en los que lo comercial se ha vuelto hegemónico' (Eltit, Burgos and Fenwick 1994-5: 365). As Debra Castillo points out, Eltit is privileged and marginalised at the same time, in the academic realm in the first case and in popular circuits in the latter (2003: 368), a statement which can be explained through Mary Green's characterisation of Eltit's narrative as 'simply inaccessible to many readers' (2007: 20). This statement arises from the fact that

⁴⁶ According to Peri Rossi's official website: 'En 1972, su obra y la mención de su nombre es prohibida en los medios de comunicación durante la dictadura militar que imperó en Uruguay hasta 1985', see Anon., 'Biography: Cristina Peri Rossi', *Cristina Peri Rossi* [online].

Eltit challenges dichotomies and has a postmodern style, a subject analysed by many scholars (e.g. Garabano 1996, Tierney-Tello 1999, Norat 2002, Williams 2004, Tompkins 2006). Her works do not fit into well-defined categories and neither she does follow defined paths because even those are subject to socio-cultural rules and hierarchies. Her postmodern style is also politically engaged. As Tierney-Tello points out, Eltit's fiction could perfectly well be associated with postmodernism as far as it shares characteristics such as the instability of identities, the focus on the margins and the non-linearity of the writing, but, at the same time, it has not left behind its commitment to denouncing authoritarianism politically, linguistically, and philosophically (1999: 80).

Peri Rossi's personal and literary projects are characterised by a rupture with the social dynamics that aim to maintain rigid codes and norms in society (Dejbord 1998: 57-9). Hence, she also focuses on transgression. For Peri Rossi this rupture can only be achieved through engaging with desire. Accordingly, her works are the exposure of a desiring subject who confronts prohibitions, regulations and the social and political structures that aim to maintain the status quo. Her first literary works between 1969 and 1971 caused shock in Uruguay for various reasons: thematically due to her critique of patriarchy and fascism, and her celebratory depictions of women and lesbianism and, on the other, formally, because of her experimental style and use of language (Dejbord 1998: 61-2).

Milena Rodríguez Gutiérrez affirms that Peri Rossi does not belong to the group of most famous Latin-American poets writing in Spain but her works are considered noteworthy (2009: 117). However, this distinction as a Latin-American in Spain, that is as an 'outsider',⁴⁷ is problematic as Peri Rossi has been living in Barcelona since 1972, as Rodríguez Gutiérrez questions later on in her article: '¿Cuántos años de transplante se necesitan para que se considere a Peri Rossi lo que efectivamente es, es decir, a la vez, una escritora tanto uruguaya como española?' (2009: 119). Peri Rossi's fame owes much to her

⁴⁷ Scholar Sharon Keefe Ugalde does not include Peri Rossi in her anthologies or journal articles of Spanish women's poetry (1992, 2006, 2007) because of her 'origen uruguayo' (Ugalde in Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2009: 118).

multi-skilled literary career, particularly thanks to her novels (Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2009: 118). Peri Rossi's fame within Spanish poetry, and particularly within Spanish poetry written by women, was to have dared to write erotic poetry, becoming a point of reference for other women writers who in the 1980s explored similar themes, as Cecilia Dreymüller points out (in Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2009: 130).

The works of Eltit defy simplistic representations of what the Pinochet regime projected as Chilean through marginal characters and places that deconstruct discourses, as well as defying traditional representations of femininity through transgressive images that challenge both patriarchal values and women's self-censorship. Peri Rossi tends to write about certain topics, such as desire and exile, from the same perspective, and, despite her subversive descriptions, she uses stereotypes in some of her works which cause unease (unless they are meant to be ironic).

Andrea Jeftanovic

Chilean writer and academic Andrea Jeftanovic (Santiago, 1970) is the author of three novels, *Escenario de guerra* (2000), *Geografía de la lengua* (2007) and *No aceptes caramelos de extraños* (2011), the compilation of short stories *Monólogos en fuga* (2006), the collection of interviews *Conversaciones con Isidora Aguirre* (2009) and the essay *Hablan los hijos* (2011). *Escenario de guerra* (2000) was her first novel, and was awarded first prize in the Juegos Literarios Gabriela Mistral 2000, novel of the year in the Premio del Consejo Nacional del Libro y la Lectura 2000, and an honourable mention in the Premio Municipal de Santiago 2001. She has worked as literary critic on the newspaper *El Mercurio*.⁴⁸ She studied Sociology at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and holds a PhD in Hispanic Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently an academic at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile and also teaches creative writing.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ 'Andrea Jeftanovic: Escenarios de guerra [sic]', *Leer es un placer* [online podcast].

⁴⁹ Andrea Jeftanovic's website.

The current scholarship on *Escenario de guerra* is limited and includes an analysis of the influence of the Jewish origins of Jeftanovic in the novel along with the theme of emigration (Cánovas Emhart and Jorge Scherman Filer 2008), two chapters in books focused on Latin American women writers (Llanos in Sierra and Román-Odio 2011, Lagos 2006, 2009), a final year dissertation on the role of memory in the novel (Higuera Pastene 2012) and a recently published article also on memory (Melgar Pernías 2014).

Jeftanovic was one of Diamela Eltit's pupils, attending her writing seminars for two and a half years, from 1994 until 1997 (Rojas 2012: online). It was in those seminars that she started conceptualising *Escenario de guerra* when Eltit asked her to write a fictional autobiography as an exercise (Coddou 2000: online). The influence of Eltit on Jeftanovic's novel is seen not only in the style and the use of a fragmented narrative, but also in the focus on female identities and on how public, violent and traumatic situations, such as dictatorships and wars, inscribe themselves on women's bodies and shape the intimate and normally private. In relation to the focus on women's bodies, there is a similar emphasis by both authors on how traumatic events and their context act as a legitimate environment to describe, in a generally creative and transgressive way, repressed, unusual or silenced experiences, such as menstruation. These two authors are committed to showing bodily processes and re-appropriating them with a new symbolism and they show similarities in relation to the textual use of menstruation. In addition, both authors share a similar approach regarding the focus of their writing; they are more interested in developing characters and the ways these characters are affected by experiences than in developing the plot meticulously. For Jeftanovic 'la fuerza está en el punto de vista y en el lenguaje, en la reiteración, en la construcción de imágenes plásticas, en la disposición de las frases' (Collado and Jeftanovic 2013: online). Such a characterisation also fits Eltit's writing. Both authors offer a sensorial experience to readers through the plasticity of their descriptions.

However, the use of language is different; Eltit's language is much more fragmented (Elizondo Oviedo 2012: 93) than in Jeftanovic's novel.

Marta Sanz

Marta Sanz was born in Madrid in 1967. She successfully completed her PhD on the poetry of the Spanish transition to democracy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid in the year 2000. She has worked as a lecturer at the Universidad Antonio de Nebrija (Madrid) and currently teaches creative writing in the Centro de Literatura Aplicada de Madrid, Función Lenguaje.⁵⁰ She has published ten novels: *El frío* (1995), *Lenguas muertas* (1997), *Los mejores tiempos* (2001), *Animales domésticos* (2003), *Susana y los viejos* (2006), *Lección de anatomía* (2008), *Black, black, black* (2010) *Un buen detective no se casa jamás* (2012) *Amour fou* (2013) *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* (2013) and *Farándula* (2015). Her poems have been published in the anthologies *Perra mentirosa* (2010), *Hardcore* (2010) and *Vintage* (2013). She has published three edited books: *Metalingüísticos y sentimentales: antología de la poesía española (1966-2000)*, *50 poetas hacia el nuevo siglo* (2007) and *Libro de la mujer fatal* (2009), and she has also recently published an essay on literature and politics, *No tan incendiario* (2014).

Sanz founded the literary magazine *Ni hablar* in the nineties, and has written and writes for other newspapers and online media such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Mercurio* and *El Confidencial*. *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* (2013) was joint winner in the thirty-fifth edition of the Premio Tigre Juan in 2013.⁵¹ *Farándula* is her latest novel and was awarded the thirty-third edition of the Premio Herralde in 2015.⁵² Scholarly attention to *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* is limited to an article by Myriam Roche, 'Daniela Astor y la caja

⁵⁰ Anon., 'Nuestros profesores', *Facultad de las Artes y las Letras: Universidad Nebrija* [online], Anon., 'Claustro de Profesores: Marta Sanz', *Función Lenguaje: Centro de Literatura Aplicada de Madrid* [online].

⁵¹ Pablo González, 'Sanz: "Los escritores necesitamos palmadas en la espalda como el premio Tigre Juan"', *La Nueva España*, 14 December 2013 [online].

⁵² Carles Geli, 'Marta Sanz gana el premio Herralde con *Farándula*', *El País*, 2 November 2015 [online].

negra: una novela de mujer' (2014) although the lack of critical studies is probably caused by the fact that the novel is relatively recent.⁵³

Esther Tusquets

Esther Tusquets (1936-2012) was born in Barcelona. She studied Filosofía y Letras at the universities of Barcelona and Madrid and taught literature and history (Davies 1998: 255). She published eleven novels (*El mismo mar de todos los veranos*, 1978, *Juego o el hombre que pintaba mariposas*, 1979, *La conejita Marcela*, 1979, *El amor es un juego solitario*, 1979, *Varada tras el último naufragio*, 1980, *Recuerdo de Safo*, 1982, *Para no volver*, 1985, *Libro de Moisés: Biblia I, Pentateuco*, 1987, *Después de Moisés*, 1989, *La reina de los gatos*, 1993, *¡Bingo!*, 2007), eight short story collections (*Las sutiles leyes de la simetría*, 1982, *Siete miradas en un mismo paisaje*, 1981, *Olivia*, 1986, *Relatos eróticos*, 1990, *Carta a la madre*, 1996, *La niña lunática y otros cuentos*, 1996, *Con la miel en los labios*, 1997, *Carta a la madre y cuentos completos*, 2009), three essays (*Libros 'de lujo' para niños*, 1994, *Ser madre*, 2000, *Pequeños delitos abominables*, 2010) and four autobiographies (*Confesiones de una editora poco mentirosa*, 2005, *Habíamos ganado la guerra*, 2007, *Confesiones de una vieja dama indigna*, 2009, *Tiempos que fueron*, 2012). She directed the publishing house Lumen from the 1960s until 2000 when she sold it to Penguin Random House (Smith 1992: 4, Busquets 2015: online). Her role as director of Lumen was decisive when it came to publishing non-mainstream writers and marginalised topics. Lumen had a progressive agenda and, as Jill Robbins points out:

was one of the most important publishers of the late Franco period, the transition, and the 1980s, when it brought out not only the work of Spanish women in general, and gays and lesbians in particular - writers such as Tusquets herself, [Ana María] Moix and her brother Terenci, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Rosa Chacel, and Leopoldo

⁵³ The novel was well-received among literary commentators. See David Becerra, 'Daniela Astor y la caja negra, de Marta Sanz', *La Marea*, 19 May 2013 [online], Ricardo Senabre, 'Daniela Astor y la caja negra', *El Cultural*, 15 May 2013 [online], Carmen R. Santos, 'Marta Sanz: Daniela Astor y la caja negra', *El Imparcial*, 22 September 2013 [online].

María Panero - but also translations of key foreign novelists and theorists, including Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Iris Murdoch, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig. (Robbins 2003: 120)

In addition, Tusquets created collections for both children and adults with a clear feminist focus, 'A favor de las niñas' and 'Femenino Singular', as a way of countering the discrimination against women's writers within the publishing industry and vindicating women's roles within society, and of offering new female voices from different cultures and also alternatives to sexist children's stories.⁵⁴

Tusquets started writing during the Transition and *El mismo mar* was published when the state put an end to censorship (Smith 1992: 91). She always took pride in publishing what she wanted and on writing without self-censorship (Tusquets and Bourland Ross 2005: 216, Tusquets 2006). Tusquets is believed to be the first woman writer in Spain to write about lesbian relationships in detail (Bengoechea 1992: 374, Smith 1992: 91, Davies 1998: 247, López-Cabrales 2000: 152). First reactions to her works were, according to Catherine Davies, 'striking, even outrageous' for two reasons. Firstly, for exploring lesbian themes and second, for her style, which was more associated with men's rather than with women's writing (1998: 256).

Scholarly attention to Tusquets' works is vast and varied. Theses, articles, monographs and edited books have been written since she published her first novel.⁵⁵ Tusquets' works have been studied within different contexts: the Spanish *Nueva Novela* (Miguélez-Carballeira 2005), the Spanish postmodern novel (Navajas 1987), contemporary Spanish female writers (Davies 1998, López-Cabrales 2000) and feminist women's writers of the *Transición* (Vilarós 1998, Bellver 2005, Nieva de la Paz 2004, Nieva de la Paz in Bergmann 2007). Analyses of *El mismo mar* are also wide-ranging although studies of

⁵⁴ Sergio Vila-Sanjuán, 'Entrevista: Esther Tusquets, 40 años al frente de Lumen', *La Vanguardia*, 5 November 2000, p. 51, Juan José Lage Fernández, 'Entrevista 'A favor de las niñas' con Adela Turín', *Platero: revista de literatura infantil-juvenil y animación a la lectura*, 185 (2012), p. 23.

⁵⁵ The first edited book on Tusquets' works was Mary S. Vásquez's *The Sea of Becoming: Approaches to the Fiction of Esther Tusquets* (1991).

intertextual elements of the novel are prominent (Gould Levine 1987, Molinaro 1989), focusing mainly on mythology (Manteiga 1988, Cornejo-Parriego 1995, Nieva de la Paz 2004) and fairy tales (Odartey-Wellington 2000, Solino 2004, Stanley 2014). Psychoanalytical readings reveal topics such as the relationship between mother and daughter (Servodidio 1987) and the process of construction of a universal female psyche through archetypes in Tusquets' trilogy (Casado 2002).⁵⁶ Despite the centrality of lesbianism to *El mismo mar* it was not until 1992 that Paul Julian Smith analysed the lesbian body in Tusquets' trilogy (1992: 91-128). As he points out, in the early days, critics 'seemed somewhat nervous of treating the theme of lesbianism at any length, and often prefer[red] not to mention the word itself' (1992: 91), and did not know whether to approach the topic of lesbianism in the novel as a core or minor topic (1992: 95). Thus, early studies such as Bellver's analysis of eroticism and her reading of closed spaces as symbols of women's sexuality (1984: 15) is re-interpreted by Inmaculada Pertusa-Seva as a clear reference to lesbian subjectivities and identities (2005).⁵⁷ Paola Solorza (2012) examines the relation between subversion and order focusing on the topic of lesbianism in *El mismo mar*, and Ellinor Broman's queer reading (2012) analyses the intertextual elements borrowed from twentieth-century lesbian narrative that refer to homosexuality in the novel.⁵⁸

The ways in which Tusquets wrote about female experiences and female pleasure were particularly new when the novel was published and were soon examined by critics (Nichols 1984). The effect of the focus on female experience and pleasure on the use of language and style has also been studied, especially from a feminist perspective (Bengoechea 1992, Valbuena-Briones 1992). *El mismo mar* is generally considered the best example of 'écriture féminine' in Spanish, not only for Tusquets' style and the use of

⁵⁶ Stacey Dolgin Casado argues that *El mismo mar* is not part of a trilogy but a tetralogy because she includes *Para no volver* (1985) (in Molinaro 2014: 143 n. 5).

⁵⁷ For Pertusa-Seva the (imaginary) space of the closet in the texts she examines is where lesbian identities are negotiated (2005: 17).

⁵⁸ Elements such as the use of sea-related metaphors that represent lesbian sexual practices, the presence of figures such as the witch and female guerrilla fighters re-appropriated by North American lesbian writers in the 1970s, among others (Broman 2012: 31-2).

strategies such as the use of colloquialism, diminutives and superlatives (Gascón Vera 1992) but also for displaying female-centred sexual pleasure. The novel has been analysed from the perspective of French feminism by numerous critics such as Stephen Hart, Akiko Tsuchiya, Barbara F. Ichiishi Marr, Margaret E.W. Jones, Biruté Ciplijauskaitė and Ellen Mayock (2002).⁵⁹ The positive attention that characterised the earlier criticism of the 1980s and 1990s and the favoured readings of the novel as an example of ‘écriture féminine’ were followed by a shift of perspective which moved towards scepticism. The distrust shown by many feminist critics was rooted in a utilitarian view according to which the novel should have had a clearer feminist agenda. New approaches even question the label of ‘écriture féminine’ (Lonsdale 2007, 2011, Miguélez-Carballeira 2005). More recently, the influence of Italian feminist philosophers on Tusquets’ works has also been analysed (Solorza 2014).⁶⁰ Current studies are varied in terms of approach and focus, for example, Helena Miguélez-Carballeira’s thesis pays critical attention to English translations of Tusquets’ novels (2005) and M.J. Marr (2004), and Laura Lonsdale and Helena Buffery (2011) explore space in *El mismo mar*. The former examines space and objects and the latter the relationship between space and national identity within the context of Catalonia. Recent scholarship includes an analysis of the discourse of love in the novel (Moszczyńska-Dürst 2013), a study of queer temporality in *El mismo mar* (Gunn 2014), and the edited book *Esther Tusquets: Scholarly Correspondences* (2014) which contains eleven essays of diverse nature that explore both Tusquets’ fiction and non-fiction.

Ana Clavel

Ana Clavel (1961) is known as a Mexican ‘multimedia writer’ because she has transformed (some of) her literary works into multimedia projects through the use of

⁵⁹ Tusquets’ engagement with Cixous’ ‘écriture féminine’ was proposed by Stephen Hart, Akiko Tsuchiya, and Barbara F. Ichiishi.

⁶⁰ By Italian feminist philosophers I refer to feminists of the sexual difference such as Luisa Muraro, Chiara Zamboni and Carla Lonzi who created the groups ‘Libreria delle Donne di Milano’ and ‘Diotima’. Solorza only analyses the influence of these Italian thinkers in Tusquets’ *Para no volver*.

techniques such as photography, video, and artistic installations.⁶¹ She has published six novels (*Los deseos y su sombra*, 2000, *Cuerpo náufrago*, 2005, *Las Violetas son flores del deseo*, 2007, *El dibujante de sombras*, 2009, *Las ninfas a veces sonríen*, 2013, and *El amor es hambre*, 2015), four short story collections (*Fuera de escena*, 1984, *Amorosos de atar*, 1991, *Paraísos trémulos*, 2002, *Amor y otros suicidios*, 2012, and *CorazoNADAS*, 2014) and the essay *A la sombra de los deseos en flor: ensayos sobre la fuerza metamórfica del deseo* (2008).

Las Violetas son flores del deseo was awarded the Radio Francia Internacional's Premio de Novela Corta Juan Rulfo 2005. Clavel also won the Premio Nacional de Cuento Gilberto Owen 1991, Medalla de Plata 2004 awarded by the Société Académique 'Arts-Sciences-Lettres' and the Premio Iberoamericano de novela Elena Poniatowska 2013. She writes a weekly column, 'A la sombra de los deseos en flor', for Mexican daily *El Universal*'s Sunday supplement *Domingo* and has written sporadically for the Mexican monthly cultural magazine *Letras Libres*.

Overview of Chapters

This thesis is formed by four thematic and comparative chapters. The organisation of the chapters does not respond to date of publication or geography. Although initially the organisation seems geographical because Latin American authors are compared with Latin American authors and Spanish authors are compared with Spanish authors,⁶² this is the result of the decision to group the works according to thematic similarities. Therefore, each chapter explores the relationship between menstruation and the four main themes identified for analysis: eroticism, trauma, transitions and rape.

Chapter 2 focuses on the erotic potential of menstrual blood and is based on Diamela Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* (1991) and several texts by Cristina Peri Rossi. An examination of the

⁶¹ This term is used by Jane Lavery. See, 'The Art of Ana Clavel', *The Institute for Language and Culture at the University of Southampton* website [online].

⁶² Cristina Peri Rossi is the exception because she bridges the two by being Uruguayan and Spanish.

ways in which menstrual blood is presented in the texts enables us to analyse the notions of taboo, transgression and subversion, and also to explore the representation of menstruation as performative.

Chapter 3 continues with an analysis of Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* but in this case in conjunction with Andrea Jevtanovic's *Escenario de guerra* (2010). The chapter examines the role of menstruation as a vehicle to explore the intermingling of universal collective traumas and the experience of menstruation, frequently perceived as 'private'. The decision to include *Vaca sagrada* in a second chapter arises from the fact that Eltit's novel offers a multi-layered approach to menstruation. This chapter engages with trauma theory and specifically the notion of postmemory.

The relationship between the public and the private is also the subject of analysis in Chapter 4, but in this case the approach is through the intermingling of personal and political transitions in the Spanish novels *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* (2013) by Marta Sanz and *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978) by Esther Tusquets. Parallel transitions are the focus of these texts: the Spanish transition to democracy and the biological processes of menarche and menopause, which culturally symbolise transitions to a different life stage. This chapter is in a dialogue with the works of anthropologists Mari Luz Esteban and Mary Douglas on women's cycles and life stages, and liminality, respectively.

The final chapter examines menarche and rape in Ana Clavel's *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007). *Las Violetas* is not a trauma narrative in which the effects of rape are explored; rather, it is an intertextual rewriting of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (among other works) —with which the chapter engages actively— and is an exculpatory account by the homodiegetic male narrator. Therefore the decision to separate this chapter on rape from Chapter 3 about trauma and include it after the chapter on transitions is because of the nature of Clavel's novel regarding the perspective from which it is narrated.

The thesis ends with a brief conclusion, which summarises the key findings of the

research, highlights the importance of this study given the scarce current scholarship on literary representations of menstruation and suggests new avenues of research.

Chapter 2

The Eroticism of Menstrual Blood in Diamela Eltit and Cristina Peri Rossi

The social and cultural invisibility of menstrual blood is contested in a number of works by Chilean author Diamela Eltit and Uruguayan-Spanish writer Cristina Peri Rossi. This chapter explores their approach to menstruation as an erotic fluid. Both authors subvert menstrual stigma through its depiction as erotic fluid and the complete detachment of menstruation from fertility. They also embark on the task of resignification through vivid, excessive and grotesque depictions of menstrual blood that at times, in Peri Rossi's case, even play with cannibalism, a recurrent motif in Peri Rossi's erotic imaginary and the ultimate expression of passion within this imaginary.¹ Both Eltit and Peri Rossi's representations of menstruation enable us to discuss the relationship between transgression and taboo (or its limits), and subversion, as well as the way in which the differentiation between these concepts affects, or not, the normalisation of their menstrual imaginaries. As seen in Chapter 1, transgression involves revealing the limits and questioning pre-defined concepts, whereas subversion overtly displays the reverse of normative attitudes, representations and views.

This chapter analyses Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* (1991) and different texts by Peri Rossi, including the novel *Solitario de amor* (1988), the short story 'La destrucción o el amor' and the poems 'Rabelesiana', 'De aquí a la eternidad', 'Barnanit VI', 'La sádica', 'Comunión', 'II' and 'Comunión III'.² Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* explores complex subjects such as female subjectivity and desire, marginality, alienation and violence through a nameless female

¹ As seen in Chapter 1 Joan Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo argue that menstruation 'is a source of social stigma for women' (2013: 9) which can be exemplified by the fact that it is socially expected that menstruators conceal their menstruations (verbally and physically) (Chrisler 2011: 202). I use the term resignification from Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which refers to the ongoing process of undermining naturalised and essentialist gender identities through the parodic proliferation of practices beyond the binary frame (2002 [1990]: xxxi, 43, 176).

² 'La destrucción o el amor' is included in Peri Rossi's collection *Desastres íntimos* (1997) and the selected poems are included, respectively, in Peri Rossi's *Otra vez Eros* (1994) and *Estrategias del deseo* (2004), and the anthology edited by Luna Miguel, *Sangrantes* (2013), which contains five previously unpublished poems by Peri Rossi.

protagonist.³ Set in the context of the Chilean dictatorship, the characters live in a world of personal lies which act as barriers impeding the creation of healthy relationships between them. The disappearance of one of the protagonist's lovers, Manuel, at the hands of the regime, permits the possibility for change for the narrator; the search for Manuel and confronting the dictatorship are traumatising experiences but they trigger the attempt made by the protagonist to gather the traces the rest of the characters have left, and build a narrative to keep their stories and memories alive. Peri Rossi's novel is structured around the interior monologue of the male narrator-protagonist which in turn revolves exclusively around his beloved Aída. The narration is trapped within his fixation with Aída's body and his fears of losing her. The narrative is highly erotic, with explicit, intense images that describe Aída's body, their sexual encounters and his desires. Similarly, in the short story 'La destrucción o el amor' the first-person narrator tells us of his occasional encounters with his lover, Ana. They are separated by a four-hour flight and are only attached to each other by the desire for each other's body. These texts have been chosen because of their similarities in terms of a shared imaginary of menstruation and their focus on eroticism, and the attempt by the authors to push the boundaries in terms of taboos. However, despite the fact that both engage with the eroticism of menstrual blood, the approaches offered by their narrators are very different, indicating the multiple ways in which transgression can be practised. The engagement with menstrual blood in the context of lovemaking is explored in these texts, which challenges the Judeo-Christian prescription in Leviticus 18:19, where a man is forbidden from having sex with a menstruating woman: 'Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period'.⁴

I argue that both authors develop a menstrual aesthetics, a term that I borrow and

³ There are two homodiegetic narrators in *Vaca sagrada*: the unnamed female narrator-protagonist and Francisca, who, at times, can be considered the same person. To avoid confusion, when I use the term narrator or narrator-protagonist I refer to the nameless female narrator, and when I refer to the chapters in which Francisca is the narrator I explicitly name her despite the fact that both could be the same person.

⁴ The version of the Bible used is the New International Version (NIV). *BibleGateway* website.

modify from Pertusa-Seva's notion of lesbian aesthetics (2005: 99).⁵ Building on her concept, the selected texts for this chapter demonstrate menstrual aesthetics because they make visible menstruation within social and literary realms of existence, they deploy strategies of repetition of images and symbols, create new imaginaries that question and disturb the status quo, and use non-linear narratives. Thus, menstrual aesthetics does not refer to menstruation itself but to a range of elements (that include common techniques in modern writing, such as repetition) which act as a vehicle to highlight not only the experience of menstruation but also the new imaginaries of menstruation the authors want to transmit. The menstrual flow appears in these texts as subject matter and recurrent image, and is also mimicked structurally by use of a fluid (non-linear) narrative.

Menstrual blood is celebrated in the selected texts through excess, to the point that it is fetishized.⁶ I argue that the works can be considered 'menstrual texts', not only because of the authors' desire to create non-hegemonic menstrual imaginaries but also because of their forms. The selected texts cannot only be considered 'feminine texts' in the sense developed by French feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and the concept of 'écriture féminine'—now used to refer to a French critical tradition— but they are also characterised by Nelly Richard's concept of 'feminisation of writing' (Richard 1994: 132), as indicated in Chapter 1. Both Cixous and Richard suggest that these concepts are detached from the gender of the writer and what differentiates them is the way they engage with descriptions of unmediated female desires. For Cixous a 'feminine text' is endless because it starts 'on all sides at once', multiple and 'very close to the flesh of language' and therefore often difficult to read (Cixous and Kuhn 1981: 53-54) and for Richard, these 'feminised' texts open up meanings,

⁵ Pertusa-Seva states that the characteristics of lesbian aesthetics are the 'falta de linealidad del discurso, la fragmentación de las estructuras gramaticales, la presencia continua de neologismos entre otras características sobresalientes en el texto, [...] estrategias de repetición de ciertos arquetipos, imágenes, símbolos y silencios empleados' (2005: 99), which echoes the features of 'écriture féminine', as seen in Chapter 1.

⁶ The term fetish is used without any kind of negative, medical or pathological connotation, and understood instead as a stimulus with the ability to trigger sexual arousal.

signs, and oppose a rationalising language (1994: 132).⁷

Eltit's and Peri Rossi's fascination with flesh and bodily secretions, apart from exemplifying what a 'feminine text' is, can also be related to an 'aesthetic of disgust' and the tension between repulsion and fascination or attraction.⁸ In fact, the aesthetics of disgust and Cixous' feminine texts have points in common because they are based on a display of excess, and on fluids which are generally hidden. Cixous also describes feminine texts in a very corporeal fashion: as an outpouring, 'as a fantasy of blood, of menstrual flow' but especially 'as vomiting, as "throwing up", "disgorging"' (Cixous and Kuhn 1981: 54). Following Cixous' and Richard's notions of feminine texts and feminisation of writing based on the exploration of unmediated female desires, the works of Eltit and Peri Rossi destabilise hegemonic imaginaries and consequently challenge heterocentric, biologicistic and fertility-centred discourses which see menstruation as a failed project, that is, the indicator of a non-pregnancy (Martin 1987: 46). In their place, these texts provocatively inscribe menstruation into a new symbolic order, that of eroticism.

Eltit's and Peri Rossi's approaches to menstruation are entangled with discourses that reveal how the biological is constructed and naturalised. Moreover, their descriptions also offer an imaginary that challenges normative representations. At the same time, biologicist points of view (that could even be seen as parodic and ironic) do make an appearance, creating a tension that manifests itself in the performativity of discourses about menstruation. Thus, these authors show a tension between questioning and naturalising canonical representations. The way in which Eltit and Peri Rossi depict menstrual blood in their works is crucial within the context of the study of the corpus of menstrual

⁷ I borrow the term 'feminine text' from Cixous' article 'Castration or Decapitation?' (1981), which does not have connotations of the phallogocentric notion of femininity seen as passivity and closer to nature (Cixous in Seller 1994: 37-9). Rather, feminine in Cixous' thought epitomises a challenge in the masculine order which privileges regionalisation and centralisation (e.g. body, libido), in favour of a model that eliminates frontiers (Cixous in Sellers 1994: 44-5).

⁸ For the recent scholarship on aesthetic of disgust see the works by Winfried Menninghaus (*Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, 2003) and Carolyn Korsmeyer (e.g. *Savoring Disgust: the Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*, 2011).

representations in literature because of their wide-ranging descriptions and moreover, in Eltit's case, the structure of the novel mimics the menstrual cycle.

The first section of this chapter, 'Same Blood, Same Lust, Different Perspectives', starts by giving an overview of the writers' approaches to menstrual blood, highlighting differences and similarities in their imaginaries of menstruation. This first section also explores the way in which these texts are examples of feminine texts in the sense described by French feminist theorists. The language used to describe menstruation and the gendered representations of blood more broadly are seen in this section to reflect the influence of French feminism. Cyclicity, transgression and performativity are also key points given the ambiguity in the representations of menstruation which act in a performative way by presenting both traces of traditional imaginaries and fissures that enable alternative discourses. The last section, 'Eroticism and Desire', explores these key themes in Eltit's novel and Peri Rossi's texts, with a focus on autoeroticism and orality respectively, and the perspectives of the different narrators.

Same Blood, Same Lust, Different Perspectives

The Authors' Approaches

Both authors focus on menstrual blood in their *corpora* (and blood more widely), and this characteristic leads us to think in terms of 'bloody *corpora*'.⁹ Menstrual blood is central to Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* and key in the overall context of Peri Rossi's imaginary of eroticism. However, their approaches are different despite the fact that both display menstruation in erotic terms.

Eltit's descriptions of menstrual blood in *Vaca sagrada* are explored by the author in detail and are frequent, giving a significant protagonism to menstrual blood, whereas in Peri Rossi's texts the mentions are brief and the scope more limited. However, in Peri Rossi's

⁹ With the term 'bloody *corpora*' I want to highlight that blood is a recurrent subject matter and image within the context of the writers' literary production (particularly Peri Rossi's erotic texts). In Eltit's case her blood was present in one of her performances in the 1980s, *Zona de dolor*, during the Pinochet regime.

case menstruation appears in a large number of her texts: novels, poetry and short stories. These different approaches suggest that Peri Rossi is more subversive inasmuch as her descriptions are explicit and she frequently links menstrual taboos with other topics such as religion, cannibalism and oral sex, as will be discussed in the last section of the chapter. However, the normalisation of the practices associated with menstruation in her works limits their subversive potential. Subversion fades away within the context of her *corpus*. In contrast, Eltit displays transgressions and their limits, and thus through this strategy she strengthens the sense of transgression.

The imaginaries of menstruation they project are also different. Peri Rossi's imaginary is more unequivocal: menstrual blood is almost inseparable from eroticism and can even be considered a fetish, whereas in *Vaca sagrada* menstrual blood is more polyvalent and is not only linked to pleasure but also to life and death. Moreover, menstrual blood in Eltit's novel is intermingled with the Chilean context of the Pinochet dictatorship. The imaginary of menstruation in the novel is so closely tied to the dictatorship that at times it is difficult to separate eroticism and the materiality of menstrual blood from menstrual allegories of the cruel and destructive procedures exercised by state terrorism and produced by abusive gender power relations.¹⁰ By contrast, Peri Rossi's representations of menstruation are more monothematic and focus on the naturalisation of non-normative desires.

As we have seen in Chapter 1 menstruation is still, in general terms, a silenced subject which provokes a variety of reactions that include unease, disgust, shame, fear and insecurity (i.e. fear of leaking or of starting menstruating unexpectedly). It is also an experience which in the context of the everyday life has been colonised by marketing campaigns and medical approaches (i.e. in Biology and Medicine textbooks, and within the discourses of medical practitioners). Advertisements for 'menstrual management products' project a sanitised vision of menstruation by emphasising discreetness and invisibility, and

¹⁰ These allegorical meanings of menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* are explored in Chapter 3.

use euphemisms. Eltit's and Peri Rossi's representations of menstruation are examples of change in the imaginary of menstruation. Their descriptions can bring social transformation, not only for making visible discourses about menstruation but also for proposing non-hegemonic models. These new models can raise awareness about the invisibility of menstruation in cultural products, and ultimately, can lead to changes in perceptions and experiences.

In their representations Eltit and Peri Rossi share an imaginary that subverts and also transgresses the menstrual taboo, particularly in terms of menstruation as a site of eroticism. However, their approaches are different in terms of language, the narrators' perspective in their approach to menstruation, and recurrent associations linked to menstrual blood. For example, Peri Rossi's texts interrogate constraints and taboos through uninhibited explorations of other themes such as homoeroticism, transgenderism and fetishism, and she also tests the boundaries with the exploration of other issues such as incest, and paedophilia.

Eltit's and Peri Rossi's menstrual imaginary is completely detached from fertility, and this can be seen as an attempt to move away from probably the most common association of the imaginary of menstruation: reproduction. Eltit's and Peri Rossi's stances aim to free menstruation from the historical burden of being equated with procreation. This ancient association can be found in Aristotle (4th century BCE) who believed that menstrual blood was the substance that nourished the foetus during pregnancy and the blood of the newborn (Sau 2000: 61). Current views change according to medical developments but core ideas that arise from the same way of thinking are deeply rooted in our imaginary. The discourse of considering menstruation as nonpregnancy or as the process that enables women to have children is found in the everyday life and in various spheres of socialisation, such as the medical profession and educational institutions (Lavilla Cañedo 2011: 58-61).

Eltit seeks to offer a different view of menstruation, as she states: 'Pensé en cuáles fantasías se pueden depositar en un cuerpo que sangra y entonces intenté sacar la sangre de

una mera biología y productivizarla, hacer correr lo líquido' (Eltit, Burgos and Fenwick 1994-5: 339). Menstruation in Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* has been subjected to scholarly attention (Green 2007, Norat 2002, Olea 1993, Labanyi 1996, Tompkins 2006). However, in Peri Rossi's case there is a lack of analysis of, and interest in, her menstrual representations in research into her works and in interviews. It has not been possible to locate any example where Peri Rossi herself talks about the role of menstruation in her texts or where her menstrual imaginary is studied. Two possible factors, which are not mutually exclusive, can be suggested to explain the lack of scholarly engagement. On the one hand, this vacuum is due to the general invisibility that exists around menstruation and the scarce attention given to existing representations. On the other hand, as we have pointed out, the subversion present in Peri Rossi's erotic texts regarding menstruation is blurred because menstrual blood is naturalised as an erotic element. In this sense, menstrual blood can be simply seen as another recurrent image in her erotic imaginary that does not stand out from other motifs.

Performativity: Repetitions and Bloodless Months that Question Hegemony

Menstruation is, for Jo Labanyi, 'the central image' of *Vaca sagrada* (1996: 85), and, as Norat puts it, this female process is intimately related to the depiction of 'the mechanics of writing itself' (2002: 150). The process of writing becomes evident in the last chapter of *Vaca sagrada* through a self-reference by the homodiegetic narrator who indicates that she is going to write the stories that constitute the body of the novel. The relationship between menstruation and the act of writing can be seen in the structure of the novel, which mimics the menstrual cycle (i.e. cyclical process) but adds an element of change (from both points of view: structure and content). The discourse of the cyclical nature of hormones in women (as opposed to a supposed linearity in the case of men) emphasises and naturalises a rigid and regular twenty-eight day cycle model that does not represent the wide variety of cycles among the population of menstruators.

The structure of *Vaca sagrada* is circular: the end links back to the start, with the reflections of the narrator on her inability to remember names and what has happened. Neither the first chapter nor the last has a title, and they fold into one another enclosing the narratives inside. One could relate this not only to Irigaray's image of the 'two-lips', which define female self-sufficient sexuality inasmuch as women's labia are always touching themselves (1985 [1977]: 24), but also to the traditional way of depicting menstruation, which is also seen as circular, as cyclical. However, as menses are depicted as radical at various points, as we will see, this idea of the cycle is challenged in the novel. This is not only reflected in the internal structure of the chapters, which vary in length, but also in terms of content because, at times, consecutive chapters focus on different characters and different storylines.¹¹ Regarding the content, the narrator mentions on different occasions bloodless months: 'Después de tres meses de carencia yo había vuelto a sangrar' (*Vaca sagrada*: 84), 'se me produjeron un vacío y una interrupción' (*Vaca sagrada*: 47). The 28-day-cycle myth is challenged through the influence of external and psychological factors which are triggers that can modify periods. When Manuel disappears she actively changes her habits and starts fasting; this action leads her to modify her periods to the extent that she stops bleeding, so she can limit her sexual drive: 'Estaba reducida en todas mis necesidades vitales y deseaba aumentar aun más la falta. Solo así podía sacarme el llamado de Manuel en la noche' (*Vaca sagrada*: 126). However, the protagonist at the end of the novel describes menstruation in a stereotypical (and even animal) fashion which enhances characteristics that are commonly attributed to menses: a physical duty, a completely futile biological repetition, an annoyance that ruins a few of her days: 'el deber físico que me imponía una repetición biológica desprovista de toda utilidad' (*Vaca sagrada*: 178). These images do not offer a rupture with the hegemonic imaginary of menses; they are in dialogue or confrontation with normative discourses.

¹¹ In the main we can differentiate between chapters in which the nameless narrator and Manuel appear, from chapters that focus on Francisca and Sergio and in which Francisca is the narrator.

The narrator juxtaposes what seem at times contradictory feelings about menstruation. This dialogue between traditional attitudes and more liberating ones is precisely what makes possible the questioning of limits and transgression in *Vaca sagrada*. As seen in Foucault's description of transgression (1977: 33-4), there is a need to cross the boundaries in both directions: pushing the limits but not erasing the line. In this sense, Eltit offers an alternative to the hegemonic imaginary of menstruation making cycles irregular and modifiable, but she ends the novel using traditional images to refer to menses. This ambiguity causes a fissure; the stability of naturalised categories is questioned. As seen in Chapter 1, Butler's notion of performativity is found to be helpful to frame the way in which menstruation is depicted in *Vaca sagrada* because through the repetition of internalised discourses about menstruation gaps are opened up, enabling us to rethink normative conceptualisations.

In Peri Rossi's texts menstruation is depicted as atemporal. There are no references to time or repetition, to the point that menstruation seems to be a continuous experience for women. Desire and menstruation form part of the same imaginary for Peri Rossi, and therefore, menstruation is detached from ideas of cyclicity. Peri Rossi's texts reflect a state of continuous arousal, and therefore, menstrual representations are present. In Peri Rossi's works, writing and menstruation are united through desire in the sense that both are triggered by the author's desire (or libido). In one passage of *Solitario de amor* the homodiegetic narrator draws Cretan signs on his lover's back with her oxidised menstrual blood (*Solitario*: 15), defying its supposed status of untouchability and appreciating menstrual blood through the parallelism between her blood and the origins of writing. This connection between body and writing is recurrent in Peri Rossi's imaginary and it is explored in Krzysztof Kulawik's article 'Lenguaje en celo', which analyses Peri Rossi's intermingling of the female body and language in her collection *Evohé* (1971):

El acto de escribir poemas y libros adquiere una dimensión sensual de un acto erótico, al situarse el sujeto amoroso y poético metadiscursivamente en el texto. Es allí – en la página, en medio de los versos – donde se desarrolla simbólicamente una relación sexual. (2005: 130)

In *Evohé* Peri Rossi explores the identification of woman with word and displays the act of writing as an erotic one. However, in this early collection of poems menstruation does not appear. The elusive language used in *Evohé* (much more indirect than the rest of her erotic texts) could be the result of self-censorship. *Solitario de amor* was a turning point in her erotic texts, which became bolder and less ambiguous.

