BODIES LEAK | BLOOD SPEAKS:

Exploring Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Menstrual Taboos and Menstrual Activism through Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger

By Ayra Alex Thomas

Introduction: Body Politics and Blood Sport

"Why bloody your hands on another's
blood-body journey?"
— Jihyun Yun, "Menstruation Triptych,"
Some Are Always Hungry

In the contemporary linguistic landscape of menstruation codes and idioms, we see blood take on a distinctly dangerous, yet powerful, life force: *Code Red. The Crimson Tide. Shark Week. A Bloody Scourge. The Curse of Womanhood.* Such lexis employed to taboo menstruation and the menstruating body not only reveals but propagates socio-cultural and psycho-social frameworks of menstruation as symbolic of disease, dirt, or disorder (Fahs 2016; Green-Cole 2020). In societies where menstrual taboos proliferate, cultural avoidance and indoctrinated shame of menstruation are often rooted by ideas of periods as a waste of or break from productivity, a shedding of toxic blood, a lack/absence of something, and, all-inclusively, a form of pollution (Bobel 2010; Donmall 2013; Newton 2016). Insofar as menstruation rests intricately connected to societal expectations, stigmatizations, and regulations of femininity, the menstruating body thus becomes the subject of Otherness or exclusion, and menstrual blood more generally takes the form of 'gendered' blood (Lupton 1993). As such, dominant strains of critical discourse regarding the body politics of menstruation often posits the menstruating body as a uniquely female suffering, where menstrual taboos may be interpreted as figurative metaphors for women's real absence, marginalization, and misrepresentation in society (Turner 2003; Kerkham 2010).

In my paper, I turn to cultural theorist Mary Douglas' most influential work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), in order to investigate the religio-historical and sociocultural structures underpinning menstrual taboos; rendering the self-contained 'male' body as pure, orderly, and clean, while characterizing the bleeding/leaking 'female' body as impure, disorderly, and dirty. Through my analysis of Douglas's theorization on dirt, I aim to reveal the ways in which menstrual blood is bestowed (symbolic) meaning based on ideals of cis-heteronormative biology, desire, and patriarchy.

In recognizing menstrual blood as 'dirt,' this essay not only critiques how menstrual taboos uphold repressive gendered norms but also asks us to consider dirt itself as creatively potent and transformative. Dirt destabilizes structures precisely through its capacity for decomposition; as dirt rots away any rigid categories governing cleanliness, gender, and social order, it fertilizes the ground for alternative forms of bodily existence and new possibilities for queer embodiment. While I delve into Douglas' assertions to unveil how menstrual blood may be regarded as a *gendered* bodily substance, I ultimately advocate for a *de*-gendering of menstruation. In an effort to move away from analyses which posit bodily fluids as inherently indicative of physiological or biological gender/sex binaries (and therefore perpetuate contemporary gender inequalities), I use Douglas' work as a departure point to broaden our understandings of how menstruating bodies are policed and concealed by gender/sex binaries.

Effectively, I hope to demonstrate how radically capsizing menstrual taboos to resist and challenge oppressive ideologies which subordinate

menstruating bodies necessarily requires the inclusion of bodies who themselves do not identify as women, but still bleed. Rather than presenting any singular 'truth' about genderqueer menstruation, I wish to offer, through my analysis, critique on dominant critical discourse which situates menstruation as a cisgendered phenomenon.[1] The main objective of my essay will be to contribute to scholarly discourse regarding genderqueer body politics and reproductive justice in order to advance queer and feminist transformative theories of menstruation that disrupt ideas of the menstruating body as inherently taboo and exclusively feminine.

Bodily Disorder: Douglas' Theory of Dirt as a Pollution Belief

In examining cross-cultural ideas of pollution, Douglas (1966) emphasizes how pollution beliefs carry immense symbolic weight in shaping, organizing, and governing the social order and values within a given society. Objects, subjects, and substances identified as polluted or pollutants are categorized as such according to a collective perception that regards them as either anomalous or ambiguous to the established cultural order. In this way, Douglas (1966) argues that pollution beliefs function to both regulate and reinforce ideas of dirtiness, contamination, and (im)purity in social life by operating at both "instrumental" and "expressive" levels (3-4). At an instrumental level, moral codes and cultural values can be defined and upheld through beliefs regarding what is considered unclean, dangerous, or contaminating; at an expressive level, pollution beliefs may also be used to support claims or counter-claims to social status. Importantly then, pollution (more than merely a material or physical concept) is symbolically regarded as both a product of and danger to social order (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 26). Thus, pollution *beliefs* carry with them pollution *rules* (i.e. to protect and maintain the social order) and pollution *dangers* (i.e. that which disrupts the social order).

