

## On Morgane Billuart's *Cycles, the Sacred and the Doomed: Inquiries in Female Health Technologies*

Morgane Billuart's book *Cycles, the Sacred and the Doomed: Inquiries in Female Health Technologies* (2024) considers what it might mean to have an "optimized" "female" body through a discussion of hormonal health—a topic with very few helpful medical or empirical resources. I am in complete agreement with Billuart that because hormonal and reproductive health is so under-researched, many people unnecessarily and unjustly experience cyclical, debilitating symptoms that should not be their normal. I also agree with Billuart that addressing the root causes of common hormonal issues is evidently not a priority for the medical-industrial complex, and that instead, these root causes should be accurately, if not entirely, described as being caused by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It is because I am in complete agreement on these points that I am frustrated that this book—which is situated as a piece of critical study—falls gravely short of elucidating the normalized ways in which work and life are directly correlated with the common malaises—PMDD, PCOS, fibroids, endometriosis—that figure Billuart's discussion of the "imperfect" menstruating body. This book is not what I think the creative industries sorely need: a resource that uplifts alternative responses to the healthcare industry's neglect and the tech industry's commercialization.

Several times in *Cycles*, Billuart passes up the opportunity to provide necessary context and accurate information. *Cycles*'s inquiry is instead limited to investigating tech solutions to hormonal health problems, such as FemTech apps like Clue. This critique would have benefited from expanding its imagination beyond simply lamenting the failed promises of the medical-industrial complex, which includes, for example, doctors who know less about PMDD than what can be found on the social media support groups that Billuart frequents. *Cycles* cultivates a disproportionate amount of suspicion towards forms of optimization—becoming sidetracked by the capitalist, tech-driven associations with the word—to the extent that there's little that engages with the questions of what it could mean to begin to feel good in one's body. Billuart rightly notices that apps are trying to sell the promise of feeling good in one's body, but the

author's challenge to this end product fails to cultivate a deeper understanding of the dysfunctions that result in feeling terrible.

Despite its issues, I stuck around to finish this book because I was hoping to see a conversation open up about the drastic redress that would be necessary to get to the root causes of the debilitating hormonal dysfunctions that are pervasive amongst people 25-45, who are also the dominant age demographic active in the art world. My biggest question for this book remains: of what use is it to critique FemTech when the critique glosses over the relationship between our social environment and the pains we are experiencing in our bodies?

*Cycles* begins from the personal account of a twenty-something cis white woman and Rietveld design graduate who experiences debilitating PMDD—a premenstrual disease which could be briefly described as an intensified version of PMS that produces mental and physical discomfort so great as to stymie one's ability to do basic tasks or to withstand the experience of even having a physical body. That PMS is considered normal is anyway a reflection of how ingrained we are within a Western biological-medical paradigm that has not bothered to do research into what it would call the "female body" other than to ensure that it can reproduce (future) workers. This system, built by misogyny, categorically hates the aforementioned female body and is neither bothered nor ashamed by the idea that it may be in pain.

Thus, Billuart is right to note that PMS has been demonstrated to be "highly impacted by the social environment one exists in" and cites a recent peer-reviewed medical study which demonstrated a "clear correlation between discrimination, poverty, pressure to assimilate, and the appearance of such a condition" in a group the study labels as "ethnic minority women."<sup>1</sup> This implication alone—that enduring microaggressions from domineering Euro-American white cultures is somehow processed in the body and re-expressed as debilitating pain leading up to monthly menstruation—could stop us in our tracks with grief or be used to mount a high-profile lawsuit against our local municipalities. But instead, Billuart makes a vague connection between "these conditions" and "the standards of capitalist society" before swiftly ending the chapter and

1. Morgane Billuart, *Cycles, the Sacred and the Doomed: Inquiries in Female Health Technologies*, Eindhoven: Set Margins Press, 2024. All subsequent quotations originate from this text.

moving on to internet memes and transhumanism. This sudden transition strikes me as a perfunctory, even pseudo-academic move that depends on recycling the themes that we know “must” be addressed within the nascent Dutch discursive landscape while maintaining a comfortable distance to such an extent that nothing substantive is written. While reading, I had the feeling that what Billuart uncovered was somehow too overwhelming to process. Still, I think readers need her to confront these difficult correlations head-on and unpack their implications.

