Abstract: This article explores current attitudes about menstruation and the resulting menarchy movement. Menarchy, or menstrual anarchy, is a response to negative attitudes about menstruation. Menarchists critique the femcare industry, pharmaceutical companies, and advertisements that produce and reinforce ideas that menstruation should be concealed and hidden. Feminist theorists reference a long history of equating menstruation with failed reproduction and reducing menstruation to a curse. The commodification of menstruation and women’s bodies combined with bioethical implications of menstrual suppression have created a sense of urgency in the menarchist movement. Menarchists, influenced by Third Wave feminism and the Do-It-Yourself-inspired punk counterculture, are coming out of the menstrual closet. As activists and artists, they are creating alternative menstrual products and critiquing mainstream discourses about menstruation. This article exposes part of the expanding menarchist archive that is accumulating on the Internet. Menarchists are critiquing and improving menstrual management while simultaneously reconceptualizing menstruation. By embracing the abject quality of menstrual blood, menstruators are transforming their own attitudes toward their monthly cycle and radicalizing menstruation.

Keywords: menarchy, femcare industry, menstrual blood, feminism, menstruation, abject
Smear It on Your Face, Rub It on Your Body, It’s Time to Start a Menstrual Party!

Shannon Docherty

Cycle I: Menstruation, Commodification, and Bioethical Interventions

In 1970, Germaine Greer dared women to taste their menstrual blood. In *The Female Eunuch*, Greer posed this provocative challenge: “If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood—if it makes you sick, you’ve got a long way to go baby.”1 Almost forty years later, Ingrid Berthon-Moine released a series of photographs of women wearing menstrual blood on their lips. Berthon-Moine’s portraits call attention to a new movement of menstrual activists. Menarchy, or menstrual anarchy, is dedicated to eradicating the disgust that accompanies Western attitudes toward menstruation. Menarchists are primarily young feminists influenced by sex-positive and queer-friendly third-wave strains of feminism, a do-it-yourself–inspired punk counterculture, and anarchist principles that seek to deregulate corporate and medical control of menstruation.2 According to a 2009 article in *The Guardian*, menarchy advocates for “simple efforts to speak openly about periods, radical affronts to negative attitudes, and campaigns for more environmentally friendly sanitary products.”3

While feminists have raised consciousness around menstrual issues in the past, the current menarchist discourse is situated in a pivotal time. The primary concern of menarchists is femcare, an industry that profits from the commodification of menstruation and women’s bodies. Femcare is part of the larger hygiene industry that benefits from the consumerism of products that maintain certain standards of bodily management. Femcare includes menstrual product manufacturers, medical and pharmaceutical companies, and advertising firms. While feminists acknowledge that femcare has created menstrual management products that allow women to menstruate while continuing to live their lives, their critiques of femcare are rooted in the idea that the industry profits from women believing that menstruation is a “curse” that

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needs to be concealed and made invisible. Menarchists reveal this oppressive pattern and seek to change the future of menstruation management.

Femcare’s increasing involvement in managing women’s bodies has led to a second menarchist concern—the bioethical implications of suppressing menstruation. Pharmaceutical techniques to suppress menstruation are being pitched as a feminist dream come true; however, menarchists are calling attention to the fallacy of this claim, insisting that a feminist response to menstruation would reverse the negative attitudes toward menstruation, not attempt to eliminate it. Menarchists are exposing the pharmaceutical funding that is behind the research and challenging the claim that menstruation is an optional lifestyle choice. The nexus of women experiencing more menstrual cycles in their lifetime, escalating numbers and types of menstrual management products, and intensified biological manipulation of menstruation has created a menstrual movement.

Menarchists are complicating and remixing the feminist stance on menstruation. Rooted in feminist activism that once fought for equal rights for menstruating women in the workplace and better products for menstruation management, menarchists are now fighting for menstruation itself. They are defending blood in an era when femcare is threatening to make menstruation disappear. Menarchists use humor, inclusive-language, blogs, zines, viral campaigns, provocative texts, performances, and art to communicate their message. Through these various mediums, they create a diversity of interventions that confront negative attitudes towards menstruation. They are coming out of the closet as menstruators and facing their “abject” fears. By making menstruation visible, menarchists are also critiquing larger issues about commodification of the body, capitalism, and disgust.

Traditional feminist analysis is used by menarchists to demonstrate how the Menstruator is Other. Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis that the construction of Woman as Other is fundamental to the history of women’s oppression extends to menstruation. Menstrual activist and scholar Elizabeth Kissling uses Simone de Beauvoir’s theory as a lens for examining attitudes toward menstruation:

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4 See for example, the Seasonique advertisement with the tagline “Re-punctuate your Life.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xsKcXoZ8W8&feature=player_embedded>. Elizabeth Kissling critiques this advertisement in her *Bitch* interview. The advertisement repeatedly uses feminist rhetoric and values of self-definition: taking control of your body and achieving empowerment through choosing to end your period.