From this, Douglas (1966) provides a theory of dirt as a pollution belief, arguing that dirt, symbolic of "matter out of place," is essentially disorder (44). Seemingly, dirt infiltrates spaces or spheres which are 'ideally' kept separated, and in doing so, dirt threatens to dismantle established orders.[2] As such, dirt not only implies a pre-existing impression of ideal order, but also signifies a transgression or violation against it:

> *Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt … promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity… In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (Douglas 1966, 44-45)*

In essence, dirt becomes both a sign (i.e. that which conveys meaning) and signifier (i.e. that which attributes meaning) for the same religious, political, or socio-cultural systems which thereby label dirt as dangerous and taboo. Then, a primary function behind practices of segregation, purification, or demarcation is not only to impose structure and respond to dirt, but also to avoid dirt and prevent dirtiness from entering a system. Herein also lies an understanding of dirt as contagious, posing a risk to others who come into close proximity with it (Persdotter 2022). Douglas (1966) notes how such appearance of

[1]Throughout this essay, I use the term "trans" or "transgender" to generally describe those individuals whose internal sense of gender diverges from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender identities take form within a broad spectrum of gender-diverse experiences requiring nuanced, affirming care (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012). Conversely, I employ the terms "non-binary" and "genderqueer" as umbrella designations for those who live outside—or between—the traditional male/female divide, whether feeling simultaneously "both," "neither," or dynamically shifting across gendered expressions (Richards et al., 2018).

[2] Here, we might imagine some literal understandings of dirt (e.g. tracking mud onto a freshly polished floor); or contagion (e.g. mixing raw foods with cooked foods); or uncleanness (e.g. leaving used dinnerware in the bedroom) to understand how dirt threatens boundaries. Douglas (1966) offers further, more culturally specific, examples of how dirt presents pollution symbolism regarding food (e.g. Indian traditions which maintain the right hand must be used for eating as the left hand is used for cleaning after defecating) and childbirth (e.g. Judeo-Christian beliefs of women requiring to be purified after giving birth) amongst many others (41; 64-75).

order is created "only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against…" and if we are to truthfully view our rituals of washing, scrubbing, disinfecting, and isolating, we see that these are ideas of "separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements" on orders of society (85).[3] In such light, Mark Murphy (2021) aptly reads Douglas as translating "the sacred and the profane… into notions of purity and danger, or between the clean and pure and the dirty and polluted" (230).

As meditations on dirt prompt reflections on the relationship between sacred and profane, order and disorder, internal and external, form and formlessness, pure and polluted, Douglas observes that religious and ritual responses "giv[e] these relations visible expression," allowing the collective (or cultural) body to know their own society; thereby, "rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body" (1966, 159). Thus, the body, as both a symbol and form of cultural text, becomes central to (de)constructions of social structure.[4] As the 'ideal' body, akin to an ideal society, retains distinct and impermeable classifications, we might understand bodily pollution in the same vein as social pollution: wherein pollution dangers (or fear of pollution dangers) lurk in fragile margins; or distend internal appendages of the system outward; or demonstrate contradictory, ambiguous, or anomalous, qualities:

> *The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious… The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers [...] and dangers to social structure reproduced in small on the human body (Douglas 1966, 142).*

In recognizing the body as a socio-symbolic system, we distinguish how bodily pollution bespeaks disorder by repeatedly blurring, crossing, and collapsing boundaries which are otherwise symbolic of orderliness. Bodily 'matter *out* of place' breaches the divisions between inside/outside, wet/dry, private/public, visible/invisible, etc., and therefore renders the body as uncontainable, unstable or inadequate.[5] Bodily orifices, viewed themselves as vulnerable margins by Douglas, serve as entry and exit points through which bodily fluids spill, leak, and seep past fleshly boundaries. Consider, for instance, how skin and hair sheds; saliva infects; semen ejects; sweat leaves residue; pus oozes; and bile corrodes. Here, we reconcile with the body as, at once, both invaded and invasive, and therein we see how bodily dirt mirrors larger symbols of both danger and power.