Gendered Blood

Vaca sagrada and *Solitario de amor* embody what Cixous has described as feminine texts, as we have previously suggested. There is an exhibition of multiple bio-fluids, such as blood, vomit, urine and saliva in these texts, but a prevalent characteristic in both authors' texts is the difference between different types of blood. Both authors have gendered representations of blood. In *Vaca sagrada* descriptions of blood are constant and there is a clear differentiation in the portrayals of women's and men's blood. Women's blood is described as excessive and always fluid (or ever flowing). It seems that this is due to an explosion: 'caía la sangre que se deslizaba hasta perderse entre la tierra. Intenté cerrar la herida con mis manos, pero la sangre no se detuvo' (*Vaca sagrada*: 43), 'la mano cortada que destilaba sangre' (*Vaca sagrada*: 161). In Eltit's descriptions women's blood emerges from deep inside and does not stop. On the contrary, men's blood is represented as dry: 'Recuerdo sus piernas como una gran masa de pus y sangre seca que lo demarcaban a todo lo largo' (*Vaca sagrada*: 46). Even two problematic passages which seem to contradict this theory of gendered blood confirm the different nature of female and male blood. On the first occasion the menstruating narrator is having sex with Manuel and she narrates how they watch her blood dry on their bodies. This scene highlights that in the process of blood

spillage menstrual blood is fluid, and it dries out due to the mixture of the combination of fluids: ‘confundidos entre amenazadores fluidos’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 25). Hence, her blood is fluid until the moment it is mixed with Manuel’s own. The second problematic passage in terms of gendered blood is when the narrator describes a childhood scene when she plays with two boys. One of them, Juan, is riding his bike when he has an accident and loses an eye: ‘Juan con el globo del ojo reventado, el agua corría [...] Juan perdió un ojo jugando con su bicicleta. Yo gritando que el ojo estaba en el fierro y su cara vacía llena de sangre’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 106). Here, it is the water that is fluid, not Juan’s blood; his blood is static on his face. All the descriptions that involve blood follow this logic of female blood being fluid and excessive and male blood being static (or having the potential to transform female blood if they are mixed). Thus, this representation of blood as gendered seems to exemplify graphically what ‘écriture féminine’ implies: fluid and non-traditional narrative, excess and eroticism of difference.¹²

Peri Rossi also writes about women’s and men’s blood but from an essentialist viewpoint. In ‘Comunión III’ blood is a gendered fluid that differentiates men and women, highlighting the traditional division between culture and nature. She juxtaposes female and male blood using gender stereotypes. Peri Rossi (at first sight) simplistically associates female blood with cultures of life due to the fact that women ‘give life’, and male blood with the realm of death and destruction: ‘Deja que ellos se desangren entre sí | por sus viles pertenencias [...] tu sangre da la vida | no la muerte’ (‘Comunión III’: 15). The poetic speaker in ‘Comunión III’ plays with menses in the sense that s/he praises menstruation in a metaphysical way but s/he also considers everyday life and experience with irony: ‘Bendice ese dolor que da la vida | pero tómame un analgésico’ (‘Comunión III’: 15). Hence, the essentialism is lightened via this humorous twist of praising menstruation but recommending that her/his lover make use of painkillers. These last two verses destabilise

¹² These gendered representations of blood will be expanded on Chapter 3, in relation to other readings related to body politics more broadly, such as abortion, violence against girls, and femicide.

the essentialist tone of the poem and make us question whether such essentialism is in fact ironic. The poem 'IV' also continues with the same female and male stereotypes that reinforce associations of life and death (i.e. caused by wars). In this poem the poetic voice refers to unconditional female solidarity against patriarchal power: '[soy] aquella que establece un pacto de honor | y de amistad | que ningún falo destruirá' ('IV': 16). Therefore, despite the fact that Peri Rossi destabilises essentialism by using irony in poems such as 'Comunión III' her representations of women's and men's blood are ambiguous because she frequently uses stereotyped images. This ambiguity exemplifies the tension between the biological and the cultural and the magnitude of the challenge of finding non-stereotypical representations.

The Choice of Menstrual Terminology

The terminology used to refer to menstruation by Eltit and Peri Rossi is quite different. In each case language serves different purposes, despite the fact that both authors share the aim of reclaiming menstruation as a process experienced by half of the population of the world, and transforming the hegemonic imaginaries around menstrual blood. In general terms they avoid common semantic strategies to refer to menses in Spanish, such as metonymy, metaphor and the use of abstract categories that include expressions such as the ambiguous 'estar desarrollada'.¹³

In *Vaca sagrada* menstrual blood is anything but hidden, and this subverts cultural stereotypes that hide female bleeding bodies. This process of hiding menstruation is also the result of self-censorship by women who act as if the process were non-existent, or who try to avoid mentioning the word 'menstruation' and instead use euphemisms or describe it as an illness. Eltit makes menstruation visible, challenging not only silence, but also offering new ways of describing it, even though the word menstruation does not appear in the novel.

¹³ As Pizarro states, common metonyms include the terms and expressions such as 'periodo', 'días del mes', 'ser mujer', 'desarrollo hormonal', and a frequent metaphor is 'regla' (Pizarro 2014: 232-4).

She instead uses other terms such as ‘sangre’, which is the most prominent, but also ‘herida’, ‘fluido’, ‘coágulo’ and ‘roja abajez húmeda’. Other expressions refer to the absence of menstruation: ‘tres meses de carencia’ (84), ‘se me produjeron un vacío y una interrupción’ (47). Eltit chooses the metonyms ‘sangrar’ for menstruating and ‘sangre’ for menstrual blood. The decision to avoid the term ‘menstruation’ might be due to the fact that ‘menstruation’ is very close to biology and the medical jargon. Eltit’s aim to propose new approaches to menstruation starts by using less marked terms.¹⁴ It is not the case that the omission of the term ‘menstruation’ serves euphemistic purposes, although it might seem so when the term does not appear in an entire novel that has menstruation as its main theme. The omission of the word menstruation can be seen as ironic, performative and even as a resignification in the sense of undermining naturalised terms and associated meanings (e.g. to consider menstruation only from the perspective of reproduction). By contrast, Peri Rossi uses unambiguous terms such as ‘sangre menstrual’ and ‘menstruación’, and other terms which are more explicitly medical: ‘endometrio sangrante’, ‘membranas sangrantes’, ‘menstruo sangrante’, ‘endometrio’, ‘óvulos encapsulados’. This terminology, as will be explained in the section that explores orality in Peri Rossi’s works, mimics the language and tone used by Monique Wittig in *Le corps lesbien* (1973), in which she explores lesbian desire by focusing on corporeality and relying heavily on anatomical terms.

Menstruation is visible and reclaimed in *Vaca sagrada*. The narrator presents menstruation as a powerful process and as something of which to be proud. This is exemplified by the emphasis on language: the narrator continuously refers to ‘mi sangre’, and even when the narrator refers to her menses as a wound, it is described in terms of ‘mi hermosa herida constante entre las piernas’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 103). However, menstruation is

¹⁴ We see that she does not use an explicit language when referring to other parts of the body either. She uses terms such as ‘cuerpos’, ‘piernas’, ‘mano’, ‘boca’, ‘lengua’ and ‘pezón’, but never refers to the genitals in terms of ‘vulva’, ‘vagina’ or ‘penis’; instead she uses other expressions such as ‘plenamente erecto’ (25) or more ambiguous ones such as ‘irreversible lesión instalada en su altura’ (25).

also ambiguously depicted at times. The ambiguity caused by the use of terms such as ‘to bleed’ and ‘blood’ also facilitates the creation of allegories, as will be explored in Chapter 3.

Peri Rossi’s erotic works emphasise the anatomical realm and it is clear, as the author says, that science inspires her: ‘no sé nada de ciencia, pero estoy muy abierta hacia ella, p.e. [sic] leo todos los prospectos de los medicamentos, me parecen una literatura increíble’ (Ragazzoni 1983: 236-7). In contrast, Peri Rossi uses the metonym ‘ser mujer’ to refer to menstruation in the poem ‘Comunión III’. In this case the poetic voice reproduces the expression of her lover when she is menstruating: ‘Ser mujer duele – dices, mientras | deposito mi mano sobre su tu vientre’ (‘Comunión III’: 14).¹⁵ Thus, through the use of this single semantic strategy within the context of her terminology of menses, she is pointing out that menstruation is still an unpronounceable experience even for women themselves. In this poem the author distances the poetic voice from the veiled language used by the lover. The poetic voice implies that her/his lover is subjected to menstrual taboos in relation to language but not her/himself, as the adjoining poems ‘Comunión’, ‘II’ and ‘IV’ show. These poems refer to menstruation in unambiguous ways, unlike ‘Comunión III’ which reflects the way the lover avoids naming menstruation by its name, or by using similar terms, and uses instead the metonym ‘ser mujer’. This common metonym in Spanish for ‘to menstruate’ is the clearest example of the traditional imaginary of menses, which considers that to be a woman is to have reached a biological state when reproduction is, in theory, physically possible.¹⁶

¹⁵ ‘Su tu vientre’ is the expression that appears in the original. The poem has only been published in this edition, and therefore there is no way of checking whether the use of two possessive pronouns is a typographical error.

¹⁶ The nuance of ‘in theory’ arises from the fact that sometimes menstrual cycles can be anovulatory, that is, when ovulation does not occur during a menstrual cycle. These cycles can have different causes but they are more frequent than one might think, especially during puberty. See Susan M. Yussman and Jonathan D. Klein, ‘Adolescent Health Care’, in *Primary Care for Women* (Leppert and Peipert 2004: 94).

Eroticism and Desire

Vaca sagrada is written in the first-person and the approach to menstruation in this novel is through the perspective of the narrator's own experience, for whom menstruation is a fundamental part of her sexual life.¹⁷ Eltit's treatment of menstrual blood can be read, according to Green, as 'an attempt to symbolize woman's sexuality in its own terms' (2007: 97). Therefore, her descriptions of menstruation are unmediated by social norms, and thus allow her to omit the traditional imaginary of dirtiness and shame, especially in relation to touching one's blood, leaking and lovemaking while menstruating. The narrator explores her menstruation without inhibition, through excess and in a celebratory fashion.

In contrast, Peri Rossi's narrators and poetic voices explore the body of the female other, 'la otra' and the desire to possess her. The same dynamic appears regarding menstruation; menstruation is externalised (referring to the lover's periods) and is never explored in terms of the poetic voice's own menstrual blood. To talk about menstruation is to fantasise about the menstrual blood of the lover. Peri Rossi's erotic texts are characterised by an obsession with the lover, her body and secretions. The narrator only explores her own body on three occasions and only to present a quandary about the narrator/poetic voice's sexual organs and gender identity. For the female narrator/poetic voice, to explore her body is to expose vulnerability. The discomfort that introspection causes is reflected in the poems 'Mi sexo', 'Le digo a mi sexo' and 'Contra la identidad', all of them in *Estrategias del deseo*. In the poem 'Mi sexo', from *Estrategias del deseo* (2004), the poetic voice develops their troubled relationship with their sex and describes the feeling in one line as 'niña impúber que ha menstruado antes de tiempo' ('Mi sexo': 90). Thus, the poetic voice/implicit author highlights a degree of discomfort and intrusiveness between sex and subjectivity. The poem 'Contra la identidad', from the same collection, also refers to the poetic voice/author's quandary about her/his gender:

¹⁷ As previously stated, there are two homodiegetic narrators in *Vaca sagrada*. However, even if we consider them to be different women, menstruation is still portrayed from a first-person perspective.

‘¿por qué soy yo y no cualquier otro u otra?’
sigue sin respuesta
a menudo he sido otro
otra
sin necesidad de ir a Casablanca
a cambiar de sexo.¹⁸ (‘Contra la identidad’: 22)

Peri Rossi’s ambiguous narrators and poetic voices are a salient characteristic of her works that has been widely analysed. The use of male or androgynous narrators/protagonists in some of Peri Rossi’s texts attracts the attention of academics (e.g. Domínguez 2000) and is a feature of her interviews (Susana Camps 1987, Adriana Bergero 1993).¹⁹ Studies by Mary Gossy (1996), Nicola Gilmour (2000) and Irimi Kalloniati (2005) question and re-interpret the identity of the narrator in *Solitario de amor*. Kalloniati’s reading of the narrator in *Solitario de amor* and the poetic voices in some of Peri Rossi’s erotic poetry as transgender is coherent with my reading of menstruation in her works.²⁰ Kalloniati considers some of Peri Rossi’s poems as ‘autobiographical narratives of a lesbian transgendered speaker’ (2005: 48) shedding light on Peri Rossi’s use of ambiguities in her narrators and characters. The polyvalence of narrators and their ambivalence forms part of her project ‘to shake loose the rigidity of existing gender categories’ (Kaminsky 1993: 120).

The same play with the gender of the narrator occurs in *Solitario de amor*. As Kaminsky writes, ‘Peri Rossi is deliberately, even playfully, ambiguous with sexual meanings’ (1993: 119). In this novel despite the fact that the narrator presents himself as a

¹⁸ Casablanca alludes to (infamous) French gynaecologist Georges Burou, pioneer of sex reassignment surgery, and who had a clinic in Casablanca, Morocco, from the 1950s (Goddard, Vickery and Terry 2007: 981). The Moroccan city has been described as ‘la Mecque mythique des transsexuels’ and ‘la capitale mondiale du changement de sexe’; see Aurélie Hazan, ‘Casablanca, la Mecque mythique des transsexuels’, *Slate Africa*, 3 October 2012 [online]. The association of sex reassignment surgery and Casablanca also has resonances in cultural products such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s play *Tropfen auf heiße Steine* (1966) and Vicente Aranda’s film *Cambio de sexo* (1977).

¹⁹ Examples of male or androgynous narrators/protagonists are found in the novels *La nave de los locos* (1984), *El amor es una droga dura* (1999), *Solitario de amor*, and the short stories ‘El testigo’, ‘La destrucción o el amor’, ‘Entrevista con el ángel’, which are included in *Desastres íntimos* (1997).

²⁰ The transgender narrator is veiled behind a masculine pronoun (Kalloniati: 10, 49) because of the use of gender ambiguities and her/his claims of identity incoherence. Kalloniati uses Cressida J. Heyes’ definition of transgender as “‘anyone who disturbs established understandings of gender dichotomy or its mapping to sexual dimorphism” (Heyes, 2000: 171)’ (Kalloniati: 7 n. 2).

man,²¹ there are a couple of ambiguous passages: ‘te miro desde el pasado remoto del mar y de la piedra, del hombre y de la mujer neolíticos’ (*Solitario*: 11), ‘[te miro] desde mi parte de mujer enamorada de otra mujer’ (*Solitario*: 12). In a further passage in which the narrator refers to himself as Melibeo, that is, the masculinised form of Melibea, the female character of sixteenth-century work *La Celestina* by Fernando de Rojas. This work is also alluded to in an episode in which the narrator remembers when Aída was wearing a male suit and, therefore, appeared androgynous. The narrator highlights that Aída does not have curves: ‘no tiene cintura, y eso da a su cuerpo una extraordinaria armonía: no hay cortes abruptos, no hay entradas y salidas’ (*Solitario*: 10-11). This passage makes reference to the way clothing codifies our way of interpreting gender and makes our interpretations seem natural, and highlights that codes can be subverted and mixed to try to reach a state where ‘dominant and nondominant gender norms are equalized’ (Butler 2004: 209).²² This episode adds a new layer to Peri Rossi’s project of destabilising gender identities, bodies and desires.

Kalloniati, following a queer reading of Peri Rossi, recognises a kind of ‘exile’ from the sexed body in the author’s poetic speakers. This conceptualisation can be very useful for tackling certain absences in her writing. Peri Rossi is transgressive in her depictions and in her endeavour to explore desires, women’s bodies and fluid identities. However, the narrators and protagonists do not explore their own bodies; the body that is explored is that of other women. The corporeality of the narrator is hidden whilst that of the beloved, or ‘la otra’, is meticulously exposed. The narrator/implied author is detached from her own corporeality and menstruation is not explored in these terms. This first-hand experience is shielded from the view of the readers, giving the impression of what Kalloniati identifies as

²¹ The narrator uses masculine agreement of adjectives such as ‘empapado’ and ‘exiliado’, and terms to refer to himself as ‘hombre’, ‘niño’, ‘explorador’, ‘huérfano’.

²² Butler explicitly refers to the categories butch and femme and explains that these terms are not a copy of the categories men and women (undertood as the ‘originals’ within a heterosexual framework), but rather, butch and femme show that the categories men and women are ‘performatively established’ and ‘the origin is understood to be as performative as the copy’ (2004: 209). Butler also writes about clothing and exemplifies performativity through social norms based on the dichotomy of ‘genuine’ and ‘false’ feminine/masculine clothing, and improvisation (2004: 96-7).

an exile from the sexed body (2005: 72). The poems ‘Rabelesiana’ in *Otra vez Eros* (1994) and ‘Comuni3n’ in *Sangrantes* (2013) are the only texts where the poetic speaker refers to her own menstruation. In the poem ‘Rabelesiana’ the body subjected to scrutiny is the one of the poetic speaker.²³ The body parts mentioned are the toes on her left foot, her ankle, her menstrual blood, her fists and her thighs. However, despite the fact that she is giving a glimpse of her body, her corporeality is still hidden from view behind descriptions of food. The body parts are covered with different marinades: cherry sauce, herbs, liqueur and cinnamon, plum juice and sultanas, and oil, veiling her body. Here, it is ‘the other’ (the lover) who has the agency, rather than the poetic speaker. However, the gaze of the lover is imagined by the poetic speaker, which is reflected in the use of conditional tenses such as ‘gustar3a’, ‘[a]sar3a’ and ‘[b]eber3a’. The poetic speaker looks at her own body as if she were her cannibal lover. Similarly, in the poem ‘Comuni3n’, which will be analysed later for its references to orality and religion, the poetic voice refers to her own menstruation within the context of a sexual encounter. Here, the poetic voice indicates that she has drunk her lover’s menstrual blood and afterwards she gives her lover her own blood to drink: ‘Y luego | te di a beber mi propia sangre’ (‘Comuni3n’: 11). The unusual fact of referring to one’s own menstrual blood in these two poems contributes to Peri Rossi’s project of exploring ambiguities and playing with identities. In contrast, the approach to menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* is through the perspective of the narrator’s experience. The narrator embraces her menstruation displaying her autonomy and the enjoyment menstruation gives her.

Autoeroticism of Menstrual Blood in *Vaca sagrada*

The subversive and transgressive nature of the use of menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* arises from its role in sexual pleasure, as Eltit confers a key role to menstruation in the

²³ The poem’s title makes reference to the works of Fran3ois Rabelais and his grotesque bodies, which are characterised by Segarra as full of holes and permeable, ‘por donde circulan humores l3quidos y materias s3lidas, cuyos orificios permiten, adem3s, la difuminaci3n de los l3mites de dicho cuerpo individual, capaz de fundirse con otros cuerpos’ (Segarra 2014: 26).

context of passion and desire. Subversion is suggested in the explicit depictions of menstrual blood as a fundamental part of the sexual life of the narrator. This dimension is not explored enough in cultural products or in the hegemonic imaginary of eroticism which influence our desires.²⁴ The transgression is produced because the descriptions of menstruation in the novel make readers question what is erotic and what is not, leading us to re-evaluate the way some desires are or are not legitimised within our cultural frameworks.

At the beginning of the novel the narrator says that neither she nor Manuel are interested in having sex. However, later in the chapter she leads us to believe that menstruation is necessary to reach climax: ‘Era ahí, entre la sangre, cuando tocábamos el punto más preciso de la turbulencia genital’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 25). Her menstrual blood acts as a switch for her desire. One day at a party she states: [B]usqué la mano de Manuel para que me tocara, me tocara abajo el placer [...]. La petición vino de mi sangre. Sangraba yo esa noche’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 87). She suggests that she only wants to have sex during her periods. Hence, she is not only breaking the taboo of sex during menses, she is reversing the Judeo-Christian prohibition to the point that the narrator needs her menstruation in order to be sexually aroused. Here menstrual blood enhances the sensation, acts as a lubricant, and rather than stopping them, in fact is delightful: ‘nada conseguía detenernos. Ni mi sangre. De pie, abierta de piernas, mi sangre corría sobre Manuel y esa imagen era interminable’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 24). Her male partner, Manuel, is a participant in this transgression: ‘pedía que le contagiara mi sangre. Se la entregaba cuando él la buscaba plenamente erecto para extraerla y gozar de su espesor líquido’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 25). The protagonist describes her menstrual blood as her power, a force of herself that makes her and Manuel creative in sex: ‘Era el poder de mi sangre’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 25).

The autoeroticism of menstrual blood is a central issue in the novel which is unambiguously depicted in two scenes. Here, the narrator describes sexual fantasies that

²⁴ Research into pornography and the use of menstrual blood as a fetish lies beyond the purposes of this thesis but according to Tram Nguyen ‘[s]mall-scale netporn organisations are proliferating on the Internet [and] Erotic Red specializes in porn about women during their menstruation period’ (2013: 107 n. 8).

involve her menses. In the first passage she describes a masturbatory fantasy which involves penetrating herself with her body as if she were split in two and could access the source of her menstrual blood through her vagina: 'Quería meterme bajo mis propias faldas y caminar ovillada entre mis piernas. Deseaba ser el paño que contuviera el coágulo [...] penetrándome hasta llegar al depósito de mi sangre' (*Vaca sagrada*: 84). This passage exemplifies the autoerotic potential of menstrual blood for the narrator. This is a subversive scene because of its bold approach to sexual autonomy and female masturbation. Female masturbation, apart from being less visible than male masturbation in popular culture, depending on the time period and context, was considered to be a moral fault that should generate feelings of guilt, as well as be the cause of disease and disability (Shuttle and Redgrove 1999 [1978]: 209-11). The narrator is demonstrating her autonomy in this passage; she is self-sufficient and able to satisfy her desires. However, it is only a fantasy and, therefore, she is marking a limit. The boundary between transgression and the limit is highlighted here through the subversion that such a passage reveals.

In the second passage the menstruating narrator is at a party with Manuel, and while he is masturbating her, she fantasises about oral sex; she imagines Manuel's tongue stopping her blood spillage. The only inconvenience raised by the narrator is that they are in a public room: 'que no poseía ningún resquicio en el cual extenderme para pedirle a su lengua que detuviera el derrame' (*Vaca sagrada*: 87-88). This erotic image is precisely caused by her menstrual blood: 'mi desesperada roja abajez húmeda organizó la necesidad de esa caricia' (*Vaca sagrada*: 87). These passages show the excess explored in other descriptions of menstruation in the novel. Her menstrual blood is 'el derrame', a word that emphasises the idea of haemorrhage and which reveals a sentiment of pride in the tone used. This second example of autoeroticism of menstrual blood also reveals the boundaries between transgression and its limits. In this case, it seems that for the narrator the fantasy of receiving oral sex while menstruating (and probably the execution of this fantasy) does not

pose any problems. On the contrary, the context is the factor that determines where the transgression lies. In this case the public space is a line not to be crossed.

For the narrator menstruation is a powerful process, evoking a sense of pride. This can also be illustrated through her emphasis on the language apart from the celebratory descriptions mentioned. She refers to ‘mi sangre’ and ‘la sangre’ eight times in two paragraphs (*Vaca sagrada*: 24-25). The emphasis on ‘mi’ indicates a strong attachment to her menstruation; the narrator is in tune with her body and menstruation is not seen as an external factor that ‘arrives’, as the common expression both in Spanish and English indicates: ‘venir la regla’ and ‘arrival of the period’. Menstrual blood is a force that she pretends to share as if it belonged to both of them: ‘Era el poder de mi sangre. Aunque fingía que era un privilegio de ambos’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 25). She highlights that menstruation is hers in the sense that it is experienced by her and that Manuel cannot share it in the same way, with the same intensity and pleasure. The emphasis on the gendered nature of this power enables the connection between menstruation and ‘écriture féminine’: the pleasurable experience of menstruation offers the mechanisms and determination not only to write about repressed aspects of female bodies, such as menstruation, in a creative way, but also to offer representations of menstruation within the context of a pleasurable sexuality rather than shame.²⁵

Transgression and its limits are also revealed when different male characters react differently to menstruation. As we have seen in previous examples, Manuel enjoys the menstrual blood of the narrator. However, this feeling is not universal and in chapter seven, ‘Diez noches de Francisca Lombardo’, a different situation appears when another male character is exposed to menstruation. This chapter is still narrated in the first person but the

²⁵ By repressed I refer to the effects of phallogocentrism, the structure of thought and writing in which the perspective of white, middle class, heterosexual, able, employed men is considered the yardstick — Jacques Lacan’s phallus as privileged signifier (2006 [1958]: 579)— and therefore excludes linguistically the experiences of women and minority groups from the category of the universal. This binary biases Western thought and influences language, and also contributes to the self-censorship of marginalised groups.

characters are different: Francisca and Sergio. They have a relationship based on control and fear, reinforced by violence against Francisca. The plot of the chapters in which Francisco and Sergio appear is ambiguous and there is a play on the uncertainty surrounding her identity, since she could also be the homodiegetic narrator of the other chapters. In one of the episodes of this chapter the traditional, patriarchal and Judeo-Christian prohibition of sex during menstruation appears. In this passage Francisca and Sergio are having sex and when Sergio finds out he refuses to continue: ‘Dijo que no quería nada conmigo si yo estaba con sangre. Que no soportaba ver las sábanas manchadas. | ¿Estás con sangre? – me preguntó. | – No – le contesté’ (*Vaca sagrada*: 97). What is also interesting here is that Sergio makes this guess not because he sees her menstrual blood, but because at that moment she is very sexually active, autonomous: ‘Mi cuerpo desnudo alcanzó una autonomía sorprendente’ (96), to the point that she even compares herself with an animal: ‘nunca fui yo, fue mi animal que mugía por salir con una enorme lengua rosada’ (97). This passage alludes to the title of the novel and epitomises the popular and clichéd consideration of menstruation as both powerful (sacred) and close to nature (cow). Here, Francisca compares herself with a cow because of her animalistic desire and reaction and, at the same time, she feels powerful; she is highly creative, she states: ‘Me atreví a todo’ (96). In this scene Sergio feels that her behaviour is different, more active, and this makes him search for a possible reason: menstruation. Later in the chapter, she reflects:

Te pusiste turbio y no entiendo que es lo que he hecho esta vez. Lo noto en la oscuridad. Me sale una gota, apenas una gota, pero aun así no quieres. No quieres nada, me dices y lo que no me dices es que te espanto con mi ojo amoratado.²⁶
(*Vaca sagrada*: 101)

²⁶ The image of the eye is relevant because, like menstruation, it represents ambiguity not only because of its texture (e.g. viscosity, filled with fluid) but also because the eye represents a body part from where fluids might come out or stay in an in-between place. This latter case is exemplified in this passage with the reference to the ‘ojo amoratado’, that is, blood has come out of the vessels and still flows inside the eye.

She keeps asking herself why her menstrual blood has a negative impact on him: ‘Mi hermosa herida constante entre las piernas [...] ¿Qué te pasa con la sangre?, ¿qué te pasa verdaderamente ante la sangre?’ (103). His reaction is surprising given the fact that blood is present in their relationship, he beats her and makes her blind in one eye. By contrast, menstrual blood causes him to reject her in a way that she does not understand because it is her ‘beautiful wound’. Furthermore, she keeps blaming herself, as if she deserved the violence inflicted upon her for trying to have sex while menstruating. This episode contrasts with those in which Manuel and the other narrator enjoy her menstrual blood while they have sex. Manuel and Sergio show different behaviours towards menstruation, while both female narrators describe their menstrual blood as celebratory and empowering.

This episode between Francisca and Sergio illustrates the myth of the *vagina dentata*, that is, the myth of the castrating vagina, present in so many cultures and which has evolved adopting many variations, including cautionary tales, mythological stories and modern filmic versions (Segarra 2014: 62, 65; Rees 2015 [2013]: 42-51), and will be explored in Chapter 4. This myth concerns fear of the female genitals, which are compared with a mouth when they are seen as active (Segarra: 65). In other words, the equation of the vagina with a mouth presupposes that they are active elements able to eat a passive component, namely, within this dialectic, a penis and food. This idea of men’s fear of women is explored by Sau who, drawing on Celia Amorós and Rosalind Miles, argues that it comes from the dichotomy between nature and culture, where women are framed within the realm of the biological, the animal, and therefore as unpredictable, irrational and dangerous. This fear, as Sau puts it, ‘es el miedo de quien ha cimentado su seguridad y su solvencia, su identidad en suma, en la *falsa* inferioridad del Otro’ (2000 [1981]: 203). Sau uses Amorós’ ideas about oppression and says that ‘la opresión produce y mantiene por la fuerza los males que se atribuyen al oprimido, en virtud de los cuales se justificará que deba seguir estándolo (Sau 2000 [1981]: 203). Thus, in this scene of the novel we see the identification of

menstrual blood, sexual activity, danger (in the sense that female sexual agency ‘threatens’ the structures that maintain male domination) and use of force to combat what is considered a transgression. Sergio makes use of his force to reaffirm his superiority in terms of power within his relationship with Francisca.

Desire for the Menstrual Blood of the Other in Peri Rossi

Desire is the catalyst for Peri Rossi’s writing, as Susanna Ragazzoni puts it: ‘la obra artística nace de la diferencia entre la realidad y el deseo del artista [*sic*], es el resultado de esta reacción ante una realidad que no es la deseada’ (1983: 229). As Peri Rossi has said in an interview with Ragazzoni: ‘Para mí el erotismo y el escribir son dos cosas equivalentes’ (1983: 241). Consequently, given the fact that one of her main themes is desire and she writes in an ‘estado orgiástico’ (Ragazzoni 1983: 241), menstruation is a recurrent subject in her erotic texts.

Peri Rossi’s own persona adds a layer to the intricate play of identities and desires in her texts. Peri Rossi states in an interview with Dejbord that she is terrified of fixed identities because of their reductionism and because ‘implican la castración de muchos aspectos’ (1998: 229).²⁷ While in this case she is replying to a question about what ‘feeling Uruguayan’ means, in the context of other interviews and within the tone of her works, her answer could be applied more widely to gendered identities. She plays with gendered identities and presents desires and sexualities as fluid in a deliberate attempt to transform imaginaries. As Henseler notes, eroticism is a constant in Peri Rossi’s work that translates into an urge to ‘undermine pre-established norms of literary and political sexual control’ (2000: 481). Peri Rossi’s project of rethinking eroticism and, by extension, menstruation, is characterised by Butler’s notions about fantasy in *Undoing Gender*. According to Butler:

²⁷ The term ‘castración’ reflects Peri Rossi’s interest in psychoanalysis, a recurrent subject in her works.

Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home. (2004: 29)

Peri Rossi's erotic imaginaries create alternative scenarios —challenge notions of reality— through their repetition. Her mastery is to write about unmediated desires that destabilise canonical representations. Peri Rossi's project, as Filou points out, has a double function; on the one hand, these writings act 'as a liberating means for personal affirmation through the representation of desire' and on the other, they act 'as a way to combat the collective prohibitions of society' (2009: 21). According to Ana Corbalán, Peri Rossi adopts a queer standpoint —in Michel Warner's and Berthold Schoene's terms— in that she is interested in engaging with transgressions as a form of resistance to what is considered normal in society and to the arbitrariness of existing taboos (Corbalán 2008: 7). Similarly, my aim is to highlight that Peri Rossi, through her subversive representations of menstruation, develops an important critique of the invisible status of menstruation and its status as a taboo.²⁸ Peri Rossi's explorations of menstrual blood challenge the traditional cultural limits imposed on menstruation based on notions of dirtiness and shame, especially in relation to touching one's blood and lovemaking while menstruating, like Eltit's *Vaca sagrada*. In Peri Rossi's texts menstrual blood is conceptualised differently and allows us to imagine new possibilities that challenge these restrictive and patriarchal conceptions that consider women's bodies as unclean. The frequent allusion to menstruation enables us to see a pattern in her imaginary of eroticism. Talk of menstruation is triggered by certain circumstances, such as when she writes about sexual encounters (e.g. 'La destrucción'). Given this recurrent association, I argue that menstruation is the ultimate fetish in her erotic

²⁸ The Spanish advert for the 2014 Tampax Pearl's summer advertising campaign, 'Baño nocturno', perfectly illustrates the emphasis on the 'importance' of menstrual invisibility. Its last line, 'Con Tampax Pearl no hay reglas', mainly makes reference to hiding menstruation because, despite the fact that it plays with the idea of there being no rules while menstruating, the video shows a naked woman swimming at midnight, and there are no references whatsoever to menstruation in the advert. *Tampax Pearl* website.

imaginary. Despite the fact that Peri Rossi's menstrual representations seem detached from a political agenda I also argue that she aims at normalising desires. The importance of the author's libido is relevant as well; as she says in one interview with Susanna Ragazzoni: '[H]asta te diría que la libido funciona tanto para hacer el amor como para escribir, hasta tal punto que me doy cuenta [...] que en los períodos en que escribo mucho tengo menos actividad sexual' (1983: 241). For Peri Rossi, lovemaking and writing seem mutually exclusive; which does not seem surprising given the obsessive nature of her writing through the repetition of topics and images. It is notable that such an important part of her erotic poetry revolves around menstruation; it can even be seen as an obsession. In relation to the ways in which Peri Rossi depicts obsessions in her texts, Kalloniati, drawing on notions from Prosser and analysing interviews with Peri Rossi, notes that the author suggests that the act of writing is a sort of psychoanalytical process with healing properties for the transgendered split self (2005: 52). Such repetitions in her writing make us think of insecurity, loss, and trauma. There is a lack of autonomy in Peri Rossi's narrators; they are incessantly in search of the lover and they show their dependency on the lover and her menstruation. By contrast, Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* adopts a completely different approach because the narrator is described as autonomous.

The repetition of some themes, such as transgressive eroticism, abjection and orality, in the selected works parallels the 'compulsive nature of many of Peri Rossi's protagonists' (Filou 2009: 41). Such repetitions, or literary obsessions, could be seen as a strategy of normalisation, that is, as if through the repetition of certain elements, such as the rewriting of the objects of desire which include menstrual blood, the theme moves from invisibility to the domain of the intelligible and representable.²⁹ Another way of considering these repetitions is as a tactic to point out the way exclusions work within a patriarchal and

²⁹ Pertusa-Seva, analysing lesbian texts such as those of Peri Rossi and Tusquets, highlights that their emphasis on naturalising lesbian relationships in their texts is a conscious effort to make lesbian love and sexuality acceptable (2005: 132). I argue that Peri Rossi develops the same tactic with her treatment of menstrual blood.

heteronormative society, and, therefore, in the context of my research, as a way of filling the void in menstrual representations and trying to redress the balance of its invisibility in cultural products.³⁰

Desire is not only a central subject in Peri Rossi's texts but is also theorised through the voices of some of her narrators. In the short story 'La destrucción o el amor' the narrator postulates that depression is the effect of a lack of desire: '[l]a depresión no es una enfermedad del alma, como creen algunos: es la enfermedad del cuerpo que ya no desea, que no sabe qué desear, que ha sido privado por alguna razón del objeto de su deseo' ('La destrucción': 152). The narrator of the short story 'La destrucción o el amor' resembles the narrator in *Solitario de amor* because his life revolves exclusively around the desire for his lover: 'Me parece innecesaria cualquier palabra que no tenga que ver con el deseo' ('La destrucción': 143). For him, desire implies a total focus on bodies ('La destrucción': 144) and as a consequence, he is only interested in his lover's body. This exclusive focus on the lover's body is analogous to the narrator's fixation in *Solitario de amor* and comparable to the author's erotic texts as a whole. Moreover, her own view of thinking about writing as inseparable from desire supports the central role that desire and eroticism have in Peri Rossi.³¹ Similarly, Eltit 'never loses sight of the specificity of the female body' in her works (Green 2007: 24), and the exploration of desires is a central theme in her novel. However, their approaches are different especially in regards to the narrator's anatomy. In Peri Rossi's works, the narrators and poetic voices are in a permanent state of lack; their identity is defined by the lover and their desire is only fulfilled by the lover's body. By contrast, in Eltit's novel the narrator is freer, making use of her own body to fulfil her desires.

³⁰ It is important to highlight that Peri Rossi is a pioneer in her uninhibited descriptions and her treatment of menstruation.

³¹ Peri Rossi shares the notion of *jouissance*, taken from French feminist writers such as Cixous, according to which repressed pleasures are re-experienced and are the source of women's writing (Jones 1981: 248). This notion of *jouissance* was influenced by the works of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes (*plaisir*) and Jacques Derrida; see Jane Gallop's 'Beyond the *Jouissance* Principle' (1984).

The desire for the visceral body enables readers to look at menstruation from an erotic point of view and also aestheticises what is seen as abject. The new erotic imaginaries that focus on flesh and fluids such as menstruation in *Solitario de amor* challenge the perception of what is and is not desirable within the social imaginary. The collective imaginary of love and its symbolism is displaced by the realm of the physiological, with descriptions that linger on anatomical portrayals and vocabulary typical of medical jargon: ‘No amo su piel, sino su epidermis’ (*Solitario*: 15). These (bio)descriptions and this emphasis on an almost medical approach to bodies are also found in other texts by Peri Rossi.

Some scholars have not seen a new imaginary of desire in this description. For example, according to Henseler ‘[n]ot all descriptions of Aída’s body are erotic’ (2000: 488), and for Corbalán, Peri Rossi shows what Corbalán perceives to be disgusting aspects of passion through her visceral descriptions (2008: 10). I however argue that Peri Rossi is eroticising the internal body and its secretions, and therefore non-normative (or unfamiliar) body parts, in terms of objects of desire. Peri Rossi reformulates objects of desire to disturb hegemonic imaginaries which are taken for granted, and to offer new descriptions that inscribe concepts previously unexplored at least in Hispanic literary texts. Menstruation plays, thus, an important role within this new imaginary of love and eroticism that centres on the biological and anatomical female body. Corbalán also highlights the visceral focus in Peri Rossi’s works; in this case she analyses two of the short stories of *Desastres íntimos* (1997): ‘Peri Rossi muestra explícitamente el aspecto físico más desagradable de la pasión al resaltar las vísceras y al destacar la belleza del cuerpo en su estado más primitivo’ (2008: 10). However, Corbalán fails to acknowledge the bigger picture of what these biological descriptions entail within Peri Rossi’s erotic texts, namely, the questioning of normative desires and practices, and taboos. Graciela Mántaras Loedel also highlights Peri Rossi’s attraction towards biological processes and her exploration of corporeal textures, ‘lo

húmedo, lo carnoso, lo cálido, lo suave' in her erotic texts (Mántaras Loedel 1995: 36), but she does not apply this to *Solitario de amor*, a text concerned exclusively with the exploration of these corporeal textures.

Peri Rossi's *Solitario de amor* is extremely visceral not only due to the fixation on body parts and fluids, but also because of descriptions that play, at times, with an aesthetics of disgust and abjection: 'amo [...] la sinuosa bilis que vomita cuando está cansada [...] los pulmones envenenados por el humo [...] la espléndida y sonora orina de caballo que cae como cascada de sus largas y anchas piernas abiertas' (15-16). In this passage, the cultural meanings applied to body parts, such as lungs or fluids like bile and urine, are magnified in terms of disgust by the context in which they are described. These body components are regarded as elements of desire in this novel, and thus, these descriptions offer a subversive approach to the topic of desire and normativity. In addition, the context in which they are depicted, that is, in states such as vomiting, urinating or being poisoned, increases their potential as elements of disgust. Eltit also deploys an aesthetic of disgust in some passages of *Vaca sagrada*, describing bodies in a grotesque fashion (with flaky skin or 'escamas', 126), and suffering extreme transformations in terms of weight (128), in disgusting situations (sleeping on the floor with vomit, 16, eating rotten food and worms, 89) or subjected to physical abuse and mutilation (36). While Peri Rossi eroticises everything and aims at naturalising desires and fetishes, Eltit uses disgust mainly in the context of criticism of power relations and social control, and not within the context of eroticism. However, this interpretation is contingent upon her readers' interpretation of her erotic passages with menstruation as disgusting or not.