5 Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style,” 331.

The social construction of menstruation as a woman’s curse is explicitly implicated in the evolution of woman as Other: “the blood, indeed, does not make woman impure; it is rather a sign of her impurity” (Beauvoir p. 169). That is to say, menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is a curse.

Kissling examines the femcare industry and concludes that corporations are contributing to (and profiting from) the construction of women as Other. In “Menstrual Meditations,” Iris Marion Young uses Beauvoir’s theory to interpret cultural attitudes about menstruation. Young focuses on Beauvoir’s description of “the onset of menstruation as a crisis for the girl, for which she is not well prepared, and about which she feels fear, shame, disgust, ambivalence, but also sometimes pride at becoming a woman.” Because menstruation is a source of shame and disgust, according to Beauvoir’s theory, “it is a reluctance to assume the feminine status that the girl knows is subordinate.” A critical look at the history of menstruation management provides an understanding of why the menstrual activist community is fighting to make menstruation visible.

**Femcare: A History of Managing Menstruation**

Menarchy is a call to stand up to the femcare industry, which profits from misogynistic conceptions of women’s body. Authors have shown that femcare commodifies women’s bodies and exists as a “cure” to the already pathologized process of menstruation. Kissling asserts that the femcare industry “reinforces and even helps create negative attitudes towards menstruation, towards women, and toward women’s bodies, and these attitudes are exploited to enhance corporate profits.” These “solutions” are sold to women at a high cost; one report estimates that the average menstruating consumer will spend more than $2,100 on feminine products during her lifetime. Menses management is big business. Kissling reports the femcare industry’s profits:

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9 Young 100.


The so-called feminine-hygiene industry...annually exceeds $2 billion in US sales (marketresearch.com, 2001). This figure does not include sales of such products as over-the-counter or prescription remedies for menstrual pain or premenstrual syndrome (PMS), nor the monies spent on advertising any of these other menstruation-related products.\textsuperscript{12}

Before the rise of the femcare industry, menstruation was managed at a much lower cost. Menstruation management technologies have expanded and improved throughout the twentieth century perhaps because of American women’s middle-class values. Historian Lara Freidenfelds documents Americans’ relationship with menstruation in \textit{The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America}. Women adapted their menstruation management techniques according to “modern” ideals concerning bodily management “developed by the white, urban well-educated class.”\textsuperscript{13} Hygiene and middle-class values coincide as they both encourage the regulation of self-boundaries and thereby uphold the modern body. Menstruation is particular to the homeostatic modern body because it blurs boundaries with blood—an indicator of both life and death—because menstruators do not have control over its arrival, and because it is abject. Thus, it is no surprise that certain menstrual management practices were taken up as women strived to belong to the middle class. For example, Freidenfelds explains the shift from using cloth to disposable pads:

By the 1940s and 1950s, the use of cloth became a marker of real poverty, and disposable pads came to be regarded as a necessity even for many of those who did not consider themselves to have made it into middle class life....Even those living in more marginal economic circumstances were likely to do what they could to buy disposable napkins.\textsuperscript{14}

The transformation from reusable rags to the intricate and excessive belts of the 1930s to more convenient and accessible products like compact tampons has affected women. Freidenfelds focuses on the positive developments of menstrual products:

According to those interviewed for this book, managing menstruation in a modern way relieved the shame, anxiety and discomfort of older methods, and usually allowed women to pursue their work and play as they and others had come to expect. A new mode of bodily management that enabled these activities

\textsuperscript{12} Kissling, \textit{Capitalizing on the Curse}, 1.


\textsuperscript{14} Freidenfelds 135.
perhaps felt especially liberatory to women, who otherwise often experienced menstruation as something that kept them from competing and participating effectively in schools and workplaces with male peers.\textsuperscript{15}

Overall, Freidenfelds argues that modern menstruators are happy with new menstrual management techniques, despite the new level of “managerial work for women.”\textsuperscript{16} Kissling also acknowledges the positive benefits of the femcare industry. She explains, “Readily available, relatively inexpensive menstrual management products that are comfortable, effective, and easy to use have permitted women to participate more freely in economic, educational, and leisure activities. Women can work in nearly any occupation, attend school, and play sports more comfortably than before.”\textsuperscript{17} While menses management has positively impacted the lives of women, menarchists critique femcare because of its underlying ideology. Femcare profits from the idea that women’s menstrual cycles are disgusting; that women’s menstrual blood is dirty and needs to be concealed, regulated, and sterilized. Menstruation has been treated as a threat to the modern normal body, and femcare has reacted by selling products that cover up the stain. The increasing number of available menstrual technologies correlates with elevating standards of concealment. Kissling argues, “as mobility provided by menstrual products increased, so did the demands of ‘freshness’ required of women...in the commercial world of so-called feminine hygiene products, menstruation is portrayed as a literal and figurative stain on one’s femininity.”\textsuperscript{18} In other words, menstruation is still taboo because products are sold that hide it. While the products necessitate advertisements and ultimately contribute to the discourse of menstruation in the public sphere, the tone and scope of the discourse is limited.