Bodily dirt, then, cannot simply be framed as contamination to be cleansed or expelled, but as an active agent of disruption, injecting ambiguity into what otherwise appear to be stable, impermeable categories governing social, cultural, and bodily norms. Still, as dirt loosens these seemingly fixed boundaries, its decomposition cultivates fertile ground upon which alternative and fluid modes of social life may flourish, inherently subverting the strictures of normative containment. In its refusal to stay in place, dirt retains the capacity to reorient social meaning precisely at the points where boundaries dissolve; through this disruption, we begin to see how the body unmakes the very structures that seek to confine it.

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[3] Insofar as perceptions or evaluations of dirt differ according to religio-historical and cultural contexts, Douglas (1966) is firm when she maintains there is "no such thing as absolute dirt" (3). Still, following Émile Durkheim's analysis of ritual(s) as symbolic of social processes, Douglas notes that, in our efforts to eliminate dirt from our environment, our "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience" (3).

[4] See: Williams 1998, 67; Murphy 2021, 230.

[5] Addressing early Christian and Hebrew perspectives on impurity taboos, and particularly their association with bodily inferiority, Douglas (1966) clarifies how "the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as a perfect container," and therein, such wholeness extended to symbolize "completeness" within a social framework (65).

Menstrual blood as bodily dirt: gendered symbols of menstrual pollution & menstrual blood as gendered substance

Menstrual blood, more than any other bodily fluid or discharge, frequently triggers a blend of shock, discomfort, and revulsion in global communities, reflecting some of our cultures' deep-rooted associations to danger and power in the context of bodily pollution (Lupton 1993; Patterson 2014; Fahs 2016; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020). As a bodily fluid, menstrual blood aligns with Douglas' theorization of dirt as 'matter out of place' insofar as it ruptures through the natural confines of the body and bestows upon the body an 'uncontrollable' physiological process. Indeed, the very viscosity of menstrual blood, as a median state between solid and liquid, challenges easy classification and serves as a metaphor for a permeable or pliant bodily disposition.[6] If we adopt Douglas's framework and regard the self-contained body as a microcosm representing the larger social system, or, if we consider bodily functions as a synecdoche for broader social structures, then, within this framework, the menstruating body symbolizes a vulnerable body politic, lacking control and/or stability. Therein, menstrual dirt beliefs often conceive the menstruating body as an imperfect and leaky container, posing a risk not only to the individual but also endangering others.

Certainly, Douglas (1966) sheds light on various cultures and religious knowledge systems that adhere to dirt-rejecting ideologies, particularly with regards to menstruation and the associated beliefs, rules, and dangers related to menstrual blood. For instance, Havik Brahmin pollution rules restrict menstruating women from entering a temple (ibid., 42).[7] In Western-European secular cultures, menstruation is frequently perceived and remedied in terms of pathogenicity and hygiene, however, menstruating bodies are susceptible to "social sanctions, contempt, ostracism, gossips, even police action" (ibid., 92).

In Judeo-Christian traditions, as reinforced by the Old Testament, menstruation is configured as a part of God's punishment toward women, or the '*curse* of Eve' for causing the fall of mankind (ibid., 52-55).[8] Certain Māori people regard menstrual blood as a form of miscarriage, and thus consider menstruation as a harbinger of spirits related to death (ibid., 119). Mae Engan groups of Papua New Guinea believe that men who come into contact with menstrual blood, without the "appropriate counter-magic," suffer severe consequences, including persistent vomiting, discoloration of blood, and mental impairment (ibid., 182).[9] Lele attitudes preserve that menstrual dangers are "only risked by men" however, if a menstruating woman sets foot in a forest, she poses a danger to the entire community by disrupting favorable hunting conditions (ibid., 187).

In all these instances, menstrual blood is categorized as bodily dirt and the menstruant is deemed both the receiver and transmitter of such pollution. As blood taints, defiles, and clings to things, menstrual pollution affirms the ways in which dirty substances do not conform to rigid boundaries. The capacity to understand menstrual pollution as embodied pollution is twofold: menstruation not only instigates bodily fears such as infection, hunger, and death, but also prompts physical control or concealment of the body such as through restrictions on access to sacred sites, practices of bodily penance, hormonal medication, hygiene technologies like tampons and sanitary napkins.