Conceptualising menstruation within this framework of disgust is problematic because it means continuously placing menstrual blood in the realm of the disgusting, but not to do so would erase its interconnectedness with social, cultural and religious values. Thus, I do not want to say that a body part or the description of a bodily process causes

disgust; I emphasise that within our cultural framework disgust might arise from certain representations. Similar emotions might arise from certain representations of menstruation, or indeed every representation, depending on the reader's disgust threshold. Thus, cultural meanings influence our perception and interpretation of bodies and processes as disgusting or not. Of her use of the term 'aesthetic disgust', Korsmeyer states that she does 'not mean disapproval or rejection but rather an emotion appropriately aroused by certain works of art—and by other objects as well—that signals appreciative regard and understanding' (2011: 4). According to Korsmeyer, the use of ambiguous representations based on a certain aesthetics of disgust 'offers an opportunity to both acknowledge and interrupt disgust reactions—which is to say that it allows us to feel disgust in order to interrogate its sources' (2011: 30). Such a reading is shared by other scholars, such as Michelle Meagher in her analysis of Jenny Saville's paintings of distorted women. Meagher argues that Saville's works offer 'the opportunity to admit to and interrogate one's own disgust' (2003: 29). Thus, representations that trigger emotions such as disgust can be used for political ends (Korsmeyer 2011: 5), and are a weapon widely used by artists.³² Disgust tells us 'about the way our social orders are structured and how we variously inhabit those social orders' (Meagher 2003: 32), and as a consequence, we can ask why certain images (or images placed in a different context from the expected) provoke such emotions. Typically, such strong emotions are triggered by 'unregulated bodies' and 'threatening bodies', that is, fat, disabled, certain kinds of body hair on women, the exhibition of body fluids, and individuals that actively display their bodies with agency when they are 'not supposed to'.³³

³² Contemporary art is rich in examples of 'aesthetics of disgust'; for example, Andrés Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) and the works by the collective ASCO, Marina Abramovic, Orlan, Leonor Fini, Carolee Schneemann, Rocío Boliver, Regina José Galindo, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta and Jenny Saville, among others. See Irene Ballester Buigues' *El cuerpo abierto: representaciones extremas de la mujer en el arte contemporáneo* (2012).

³³ A recent controversy in the art world exemplifies this last category of interpreting female sexual agency as threatening. The painting in question, *Portrait of Ms Ruby May* by Leena McCall, was removed from the Society of Women Artists' 153rd Annual Exhibition in 2014 for being considered 'disgusting' and 'pornographic'. The painting shows a woman, standing, gazing defiantly at the audience with her clothes unbuttoned revealing her pubic hair. The woman is saying through her pose that she is in control of her

Menstrual blood is part of the repertoire of fetishes (as we have seen, understood as stimulus with the ability to trigger sexual arousal) explored in Peri Rossi's works.³⁴ In the short story 'Fetichistas S.A.' the relationship between subject and object of desire is explored:

la relación que uno establece con su fetiche (sean las medias de nylon negras, las campanas de una máquina llena de luces o un vaso de whisky) es siempre personal, intransferible, solitaria e intensa. Esa relación es lo más íntimo que tenemos, el lugar más auténtico de nuestra subjetividad. ('Fetichistas S.A.': 11)

Scholars have not tended to see menstrual blood in Peri Rossi's texts as a fetish. In *Solitario de amor* 'desire crosses the borders of prohibition to expose itself as such: as pure desire for a female body' (Henseler 2000: 483), and it is explored in unconventional ways, as an object of desire and a fluid of envy, reversing the Freudian notion of penis envy, which refers to his belief in women's sense of lack.³⁵ On the contrary, although offering nothing radically new, regarding menstruation as the object of envy, Peri Rossi shifts the perspective and points out the arbitrariness of considering the penis as the model.

The importance of the role of menstruation in the novel is reflected in the parallelisms between the psychological journey of the narrator, in terms of his feelings towards Aída, and the way menstruation is portrayed within the narrative. There is a change in terms of his feelings that grows in intensity to surreal proportions. The description of his feelings goes from love: 'amo [...] la oxidada sangre menstrual' (*Solitario*: 15) to obsession

body and sexuality; a statement still seen as a danger to society, given the reaction it caused. See Rowan Pelling, 'How is this painting "pornographic" and "disgusting"?' *Guardian*, 8 July 2014 [online].

³⁴ *Desastres íntimos* looks into varied fetishes in some of the short stories: 'Fetichistas S.A.' explores the fetishes of a group of people who get together to talk about their objects of desire: masculine Adam's apples, bras, left-footed shoes and strabismic eyes. In 'La ballena Blanca' the focus is on overweight women, and in 'Extrañas circunstancias' BDSM practices are the focuses.

³⁵ Freud considered that the penis was an object of envy for women. According to this view the girl has a castration complex because she notices that she lacks a penis and as a consequence she feels inferior. For Freud in this situation there are three paths that can be followed: 1) development of an intellectual career or narcissism that ends up in neurosis, 2) adopting a masculine role and therefore choosing a homosexual object of desire, or 3) the 'normal' path: take the father as the object (Oedipus complex) and development of a 'normal' femininity – passive and maternal, that is, the desire to have a penis is translated into the desire to have a child (Adánez 2013: 21-3).

with Aída's body and subsequent isolation from the world: 'mi mirada se alimenta [...] de tus menstruaciones dolorosas' (28). Then, it moves to the desire to possess Aída through drinking and eating her fluids and flesh: 'sólo quiero alimentarme de Aída, de sus jugos, de su carne, de sus secreciones [...] de sus emanaciones' (60), 'Bebo de ti [...] la sangre menstrual' (71). Later, the narrator wants to become one with Aída's body and be her menstruation: 'soy tu menstroo sangrante' (146), and finally, when Aída splits up with him, he expresses his loss through longing for her menstrual blood: '[a]nhelo lamer tu endometrio. Anhelo tu sangre menstrual, brillante y roja' (155). It is necessary to point out that in these passages menstruation is not the sole fluid of desire; the narrator craves other fluids such as bile, urine, vomit and tears, and also other features related to Aída, like phobias, orgasms, fears ('mi mirada se alimenta de tus fobias y de tus temores, de tus duelos y de tus deseos', 28). However, despite the fact that menstruation is not a unique fluid, body part or personal feature of desire, menstruation appears constantly and not only in *Solitario de amor*, but also in other texts as this chapter shows.

Multiple parallelisms can be drawn between this novel and the short story 'La destrucción o el amor' particularly in terms of the evocative connotations that Peri Rossi confers on menstrual blood. This short story is another exploration of lust and sexuality that contains all the ingredients present in *Solitario de amor*. These two texts share the unstoppable and visceral desire for the lover's body, references to the maternal body, sons (and daughters?) as intruders who kill relationships and force lovers into exile,³⁶ and the pornographic way of looking at the body as if it were food. Moreover, the identity of the male narrator is destabilised through references that play with ambiguity, analogous to *Solitario de amor*. In this case, the passage containing this ambiguity makes reference to an imagined lesbian sex encounter between the lovers that includes an image that could be read in terms of eroticism of menstrual blood:

³⁶ The use of the masculine term ('hijos') as universal in Spanish does not enable us to distinguish whether 'hijos' includes daughters or not. The distinction is relevant in this case because of Peri Rossi's engagement with psychoanalysis.

La esperaré con una fuente de fresas rojas que haré estallar sobre su cuerpo para que sangren. Alguna tendrá el tamaño exacto de su clítoris. Será como un acto homosexual: clítoris contra clítoris, el zumo rodará por los labios hinchados de su sexo.³⁷ ('La destrucción': 148-9)

The image of the red juices of the fruit resemble blood, which can be compared with menstrual blood when we reach the final part of the passage and see that the red fluid runs down over her labia. This (menstrual) fantasy highlights a frequent link in Peri Rossi's imaginary: menstruation in her erotic texts is linked to violent practices (real or imagined by narrators or poetic voices), or subject to violent language (not meaning that the practice itself is violent). In the passage of the strawberries both the description of the red fruits exploding on the body of the lover and the use of the verb 'to bleed' evoke violence. Poems of *Estrategias del deseo* also include the violent nuance when they directly or indirectly refer to menstruation within the context of eroticism. In the collection *Estrategias del deseo* the poems that depict menstruation include a violent component.³⁸ This violence is manifest in different ways: the comparison of sex with hunting and cannibalism ('El amor y el odio sólo pueden terminar en la deglución del otro', 'La destrucción: 146), mentioning menstruation within the context of terrorist attacks, making reference to red meats that bleed ('Exaltación libidinal': 49), or even just for the expression of exalted desire: 'en el grito vertiginoso | de la jauría de tus vísceras' ('De aquí': 33). Similarly, the language of the descriptions where menstruation appears in the context of sexual practices in *Vaca sagrada* also includes a violent component: 'Manuel pedía que le contagiara mi sangre [...] Manuel aparecía sangrando' (*Vaca sagrada*: 25). For both authors sexuality and violence are

³⁷ The use of strawberries, apart from colour similarity with blood, could also allude to the French expression 'c'est la saison des fraises' that refers to menstruation; see Anon., 'Top Euphemisms for "Period" by Language', *Hello from Clue*, 11 March 2016 [online].

³⁸ The topics are: the process of writing, the muses and their agency, the female body as word, fear of the lover's breast cancer, loneliness, waiting for the lover, romantic dates, illnesses such as pneumonia and infections, how time passes, smoking, long-distance relationships and how much they cost, the sense of being foreign, Barcelona, unsatisfied desire, and the terrorists attacks of 9-11 and 11-M, in New York (2001) and Madrid (2004) respectively.

intricately connected, and menstruation provides both pleasure (i.e. represented as erotic fluid and/or fetish) and pain through the images that the descriptions about menstruation evoke.³⁹

Menstruation belongs to the repertoire of Peri Rossi's sexual fetishes in her texts as showed in the selected passages of *Solitario de amor* and 'La destrucción o el amor'. The role of abjection in the novel and the relevance of menstruation as a medium in Peri Rossi's project of challenging patriarchal discourse and taboos, are areas which have not been sufficiently, if at all, explored, as has been highlighted. Moreover, the emphasis on the material body is a key element in the creation of a repertoire of real bodies that defy sanitised representations of women's bodies and opens up the space for the eroticism of menstrual blood. Butler's notion of 'livable lives' (2004: 8) and her approach to fantasy are useful concepts with which to tackle Peri Rossi's social criticism through poetic language, and erotic, occasionally, surreal narrative. The author brings about symbolic transformations, especially in the domain of social constructions, to counteract rigidity and reductionism, strategies that can be seen in the treatment of menstruation as a fluid of desire. This is why Butler's notion of 'livable lives' is helpful, because the ultimate aim of her criticism is to 'open up the possibility of different modes of living; [...] to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation' (2004: 4).⁴⁰

³⁹ This connection between sexuality and violence/death is central to Georges Bataille's works (e.g. *L'Érotisme*, 1957, *Les larmes d'Éros*, 1961) because of his conceptualisation of sexual acts as acts of violence which result from a loss of boundaries of the body, as Benjamin Noys points out (2000: 83).

⁴⁰ Livable is a key concept in Butler's *Undoing Gender*, where she questions what makes a life bearable. She gives examples of the 'norms and conditions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself' bearing in mind that '[w]hat is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some' (2004: 8). Butler continues exploring the concept of livable life in *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) in the context of post-9/11, and broadens the subject by questioning what a grievable death is, and what counts as human.

Orality as Paradigm of Extreme Desire

The descriptions of sexual encounters with menstruation in Peri Rossi's texts generally involve an oral component, as we have seen in the passages that mention menstrual blood in *Solitario de amor*. This recurrent convergence of menstruation and gratification through orality brings us back to Kristeva. Kristeva identifies the categories of food, body discharges (or 'waste') and signs of sexual difference as the axes around which individual and social taboos are built (Kristeva 1982). Peri Rossi joins these categories with the use of menstrual blood in some of her texts where the lover's menstrual blood is drunk as part of the erotic experience. The link between orality and menstruation also appears in *Vaca sagrada*, although the approach is different for two reasons. On the one hand, the narrator of *Vaca sagrada* refers to her own menstrual blood, unlike Peri Rossi's narrators and poetic voices. On the other, the desire to drink menstrual blood appears as an idea or fantasy, not as a fact, which as we have pointed out, marks the limits of the transgression at the same time as the transgression is being affirmed.

Peri Rossi's descriptions of sexual encounters involving menstruation are at times intertwined with cannibalistic activities that represent extreme desire to the extent of consuming the lover ('no quiero ingerir, introducir en mi cuerpo sustancias ajenas a Aída', *Solitario*: 60; '[c]omérmela y amarla es todo uno. Sobarla y saborearla', 'La destrucción': 149). Peri Rossi's recurrent use of cannibalism and proliferation of bodily fluids within the context of sexual practices not only makes reference to Wittig's characterisation of intense lesbian desire in *Le corps lesbien* through descriptions that include 'choking, bleeding/wounding, and the proliferation of bodily fluids' (Vassallo 2007: 57-8),⁴¹ but also to the association in popular culture of lesbian and vampire, who are represented as

⁴¹ E.g.: 'L'éclat de tes dents ta joie ta douleur la vie secrète de tes viscères ton sang tes artères tes veines tes habitacles caves tes organes tes nerfs leur éclatement leur jaillissement la mort la lente décomposition la puanteur la dévoration par les vers ton crâne ouvert, tout lui sera également insupportable' (Wittig 1973: 7).

‘sexually aggressive women’ (Creed 1993: 59).⁴² Moreover, as Creed points out, ‘the female vampire’s blood-sucking is equivalent to oral sex’ (1993: 69). Peri Rossi does not use the figure of the vampire as such but her representations of extreme desire univocally associated with oral sex and menstrual blood, in conjunction with her focus on lesbianism (and sexually fluid characters) bring these connections to mind.

In Peri Rossi’s texts, cannibalism is explored in detail in the short story ‘La destrucción o el amor’ where it is defined in the voice of the homodiegetic narrator as: ‘la ingestión por la boca de aquello que amamos o de aquello que odiamos, para poseerlo definitivamente’ (‘La destrucción’: 147). The narrator justifies his desire to eat his lover because of his incapacity to reproduce; the only way he can experience the feeling of containing a human being is through eating: ‘Yo que, como hombre, no puedo dividirme, ni multiplicarme, ni albergar a otro, sólo puedo aspirar, como macho, a comerme otro cuerpo, a aniquilarlo: no me ha sido dada la reproducción’ (‘La destrucción’: 151). Again, this passage highlights the idea of lack and nostalgia present in Peri Rossi’s erotic texts. This notion of incorporating the lover also appears in *Solitario de amor*, where the narrator wants to dissolve the borders between self and other through incorporating firstly the lover through drinking her fluids and second, being incorporated into his lover’s womb, emulating the time when Aída was pregnant. However, despite the fact that desire is exemplified through the idea of incorporation in both ‘La destrucción’ and *Solitario de amor*, these texts have different connotations. In ‘La destrucción’ desire is violent in the sense that the narrator-protagonist’s desire is directed towards the destruction of the lover. In *Solitario de amor* the narrator aims finally to be incorporated by the lover, so he does not want to destroy the other. Lindenbaum, drawing on Glasse and Conklin, notes that in some kinds of

⁴² For literary criticism on female and lesbian vampires see Paulina Palmer *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999); Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (1994); Sue Ellen-Case, ‘Tracking the Vampire’ in Ruth Bienstock Anolik, ed., *Horri-fying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature* (2007). Furthermore, the interpretation of the legend of the vampire as a symbolic story about menstruation or menarche is found in works such as Shuttle and Redgrove (1978) and Creed’s chapter ‘Woman as Vampire’ in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993).

endocannibalism, the type that Peri Rossi alludes to in this last example of the novel, the ingestion of body parts or the whole body is an act of affection (Lindenbaum 2004: 478). Some of the selected poems that also explore the oral and erotic potential of menstrual blood and therefore, the question of assimilating parts of the lover's body, deal with the religious imaginary of transubstantiation, that is the Catholic doctrine that the elements of the Communion are the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, and the assimilation of the lover's blood, which in Catholicism can be seen as a cannibalistic act (Lindenbaum 2004: 480).

The poems 'De aquí a la eternidad' and 'Comunión' re-appropriate religious iconography and replace it with lovemaking images, and thus, inscribe women's blood into both the realm of eroticism and the realm of the sacred: 'consagrando tu sangre menstrual | elevando el cáliz de tu vientre' ('De aquí...': 33). In 'De aquí a la eternidad' the comparison is between the act of lovemaking, orgasm and the death of Jesus, and in 'Comunión' with Catholic Holy Communion, which is considered as collective action that represents the union of believers with God (Gómez Navarro 2006: 503) through the act of consuming the flesh and blood of Christ to reach grace and salvation. Peri Rossi describes in this poem a symmetrical operation which parallels the Catholic Communion because the two lovers give their menstrual blood to each other: 'bebí la sangre de tus entrañas | la sangre que manaba entre tus piernas [...] Y luego, | te di a beber mi propia sangre' ('Comunión': 11). This reciprocal act is an act of love, a 'sello sagrado' that represents sorority —'la hermandad del amor | y del género' ('Comunión': 11)— and which can also be compared with the blood oath of becoming blood sisters. Here, Peri Rossi defies religious notions of menstrual blood as impure and homosexuals as deviants, and redresses the gender imbalance through the creation of an alternative imaginary, an alternative order built around women, their blood and their own desires, as well as ideas of sorority and reciprocity. These poems offer a sharp criticism of the androcentrism present in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The fixation with menstrual blood and orality enables us to interpret the poems ‘Barnanit VI’ and ‘La sádica’ (2004) as scenes of oral sex that involve menstrual blood, despite the fact that menstruation is not mentioned. This reading is made possible because menstruation is normalised within Peri Rossi’s imaginary of eroticism. In these poems there is a comparison between lovemaking and animals devouring their prey. The use of the image of the bloody jaws symbolises the orgasmic experience caused by oral sex between menstruating lovers: ‘y tú te volvías | yo me volvía | en la danza inacabable de las nupcias | con las fauces embadurnadas de sangre’ (‘Barnanit VI’: 78), ‘regresa de la cacería con las fauces ensangrentadas | y restos de carne entre los dientes. | Ha comido | ha gozado’ (‘La sádica’: 79). In addition, as we have seen, the short story ‘La destrucción o el amor’, which is a cannibalistic fantasy in itself, includes the description above of an imagined sex encounter between two lesbian lovers and a bowl of strawberries that can be read in terms of the eroticism of menstrual blood (‘La destrucción’: 148-9). The same mixed imaginary appears in the poem ‘Exaltación libidinal’, in *Estrategias del deseo*, where the poetic voice walks around Barcelona missing the lover in every corner of the city. The poetic voice imagines pleasurable situations with the lover which include two scenes that, once more, manifest this conjunction of menstrual blood and food:

Ah, no estábamos ahí
 mirándonos intensamente
 susurrándonos obscenidades
 mientras el mâtret de pato sangraba
 como tu concha
 concha marina
 concha de amar del mar
 [...]
 comiéndote una crepe de chorreante mermelada
 tan roja como tu sangre menstrual. (‘Exaltación libidinal’: 48-49)

In Peri Rossi’s imaginary of menstrual blood and orality the ingestion of the lover implies the dissolution of borders between self and other, which parallels her project of collapsing

boundaries in terms of exploring desire and taboos. At the same time, this correspondence mirrors what we identified as consideration of menstruation as abject, that is, as that which does not respect borders (Kristeva 1982: 4). But also echoes Kristeva's ideas about pollution by food according to which '[w]hen food appears as a polluting object, it does so as oral object only to the extent that orality signifies a boundary of the self's clean and proper body' (1982: 75).

If for Kristeva the categories of food, body discharges and signs of sexual difference are the axes around which individual and social taboos are built, Peri Rossi unites all of them with the use of menstrual blood in these texts. It is as if menstruation were the medium through which to challenge other taboos in addition to the menstrual taboo itself.

Chapter 3

Traumatic Periods in Diamela Eltit and Andrea Jeftanovic

Experiencing menstruation as traumatic is not uncommon among menstruators given cultural associations between this natural process and ideas of shame and embarrassment. This chapter explores the ways in which Diamela Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* (1991) and Andrea Jeftanovic's *Escenario de guerra* (2000) use menstruation as a vehicle to explore trauma. However, their approach does not merely consider menstruation from an individual perspective. Instead, both novels also use menstrual blood as the main motif and the axis of the novels to examine violent contexts in which death is part of everyday life: the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), Yugoslavia during World War II (1941-1945) and the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Here menstrual blood is the fluid that channels trauma. These two texts use the bodies of the narrators, and particularly menstruation, as metaphors through which the narrators experience their connection with the suffering of people they love. However, menstrual blood is not the only blood represented in the novels. The recurrence of blood in general terms is significant because it is represented as gendered (as we also saw in Chapter 2) and thus is used to foreground body politics (in the same way menstruation is brought to the fore to break up the silence around this experience). Both novels avoid the utilitarian views present in the traditional association of menstruation with reproduction, and instead, Eltit and Jeftanovic present menstruation as a place of solidarity, memory and mobilisation.¹ Furthermore, this chapter engages with the focus on and popularity of studies of trauma in literature started in the last two decades (Vickroy 2001, Kerler 2013, Caruth 1993, 1995, Marder 2006, Luckhurst 2008, Hirsch 2008). This approach frames the analysis of the novels and the chapter attempts to show that *Escenario de guerra* is an exercise in trauma theory in which menstruation is used to illustrate the cyclical nature of trauma.

¹ As we saw in Chapter 2, the main resignification in *Vaca sagrada* is the consideration of menstruation as erotic fluid.

The eroticism of menstrual blood, as discussed in Chapter 2, is not the only way menstruation is portrayed in *Vaca sagrada*. In this chapter menstruation is analysed in relation to state and interpersonal violence. Thus, menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* represents not only pleasure, but also life and death. The fact that menstruation is explored in the novel through multiple perspectives mimics the diversity of meanings attributed to it. Anthropologically, menstrual blood is considered as a sign of pollution by many cultures (Douglas 1984: 121-2), euphemisms are not infrequent, and the hiding of it is a common response, although it is also a sign for celebration in other contexts (e.g. when it is celebrated as a rite of passage and in cases when a pregnancy is not wanted). This dilemma is very clear in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* where she states that female blood is a 'fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together' (1982: 95). Cynthia Tompkins states that the taboo of menstrual blood is subverted in *Vaca sagrada* thanks to the 'juxtaposition of contradictory options' (2006: 120). However, what makes *Vaca sagrada* subvert the taboos on menstruation is not the presence of ambiguities—because menstruation is a web of contradictions *par excellence*—but their very radical portrayal along with their allegorical use.

The exploration of menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* and *Escenario de guerra* is multi-layered because it links the personal experience with a wider context. For both authors menstruation is the key process through which to explore the intermingling of private and public. Moreover, the authors not only transform the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' into 'the political is personal', but they also collapse both terms into one another. This blend of the political and the personal is exemplified through Grosz's model of the Moebius strip which she uses to describe the impossibility of thinking about body and mind in dualistic terms, that is, as separate entities (1994: xii).²

² The Moebius strip refers to 'the inverted three-dimensional figure eight' which enables to see 'the inflection of mind into body and body into mind' (Grosz 1994: xii).

Despite the fact that both novels use menstruation with a common purpose, that is, to link the personal and the political, the approaches to menstruation are different in terms of the way in which the narrators (who are also the protagonists) refer to their periods. The differences in language, which will be discussed later in the chapter, enable us to see the narrators' diverse perceptions of menstruation and their bodies. Their approaches are a reflection of the way in which the central themes of attachment and detachment are explored in the novel.

As seen in Chapter 2 Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* illustrates concepts of French feminists in their theories of language and the body and the feminism of difference, which emerged in order to re-evaluate the female body and those characteristics traditionally associated with femininity, such as empathy, cooperation, care, and sensitivity, in opposition to the characteristics associated with masculinity, which are considered universal. In this sense, as Mary Green points out, Eltit 'never loses sight of the specificity of the female body' in her works (2007: 24), and the same can be applied to Jeftanovic's novel. In addition, the authors aim, through the 'production of symbolic and cultural capital to construct subjectivity from the position of a female subject' (Olea 1995: 198). Moreover, they enmesh the female body in the broader context of traumatic (and public) experiences.

These two novels are examples of the way in which menstruation is used as a metaphor to talk about collective traumas, in the way Betina Kaplan describes in *Género y violencia en la narrativa del Cono Sur 1954-2003*: 'el cuerpo de la mujer se constituye como una metáfora a ser narrada como manifestación de la experiencia colectiva y, en particular, de los regímenes políticos represivos cuya marca lleva inscrita' (2007: abstract).³ We will go on to explore how Kaplan's statement summarises the use of the female body and menstruation in the two novels selected for analysis. Menstruation in both novels is used to explore traumatic events which not only affect the narrators themselves but also the wider

³ Shu-li Chang also analyses the way contemporary women's narratives make use of private traumas as allegories for other collective traumas (2004: 106).

community around them, such as family members, the exiled, the victims of war, and the ‘detenidos-desaparecidos’.⁴ Therefore, this chapter also engages with Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, which refers to how the memory of traumatic events is transferred between people from different generations who experienced them to people who did not through oral and written narratives, and visual media such as family photographs. The transmission of traumatic memories between generations is observed in *Escenario de guerra* and this process is embodied in the protagonist’s menstruation because her menstrual blood is the element that connects her (Tamara) and her father, via trauma. Interestingly, Hirsch explains postmemory in terms of a “‘bleed” from one generation to the next’ (2012: 34). The image of bleeding is used in both novels, and, unlike Hirsch, I interpret it literally. In addition, *Escenario de guerra* is an exercise in trauma theory, aiming to display narrative devices that mimic the effects of trauma. *Vaca sagrada* is not an exercise in trauma theory but, similarly, menstrual blood connects the narrator and the ‘detenidos-desaparecidos’, although the transmission of trauma (and blood) between individuals does not necessarily take place between different generations. Moreover, the importance of menstruation within the plots is supported by the use of cyclical structural elements. In both novels the presence of cycles is a distinctive feature expressed formally and through imagery and plot.

This chapter starts by analysing the content and structure of the two novels. The focus then shifts to trauma and the ways in which trauma theory enables us to interpret narrative devices used in the novels, demonstrating that there is a strong link between menstrual blood and trauma and that blood is used to foreground body politics. The next section looks at the recurrent subject of somatisation present in both texts and the way in which the narrators use their bodies to connect with the suffering of people they love. But menstruation is not only present as a vaginal fluid; rather, as I argue in the following

⁴ The category ‘detenido-desaparecido’ was created in Chile by the AFDD, Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos, and refers to those people who disappeared after being detained by the state and whose location is still unknown (Díaz and Gutiérrez Ruiz 2008: 190). The AFDD was created at the end of 1974 by women who ‘sought to make a collective, public response to the acts of terror perpetrated by the State’ (Nelson 2002: 51).

section, there are episodes of vicarious menstruation in both texts employed for different ends: in Eltit's novel it is used to epitomise female empowerment and in Jeftanovic's novel to exemplify the way trauma affects the body. Both cases serve to underline the centrality of menstrual blood to the novels. Finally, the last section focuses on the endings of the novels, concluding that menstruation is a suitable metaphor and image for two circular stories in which the narrators have to abandon the traumatic loop in which they find themselves and confront their past in order to move forwards.

The Novels

Escenario de guerra is a combination of drama and diary with a fractured narrative that mimics the protagonist's identity and her relationships. The story is told from the perspective of the adult protagonist, Tamara, who recalls episodes from her childhood and describes the present day. Although the context of the novel is never explicitly mentioned, the events appear to take place during the early 1990s, coinciding with the Yugoslav wars and the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, since references to her father's age can be mapped onto these historical episodes. The self-reflective narrative, where the process of writing and remembering is explicitly showcased, draws on Jeftanovic's autobiographical references which add authenticity to the subject of the legacies of trauma.⁵

The novel explores the theme of memory, the effects of trauma on identities and their embodiment, and real and metaphorical migrations. It is a novel about trauma not only because almost every character has been affected by a certain traumatic event or by the consequences of traumatic events, but also for the way trauma is depicted formally in the narrative. *Escenario de guerra* is not linear; it is fragmented, mimicking the mental state of the homodiegetic narrator. The narrative is constructed through flashbacks and repetition of memories that continuously add new nuances and information to the storyline. However, the

⁵ Jeftanovic's father is Yugoslav-Serb and her mother is Jewish of Bulgarian origin (Cánovas Emhart and Sherman Filer 2008: 33).

narrative is never entirely completed, and the story in all its detail remains beyond our reach; for example, there is not a single reference to her parents' exile to Chile or how they experienced it. The narrative is also scattered with dreams and nightmares that normally include members of her family and herself. The whole novel is an exercise of memory as Tamara repeatedly recounts past experiences, offering different nuances every time a past episode is recreated. Memory is represented as flexible, and in constant change and re-creation. Images spring into Tamara's mind and she recalls things that happened in the past which apparently were forgotten, showing how the psyche influences memories through different devices such as amnesia or unconscious repression. In addition, she even feels that some episodes are taking place for a second time (122-3). Reality and imagination are interwoven. Tamara has to confront her and her parent's past, confront her fears, and find out what happened during the violent episodes in the country of her ancestors. She struggles to adapt to places and environments (people and even herself) until she has resolved these crucial questions.

The author is committed to showing culturally silenced bodily processes such as menstruation and re-appropriating them with a new symbolism, although the focus on menstruation in the novel is more a secondary factor than a theme in its own right. Menstruation itself (i.e. the experience of menstruation) is relegated to second place because it is focused on representing the effects of war. This deflection from the materiality of menstrual blood can act as a weapon, and as a shield. It is a weapon in that it confronts readers with a hidden and usually uncomfortable issue. It is a shield because depicting menstrual blood in allegorical terms (i.e. political violence and collective traumas) could be seen as a strategy to 'legitimise' the use of menstruation in the novel, rather than as a subject in its own right. By contrast, menstrual blood in *Vaca sagrada* is explored as a powerful experience in itself.

Eltit's postmodern narrative is neither direct nor linear and, although Eltit does not provide information about how to read the text, the reader must actively make connections to re-create the story, having the freedom and authority to choose how to read the text—for example, being able to omit passages only to focus on particular story lines. For Leónidas Morales, Eltit's work must be understood within the epistemological model of the rhizome developed by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Morales 2004: 12, 31, 47-50). In accordance with this model, Eltit follows a rhizomatic narrative equivalent to a net(work) where multiple points are crossed and interwoven. The novel is written both in first and third persons, and includes dialogues between and the thoughts of ambiguous characters which must be identified by the reader by cross-referencing throughout the novel. Identities are blurred and confusion with regards to the characters is common. Therefore, given this complexity, tracing a plot is not straightforward and even the intention of doing so could be seen as questionable precisely because of its postmodern nature: the reader has the freedom and authority to choose how to read the text, for example, being able to omit passages only to focus on particular storylines.

The Novels' Exploration of Trauma

Trauma theory enables us to understand structural elements of the novels, such as the prevalence of repetitions and cycles which allude to the effects of trauma. Both novels address the subject of trauma using menstruation as the main motif and both explore the way in which menstruation is used to represent how trauma is transmitted between individuals and generations. Taking studies of trauma as a framework this section analyses the narrative devices of Jeftanovic's novel in order to evaluate the text's engagement with such theories, as well as the way in which both novels use menstruation as an allegory of violence.

In *Escenario de guerra*, the structural elements that mimic the effects of trauma are the use of non-linear time, and the inclusion of dream-like episodes and flashbacks, and in

terms of language, there is a constant allusion to cycles and information is repeated. Thus, *Escenario de guerra* displays characteristic devices in literary trauma narratives (Kerler 2013, Vickroy 2001). Despite the fact that violence is an important theme in *Vaca sagrada* and that the novel also develops strategies shared by trauma narratives, such as non-linear time, oneiric episodes, and the use of an unreliable narrator (Kerler 2013: 97), Eltit's novel cannot be categorised solely in these terms. These devices are also characteristic of *Vaca sagrada*'s postmodern narrative, rather than simply an exercise in the articulation of trauma, and therefore, Eltit's use of menstruation is explored in relation to allegory.

Escenario de guerra is framed within multiple battlegrounds. There are different conflicts, both physical and internal, that continuously appear in the novel: intra-familial, inter- and intrapersonal struggles, war, and economic violence. The embodiment of trauma is depicted in multiple ways throughout the novel. Various characters have their own traumas which are presented in different ways: 'Mamá es atacada por enfermedades inéditas. Ella es la autora de sus nódulos inflamados; escribe sus desdichas *sobre su cuerpo*' (41, my emphasis). Her mother knits 'prendas deformes', such as 'un suéter sin cuello, una bufanda demasiado corta, un guante con cuatro dedos' (42), reflecting the troubled state of her psyche. This fact is repeated on two occasions to highlight her mother's trauma, and this is the manifestation of acting out: 'the tendency to repeat something compulsively' as the consequence of a trauma which is still very present in someone's life (LaCapra 2001: 142). Tamara's father is also a traumatised individual. The trauma of war has affected him in such a way that it is translated into a repulsion towards certain smells and images. The aversion towards the smell of excrement is highlighted in the novel, especially as an imaginary smell: 'lo atormenta ese olor que sólo existe en su mente' (22). This is because the smell of excrement he imagines reminds him of the war when he had to walk barefoot, having sold his shoes: 'Pisar las calles era pisotear los propios excrementos, los del vecino, los de los otros habitantes que viven con miedo. Un río coagulado de desechos y heces' (22).

Menstruation is another biological product that Tamara's father cannot tolerate because it reminds him of the blood spilled during the war. His aversion towards menstruation affects the way in which Tamara experiences her periods. When the young Tamara menstruates she feels guilty: 'La culpa me fluye entre las piernas' (38) because during her periods she is rejected by her father ('Esos días no me dirige la palabra', 37). For both, Tamara and her father, menstrual blood has a traumatic effect because it triggers traumatic memories. Tamara refuses to grow up because it involves having periods, and this has two effects. Firstly, her periods are experienced as alienating processes. Menstruation is nothing more than a biological duty: 'un trámite que mi cuerpo no olvida' (38). Second, she does not want to menstruate because this upsets and angers her father and she does not want to aggravate his torment. Tamara's father considers menstrual blood to be unbearable, as a reminder of the war. This is not because he explicitly recognises this but because Tamara realises that 'Yo sé que cuando sangro, papá piensa, sospecha, está seguro de que tengo algo que ver con el oficial del brazo alzado' (39). Because of his disgust, Tamara has internalised feelings of shame towards her menstrual blood. She thinks that her father believes she has hurt or killed somebody (37). Tamara projects her father's fears onto her body and that is why she starts to have visions of dead bodies when she menstruates (39). She recognizes her father's rage when she has her periods and she wants to free herself from the responsibility: 'No quiero ser portadora de una sangre que tiene que ver con la muerte de mi abuelo' (189). When she meets her uncle she fears that he will have a similar negative reaction towards her menstrual blood, and these worries trigger a series of thoughts and feelings from the past. The feeling of shame when she menstruates has not disappeared as time goes by and she reacts in the same way she used to when her father was infuriated: 'Bajo la cabeza, recojo las manos sobre mi falda y miro el piso' (39, 189).

The most prominent strategy foregrounding the way in which the characters are in a traumatic loop is the presence of cycles. The presence of cycles appears on multiple levels

such as plot, form, structure, and imaginary. This characteristic highlights the importance of trauma in the novel through the emulation of one of the ways in which the effects of trauma are experienced: repetition. In *Escenario de guerra* cycles appear through structure, recurrent images of menstruation as well as in multiple allusions to circular motifs and expressions indicative of the idea of cyclicity.⁶ The compulsive repetition of traumatic events, or acting out, adds another layer to the different motifs of cyclicity. The same happens to the structure: the novel is rounded because every aspect of the novel is interconnected, that is, everything alludes to the way in which trauma affects the characters, despite the fragmentation of the narrative. References to menstruation and blood in more general terms add another component of cyclicity to the novel, while menstrual symptoms, such as dizziness which is described as circular (not an unusual way of imagining dizziness or light-headedness), are another example of circularity. The fact that the narrator uses the adjective ‘circulares’ to describe dizziness is redundant but is nevertheless a deliberate attempt to emphasise the idea of cyclicity, which in this case is intimately linked to menstruation. Tamara’s menstrual cyclicity acts as a reminder of the terror during war and triggers Tamara’s father’s trauma. Tamara has interiorised that her periods are not welcome and that she has to stop them. Because of this, menstrual blood is magnified in her mind: ‘Sangro constantemente’ (38), ‘[sangro] [t]odos los lunes’ (37), giving the impression that her menstrual flow has an unusual pattern of repetition, a cycle which starts every Monday. Thus, her menses highlight the time loop in which she and her family seem to live. It is impossible that she bleeds every Monday, especially because she suggests that she menstruates five days a month, but nine times a year (38) and she also makes reference to occasions when ‘la sangre demora en llegar’ (38). Therefore it is this shocking image of her blood that recurs again and again in her mind from the perspective of an adult thinking about the past. Menstruation is trapped in its circularity; menstruation is a periodic reminder

⁶ For example: ‘migraciones redondas que después toman forma de espiral’ (49), ‘todo da vueltas’ (31), ‘[l]a marcó con un círculo para tenerla como horizonte’ (67), ‘migraciones en redondo’ (91, 93), ‘avanzamos en círculos concéntricos’ (155), ‘esta fuga circular’ (157), ‘ida y vuelta’ (201).

of hers and her father's unhealed wounds. Menstruation is, for Tamara, a traumatic experience despite the fact that it is a normal bodily function. However, the way in which this passage draws our attention to experiencing menstruation in distress recalls a common feeling for some people, for example, girls who think that their bodies are shameful or unclean or who feel that they will have to adapt to a hostile world, and transgender men for whom 'the presence of menstruation can be especially unwelcome' (Bobel 2010: 161). This passage in the novel reflects this common negative way of experiencing menstruation, and as Laura Brown puts it, attention must be drawn 'to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain' because for some people traumatic events 'do lie within the range of normal human experience' (Brown in Caruth 1995: 110).

As stated above Tamara's father's reactions towards her blood trigger negative feelings in how Tamara herself experiences her menstruation, which is illustrated in several ways. Firstly, menstruation connects trauma and cyclicity not only because Tamara and her father experience her periods in a traumatic way, but also because menstruation refers to a traumatic vicious circle from which they cannot escape. In Tamara's case trauma is dictated by biology, by her body, which is described as having its own agency. Moreover, this association of menstruation with trauma not only emphasises the fact that trauma reappears but also that it is a long-term process, just like menstruation within the context of menstruators' lives. Second, the trope of the cycle makes reference to the impossibility of leaving a state of permanent alienation and displacement. The protagonist is trapped in a destructive dynamic of the self fed by the consequences of her parents' traumatic past. Third, cycles are also represented by the repeated patterns of behaviour of the characters, the repetition of armed conflicts in the same geographical area, and the consequences of traumatic experiences and constant migration, which are rooted in the Jewish origin of Tamara's family and thus allude to the Jewish exile before, during and after World War II.

The family history of Tamara recalls the trope of the *Wandering Jew*, the figure in Hebrew literary tradition who wanders ‘through exile, doing penance for some act of wrongdoing, attempting to find his way back to the Jewish homeland’ (Potok 1998: 135). Tamara’s Jewish background is evident in one passage in which she reflects about her upbringing: different traditions and food at home to her peers, as well as the different language that was spoken between her parents (31).⁷ The trope of the *Wandering Jew* epitomises alienation, the feeling that characterises Tamara and her family, which is also exemplified in the forced journeys which are repeated in both generations. Firstly, Tamara implies that her parents were forced to emigrate due to war. In the case of her father it is clear that he emigrated when he was a child: ‘La marcha de papá de la mano de su madre escapando a un continente sin guerras’ (159), ‘Ahora papá nació en un país que ya no existe. Su nacionalidad es de fantasía [...] Su patria se ha fragmentado’ (170). Tamara’s mother’s case appears to be similar to her father’s, given the fact that during Yugoslavia during WWII, the Jewish population was subjected to genocide (Tomasevich 2001: 582-3) and forced into exile, but no information is given about her case. Notwithstanding this, Tamara never reflects on her mother’s childhood, that is, Tamara never imagines her mother during the war and never makes references to her origins or nationality. On the contrary, the war and exile are subjects which she clearly associates with her father. The different relationships that Tamara has with her parents have implications for the way she experiences menstruation: menstruation does not evoke solidarity between mother and daughter in this novel, as will be discussed later. Secondly, Tamara’s parents force her and her siblings to move from one house to another, mimicking their own exile during WWII. This process ultimately ends with the feeling of not belonging anywhere. The trope of the *Wandering Jew* is also reflected in the fact that Tamara spent her childhood moving to different houses, and this is evidenced in the first page of the novel: ‘Comienza la función de mi infancia. Sucesivos cambios de casa, no podemos anclarnos en ningún punto fijo’ (13). Economic

⁷ Cánovas Emhart and Sherman Filer (2008: 34-5) analyse the references to Tamara’s Jewish upbringing.

problems meant that her family had a nomadic existence. They were trapped in a spiral of poverty which did not let them settle, and which, again, emphasises the cyclical dynamic established in the novel. In this sense, Tamara's childhood means an endless restart; she never had a stable sense of progression, like the way she experiences her periods: as an ever-recurring duty, or curse in her case.

The fact that they are constantly forced to move houses is not the only factor causing disruption; the instability within the house also feeds Tamara's unease as her parents leave and return from time to time. This behaviour does not only occur during Tamara's childhood but also in her adulthood.⁸ This pendular behaviour shows that the family members cannot find their place, they cannot be together, nor completely isolated from each other; there is deep unease. The same happens to Tamara and her partner Franz: they split up, she goes away, they reconcile, they reunite, he disappears (and finally commits suicide). The repetition of these behaviours emphasises the multiple conflicts which affect Tamara and which have a permanent effect on her life.