Alongside this superficial engagement with research and avoidance of the complex nexus between the social and the physical body, the book is filled with errors that suggest the research is, ironically, disembodied from the high stakes of lived experience. For instance, early on the writer mislabels the phases of the menstrual cycle, swapping follicular for luteal in her narration from day one to day twenty-something. It seems odd, even unforgivable, for a book to identify a lack of information about hormones as structural while simultaneously mistakenly reproducing misinformation. I wonder also what much small, yet repeated errors reveal about the structure of our creative industry? Isn't it still dominated by a patriarchal-capitalist clock even when it is run by women and non-binary people who are overworked and under slept? Beyond this, names of writers cited in the text such as Legacy “Russel” and Fred “Morton” are misspelled. *Cycles*—published by the Eindhoven-based Set Margins—is designed and laid out in a way that is sharp and tasteful, but the full-length, perfect-bound book (that would have required ample funding and resources) cannot be used other than as a prop in a discourse machine, producing and recycling fragments from an abstracted landscape. For me, even as a person who feels it is unreasonable and unnecessary to produce work without error, these cringey typos give rise to questions about what would actually be useful in a context that needs more attention.

While the book points out that the medical industry has failed cis women, it stops within the boundaries of that industry's existence by saying that its lack of knowledge around PMDD is “astonishing,” which is true, but why not then, if you're going to make the effort to write a book, do more to uplift specific practices that have helped menstruating people to feel better without requiring them to feel optimal? For example, Billuart vaguely names the “self-

study,” “gathering information,” and “alternative” rituals that “marginalized people” did before the internet but gives no indication of specifically what these healing rituals are nor does she speak about her experience with them. Instead, she critiques the possibility of feeling good seemingly for critique's sake. Although *Cycles* begins with an admission that taking time alone for oneself in the days leading up to menstruation is always associated with a lessening of the debilitating symptoms of PMS—and here the writer makes a connection between her own symptoms and an “overstimulating daily life”—the book then ends with the writer and her interlocutor, a curator who shares her interest in FemTech, discussing that they are “uninspired” by the idea that getting rest is the answer to our problems. To print and circulate that you are “uninspired” by the idea of resting as a way to alleviate unwanted symptoms is quite frankly absurd and an irresponsible affectation as adequate sleep is categorically required not just by the hormonal system but literally every biological system we carry in our bodies. Billuart's supposition that, “Still at the end of the day, what everyone wants is just to have a smooth, enjoyable ride” is embodied in the text's uneven critique and furthermore adheres to the tired paradigm of identifying neo-liberal structures without rejecting them thereby further re-inscribing a simulacrum of critique. Instead of producing a desperately needed resource, Billuart, uninspired by rest, ultimately fails to acknowledge how the very context of creative work—characterized by isolation, competition and overwork—prolongs or exacerbates hormonal diseases and makes confronting the health of a menstruating person irreconcilable with dominant ideas of “success.”

My final take: this book reads as though the writer still lives with an expectation and a desire for a patriarchal medical system to protect her. While Billuart notes the frustration of “endlessly seeking cures that the medical system fails to provide,” in the same paragraph she reaffirms her loyalty to a system that does not work: “...it's still necessary not to completely turn your back on medical institutions.” To me *Cycles* reads as if Billuart can identify that Western Medicine™ does not fulfill its promise even to those it is designed to serve but is nonetheless unaware of the care work being done by those who the medical-industrial complex was never designed to serve. A shame, as Billuart needs this awareness.

by Taylor LeMelle