In cultures where we witness the menstruating body become the subject of taboo or danger, Douglas (1966) is certain we also find "pollution ideas enlisted to bind men and women to their allotted roles," and therein we observe how gender distinctions and inequalities continue to play a central role in constructing societal divisions (174). Among psycho-sociologists, anthropologists, and feminist theorists alike, much scholarly ink has been spilled regarding the intricate connections between women's bodies, menstruation, and the ways in which menstrual

[6] Douglas (1966) notes Jean-Paul Sartre's anxieties of "stickiness" being "soft, yielding and compressible … long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness" (47).
[7] See also: Puri (1999); Cohen (2020).
[8] See also: Delaney, Lupton, and Toth (1988); Dawson (2005); Štante (2013); Newton (2016).
[9] See also: Delaney, Lupton, and Toth (1988); Baldy (2017).

blood more specifically takes the form of a '*gendered*' bodily substance that symbolically enacts (and attacks) oppressive, misogynistic, or patriarchal social structures.

In the wake of modern psychoanalytic theory, indoctrinated shame and cultural avoidance of menstruation may be anchored by Freudian theories of penis envy or castration anxiety (Lupton 1993; Donmall 2013). Under this phallocentric framework, the menstruating body is ascribed both the capacity to reproduce as well as an internal inadequacy or bodily deficiency for failing to do so. Menstruation is thus seen as a waste/break from productivity as well as a shedding of toxic/useless blood. Patterson (2014) argues that the post-menarcheal body gradually acquires sexual meaning through the development of larger breasts and wider hips (i.e. conditions sufficient for pregnancy and motherhood) and girls, often influenced by media representations, are taught to strictly manage and discipline their bodies in order to conform to expectations of (cis-heterosexual) male desire.[10] The sexual differentiation between men and women becomes invariably hinged on the symbolic absence or presence of a penis, with menstruation, in particular, symbolizing what is perceived as most lacking in women: self-control, the phallus, and offspring.

Conversely, many analysts have also framed symbolism of menstrual pollution vis à vis Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualization of women's bodies as *Other* or *Othered* (Chiwengo 2003; Piran 2020; Wood 2020). In *The Second Sex* (1989) de Beauvoir argues that 'women are not born' but rather 'made' by societal expectations and then constrained to the conditions of their biology and physiology. A menstruating woman is accordingly seen as undesirable or unruly due to her uncontrollable nature. Along these lines, menstrual taboos also reserve some potency by ensuring that women actively participate in the process of Othering themselves, monitoring and regulating menstrual dirt through routine self- checks or controls (e.g. surveying for stains and leaks, keeping hygiene products on hand, and tracking period cycles). Taking stock of the main analytical threads in (post-)modern discourse regarding menstrual taboos, women's bodies are chiefly tied to pollution beliefs through—evidently industrial—notions of reproduction and production. The menstruating uterus is understood to be in *want* of something or completely out of order; the menstruating body is laden with the implications of a (re)productive system that has fallen short in producing.

What becomes abundantly clear through such analyses of dirt-rejecting dogmas and rituals is that within the *social* body politic (and *social* politics of the body), we principally observe anti-social mechanisms of power and control. Under a patriarchal society, the non-menstruating and self-contained male body is rendered ideal, pure, clean, and thus, orderly, while the menstruating and leaking female body is framed as dangerous, impure, unclean, and thus, disorderly. Certainly, the question lingers, as observed by Elizabeth Grosz (1994), regarding why menstrual blood (i.e. a 'polluting' bodily fluid) poses a danger to social order in a way that tears or, more significantly, semen (i.e. a 'nonpolluting' bodily fluid) does not. Grosz (1994) hints at a plausible answer: "Is it that paternity is less threatening, less dangerous, less vulnerable, than maternity? Or rather, is it less dangerous and threatening for men?" (207). Menstrual taboos, which work to systemically conceal or control women's bodies, reinforce menstruation as a uniquely female suffering and therein function as *figurative* metaphors for women's *literal* absence, marginalization, repression, and misrepresentation in society (Turner 2003; Kerkham 2010). As Meta Mazaj (1998) declares:

> *"Menstruation thus remains buried, sunk deep in the vaginal cave… It is hidden in a culture which associates the male with admirable normative principles and the female with the vague and indeterminate, the unbounded and formless, the irregular and disorderly… To recognize women's bleeding is to assess the consequence of gender in its biological, societal, and psychological representation (273-274)."*

While we may challenge earlier arguments on the gendered double standards of menstruation

[10] Importantly, menarche (i.e. the first menstrual cycle), in various cultures and religious systems, continues to be the most pervasive gender marker that propels the socialization of young women into an 'ideal' form of adulthood.

by pointing out their reductionist, flattening, or myopic approaches, which frame menstruation solely through (cis-heteronormative) reproductive lenses and assume the female body acts as incubatory vessel, there is indeed no denying that menstruation plays a significant role in both shaping and disrupting constructions of the gendered self.