Many feminist scholars of menstruation have focused on feminine hygiene ads as a source and indicator of negative attitudes towards menstruation.\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Flow: The Cultural History of Menstruation}, Stein and Kim recount the history of menstrual advertising. While not blaming femcare for making menstruation taboo and shameful, Stein and Kim point out that “while ads didn’t invent self-loathing, they sure as hell capitalized on it, promulgating a sense of bodily mortification we all should have outgrown decades ago...one could say our collective mind-
set is the result of effective advertising campaigns."\textsuperscript{20} Menstruation is not the subject of these advertisers’ messages; rather, the management process and techniques of concealment are being discussed. Product innovations have expanded the feminine hygiene aisle but have not diversified attitudes towards menstruation. Kissling explains that while “advertising for menstrual products is one of the few visible, public discourses about menstruation, these texts implicitly and explicitly emphasize its dirtiness and/or its secrecy and, thus, contribute to the ongoing cultural constructions of women as Other.”\textsuperscript{21} Recently, Kotex launched a self-conscious media campaign that mocks the euphemisms and shame so prevalent in menstrual ads. On the company’s website, the mission states:

U by Kotex brand wants to help women change the conversation about periods and vaginal care. By bringing it out into the open, we hope that every woman will learn to think differently, talk openly, take charge, help Break the Cycle and begin to feel comfortable with her body and confident about her personal care.\textsuperscript{22}

U by Kotex understands that its audience is younger women who are eager to critique negative attitudes about menstruation. While this campaign strives to “break the cycle” of menstrual advertisements, the products it sells are not new; they are the same tampons and pads repackaged with neon colors and sold to a savvier, younger consumer.

To Menstruate or Not to Menstruate: Bioethical Interventions

Menstrual suppression is the latest trend in menstrual management, and its bioethical implications have spurred a reaction from menarchists. Drugs such as Seasonale, Seasonique, Lybrel, and Depo Provera are extended birth control contraceptives that enable women to limit their bleeding to three times a year. Freidenfelds argues that this is merely the next step in the modern approach to menstruation. She points out, “What could be a more obvious extrapolation of the modern period than a product that could almost make menstruation disappear?”\textsuperscript{23} The increasing popularity of these products indicates that women are buying into the idea that a life without menstruation is one worth choosing. Menarchists attribute the increasing pharmaceutical control over menstruating bodies as a consequence of negative portrayals

\textsuperscript{20} Stein and Kim 114.
\textsuperscript{21} Kissling, Capitalizing on the Curse, 9.
\textsuperscript{22} U by Kotex, Mission Statement, Kimberly-Clark Worldwide, Inc. Dallas, TX, 4 Apr. 2010 <http://www.ubykotex.com/the_mission>.
\textsuperscript{23} Freidenfelds 198.
of menstruation. Kissling writes, “the negativity toward menstruation expressed in media coverage and promotion of Seasonale is neither new nor surprising….Cultural negativity about menstruation is surely one of the factors that helps explain women’s ignorance of menstruation.”

If more women had access to research and information about menstruation, perhaps fewer women would choose menstrual suppression. At the very least, women would be making informed decisions.

At the same time that women are choosing to suppress their menstrual cycles, industrialized societies are seeing an increased incidence of menstruation. The average woman in today’s industrialized society menstruates 450 times in her lifetime compared to about 50 periods for the prehistoric woman. Today, in agrarian societies around the world, a woman only menstruates about 150 times in her lifetime.

The increasing number of monthly menstrual visits juxtaposed with the emergence of menstrual products and drugs that control, manipulate, and manage menstruation provide an interesting context for menstrual anarchists.

Menarchy critically addresses the role of menstruation in women’s lives and addresses what is at stake in ending menstruation. Menstrual suppression advocates make historical, biological, and reproduction-centric claims that rationalize pharmaceutical interventions of the menstrual cycle. Elsimar Coutinho, one of the first doctors to introduce the idea of suppressing menstruation, argues that as women have begun to have more periods and less reproduction, menstruation has become obsolete; he believes that the most medically advanced “treatment” of menstruation would be its total cessation. Menstruation, he argues, “means that the [reproductive] system failed and, for the sake of reproductive efficiency, would have to be repeated the next month, the month after that, and so on, until a successfully nested fertilized egg starts to develop.”