Circular transatlantic journeys between Tamara's father's country of origin and Chile are a recurrent theme in the novel that represents the traumatic loop in which Tamara and her father find themselves. Before Franz's disappearance and suicide, he and Tamara embark on a one-way trip to Europe. This trip puts a definitive end to their relationship and they return to Chile. Thus, what seemed to be a one-way journey ends up being a round trip, creating another cycle which suggests the impossibility of escaping to a new place and starting a new life. Tamara repeats this circular trip to Europe, in this case travelling back to her father's home country after he dies. It is the return that her father never made: 'Siempre pensé que haría este viaje con papá' (187); she is closing the cycle by going back to where her father started his journey, and now it takes place after another war has ended.

⁸ As a child, Tamara's mother leaves but then returns, and when Tamara is an adult, her mother goes to live with her and later with Adela, Tamara's stepsister. When her parents decide to live in different places and Tamara is living with her mother, she stays with her father at weekends. Later, she goes to live with him until she goes to university.

Menstrual Allegories of Violence

As we saw in Chapter 2 menstrual blood in *Vaca sagrada* is anything but hidden. Eltit's menstrual representations subvert cultural stereotypes which hide menstruating female bodies (Olea in Lértora 1993: 94). Some of the most challenging images of menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* are those of the menstrual blood running down the legs of the female narrator, covering her partner's body, flowing without restraint through the house, and observed closely and joyfully: 'Mirábamos las manchas rojas en su cuerpo, en las sábanas, cayendo desde la abertura de mis piernas' (24-25), 'permanecíamos serenos observando como la sangre se secaba endureciendo nuestros cuerpos' (25). In these quotations, Eltit presents a highly provocative image that goes beyond social conventions: that of the menstrual blood which deliberately stains. This challenges a general fear of leaking and staining clothes or surfaces, and therefore, publicising that one is menstruating, and exposing oneself to comments loaded with disgust from others. Her menstrual blood is described through excess, not only because of the frequent references but also for the descriptions of the blood freely running down the legs of the narrator and covering different surfaces: 'En esas noches dejaba que la sangre corriera por mis piernas, corriera por mis piernas en tres días rigurosos. Ah, esas noches con la sangre deslizándose por mis tobillos, el empuje del pie, el piso, las sábanas mojadas en mis sueños' (50). In the novel, and in these two passages in particular, blood is very visible and dyes surfaces. Blood is represented as difficult to hide or eliminate, this being an allusion to the impossibility of hiding the blood shed by the regime.

Blood traces are everywhere, and this indicates the ultimate failure of the regime to hide repression and also deny the existence of the disappeared. Thus, the emphasis on the visibility of blood in the novel not only aims to offer playful, erotic representations of menstruation that subvert its social and cultural invisibility, but also calls attention to state violence during the Pinochet regime. In the second chapter of *Vaca sagrada*, in a passage in

which the narrator and Manuel are having sex, menstruation evokes torture in two different ways. On the one hand, the descriptions of the narrator's menstrual blood mirror the silence around this form of state violence. This is exemplified when the narrator reflects: 'Jamás hablábamos de la sangre. Simplemente la esperábamos para generar la confusión en nuestros cuerpos' (25). They do not talk about blood, in the same way that torture is a taboo topic: neither menstruation nor torture are experiences to talk about, but to experience in the shadows. Gisela Norat says that the fact that they do not talk about the blood reminds us of 'the official secrecy on the issue of the disappeared despite the fact that mass persecution and detention constituted a national bloodbath during General Pinochet's regime' (2002: 161). On the other hand, the description reproduced above is an allegory of torture: menstrual blood arrives without warning—in spite of the individual being aware that sooner or later it will happen—and it envelops the narrator and Manuel creating a state of mental and physical confusion, altering their senses as if they have been subjected to torture: 'confundidos entre amenazadores flujos que nos mecían alterando nuestros sentidos' (25). This post-coital description in which they appear covered in their own body fluids and with distorted spatial awareness is only an anticipation of what is to come when Manuel is detained. Moreover, in this passage in which the narrator describes a sex scene between her and Manuel, she uses terms that allude to violence such as 'lesión', 'genocidas', 'letales', 'herida', 'tajo', 'muerte' and 'víscera' (25). Menstruation is used allegorically in these passages and, thus, in Eltit's text menstruation is not represented as traumatic in itself, unlike in Jeftanovic's novel.

Menstruation in *Escenario de guerra* is only described in relation to violence. This aspect is developed in the chapter 'Papá y mi sangre', in which Tamara's father externalises his anger when Tamara menstruates by banging on the table and shouting: 'no quiero sangre en esta casa' (37). Here menstruation is portrayed as a performance, exemplifying Tamara's detachment from her body and her rejection of her menstrual blood. In this chapter Tamara

is alone in her bedroom and hangs her bloody underwear from the light bulb. This action enables her to express her feelings about menstruation. The image of the ‘calzones manchados’ (37) frames her thoughts (‘Observo el mundo a través de ese prisma’ 37) and embodies the negative feelings that she has about menstruation, as she experiences her menses as if they were wounds of war. The description of her bedroom tainted with the red light emanating from a light bulb covered with her bloody underwear is described as a battlefield: ‘Las cortinas se ven salpicadas, la ventana es un hematoma, la puerta está cruzada por franjas veteadas’ (37) and, depending on how she moves, the scene changes and she imagines that everything is covered in fire. In this passage, menstrual blood is not only the centre of attention, but also is used to make the connection between menstruation and a battlefield. The light that passes through the blood-stained fabric dyes the scene, leaving the impression of gunfire that has left splashes of blood and residual fires everywhere. This passage is the description of the aftermath of war.

Moreover, just after the episode of the light bulb the terms used by Tamara to talk about her menstruation allude to a battlefield: ‘vendas’, ‘herida’, ‘hemorragia’ (39). Menstruation is detached from her body; it is an external factor which is solely linked to her father’s obsession with the war. Tamara also mentions that she tries to ‘[retener] eso que corre desde mí para seguir existiendo’ (39) as if she had a fatal wound and was about to die. In this scene we see the way in which her father’s traumatic memory was transferred to Tamara, having a negative effect on her experience. Tamara performs imaginatively what she believes her father thinks of when she menstruates; she puts herself in her father’s place in that she imagines a violent setting, as if there were a war. In this context, for Tamara, menstruation is death, and she is afraid of dying: ‘temo amanecer diluida en una mancha’ (38), ‘Siento pánico de este flujo que amenaza con destruirme’ (38).⁹ She imagines herself bleeding to death while sleeping and this vision terrifies her. Nobody demystifies her fears,

⁹ Tamara’s vision of drowning in her own blood recalls Carol Gilligan’s research into female adolescence. In her study she found out that ‘girls use images of violent rupture, death, and drowning in describing the transition between childhood and adolescence’ (Gilligan in Hirsch 1997: 221).

and moreover, the only reaction she knows to menstruation is her father's anger. Tamara experiences her menses as traumatic and painful experiences which have to be hidden. Her father represents the negative pressure inflicted upon how menstruation is experienced in patriarchal societies. In this novel menstruation is strictly associated with the father figure and this has more implications for the way Tamara experiences her periods than only through the association with her father's trauma. This is also evidence of the gulf between her and her mother: Tamara lacks maternal socialisation in terms of providing information about menstruation. This is not to say that mothers are solely responsible for this education but 'mothers are typically the primary source of information' (Jackson 2013: 380).

Despite the fact that menstrual blood is the fluid used to explore trauma, it is not the only blood represented in the novels. References to blood allude to different traumatic situations related to the violence encountered by both narrators. The prevalence of blood in both novels, through explicit or more indirect references, is aimed at denouncing situations of discrimination, appalling conditions under which practices such as abortion are carried out, and violence against women (e.g. sexual, domestic and obstetric violence). Thus, the role of blood in the novels is clearly gendered and focused on body politics. Moreover, in Eltit's novel the gendered dimension of blood is clearly depicted through different representations of women's and men's blood, a feature explored in Chapter 2 which will be examined here regarding body politics using additional examples.

In *Vaca sagrada* references to blood appear when the narrator is told that Manuel is detained. This information triggers the description of certain episodes of her life which include blood: first, when she is a child and accidentally cuts her legs on glass while she is fleeing from an imaginary figure; her grandmother's dog bleeding to death after giving birth; an exhibitionist who appears in front of her with stains of blood on his legs; the description of an abortion she undergoes; and finally, what seems to be her ill grandmother in hospital bleeding after having had an injection (43-7). The narrator instantly associates

Manuel's detention with these fearful and bloody moments she experienced in the past. His detention triggers these episodes, like childhood traumas that emerge in which the representations of blood are violent, personal, dirty, disgusting and very graphic. One of the descriptions in this passage also reminds us of menstruation: 'El corte en mi pierna fue tan profundo que la carne se abrió de inmediato. No hubo dolor [...] pero la sangre no se detuvo' (43). Blood here does not stop and, in this case, the wound does not hurt. The narrator later reflects on the lack of pain, 'ausencia de dolor' (50), when she refers to her menses. When the dog dies she cleans up the blood, and she remarks that '[f]ue muy difícil eliminar las manchas de sangre' (45). In the description of the abortion she remembers her haemorrhage, 'el derrame' (46) and the painful experience caused by the surgical tools. The scene of her grandmother in hospital also reflects a spillage of blood: '[l]a sangre desbordada corrió por su brazo derecho' (47). The episode of the exhibitionist is the only one in which blood does not flow: he is a man and his blood is represented as static, his blood dried on his legs '[r]ecuerdo sus piernas como una gran masa de pus y sangre seca' (46). Apart from the link between these gendered representations of blood and 'écriture féminine' discussed in Chapter 2 in these cases, blood is also associated with body politics, because it addresses abortion, gendered violence and femicide (the narrator is forced to kill the female puppies when they are born). In addition, in the totality of cases the main characteristic of blood depicted in the novel is that it impregnates surfaces: the ground, the floor, the bed, the nurse's glove, the bodies, which as previously mentioned is a reference to the impossibility of hiding the blood shed by the Pinochet regime.

In *Escenario de guerra* there is one passage in which vaginal blood is indirectly described as a consequence of Tamara's rape at the age of fifteen by a debt collector from the bank (87-9). In this passage Tamara recalls that when she was raped '[l]a copa [de vino] se derramó en el piso' (88). Red wine in its resemblance to blood acts in a symbolic way, thus, the spilt red wine is a metaphor that symbolises the blood derived from the rape. The

image of the wine stain on the floor also appears in the context of a list of traumatic situations for Tamara, such as her mother's attempted suicide and family fights (122), and as the result of a row between her parents triggered by her mother's dissatisfaction in her marriage (57). Thus, in this novel there are also references to blood that are associated with body politics but are more elusive.

Somatisation and Continuum

The themes of attachment and detachment run through both novels. The degree of attachment between the narrators and their menstruation is a reflection of the way in which they connect with their loved ones. Menstruation is the link between the characters. Moreover, the language used by the narrators enables us to see different ways of negotiating how menstruation is experienced in terms of attachment and detachment. In both texts the word menstruation is avoided completely and the terms used instead reflect the ease or unease the narrators experience when they menstruate. In *Vaca sagrada* the term 'sangre' is preferred. As we have seen in Chapter 2 menstruation is a powerful process for the narrator and one of which she is proud. The language used shows the strong attachment the narrator has to her menstruation and the way in which she is in tune with her body. Her periods are experienced not only with ease but also with pleasure, (see Chapter 2). Menstrual blood is presented by the narrator as something empowering, and as herself, that is, not as an external element, unlike in Jeftanovic's novel.

In *Escenario de guerra* the term 'la sangre' (e.g. 38, 139), or the form 'sangro' (37), are also used, as well as other more euphemistic expressions such as 'lava tibia' (38), 'esta herida periódica' (39) and 'ese manantial' (39). Most of the terms imply a sense of detachment because of the use of demonstrative adjectives: 'este flujo' (38), 'ese líquido' (38), '*eso* que corre desde mí' (39, my emphasis). Menstrual blood is described as external, an imposition over which Tamara has no control: 'Ese flujo que corre *desde mí*' (39, my

emphasis), 'brota de mi cuerpo' (39), despite all efforts to suppress it ('Intento retener eso', 39). The sense of being out of control is also reflected in the passage that describes Tamara's menstruation; she feels that her body is detached from her mind: 'Mi cuerpo no responde' (39). Tamara is alienated from her body; she is as detached from her body as she is from the relationships in her family and the world. Just as the term menstruation never appears in the novel, words that refer to the traumatic past are elusive. Therefore, Tamara only gets to know words such as 'fosas comunes, epidemia, deportaciones' (29) through an encyclopaedia, and in the case of menstruation she has no referents except for her father's disproportionate reaction.

These expressions used by the narrators have additional implications: menstrual blood in *Escenario de guerra* is traumatic and therefore must be stopped, whereas menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* provides the link between the narrator and Manuel and other 'detenidos-desaparecidos', and for this reason her menstrual blood needs to flow. Norat affirms that the narrator's menstrual blood in *Vaca sagrada* flows 'as a reminder that she is alive and as a symbolic umbilical cord that sustains those threatened with extinction' (2002: 163). The image of the umbilical cord is unfortunate because nothing in the novel is connected to pregnancy; moreover, menstruation is never associated with this imaginary. Despite the fact that for the narrator her menstruation keeps Manuel alive, as we will see, the relationship between them is not in terms of a maternal body, but rather one of solidarity.¹⁰ Jo Labanyi also mentions fertility in *Vaca sagrada* but from a different perspective because for her, 'Eltit has linked her use of menstruation in *Vaca sagrada* to the concept of waste, for it is blood expelled precisely because reproduction is not taking place' (1996: 96). Although Labanyi nuances this by declaring that '[t]he novel insists on the

¹⁰ Green's *Diamela Eltit, Reading the Mother* (2007) is an analysis of Eltit's *oeuvre* from a psychoanalytic and feminist perspective in which the main focus is the maternal body. Green's reading is based on the representation of women as abject in the novel, arguing that it is 'founded on her mothering and reproductive function' (2007: 95). According to Green, the Chilean context of dictatorship and its phallogocentric discourse prevents the movement of 'the female body away from the fear and horror displaced onto the mother' (2007: 155).

bleeding female body as an image, not of fertility, but of disintegration and death' (1996: 96), she is still using the framework of reproduction. By contrast, I argue that Eltit resignifies menstrual blood in this novel through the complete detachment of menstruation from fertility. She multiplies the imaginaries from which menstruation can be conceptualised, such as eroticism and solidarity, and uses menstruation as a vehicle with which to explore the intermingling of the public and the private. Moreover, the emphasis on blood in general terms and its portrayal as gendered and excessive contributes to this link between the personal and the public, and specifically state violence during the dictatorship.

In *Vaca sagrada* menstrual blood reflects the continuum of bodies between the body of the narrator, Manuel and those of the disappeared. The narrator of *Vaca sagrada* has a psychological and physical bond with her lover Manuel which is manifest when she finds out that he is detained. In the moments before his detention the narrator highlights the mental connection between the two of them: 'Manuel habitaba en mi mente' (49), 'adquirí la costumbre de llamar a Manuel con el poder de mi mente' (48). The blood of the narrator keeps Manuel alive, or at least the hope that he is still alive. For this reason, when the narrator is told that Manuel is detained she stops having periods: 'se me produjeron un vacío y una interrupción' (47). This absence of menstrual blood makes her think about death, about the possibility of Manuel being murdered. She makes the connection from Manuel to the wider community of 'detenidos-desaparecidos' during the Pinochet regime: 'Pensaba que si me quedaba dormida, ellos se iban a morir en forma masiva' (51, my emphasis). Her menstrual blood triggers thoughts in which she imagines Manuel suffering while he is detained in the South. In one passage, when the narrator thinks of Manuel in captivity her menses flow incessantly, in the same way that the repetition of the word 'sangre' is constant (50-1). She becomes aware of the painful fate of those in prison while observing her menstrual blood. Her menstrual blood is 'la única respuesta' (50) because her blood makes her aware of the traumatic events that are happening in the country. The narrator's

menstruation is a way of being attached to those who suffer. Thus, the solidarity with the ‘detenidos-desaparecidos’ is inscribed with her body through her menstrual flow: ‘Terminaba empapada en mi propia sangre para no olvidar lo que era la sangre. Yo no estaba muriendo, pero sangraba’ (51).¹¹ The narrator feels a sense of responsibility to keep the ‘detenidos-desaparecidos’ alive, and she symbolically keeps them alive when she menstruates: ‘Manuel estaba detenido en el Sur y mi sangre conseguía suspender su muerte por una noche’ (51). Menstruation (allegorically) has the power of keeping people alive but also, for the same reason, menstruation is closely related to death: ‘llegaba la sangre, todos los meses llegaba la sangre y, en ese tiempo, la sangre había perdido en mi cualquier rango que no fuera su irreversible conexión con la muerte’ (51). Furthermore, just before the last episode of the novel the narrator declares what at first sight seems to be a contradiction: on the one hand she affirms that she is not bleeding any more and, on the other, she says that she is still menstruating. The differences in these considerations stem from the distinction she makes between symbolic menses and the biological process: ‘el deber físico’ (178), ‘Supe que ya no sangraba cuando dejé de esperar la llegada de la sangre. No la esperaba pues su descenso no me producía el menor atisbo de estupor’ (178). At this point Manuel could be dead, although this is not explicit in the novel. However, another interpretation might be that he is dead because the bond is broken and therefore her symbolic menstruation has disappeared: her powerful blood has become a ‘líquido neutro’ (178) and her feelings about her body have changed as well. What is left is purely the biological dimension of the process which is described as a useless repetition, a nuisance that through its routine ruins some of her days (178). Now she feels like other women: ‘me había uniformizado con los otros cuerpos’ (178). This shift of perspective from considering menstruation in a symbolic way to describing periods as mere biological process is a positive representation of menstruation, despite the narrator’s negative view, because this new symbolism aims at

¹¹ This brings to mind the visual project *Sangro pero no muero* (2010) by Isa Sanz in which, through photography, video and performance, she explores menstruation within the life-death cycle and as icon of femininity.

normalising menstruation within the context of everyday life. These conflicting feelings reflect a common ambivalence in attitudes towards menstruation: it signals the possibility to give life, and also this ‘mysterious’ liquid can cause death and decay, which can be seen in myths in which menstruation is the cause of rotten crops and withered flowers, and the cautionary tale of avoiding sex during menstruation because it could be fatal for men (Pliny in McClive 2015: 31) or damage the health of a new-born (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 21, McCracken 2003: 63).

The way in which menstruation is used in *Vaca sagrada* to symbolise the connection between the narrator and the disappeared mimics certain embodied public practices of resistance that took place during the dictatorship. During the Pinochet dictatorship not only were the deaths of the disappeared denied but also their lives, ‘by claiming that the disappeared never had existed’ (Nelson 2002: 50). For this reason, relatives and friends of the disappeared challenged official discourses through public protests such as hunger strikes, the display of photographs of missing people, *encadenamientos* and folk dances (Nelson: 51). Through these public protests relatives and friends aimed at making visible the denied lives of the disappeared (Nelson: 50-1). According to Nelson, the AFDD wanted to create a continuum of their bodies and those of the disappeared through these actions (2002: 51). *Vaca sagrada* reflects this continuum, the narrator seeking to unite her body and the bodies of the disappeared through her uninterrupted flow of menstrual blood. The only difference is that menstrual blood is only displayed in the private space in the novel and the communitarian effort to oppose the official discourse is not present. Nevertheless, the public link can be made through writing. Menstrual blood is, therefore, also shown publicly to the reader.

The subject of the continuity of bodies and embodied practices of resistance is recurrent in Eltit’s oeuvre. In one of Eltit’s performances, *Zona de dolor* (1980), filmed by Lottie Rosenfeld, Eltit appears with cuts and burns on her arms before entering a brothel

where she reads aloud fragments of her novel *Lumpérica*.¹² As Nelson puts it, Eltit made evident ‘the link between individual and shared experience in the fragmented postcoup context’ through her self-mutilated body (2002: 155), merging the individual, the collective, the private and the public. In fact, Eltit herself stated in 1985 that there is continuity between her literary and visual creations, saying that both ‘form part of one and the same creative practice’ (Nelson: 157). The connection between the bodies of the narrators and their loved ones illustrates the process of somatisation, that is, a physical feeling or symptom that has its origins in an external factor or a state of mind.¹³ In these novels, somatisation refers to the way in which psychological traumas inscribe themselves on the bodies of the narrators. Leónidas Morales sees the phenomenon of somatisation as a recurrent motif in Eltit’s novels. However, he cites only *El cuarto mundo*, *Los trabajadores de la muerte* and the play ‘La invitación, el instructivo’ (2002), ignoring *Vaca sagrada*.¹⁴ In his analysis of ‘La invitación, el instructivo’, which is an allegory of the search for the disappeared, he identifies two metaphorical somatisations in the female character, M1, that recall *Vaca sagrada*’s images. Firstly, the bodies of the disappeared are described as if they were inside her own body: ‘como si los llevara en su vientre, como si fueran hijos que pugnarán por nacer’, and second, M1 urinates constantly and everywhere as if she were trying to eject her own grief (Morales: 137-40). These metaphorical somatisations also appear in *Vaca sagrada*. Apart from the menstruation bond, we can identify different feelings that intersect with the extreme experiences of detainees in prison, in this case personified in Manuel, such as being deprived of food, water, sleep, cold, and torture, as we will see. A bodily bond between the narrator and Manuel is created through hunger: ‘Privada, ayunante crónica, la sensación de náuseas empezó a ser la normalidad [...] Su cuerpo [de Manuel] se había

¹² See Anon., ‘Diamela Eltit: Zona de dolor’, *Hemispheric Institute* website.

¹³ According to a medical definition, ‘somatisation or functional disorders [are] characterised by the subjective report of physical symptoms in the absence of clear physical pathology’ (Rask and others 2009: 625).

¹⁴ The play ‘La invitación, el instructivo’ was included in the booklet created for the event ‘Semana de Autor’ dedicated to Eltit in La Habana, Cuba, in November 2002 (Morales 2004: 131).

disuelto, sus rasgos estaban completamente atomizados en mi memoria' (89). The narrator describes her 'hambre constante' and her 'constante sequedad' (126). The narrator uses fasting as another kind of somatisation, another connection between their bodies. Moreover, fasting acts as a kind of solidarity with prisoners who are deprived of food, and at the same time, fasting is also a form of punishment she inflicts on herself to expiate her guilt for being unable to suffer alongside them. The narrator's fasting also recalls the hunger strikes that were a feature of resistance under the dictatorship. The narrator is worried about Manuel, and she imagines that Manuel is experiencing physical deformation as a consequence of torture: 'Manuel [...] no podía rehacer su figura' (89), 'Manuel se enfrentaba en el Sur con una desintegración masiva' (121). Consequently, she experiences this imagined deformation in her own body: 'mi cuerpo empezó a traicionarme. Mi carne se desbordaba expuesta a cualquier mirada' (89), to the extent that she even starts thinking of her body with disgust (127). She believes that Manuel has four broken ribs and, therefore, she feels 'fracturada, irregular' (126). In chapter eight the feeling of cold and pain simultaneously in both characters is evident; she imagines Manuel '[a]gredido hasta el límite por la intensidad del frío, debí soportar sus estertores en la noche, esa noche en que un insoportable dolor en mi costado llevó hasta el borde de la paralización una de mis piernas' (121). In another passage the narrator explores the effect of lack of sleep; she is deprived of sleep because she imagines that Manuel does not want to live and 'atentaba contra su respiración entre el frío de las noches' (78). At this point, the narrator states that 'los músculos ya no me respondían y mi respiración se volvía muy inestable' (78). These passages illustrate the ways in which the public affects personal experience, although in this case this influence is depicted literally.

In chapter eight, the narrator becomes aware that she is somatising Manuel's experiences in prison, and that this is causing her serious problems: 'Comprendí que la situación física de Manuel era la mayor trampa que me había tendido' (127). She even

affirms that ‘Manuel se había apoderado de mi porvenir orgánico y de mi mente’ (121). For this reason she tries to take control of her life again through changes in her body, for example, by beginning to fast suddenly for the second time. As is well known, fasting can lead to amenorrhea, and this is implied in the novel. Avoiding menstruation seems to be the only means to break the bond between them: ‘Estaba reducida en todas mis necesidades vitales y deseaba aumentar aún más la falta. Solo así podía sacarme el llamado de Manuel en la noche’ (126). It seems that if she achieves the suppression of her menstruation she will not have ‘the call of Manuel’. This expression is ambiguous and it refers to both sexual drive and other kinds of physical manifestations such as hunger, cold, thirst and pain. Thus, in order to stay alive she has to symbolically kill Manuel.

In *Escenario de guerra*, the excessive way in which menstrual blood is described in two passages is a powerful metaphor for the embodiment of postmemory, described by Hirsch as a ‘bleed’ between members of different generations (2012: 34), as previously mentioned. Tamara describes the nature of her menstrual flow as unstoppable; it seems that one cannot block this bleeding (suffering). The first passage appears in the chapter ‘Papá y mi sangre’. Here, Tamara describes her menstruation in a hyperbolic way: ‘Sangro constantemente [...] No dejo de sangrar’ (38). The second passage describes a scene in which Tamara is with her uncle and starts menstruating: ‘Contraigo los muslos pero esa lava tibia fluye sin cesar’ (189). These passages not only explore the themes of detachment and cyclicity, but also reflect the way in which unhealed psychological wounds persist and are embodied in real menstrual blood. Jeftanovic’s novel fits current ways of depicting trauma in contemporary fiction; according to Laurie Vickroy:

[s]urvivors’ painful connection to past trauma is also displayed and replayed through the body, even branded into their flesh [...] Characters’ scars become both connecting points and obstacles to potentially intimate or sexual relations, drawing others’ sympathy until the agony that underlies them becomes overwhelming. (2001: 32)

Vickroy adds that '[t]rauma writers make the suffering body the small, focused universe of the tormented and a vehicle for rendering unimaginable experience tangible to readers' (2001: 32-3). This parallels the way in which Jeftanovic focuses on menstruation and uses it as vehicle to explore her father's trauma. However, menstruation is not the only example through which somatisation is explored.

Escenario de guerra contains multiple references to corporeality and to the repercussion of trauma in bodies. For example, the first night Tamara spends with Franz, she makes reference to the somatisation of past experiences, how the body keeps a record of the past: 'Sé que verá en mi cuerpo las cosas que me han pasado' (97). In this passage Tamara indicates that traumas rooted in her psyche are embodied. For Vickroy: 'Social conflicts are enacted in characters' personal conflicts where historical trauma is personalized by exploring its effects in bodily violations and wounds, in sexuality, or in the struggle to achieve emotional intimacy' (2001: 168). Franz and Tamara's relationship is described in these terms of struggling to achieve emotional intimacy, and moreover, this struggle is described in corporeal terms: they have an 'agujero en el pecho' (114, 127, 132, 136). They carry a metaphorical wound that hinders their relationship. Moreover, the gap between them is described through a menstrual image: 'una franja de tierra se interpuso entre ambos [...] se instaló una brecha por donde se fugaban nuestros sentimientos' (128). This image mirrors menstruation, with the vulva as a 'brecha' through which blood/suffering flows.

Despite the fact that menstruation in *Escenario de guerra* is associated with trauma, and experienced in terms of detachment and shame, there are two passages in which Tamara faces her menstrual blood. The first passage has already been described: the scene in which she hangs her underwear from a light bulb. Here, despite the fact that Tamara associates menstruation with a battlefield, she describes her menstruation in detail in terms of colours and textures, lingering over the words. The second passage is the one in which she writes with her menstrual blood in the bathroom and on the walls: 'En la ducha escribo mi nombre

con ese líquido sobre los azulejos. Cuando crecí dibujé un corazón con el nombre de papá y el mío. Después lo atravesé con una flecha' (38). Tamara imagines this scene when she visits her uncle: 'Pienso, en qué pasaría si escribo con ese líquido su nombre y el mío sobre los azulejos [...] O si pinto este país con mis diez dedos rojos' (189). These two passages with the image of Tamara writing with her menstrual blood show the way in which menstruation for Tamara is unambiguously connected with the figure of the father. However, these scenes are not the only ones when Tamara's menstruation is linked to a male figure. In the passage in which Tamara visits her uncle and begins to menstruate, she imagines that maybe her uncle would be able to suck out her blood. But her only worry is that he would not be able to spit it out afterwards: 'tal vez puede succionar mi sangre [...] Pero quizás no puede escupirla' (189). The act of sucking blood and expelling it afterwards is a reference to one of the stages, the *mezizah be-peh*, involved in Jewish circumcision (Hart 2009: 194). This ceremony is carried out by the *mohel*, that is, the ritual circumcisor, who in this case is her uncle, and forms a rite of passage for the infant who is circumcised (Hoffman 1996: 28). Jeftanovic is adapting a ceremony conducted with male infants to an adult female. This passage indicates that Tamara has not had a rite of passage and that she longs for one in order to transition to a new stage in her life that she hopes will be less traumatic.

Tamara associates menstruation with weakness, pain ('algo me punza el vientre' 38), insomnia ('No dejo de sangrar, no puedo dormir', 38), bags under her eyes, paleness, bone ache, nuisance, and describes the process in terms of an unknown illness. Moreover, during her periods the description of the body changes and feelings she experiences is entangled with her father's body. In this case, when she describes her pains she talks about her father, projecting what must be her own bodily changes onto her father. The description of the bodies is a visual palimpsest: 'Papá siente nauseas, mareos circulares. [...] A papá se le abulta el abdomen, crece hacia adelante. [...] Se le hinchan los pequeños pezones, los

tiernos botones. [...] Tiene algo vivo dentro' (38). She imagines her discomfort in a different body. The symptoms Tamara describes are typical changes that can occur before or during menstruation, namely, swollen belly and breasts, nausea and dizziness. At this point we can wonder why Tamara describes her feelings through the figure of her father. On the one hand, this is a way of sharing her pain with her father, as a strategy of empathy. On the other hand, she is looking for a frame of reference that makes her understand her father's pain and reactions. Moreover, Tamara's menarche started when she was nine years old, which coincides with the age of her father when he faced the most traumatic episode of the war.

These passages evidence the way in which Tamara experiences her body and her father's as a continuum, which is an indication of her failed attempt at independence: she lives her life according to her father's experiences. Even when she is an adult and does not live with her father, her reactions to her periods are mediated by him.

Vicarious Menstruation

Both novels, in addition to describing menstruation directly, depict menstruation vicariously through the use of the images of a nosebleed in *Vaca sagrada* and bleeding gums, in *Escenario de guerra*. However, as will be examined, their uses are different: vicarious depictions in Eltit's text are used to highlight the link between the personal and the political and denounce situations of discrimination against women, whereas in Jeftanovic's novel this image does not lead to such claims.

In *Vaca sagrada* the passage in which a nosebleed is described is the one in which the intersection between gender, class and ethnicity is especially evident. The narrator is in a party (*fiesta*) that seems to be the cover for a clandestine female workers' rights' meeting. Her situation of lack of work and poverty, leads to her joining the workers' confederation, where *mestiza* workers of 'facciones indias' (130) unite to create their manifesto ('estatuto orgánico', 131) which is tattooed on their thighs. The episodes in which the narrator

describes the meetings demonstrate the marginal situation in which she and her colleagues find themselves. They ask for ‘espacio habitacional’ (132) and the narrator is worried about her ‘mezquina paga’ and survival in the city (170-71). The scene of the nosebleed happens when the narrator imagines the female workers demonstrating for their rights. She visualises them walking and bleeding from their noses. She wants to bleed like them as well while they are ‘desfilando con el puño en alto’ (115).¹⁵ In this passage of the nosebleed, the flow of blood in a public space is empowering for women: they display their blood, while battling in a gendered war against discrimination. It is a statement of the power of their gendered blood; a key consideration for the narrator: ‘era el poder de mi sangre’ (25). Janis Breckenridge indicates how Eltit shows in this scene that ‘women can demonstrate empowerment and social defiance not only in the private sphere but also in the public arena’ (1999: online). The image of the workers’ blood in her dreams enhances a united fight for women’s rights, but the reality is complex and in this case it can entail discouragement and dissolution because obstacles to a united struggle also emerge on these pages and the narrator expresses her profound disenchantment. She states that in the second meeting the atmosphere is strained because of the existence of different points of view, and possibility of division (169). In this passage blood symbolises female empowerment and not only opposition to the regime but also to any kind of discrimination against women in general, and women from deprived backgrounds in particular. The fact that the image is that of a group of women bleeding as a sign of protest, and taking into account the role of menstruation in the novel, it is also a clear depiction of vicarious menstruation. However, given the unambiguous descriptions of menstruation in the novel we wonder whether the

¹⁵ The association of the nosebleed with menstruation is an old one because of the conceptualisation of balance of bodily fluids in Hippocratic medicine. According to this view, the onset of menstruation and nosebleeds were ‘equivalent signs of the resolution of fevers’ because in both cases ‘excess of blood’ is discarded from the body (Laqueur 1986: 8). However, Hippocratic medicine was not the only discipline that linked menstruation and nosebleeds. According to Peggy McCracken, Freud and premodern medical theory connect these two processes as well. For Freud, ‘the blood from her nose symbolically replaces menstrual blood in her explanation for the bloody sheets’ and according to premodern medical theory ‘women’s bleeding from the nose or the breast was thought to be the result of a menstrual disorder’, and McCracken states that this analogy ‘is surely motivated by the fact that both are characterized by an uncontrolled flow of blood that does not result from a wound or a disease’ (2003: 13).

image of women menstruating in this passage, rather than with nosebleeds, would be too subversive, given the fact that menstruation is depicted in private contexts in the novel.¹⁶

In *Escenario de guerra* indirect references to menstrual blood include the aforementioned ‘brecha’, but are not limited to this. In a passage describing Tamara’s childhood, when her mother suffered from psychosomatic illnesses, Tamara also (unconsciously) starts to create her own psychosomatic illness: ‘he ido inventando mi propia enfermedad sin categoría’ (54). The descriptions make reference to menstruation —or it seems that she identifies her psychosomatic illness with menstruation:

Todos los meses extrañas úlceras me horadan el interior de la boca. Las encías se agrietan, la lengua se deforma. Los médicos no encuentran el antídoto ni la causa de este mal. Los exámenes apuntan a mi sangre misteriosa. Por varios días mantengo silencio, me pierdo en mis laberintos, me sangran las encías. (54)

This passage is the representation of vicarious menstruation in which blood flows through other places. There are different references that support this interpretation. Firstly, the reference of the monthly frequency (‘Todos los meses’) with which it happens is a traditional marker to refer to menstruation. Second, the mention of her mysterious blood recalls menstruation, and finally, the reference to getting lost in her labyrinths evokes uterine symbolism.¹⁷ The image of bloody gums also appears in Carmen Gómez Ojea’s *La novela que Marien no terminó* (1988), in a passage in which a friend of the protagonist bleeds through her gums while she menstruates: ‘una vieja amiga que siempre que menstruaba le sangraban las encías: se le llenaba la boca de sangre, como un vampiro tras el desayuno’ (*La novela...: 54*). Ojea’s fascination with the menstrual cycle and related subjects such as gynaecological issues, abortion, virginity, and rape recall Eltit’s and

¹⁶ The alternative version of menstruating women in public exists in contemporary visual culture. British artist Sarah Maple (1985-) has an oil on canvas titled *Menstruate with Pride* (2010-11) that includes a portrait of herself dressed in white with a menstrual stain and in an empowered pose, that is, with her fist raised in the middle of a group of people who show their disgust.

¹⁷ There is a similar description in one passage in *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* in which the narrator uses sea imagery and the image of the labyrinth as metaphors for women’s experiences and sexuality (*El mismo mar: 88*).

Jeftanovic's writing.¹⁸ These three writers focus on offering diverse depictions of menstruation that subvert stereotypical representations. *Escenario de guerra* and *La novela que Marien no terminó* link bleeding gums with menstruation and both use the shared image of the mouth as the vulva and the bleeding gums as menstruation. These associations are not new but form part of the 'culturally engrained homology' of lips and labia, according to which 'the female body's supposed labial symmetry collapses distinctions between the "mouth", on the face and that of the genitals' (Rees 2015 [2013]: 66, 67). This image is described in Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977) and will be explored in the next section.

The Im/possibility of Recovery: the Ending

In Chapter 2 we argued that *Vaca sagrada*'s circular structure illustrates the image of Irigaray's 'two-lips' (Irigaray 1985 [1977]: 24), which coincides with the display of the narrator's autoerotic power of menstrual blood. Similarly, in *Escenario de guerra* the end links back to the start, enclosing the stories inside, and its circular structure. In both texts, this structure parallels traditional considerations of menstruation as cyclical and the way in which menstruation is represented: as irregular and modifiable, through the variability of the internal structure of the chapters, in Eltit's text, and as following an unusual pattern of repetition in Jeftanovic's novel. Both novels have an open ending that links them back to the first chapter, and despite the fact that both novels have similar endings the approaches are different in terms of their engagement with trauma. The ending of *Escenario de guerra* also helps to justify the claim that the novel is an exercise in trauma theory, unlike *Vaca sagrada*.

In *Vaca sagrada* the narrator starts the novel in a state of confusion reflecting on what happened: 'Después de tanto esfuerzo he perdido el hilo razonable de los nombres y se

¹⁸ Examples of novels in which Ojea writes about these subjects are *Los perros de Hécate* (1985), *La novela que Marien no terminó* (1988), *Ancila en los fuegos* (2005) and *Nosotras de cinco a nueve* (2010).

han desbandado todas mis historias' (11). This thought is repeated at the end of the novel, just before she decides to write her story. In this novel menstrual blood is a stimulus for mobilisation because the narrator's absence of menstruation at the end of the novel motivates her to look for the disappeared in a more active way. Her lack of blood—which can also be related to the 'erasure' of blood (people) by the regime—inspires the protagonist to go to the South in the search of clues that explain the feeling she has about the possible death of Manuel. He is detained in the South, in Pucatrihue, which is the place where he comes from (17, 42). The image of the South also represents the opportunity to find peace in her uncertain life (180). The search itself is consuming and painful because it makes her face the terrifying realities of the South with its birds—seen as her own fears, male abuse, the regime's terror and violence—and this prevents her from continuing: 'Me recriminé - lo recuerdo - por la fantasía que me había llevado a pensar que yo poseía alguna garantía corporal' (183). She even thinks that she had invented all the stories told in order to overcome the terror and anxiety she feels about the situation:

[J]amás había existido nada de lo que figuré y que yo había inventado un conjunto de nombres para combatir el vuelo de los pájaros e inventar para mí una historia con un final que se hiciera legible. (184)

Nevertheless, the last untitled chapter is the reflection of the need of the narrator to gather all the different traces the others have left and she has kept ('las pruebas que había conservado', 188) in order to write their enmeshed stories. Once again, this need comes from a corporeal feeling: 'supe que lo haría porque mi corazón estaba congelado y necesitaba con urgencia un poco de calor' (187). This ending shows that the need to bear witness to what happened during the dictatorship and to keep alive the memories of those who were killed by the regime is the result of corporeal stimulus. The body writes the story, rather than the story being marked on the body of the narrator.

In *Escenario de guerra* the first and last chapter are represented as theatrical performances. The first chapter 'Función a solas' is 'sólo un extracto, una escena' (16), a sort of rehearsal, that is, an excerpt from Tamara's life, and the last chapter is the 'día de la representación' (203), when the performance ends. Therefore, *Escenario de guerra* follows a similar pattern regarding the ending. However, the focus is more individualistic than in *Vaca sagrada* because Jeftanovic's novel is about Tamara's finding her place in the world. By contrast, Eltit's novel is not only focused on the narrator but also on the 'detenidos-desaparecidos'. Tamara attempts to find answers, which require her to resolve the question of her origin, and the history of her family to try to understand who she is. Tamara, through psychoanalysis (83, 85), is able to express repressed memories and verbalise her traumas to try to reconcile herself with her past. Moreover, like Eltit's narrator, Tamara gathers pictures (143) and memories from others, and writes (e.g. 29, 132, 137), although in Tamara's case this process is more focused on healing herself. In this respect, the ending of *Escenario de guerra* is significant because in the last chapter, 'Puesta en escena', every character of the novel has a role in 'el día de la representación' (203). The characters perform their monologue, which is a brief line about themselves, and the representation ends successfully with the actors holding hands in a sign of solidarity. The narrator here seems to have found a solution to her problems in which every member of the family is reconciled with each other, even if only as a performance, the fruit of Tamara's imagination. The ending is Tamara's strategy to comfort herself. This approach recalls strategies of complete recovery from symptoms caused by trauma described by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, according to which in cases of complete recovery the person integrates the traumatic memories through the completion and creation of a narrative of his or her autobiography (van der Kolk and van der Hart in Caruth 1995: 176). Tamara creates an alternative ending in the last chapter and thanks to this reimagining of the scenario 'the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience [and] many patients are able to soften the

intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror' (178). Thus, the last scene of the novel in which the actors are holding hands represents a utopian situation in which Tamara and her family are in harmony. Through performance, Tamara escapes the traumatic loop. The novel ends with a gratifying and pleasing image: 'trenzamos las manos aferrándonos por un instante, a la misma cuerda de vida' (207). Tamara decides to live this last moment as if it were real and not a performance, and to consider that everything she has lived before, that is, real life, was a fiction. So through the creation of the alternative ending Tamara manages to escape from a life lived as a performance. However, this ending takes us back to the start of the novel: '[c]omienza la función de mi infancia' (13); the cycle has been closed, but given the lack of information about what happens to Tamara, the ending could also signify that Tamara does not manage to overcome the situation and stays trapped in her vicious traumatic circle. In a sense, the lack of a clear conclusion that favours one interpretation or the other mirrors the fact that people exposed to trauma will always have to deal with possible relapses.