Still, the lacunas remain glaringly clear: What about those women who do not menstruate and those men who do? How do we challenge perceptions of menstruation as a *women's* issue to foreground individual experiences across the gender spectrum? What about the distinct struggles faced by menstruating bodies that do not identify as female, or menstruants who are not women? Indeed, how do we unsettle—or rather, transform—ideas of the menstruating body as inherently taboo and intuitively feminine?

While Douglas's (1966) framework remains foundational in thinking about pollution, boundary maintenance, and socio-symbolic order, it is not without its limits, particularly when placed in conversation with queer and trans embodiment. Douglas' analysis is firmly rooted in provisional (and performative) binary structures: clean/dirty, male/female, inside/outside. These dualisms, though instrumental in illuminating the ideological rigidity of social systems, can themselves replicate the exclusions they describe. As scholars such as Judith Butler (1990) and Jasbir Puar (2007) argue, binary logics often fail to accommodate the layered, lived realities of bodies that do not conform to cisnormative or heteronormative expectations. Gender, Butler reminds us, is never a fixed essence but an ongoing series of transgressive acts that defy tidy classification. Thus, to fully mobilize Douglas in the service of a queer politics of menstruation, then, may require queering her theory itself and reading against the grain of her structuralism to imagine dirt not just as a threat to order, but as a site where normative frameworks collapse under the weight of what they cannot categorize. In this light, menstrual blood does not merely mark "matter out of place," but reveals that the very places—and the meanings assigned to them—are unstable, historically contingent, and open to radical reordering.

Menstrual blood, precisely because it is a bodily fluid that refuses neat categorization, exposes the instability—and thus vulnerability—of rigid gender binaries. Menstruation embodies dirt's intrinsic capacity for decay insofar as menstrual blood corrodes symbolic boundaries constructed around the cisheteronormative body. Rather than seeing menstrual blood's unruliness as a social liability, we might instead interpret such bodily dirt as a site of political possibility—as ongoing resistance—against the binary logics of femininity or masculinity.

Menstrual resistance: dirt as art & towards a genderqueer body politics of menstruation

In recognizing the menstruating body as a particular locus for gender-based discrimination and governance, it becomes imperative to explore (re-)configurations of menstrual symbolism and, more broadly, strategies for gender justice that actively subvert and resist these dictates. The task, therefore, is not only to evolve our conscious acts of resistance to reconcile with dirt-*affirming* ideologies, but to also mobilize a notion of resistance which continues to empower the vulnerable margins and threatened borders of the body politic. Douglas (1966) offers some fundamental groundwork for this charge, emphasizing that dirt maintains immense creative power insofar as "dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness," and such formlessness is "an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay" (198-199). On the power of disorder, Douglas (1966) writes:

> *Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality (117).*

If borderline functions and ambiguous states are seen as threatening to societies where ideas of danger are based on form and cohesion

(or a lack thereof), then surely this is sufficient criteria to claim that immense energy and agential power exists in margins and unstructured areas. Ironically, the very semantics and polysemic capacities of the terms 'taboo,' 'danger,' and 'power' offer ambivalent connotations that wield menstruation as a tool for both reinforcing hegemony and engaging in counter-hegemonic resistance.

The 'potentiality' of dirt, therefore, is neither passive nor purely destructive, but generative. Building on this, we might consider rot (in its symbolic and literal sense) to be perhaps the most powerful expression of dirt, marked by its slow and deliberate labor of undoing. Where dirt marks the transgression of boundaries, rot begins to erode the foundations themselves. In the context of menstruation, rot becomes a political force: it decomposes the rigid, cisheteronormative categories that frame bleeding as biologically deterministic. Menstrual blood, often treated as taboo, performs this rot in real time—it seeps, stains, and refuses containment, challenging the fixity of gendered embodiment. To frame menstruation through the lens of rot is to recognize (and continue to mobilize) a politics of deviance that finds its momentum in the breakdown, in ambiguity and transformation.