Coutinho’s depiction of menstruation as failure is not new. Feminist theorists reference a long history of reducing menstruation to failed reproduction and of calling for unnecessary medical interventions on women’s bodies. Emily Martin critiques medical literature for using medical metaphors that see women solely as reproducers and thus frame the menstrual cycle as a reproductive failure. Some (outdated) medical texts have described the “uterus crying for

24 Kissling, Capitalizing on the Curse, 74.
25 Carol Livoti and Elizabeth Topp, Vaginas: An Owner’s Manual (New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2004) 11. Though changes in diet, healthcare, overall health, lifespan, and the number of children/ pregnancies all contribute to this increase, the fact remains that menstruation is more prevalent in today’s industrialized societies than at any other time in history.
lack of a baby.” Menstrual blood, therefore, is viewed as waste—an unused, unproductive substance. These sexist metaphors of the body reflect industrialist and capitalist values. Martin explains, “Menstruation not only carries with it the connotation of a productive system that has failed to produce, it also carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap. However disgusting it may be, menstrual blood will come out. Production gone awry is also an image that fills us with dismay and horror.” This brings attention to why we see menstruation as a failure. Martin writes:

> Perhaps one reason the negative image of failed production is attached to menstruation is precisely that women are in some sinister sense out of control when they menstruate. They are not producing, not continuing the species, not preparing to stay at home with the baby, not providing a safe, warm womb to nurture a man’s sperm. I think it is plain that the negative power behind the image of failure to produce can be considerable when applied metaphorically to women’s bodies.

As Martin’s research shows, this so-called “objective” medical discourse is rooted in cultural ideas about menstruation. Martin’s analysis of medical metaphors is fundamental to deconstructing Coutinho’s belief that menstruation should be eliminated. Like most “experts” in the world of menses management, Coutinho is affiliated with the femcare industry. As one of the developers of the injectable hormonal contraceptive Depo Provera, it is no wonder that his position on menstruation is that it needs to be “treated” by the medical industry. Dr. Leslie Miller of NoPeriod.com supports menstrual suppression based on her extensive research funded by Wyeth, one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies. While many advocates of menstrual suppression claim that modern women have no reason to menstruate except during brief periods when trying to conceive, Kissling questions whether menstruation’s only purpose is to allow for childbearing.

While menarchists have ranging opinions on menstrual suppression, their common response is that more research is urgently needed. The medical process of menstruation is not

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28 Martin 29.

29 Martin 30.


well understood, thereby making the consequences of “treating” menstruation through menstrual suppression potentially risky. Certainly, some menstruators with particular health issues will benefit from menstrual suppression technologies; however, menarchists’ main critique of the drugs is the way they have been marketed as a lifestyle issue. In *Take Control of Your Period*, Diana Kroi uses post-feminist logic to defend the reasons one may choose a menstruation-free lifestyle. She posits that a number of lifestyle issues may factor into a woman’s decision to control her menstruation through suppression including simply not liking a monthly period to avoiding the discrimination that menstruating women sometimes face in society. The post-feminist stance is that choosing to end menstruation is empowering because menstruation does not serve women. The idea is that a body freed from menstruation is always ready for sex, for work, and for play. In an interview with *Bitch* magazine, Elizabeth Kissling explains how this is part of the neo-liberal ideal body:

The non-menstruating woman could be seen as the ideal neo-liberal subject. A woman’s menstrrating body is leaky, it swells, it’s unpredictable, her emotions are heightened—therefore this body is seen as a problem in a neo liberal economy. A menstruating woman can’t present herself as a rational, self-actualizing subject, she isn’t able to participate in consumerism 24/7. A non-menstruating body is much better suited to market success in the consumer economy. Menstrual suppression, as it is currently being used and marketed, is a bioethical concern that needs to be taken seriously. Succumbing to a post-feminist attitude and choosing menstrual suppression for convenience is an act that demonstrates women’s continued shame around menstruation.

Iris Marion Young equates the shame and secrecy of the menstruating body with the idea of being “In the Menstrual Closet.” She shows that women believe in the importance of concealing their menstruation and that they follow a myriad of “practical rules.” The rules all spring from the assumption that menstruation is dirty and must be hidden. In addition to the cultural messages that are fed to women about themselves through advertisements, patriarchal medical texts, and menstrual products, women face a unique existential crisis when they men-

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34 Young 106.
Menstruation transgresses boundaries, thereby making it seem disgusting. In *Disgust: A Gateway Emotion*, Susan Miller writes:

> The age-old anxiety about periodic bleeding likely relates to the disturbance of body boundary when inside matter flows out. Loss of blood is especially threatening because blood is known to be essential to life…. Other powerful emotional dynamics surely contribute to the blend of anxiety, revulsion, and awe in response to menstruation, not least of which might be the fact that menstruation separates woman from man and highlights those functions of woman that man cannot perform. 

If menstruators believe that menstruation is disgusting, they also buy into the idea that they are disgusting. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection is closely related to disgust. While disgust immediately tries to separate and “Other” the object of disgust, Kristeva’s theories of abjection recognize the uncanny ambiguity that accompanies the abject. Abject is neither Subject nor Object, inside nor outside. Kristeva describes the abject as a “correlate to the subject that lies just on the other side of the border of its identity and threatens to dissolve that border.” Menstruation therefore defies the idea of Self as an autonomous continuous body. Kristeva explains that the cause of abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”

Facing one’s abject-ness is what is at stake in coming out of the menstrual closet. Young theorizes about the abject origin of these fears:

> As menstruators, women threaten psychic security systems because female processes challenge the distinction between inside and outside, solid and fluid, self-identical and changing. Both men and women experience menstruation as abject or monstrous, because both harbor anxieties about a dissolution of self and merging with the ghost of a mother.

