GENDERED BODIES
Feminist Perspectives
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In this chapter, we look at menstrual activism, female sexuality, ritual genital cutting, mastectomy and body image, eating disorders, and elective cosmetic surgeries, and examine the extent to which women can take control over the social definition of their bodies. In some instances, women choose to go along with fairly conventional norms and expectations of femininity, but see it as their choice, not as succumbing to oppressive norms. Other women go beyond the norms by flaunting their sexuality or menstrual status. Other women use the norms as a means of control over their own bodies, dieting to the point of illness. Still other women defy or resist the pressure of the norms, refusing to have breast reconstruction after a mastectomy or a face-lift when wrinkles appear.

Menstrual Activism

Menstruation, in biological terms, is the end result of hormonal preparation of the uterus for pregnancy after ovulation. If a fertilized ovum is not implanted in the uterus, the lining sloughs off—and that is menstruation. When a woman’s ovaries stop maturing and releasing eggs, the cycle ceases—and that is menopause. These cycles are imbued with cultural and social significance in many societies. Menstruation, as a mark of becoming a woman, is often celebrated. In modern Western societies, a girl’s first period (menarche) is not ritualized. Rather, it begins a monthly worry about showing blood and the danger of getting pregnant. Worse, the “condition” has become somewhat shameful and stigmatizing—something to be hidden.

In a famous political fantasy in Ms. Magazine, Gloria Steinem (1978) asked:

What would happen . . . if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not? The answer is clear—menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event. Men would brag about how long and how much. Boys would mark the onset of menstruation, that longed-for proof of manhood, with religious ritual and stag parties . . . . Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation (“menstruation”) as proof that only men could serve in the Army (“you have to give blood to take blood”), occupy political office (“can women be aggressive without that steadiest cycle governed by the planet Mars?”), be priests and ministers (“how could a woman give her blood for our sins?”). . . .

In short, if men could menstruate, the power justifications could probably go on forever. If we let them. (p. 110)

The equation of menstruation with high or low status, Steinem said, depends on the status of women. Whether women have high or low status in a society determines whether menstruation is celebrated publically or hidden in menstrual huts, whether it confers a sacred aura or one of pollution that needs to be “sanitized,” and whether it is medicalized as a pathological condition or handled as a proud part of daily life.

In the following excerpt, Chris Bobel, professor of women’s studies, describes the menstrual activism of third-wave feminists, young women who define their bodies and their sexuality as forms of power.

Resistance With a Wink: Young Women, Feminism and the (Radical) Menstruating Body

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Menstrual activism—a persistent but little known presence in the women’s health movement since the early 1970s, and more recently, the environmental movement, the “punk scene,” and anarchist communities, began with a scathing critique of the dominant Western cultural narrative of menstruation, resisting the framing of menstruation as dirty, shameful, and something best hidden. Its goal is to make menstruation, in the words of documentary filmmaker Giovanna Chesler, “audible and visible.” The counter-narrative of menstrual activism explicitly politicizes and demystifies the personal experience of menses, aiming to give women back the power over their bodies.

A large part of menstrual activism is resistance to the “femcare” industry, seen as the producers of polluting, underregulated (and thus unsafe), and ultimately unnecessary products that exploit the taboos surrounding menstruation. Many menstrual activists are primarily concerned about the content of conventional products—tampoons and pads. Toxic residues left behind by pesticide-laden and bleached cotton (a main ingredient) and the potentially irritating effects of rayon (another main ingredient) lead activists to promote reusable products, such as washable cloth pads and internally worn devices that collect rather than absorb blood.

Though menstrual activism is practiced by mostly White, college-educated women, many of whom identify as queer, it is diverse in the ways it manifests itself—spanning the terrain from the sacred to the ribald and the practical to the abstract. It can be a mother-daughter ceremony in prepara
tion for a young woman's first menses in suburban San Francisco, a "Tampon Send-Back" campaign at a prestigious college, a small group of women hand-sewing their own reusable cloth menstrual pads (called a "Stitch 'N Bitch"), and the "Red Brigade" contingent of the Michigan Woman's Music Festival annual parade—a boisterous cadre of women, some naked and most decorated with red paint and red accessories, carrying cardboard signs emblazoned with slogans such as "Love Your Blood!" and "Corporations Out of My Cunt!"

**Menstrual Activism History**

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, members of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (authors of the "Bible of Women's Health:" Our Bodies, Ourselves) and the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research (founded in 1979) led a series of courageous efforts to improve the safety profile of conventional menstrual products, especially tampons (Rome and Wolhandler 1992). One brand of tampons was implicated in a wave of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), a bacterial infection that killed 38 women in the early 1980s and caused the serious illness of 813 more (FDA 1999). By 1982, more than 2,200 menstrual-related TSS cases had been reported to the Centers for Disease Control (Tieno 2001).

In 1989, a small group of British feminist environmental activists called the Women's Environmental Network (WEN) organized a national media blitz designed to publicize the dangerous by-products of the chlorine bleaching process used to produce tampons and sanitary napkins (Costello, Vallee, and Young 1989). There was some positive response from manufacturers, but not enough, stimulating the founding of several alternative product companies.

In the 1990s, two influential books were published that challenged readers to rethink the ways they manage their monthly bleeding—The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo (Huppert 1999) and Cunt: A Declaration of Independence (Musco 1998). The Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC 2003), a national grassroots organization, started its "Dioxin Out of Tampons" campaign (later renamed "Tampaction") in 1999. In 2000, the first antitampon conference was held at James Madison University in Virginia. Also in 2000, poet Geneva Kachman and filmmaker Molly Strange established "Menstrual Monday," a "holiday" designed to challenge menstrual taboos, secrecy, and negativity (see www.moltx.org). It is in this context that contemporary menstrual activists, including a small group of urban punk feminists, founded "The Bloodsisters"; their call to arms is "Axx Tampax!"