On the heels of legislative change catalyzed by the Equal Pay Act, Griswold v. Connecticut, and Roe v. Wade in America during the 1960s and 1970s, the second-wave feminist movement increasingly supplied artists and creators with a platform to envision a world where menstruants are liberated from the influence of (heteronormative) gender constructs and constraints. Douglas (1966) herself contends that art "enable[s] us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience" and aesthetic pleasure often arises "from the perceiving of inarticulate forms" (47). In this way, art not only offers a gateway for exploring—indeed, actualizing—the ineffable, but art fundamentally implores both the artist and viewer to confront the symbolic potential of ambiguity or disorder.
According to Breanne Fahs (2016), menstrual art in particular, "more than other forms of art aimed at deconstructing notions of embodiment," distinctly challenges and attacks notions of the 'dirty' (107). Significantly, menstrual art (i.e. art focused on themes directly related to menstruation; art which employs menstrual blood or menstrual management devices as a medium; and/or art incorporating the menstruating body) invites violation of menstrual taboos by radically challenging ideas of menstruation as private, feminine, and disorderly (Fahs 2016; Kutis 2019; Green-Cole 2020; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020; Lewis 2020). Moreover, considering Judith Butler's (1988) notions *of* performativity and gender constitution(s), menstruation itself can be viewed as a performative act, consciously displayed or kept concealed by the theatrical body-stage. As "the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (Butler 1988, 521), artworks that recognize menstrual blood as *gendered* blood arguably deconstruct and re-evaluate the disorderly positioning of the leaking female body to instead portray a more positive, subjective, ambiguous, or riotous perspective on menstruation.

In 1971, Judy Chicago's Red Flag—a lithograph of herself extracting a tampon—shattered the taboo surrounding menstrual blood by placing it firmly within the "high art" canon. By co-opting the conventions of fine art, Chicago lent menstrual blood the gravitas usually reserved for male-coded subjects, forcing viewers to confront what has been hidden or sanitized. From 2000 to 2003, Vanessa Tiegs painted over eighty canvases using her own menstrual blood, creating abstract, phoenix-like compositions she dubbed *Menstrala*. Over a 28-day performance in 2013, Casey Jenkins sat knitting in a gallery with yarn drawn from her vagina—some days tinted with menstrual blood. The piece centered the menstruating body as both site and medium, refusing the discreet containment and privacy society demands from bleeding bodies.

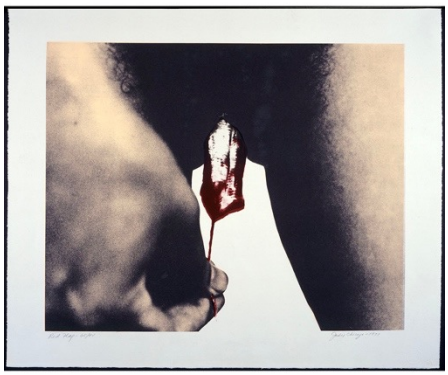

Figure 1. Judy Chicago "Red Flag" (1971)

Figure 2. Vanessa Tieg "Silverfish Spirits" as part of the Menstrala Series (2000-2003)

Figure 3. Casey Jenkins' Casting Off My Womb (2013)

Understood through this vein, menstrual art enacts a *further* disordering of the originally perceived disorder, and by doing so, metamorphizes symbols of bodily dirt into tools for bodily resistance. To the extent that menstrual art transforms stigma into creative resistance, it remains a cornerstone in radical menstrual activism. Still, to date, menstrual art has been predominantly produced by cis-gender and (self-identified) heterosexual women. To date, there are very few examples of trans and non-binary menstrual activism, a gap that highlights how bleeding bodies outside the cisfemale paradigm are routinely overlooked. To date, there are very few examples of trans and non-binary menstrual activism, a gap that highlights how bleeding bodies outside the cisfemale paradigm are routinely overlooked. In 2017, trans artist Cass Clemmer disrupted this erasure by publicly posting their free-bleeding self-portraits on Instagram under the banner #PeriodsAreNotJustForWomen. Such an intervention demonstrates the power of menstrual art to contest and expand ideas of menstrual normativity, however—as Clemmer themselves emphasize—true liberation demands moving past overly romanticized or homogenized views of menstruation as celebratory for and central to ideas of womanhood and femininity, and rather, embrace its subversive potential across all gendered identities (Bobel 2010; Frank 2020).[11]