Instead of facing our abject selves and maternal origins, women are supposed to cover up any trace of menstruation. As menstruators, women are viewed as abject and out of control. Young believes that the need to conceal menstruation is connected to the need to erase any signs of being unable to control that which is abject. Young suggests two options cultures util-

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37 Kristeva 4.

38 Young 111.
ize to “hold this anxiety at bay.” Historically across cultures, women were separated from men while they were menstruating. Our contemporary society has taken the second route of creating a menstrual closet. Young explains:

Women may be allowed to roam free among men but must keep signs of their menstruation hidden. In either case, women every month carry the burden of abjection, the monstrous, the stigma of birth and death, as a practical and enforced shame. She is in a menstrual closet. If a woman wishes to walk among men when she bleeds, then she had better keep her private fluidity a secret.

Young’s idea of the menstrual closet explains why we treat menstruation as something shameful. Of course, this shame is reinforced by the cultural expectations and capitalizations of menstruating women as Other. This internal and external pressure for women to feel disgust at their menstrual blood creates a sense of silence around menstruation. Menarchists strive to make menstruation visible and in doing so, they are coming out of the closet as menstruators.

Cycle II: Menarchy: Out and Proud

I am a menarchist. I am a menstruator. I am menstruating. Menarchists are coming out of the closet and encouraging other menstruators to do the same. Academic literature on menstruation provides theory that grounds menarchy, but the bloody menstrual war is being fought online by menstruators everywhere. Informally archived by academics such as Elizabeth Kissling and Chris Bobel, the collective research blog “re:Cycling: the Society of Menstrual Research,” and “Adventures in Menstruating” author and performance artist Chella Quint, the menarchy movement is emerging rapidly. Menstruators are coming out as individuals and creating communities. Menarchy is a radical movement that strives to reclaim menstruation. Capitalism has hijacked menstruation, hyped up its disgustingness, and used it as a tool of terror to make women scared of their own blood. This war on menstruation is supported by menstruation management products and the femcare industry.

Menarchists are re-appropriating their periods and slowly creating a counterculture that rejects mainstream discourses of menstruation. One blogger, Ninja Witch, released a series of t-shirts called “The period is finally coming out of the closet.” She explains, “Every time a womyn’s monthly blood flow occurs as part of a cycle, magick happens. It’s time we start giv-

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39 Young 111.
40 Young 111.
ing her the respect and honour she deserves.” The t-shirts read: “Period.” “It all started with a period.” “Womyn rule, period.” “I need a break, period.” “Everything is better with a period.”

Because menstrual product advertisements presume audiences cannot handle the sight or mention of blood, menarchists challenge these assumptions. “re:Cycling,” a blog formed by the Society of Menstrual Cycle Research, has recently critiqued the Always Infinity advertisement, shown in Figure 1, which claims to make “fluid seem to POOF! Disappear. Just like magic.”

![Always Infinity Advertisement](image)

**Figure 1. Always Infinity Advertisement.**
*In her blog on re: Cycling, Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, Elizabeth Kissling critiques the image of purity portrayed in this ad that is about anything except menstruation.*

This advertisement shares many of the tell-tale oppressive qualities of menstrual advertising. Refer to fluid instead of menstrual blood—check. Show blue liquid instead of a representative or realistic color—check. Depict the products as a “magical” solution—check. Assume that women want any sign of menstruation to disappear—check. Use language referencing a scientific level of menses management and “absorption”—check. Use white backdrop that alludes to the purity of life without menstruation—check. Super skinny, glamorized model—check.

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43 Always Infinity.
Elizabeth Kissling’s blog entry questions what magic is happening here. She quips, “seriously—something’s magic here. Maybe it’s PhotoShop, but that pad is almost as wide as her ribcage. It’s definitely bigger than her head.”44 Whiteness, unrealistic body images, and purity are being marketed here.