Chapter 4

Life Cycles, Transitions and Liminality in Marta Sanz and Esther Tusquets

Menarche and menopause are life stages culturally constructed around the idea of transition into and out of a woman's fertile years. These important moments reveal the tension between the private experience and social assumptions, fears and expectations, and consequently these processes are used by authors to examine personal and political transitions through literature. This chapter examines the ways in which Sanz's *Daniela Astar y la caja negra* (2013) and Tusquets' *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (1978) use the menstrual cycle as a framework to explore the Spanish *Transición* and vice versa.¹ Both novels explore the Transition from the perspective of the personal, the micro, the cultural and the social on a small scale, namely how specific people lived, what the transition to democracy meant for them, and the way in which this period influenced women's expectations and experiences. The texts therefore offer a different approach from traditional accounts about the Transition that focus on the political in the restrictive sense of the word: the sphere of political parties and institutions and, in general, the considered 'public' domain. Despite difference in style and tone, both novels focus on women's perspectives, have the Transition as backdrop and engage with personal transitions in terms of landmarks in the lives of the homodiegetic narrators. These transitions, at the same time, parallel biological processes stereotypically associated with moments of change in the context of women's lives: menarche and menopause. The novels focus on the lives of women from different generations and the ways in which the dictatorship and their social class influenced their identities. Sanz's and Tusquets' novels criticise double standards and the slow pace of change in Spanish society, not only in legal terms (e.g. criminalisation of abortion) but also in terms of mentalities.

¹ From now on I refer to the Spanish transition to democracy, the *Transición*, as the Transition.

The concept of liminality, which refers to ‘a state of being between states’ in which individuals are considered vulnerable and dangerous simultaneously (Thompson 2010: 398), helps us to explore the way in which both narrators perceive themselves and how their social networks perceive them during the personal changes they experience. This chapter engages with the different ways in which liminality is presented in the novels: through representations of characters in in-between stages (both physical and mental), a characteristic connected with ideas of vulnerability and danger, and which is especially associated with sexuality and sexual agency.² The focus on liminality in the novels leads to an exploration of horror and violence. An examination of the associative link between the menstrual cycle and violence within the broader context of the corpus of the texts analysed in my study shows us that this link has wider resonances, which leads me to coin the term ‘monstruation’.³ I use this term to refer to literary approaches in which menstruation is described as the result of having a monster or animal inhabiting and devouring the womb.

The novels also enable us to look into gendered ways of growing up and growing old: how women deal with moments such as menarche and menopause that are subject to sociocultural burdens, and the ways these moments of change affect their personal development. The manner in which menstruation is represented in Sanz’s novel plays a key role in undoing dominant imaginaries concerning what the terms ‘womanhood’ and ‘femininity’ mean, as well as the gendered process of growing up (Butler 2004: 9-10, Fausto-Sterling 2000: 244). In other words, undoing the gendered process of growing up means the questioning of learned behaviours acquired through socialisation, which are generally different for girls and boys. These include the ways in which children deal with

² In *Daniela Astor* Catalina’s mother is worried about the incipient sexuality of her daughter. In *El mismo mar* liminality is not only explored in terms of menopause but also in relation to the lesbian body, represented in ambiguous ways.

³ The term ‘monstruación’ (within the context of menstruation rather than the sphere of monsters) appears in social media, especially as a hashtag in Twitter, and is mainly used to allude to the unwelcome start of someone’s period. Peruvian advertising agency Tribal 121 launched the campaign ‘#Monstruación’ in March 2016, in which a young woman refers to the period as ‘monstruación’ and expresses in a humorous way why periods are a nuisance for her. The campaign opened up a debate on social media by asking women both if they identify with her opinions and if they would like to share their experiences. See ‘Sin Pelos/#monstruación’, Tribal 121 *YouTube Channel* [online video].

the biological and psychological changes they undergo, and how their cultural context influences their experiences, behaviours and feelings.

The attention to menstruation and menstrual related subjects in *Daniela Astor* indicates a clear intention on the part of the author to vindicate its place in literature.⁴ However, at the same time, this novel does not adopt the feminist-spiritualist approach analysed by Chris Bobel (2010: 65-96), in that it does not consider menstruation as a definitional experience for womanhood and/or a ‘unique’ process by conferring on them mystic properties.⁵ Menses can be considered as occupying a liminal space in the novel: menstruation is present but its role does not overrule the narrative. Consequently, Sanz’s aim to make menstruation visible in the literary realm is achieved through her inscribing menstrual representations in a non-disturbing and quotidian realm, and at the same time she demystifies in the novel culturally attributed meanings of menstruation, such as conferring on menstruation the capacity to measure girls’ and women’s maturity and status. The novel explores an alternative way of framing women’s lives, whereby the presence or absence of menstrual blood is not what defines life stages. The text also nuances the process of growing up as not necessarily linear or progressive. In this way, *Daniela Astor* highlights that the context is more important to growing up than starting one’s period: the imprisonment of Catalina’s mother is the crucial event that determines her personal change. Thus, Sanz’s oeuvre in general, and *Daniela Astor* in particular, breaks the silence about menstruation through a variety of examples that dissociate the process from fertility, and that also question hegemonic models that frame women’s lives according to their reproductive

⁴ Menstruation also appears in other novels by Sanz, such as *Susana y los viejos* (2006), *Lección de anatomía* (2008) and *Amour fou* (2013). In *Lección de anatomía*, the menarche of the homodiegetic narrator is described in detail, and menstruation is seen from the same perspective as in *Daniela Astor y la caja negra*: ‘en ese momento no asocio la menstruación a la fertilidad ni el ser mujer a la fertilidad; vinculo el ser mujer a la menstruación y a sus parafernalias: compresas, tampones, bragas dobles para irme a dormir, ibuprofeno, bidé, cambios consentidos de carácter, ropa interior, la antigua celulosa, una toallita debajo de las sábanas, inflamaciones de los pechos, no me roces, no me mires’ (*Lección de anatomía*: 163). In *Amour fou* there are four references to menstruation and two of them also appear in *Daniela Astor y la caja negra*: the allusion to sanitary towels in the context of prison (*Amour fou*: 33) and within the context of puberty and body changes (*Amour fou*: 114). Menstruation also appears in the short story ‘Consejos publicitarios’, published in the monthly newspaper *La Marea* in November 2014, 54-5.

⁵ It is interesting that menstruation is never referred to in these terms, but instead as ‘periodo’.

potential. Tusquets also attempts to reclaim a place for menstrual representations in literature, but unlike Sanz's novel, *El mismo mar* frames women's lives within the traditional model of presence and absence of menstrual blood. Tusquets' narrator also attempts to problematise childhood as a stage of freedom and happiness, because in this novel childhood is represented as a sad and lonely period in which she has to repress her sexuality. Thus, the novel also demystifies imaginaries.

Menstruation or menstrual-related themes not only form part of the wider framework of the novels but are also referred to directly.⁶ Nevertheless, the way menstrual references are presented and described is key in the overall context of the novels because they underline the novel's social criticism through destabilising stereotypes. In *Daniela Astor* this criticism is made through different female voices—with their experiences, worries and wishes—talking about taboos such as female teen sexuality and desire and the clear attempt on the part of the author to depict empowered women. The representations of menstruation are aligned with the attempt to demystify taboos and preconceived ideas deeply rooted in society; hence, their detachment from traditional considerations of the first menstruation as the marker of entering womanhood. Similarly, in *El mismo mar* the use of seasons reflects the cycle of putrefaction and renovation, and mimics the menstrual cycle of the narrator. However, the narrator offers a more positive vision of menopause that differs from negative stereotypes that associate it with decay.

This chapter starts by examining how the content, structure and the narrators' perspectives of the novels enable us to frame the texts as examples of narratives that contest traditional conceptualisations of time, aging and agency. The next section, 'Life Cycles', focuses on the way in which the menstrual cycle is employed to explore these issues. This section draws on Mari Luz Esteban's study on alternative frameworks for women's lives and explores the way in which context and access to information affects the experience of

⁶ In *Daniela Astor* these subjects are briefly mentioned seven times, two of which are related to menarche, two to premenstrual symptoms, one to menstrual products, one to menstruation and one to menopause. In *El mismo mar* there are three explicit references to menstruation.

menarche. In addition, the section also analyses menstrual closure, a characteristic shared by both novels (and other texts from the survey) that refers to the way in which menstruation is used at the end of the end to fulfil or undermine readers' 'horizon of expectations'. 'Life Cycles' ends by looking at the symbology of the seasons present in *El mismo mar* and the way in which menopause is firstly conceptualised as a period of decay but finally as a phase of renovation. The last section 'Liminality and Horror' draws on Esteban's notion of 'trabajo corporal' and Wittig's statement 'lesbians are not women' to look into liminality through representations of ambiguity in both novels:⁷ through changing bodies during puberty and modifications in *Daniela Astor*, and through an exploration of androgyny in *El mismo mar*. This section also explores the aspect of liminality that touches on horror and the uncanny, and analyses the use of visceral representations of menstruation in a broader corpus of texts.⁸

The Novels

Daniela Astor intertwines narration in the first person and a documentary about cultural products and the sphere of celebrity in the years of the Transition. The voice of the first-person narration belongs to Catalina Hernández Griñán, a Spanish woman born in 1966, or 1967, who recounts her life as a twelve-year-old girl who lives in Madrid in the middle of a double transition: her personal transition as an adolescent, and the Transition. This narration depicts a personal story of growing up which also shows the way childhood and the lived experience of that period cast a shadow over adults' lives. Catalina is also the creator of the documentary, *La caja negra*, present in the novel in the form of 'cajas'

⁷ Wittig states that 'lesbians are not women' because they are outside of the heterosexual system, considered as a political regime and not only in terms of sexuality (Wittig 1992: xiii). The statement was made at the Modern Language Association's annual conference in 1978 and was published in *Questions feministes* two years later (Turcotte in Wittig 1992: viii).

⁸ I use the Freudian term 'uncanny' to denote that which 'belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread' (Freud 2003 [1919]: 123), and which is expressed through for example, 'severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm', but primarily 'the fantasy of living in the womb' (2003 [1919]: 150). Barbara Creed also uses Freud's 'uncanny' to explore uterine imagery in horror films.

(boxes), which appear as separate chapters distributed among the first-person episodes.⁹ The narration and the boxes can be read independently, but the juxtaposition of the two adds authority to the novel because the documentary describes episodes, celebrities and films that are part of Spanish popular cultural heritage or that can be found on the internet thanks to the appendix included by Sanz. Both levels of the text act as ‘vasos comunicantes’ in Mario Vargas Llosa’s terms, a narrative technique whereby different episodes that might seem unrelated communicate with each other in a certain way that changes how they are read (Vargas Llosa 1997: 143). *Daniela Astor* juxtaposes the images of women in show business during the *destape* and the illusion of liberation and freedom associated with them, with those of women who suffered the effects of restrictive laws, such as the criminalisation of abortion.¹⁰ In so doing, the novel shows the tensions working- and middle-class women are forced to confront living in the midst of the changes that the transition to democracy entailed: the ‘liberation’ of women, and society’s reticence towards such changes. The roles of husband and wife in the household and attitudes towards motherhood and abortion were changing, as well as women’s struggles for the right to decide how to control their bodies.¹¹

El mismo mar is set in the post-Franco period in Barcelona. The novel is a confessional narrative in which the anonymous narrator-protagonist,¹² a middle-aged

⁹ There are ten boxes that contain descriptions in bold and in brackets of what is shown in the documentary. The descriptions are followed by the transcription of the background voice and dialogues of the documentary. The two different levels of the text are intimately connected by the common ‘creator’, Catalina, and the lived experience of her childhood and friendship with Angélica until a present time (set in 2014 when the documentary is edited). Both the first-person narration and the documentary influence the way we read the novel. On the one hand, we understand the way the cultural context of the Transition influenced the lived experience and socialisation of the narrator. On the other hand, readers are made aware of the way her experiences of growing up during the Transition influenced her adult self.

¹⁰ *Destape* (‘unveiling’) refers to the ubiquity of eroticised women’s bodies that proliferated in the media at that time.

¹¹ The novel describes the shifting realities of the period, such as women developing new ambitions and studying what they want as is the case of the mother of the protagonist in the novel. It also highlights naturalised attitudes in society, such as who is in charge of the domestic chores (142), women having to do two jobs (public and domestic), paternalistic behaviours towards women (33) and everyday sexism (33). However, these issues are outside the scope of this chapter and would require a section of their own. It can be said, to a certain extent and with exceptions, that these attitudes are also prevalent in present day in Spain, and thus, the issues described in the novel are contemporary.

¹² In 1997 a new edition of the novel edited by Santos Sanz Villanueva was published in which significant changes were made, including the name of the narrator, Elia. For an analysis of the changes made see

academic woman born into the Catalan bourgeoisie, leaves her husband after a life of unhappiness and alienation and goes back to the two houses of her childhood to reflect on her past and who she is. During this period of ‘seclusion’ she has a fulfilling lesbian relationship with one of her students, Clara, with whom she is able to delve into her memories, accept herself and feel happy for the first time since her first and only love, Jorge, took his life when she was eighteen years old. However, despite the narrator’s happiness with Clara, in the end she succumbs to a patriarchal mandate and returns to her husband, Julio, ending the relationship with Clara. In Tusquets’ novel, the Transition as a time of change is represented through the lesbian relationship between the narrator and Clara. However, at the same time, the relationship’s short duration and abrupt ending confirm that societal mentalities had not radically changed, and that the patriarchal order was deeply ingrained in society. In the novel neither the narrator’s family circle nor the narrator herself are ready for such a change; neither staying with Clara or leaving her husband are considered possible options as both solutions are too transgressive. Here, the dichotomy between public and private is highlighted: the narrator’s family tolerates a brief affair between the narrator and Clara, but only if it is restricted to the private sphere, but they would not accept a change in the status quo.

The homodiegetic narrators in both texts changed—or were in a process of transition—but their family circle did not change at the same pace. Thus, in both novels the criticism that can be observed is that during the Transition (at least during the first few years covered in the novels, namely until 1978) women’s lives had not been substantially improved. They still had to face restrictions, different (double) standards for them compared to men, with the effect that women’s bodies, sexuality, and agency were policed. In both novels the protagonists are fifty year-old women who recall their pasts in order to understand who they are in their respective present, that is, 1978 in Tusquets’ novel, and

Pertusa-Seva, ‘Un mar diferente al de la primera edición: Esther Tusquets revisitada’, in Molinaro and Pertusa-Seva, *Scholarly Correspondences*.

2014 in *Daniela Astor*. Both narrators —and other female characters— are women who try not to conform to what is expected of them by their particular social affiliations, that is, the Catalan bourgeoisie and lower-middle class family in Madrid respectively. In both texts, the Transition, and in particular the year 1978, are of crucial importance: this year triggers the change in focus. 1978 is key because it alludes to the ratification of the Spanish Constitution in that year. This represents the moment in which the country symbolically emerges from Francoist infantilisation and moves to adulthood; although this is not to say that 1978 represents the end of this transition into ‘adulthood’, as the government until 1982 —when the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party, PSOE, won the general elections— since it marked the return of a left-wing party, and thus who had opposed the Franco regime, for the first time in 50 years. *El mismo mar* is set in 1978, the year when the narrator tries to overcome a life of dissatisfaction, while in *Daniela Astor* 1978 is the year in which Catalina is forced to grow up. What distinguishes the two is the narrative present: in 1978 Tusquets’ narrator is fifty and Sanz’s narrator twelve —they form part of different generations. Of course, Tusquets and Sanz form part of different generations and the novels were published during very different contexts, and thus, influencing their perspective on the Transition. *El mismo mar* was published in the symbolic year of 1978, in the middle of the Transition, and by contrast, Sanz’s novel examines the legacy of the Transition focusing on women. As will be explored in the section ‘Liminality and Horror’ the notion of liminality runs through both novels. This is also stressed in the way the narrators describe their current age. Both use the same expression: ‘a mis *casi* cincuenta años’ (*Daniela Astor* 240, *El mismo mar* 114, my emphasis). This age triggers the necessity for both women to take stock of their lives.

In *Daniela Astor* the first-person narration adopts, for the most part, the perspective of Catalina as a young girl in a present located in 1978; the novel starts: ‘Me llamo Catalina Hernández Griñán. Tengo doce años. Mi madre es de pueblo’ (11). However, the voice of

the narrator as an adult also appears on few occasions. The author uses an intrusive narrator, in Gerald Prince's terms (2003 [1987]: 46-7), to include Catalina's perspective as an adult. This can be observed, for example, in the sentence 'Comienza la época de los engendros recosidos' (52), when the adult voice of the narrator harshly judges the appearance of women who have undergone cosmetic surgery. The adult voice of the narrator is also present on some occasions, anticipating what will happen in the future: 'Luis adquiere costumbres de viejo para que después la vejez no lo pille por sorpresa. Sin embargo, no llegará a viejo. Muere de un cáncer de estómago en 1999' (219). Thus, the narrator shifts her voice from one perspective to the other, from the young to the adult self, or more precisely, the adult voice interjects into the narration of the younger self: 'Al mirar el papelucho, certifico, sin embargo, que mi caligrafía *de entonces* era un auténtico primor' (15, my emphasis). The use of this intrusive narrator emphasises the role of the narrator in the selection of material to include in the narration. Through this strategy the narrator/implicit author highlights that retelling stories from the past is subject to a process of selection of content and style. In addition, the narrator also alludes to the possibility of modifying content as a consequence of memory's fragility and interpretation of events from the perspective of the present: 'Ahora sólo puedo escribir tomando partido porque lo hago desde la conciencia no de lo que estaba sucediendo sino de todo lo que después sucedería' (174).

The novel also raises the issue of teenage agency by questioning the generalised notion in Western society that teenagers know less than they actually do, and which also magnifies an idea of innocence by presenting a vision of childhood 'as idyll' (Johnson 2013: 217, 227). But in *Daniela Astor*, the narrator/implicit author confers agency on the young Catalina by not infantilising her or diminishing her agency as a teenager: 'No todo son sospechas en las vidas infantiles [...] sería deshonesto si ahora dijese que no sabía adónde iba mi madre aquella tarde. Lo sabía perfectamente' (174). This can also be seen in the way the narrator describes her story: 'Ésta es una historia sobre el adulto que todos los niños

llevamos dentro y también sobre la niña que se ha quedado dentro de mí' (173). Sanz presents a character who is not immature despite her young age and takes her experiences and perspective seriously. The adult narrator implies that her younger self sometimes felt more like an adult than her current self. Thus, this novel not only demystifies the imaginaries of childhood and menarche, but also explores time in a non-linear way. Here, Catalina's self-perception in terms of her life stages problematises the traditional vision that equates increased maturity with age.

The narrator's perspective in *El mismo mar* is that of the middle-aged woman who recalls her past and reflects on her present. However, unlike Sanz's Catalina, she never adopts the perspective of her younger self. In Tusquets' novel there are no changes in perspective; the difficulties in reading the text do not lie here, but in the punctuation and the web of intertextual references. The image that the narrator projects of her younger self is that of a misunderstood daughter: 'seguro que [a mi madre] le he estropeado el placer del viaje, como tantos otros placeres del pasado, con una de *mis rarezas* siempre inoportunas, *una más en la larga lista* de rarezas y agravios de una hija *disparatada*' (22, my emphases). Her childhood and teenage years are presented with mixed emotions. The return to her childhood is not as joyful as Solorza claims; the narrator does not see her childhood as 'liberadora' (Solorza 2012: 169). Despite the fact that the narrator remembers nostalgically her childhood ('antes de la adolescencia no había farsas, solo juegos', 99) and associates this phase with candour (18), these associations are not as clear cut as it seems. Her childhood also means oppression (91) and sadness (92, 141),¹³ allusions to a closeted sexuality which she only dares to explore as a middle-aged woman who is starting her menopause. In a similar way, spring appears twice in relation to weakness: 'cansancio primaveral' (50), 'crisis primaveral' (228), reflecting that the supposed period of blooming is by the same token a troubled one. Thus, in this sense, Tusquets' novel also plays with a non-linear time in terms of perception of life stages.

¹³ E.g. 'me voy vistiendo lentamente mi tristeza de niña' (90).

Both authors complicate standard, linear chronologies of how life is imagined and experienced by collapsing the future and the past into the present; the spirit of a girl can be inside an older woman, and vice versa. Nevertheless, at the same time, both emphasise the importance of the context of the Transition in order to argue —somewhat against the grain— that it is the narrators who change, rather than wider sectors of the Spanish population and institutions.

Life Cycles

As seen in Chapter 1 menarche and menopause are considered the markers that frame women's lives, a vision that reflects the way in which our lives are classified according to our reproductive potential —and constructed around the presence and absence of menstrual blood— by the health sciences. Time and life cycles play a key role in the novels because both texts problematise hegemonic conceptualisations of age and time by using the menstrual cycle. The texts explore the gendered process of growing up and focus on the idea that childhood does not always mean innocence and happiness. Tusquets and Sanz demystify childhood as a period free from suffering. *El mismo mar* uses a more conventional framework regarding life stages, namely the symbolism of the seasons, although it also problematises the meanings attributed to these. *Daniela Astor* demonstrates that menarche is not always a rite of passage.

Despite the fact that the framework created by the health sciences shapes the perceptions of our bodies and lives, other models of thinking about life stages are possible, as Mari Luz Esteban observes. In *Re-producción del cuerpo femenino*, she points out that feminist women divide their lives in different ways from the models established by the biomedical sciences, privileging other factors such as the moment when they were introduced to feminism, changes in their sexual identity and changes of cohabitation or job (2001: 156-159). This alternative way of framing women's lives is observed in *Daniela*

Astor because menarche is replaced by other factors to determine when the narrator feels that she has 'become' a woman. To 'become' or 'feel like' a woman is a social construction and the novel not only emphasises this but also evidences conflicting perceptions about how and who you think you are and how people perceive you to be. In the novel, the latter is observed when Sonia comes back from prison and tells her daughter that she has become a woman: 'Catalina, estás hecha una mujer' (236). However, Catalina does not share the same perception. As is also suggested in the novel, this process of maturation is not always linear or progressive: 'pienso que mi madre está equivocada, que tal vez fuera una mujer hace un año [...] Quizás entonces fuera una mujer hecha y derecha, pero han pasado tantas cosas que ya no sé lo que soy' (236). The influence of the feminist movement and feminist ideas is patent in the novel as well, especially with regards to the relationship between Catalina's and Angélica's mothers, Sonia and Inés, thanks to whom Catalina becomes familiar with the work of Simone de Beauvoir, or 'simondebubuar' as it appears in the novel (99).

In *Daniela Astor* menarche neither plays a significant role in Catalina's maturation nor determines her life cycle. By contrast, menarche is treated as one of many processes and events in a girl's life. The lack of detailed descriptions about the moment when Catalina started menstruating is relevant because of the context in which it takes place. This is a novel in which the process of growing up is documented in depth, including descriptions of her physical and psychological changes, her changing perception of the world and her incipient sexuality. This is not to say that her menarche is completely absent in the novel. In fact, through the absence of detailed descriptions of her first period the author creates a distance between menarcheal symbolisms in the collective imaginary and what menarche can mean for a girl when the first menstruation is not lived as a traumatic experience. This distance is created primarily by demystifying what for some is the landmark of the first menstruation. In this case, the first menstruation of the protagonist is insignificant in comparison with the experiences she is going through at that time: the imprisonment of her

mother for aborting her pregnancy, the unsympathetic attitude of her father to her mother and subsequent abandonment, and Catalina's relocation to her friend's house for the six months of the prison sentence. Therefore, the influence of contextual factors shapes Catalina's childhood and enables her to frame her life in an alternative way. This is not therefore a 'typical menstrual novel',¹⁴ in which menarche is granted the (symbolic) prominence that would be expected within the framework of the first period as the marker of the transition to womanhood. Contrary to what traditional narratives offer, in this case what makes her grow up is not the menarche (despite occurring at this time) but instead a difficult period of time coinciding with the incarceration of her mother in 1978-9 for having had an abortion, which was illegal at the time. Thus, there is no link here between menarche and the common cultural imaginaries of menarche, such as virginity, rape, and trauma associated with menses or the menarche (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 73-82, 181-4, Adánez 2013: 48-61, Sau 2000: 59, Sau 2000 [1981]: 195). Despite the fact that menarche is not described in relation to a traumatic experience, Sanz plays with the underlying imaginary of trauma, but through abortion rather than menarche, as we will discuss in the subsection 'Monstruation'.

Menstruation in this novel is mainly described in relation to Catalina's mother and not to Catalina herself. This is significant because, given that the novel explores Catalina's changes, we could assume that the menstrual references would refer to Catalina, not her mother. This approach would be expected within a conventional narrative about growing up. By contrast, Catalina's menarche is briefly referred to in one passage:

Los acontecimientos transcurren a una velocidad increíble. *Me baja el periodo. Me escondo las minúsculas tetas debajo de los jerséis y agacho la cabeza cuando paso por delante del taller mecánico. Dejo de ser una enana del circo, una liliputiense muy arregladita, una mocosa que anda con los tacones de su madre.* (*Daniela Astor*: 185, my emphasis)

¹⁴ I use the term 'typical menstrual novel' to refer to linear narratives about girls' development that culminate in the arrival of menstruation.

The menstrual reference here is almost disguised among other changes. The prompt allusion to her menarche contrasts with the detail in the descriptions of the changing body in puberty, which includes physical modifications ('abultados botones de mis dos tetitas que duelen. A veces noto un escozor como si la carne se abriera para dejar paso a la floración de una patata' 25; 'me salen granitos en la frente' 184), and changes in body odour, for example, the acrid smell that Catalina's mother identifies with vaginal secretions ('Aquí huele a choto' 177), the appearance of body hair (201, 209), and also self-exploration and pleasure ('Disfrutar [los sábados] de las masturbaciones que aún no se llaman así, pero que no dejan de serlo. Densas y punzantes' 91).

In contrast to the fleeting menstrual reference to Catalina's period, the narrator gives much more detail regarding her mother's period. Through this strategy Sanz is able to explore the subject of menstruation without falling into a more conventional coming-of-age narrative. This novel explores the way in which Catalina is familiar with her mother's periods. She knows how they affect her; Catalina notices that just before her mother starts menstruating her body becomes more sensitive to touch. Catalina knows that she should not be too noisy, has to eat the deep-fried fish that she hates and she should not insist on going to bed late at night (66). The second mention of Catalina's mother and her menses is also related to premenstrual feelings and is depicted from a sympathetic point of view. The voice of the narrator explains that her father has left the house and she, Catalina, does not miss him because her relationship with him was not close. This stands in contrast to how she feels when her mother is not at home: 'Cuando mi madre se va, la casa está vacía. De las malas y las buenas vibraciones. De la emanación vaporosa del síndrome premenstrual' (183).¹⁵ The so-called premenstrual syndrome characterises her mother and makes her distinctive. Catalina perceives it to be intrinsically linked to her mother Sonia; the premenstrual

¹⁵ The term 'síndrome premenstrual' could be considered an anachronism within the context of the novel, but further study is required to determine when it started to be used in Spanish. 'Síndrome premenstrual' appears in 1979 in Victoria Sau's article 'Datos para el diagnóstico psicológico del alcoholismo', *Anuario de psicología*, 20.20, 101-112. However, this does not mean that the expression was used in everyday life; it is a reflection of the intrusive narrator (Catalina as an adult).

syndrome is her body, herself and not an external factor that ‘arrives’ —as English and Spanish has it (‘me viene la regla’). Here and in the previous episode, the descriptions emphasise the idea of a fluid which is part of the self, that is, menstrual blood flows down from inside (66) and also, one releases menstrual blood because menstruation is part of what menstruators are. Moreover, the language in the description of the ‘vaporous emanation’ is highly poetic and evokes this sense of loss and nostalgia that the narrator uses when remembering her mother. The use of the expression ‘emanación vaporosa’ brings us back to ‘vapores’, that is, the term used by medical practitioners in the second half of the eighteenth century to refer to a substance which is seen as threatening to women from the age of puberty until their menopause. According to this view, these ‘vapores’ were the causes of the symptoms diagnosed under the term ‘hysteria’ (Sau 2000: 69). In other words, the ‘vapores’ were the physical explanation of women’s non-normative desires.¹⁶ The expression ‘vaporous emanation’ is a reappropriation of the term that erases the negativity of its historical usage. Thus, in the novel, Sonia’s menstruations imply empathy and care. This empathy is also reflected in the content of the parcels Inés (Sonia’s friend and Angélica’s mother) sends to Sonia in prison, which include cellulose, a material Sonia prefers to sanitary towels: ‘mi madre aún siente una gran desconfianza por las compresas’ (202).¹⁷ This reference to the parcel shows a degree of sorority between women who respect and take care of each other. In *Daniela Astor* Catalina explores in more detail her mother’s periods in order to express feelings of love and female solidarity (e.g. mother-daughter relationship and female friendship), and to support the argument that her mother’s imprisonment and the relationship between them were crucial in her own process of growing up.

¹⁶ A parallelism can be drawn here with uses of the umbrella term ‘premenstrual syndrome’ (or simply, menstruation) to accuse women of being ‘out of place’, irascible and mad. The ‘premenstrual dysphoric disorder’ is another example of pathologising certain behaviours that ‘contravene idealised femininity’ (Ussher 2013: 66).

¹⁷ Commercial sanitary towels became more widely available in the 1970s. See Cesar Lumbreras, ‘La protección íntima mueve millones’, *El País*, 13 March 1983 [online].

Daniela Astor and *El mismo mar* illustrate the way menarche itself is constructed and performed. Both narrators experience menarche differently depending on their family context and access to information. The way in which having access to information influences the lived experience of menstruators is mimicked through the amount of contextual detail the reader has access to. In *El mismo mar* contextual references are scarce and allusive; readers must read between the lines to place the story in time and place. This is in contrast to *Daniela Astor*, where readers are saturated with information, implying that it is almost impossible not to be aware of certain issues.¹⁸ Catalina's lack of trauma and unease is explained by her degree of awareness of subjects such as menstruation and sex.¹⁹ She 'is' in the world, unlike Tusquets' narrator as a child, and unlike the young characters of Andrea Maturana's 'Yo a las mujeres me las imaginaba bonitas'.²⁰ In contrast, *El mismo mar* explores the lack of information about menstruation during the dictatorship. The first reference to menstruation in Tusquets' novel is triggered when the narrator remembers her teenage years. In this passage she highlights her androgynous body and the absence of menstruation until she was at least seventeen. She also emphasises her lack of awareness of menstruation: 'a mis catorce a mis quince o a mis diecisiete años [...] no sabía nada todavía de una posible herida entre las piernas' (121). This reflection foregrounds her isolated situation. The description highlights the fact that she was lonely and that her relationship with her mother was distant. Similarly, it gives us information about the silence surrounding menstruation during her teenage years. It seems quite difficult to believe that at seventeen nobody would have mentioned menstruation or have shared personal experiences with her

¹⁸ In *Daniela Astor* there are multiple references to popular culture from both the Transition and the present, especially to current technologies and social media such as Google, Wikipedia, Twitter and blogs.

¹⁹ The intrusive adult narrator states that when in 1979 she was given the famous guide for teenagers *El libro rojo del cole* (1979), which contains a section about sexuality (and that also has information about menstruation), she already knew everything about sex: 'Mi madre me lo ha explicado casi todo y lo que no me ha explicado yo me he preocupado de aprenderlo' (129).

²⁰ In Maturana's short story the young characters lack information about everything including menstruation, which intensifies their naivety.

relating to menstrual ‘management’.²¹ However, this passage about the narrator’s teenage years reflects the rigid silence not only in terms of menstruation but also about sexuality during the Francoist dictatorship (Mahamud Angulo 2012: 347). The use of the metaphor ‘herida entre las piernas’ contributes to highlight her lack of awareness about periods when she was younger. Therefore, the juxtaposition between having and lacking information parallels the way in which readers have access to contextual information: in the short story ‘Yo a las mujeres me las imaginaba bonitas’ readers are lacking spatial and temporal references; the story is presented in a vacuum. Moreover, a bigger claim can be made regarding these passages: they reflect the context of generalised isolation and repression that characterised the Spanish post-war. Michael Richards provides a framework of autarky and silence to understand the 1940s in Spain in *A Time of Silence* (1998). According to Richards, Francoist self-sufficiency after the Civil War was not just an economic policy, but rather a philosophy based on a ‘whole culture of repression’ (1998: 2) understood in terms of silencing anything that threatened the nationalist agenda.

Despite the fact that references to menstruation in *Daniela Astor* avoid traditional negative stereotypes and connotations associated with periods, there is one passage in which menstruation is referred to as a nuisance. However, menstruation is only portrayed as a nuisance in order to exercise one’s agency. In the novel, the traditional consideration of menstruation as inconvenience appears not to emphasise this stereotype, but is used as a means of achieving something. Menstruation is a tool for agency when Catalina lives with the Bagur family. She uses menstruation as an excuse to stay at home instead of meeting some of Angélica’s new Christian, teenage friends: ‘Suelo poner excusas de mujeres para no bajar a comer pipas y a tontear con los chicos’ (201). The expression ‘women’s excuses’ is unmistakably referring to menstruation because it is part of the repertoire of euphemisms

²¹ Menstrual hygiene management is the term used by organisations such as WASH Unite, who created the initiative Menstrual Hygiene Day.

sometimes deployed in order to avoid words such as period or menstruation.²² She reluctantly convinces Inés to stay at home implying that she suffers from menstrual cramps: ‘Me duele la tripa’ (201). The pains are real even if she is not menstruating. In her stream of consciousness she confirms her painful aches and she feels as if her body parts were dislocated. These sensations are the somatisation of her fears, which are the reactions that Angélica’s new friends might have when they meet her: ‘Temo lo que los chicos me puedan decir. No es un secreto dónde está mi madre’ (201). Thus for Catalina menstruation is the definitive excuse to avoid her peers and their conservative views on contraceptives and abortion.²³

Menstrual Closure

Menstruation and menopause are not only experienced as a phase of empowerment or used to gain agency; they are also used as a strategy of closure, or ‘the satisfaction of expectations and the answering of questions raised over the course of any narrative’ (Abbot in Herman 2005: 65-6). Tusquets’ novel offers a good example of the way in which menstruation gives closure through disclosure (Swanson 1995: 94-5) to the menstrual tension present in the narrative. In contrast, Sanz uses the climax of the novel to disrupt readers’ expectations of how it should end, thereby exposing and critiquing their preconceived ideas.

As we have seen, in *Daniela Astor* factors related to the context, such as her mother’s clandestine abortion and imprisonment, are more decisive for Catalina’s development than the staining of her underwear with menstrual blood for the first time. In relation to the first stain, there is one passage in the novel that contributes to interpreting menstruation in the novel as on the one hand, a way of demystifying taboos and

²² Other strategies include referring to menstruation as ‘it’ (Jackson and Falmagne 2013: 390-391).

²³ Selling contraceptives was still illegal until October 1978 (Larumbe 2002: 174). The narrator mentions that Sonia got pregnant because she had to stop taking the pill as it was ‘cara, difícil de conseguir, perniciosa para la salud’ (129).

preconceived ideas such as menarche, and on the other, offering other representations of the teenage years. When Catalina's mother is imprisoned and goes to live with the Bagur family, the voice of the narrator says: 'Ellos se ocuparon de las necesidades de mi madre. También me dieron toallas y unas bragas limpias cuando se dieron cuenta de que me había hecho pis sobre su felpudo' (242). This description appears at the end of the novel and in fact is one of the last sentences of the first-person narration. The fact that this description appears at the end is of crucial importance because of the overall perspective of the novel, in which the imminent presence of Catalina's menarche is latent through detailed descriptions of her bodily changes (e.g. 25) and her psychosexual development. These descriptions are intrinsically associated with menarche in the collective imaginary. Therefore using menstrual blood in this passage instead of urine would have given closure to the coming-of-age narrative —according to a more traditional framework— as ending the novel with Catalina's period was in the reader's 'horizon of expectations'. Mentioning Catalina's period would have acted as a climax, releasing the biological and emotional tensions of growing up. Instead, the author provides an ending which once again demystifies the role of biology by using an external event as the cause, in this case the fear of the situation the protagonist is experiencing.

El mismo mar also has a menstrual passage at the end (ten pages before the last page). Moreover, this passage also appears just after the scene in which Julio rapes the narrator, and this confirms the associative link between menarche and trauma through sexual violence. The rape scene triggers the description of a different vaginal blood: menstrual blood. This concurrence is found in a number of texts in my survey chapter and will be analysed in Chapter 5 in the context of Ana Clavel's *Las Violetas son flores del deseo*. The narrator's first periods are remembered as traumatic and violent, and her reflection on them is triggered by a painful moment. When she wakes up in Julio's apartment after the rape, she finds out that Clara had spent the night with one of her friends. What follows is a passage in

which the narrator waits for the pain caused by their separation. The description of the pain resembles a sensation common to many who are about to start menstruating: ‘todavía no duele, todavía no noto casi nada – unas náuseas muy leves, cierto aturdimiento – y me dan todavía más miedo estos dolores que no aparecen instantáneos y totales, de una vez, con la intensidad precisa y en el momento que corresponde’ (218). Readers who have experienced these signs find the confirmation of menstrual discomfort later on when the narrator explicitly compares it with ‘las primeras reglas de la adolescencia’ (219). The detailed description is a vivid account of the anxiety this moment can cause because of the uncertainty about the magnitude of the potential pain: ‘conocerlo [el dolor] y saber su calidad y de qué materiales ha sido confeccionado, saber cómo va a ser el dolor que esta vez vas a sufrir’ (210). The narrator explains the ambivalent feeling of wanting to avoid the unpreventable experience while having the strong desire to start menstruating and confront it: ‘uno se está muy quieto, pues, para evitar que lleguen [...] y al mismo tiempo está deseando ferozmente que lleguen ya de una maldita vez, de una puñetera jodida maldita vez, para salir de esta tremenda incertidumbre todavía peor y más cruel que el dolor mismo, para tener por fin ante ti, dentro de ti, el sufrimiento’ (219). The description of menstrual pain is a metaphor for talking about the agony that uncertainty provokes: ‘el miedo pánico a un dolor que no conocía, pero que sabía llegaría *puntual a la cita* y que imaginaba intolerable’ (219, my emphasis). Moreover, menstruation is used because of its cyclicity, as seen in the use of the word ‘cita’ which has the connotation of an event that regularly takes place, like menstruation.

This passage at the end and the tone —which is quite different from the rest of the novel— acts to release the tension built in the last part of the novel. The expression ‘puñetera jodida maldita vez’ reflects impotence. More than the aim to shock (because it is the only time when the narrator uses bad language), it has an explanatory effect —just like including menstruation in this passage. The arrival of menses is a metaphor for her

helplessness and the realisation that she is going back to her previous life. But this passage also offers the opportunity to give first-hand experience of menstruation. Moreover, the inclusion of this menstrual passage at the end offers a climax by giving closure to the symbolic associations that run through the novel: womb imagery, fairy-tale motifs, and cycles and transitions (all of them connected with menstruation).²⁴ These ‘menstrual motifs’ are channelled at the end through the explicit reference to menstruation.

The strategy of including a menstrual reference (which has an important role in the novel, e.g. it contributes to the plot) at the end is repeated in other texts, with different purposes and diverse effects. In Beatriz Pottecher’s *La isla de los perros* (1994) menstrual blood and vaginal blood more generally are recurrent in the novel.²⁵ In this case, the fact that the novel ends with a reference to a tampon is not supposed to shock. Here, the tampon is the element that enables the protagonist to escape from a man who wants to film her in a snuff movie. She pretends to be menstruating and needs to go to the toilet to change her tampon. The novel ends when she takes the tampon out of her bag, asks where the toilet is, and escapes. Therefore, menstruation is used as a pretext which enables her to survive. In Zoe Valdés’ *La cazadora de astros* (2007) the chapter with the reference to menstruation is a disruption in the text because, on first sight, it does not follow the structure of the novel in which two different stories are narrated one after the other.²⁶ Menstruation is described by the narrator as a disruption, as ‘sorpresivo fluido’ (330), and this is embodied in the text because this passage is unconnected from the two stories. Cristina García Morales’ short

²⁴ For analysis of menstrual symbolism in fairy tales see Bruno Bettelheim (1991 [1975]: 202, 213, 225, 232-35, 268-70), Jennifer Waelti-Walters (1982), Francisco Vaz da Silva (2007) and Donald Haase (2008).