As scholarship and awareness surrounding queer menstrual activism *gradually* infiltrate contemporary discourse, we become better equipped to fill the cavities of cis-heteronormative body politics. Arguably, the fact that trans and non-binary menstrual experience (still) remains greatly under-studied, under-spoken, and under-advocated seems inherently tied to ideas of menstruation as a uniquely female suffering, and the genderqueer menstruant as even more 'dirty' or 'disorderly' than the cis-hetero menstruant. Indeed, in various western cultures, genderqueer menstruation remains a twofold state of marginalized Otherness; and both trans and/or non-binary menstruants, in particular, remain at risk of gender-based violence and reproductive injustice (Bobel 2010; Fahs 2016; Frank and Dellaria 2020; Bobel and Fahs 2020). Sarah E. Frank (2020) argues that menstruation and current types of menstrual management are significant sources of anxiety and dysphoria for those outside the gender binary, insofar as the incongruence between the gendered identity felt by trans and non-binary individuals, the lived experience of menstruation, and the socio-symbolic construction of menstruation as inherently feminine all work to fracture a sense of self. Frank (2020) notes how bathroom spaces, professional healthcare sites, and menstrual hygiene products serve as inherently cis-gendered institutions to further stigmatize and socio-symbolically reject trans and non-binary menstruants. Indeed, there is a way in which the very shaping of cultural artifacts associated with menstruation (for instance, women's *healthcare* centers or *feminine* hygiene products) strengthen biologically reductive notions of menstruation and therein reinforce binary understandings of

[10] As Butler (1988) posits: "It remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate… my only concern is that sexual difference not become a reification which unwittingly preserves a binary restriction on gender identity and an implicitly heterosexual framework for the description of gender, gender identity, and sexuality" (530-531).

gender.

Viewed from this perspective, it may be tempting to emphasize the ways in which genderqueer menstruants are forced to negotiate with their identities and bodies within the confines of cis-heteronormative spaces and structures, however, as Klara Rydström (2020) notes, dysphoria related to menstruation is not a universal trans experience. For instance, studies have shown that some trans and non-binary menstruants react more positively towards menstrual suppression and regulation than cisgender menstruants (Rydström 2020; Chrisler et al. 2016). In this context, we grasp how transnormativity and queernormativity, too, enact structures of exclusion and Othering which ironically mirror the hierarchical ordering of heteronormativity, and in doing so, reify static and 'containable' gender norms.

So then, to radically move away from cis-heteronormative expectations, hyper-disciplines, and socio-cultural or religio-historical constructions of menstruation which posit the body as indicative of physiological or 'biological' gender/sex binaries (and thus, perpetuate contemporary gender inequalities), would certainly entail a *de*-gendering of menstruating bodies and menstrual blood. Fundamentally capsizing menstrual pollution beliefs, dangers, and rules in order to *resist* patriarchal ideologies which subordinate menstruating bodies, and rather propel activist-based research into equal reproductive justice rights and genderqueer body politics, necessarily requires recognition and inclusion of those (intersex, agender, bigender, non-binary, trans) menstruants who themselves do not identify as cis-gender women but still bleed. As Chris Bobel (2015) notes:

> *"…the entire black body, trans body, disabled body, and fat body, for example, are read as abject, as deficit, and thus, at risk… So while we are celebrating a new era of menstrual awareness, we need to be mindful of who is authorized to dance at the new party… [we must] consider the lived realities of those of us who occupy a social space that vibrates—all day, every day—with peril…[...]*
>
> *[...]If not, we merely prescribe a one-size-fits-all kind of new menstrual consciousness that keeps the movement small and fringy" (Gender & Society).*

Put simply, there is no one experience of inhabiting a menstruating body and menstrual realities differ among menstruants and non-menstruants alike. Within this comprehension, there exists a compelling argument for the de-gendering of menstruation, menstrual body politics, and menstrual activism more generally. In the phraseology of Jennifer Tyburczy (2017), it is only through "multiple individual's new identities, communities, and politics" that both space and force emerges "where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior might evolve into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance" (52). In reconciling with the fact that the menstruating body may signify (and be signified through) diverse gendered experiences, we thus embark on the task of decomposing, ploughing back, and harvesting the full creative potential of "that which is rejected" (Douglas 1966, 207). It is from this transformative and powerful rot that both resistance and renewal of life burgeons forth, crawls out from the center, and ultimately flourishes in the margins and boundaries.

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