In addition to making critiques, menarchists push their agenda through satirical art pieces that take on the imagery of traditional femcare ads. For example, in 2002 the Museum of Menovulatory Lifetime (MOLT), a virtual museum dedicated to changing society’s attitudes toward menstruation, held a contest to develop alternative menstrual product advertisements. Geneva Kachman, MOLT’s founder, explored the question, “Is it possible to create advertising based on a positive menstrual narrative, and yet at the same time, effectively market to these larger demographics?”45 Her vision was to create a “menstrual narrative in which menstruants are in a state of ‘enhanced’ rather than ‘tainted’ femininity, and menstruation is ‘self-care opportunity’ rather than ‘hygienic crisis.’”46 One of the more interesting ad proposals is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Ad Proposal for “MITT’N Pads.”
Part of a 2002 contest by MOLT: The Museum of the Menovulatory Lifetime to develop alternative menstrual project advertisements.47

46 MOLT.
47 MOLT.
The ad features a photograph of nine mittens with the following caption:

A MENSTRUATING WOMAN GOES THROUGH A LOT

Of pads, that is. Experts suggest women use pads at least some of the time, and studies have found more women prefer using them at night. By using MITT’N Pads for your next period, you can go through a lot less... pads. Our pads are softer, more comfortable, and TWICE as absorbent as other leading brands. That’s right... twice as absorbent, without any added bulk, so you can save a bundle of... cash.

MITT’N Pads – “it’s true, one MITT’N is better than two.”

In the ad, the mittens are bright red rather than bleached white with a drop of detergent-looking blue liquid. The ad also addresses concerns about the cost of menstruation management. This advertisement does not glorify menstruation, nor does it deem it disgusting. Instead, it offers a realistic option—with a touch of satire—for a re-envisioned positive future of menstrual product advertising. The advertisements created for this contest illustrate the work that needs to be done to modify the cultural norm equating menstruation with filth.

Chella Quint, a pioneering menarchist, is adamant about deconstructing menstruation’s reputation of being historically, socially, and culturally cloaked in fear, shame, and disgust. In her zine “Adventures in Menstruating,” she writes, “deconstructing these beliefs, with brute force when necessary, is empowering.” Her witty and comical zines are reflective of other menarchists, who also toy with ideas about menstruation being disgusting. In her e-zine, Quint writes, “The gross-out factor is still fun. It’s the new fart joke. You wait and see. Laughter is therapeutic—sometimes periods are a pain in the uterus!” She is not afraid to approach disgust and address it with humor, turning standard menstrual jokes—which Iris Marion Young argues are typically manifestations of abjection—upside down. Quint is interested in exploring the abject; she understands the power in doing so. She implores us to embrace our menstrual flow rather than internalizing this disgust and trying to detach it from ourselves. Quint rejects the fear of being outed as abject and disgusting by wearing menstruation on her pants. As a vocal leader in the menarchist movement, she has begun to appropriate the fear around menstruation. She is out of the closet and actively blogs and participates in re-appropriating ideas around menstruation.

48 MOLT.
50 Quint n.d.
Chella Quint encourages menstruators to deploy disgust by proudly wearing a menstrual stain. As a critique of neo-liberal ideals of the modern body, she introduces a fashion product, Stains™, “a removable stain to wear on your own clothing as you see fit.” Quint promotes her subversive product:

“We’ve got a way to undermine this sort of feminine hygiene ad once and for all. We’re gonna debunk, demystify and disempower leakage fear by turning the stain into an object of desire. An object of beauty...I’m wearing my heart on my sleeve and my blood on my pants. I’m gonna reclaim the stain, reclaim my blood, and reclaim my period. Because people, I’m telling you red is the new black.”

Quint engages with other menarchists, and recently participated in Femstruation Week in February 2010. Put on by the Edinburgh AnarchaFeminist Kolektiv, the week highlighted menarchy’s varying agendas. Femstruation Week illustrates what the broader menarchy community is doing and what menstrual activism looks like. By dedicating the week to “femstruation,” menarchists cultivate a sense of pride, analogous to coming out of the closet and participating in gay pride parades. The witty language used when describing the week, “this week-long foray into menstruation will start heavy and end light,” is in typical menarchist style. The array of workshops, talks, zine stalls, spoken word performances, art installations, photo collections, performance art, and video displays show the diverse modes of activism.

A key component of menstrual activism is educating others about the history of menstruation. The Museum of Menstruation and Women’s Health (MUM) is a virtual museum that documents anything and everything related to menstruation. The purpose behind the museum is:

To be the world’s largest repository for information about, and “showcase” for, menstruation, including as many cultures as possible. This would include collecting and displaying, when possible, stories, customs, and artifacts, and conducting education about menstruation.

MUM is a useful resource for anyone interested in the cultural constructions of menstruation. Harry Finley, the museum’s self-proclaimed “curator,” has an inspiring vision of educating

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51 Quint n.d.
52 Quint n.d.
people about menstruation. Creating a museum that features menstruation brings attention to the cultural construction and intricate histories of different cultures’ experiences with menstruation. Although MUM is not an accredited museum and Finley is a collector not a curator, MUM acts as a resource for any budding menarchist. By having a collection of products, advertisements, poems, artifacts, texts, and basically anything at all related to menstruation, MUM acts as an unofficial database and archive for menstrual activists. Menstrual activists and scholars Elizabeth Kissling and Geneva Kachman have offered poignant critiques questioning Finley’s motivations for creating the museum. His interest in menstruation is clear, but his menarchist agenda is questionable. In creating this museum without a deliberate intention to change the conception of menstruation, MUM exoticizes Menstruators as Other. Kachman’s critique resulted in the creation of her own museum.