²⁵ Beatriz Pottecher (1961-) is a Spanish writer and translator. Apart from *La isla de los perros* she has published short story collections (e.g. *Ciertos tonos de negro*, *Onca*) and writes about literature in Spanish newspapers such as *La Vanguardia*, *ABC* and *El Mundo*.

²⁶ Zoe Valdés (1959-) is a Cuban-Spanish writer, screenwriter and filmmaker. She has published novels, poetry and short stories and is a contributor on Spanish and French newspapers and magazines such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Libération*, and *Vogue*. She was a finalist for the Premio Planeta in 1996, Premio Casa de las Américas in 1988 and La Sonrisa Vertical in 1987. Her fiction is autobiographical and is characterised by eroticism and a nostalgic vision of Cuba.

story ‘La puta Literatura’ (2008) is about a sex worker named Literatura.²⁷ Menstruation appears right at the end of the story to signal a new cycle in the life of the protagonist. Her menstruation makes her focus and ‘[volver] a la fórmula del éxito’ (135) enabling her to start a new cycle. Carmen Boulosa’s *Antes* (1989) is a sort of *Bildungsroman* in which menstruation is the key element.²⁸ The protagonist is afraid of growing up and of the physical changes she will have to experience. Menstruation appears in the last two pages when the protagonist dies (readers do not know whether it is a real or metaphorical death, that is, the death of the girl as part of the transition to womanhood) when she menstruates for the first time. These examples reflect the way in which menstruation is used as a key element to describe the release of tension built up in the narrative, especially for its affective power as a process subject to strong feelings.

The Seasons: A Cycle of Putrefaction and Renovation

A study of sociocultural representations of menopause in Spain has highlighted that, even when menopause is considered a natural process and not an illness (as some medical practitioners insist), is still associated with a period of change or transition (Gómez Martínez and others 2008: online). The researchers consider that physical symptoms experienced during this time are not the most important aspect for women but ‘la consciencia del propio cambio, que remite a situaciones más socioculturales que físicas: la edad entendida como construcción social que discierne periodos claramente enmarcados en la biología y cultura de la mujer: menarquia, menopausia y prácticas íntimamente relacionadas con ellas, que se ven relegadas o impedidas’ (Gómez Martínez and others 2008: online). Thus, negative

²⁷ Cristina García Morales (1985-) is a Spanish writer and interpreter. She has published the novels *Malas palabras* (2015) and *Los combatientes* (2013), and was awarded the Premio INJUVE de Narrativa in 2012. Her short stories appear in anthologies about young Spanish writers such as *Bajo treinta: Antología de nueva narrativa española* (2013) and *Pequeñas Resistencias 5. Antología del nuevo cuento español 2001-2010* (2010).

²⁸ Carmen Boulosa (1954-) is a Mexican novelist, poet and playwright. She has been awarded the Premio Xavier Villaurrutia (México), the Anna Seghers-Preis and the Premio de Novela Café Gijón, among others.

attitudes towards menopause that women can experience are more influenced by sociocultural factors —such as perceptions and stereotypes about aging, ideas of womanhood and the role of women in a society shaped by motherhood— than actual physical signs. Given the fact that menstruation is considered one of the most powerful markers of womanhood —because of its relationship with fertility and the central role of reproduction that society attributes to women— a common image of menopause in the collective imaginary is that of ‘atrophy and failure’ (Martin 1987: 166). Such negative representations mould menopausal women’s negative self-perception and can lead to depression (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 224). These feelings are those reflected in *El mismo mar*. The narrator does not know how to describe her new situation: ‘crecí, o maduré, o me pudrí o morí, cualquiera sabe’ (122). The word menopause is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, but there are recurrent references that allude to this stage: ‘estoy ahora por primera vez definitivamente *al otro lado*’ (119, my emphasis), ‘cuando una está por primera vez al otro lado de la juventud’ (122), ‘he tenido por primera vez conciencia de empezar a envejecer’ (138). These three sentences highlight the idea of the narrator being in a liminal state, transitioning to a new phase which is even described in spatial terms (e.g. ‘al otro lado’). She also refers to herself as ‘niña envejecida’ (27, 34), which adds a new layer to her perception of being in a liminal state: she feels in the midst of a transition that takes her back to the feelings experienced as a girl. However, the clearest reference to menopause —the traditional biological consideration of a stage of non-fertility— appears in the passage set in what is identified as The Liceu. In the opera house Clara tightly embraces the narrator, and this display of affection triggers the thought:²⁹ ‘[Clara] se ha aferrado a mí como si en mí radicara - *qué sarcasmo* - el centro mismo de la vida’ (135, my emphasis). The narrator humorously reflects on the fact that she is no longer fertile. The passing of time is explored in one passage regarding stereotypical changes, both physical and psychological, and

²⁹ The Liceu is the place that epitomises the narrator-protagonist’s high class, ‘esta miserable raza mía [...] mi clase, la raza enana’ (129). She takes Clara to The Liceu as a ‘ritual’ (126-7).

feelings associated with menopause. In this passage the narrator remembers three teachers who were worried about the narrator's queerness as a child,³⁰ describing them using clichéd images of single middle-aged women. The narrator's description turns into the projection onto them of her current anxiety and frustration when she talks about desire. The overlap between the descriptions of her teachers and her own is more evident when the narrator imagines the teachers' vaginas:

una vagina húmeda y cerrada - paulatinamente un poco menos húmeda y un poco más cerrada a medida que van pasando los años -, una vagina que es también otro pozo ciego, una vagina que a fuerza de ignorada es como si no existiera y que grita tan fuerte desde esta casi no existencia que su aullido angustioso puede desquiciar el universo. (*El mismo mar*: 82)

The narrator suggests that her frustration results from repressing desire and not being proactive in finding her own pleasure. Internalising stereotypes and prejudices, she highlights the feeling of loneliness and unfulfilled desire through the oxymoronic image of a silent crying vagina with an 'alarido desesperado y mudo que les brota del hueco oscuro y salobre, de la herida quemante entre las piernas' (82). From the perspective of being middle-aged, she imagines how her teachers might feel in an attempt to empathise or even to take revenge. Unlike the language used with regards to sexuality in the novel, characterised by sea and vegetal motifs that allude to a fluid sexuality, this passage presents a crude portrayal of women as vaginas and whose ability to experience pleasure is only conceptualised in terms of a genitalised sexuality (with an heterocentric undertone). This incensed description precedes the erotic passages between the narrator and Clara. Therefore, the contrast between the language in this passage and the language in subsequent descriptions reflects Irigaray's and Cixous' conceptualisation of female sexuality as fluid, diffuse and multiple (Jones 1981:

³⁰ Here the term queerness reflects the sense of the text in which the word 'loca' is used: '[las tres profesoras] me miran preocupadas, qué será en el futuro de esa chiquilla loca loca' (81). Therefore, the term can refer to both her 'odd' personality and her queer identity. The term 'loca' is repeatedly used by the narrator to refer to both herself and Clara and, as Ellinor Broman points out, this adjective also carries connotations of homosexuality (Broman 2012: 20).

251-2, Irigaray 1985 [1977]: 24, Irigaray 1985 [1974]: 229, 239-40) versus normative heterosexuality.³¹ In *El mismo mar* menopause gives the narrator the opportunity to explore her sexuality with freedom; she experiences this new stage as renovation, and this will be the focus of our attention.

Despite the fact that explicit references to menstruation or menstrual-related subjects are scarce in *El mismo mar*—menstruation only appears explicitly in three passages (102, 121, 219)—the menstrual cycle offers the framework for the whole novel. This is supported by the use of colour symbolism (Vaz da Silva 2007) and fairy tale motifs that contribute to the menstrual imaginary in an indirect way. Seasons provide the framework through which the narrator conceptualises her life, although the novel problematizes the conventional Western symbolism in which each season represents a life stage (from spring to winter, that is, from birth to death) (Frye 2006 [1957]: 149). Winter-spring and summer are the seasons referred to in the novel which correlate with the narrator's life stages of childhood and middle-aged adulthood respectively. Moreover, the novel engages with the association between the seasons and life stages, and the biological processes that are culturally associated with these phases: menarche and menopause. But there is a passage in which the narrator resorts to a more conventional framework of the seasons to designate youth, middle and old age: 'los muchachos que se habrán escabullido a mi lado hacia la primavera mientras yo me adentraba a contracorriente en el invierno' (55). Descriptions of seasons are recurrent and detailed in terms of sensorial information. The general tone of these descriptions is sensual, a prominent feature of the novel. The sensual tone is not only present in passages that focus on bodies and erotic encounters but also in other less predictable elements, such as flowers and vegetation (18-20), a dead nun (21), and a raised-relief map of Spain (57).

³¹ Moreover, this comparison also illustrates the fact that the novel reflects Irigaray's views on lesbianism present in her 1974 *Speculum. De l'autre femme* in which she adopts female homosexuality as a metaphor for a freer and more authentic form of sociability among women and as a necessary stage in women's lives to discover their own sexuality (Irigaray 1985 [1974]: 116-7; Hernández Piñero 2009: 34-5).

There is an overlap between the seasons and the narrator herself. Spring and summer (although May is, in fact, the month that epitomises summer in *El mismo mar*) reflect a cycle of decay, putrefaction, and renovation for the narrator who is experiencing menopause. Summers in Barcelona are suffocating and dusty (90) to the point of being obscene: ‘la obscenidad imposible de los meses de mayo [...] con ese olor a turbio y a cerrado que invade extrañamente los espacios abiertos, olor a leve podredumbre, flores de mayo descomponiéndose lentas’ (18-9), ‘mayos sofocantes y lascivos’ (21). Thus, the realisation by the narrator of her new stage, which coincides with the beginning of summer in the city, makes her go back (metaphorically) to her childhood to start a new cycle of renovation. This metaphorical return takes place through her physical retreat to the inhabited family house and her love affair with Clara. To symbolise this return to her childhood the physical retreat starts when the narrator wanders around the house and then curls herself up in the foetal position: ‘me he acurrucado en el sillón de cuero, las rodillas junto a la nariz’ (30). The narrator also describes this position when she remembers her periods. She describes how, at the first sight of her first periods (‘cuando habían aparecido rastros ya de sangre’ 219), she used to await the pain in the same position: ‘yo me sentaba en el suelo [...] las rodillas a la altura de la barbilla y los brazos enlazando mis piernas’ (219). This scene reflects the exploitation of the recurrent uterine imagery in the novel which encapsulates the narrator’s return to her childhood, in this case as a symbolic return to the mother’s womb. In fact, the above-mentioned uninhabited family house also represents the womb; an image analysed in the context of horror films by Barbara Creed (1993: 55). The description of The Liceu is the clearest example of the womb imagery: ‘con mucho terciopelo grana [...] la escalera larga y empinada, alumbrada solo en rojo [...] el estrecho túnel sangriento y aterciopelado’ (132). Moreover, there is an emphasis in the novel on the colour red as ‘rojo como la sangre’ (33, 64, 65, 105, 129) and ‘rojo sangre’ (204), just as in fairy tales such as Snow White (65) or Lorca’s symbolism (176-7, 186) as the narrator points out. These

recurrent references contribute to the creation of a menstrual imaginary which is the framework of the story, and, therefore, has an impact on the reader's horizon of expectations.

This new stage for the narrator acts as the puberty she never had because she was an 'adolescente bien nacida, que no sale a las calles, que no recorre de noche las largas calles hasta el mar, que no conoce aún esos oscuros templos [...] donde unos camareros amables o impersonales te sirven largos vasos de menta con mucho hielo y te sirven cigarrillos' (119). Therefore, the narrator uses the symbolism of the seasons to highlight that her new stage, menopause, is intended to be lived as a period of renovation and agency.

Liminality and Horror

Ambiguous bodies have key roles in both novels. In Sanz's novel the changing body that Catalina experiences during puberty is explored through the perceptions of Catalina herself and her mother. In Catalina's case, her opinion is shaped by the contrast between the celebrities' bodies she admires and the bodies of women that form part of her life (e.g. her friend Angélica, her mother Sonia, her mother's friend Inés). Moreover, Catalina's eating habits and behaviour are influenced by the divergence between the two. Therefore *Daniela Astor*, through the different perspectives offered by the first person narration and the documentary, evidences the way in which models of femininity presented in the media have an impact on teenage girls' self-perceptions and aspirations. In Tusquets' novel, lesbian characters are characterised by having ambiguous and androgynous bodies. Both novels depict multiple transitions and thus, these androgynous/ambiguous bodies are examples of change.

These bodies symbolise liminality: ambiguous bodies are in in-between stages, a status perceived as dangerous. As Douglas points out 'ambiguity is a character of statements capable of two interpretations' and therefore defies order (1984: 37) and sometimes is

associated with horror. As we have seen in Chapter 1, menarche, within patriarchal thought, is taken as the marker of the transition from childhood into womanhood, separating the infantile body from the pubescent body—a separation rooted in a potential and hypothetical capacity to procreate. It is for this reason that menarche appears to be associated in the symbolic order with one's initiation into the realm of (heterosexual, coital) sexual relationship. Menarche is, therefore, symbolically linked with *machista* conceptions of the young female body as provocative, as well as social anxieties about female sexual agency: the dangerous female body. Catalina has internalised this attitude. In one passage she is self-aware of her looks and changes her appearance to try not to appear provocative: 'Me recoloco las medias alrededor de las pantorrillas para evitar ser provocadora' (104). This anxiety surrounding the young female body as a sexual being appears in the novel in the context of Sonia's ambivalent thoughts about her daughter and her maturity: 'Le da miedo mi precocidad, pero le calma que no me haya bajado el periodo' (31). On the one hand, this shows how menarche is associated in the collective imaginary with the possibility of sexual agency, which in the case of teenage girls is still widely considered a taboo (Sau 2000 [1981]: 197, 207; Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 22; Jackson and Falmagne 2013: 381). On the other hand, the sentence exemplifies the ways in which liminal individuals are seen as simultaneously vulnerable and dangerous.

In *Daniela Astor* women's bodies are conceptualised by Catalina and Angélica according to two extremes: Catalina's mother, Sonia, and celebrities. For Catalina, Sonia represents the rural: 'Ella es de campo como las vacas y las terneras' (24). Catalina sees her mother as vulgar and brutish but also at the same time as 'una mujer de verdad' (27). On the other hand, the famous women in show business admired by Catalina and Angélica represent for them the urban world and sophistication. The pubescent bodies of Catalina and Angélica lie in between these extremes and, in fact, when they play their bodies are merely a physical support upon which to project imagined and desired bodies that are strongly

influenced by commodified representations of female bodies. Catalina and Angélica have a playful pastime that consists of imitating women in show business through their alter egos: Daniela Astor and Gloria Adriano respectively. The following description exemplifies this intermingling of real and imagined bodies and acts as a visual palimpsest of the desired and imagined body and the real, infantile body: ‘Gloria Adriano se desprende del liguero y deja al aire la piel de sus muslos cuando Angélica se baja unos leotardos llenos de pelotillas’ (48). The performance of these desired bodies evidences an unglamorous reality which is depicted in the novel when Catalina makes a reference to Angélica’s pubis as ‘a raw chicken breast’ (48). This description does not match up to her mental image of a woman’s vulva in the contemporary media: vulvas and pubic hair at that time had not been subjected to waxing and laser treatments or cosmetic surgery, thus, they were depicted with dark and frilly pubic hair. This ‘trend’ is reflected in Catalina’s documentary: ‘el pubis era un pubis, al fin, un pubis peludo, latiente, verdadero’ (43).³²

In the midst of the characteristic changes that take place during the teenage years, the young protagonist of *Daniela Astor* sees herself as an amphibian, a ‘rana’ (55), which is a reference to liminality. Amphibians are characterised by a corporeal transformation that enables them to live in two different environments, just like teenagers, who are neither children nor adults and who inhabit a liminal space, in which they negotiate their new status. There are other references in the novel that reinforce this idea of liminality through references to the animal world: Catalina also refers to herself as a creature in her chrysalis before its metamorphosis (90, 100) and as a duck (49), which can be read as a reference to Hans Christians Andersen’s ‘The Ugly Duckling’³³ and the transition from an ugly duck to a

³² The criticism in the novel of the well-established trend of waxing/shaving pubic hair parallels current attempts to highlight the naturalisation of these practices. Since 2013 there have been numerous online articles about not waxing/shaving pubic hair. This shift has already been appropriated for commercial purposes: this is the case of one of American Apparel’s 2014 marketing campaigns, which aimed to shock audiences with the use of mannequins with hairy vulvas. See Louisa Peacock, ‘American Apparel Pubic Hair Mannequins Stunt Shocks New Yorkers’, *Telegraph*, 17 January 2014 [online].

³³ It is worth mentioning the parallelism between this comparison and the one in Ana María Matute’s *Primera memoria*, where the homodiegetic narrator refers to herself as a monster, neither a girl nor a

beautiful white swan.³⁴ The importance of liminality in the novel is also emphasised with the repetition of the word ‘casi’ in the voice of the narrator which refers precisely to this situation of neither being one thing or the other (‘*Casi* es una palabra muy importante en mi vocabulario’ 12). *Daniela Astor* explores the changing body during puberty in detail through two processes: biological changes and the gendered ‘trabajo corporal’ to which these bodies are subjected. *Daniela Astor* explores the way in which Catalina negotiates her liminal state. To become a woman, or to be categorized as one, requires a gendered ‘trabajo corporal’ during one’s life. According to Esteban, ‘trabajo corporal’ refers to the modifications that individuals enact upon their bodies depending on how they want to look (2011: 51). As Esteban notes, ‘trabajo corporal’ has an impact on different areas of life, from how to look and behave, shaping expectations and promoting specific ways of being which ‘maintain a determined social, political and economic order’ (2011: 51). ‘Trabajo corporal’ is gendered because modifications are carried out according to gendered models.³⁵ In this novel, the way gendered ‘trabajo corporal’ functions is evident —apart from mimicking behaviours from the media— through Catalina’s discipline in terms of eating habits. Eating habits and the influences of discourses surrounding food offer a way of exploring how girls feel pressured into conforming to social constructions of femininity and womanhood, and how this contributes to eating disorders. Catalina does not eat much (22) and she is very wary of what she can or cannot eat in order to accomplish her desired body, which according to the bodies that appear in the media must be recognisably feminine and desirable. Therefore, she does not eat sweets, not because she does not like them, but because of the discourse of dieting that makes girls and women more vigilant about what and how much they eat. The text emphasises Catalina’s poor diet and the strategies she employs to modify her physiognomy:

woman. In addition, references to the tales of Peter Pan and The Little Mermaid, which explore the concept of liminality, are alluded to in the novel (Matute 1971 [1960]: 148, 243).

³⁴ Catalina also refers to herself as a reptile (69), a carp (26) and a generic fish (55).

³⁵ ‘Trabajo corporal’ is the term Esteban uses for those processes aimed at strengthening certain aspects of our bodies, behaviours, intellectual curiosities and ways of seeing which are taught and internalised differently depending on whether a person is considered a woman or a man. The term originates in studies of boxers by the sociologist Loïc Wacquant (Esteban 2011: 51).

she prefers to eat chicken and the doughy centre of the bread, information which is repeated on three occasions (25, 26, 205), because she thinks her breasts will grow and her hormones will change if she eats this food. This popular belief is transmitted by Angélica when she pretends to be her fictional persona Gloria: ‘Es bueno por las hormonas y la grasa’ (25). Catalina’s diet can be understood as a way of trying to escape from a liminal state: she wants to stop being an amphibian to become a ‘proper woman’ like the ones she admires.

In contrast to the recurrent and detailed references to the narrator’s corporeality in Sanz’s novel and the efforts made by Catalina to modify her body, the narrator in *El mismo mar* only describes her own body once.³⁶ This single reference takes place in the passage in which she highlights her androgynous body at seventeen: ‘a mis catorce a mis quince o a mis diecisiete años yo no tenía muslos, ni vagina, ni vientre [...] no sentía siquiera mis senos’ (121). However, the narrator describes her body vicariously through the descriptions of Clara because she sees herself reflected in Clara. Clara’s body is depicted as prepubescent: ‘su cuerpo niño, casi ni adolescente [...] este cuerpo que no es siquiera todavía un cuerpo de mujer, que no es siquiera adulto’ (111-2). For the narrator Clara’s body ‘resulta tan terrible, tan turbador en su ambigüedad y en su desamparo’ (112), which reflects how liminal individuals are considered vulnerable (‘en su desamparo’) and menacing (‘terrible’, ‘turbador’) at the same time. These passages in which the androgynous bodies of Clara and the narrator are described, recall images of the ‘new woman’ of the 1920s, such as the *garçonne* who adopted an aesthetic traditionally associated with masculine style in terms of hair and dress code. Victor Margueritte’s *La garçonne* (1922) reflects not only the looks of these women but also a change in attitude. As Mary Louise Roberts points out, the protagonist of Margueritte’s novel ‘rejects her bourgeois family [and] leads a hedonistic and “liberated” life in Paris’ (1993: 659). Roberts states that ‘[t]he silhouette of *la femme moderne* - as being without breasts, without waist, without hips - visually articulated this

³⁶ However, Tusquets’ narrator meticulously describes other women’s bodies in an eroticised way (similar to Peri Rossi’s texts).

erosion of traditional cultural categories' (1993: 671). The use of these traits and androgyny in *El mismo mar* symbolises the attempt made by the narrator/implicit author to question, albeit tentatively, hegemonic models of sexuality. This approach is based not only on the Irigarayan model of fluidity (1985 [1974]: 227-40) but also on Wittig's notions of the 'lesbian body', a body which is outside the gender binary, a notion also adopted by Paola Susana Solorza in her study of desire in Tusquets (2012: 170). There are two references to Orlando (78, 87) whereby the narrator compares herself with Orlando, and Clara with Angélica. These references are indirect allusions to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), a novel that explores transgenderism through play with gender ambiguity and gender roles. *El mismo mar* also includes references to another androgynous character, Peter Pan, whose gender is described by Broman as ambiguous (19).³⁷ In *El mismo mar* there is no attempt by the narrator to modify her body in order to mimic a certain model of hegemonic femininity. But she does question her belonging to the category of 'woman'. This idea can be observed in the passage in which she reflects on the fact that for thirty years she had a 'vida de presunta adulta, de *supuesta* mujer' (205, my emphasis). The false or assumed womanhood she alludes to recalls Wittig's statement: 'lesbians are not women' (1978). Thus, she is not a woman in Wittig's terms; an interpretation which is reinforced by the narrator's emphasis on androgyny.

Menstruation is not deployed in these novels as one of the key markers of 'becoming' a woman, as it is commonly designated in everyday language ('ahora, ya eres una mujer', 'now you are a woman') and which is also reflected in literary works.³⁸ Sanz deliberately opens up a space between menarcheal symbolism in the collective imaginary and what menarche can mean for a girl when the first period is not lived as a traumatic experience. Menstruation is represented as a normal process which is lived by Catalina as an

³⁷ Broman's study of intertextuality in *El mismo mar* analyses elements related to androgyny that feature in early twentieth-century lesbian narratives (Broman 18-9), although she does not reflect on the reference to Orlando in the novel.

³⁸ References that reflect this common association can be found in, for example: José Donoso, *El lugar sin límites* (1981); Santiago Roncagliolo, *Pudor* (2005): 'Mariana ya es mujer! | ¿Y qué era antes?' (47).

everyday issue before and after starting her period. For Catalina, unlike for her mother as we have discussed, menstruation does not bear the connotations of a process linked to the vulnerability and danger that characterises liminality. Similarly, in *El mismo mar* menstruation does not appear in connection with liminality. In fact, menstruation could even be seen as separated from gender in the novel. Menstruation does not affect the narrator's views on womanhood. The narrator's emphasis on the menstrual cycle, through direct references and symbolism, does not influence her gender identity. As we have seen, the androgynous bodies of the narrator and Clara are the ones considered liminal. However, in *El mismo mar* menopause is a process regarded as liminal for the narrator herself and also for her family. The general pessimistic tone of the narrator changes when she refers to menopause.³⁹ Thus, the narrator characterises this process in ambiguous terms that cover contrasting but not always exclusive ideas, such as pleasurable pain. Despite the fact that there is an associative link between illness and menopause —‘es posible, pienso, que no me sienta tan bien como de costumbre, aunque no estoy exactamente enferma’ (51)— she takes pleasure in this moment of change, which is compared to a period of recovery from an illness: ‘[me siento] más bien con esta *sensibilidad extrema y deliciosa* de las convalecencias’ (51, my emphasis). At the same time, the narrator refers to this period of change in terms of an imminent metamorphosis: ‘[me siento] con esa sensibilidad aguda de las esperas que preceden a la *metamorfosis*’ (51, my emphasis). The use of the word metamorphosis refers to transition, to the liminality of this new stage, which in this case means empowerment to do things for herself without taking into account her family's desires or the mantra of ‘qué dirán’, strongly rooted in Hispanic culture.⁴⁰ The narrator takes pleasure in the idea of transgressing boundaries, that is, of being on the verge of deciding to

³⁹ The narrator only mentions in one passage that she is happy: ‘soy de nuevo ahora, por primera vez después de tantísimos años, absolutamente feliz’ (187). This moment alludes to her relationship with Clara, although the feeling does not last long.

⁴⁰ The influence of the ‘el qué dirán’ convention is exemplified as follows: ‘Escapamos furtivas con el alba, yo, porque no quiero ni imaginar lo que estarán diciendo de nosotras las gentes de este pueblo, que me conocen y acechan y desaprueban desde niña, y prefiero no dar más pábulo, más imágenes concretas, a sus habladurías malignas’ (186).

play Maite's game (one of the narrator's friends) which consists in having an affair with Clara.

The onset of menopause equals liberation for the narrator. In this case liberation does not mean freedom from the potential of getting pregnant, but liberation from social norms and expectations. This vision coincides with Emily Martin's conclusions about attitudes towards menopause in North America, that is, that 'women going through menopause by and large [...] see it as a release of new energy and potentiality. Some women [...] even manage to harness the anger provoked by their position in society to their desire for a different kind of life' (1987: 177). However, the perception that her family has is completely different; in their case the agency resulting from her new liminal status is seen as dangerous. Empowerment is sometimes interpreted as madness by others, which can be seen both in the novel and in Martin's study of the menstrual cycle. Martin states that medical practitioners and many young women (generally daughters of menopausal women)⁴¹ 'share the medical view that menopausal women are out of control' because their behaviour has changed (1987: 177). As Martin points out, 'when women step out of an accustomed—even if no longer wanted—role and protest, resist, or act in the world, they are defined as sick and weak (just as women with PMS are)' (1987: 175). In *El mismo mar* when the narrator leaves Clara and resigns herself to her previous life, she imagines the relief of her family: 'mi madre y Julio y Guiomar se reunirán felices y cómplices a mis espaldas para respirar con alivio y comentar que he superado felizmente una nueva crisis primaveral' (228). The narrator's personal metamorphosis is a clear transgression of what is expected of her and is seen as irrational by members of her family. The condescending tone she imagines reflects that she was treated by them as if she were mad. Moreover, the way this is described as a temporal 'crisis' reflects that she feels belittled by them in the sense that it is considered a phase or whim.

⁴¹ This remark is based on the characteristics of the sample for the interviews. Martin only interviewed women; therefore we have no information about the perceptions of the sons of menopausal women.

Monstruation

‘Monstruation’ is a slang term for menstruation mainly used to refer to the combination of the period with symptoms typically associated with PMS. In the Spanish speaking context the euphemism ‘monstruación’ also exists (Clue 2016: online) but it is used marginally. The term unites a humorous tone with negative connotations and stereotypes typically associated with periods (e.g. anger, irrationality and/or aggressive behaviour). Its use in literature appears to be restricted to the Francophone world, with the poem ‘Jeanne’ by Jean-Jacques Manicourt being the only allusion found that refers specifically to menstruation.⁴² The French postmodern philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy mentions the term when analysing images of a violent nature, and states that it comes from the French-Tunisian philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (Nancy 2005: 142).⁴³ ‘Monstruation’ can be reclaimed as a concept to refer to visceral representations of menstruation, in the sense of ‘representaciones desgarradoras’, because of the way in which menstruation is embodied as a monster or animal which inhibits the womb and literally tears apart its interior. This concept is useful because the violent connection between menstruating and feeling devoured by a creature is a recurrent analogy in the descriptions of menstruation by contemporary Hispanic women writers, including Tusquets. In these cases menstruation is experienced as a live creature that cannot be controlled and whose consequences can only be suffered passively. This description reflects a sort of dislocation because the self is felt as though split in two. In other words, menstruation is represented as an external being, not part of oneself.

In *El mismo mar*, the narrator’s memory of menstrual pain is described through a traumatic analogy: ‘esperando el instante intolerable y cierto en que una hiena monstruosa y desenfrenada me devoraría durante horas las entrañas sin lograr hacerme morir, sin lograr yo

⁴² Jean-Jacques Manicourt, *Les Chairs courtisées* (Paris: Le Publieur, 2003), p. 40.

⁴³ Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (1973) is a Franco-Tunisian writer and philosopher. He has written novels (e.g. *Cancer*, 1994, *Vies et morts d'Irene Lepic*, 1996) and essays (e.g. *L'Esprit du nihilism*, 2009, *Après Badiou*, 2011).

morir' (219). In this passage, pain is equated with torture because it is a long and continuous use of violence by an external being with the aim of debilitating and causing agony without killing. The passage also highlights the abject nature of the womb within patriarchal thought. The grotesque depiction of her uterus as monstrous supports the association of women with the animal world, amply deployed in cultural products, and particularly in horror films as Creed points out (1993: 49-50). However, the association of women and animals and/or beasts forms part of a long tradition in literature that could be traced back to medieval bestiaries in which women were 'often represented as hybrid creatures, such as sirens, forever transfixed in their monstrosity' (Desblanche in Seago and Armbruster 2005: 381). These representations reflect archetypes of femininity and the gender binary that equate the male with rationality, and the female with irrational nature (Desblanche: 381-2). Contemporary women's writing revisits these animal representations, which is a challenging strategy in itself because in so doing they not only offer liberating visions about women (e.g. through visceral descriptions that capture suffering and reclaim not only positive but also negative experiences), but also perpetuate misogynistic undertones.⁴⁴

As we have seen in Chapter 3 the term monstrosity can be applied to Jeftanovic's *Escenario de guerra* in the passage in which Tamara describes the feelings that precede the start of her period: 'temo parir a ese monstruo que me muerde y que está aferrado a mis entrañas' (*Escenario*: 38). But Jeftanovic's *Escenario de guerra* and *El mismo mar* are not the only texts that support this notion of monstrosity. In Lucía Guerra's *Más allá de las máscaras* (1986), the narrator describes her menstrual pain saying that 'los ovarios me agujoneaban como cangrejos hambrientos' (69).⁴⁵ Although in a slightly different context,

⁴⁴ Desblanche shows the way in which writers such as Fay Weldon, Jeannette Winterson, Anne Düguel, Pierrette Fleutiaux, Angela Carter and Marie Darrieussecq describe 'animalised women or animals associated with women in derogatory ways' (384). This strategy can, however, be satirical or aimed at destabilising such symbolism.

⁴⁵ Lucía Guerra Cunningham (1943-) is a Chilean writer and academic. She is Professor of Latin American Literature at the University of California, Irvine, and she specialises in gender studies, critical theory and creative writing. In her feminist fiction she focuses on women's silenced experiences and eroticism. She has been awarded prizes not only for her essays (e.g. Plural Essay Award in 1987, the Casa

the narrator of Ángeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida* (1990) refers to her pregnancy in similar terms: 'odiaba la sensación de estar continuamente poseída por algo extraño. Cuando empezó a moverse como un pescado nadando en el fondo de mi vientre creí que se saldría de repente y tras ella toda la sangre hasta matarme' (*Arráncame...*: 31).⁴⁶ In Blanca Álvarez's *La soledad del monstruo* (1991), the cramps, 'retortijones', are like 'una manada de búfalos [que corren] por los espacios cavernarios del vientre' (*La soledad...*: 84).⁴⁷ In Orietta Lozano's *Luminar* (1994) menstrual pain is compared not just to giving birth, but to a monstrous birth:

Mi vientre siente el dolor de un parto, reconozco ese dolor aunque no haya parido más que sueños, pero *es el dolor de todas las mujeres*, es tu dolor Annie, de todas las Berenices, de todas las Helenas... no puedo contenerme más en este cuerpo, *estoy pariendo un centauro, un tritón, una sirena, una bestia...* quiero tener un pico, una trompa, una cola, pezuñas, garras y pinzas, caparazón y tentáculos.⁴⁸ (*Luminar*: 91, my emphasis)

In *Daniela Astor Catalina* compares a strong pain with menstruation and her expression refers, precisely, to a sense of being tortured by imaginary beings, '[c]omo si me descoyuntaran' (201).

In her novel, Sanz does not explicitly allude to anthropomorphised uteruses or animals and monsters enclosed in wombs, but she explores the uncanny in the passage about representations of abortion in Spanish popular culture described in 'Caja 7', and in the collective imaginary. Catalina's description of this feeling as dislocation focuses on

de las Américas Prize in 1994) but also for her fiction (e.g. Premio Letras de Oro in 1991, the Premio Municipal de Santiago de Literatura in 1992 and the Gabriela Mistral Award in 1997).

⁴⁶ Ángela Mastretta (1949-) is a best-selling Mexican writer and journalist whose works explore female experiences. She has been awarded prizes such as the Premio Rómulo Gallegos in 1997 and the Premio Mazatlán in 1985 for her first novel *Arráncame la vida*, which has been translated into over ten languages (Lavery 2005: 1-2).

⁴⁷ Blanca Álvarez González (1957-) is a Spanish journalist and writer who has published adults' and children's fiction and poetry. She has been awarded prizes such as the Premio Internacional de Poesía Erótica Cálamo in 1986, and the Premio Anaya de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil in 2011.

⁴⁸ Orietta Lozano (1956-) is a Colombian poet and novelist whose oeuvre is characterised by experimentalism, a baroque style and a focus on eroticism and the female body. She was awarded the Premio Nacional de Poesía in 1986 and 1992, and the Best Colombian Erotic Poem Casa de Poesía Silva in 1994.

representations within the *fantaterror* genre, and thus, images of unhealthy locations, rivers of blood, witchery and filthiness (237-41).⁴⁹ This passage explores the uncanny and abjection with images such as ‘criaturas macrocefálicas embutidas en botes de compota’ (238), ‘camilla con las sábanas salpicadas de secreciones de la anterior paciente’ (238), ‘columpios que se balancean sin que nadie los empuje’ (238), and ‘mujer sin entrañas’ (239).⁵⁰ Building on Creed’s remarks on horror movies, films of the *fantaterror* genre ‘point to the inherently monstrous nature of the womb as well as the impossibility of ever completely banishing the abject from the human domain’ (1993: 49). In this way, Sanz’s novel highlights the popularity of films of the *fantaterror* genre, and associates its appearance with the context of reactionary ideologies during the Transition. In these films the ‘dangerous’ female body appears as women reach new visibility in Spanish society.⁵¹ Male anxieties over what was considered fearful and uncertain, namely, women’s rights and emancipation, female sexuality and control over one’s body, were projected onto these films. Creed points out that slasher films deal ‘specifically with castration anxieties, particularly with the male fear of castration’ (1993: 125). This is coherent with what Susan Faludi describes in her book *Backlash* (1992), where she recognises and explains a phenomenon of reaction against a perceived change in women’s empowerment. In this sense the fear of women’s genitals is a metaphor for female empowerment. This line of argument has also been developed with regards to film representations of female vampires as sexually voracious (Creed 1993, Tudor 1989), as has been highlighted in Chapter 2 through Peri Rossi’s homoerotic and cannibalistic descriptions. Creed, drawing on Andrew Tudor,

⁴⁹ *Fantaterror* refers to the genre of horror films made in Spain, which had its climax between 1969 and 1981 (Díaz 1993: 64), and was characterised by violent and erotic content (Díaz 1993, Pulido 2012). The death of Franco and the end of censorship influenced the development of the genre into an erotic subgenre (Díaz: 64), where the female body was displayed in ways that would not have been possible under other circumstances.

⁵⁰ Catalina’s documentary contains descriptions of eroticised violence against women where the body is ripped open and bleeds, as depicted in the *fantaterror* genre. ‘Caja 7’ also includes sordid depictions of abortions.

⁵¹ Women become more visible through the feminist movement which, according to Larumbe, was reborn from 1975 to 1981 not only ideologically but also in an organizational sense. At this time, feminism also became visible as a ‘relevant and active minority’ (2002: 159).

tentatively links representations of female vampires with ‘the rise of the women’s liberation movement, which also led to public fears about a more aggressive expression of female sexuality’ (1993: 59). But in the case of Sanz, this connection is explicit in the context of the Transition and the *fantaterror* genre.

The descriptions of menstruation as monstrosity in the afore-mentioned novels also recall approaches towards the origin of menstruation found in different cultures around the world. In *Teoría de los cuerpos agujereados*, Marta Segarra adopts anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches to explain that menstrual blood provokes disgust and is considered a taboo because ‘evoca la presencia de un animal voraz en el interior del sexo femenino, capaz de comerse el sexo masculino que se introduzca en él’ (2014: 76).⁵² Variations of this notion, which recalls the myth of the *vagina dentata*, are found around the world (Alarcón-Nivia 2005: 36, Sau 2000: 205). According to Alarcón-Nivia, in many indigenous cultures menstrual blood was initially caused by the bite of an animal which, depending on the community, could be a lizard, a bear, a crocodile, a bird or, most prevalently, a snake (2005: 36). Creed also explains that ‘[m]any early myths state that the young girl begins to bleed when the snake-goddess, or god which lives in the moon, bites her [and that] H. R. Hays states that Cretan religious vessels were represented as a vagina with a snake crawling inside’ (1993: 64). The myth of the *vagina dentata* is a reformulation of these conceptualisations that, in short, symbolise, the fear of women’s genitals.⁵³ Anthropological and psychoanalytical accounts of the precursors and many variations of the *vagina dentata* are a useful way of framing the issues raised in the novels under review and the texts mentioned above. These authors give a different meaning to the myth; they use elements from it, deconstruct it and create new representations on the basis of personal experience. However, at the same time, as it has been argued, despite the fact that the

⁵² This conceptualisation recalls castration anxiety.

⁵³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* ‘the motif or theme of a vagina equipped with the teeth which occurs in myth, folklore, and fantasy, and is said to symbolize fear or castration, the dangers of sexual intercourse, of birth or rebirth’, *OED* [online]. According to Emma Rees the phrase *vagina dentata* is used for the first time in the twentieth century (2015 [2013]: 20).

authors reappropriate and reclaim these new images they also perpetuate negative archetypes of femininity associated with the animal/beast and female fragility or weakness.

Chapter 5

Ambiguous Blood: Menarche and Rape in Ana Clavel's *Las Violetas son flores del deseo*

As seen in Chapter 4, menarche is considered to be the marker of the transition from childhood into adulthood by signalling the start of a woman's fertile years. Despite the fact that the first period is a process unconnected from sexuality, it is constructed around the idea of sexual agency and embodies sexual tensions and fears. As scholars such as Linda Mason have pointed out, girls around their menarche are seen as sexually mature and are 'at potential risk of sexual abuse' (2013: 4). This is because menarche and the body changes that are associated with sexuality (i.e. secondary sex characteristics, such as enlargement of breasts, change in distribution of body fat and growth of body hair) occur simultaneously and therefore 'mark' them as sexualised individuals (2013: 8). Thus, there is an association between menarche (and the above-mentioned physical characteristics) and the status it brings, and how girls are seen as sexually mature, 'available' or 'rap(e)able' (Mason and others 2013: 1-4).¹

This chapter examines the imaginary of menarche and menstruation in relation to rape in Ana Clavel's *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007), a novella that explores this relationship through its use of ambiguity.² Clavel's text is quite different from the primary texts analysed in Chapters 2-4 because *Las Violetas*, as will be discussed in this chapter, does not offer an alternative imaginary of menstruation and, in fact, uses stereotypical associations with regards to virginity and menarche. However, the inclusion of this text enables us to explore transgression, especially by analysing *Las Violetas* alongside interviews with the author in which she explains her conceptualisation of this key concept of the thesis.

¹ Although the term 'rap(e)able' is not recognised as a word in established English dictionaries, there are two entries in dictionaries of slang: 'rapeable' and 'rapable'; see *Urban Dictionary* website.

² I treat *Las Violetas* as a novella following the consensus on the characterisation of *Las Hortensias* as such because it is a prose work of medium length (between a short story and a novel) in which 'unprecedented, extraordinary, or ambiguous' events are described (Mccarthy in Herman, Manfred and Ryan 2005: 404).