Geneva Kachman’s website and virtual museum, MOLT, the Museum of the Menovulatory Lifetime, has a revolutionary attitude toward menstruation. Menovulgraphy, a concept coined by Kachman, is the time period from puberty to menopause told as a story with pictures. She encourages women to make art and express their lives punctuated through their menstrual cycles. Monthly bleeding punctuates our lives, marking significant events. By using menstrual cycles to mark time, she finds value in menstruating and offers a reason for menstruation to continue. This new way of thinking of time also imagines time cyclically rather than chronologically, thereby destabilizing Coutinho’s evolutionary argument.

Kachman lives out of the menstrual closet and encourages all women to do so. She created Menstrual Monday, an international holiday begun in 2000, which has been celebrated the Monday before Mother’s Day for the last ten years. The holiday provides an example of a re-imagined world where women have positive relationships with menstruation. The mission statement of this holiday is as follows:

- Create a sense of fun around menstruation;
- Encourage women to take charge of their menstrual and reproductive health care;
- Create greater visibility of menstruation, in film, print, music, and other media; and
- Enhance honesty about menstruation in our relationships.

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55 MOLT.
56 MOLT.
MOLT offers suggestions for activities, crafts, and menstruation celebrations. The holiday and MOLT’s website have quietly drawn a crowd of menstruators and celebrants who want to commemorate and support menstruators. Free “starter kits” were offered to help initiate parties on Menstrual Monday. The demand was higher than expected and by the first year more than 900 kits were ordered. This support demonstrates that menstruation can and is being viewed differently. MOLT does, however, recognize the power that the feminine hygiene industry possesses, and Kachman attempted to pair with a corporate sponsor for Menstrual Monday. In 2002, MOLT contacted Proctor & Gamble, the makers of Tampax. According to Elizabeth Kissling, P&G’s public relations officer responded that this holiday was “too much about menstruation.” This reply is a fitting example of the current mainstream discourse around menstruation. The companies that arguably are improving menstruators’ lives refuse to acknowledge what they are “protecting” them from—menstruation. Kachman boldly comes out of the closet and brings the discourse back to menstruation.

MOLT and MUM strive to make menstruation accessible and to initiate conversations and questions about the history of menstruation and menses management. These sites, along with a plethora of zines, books, blogs, and alternative menstrual products are all exposing the connections between misogyny, capitalism, and menstrual management. They are not only critiquing this system, however, but participating in the conversation and proposing new ways to think about menstruation.

Menarchists are active supporters of alternative menstrual products. Inspired by the do-it-yourself punk movement, menarchists are taking menstruation management into their own hands. Much of their effort has been to “unlearn the shame, resist the corporate brainwashing, and literally get our hands dirty learning how our bodies work.” Any mention of menstrual activism is accompanied by an in-depth description of alternative menstruation products. Menarchists believe that Diva Cups, Luna Pads, the Keeper, and other “alternative” menstrual products offer a superior option to tampons and pads. Because they are reusable, these products are also environmentally friendly.

Instead of promoting a single “normal” (not menstruating) modern body that women should emulate, makers of these new products recognize that menstruation and menses management should look different for different bodies. Through word of mouth and zines, menarchists offer resource guides to different products. They offer their own experience to “reassure

57 MOLT.
58 Kissling, Capitalizing on the Curse, 112.
the reader that she is getting a (at least one woman’s) true account.”60 This particular group of menarchists avoids condensing menstruation to simply a “women’s” issue. They want to separate menstruation from femaleness. Bobel explains, “Calling attention to the uniquely female experience of monthly bleeding excludes young girls, post menopausal women, transgendered and transsexual women and women, who for myriad other reasons, cannot or will not bleed.”61

Marketing campaigns for the alternative products contrast sharply with Kotex, Tampax, and Always. First, they do not stem from the premise that menstruation is taboo and that their product will help ease a woman’s life and make menstruation as little a hassle as possible. It is quite the opposite. Kissling explains this striking new attitude towards menstruation: “Ads for ecologically sound products do not market secrecy and shame along with the products. There is no mention of freshness and no remedy for tainted femininity. Menstruation is understood to be a fact of life that one must accept, rather than hide or control.”62 The ads are straightforward, informative, and transparent about their goal of “freeing women from dependency on cumbersome, uncomfortable, expensive, paper-based products.”63

Secondly, the advertising for these products is done through word of mouth, with women promoting the products. The Keeper, which is a rubber cup designed to collect menstrual blood, has a strong “fan base.” Even the official webpage for The Keeper aligns with menarchist’s ideas about marketing menstrual products—it is informative and full of testimonials of women endorsing The Keeper. The official webpage explains the financial benefit; women will save $445 throughout ten years, as well as cut back on waste and disposable products. Lunapads are another popular alternative. Washable cloth menstrual pads are a practical and resourceful tool for women to manage their menstruation.