Las Violetas is a short novel that examines subjects such as paedophilia, desire, rape and the relationship between the binary of innocence and ‘perverse’ desires.³ The homodiegetic narrator, Julián Mercader, comes from a family of doll makers and decides, with his associate Klaus Wagner, to secretly create and commercialise pre-adolescent dolls for an adult (and paedophilic) public. These dolls, the Violetas, are named after and resemble Julián’s daughter, to whom he is sexually attracted. They are realistic: they have human characteristics such as temperature, scent and blood. Their purpose is to satisfy the paedophilic desires of Julián and his clients by allowing them to rape the dolls without legal consequences. Julián is in turn a target of the secret association called ‘Hermandad de la Luz Eterna’ whose aim is to put a violent end to what they consider to be ‘perversión’, that is, desire for prepubescent bodies, whether human or not (*Las Violetas*: 119, 124).

The association between menarche and rape is not uncommon in literary works, and it is also the focus in one of the texts included in Chapter 1: Andrea Maturana’s short story ‘A las mujeres me las imaginaba bonitas’.⁴ The shared imaginary between menarche and rape is consistent with the notion according to which the start of menstruation is seen as the moment of sexual development and offers writers the opportunity to negotiate this social construct in different ways. *Las Violetas* explores the perspective from which the pre-menstrual body is the object of desire, rather than a sexualised body, because the infantile, even androgynous body, is the one that satisfies the desires of the paedophiles. References to menstruation are scarce but their role in the novel is crucial because menstruation is the catalyst of the story because the forbidden dolls are created following Julián’s realisation that his daughter Violeta has started menstruating. However, the scene is ambiguously described, suggesting that the passage could also refer to an episode of rape. According to

³ The novella has twenty-three chapters which range in length from a single sentence (e.g. chapter XXVII) to seven pages. ‘Perverso’ and ‘perversidad’ are the words used in the novel to refer to paedophilic desire.

⁴ Comparative analysis of Clavel’s and Maturana’s texts is beyond the scope of this chapter, yet it should be considered for further research.

Jane Lavery, not only does not Julián rape Violeta, the reader also commits the crime by imagining the scene (2013: 172), as will be discussed.

In order to explore the subject of transgression, which is pivotal in the novel, this chapter looks at intertextual elements and interviews with the author. Moreover, it draws attention to the implications, both literary and more broadly cultural, of Clavel's challenging representations of desire, and for this reason I adopt an ethical position. This position draws on Laura E. Tanner's approach to reading intimate violence according to which she 'provide[s] a critical perspective that allows the reader to resist the kind of intimate violence that certain texts would perpetuate through the act of reading' (1994: 16) and thus adopts an ethical perspective. She foregrounds 'the reader's status as negotiator between the conventions of representation and the material dynamics of violence' (1994: xix), noting that as 'the experience of reading implicates the reader in specific attitudes toward empirical violence, criticism of representations of violation must establish a means of reintroducing the suffering material body into literary analysis' (1994: 7). The approach in this chapter thus engages critically with the text, and our own responses to it, while taking into account extraliterary works by Clavel in which she theorises about desire in order to decide where to position ourselves as readers in relation to the case of justification of paedophilia and sexual violence presented in the novel.

This work not only contributes to the creation of a genealogy of menstrual blood in literary texts, or a genealogy of menstrual texts as discussed in Chapter 1, but also offers an opportunity to engage with the subject of transgression on multiple levels. As previously argued in Chapter 1 the appearance of menstruation in the novel is transgressive *per se* in the sense of breaking the silence around menstruation and, in this case, the effect is greater given the fact that, as has been pointed out, menstruation is the catalyst of the story. Moreover, this chapter not only engages with extraliterary material (i.e. Clavel's articles and interviews) but also with intertextuality, as the chapter is in dialogue with Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Intertextuality provides a point of comparison in order to evaluate how transgression is interpreted by the author, and the extent to which this text can be considered ‘transgressive’—one of Clavel’s stated aims. Clavel defines herself as ‘una escritora de deseos y sombras’ (Herrera and Clavel 2006: online), and takes pride in the labels she has gained as an ‘escritora transgresora’ who writes ‘escritura transgresora’ (Clavel in *Palabra de autor*: 9:34 [online video]). However, she is quite vague when describing this adjective; for Clavel transgression can be seen as ‘tratar de ir más allá’ (Clavel in *Palabra de autor*: 9:48 [online video]). In one interview she recognises that the challenge was to base her story on the novella *Las Hortensias* (1949) by the Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández and ‘to go further’: ‘El reto era ir más allá de esa extraordinaria historia’ (Herrera and Clavel 2006: online). The protagonist of *Las Hortensias* acquires a life-size doll that resembles his wife and with which he becomes obsessed to the point that he substitutes ‘it’ for his real wife. Thus, Clavel’s aim was to think about how to adapt Hernández’s story by adding more subversive content. The result was to write about ‘mujeres adolescentes que sangran y que son como vírgenes’ (Herrera and Clavel 2006: online). Therefore, Clavel identifies that the transgressive component in the novel is rooted in the inclusion of menstrual blood. However, despite Clavel’s claims of ‘going further’, the representations of menstruation in the text are based on a traditional association between menarche and rape. This association is rooted in the conceptualisation of menarche as a marker culturally read as a moment of sexual maturity and therefore, regarded as an indicative of sexual availability. Moreover, the erotisation of pre-pubertal bodies in this text follows the stereotyped image of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Thus, Clavel’s interpretation of ‘transgression’ is closer to the traditional imaginary than it is to offering new representations that destabilise normative representations of menarche. Unless, that is, we read the novel as a mere exercise of artifice based on clichés which aims to mimic and ridicule traditional representations. As will be discussed, ambiguity is a key feature in the novel designed to implicate the reader in uncomfortable,

and perhaps unsolvable, situations.

I argue that in *Las Violetas* there is explicit engagement with *Lolita* (as well as *Las Hortensias*) that enables us to read the novel as a parody of this predecessor.⁵ The novel is an ‘exercise in intertextuality’, to borrow the expression used by Linda Kauffman to characterise *Lolita* (in Clegg 2000: 110). Lavery highlights the role of intertextuality in the novel, arguing that *Las Violetas*’ condition of ‘postmodern pastiche’ (158) ‘serves to underscore literary constructedness and the notion that all texts, both literary and non-literary, are intertextual’ (157).⁶ However, intertextuality in *Las Violetas* not only functions ‘to underpin the novella’s status as a work of art’ (Lavery 2015: 158); it is also part of the active engagement that the novel has with *Lolita*, which has two different implications. Firstly, *Las Violetas* can be seen as an ‘homenaje’ to *Lolita* (AP 2012: online), and secondly, the emphasis on intertextual elements from *Lolita* and other literary and visual works functions as a critique of the male gaze and of the extent to which the sexualisation of childhood is ‘normalised’ in Western culture. In this sense, to consider *Las Violetas* as a parody of *Lolita* enables us to apply this dichotomy because, as Hutcheon points out, ‘[p]arody is a perfect postmodernist form in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies’ (1993: 251).

This chapter starts by looking at the scholarly attention paid to the novel and its presence in the media, before examining intertextuality and Clavel’s insight into the subject of desire, in order to establish what transgression means for her. Considering Clavel’s interviews and articles helps us to frame *Las Violetas* within a broader context in which desire is the centre of the author’s production, both fictional and journalistic. A comparison

⁵ As Alfred Appel Jr points out in his study of *Lolita*, ‘by definition, parody and self-parody suspend the possibility of a fully “realistic” fiction, since their referents are either other literary works or themselves, and not the world of objective reality which the “realist” or “impressionist” tries to reproduce’ (in Connolly 2009: 147).

⁶ Lavery also compares *Las Violetas* to Nabokov’s *Lolita* but she does not give sufficient consideration to this famous predecessor in her analysis. For Lavery *Las Violetas* ‘has resonances’ with *Lolita* on the grounds of its ‘overall positive reception [...] despite its controversial subject matter’, the depiction of the narrator as unreliable, the perspective from which it is narrated and also because both novels ‘suggest that under-age girls may be prematurely sexual’ (Lavery 2015: 141). We will challenge Lavery’s final point. Apart from this final point the rest are valid, if undeveloped.

with *Lolita* is carried out throughout the chapter, as this approach enables us to look into the two issues of considering *Las Violetas* as parody (i.e. homage and critique), but more importantly, by so doing it offers a point of comparison for an analysis of Clavel's supposed transgressive representations of desire in *Las Violetas*. The next section focuses on the extent to which menstruation is depicted as transgressive in the novel. I analyse the characteristics of Julián's (and of Nabokov's narrator Humbert Humbert, HH's) object of desire in order to contextualise the relevance of menarche in the story. The concept of purity is also a focal point in the section because of its connection with Julián's and his customers' sexual arousal at the breaking of the doll's 'hymens'. In this section we will also suggest that this 'defloration' is a symbolic menarche because of Julián's desire to control every aspect in the 'development' of the dolls, that is, their creation and their transition into womanhood according to Julián's imaginary of (un)broken bodies. Finally, the last section explores the way in which menarche is associated in the collective imaginary with fear of sexual violence. Clavel's deliberate confusion of signs in the ambiguous passage in which Violeta's menarche or rape is alluded to, by engaging with existing criticism about this ambiguous scene, confirms the constructedness of this imaginary.

The Novel's Reception

As seen in Chapter 1, *Las Violetas* was awarded numerous prizes (e.g. Radio Francia Internacional's Premio de Novela Corta Juan Rulfo 2005, Premio Nacional de Cuento 'Gilberto Owen' 1991, and Premio Iberoamericano de novela Elena Poniatowska 2013). In terms of readership, Lavery states that when *Las Violetas* was published Clavel was already 'an established writer in Mexico' with a 'devoted fan base' (2013: 164). However, the justification for the 'devoted fan base' affirmation is questionable given Lavery's sources: she bases the affirmation on 'one blogsite where various bloggers explain that they purchased or are intending to purchase *Las Violetas*' (2015: 176 note 14), and, in addition,

contributions to the blog are not traceable. It is clear, by looking at Clavel's presence in the Mexican media, that her works have received positive criticism and that she has earned a place in the Mexican literary sphere. She collaborates in literary festivals and book fairs not only in Mexico (e.g. Tlapan 2015, Yucatán 2015, Guadalajara 2000) but also abroad (e.g. Internationales Literatur Festival Berlin 2010).⁷ In 2013 the collection *Material de Lectura* of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) published a selection of short stories by Clavel within its 'Cuento Contemporáneo' series.⁸ In January 2015 Penguin Random House announced that they would publish Clavel's latest novel.⁹ Clavel was interviewed on 18 April 2015 in the Mexican television programme 'Palabra de autor', a programme that aims to 'difundir a través de la televisión la obra de importantes escritores mexicanos, con quienes se establece una conversación desde la perspectiva del lector curioso y no del experto'.¹⁰ Thus, Clavel's works are receiving increasing recognition.

Las Violetas has been favourably received by critics. Firstly, according to the judges of the Premio de Novela Corta Juan Rulfo the novel has 'una impecable estructura y un estilo cadencioso y envolvente, ritmado de sugerencias y abismales exploraciones del mundo de deseos'.¹¹ Secondly, *Las Violetas* was part of a selection of fifteen texts written by Mexican authors presented at the Salon du Livre 2009 in Paris, at which Mexico was the guest country of honour.¹² Finally, surprisingly, two fragments of the novel have been included in the anthology *Poesía y prosa*, a volume distributed for free in hospitals, cultural centres, mobile libraries and the offices of the Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de

⁷ Yanet Aguilar Sosa, 'Libros y escritores tomarán Tlapan', *El Universal* 9 May 2015, Yanet Aguilar Sosa, 'Hoy arranca la Feria de la Lectura Yucatán 2015', *El Universal*, 7 March 2015, Juan Hernández, 'Hoy abre la fiesta del libro en Guadalajara', 27 November 2015, NOTIMEX, 'Cierre Festival de Literatura de Berlín', *El Universal*, 26 September 2010, Anon., 'Participants 2010: Ana Clavel', *Internationales Literatur Festival Berlin* website.

⁸ NOTIMEX, 'UNAM incrementa su Material de Lectura', *El Universal*, 13 November 2013. Clavel's anthology corresponds to number 126, *Material de Lectura UNAM* website.

⁹ Yanet Aguilar Sosa, 'Penguin Random House informa novedades 2015' *El Universal*, 14 January 2015.

¹⁰ Yanet Aguilar Sosa, 'Regresa el programa *Palabra de autor*', *El Universal*, 20 March 2015.

¹¹ AFP, 'A 2 mexicanos, el Juan Rulfo internacional', *La Jornada*, 13 December 2005.

¹² Anon., 'México, invitado de honor del Salón del Libro', *La Voz de la Embajada de México en Francia*, 17 (2009), pp.1-2.

los Trabajadores del Estado (ISSSTE).¹³ This project aims to reach new audiences (‘público de no lectores’) and selects ‘obras de contemporáneos mexicanos, imprescindibles y con reconocimiento internacional’. The coordinator of the anthology states that the authors whose texts have been included ‘tienen méritos comprobables con premios, publicaciones, distinciones y crítica’.¹⁴ Thus, while Clavel’s profile within Mexican literature is not comparable to bestselling authors such as Ángeles Mastretta or Laura Esquivel, her works are being recognised by critics and commentators. Scholarly attention dedicated to this novel is scarce: Natalia Plaza Morales (2012) analyses Hernández’s *Las Hortensias* as an intertext of *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* and Lavery focuses on the paratextual elements of the novel —she affirms that her analysis is on peritextuality but, in practice, her approach is broader because she includes a discussion of the Mexican publishing industry and the way it affected the publication of the novel, and readership.¹⁵ *Las Violetas* also exists as a multimedia exhibition in which fourteen artists, including Clavel herself, used cardboard dolls to recreate their own version of the Violetas, and this project has also been analysed by Lavery in *The Art of Ana Clavel: Ghosts, Urinals, Dolls, Shadows and Outlaw Desires* (2015).¹⁶

Dark Desires: Between Transgression and Parody

Las Violetas is rich in intertextual elements. In this intertextual dialogue, key elements of *Las Violetas* are shown by Clavel not only to be pre-existing in Western culture, but also to be products of renowned authors and artists. Thus the story is not new, and the tropes and images have been used by canonical authors.

¹³ Yanet Aguilar Sosa, ‘Lanzan colección literaria en hospitales’, *El Universal*, 18 March 2015.

¹⁴ Yanet Aguilar Sosa, *El Universal*, 18 March 2015.

¹⁵ For an analysis about paratext and peritext, see Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, ‘Introduction to the Paratext’ (1991).

¹⁶ See Lavery’s chapter ‘*Las Violetas son flores del deseo*: Multitextuality: (Cyber) Art Installation, (Performing) Dolls, and (Multi)authorship’, in *The Art of Ana Clavel* (2015), pp. 178-207.

Regarding paratextual elements, Gustave Courbet's oil-on-canvas *L'Origine du monde* (1866) and Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-1966) are alluded to through the image of the book cover. The cover displays a voyeuristic shot in which a faceless girl lays on the floor with her legs open, showing her pubic area covered with tight, white underwear.¹⁷ In terms of content its plot is based on Felisberto Hernández's *Las Hortensias* (1949) and the novel also engages actively with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1959) and Hans Bellmer's sculpture *Die Puppe* (1936). *Las Violetas*'s engagement with *Lolita* is not restricted to thematic similarities; the novel also has formal similarities and resemblances in tone. Both play with intertextuality and artifice, and Clavel's novel also has an unreliable narrator (Lavery 2015: 144-46) whose tone mimics Nabokov's self-exculpatory narrator, and some passages mirror scenes from this literary predecessor. Moreover, as will be seen, the comparison between *Lolita* and *Las Violetas* enables us to discuss how transgression is conceptualised in Clavel's text concerning menarche and vaginal blood more broadly.

The novel demonstrates that the behaviour of the protagonist is the result of his socialisation within patriarchal ideas: the construction of a type of masculinity based on privilege, power, and the abuse of his privileges as a heterosexual, able-bodied and wealthy man. Moreover, the narrator tries to persuade readers to understand the dynamics of his logic and of his abusive behaviour. The perspective of the narrator exposes readers to arguments aimed at rationalising his actions or desires, potentially to exculpate him. This strategy is also a prominent feature of *Lolita*. Therefore HH and Julián not only share their incestuous attraction towards their daughters (step-daughter in HH's case) and sexual abuse—although, as will be seen, this is disputed in the case of *Las Violetas*— but also the fact that both address the reader directly, as the novels are written as confessions that seek the reader's empathy by rationalising their behaviour.

¹⁷ The use of these canonical visual works sets the scopophilic lens of the novel, in which the narrator aims to construct a complicit reader.

Julián's arguments are stereotypical excuses used to justify rape by both rapists (Scully and Marolla 1984: 533-37) and wider sectors of the population (e.g. Burt and Albin 1981, Acock and Ireland 1983, Gilmartin-Zena 1988: 280).¹⁸ Firstly, he demonstrates an essentialist approach when he alludes to destiny and genealogy. According to this view, his paedophilic tendencies have been partly inherited from his father, who had created the factory of dolls: 'Digamos que mi destino estuvo trazado antes de mi nacimiento' (18). Secondly, he blames victims in order to justify himself. In this way, beautiful women (especially those seen as passive, defenceless) are the ones responsible for their own rape, not the rapists: 'la belleza más insoportable es aquella que, en su bostezo letárgico, reclama a gritos una voluntad irredenta de ser profanada' (20). He reverts to the patriarchal notion that considers innocence as provocation, an idea that is repeated when the narrator remembers the moment his wife Helena finds out that she is pregnant. In this passage, Julián fantasises about the foetus, displaying the same arguments: 'la nueva Violeta, aun sin ojos [...] me contemplaba mansa, indefensa, provocadoramente' (30). He continues to justify his actions and thoughts: 'hay seres que son culpables de inocencia: son ellos los que consiguen tirar de la cuerda' (53). When the young Violeta plays with Julián and her dolls in her 'fiesta de no-cumpleaños' (73)¹⁹ he also justifies himself: 'con esa vulnerabilidad altiva que pedía a gritos ser dominada' (76). Moreover, Julián interprets every gesture as an innuendo: 'Sentadas a mi alrededor, los brazos y piernas abiertos no sé si reclamando una suerte de abrazo total' (74). In a similar vein, HH also turns to the strategy of victim blaming in order to justify his desire and actions: 'it was she who seduced me' (*Lolita*: 132). Moreover, in both texts the narrators try to justify their behaviour by presenting a crucial event from their

¹⁸ Such justifications of rape are still widely heard nowadays, as a quick search online shows (e.g. pro-rape pick-up artists such as Julien Blanc). Articles and campaigns that denounce such attitudes and 'Rape Culture' —normalisation of male sexual violence and victim blaming— (e.g. Everyday Sexism) are also very present on online media. See, Shannon Ridgway, '25 Everyday Examples of Rape Culture', *Everydayfeminism.com*, 10 March 2014 [online], Concha Solano, 'La cultura de la violación', *Pikara Magazine*, 2 September 2014 [online].

¹⁹ The 'unbirthday' party is a reference to Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), in 'Chapter VI: Humpty Dumpty'. Clavel's novel also includes one reference to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

childhood that would explain their incestuous desire as adults. In HH's case the experience is his first love, Annabel, with whom he had his first sexual encounter (*Lolita*: 13), and in Julián's case, the incident is the episode with Naty, in which he sees a vulva for the first time (*Las Violetas*: 22-3). Although Lavery recognises that Julián's "'abnormal' sexualisation' is rooted in the scene with Naty (2015: 149), she does not see a parallelism between this scene and the passage with Annabel in *Lolita*. The Freudian passage of Annabel in *Lolita* —defined by Apple as a parody of Freudian theories (in Clegg: 56)— is, at the same time, parodied in this passage of *Las Violetas*. Therefore, Clavel mimics Nabokov's text, which parodies Freud's theories, by portraying Julián as a caricature of HH through the use of the above-mentioned clichés.

A controversial point argued by Lavery when comparing the novels is that for her these texts 'suggest that under-age girls may be prematurely sexual' (2015: 141). She follows a similar line of argument when she analyses the book's cover; for Lavery one of the reasons the photograph is disturbing is because it displays an 'uncomfortable truth: that young under-aged girls are increasingly experienced with many forms of sexuality in today's society' (2015: 171).²⁰ However, this idea can be challenged because *Las Violetas* is not about child-teenagers' sexuality or their agency. Violeta, as a girl, never shows her desire and at the end when readers face Violeta's desire for her father it is mediated by the narrator,²¹ who is—in addition— unreliable. Julián's unreliability is identified by textual signals described by Ansgar Nünning, such as the use of a confessional tone and his explicit attempt to elicit the reader's empathy, syntactic signals such as repetitions and ellipses that reflect his personal involvement in the facts narrated, and the inclusion of doubts about his

²⁰ Despite Lavery's affirmation about teenage sexuality she declares later on that 'fissures in Julián's account serve to critique his and the highly problematic conventional patriarchal ploy of encoding abuse victims as taking pleasure from rape, thus relieving the perpetrator from responsibility for the crime' (2015: 145).

²¹ At the end of *Las Violetas* Julián has a heart attack and, while in hospital, Violeta rings him. According to Julián, she only says three things: '¿Por qué me reemplazaste? [...] Voy en camino... Espérame' (131), which he interprets as a 'bienaventurada anunciación' (131), that is, as a declaration of her desire for him.

own mental health, that is his admitted lack of reliability (cited in Olson 2003: 98). Moreover, the inclusion of oneiric and surreal passages (e.g. the assassination of Klaus by the Hermandad, the possession of multiple dolls by Julián towards the end of the novel) contributes to his characterisation as unreliable. The narrator's aim throughout the novel is to persuade readers to understand him, and by ending the novel with Violeta's reciprocal attraction towards her father, Julián is portraying himself in a positive way. By contrast, Kauffman points out in her analysis of *Lolita*, readers should not be tempted to believe HH when he claims that Lolita seduced him —as literary critics from the 1950s and 1960s tended to assert in order to mitigate HH's abusive behaviour (Clegg 2000: 57). For Kauffman the claim of Dolly seducing HH is not only doubtful, but unverifiable (in Clegg: 106).

As is evident, Lavery's approach to Clavel's novel is indulgent, to say the least. This is understandable in the context of the limited scholarly attention Clavel's *oeuvre* has had so far, and thus Lavery constructs a favourable critique so that the writer's works are taken into consideration by readers and critics alike. In this sense Lavery's analysis resembles earlier criticism of *Lolita* (e.g. Leslie Fiedler, Lionel Trilling, Martin Green, Page Stegner)²² because she emphasises the idea that *Las Violetas* 'is more about the work of artifice than the story of one man's sexual lust for his daughter. For Julián the desire to capture the essence of his daughter is less about the "real" Violeta, and more about a languishing for aesthetic beauty' (Lavery 2015: 156). This focus on the 'work of artifice' parallels earlier criticism of *Lolita*, as pointed out by Ellen Pifer and Gladys Clifton (in Clegg: 104). Julian Connolly also highlights the same idea, that the first reviewers of *Lolita* 'often expressed views of Dolly that are in close accord with Humbert's own representations (or misrepresentations) of their relationship' (2009: 31).

The intertextual references in *Las Violetas* show the extent to which socialisation within these sociocultural 'conventions' is present in different media as tropes and images

²² See Connolly (2009: 32) and Clegg (2000: 43-49).

which are reinforced through repetition. Paradoxically, Clavel can be seen as extending this through the production of this novel itself. The disturbing ending in which it seems that the father-daughter attraction goes both ways troubles the reader's interpretations without offering closure. Moreover, by looking into Clavel's ideas to interpret the novel we only face ambiguity. Despite the fact that Clavel prides herself in her 'escritura transgresora' (Clavel in *Palabra de autor*: 9:34 [online video]), the reality is that her approach to some topics is through stereotypes. Traditional representations are found in the visions of menarche, virginity and purity, and the symbolism and aesthetic devices around menarche and rape. The combination of what critics and Clavel herself refer to as transgressive elements—focus on 'dark' desires—with conventional elements, complicates the reader's interpretations and the ways in which we react to the novel. On the one hand we could read *Las Violetas* as a parody of the above-mentioned literary and visual products (i.e. *Lolita*, *Las Hortensias*, *L'Origine du Monde*) because the novel also includes elements from different genres such as crime fiction, fantasy and fairy tales, and this fact contributes another layer to the intertextual play of the novel.²³ In this sense *Las Violetas*, as a hybrid, is a playful exercise for readers who share the same code as the author—the implied reader in Wolfgang Iser's terms (1978 [1976]: 29), and this playfulness could be seen as a strategy to undermine the application of reality/ethical reading about the themes of rape, paedophilia and voyeurism included in the novel (similar to early criticism of *Lolita*, as previously stated). However, on the other hand, from the interviews and articles that Clavel publishes in online newspapers, we see that she takes the topic of desire very seriously; she is unapologetic about the perspective from which she writes and is very critical not only of puritanism and censorship, but also of mainstream erotic novels such as E.L. James' *Fifty*

²³ Elements of the crime fiction genre can be detected when the reader is introduced to the 'Hermandad de la Luz Eterna', which aims to 'abolir toda forma de perversidad' through violent means (*Las Violetas*: rear cover). Plaza Morales analyses characteristics of the fantasy genre in the novel (2012: 407-9). Elements of the fairy tale genre are found in the use of symbolism and aesthetic devices, the treatment of life stages and the ('happily ever after') ending in which the narrator implies that Violeta desires her father.

Shades of Grey (2011).²⁴ Thus, at the same time this stance makes it difficult to engage with *Las Violetas* as a parody of canonical works such as *Lolita* or Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), a novel also alluded in *Las Violetas* as we have seen, and which is surrounded by suspicions of Carroll's alleged paedophilic desire for Alice Liddell. Therefore, given this polarity between engagement and criticism, the positioning of the (implied) author in *Las Violetas* is not easy to decipher. However, by looking at Clavel's publications and interviews in which she explores the topics of writing and desire we have a clearer vision of her (or the implied author's) standpoint.

When Clavel is asked about the process of writing she frequently tells the story of the day she started writing when she was fourteen years old. The first occurrence was when in a dream a voice dictated a text to her and she had to get up and write it down.²⁵ This trigger, a cliché in itself which aims to avoid an ethical positioning on her behalf, recalls the first sentence of the acknowledgments of *Las Violetas*: 'Este libro surgió de un sueño que me fue confiado' (*Las Violetas*: 136). Clavel's representations of herself as a passive recipient is a recurring feature in interviews: 'yo no escogí la escritura, sino que la escritura me eligió a mí' (Herrero and Clavel 2006: online). This strategy of limiting her agency in the process of creation is a recurrent idea which could be seen as a way to distance herself from the controversial topics she writes about and her vantage point, although Clavel's tactic is not as unequivocal as it seems. Firstly, Clavel's expression suggests that this trigger is external; hence she shows a certain detachment from what she writes. This attitude resurfaces when she talks about *Las Violetas*: 'como este asunto no lo he dirigido yo, me encuentro, por ejemplo, con una historia como la de *Las Violetas son flores del deseo*, donde me percibo más como lectora que como autora de esa obra que es mía' (Herrera and Clavel

²⁴ Clavel compares *Fifty Shades of Grey* to fast food: low quality and highly dependent on marketing. See NOTIMEX, 'Ana Clavel critica a *Cincuenta sombras de Grey*', *El Universal*, 30 April 2015 [online].

²⁵ Herrera and Clavel, *La Colmena*, 51/52 (2006), Carlos Pascual, Mónica Lavín y Ana Clavel, *Palabra de autor: Ana Clavel*, 18 April 2015 [online video], Yanet Aguilar Sosa, "'Escribir, una vocación gozosamente impuesta": Ana Clavel', *El Universal*, 30 March 2008, Ana Clavel, 'Cómo no ser mujer en México - sin morir en el intento', *Confabulario*, 12 October 2013.

2006: online), as if this might be a way of justifying her decision to write from the perspective of a male paedophile. However, when she elaborates on these ideas she assumes that the topics are rooted in her (unconscious) desires and therefore her role as creator is not as passive as she previously wanted to show:

En mis primeros escritos trataba de esconderme, pero de todas maneras uno se refleja. Supongo que hay mucho de mí en Antonia, en Soledad, en Raimundo, en Julián Mercader y en todos mis personajes, aunque eso no significa que uno esté narrando vivencias personales. (Herrera and Clavel 2006: online)

Such a declaration is not taken into account by Lavery, who writes that it is the reader who has ‘perverse desires’ (2013: 172), and who therefore longs for scenes of sexual violence. This will be discussed further in the section ‘Menarche or rape?’.

Both Clavel and Lavery generalise assumptions about desires in a simplistic way to the point that it seems that everyone is a potential paedophile. In 2012, when Clavel was asked about cases of kidnapping and incest, she said that literature enables people to confront such desires, that is, a sort of sexual sublimation, and that everybody has a ‘dark’ side.²⁶ And in 2013 Clavel recognised that some of her readers thanked her ‘por hablar del deseo masculino’.²⁷ As a writer interested in exploring desire, she has a fascination with ‘nymphs’.²⁸ Clavel writes about ‘nymphs’ in fiction (*Las Violetas*, *Las ninfas a veces sonríen*) and also in articles for cultural magazines,²⁹ in which she demonstrates that she is not only a connoisseur of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, his life and *oeuvre*, but also of more obscure

²⁶ AP, ‘Ana Clavel: Hay que darle la cara a los deseos’, *Telemetro*, 24 April 2012. This point of looking into our ‘dark’ desires through an individual journey is a recurrent theme in Latin American literature that can be found in the works of authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo and Julio Cortázar (Shaw 1992, Standish 2001).

²⁷ Ana Clavel, *Confabulario*, 12 October 2013. This statement offers an insight into the novel’s readership, but the way it is phrased is disturbing, as it suggests that all men are paedophiles.

²⁸ Clavel’s obsession with desire, and especially with non-normative desire, reminds us of Cristina Peri Rossi’s works. In this sense it is illustrative that in the acknowledgements to *Las Violetas* Clavel states that the manuscript of the novel was sent to her (‘mi admirada Cristina Peri Rossi’) via her friend, the critic Hugo Verani.

²⁹ Ana Clavel, ‘“Josefinas”: Las Lolitas del XIX’, *Domingo: El Universal*, 28 September 2014, Ana Clavel, ‘La hermana menor de Lolita’, *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 127 (2014), Ana Clavel, ‘Cuando las ninfas sonríen’, *Domingo: El Universal*, 21 April 2013, Ana Clavel, ‘Eros a debate’, *Confabulario: El Universal*, 6 June 2015.

predecessors such as Heinz von Lichberg's short story 'Lolita' (1916).³⁰ In Lichberg's 'Lolita' a German student travels to Alicante where he meets and falls in love with Lolita, a young girl who is subject to a curse that affects women in the family. Every woman who gives birth to a daughter bewitches men, goes mad and dies or is killed. Lolita mysteriously dies, and her death can not only be interpreted as a symbolic death, that is, as her menarche, but also as a vicarious representation of her loss of virginity with the German student because the student finds a white flower with Lolita's blood on his pillow the day Lolita is found dead. In this sense Clavel has a fixation with the theme of 'nymphs' similar to Nabokov, who wrote other texts about the predilection of adult men for young girls.³¹ Clavel's perspective is problematic because although she does not justify paedophilia, her way of validating the perspective from which she writes the novel seems to imply that any kind of (non-normative) representation of desire should be praised 'por tratar de ir más allá' (Clavel in *Palabra de autor*: 9:48 [online video]). However, despite her claims to be transgressive, she is not offering anything new. Clavel is so concerned with trying to find 'transgressive' stories that she overlooks issues such as unequal power relations and consent, and her treatment of desire is quite homogeneous:

Me parece muy peligroso –destacó Clavel–, que como sociedad nos coarten el placer, tiranizando los deseos. Que estigmaticen todo lo que no tiene que ver con lo sano, lo bello o lo más bueno, y entonces se reprima todo lo que se mueve por debajo.³² (in Paul 2007: online)

It is not the role of literature to moralise or to offer 'good' representations of sensitive subjects. However, I find it useful to engage with the ethical dimension, to read Clavel in ethical terms (Tanner 1994), especially when cases of paedophilia, grooming, arranged and

³⁰ Ana Clavel, 'Territorio Lolita', *Confabulario: El Universal*, 7 July 2013. The English translation of Lichberg's 'Lolita' by Carolyn Kunin was published in *TLS*, 23 July 2004.

³¹ See Connolly, 2009, pp. 9-15.

³² Carlos Paul, 'Diseciona una escritora la sublimación incestuosa varonil', *La Jornada*, 7 November 2007.

forced marriages involving girls are being uncovered on a daily basis all over the world.³³

With this in mind, Clavel's uncritical approach to certain works of art is unsettling, for example, Balthus' paintings of prepubescent girls —described by the art critic Jason Fargo as 'erotic images of children'.³⁴ Clavel explains that:

La pederastia, por supuesto, no es justificable; empero, por ejemplo, ignoro si Balthus hubiera podido pintar —en la actualidad— a sus niñas adolescentes, porque de entrada hay una especie de estigmatización, de condena, independientemente de cómo se formule el deseo. (in Paul 2007: online)

Hence, what defines Clavel's writing as 'escritura transgresora' from her perspective is the narrator's standpoint. According to this view, her writing is transgressive because she writes about sensitive issues, in the case of *Las Violetas*, which are based on real-life events told from a different and challenging perspective. In this sense, the comparison with Nabokov is pertinent in that, as Connolly points out, 'Nabokov would have had no trouble in depicting a pedophile as a foul creature from whom we would all recoil at first sight, but that would not present a very interesting challenge to him as a writer' (2009: 49).

In Lavery's attempt to engage positively with Clavel's work she is seduced by Clavel's explanations and follows what seems to be the key idea in Clavel's works: that 'human instinct is ultimately irrepressible' (Lavery 2015: 29).³⁵ In this respect, Lavery's analysis lacks nuance because she does not take into account that desire is also to a certain extent constructed via socialisation in specific cultural contexts. In a similar vein, when Lavery discusses pornography, she follows Clavel's 'black and white' positioning, treating

³³ The case of a Paraguayan ten-year-old girl who was raped by her stepfather and is now pregnant is receiving media coverage around the world especially thanks to Amnesty International's campaign to prevent the girl from continuing with the pregnancy because of the high risk to her life. See Anon., 'Paraguay: Debe permitirse el aborto a una niña de 10 años violada', *Amnistía Internacional*, 29 April 2015.

³⁴ Jason Fargo, 'Bizarre Balthus Show Reveals Artist's Fixation with Cats and Young Girls', *Guardian*, 21 October 2013 [online].

³⁵ There is an engagement with psychoanalytical concepts in the novel, such as the incest taboo, fetishism and the repression of the libido, which is not developed here but is succinctly described in Plaza Morales (2012: 402). Likewise, *Las Hortensias* and *Lolita* also engage with psychoanalysis, and therefore intertextuality between these works appears on multiple levels.

‘autoerotic, lesbian, homosexual, transgender [and] paedophilic’ material as if belonged to the same category or were even comparable and catalogued in what Lavery labels ‘‘abnormal’ or non-heteronormative’ types (2015: 188). Here, she completely overlooks the negative connotations of the term abnormal but, most importantly by mentioning these terms in the same sentence she equates incomparable practices and desires. Lavery omits issues of power and consent because masturbation and sex between consenting adults —no matter what kind of sexual practice or gender— are not comparable with paedophilia.

As discussed in Chapter 1, transgression always implies a dialogue between limits, and it is therefore enlightening to read Clavel’s review of Charlotte Roche’s *Feuchtgebiete* (2008)³⁶ to see where she herself places the limits. For Clavel, Roche’s autobiography is provocative, transgressive and distasteful: ‘la novela de Roche es realmente escandalosa pues lleva la búsqueda del placer corporal a terrenos que transgreden la higiene, la medida, el buen gusto’.³⁷ And what is even more interesting is that the only episode of *Feuchtgebiete* described by Clavel as exemplifying what she considers a ‘provocación gratuita’ involves a used sanitary towel left on a banister. This prudish attitude is reflected in the way she writes about menstruation in *Las Violetas*, in which Clavel turns to stereotypical associations that are far from transgressive in the sense of ‘going further’.

Vaginal Blood, (Un)broken Bodies and Desirable Vulnerability

As we have discussed in the previous section there is a clear engagement with *Lolita* in *Las Violetas*. In this section the focus is on the overlap between the characters Dolly (Dolly Haze is Lolita’s real name) and Violeta,³⁸ and also on the way both narrators theorise

³⁶ Charlotte Roche (1978-) is a British writer and television presenter based in Germany. Her first novel, the best-seller *Feuchtgebiete*, tells the story of a young woman who is hospitalised after an injury caused by self-mutilation, and explores themes such as sexuality, hygiene, taboos and trauma.

³⁷ Ana Clavel, ‘Zonas húmedas, de Charlotte Roche’, *Letras libres*, Marzo 2010.

³⁸ Firstly, both are twelve years old when the crucial events happen in the novels, that is, when Dolly meets HH (*Lolita*: 18, 45), and when Julián decides to create the dolls resembling Violeta, after the scene of the menarche/rape (*Las Violetas*: 69-71). Both characters are meticulously described in terms of appearance but also in terms of scent, and the smell used in both cases is the same, honey (*Lolita*: 111, *Las Violetas*: 34).

about their objects of desire more broadly in parallel, through ‘nymphets’ and prepubescent girls/dolls respectively. This analysis also enables us to look into the ways in which menstruation is represented in *Las Violetas* and in *Lolita* in order to examine how transgressive, if at all, menstruation is portrayed as being in the novel.

The objects of desire of HH and Julián share the basic characteristic of being girls whose bodies have not started (or have only just started) to change with puberty, and look androgynous. HH’s ‘nymphets’ comprise girls between ‘nine and fourteen’ of ‘demonic’ nature (*Lolita*: 16). In Julián’s case his ‘object of desire’ is Violeta’s image when she was twelve, and in fact, he uses that image for the design of the illegal dolls, the Violetas. The dolls’ features are emphasised at various points in the novel. The Violetas are life-sized pre-adolescents (36, 43, 111) described with clichés which are based on, and also include, the schoolgirl uniform fetish and the ‘Lolita-esque’ aesthetic (Lavery 2013: 167-8) of ‘cuerpos prepúberes’ (27) ‘con labios entreabiertos’ (43).³⁹ Julián’s descriptions of the dolls highlight certain features such as their submissiveness (‘dulces niñas’ 40, ‘sonrisa virginal’ 41, ‘niñas de tiernos doce años’ 43), but particularly their androgenic and ethereal look: ‘eternas niñas pubescentes en el incierto cruce de los reinos aéreo y terrenal’ (36), ‘muchachas de senos albeantes y carnes y líneas fronterizas’ (39). The characteristics of Julián’s object of desire match those described by HH. Firstly, both consider these girls/dolls, as Connolly points out, ‘out of the realm of the human’ (2009: 74). In this sense ‘[HH] casts Dolly and girls like her into this supra-human category [of the nymphs as semi-divine beings]’ (2009: 74-5). And secondly, the reference to liminality in both cases is evident, not only because of their androgynous appearance, which can also be seen in the use of the words ‘entreabiertos’ and ‘fronterizas’ in the previous description, but also because both narrators consider them in a stage between phases or places. In *Las Violetas* Julián situates the dolls between earthly and

³⁹ The clothing of the Violetas also responds to the Lolita-esque clichés: ‘enfundadas lo mismo en atuendos de princesas [...] que al último grito de la moda con minifaldas y melenas ensortijadas’ (27) ‘con uniforme escolar [...] era el modelo preferido por la mayoría de los clientes’ (39). These descriptions respond to the widespread concept and image of ‘Lolita’ which is recurrent in mass culture under different forms that include fashion and erotica (Connolly: 168-9).

divine realms, and in *Lolita* HH uses the terms nymphet and ‘nymph’, as Connolly highlights (2009: 76), which in Zoology refers to ‘the immature larval form of certain insects’, and therefore the state before the metamorphosis from girl to woman.⁴⁰

Although HH and Julián are attracted by a particular look —and physical appearance is extremely important— there is another dimension which interests them: lack of agency. Julián creates copies of the real Violeta in order to fulfil his own and his customers’ sexual desires for rape. In *Lolita* HH treats Dolly as if she were a sexual toy because he is only interested in satisfying his sexual fantasies. HH does not regard Dolly as a human being, and in fact, he also refers to Dolly as if she were a doll in two passages. In the first HH indicates that the ‘Lolita’ he had sex with was not the real one but a projection of his fantasies: ‘What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness-indeed, no life of her own’ (62). The second occurrence takes place when HH plans to drug Dolly with sleeping pills in order to rape her for the first time (*Lolita*: 123). Thus HH wants to make a doll out of Dolly and also wants to achieve what Julián intended with the dolls: ‘una violación sin consecuencias’, that is, acting without encountering resistance or being accused.⁴¹ Despite the clear engagement with *Lolita* described above, there is a radical difference in the conceptualisation of the objects of desire in these texts. More precisely, this difference lies in the role of menstruation within the narrators’ imaginary. In *Lolita*, the status as nymphets is independent of menstruation, as is clear in the passage which describes HH living with Dolly and her mother, and his wondering whether Dolly has started menstruating or not (47). By contrast, for Julián menstruation marks the entry into the domain of womanhood and, therefore, of undesirability. References to the possibility of the imminent arrival of menses are oblique in *Las Violetas* and the way it is described creates a disturbing

⁴⁰ ‘Nymph’, *Chambers Dictionary*.