While alternative menstrual products are truly revolutionizing ideas about menstruation and how it can be managed, the most progressive outcome of these products is that they connect women more directly to their actual menstrual blood. When rewashing a Lunapad or emptying a Keeper, menstruators are directly touching and addressing their abject menstrual blood. They are looking at it fearlessly, directly, and, depending on how subversive they aspire to be, may even be doing so in public places. By cleaning out and rinsing their blood in public restrooms, women are embracing their menstrual cycles and making lasting impressions on the women who witness this act. While menarchists are trying to change public attitudes to

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60 Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style,” 337.
61 Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style,” 34.
62 Kissling, Capitalizing on the Curse, 97.
wards menstruation, they must do so by first overcoming their own internalized messages of misogyny that manifest in self-disgust.

Cycle III: A Messy Menstrual Moment

Half-asleep I reach down and dab my vagina. It is wet. I open my eyes and excitedly see a thin layer of red glaze on my index finger. I knew it! Satisfied, I triumphantly stick out my finger to show my girlfriend before turning over and closing my eyes for another ten minutes. I knew it was coming, of course. The timing was right, and of course there were the cramps and debilitating desire to stay in bed all day yesterday.

Where is my Diva Cup? What will my blood look like this month? Recently it has been a brilliant crimson. I used to squirm and bunch up my pad or immediately flush down my tampon. Now I respectfully inspect and admire the pools of monthly blood that seep out of me. It is shockingly beautiful. A sign of revolution, a flag of courage, and as Judy Chicago has demonstrated, a deliberately radical piece of art (see Figure 3).

The clots still slightly disturb me. The chunkier pieces are a bit gelatinous and reminiscent of strawberry jam. They scare me a little as I imagine them as crumbles of my living body—the lining of my uterus and protective layers that exist to create another living thing. I want to touch it, smear it, use my menstrual blood to create something, to evoke feelings and emotions. Many artists have attempted to transform attitudes about menstrual blood by mak-

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ing menstrual art. Artist Vanessa Tiegs created a series of eighty-eight paintings titled “Menstrala” (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Galaxy Crossing by Vanessa Tiegs. One of eighty-eight images made over the course of three years using the artist’s menstrual blood.65

She uses her menstrual blood as a journal of what she calls her “monthly cycle of renewal.” Because she has found so few visual images of menstruation itself, she created them herself. Using her own menstrual blood as the medium, she expresses herself, her moods, and her sexuality through art. Her intention is to create positive, affirmative visuals of menstruation, as well as to connect with her own body.66

Menstrual writing is cyclical writing. It disbands phallogocentric ways of being, of reasoning, of work production, of existing in the world. Menstruation is our freedom. We can smear it on the walls, paint with it, wear it, flaunt it. Let Ingrid Berthon-Moine’s portraits be an inspiration (see Figure 5).

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The women stare uncompromising into the camera. Their blood-stained lips could very well be a thick coat of Cover Girl™ lipstick, but a second look reveals the blood-clotted traces of menstrual blood. Berthon-Moine’s portraits reflect contemporary menarchist ideas. She literally brings menstruation to the mouths of women. In the photograph above, with blood boldly on her lips, the woman’s silent stare represents the silence that surrounds menstrual blood. Berthon-Moine’s series of portraits showcase menstruation’s invisibility and remove any mediating menstrual technology that erases signs of menstruation. In re: Cycling, Chris Bobel analyzes the power behind Berthon-Moine’s series:

Moine’s models, silent and unblinking, issue a challenge. When we meet their gaze and contemplate their red mouths, we are forced to look back at ourselves, and at each other. Why is there a menstrual taboo anyway? And who and what does it serve? There must be an awful lot at stake when people work so hard to keep it alive…. Sexism and misogyny shape cultural attitudes about women’s bodies and women’s lives, rendering them deficient, at best, and repulsive, at worst. This sets the stage for abuse, for the “justification” of power and control over women and girls and all things feminine. Let’s not let that connection go unnoticed while we look away from the “icky,” especially then. The menstrual taboo is rooted in a negative and dysfunctional view of women’s bodies and experiences, an artifact of sexism, as old as sexism itself. Challenging the taboo

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says NO to disrespecting women and moves us one step closer to ending vio-

lence against women. That’s the power of work like Moine’s.68

Leaking, leaving our mark wherever we go. We could revolutionize femcare, radically
reject it and instead spill, stain, and smear everywhere. Right now slime and ooze stick my legs
together. I sit in a pool of my blood. Unusually comforting, warm, and powerful. I learn to en-
joy this slow transformation that my body creates. I will be glad when it is over. But for this
one week a month, menstruation reminds me, inspires me, and transforms me.

68 Chris Bobel, “What’s Menstruation Got to Do With It?” web log posting, re:Cycling: Society for Menstrual Cycle
References