⁴¹ The use of the term Dolly is very relevant because is a diminutive for doll, as pointed out in the annotated version of *Lolita* (2000: 333 note 9/5).

atmosphere that alerts the reader to what is to come. This possibility is suggested when the narrator remembers a conversation between himself and Helena just before she abandoned them. The conversation is about their perceptions of Violeta growing up and the proximity of menses: ‘Violeta estaba por cumplir doce años’ (55). Julián, between melancholic and alarmed, says that she is going to be twelve years old and Helena replies: ‘... ya comienza el milagro... Si al menos pudieras quedarte siempre así...’ (56). This passage plays with ambiguities but it prepares readers for the changes of puberty, including menarche, that Violeta is going to encounter, and the resulting effect that this will have on Julián.

Expectations about the moment Violeta starts menstruating provoke anxiety in Julián, which is rooted in the simplistic belief that the first menstruation turns girls into women. In this sense, despite the fact that *Las Violetas* does not equate changing adolescent bodies with an increase in desirability (because of the paedophilic desires of the protagonist), the novel relies on the traditional notion of equating menarche with the entry into womanhood. Thus, by comparing the way in which menstruation is represented in Clavel’s novel and in Nabokov’s *Lolita* it is evident that *Lolita* subverts the traditional imaginary of menstruation to a greater extent than *Las Violetas*. In *Lolita* the traditional link between menstruation and reproduction is non-existent and HH’s notion of nymphet is independent of the reality of having periods.

I interpret Julián’s fear of his daughter’s menstruation as the fear of knowing that her body will start to change, and not as a fear of the potentiality of becoming pregnant, as Lavery seems to argue (Lavery 2015: 150). The same fear is described by the narrator of *Lolita*: HH recognises that when Dolly grows up she will turn into a “‘college girl” —that horror of horrors’ (65). This horror refers to changes in complexion identified by HH when Dolly is fourteen: [h]er complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy high-school girl [...] [and] her legs had grown!’ (*Lolita*: 205). HH also identifies this change in terms of Dolly’s agency because she accuses him of having raped her (202). Julián experiences ‘that horror’

when he discovers that Violeta has started menstruating. He only elaborates on this fear when he narrates a dream in which this fear relates to making somebody pregnant. However, he does not fear the pregnancy itself, as the proof of rape, but the fact that the woman can accuse him of rape: ‘quiere gritar pero de su boca no sale ningún sonido [...] no podrá acusarme, no habrá consecuencias’ (109-110). Thus, both narrators associate their sexual arousal with the vulnerability of their objects of desire.

In both novels the concept of ‘purity’ in relation to virginity and/or preservation of the hymen appears, although with different undertones. The Violetas are described as ‘virginales’ (36, 111) and their main attraction is to be used to ‘consumar [...] una ensoñada violación silenciosa, sin consecuencias’ (111).⁴² Furthermore, the design of the dolls is highly sophisticated. Their skin is very realistic, they have a ‘textura aduraznada’ (36) and an ‘artilugio de redes capilares que, por debajo de la piel mentida, las hacía sonrosar de pies a cabeza, confiriéndoles lo mismo rubor a sus mejillas que lubricidad a su oculta sonrisa virginal’ (40-1).⁴³ Julián has studied Medicine, and consequently is able to create his ‘hallazgos circulatorios con esa suerte de hemoglobina sustituta’ (43). The fact that the dolls have body temperature, which can also be changed depending on the customers’ desires (40) makes them even more realistic. However, their most important feature is that they bleed when they are ‘deflowered’: ‘su sangre virgen de cálices recién abiertos’ (36), ‘[q]ue sangraran [...] las hacía particularmente codiciables a los ojos de aquellos hombres’ (37). The hymen is ‘the membrane cross-culturally equated with female virginity’ (Ahmadi 2016: 1),⁴⁴ an association that not only does not take into account the diversity of hymens—which in some cases may not even exist— (Lavilla Cañedo 2011: 81) but also the fact that the

⁴² The desire for these infantile bodies reminds us of García Márquez’s last novel *Memoria de mis putas tristes* (2004) in which an old man longs to deflower a fourteen year-old girl.

⁴³ There is a juxtaposition between the Violetas and the Hortensias which highlights the degree of sophistication of the Violetas. The Hortensias have ‘piel de cabritilla’ and scents (*Las Hortensias*: 223), and they can also be filled up with hot water to mimic body temperature (*Las Hortensias*: 225).

⁴⁴ It is worth mentioning the rise in hymenoplasty worldwide (Ahmadi 2016:1), the surgical intervention that restores the hymen, practised ‘where a woman’s premarital virginity is inextricably linked with personal and familial notions of honour’ (Ahmadi 2013: 1).

membrane may no longer be intact for a number of reasons unrelated to male penetration, including deflowering ceremonies, such as within certain Gitano communities (Gay-i-Blasco 1997: 524-26). These examples reflect the way virginity is valued, regarding ‘defloration’ as a trophy within patriarchal thought.⁴⁵ In this sense, the *machista* concept of ‘estreno’ in use in popular speech —is only applied to women and refers to having sex with a virgin— shows this sense of ‘conquest’ and pride reflected in the novel.⁴⁶

In *Lolita* HH also acknowledges the traditional association between an intact hymen and purity in the passage in which he talks about his plan to drug Dolly in order to sexually abuse her: ‘Restraint and reverence were still my motto —even if that “purity” (incidentally, thoroughly debunked by modern science) had been slightly damaged through some juvenile erotic experience, no doubt homosexual, at that accursed camp of hers’ (*Lolita*: 124). However, the breaking of the hymen as a consequence of penetration is not as crucial as it is considered to be in *Las Violetas* where the main characteristic of the dolls is precisely their capacity to ‘bleed’ after penetration. In fact, blood is unmentioned within this context in *Lolita*. In this sense, *Las Violetas* depicts a much more traditional imaginary in which ‘purity’ affects the way sexual pleasure is experienced by Julián and his customers. Thus, Clavel does not deconstruct this traditional imaginary; in fact, she maintains it. The close connection between menstruation and flowers, from the point of view of imaginary and language, and their association with virginity, is particularly relevant in the novel, as it reflects the relationship between menstruation and flowers, which both symbolise fertility and the cycle of decay and renovation (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988: 116, 164, 190-2, Green 2010: 152).⁴⁷ Female genitals are referred to in the novel in these terms,⁴⁸ and sexual

⁴⁵ Articles that combat these ideas by demystifying widespread stereotypes and prejudices about virginity are common in different online feminist media, and this is a symptom of the degree of prevalence of these myths nowadays. See Irene and Marta A., ‘Palabras que importan: virginidad’, *Proyecto Kahlo*, 1 July 2013, Mónica Quesada Juan, ‘¿Aún eres virgen?’, *Pikara Magazine*, 16 May 2013.

⁴⁶ For an example of the use of the term ‘estrenar’ in relation to virginity and an intact hymen see Anon., ‘Leticia Sabater se opera “para volver a ser virgen”’, *SModa: El País*, 26 May 2015 [online].

⁴⁷ The novel exploits the semantic and lexical field of flowers and its associations with sexuality, menstruation and rape. There are mentions of thirteen different flowers in the novel: violet (‘violeta’), hyacinth (‘jacinto’ 98), carnation (‘clavel’ 98), daffodil (‘narciso’ 98), honeysuckle (‘madreselva’ 33),

maturity as ‘una adolescente en la flor de su edad’ (82).⁴⁹ Also the ‘barrio de la Flor’ is described as a neighbourhood with adolescent sex workers (57), again underlining the association between flowers and puberty. Moreover, the word used for ‘losing one’s virginity’ belongs to the same semantic field: ‘desflorar’, which in the case of the novel is ‘to pull the petals off’ (‘deshojar’, 46).

The abuse of a body that (still) does not menstruate is seen by Julián and his customers as the ultimate source of pleasure. The vaginal blood that appears as a consequence of domination and violence is regarded as proof of their masculinity and a fetish because this is the main feature customers seek in these dolls: the vaginal blood is what makes the dolls distinctive and more alluring. This blood is unlike menstruation, because menstrual blood flows independently of desires or actions. The act of breaking the membrane to let the blood run is a sort of symbolic appropriation of women’s processes, like reproduction, which is also described in the novel.⁵⁰ Julián’s emphasis on claiming his role as creator/mother of the dolls in the novel supports this idea of wanting to be responsible for the vaginal bleeding, which can be interpreted as a vicarious period as will be discussed in this section. Julián considers the bodies of adolescents and dolls as closed

hydrangea (‘hortensia’ 38), water lily (‘nenúfar’ 46), lilac (‘lila’ 90), lavender (‘lavanda’ and ‘espliego’ 90), *Erodium moschatum* (‘almizcle’ 90), *Styrax officinalis* (‘estoraque’ 90) and cyclamen (112). Within the semantic field of flowers there are more terms: to pull the petals off (‘deshojar’ 46) in the sense of ‘perder la virginidad’, to replant (‘trasplantar’ 94), greenhouse (‘invernadero’ 94), flowers (‘flores’), to sprout (‘brotar’ 95), growing (‘cultivando’ 95), pruning (‘podando’ 95), garden (‘jardín’ 95), scent (‘aroma’ 99), bud (‘capullo’ 30) and calyx (‘cáliz’ 37). The same happens to the lexical field, with the use of terms such as ‘flor’, ‘flores’ (21), ‘florecer’ (79), ‘florecido’ (55) and ‘florecente’ (9). Moreover, the name Violeta, which appears in different contexts (names of characters, Helena’s favourite colour, the fragrance of the dolls, in a reference to one of Neruda’s poems), makes the reader consider its associations with the sound of the frequently used word ‘violación’, despite the fact that their etymology is unrelated. ‘Violeta’ comes from the Latin *viola*, whereas ‘violar’ comes from the Latin *violare* which is related to the word ‘violencia’. Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* [online].

⁴⁸ The terms used to refer to female genitals are bud (‘capullo’ 30), calyx (‘cáliz’ 37), ‘flor abierta de su inocencia’ (49-50), ‘cuerpo recién florecido’ (55), ‘botón erecto de una flor a punto de prodigarse’ (75).

⁴⁹ There is only a mention of female genitals in which the semantic field changes: ‘su perfume de pescado’ (95).

⁵⁰ The topic of men’s envy of reproduction appears in three passages. Firstly, in the case of Julián’s father, the trigger to create dolls coincides with his wife’s pregnancy, which can be considered as a vicarious process of reproduction in which Julián’s father channels his envy of pregnancy. Secondly, Julián adopts his role as mother and father of the dolls (‘a las que conocía desde antes de su nacimiento en los moldes, de quienes en cierta medida era yo su progenitor’, 74). Finally, Julián is more assertive later on when he states that: ‘las Violetas [...] nacieron de una pasión ilícita: la mía. Fui yo quien las concibió’ (126).

and he longs for the moment that he can break ‘sus cuerpos cerrados y perfectos de muñecas inofensivas, romperlas con una grieta esencial, hacerlas vulnerables. Tan vulnerables y frágiles —sé muy bien que pocos se atreverán a admitirlo— como sólo un hombre es capaz de serlo’ (*Las Violetas*: 71). The narrator is implying in this passage that he wants to perform a symbolic menarche, preserving the traditional meaning of menarche as the transition to womanhood. However in this case the vaginal bleeding caused by rape is the marker of the transition of girls into womanhood.

The novel explores Julián’s conceptualisations of bodies as broken and unbroken, a differentiation rooted not only in the genital difference of having a vagina or penis, but also on their sexual ‘initiation’ and their perception as vulnerable. Unsealed bodies leak and bleed; something unthinkable for Julián unless the bleeding is caused by penetration (71). He has to be responsible for the bleeding; it is like a trophy that confirms his power. In this respect, Julián’s (and his customers’) masculinity is constructed around the capacity of inflicting pain through creating a wound. This conceptualisation of women as broken reminds us of Freudian ideas according to which women were conceived of in terms of castrated men (Freud 1933). In fact, Clavel engages with this idea by writing the episode in which Julián, as a boy, sees Naty’s vulva. In addition, at the same time this episode has resonances with the Freudian passage of Annabel in *Lolita*, as mentioned previously. The pubescent girl Annabel Leigh was HH’s first love; they had intimate contact and she died of typhus shortly after (*Lolita*: 13). In the scene with Naty Julián discovers the difference between the girl and the dolls; for him Naty is ‘broken’ because she has a vulva, and he repeats ‘[r]ota-rotarota...’ (22) until Naty herself realises the difference between her genitals and the smoothness and absence of a ‘hole’ in the dolls’ genital anatomy and screams out, terrified. Not only does Naty’s reaction scare Julián, so too does the fact that he has discovered ‘el secreto de su herida’ (23). Julián allies himself with the dolls, who for him are closer to him in the sense that they are sealed, unbroken, unlike Naty and her vulva:

‘me sentí seguro junto al universo perfecto de su cuerpo cerrado y sin cicatriz alguna’ (23). A sealed body is what makes Julián feel safe; a clear reference to Freud’s castration anxiety (Freud 1914) according to which when a boy sees a vulva, he first cannot believe the lack of penis and second, he becomes frightened because he may also be castrated. Julián refers to Naty’s vulva with euphemistic expressions related to holes: ‘esa grieta era una boca y un abismo [...] una herida pródiga’ (61),⁵¹ instead of interpreting his penis as an abnormal protuberance in relation to Naty’s external genitals.⁵² Abjection, dirt in Douglas’ terms, is that which is not in the ‘right’ place; in this case Julián thinks of the penis as the ‘right thing to have’, and Naty’s perceived otherness threatens him. Within Julián’s worldviews, broken bodies are those regarded as vulnerable.⁵³ Julián’s desires are grounded in fantasies of domination and violence. When he describes his sexual practices he takes pleasure using force; in one scene he talks about one of his dolls, Clavel (‘una Violeta ingobernable’) with whom he had to take extra measures: ‘había que someterla siempre de pie: atada, amordazada, aun descoyuntada’, ‘había que castigarla’ (98).⁵⁴ This passage illustrates Rubí Carreño’s theory that characters considered ‘feminine’ (women, homosexuals and children) are subjected to sexual violence mainly by male characters in order to ‘castigar en ellas (y en sí mismos) el deseo que “despiertan”’ (Carreño 2007: 185).⁵⁵ In both *Las Violetas* and *Lolita* the narrators not only derive pleasure from taking advantage of vulnerable girls (real or fictional in the case of the dolls) but both also blame their victims, arguing that these had

⁵¹ The vocabulary used by the narrator to refer to the vulva is exclusively explored through euphemisms of two types: related to flowers, as we have seen, and associated with holes. In the case of the imaginary of vulva as hole we find the terms ‘herida’ (34), ‘rota’ (22), ‘flor abierta’ (49), ‘grieta’ (61), ‘abismo’ (61), ‘grieta esencial’ (71), ‘herida pródiga’ (61), ‘herida original’ (123).

⁵² The rejection of Freud’s female castration complex was proposed by feminist psychoanalyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni who indicates that women do not lack anything (Adánez 2013: 164).

⁵³ This affirmation is also consistent with two passages in which Julián describes himself as broken. In one he discovers that Violeta menstruates (‘estaba roto [...] Toda felicidad era [...] una herida permanente’ 71) and in the second passage Julián feels broken when he finds out that his colleague Klaus is dead (me había convertido en un ser fracturado y vulnerable, un guiñapo [...] una herida lamentable y doliente’, 113). These passages show that when he uses the expression ‘to be broken’ he is portraying himself as vulnerable.

⁵⁴ These passages are a clear reference to Hans Bellmer’s sculptures of dismembered prepubescent dolls.

⁵⁵ Carreño’s study is about violence and eroticism in the works of four twentieth-century Chilean authors (María Luisa Bombal, Marta Brunet, José Donoso and Diamela Eltit).

seduced them. The association between eroticism and violence is the result of unequal power relations in which becoming ‘men’ or ‘women’ depends on ‘el aprendizaje de ejercer y recibir violencia bajo la forma de prácticas eróticas’ respectively (Carreño 2007: 185).

As we have highlighted, Julián admits that Violeta’s bleeding drove him to create realistic adolescent dolls that bleed when they are vaginally penetrated: ‘[f]ue entonces que pensé en construir las Violetas púberes. Abrirlas y hacerlas sangrar’ (71). This direct affirmation unfolds after the allusive passage that intertwines the imaginaries of menarche and rape.⁵⁶ Despite Clavel’s claims about her transgressive writing she is still using the same imaginary present in the collective unconscious. However Clavel is not the only writer to do this; menarche, rape, virginity, blood that results from ‘defloration’ form part of the same mixed imaginary present in many contemporary texts. Almudena Grandes’ *Las edades de Lulú* (1989) explores the prestige of the blood resulting from the first penetration (if indeed bleeding results).⁵⁷ In Grandes’ novel it is the woman who praises this blood: after Lulú and Pablo have sex, she wants to know if she has bled a lot, and he says no. Lulú is disappointed because she was expecting, and looking forward to, a haemorrhage:

No había sangrado nada. Nada. Aquello sí que era un desastre. Había pasado algo importantísimo, decisivo, algo que no se volvería a repetir jamás, y mi cuerpo no se había dignado a conmemorarlo con un par de gotas de sangre, un mínimo gesto dramático. Me había defraudado mi propio cuerpo. Yo había imaginado algo más truculento, más acorde con la vertiente patética de la cuestión, *toda una hemorragia*, un desmayo, algo, y solamente había tenido un orgasmo, un orgasmo largo y distinto, incluso de algún modo doloroso, pero un orgasmo más, al fin y al cabo. (*Las edades...: 80*, my emphasis)

Las Violetas is an example of the way in which the loss of virginity is intrinsically associated with a release of blood. Similarly, in Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus* (1982) Esteban rapes Pancha García when she is fifteen, and his way of realising that she was a virgin is that she bleeds: ‘se dio cuenta demasiado tarde, por las salpicaduras

⁵⁶ Freud argues in his essay ‘The Taboo of Virginity’ (1918) that some women subconsciously associate menstrual blood and defloration, which entails connotations of physical harm (Freud 1971 [1918]: 221).

⁵⁷ In *Las edades de Lulú* the menarche of the protagonist is also the catalyst of the story.

sangrientas en su vestido, que la joven era virgen' (*La casa...*: 56).⁵⁸ Reina Roffé's *Monte de Venus* (1976)⁵⁹ and Albalucía Angel's *Misiá señora* (1982)⁶⁰ also explore this relationship, although the perspective of these two novels involves a traumatic backdrop that differs from Grandes' novel.

Menarche or Rape?

In chapter XI the narrator makes a confession to the implied reader: 'Sólo esta vez, antes de que mis labios se conviertan en ceniza, me atreveré a decirlo' (64). What follows is a passage that changes in format and style: it is written in verse and employs narrative devices such as the juxtaposed repetitions in the passage of 'Afuera llovía' and 'Adentro' (64-6). This passage in verse describes the above mentioned ambiguous episode at the time when Violeta was twelve. What the poetic voice/Julián says is that Violeta has a shower and he goes unnoticed into the bathroom to observe her naked. At the end of the passage the allusiveness of the descriptions makes it difficult for the reader to decipher what happens in the bathroom. However, the violence that is suggested in the descriptions makes an interpretation of rape possible:

La mirada había rasgado el velo de la
niebla y la cortina.
El cuerpo dulce y frutal también.
Súbitamente desgarrado. Derramándose
en gotas violentas que salpicaban de púrpura
la blancura de la tina. (*Las Violetas*: 66)

The passage starts by focusing on Julián's gaze, which is described as being able to pierce.

⁵⁸ The association of defloration with blood is so common that for Esteban there is no other explanation for Pancha's haemorrhage (i.e. as a violent sex act).

⁵⁹ 'Yo no muy despierta ni consciente de lo que me sucedía, me rendí. Cuando terminó todo, por suerte muy pronto, me quedé tendida sobre la cama bramando de bronca. No sé si se dio cuenta, en su arrebató, que yo era virgen, que estaba sangrando y maldiciendo a toda la inmunda humanidad' (*Monte de Venus*: 112).

⁶⁰ 'Un año más que tú, tenía, cuando me desfloraron [...] me desvistió, prenda por prenda, vamos a ver el tálamo nupcial, se rió [*sic*], gangoso por los tragos, y ni gritos ni ruegos valieron, pues no paró de penetrarme, hasta que no me vio ensangrentada, hecha guarapo' (*Misiá señora*: 258).

The power of the gaze in its capacity to ‘penetrate’ bodies symbolically is also present in *Lolita*: ‘[I] had visually possessed dappled nymphets in parks’ (*Lolita*: 55). References linked to perforation are developed in the following stanzas when violence is suggested. The ambiguity lies in what it is that pierces Violeta’s body: is it Julián’s gaze or is it his body? At this point, the recurring phrase ‘La violación comienza con la mirada’, with which the novel starts and that is repeated twice more in the text (9, 95, 97), and once on the rear cover, sets the framework for a scene of rape because this sentence confirms that the perpetrator has already imagined the crime—he has previously ‘raped’ someone with his gaze. The presence of reddish drops in the passage highlights the ambiguity of the situation making us question what these reddish drops are: the result of Julián’s imagination (that is, the incestuous rape of his daughter), the blood from an actual rape, or the menstrual blood of Violeta’s menarche, as chapter XIII indicates. The aesthetic devices of the scene increase the uncertainty, making any of these readings possible. In addition, the decision to choose the colour ‘púrpura’ for the drops also creates uncertainty because the colour also indicates ambiguity: it is a colour that lies in a continuum that goes from red to blue, and depending on the tone it can be associated with eroticism, sexual maturity, violence and death. I have not translated ‘púrpura’ because the interpretation of this colour also depends on the language and the context. For example, ‘púrpura cardenalicio’ is bright red, but generally if it refers to a flower the colour tends to be violet, which is precisely the name of the character in this novel. I would say that in English, purple leans more towards violet than in Spanish, which in this passage would eliminate the ambiguity that characterises it. It is true, however, that the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ song ‘Purple Stain’ from the album *Californication* (1999) refers to menstruation. The contrast between the colours red, of what could be Violeta’s blood, and white, of the bathtub, is a well-worn image that encapsulates the symbolism of opposites, such as innocence and sexual maturity (or abuse, depending on the context), and virginity and loss of virginity or rape, as we have seen in Chapter 1.⁶¹

⁶¹ The juxtaposition of red (blood) and white appears in other contexts such as bed sheets, underwear and

In Clavel's novel the vocabulary used to describe the bathroom scene also suggests violence: the violence of the gaze and of Julián's desire. Violeta's body is described as suddenly torn, spilling itself through violent drops (66), which can be interpreted as rape. This interpretation can be understood in the same way as Tanner analyses a similar scene in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*: 'the act itself [of rape] becomes more visibly absent; the rape becomes a gaping hole in the text that the reader must fill' (Tanner 1994:19). Thus, both novels play with the possibility of rape. The possible interpretation of the bathroom scene as rape haunts the reader and in subsequent chapters new nuances and ambiguities appear which continue to raise questions about what has happened. For Lavery, following Iser's notion of 'structured blanks' (which refer to the capacity of the reader to imagine events when there are narrative gaps; Tanner 1994: 19), the rape in *Las Violetas* only occurs in the readers' imagination as a consequence of the reader's desire for that sexual violence (Lavery 2013: 172). This is an important assumption and a loaded accusation. By using a similar argument, Lavery compares *Lolita* and *Las Violetas* in terms of the degree of discomfort that the reader experiences, which is accordingly because 'the narrative obliges the reader to become an accomplice and partner in crime' (Lavery 2015: 11). This reading pushes Lavery into arguing, again, that the reader longs for sexual violence; a dangerous accusation that diverts the attention from looking into issues such as the author's strategies which facilitate such interpretations. Moreover, in so doing, she makes no attempt to question the author's 'perverse desire' that can be traced in the excerpts from interviews quoted earlier. There is a deliberate confusion of signs by the author who plays with two imaginaries: Violeta's unexpected menarche (unexpected for both herself and her father) and rape. But according to Lavery, the rape of Violeta is never committed (2013: 172) and readers' interpretations of

tiles. Examples appear in texts such as Lucía Etxebarria's *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*: 'enorme mancha roja sobre los azulejos blancos' (154), Andrea Jeftanovic's *Escenario de guerra*: 'Sangro constantemente. En la ducha escribo mi nombre con ese líquido sobre los azulejos' (38), Rosario Ferré's *La casa de la laguna* (1997): 'recuerdo claramente el inodoro salpicado de sangre [...] y luego llevaron corriendo las sábanas manchadas de sangre hasta el lavadero' (100). Gabriel García Márquez's short story 'El rastro de tu sangre en la nieve', written in 1976 but published in 1992, depicts women's cycles in a symbolic way through the use of the white and red contrast and the flower metaphor.

rape are triggered by rhetorical devices that place them in a state of anticipation. Lavery states that the novel horrifies precisely because the reader's expectations of violence are grounded in our 'perverse desires' (2013: 172). However, Lavery's interpretation could be challenged because it is not the case that we are longing for a scene of sexual violence *per se*; this interpretation is the result of the way in which the text is constructed: the reader is invited to imagine the scene. Thus, despite the fact that we might be imagining that rape happens—which has nothing to do with Tanner's and Lavery's explanations of the reader being the author of the crime (Tanner 1994: 19, Lavery 2013: 169-70)—this novel demonstrates the degree of constructedness of an imaginary (i.e. virginity, purity) through the use of specific devices (i.e. colours as semiotic markers, narratives that deal with transitions) that trigger certain interpretations (i.e. rape). However, the key point here is to highlight the way menarche is used in the novel, that is, underscoring traumatic connotations usually associated with menstruation. Thus, it is another example of the not unfamiliar strategy of linking menarche or menstruation to rape, in a similar way to Maturana's 'Yo a las mujeres me las imaginaba bonitas'.⁶²

In chapter XIII the homodiegetic narrator recalls the bathroom scene and adds new information: Isabel, Julian's sister-in-law, has arrived to see Violeta who has called her urgently to say that '[ella] estaba herida' (69). There is an associative link for the implied reader between this affirmation and an indirect reference to rape. The interpretation of rape is also stressed through paratextual devices such as the title and book cover which frame readers' interpretations. According to Lavery '[t]he reader-spectator may justify his or her reading of rape in the photograph as the result of peritextual devices skilfully and strategically working together to draw us towards this interpretation' (2013: 171). When

⁶² The author plays with ambiguity through the total ignorance of the protagonist and her sister about menstruation: on the one hand, menarche is lived in distress because of the lack of previous information about menses, and it is interpreted by the older sister as a punishment for having had intimate contact with a boy, but on the other hand, the first menstruation in the novel is linked to rape because the author plays with both imaginaries, mixing the symbolism of both kinds of vaginal blood—and in fact, the ghost of sexual violence hangs over the rest of the story in the eyes of the narrator-protagonist.

Isabel arrives, Julián seems (surprisingly) not to understand anything. His reaction can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it seems that he has not seen Violeta's menstruation or that he is pretending not to know that she menstruates because this would imply that he has spied on her. On the other, he is covering up the fact that he raped his daughter. An offended Isabel shows her astonishment at the fact that Julián has not noticed what has happened to Violeta: 'Ustedes los hombres nunca saben nada... ¡La menstruación! Qué más podía ser. ¿Dónde está Violeta?' (70). It is enlightening that despite the fact that the narrator is a man, the word 'menstruation' is only pronounced by a female character, Isabel. A pertinent comparison with *Lolita* can be made here with regard to the way in which each work approaches transgression. In *Lolita*, menstruation is addressed by HH four times, free from negative connotations: HH refers to menstruation without the traditional shame commonly associated with periods —especially given that the novel was written in the 1950s. HH mocks euphemisms that refer to periods (47), buys 'a box of sanitary pads' for Dolly (141), and recalls conversations with other people (his first wife's lover and Dolly's teacher) in which periods were mentioned (28, 194). In this sense, *Las Violetas* maintains a traditional, but common attitude, according to which periods are only discussed between girls or women or in 'private' contexts. In this case the fact that the word 'menstruation' is only pronounced by Isabel, in a novel with limited dialogues and narrated by a male character, reflects the way in which the author uses conventions and portrays Julián as a stereotypical character.

When Isabel asks 'Qué más podía ser' she phrases the question in rhetorical terms because for her there is no other explanation possible. However, this is an irony for the implied reader because of the additional information available. The implied author is introducing and manipulating the possibility of rape again by the use of irony. This interpretation is also favoured especially when in chapter X the topic of sexual abuse within families is brought up. In this chapter, Helena confesses to Julián that she was subjected to

sexual abuse during her childhood by members of her family (59-60). The passage about the encounter between Isabel and Julián confirms to us, on the one hand, the invisibility of menstruation, especially for men, implying that periods are only discussed among women and that men seem unaware of them. However, the fact that Julián had studied medicine makes it difficult to believe that he is not aware of what menstruation is. On the other, her reply echoes the difficulties and reticence/reluctance to believe that rape happens within the context of a family—despite the fact that sexual abuse within families is the most frequent environment in which these crimes are perpetrated (Dowdeswell 1986, Fernández Díaz 2003)—as was signposted three chapters before when readers were aware of Helena's past of sexual abuse.

Julián's reaction to the question asked by Isabel wondering where Violeta is, seems to be a confession and again feeds the reader's suspicions of rape, without confirming them: 'Recordé la bruma del bosque todavía cálido y húmedo en la punta de mis dedos y musité: | En el baño' (70). The allusiveness of the sentence with the possible revelation of the evidence of the crime and the recurrent phrase of the narrator 'la violación empieza con la mirada' (95) reminds the reader that he could have raped Violeta in the bathroom.

Conclusion

Questioning representations of menstruation is always necessary because of the tendency for it to be colonised by the androcentric perspective of medical science and the consumerist views evident in advertisements for menstrual products. Moreover, in light of current media interest in menstruation it is crucial to be critical in order to prevent the reproduction of stereotypes and encourage female empowerment. This thesis has highlighted the importance of literature as a field which offers new imaginaries of menstruation created by women writers. These writers undermine traditional conceptualisations according to which periods are limited to the realms of reproduction and medicalisation.

This thesis has demonstrated that the engagement of the selected authors with menstruation is varied, and one of the salient features found in the study is the detachment of menstruation from fertility in the texts. Diamela Eltit and Cristina Peri Rossi create a new imaginary that questions and disturbs the status quo by primarily depicting menstrual blood as an erotic fluid. They transgress considerations of menstrual blood as dirty and shameful, and the taboo surrounding sex while menstruating. In addition, both authors subvert the menstrual stigma by describing menstrual blood through excessive representations which touch on the considered 'biggest breach of menstrual etiquette': leaking.¹ Eltit's *Vaca sagrada* depicts menstruation in a celebratory, empowering and autoerotic fashion, whereas Peri Rossi's texts explore menstruation to symbolise extreme desire for the lover and the vulnerability of the poetic voices. Their menstrual fantasies and transgressions challenge the invisibility around menstruation. They also defy the Judeo-Christian prohibition of sexual intercourse during menses and views on non-reproductive sex through their depictions of sexual relationships and autoeroticism. These depictions involve menstruation as a playful component, especially through the display of lesbian sexual relationships and oral sex with

¹ Arwa Mahdawi, 'The Connected Vagina: Monitor How Full your Tampon Is – with a New App', *Guardian*, 17 May 2016 [online].

menstruation in both homo- and heterosexual encounters in Peri Rossi's texts. Furthermore, in Peri Rossi's imaginary menstruation can be considered as the object of envy or a 'foundational stone', reversing Freud's traditional notion of penis envy. Moreover, through the blurring of boundaries and recurring deployment of menstruation as pleasurable Eltit and Peri Rossi allow us to construct an imaginary of menstrual blood that resists what is considered 'normal' in society.

The analysis of Marta Sanz's *Daniela Astor y la caja negra* in conjunction with Esther Tusquets' *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* allows us to explore the ways in which female life stages have been culturally constructed around the notions of liminality and through the lens of reproduction. By contrast, despite the fact that Ana Clavel also looks at menarche from the perspective of liminality, her approach confirms patriarchal stereotypes around the theme of erotisation of pre-pubertal bodies and the vaginal blood fetish of the loss of virginity. However, her novella's use of ambiguity aims to implicate the reader in perhaps unsolvable situations, which reinforce stereotypes and ridicule traditional representations of growing up.

This thesis has also contributed to the discussion of broader issues such as the dialogue between transgression and taboo, thanks to the comparative approach of the research which enables us to analyse this tension. Chapter 2 demonstrated that Eltit is determined to play with and transgress the imaginary of menstruation, whereas Peri Rossi's subversive representations (e.g. menstruation in conjunction with other subjects such as religion and cannibalism, and often depicting scenes of oral sex where menstruation is involved) become normalised through their repetition. In Peri Rossi's case, the constant connection of menstruation with orality tends to attenuate the subversive power of such an image. Her descriptions of menstruation within the context of eroticism are repetitive, relegating what could be considered, at first, a subversive imaginary. The limits are not sufficiently marked so as to make the transgression explicit because the representations of

menstruation as erotic fluid are normalised, and this could indeed be Peri Rossi's aim. In Eltit's novel there is a dialogue between the boundaries of transgressions and their limits, illustrating the tension between the questioning and reinforcement of the taboo. The analysis of *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* also revealed the tension between transgression and limits at different levels. Firstly, an examination of interviews with and extra-literary texts by Clavel showed the author's notion of what 'transgressive' is, which served as framework from which to evaluate the imaginary of menstruation that she displayed in the novella. Second, the intertextual analysis with *Lolita* provided a point of comparison useful for examining the extent to which Clavel's intention was to explore transgression. By mimicking *Lolita*, the novella can be seen as an exercise in artifice (use of irony) but at the same time, Clavel reinforces stereotypes with her approach.

A key finding is the strong connection between the private and the public through the use of menstruation. This is particularly evident in *Vaca sagrada*, *Escenario de guerra*, *Daniela Astor* and *El mismo mar* where the contexts of the Chilean and Spanish dictatorships are juxtaposed with personal transitions. Eltit and Andrea Jeftanovic use menstruation as a metaphor through which the narrators experience their connection with others' suffering. Therefore, menstrual blood represents solidarity, memory, and mobilisation in Eltit's case. Sanz demystifies menarche as a landmark in girls' lives by focusing on the influence of external factors (e.g. social restrictions, prohibitions which limit personal freedom) and the effects of conservative mentalities and institutions on teenagers' development. Tusquets' novel uses menopause as a framework to explore both the personal rebellion of the homodiegetic narrator against her social circle, and Spain's transition into symbolic adulthood. By contrast, Peri Rossi's and Clavel's works focus on the realm of desire. Peri Rossi's texts have a political dimension in the sense that she aims at normalising desires through the repertoire of fetishes that include menstrual blood. The elusive perspective of Clavel and the ambiguity present in *Las Violetas* make the text difficult to

read in ethical/political terms, as the analysis in Chapter 5 has suggested. In addition, descriptions of blood in more general terms are also used by authors to explore body politics, and thus intermingling once more the personal and the political. This strategy is developed through two different approaches. Firstly, by describing blood as gendered through radically different portrayals of women's and men's blood (Chapter 2 and 3), and secondly, through the use of vicarious menstruation (Chapter 3 and 5), that is, depictions of bleeding female bodies —excluding menstruation— which can be used to highlight body politics, as is the case of Eltit's novel.

The methodological approach of the thesis, which is grounded in close reading of selected texts, has produced contributions such as the concept of 'menstrual text', but also the notions of 'monstruation' and 'menstrual closure'. Both notions have emerged from the consideration of the commonalities in the texts produced by a diversity of authors; these terms highlight a wider resonance of convergent imaginaries of menstruation. Monstruation encapsulates recurrent connotations of violence that writers confer on menstruation. However, this strategy has different purposes, such as to re-examine animality, to reclaim pain and to denounce misogynistic representations of women in cultural products as has been seen through representations of lesbian vampires (Chapter 2) and the Spanish *fantaterror* genre (Chapter 4). Hence, representations of menstruation as monstruation (through visceral and violent images) negotiate negative portrayals that associate female bodies with animal drives and consider female empowerment as a threat. The notion of menstrual closure, which alludes to the use of menstruation at the end of the narrative, highlights the affective power menstruation has as the result of its taboo status. This is a common feature found in the broader corpus of texts and, in the case of the selected novels, menstruation is the narrative device used in order to satisfy or destabilise readers' 'horizon of expectations' (Jauss 1982) regarding coming-of-age narratives. Chapter 4 analyses the use of the strategy of menstrual closure. In *El mismo mar* menstrual closure appears to fulfil

readers' 'horizon of expectations', whereas in *Daniela Astor* the narrative device is used to undermine them by destabilising the climax of a traditional coming-of-age narrative.

This study has presented examples of the ways in which menstruation is reflected structurally in the texts through different narrative techniques. The works included in Chapter 2 exemplify this approach through the use of non-linear narratives —'endless' texts— which remind us of the feminine texts defined by French feminists. Chapter 3 explores this interdependence in *Escenario de guerra*, a text with narrative strategies that simultaneously mimic the effects of trauma and menstrual cyclicity. *Escenario de guerra* displays devices characteristic of trauma narratives, such as repetition, flashback, oneiric descriptions and unreliability, and was compared with *Vaca sagrada*, a novel which uses similar strategies though this is more connected to its postmodern style than an engagement with writing a trauma narrative. In the novels analysed in Chapter 4 the experience of the narrators' menstruation is mirrored through the amount of detail to which the reader has access in the texts. In addition, seasons in *El mismo mar* allude to the cycle of putrefaction and renovation, which echoes the menstrual cycle of the narrator.

The idea that menstruation is a silenced subject in literature has been contested. The overview of texts has shown that menstrual blood is a subject widely explored by Hispanic female authors and is described from a plurality of perspectives that are shaped by the context and the literary trends at the time of their production. The creation of a corpus has also served to frame the selected works within a wider body of texts which not only engage with menstruation but which also can be considered 'menstrual texts'. Menstrual texts contribute to making menstruation visible not only in general terms but also in the literary realm. Aesthetically, authors develop this by deploying recurrent images (e.g. menstrual blood as fetish, menstruation described as 'monstruation'), offering new imaginaries that question traditional representations and conceptualisations of menstruation (e.g. menstrual blood as an erotic fluid, the first period as marker of womanhood), and, in addition,

menstruation also plays an important role within the narrative in the selected texts: menstruation can be the central image, the axis of the text and/or the catalyst of the story. Moreover, the authors describe menstruation by transgressing considerations of menstrual blood as dirty and shameful, and by underlining the tension between liberating images of menstruation and more conventional approaches which emphasise the biological side of the process and highlight features such as menstrual pain.

This thesis has also aimed to address the lacuna in scholarship of literary representations of menstruation in Latin American and Spanish texts by offering new ways of reading this subject matter, and by contributing to the creation of a corpus that merits further analysis. What the study highlights is the need to continue exploring the subject of representations of menstruation because the theme of menstruation is a productive subject matter which offers multiple possibilities for research. Analyses from cross-cultural perspectives enable us to study different perceptions, associations, and practices related to menstruation, which are also shaped by different gender ideas, across different cultural contexts. Literary texts in which menstruation is featured offer an insight into the ways in which periods are negotiated in different cultures and times, and thus they are valuable sources in which to explore differences in the ways periods are negotiated, not only in 'logistical' terms (e.g. menstrual management, use of remedies, influence of restrictions on the experience), but also the impact of periods on subjects such as womanhood, femininity and gender. Moreover, the impact of class, ethnicity and religion on the ways in which menstruation is experienced, and the examination of representations of menstruation written by male authors are also avenues of research requiring exploration. In addition, the field of translation studies offers promising areas of study; how translators negotiate the tone and language used to refer to menstruation gives us understanding of the ways in which periods are conceived in different linguistic contexts. Comparative studies between works written in different languages enable us to assess differences in the lived experience, language,

imaginaries, other recurrent themes and how authors from different cultures engage with the subject of menstruation.

In summary, this thesis demonstrates the importance of research on menstruation in literary studies. Existing approaches to menstruation in literature tend to be simplistic, broad or are not centred on menses. The approach taken serves to construct a corpus of works that engage with menstruation written by women, analysing both overlooked texts and well-known works in which the role of menstruation has gone unnoticed by scholars. In addition, the close reading of the texts which shape the four content chapters offers alternative interpretations of the subject of menstruation and engages with broader discussions such as the relationship between transgression and limits. Finally, the focus on representations of menstruation in literary works forms part of the current wave of attention to menstruation, mainly outside but also tentatively inside academia, and contributes to the conversation by highlighting the need for critical approaches to a subject still considered a taboo and a source of embarrassment.

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