What explains the upsurge in activity and the shift in focus that took place in the menstrual activism movement in the mid 1990s and continues today? The simple answer is that feminism changed. While today's actions were set in motion by activists who confronted the femcare industry by working within the system, the current movement is shaped by different, though related, cultural and ideological developments, namely, the emergence of third-wave feminism infused with the spirit of punk (Henry 2004). Choosing to

work outside the system, the newest phase of menstrual activism centered on what's commonly called "radical menstruation," or as one activist puts it, "breaking the tampon addiction."

**From Talking Cunts to Grrrls With Pom Poms: Menstrual Activist Strategies**

A central theme in the discourse of menstrual activism centers on identity. In particular, the activists seem compelled to enunciate very clearly who they are not. They are not, as the website Whirling Cervix (n.d.) stated, "the type to enthuse about becoming one with the chalice and the Goddess"; "cramps still suck, but it's nice to be a little more in touch with 'that time of the month'" (p. 7). This view intentionally dissociates from the cultural feminist celebration of the body and the Goddess, rooted in a vision of menstruation as a source of women's power. Across the movement—in self-published zines, on websites, in spoken discourse—is this theme of distancing from the feminist "I bleed, Therefore I Am" perspective. The menstrual activists' break with this tradition is even more clearly articulated in their linguistic choices. At a cloth-pad-making workshop organized by the environmental group E* Funk at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, the leaders stated very clearly:

We say "menstruator" instead of woman when we refer to those who menstruate. We do this because not ALL women menstruate and not ONLY women menstruate. (Bobel 2005)

Yonah EtShalom, menstrual activist and former coordinator of SEAC's national Tampaction campaign, was among the first in the movement to push for gender-neutral language. Calling attention to nonmenstruating women, such as those who suppress their periods with diet, exercise, or contraceptives, postmenopausal women, and ill women, and to some intersexed and transgendered people, some of whom identify as men, who do menstruate, EtShalom (n.d.) stands for a truly inclusive movement. The menstrual activist's opposition to the rigid gender binary—a paradigm which equates menstruation with womanhood—is a clear reflection of third-wave feminist ideals of defying gender and sexual categorization and alternatively blurring body boundaries.

Given the strength of the menstrual taboo, menstrual activists must deploy a number of creative strategies to grab and sustain attention. One strategy commonly used is humor. The zines produced by menstrual activists, with titles such as Red Scarf (Fawn n.d.), Pull the Plug on the Feminine Hygiene Industry, and It's Your Fucking Body (Abbondanza n.d.) are unashamedly outrageous. For example, in the zine Femmenstruation Nites Rag (Chantall and Brackin n.d.), "Cunt Woman," a hand-drawn image of a vulva with arms and (hairy) legs, speaks in "thought" bubbles about key topics like menarche, sex during menstruation, PMS, and tampon alternatives. The use of humor draws in readers who might otherwise find this historically silenced and shamed topic too gross or personal to engage.
Often the humor takes the form of reappropriation, that is, taking practices and representations typically used to debase women and using them to resist. In the widely circulated Bloodsisters' *zine Red Alert* #2, the authors offer “thanks for the (respectfully) stolen images” (n.d., p. 3) that pepper their pages. Notable images from the zine include a skipping, pinafored-and-black-patent-leather-shoes-clad little girl; models posing in a circa 1950s sewing pattern publication, cowgirls with the copy “Why ride the old cotton pony? GET UNPLUGGED. Choose reusables!”; and a circa 1950s model sporting a high-style bathing suit and cat’s-eye sunglasses, with the superimposed text, “our revolution has style.” Sometimes the images are used as exposed (i.e., pretty silly how those women are posing, isn’t it?) or reclamation (i.e., let’s celebrate the innocence of little girls rather than exploit it, and/or she may look innocent but don’t underestimate her!).

Another reappropriative tactic is the increasingly popular “radical cheerleading.” Gaining a (sneakered) foothold in anarchist and punk communities and fast becoming a fixture at antiwar and antiglobalization protests, radical cheerleading reclaims a practice typically associated with the worst of patriarchy and reinvents it to mean something wholly different (Zobi 2004). Sparkle Motion, a Colorado-based radical cheer group defines radical cheerleading as...

> **activity** with pom poms and middle fingers extended. It’s screaming F**K CAPITALISM while doing a split. You don’t have to be a dancer, coordinated, or even female-identified. We’re all about kicking corporate ass, taking on the social justice and women’s issues of the day, and having a fucking blast doing it. (rachelleuproot info)

One menstrua activist wrote a “Blood Cheer” set to a Beastie Boy tune that exhorts women to “let it go, let your blood flow” and “smear it on your face and rub it on your body. It’s time to start a menstrual party” (Chantal and Brackin n.d., 19). The author performed at a Halloween party while dressed as a bloody tampon.

Still another common strategy used by the menstrual activists involves reproducing advertisements of the femcare industry and altering them as a means of parody. Reminiscent of graffiti seen on billboards, this strategy directly confronts what activists regard as the industry’s dishonesty and empty promises and rewrites the ads to reflect a more authentic story, for example, that tampons are linked to toxic shock syndrome. The use of Raggedy Ann in *Red Alert* #2 (Bloodsisters n.d.) is illustrative. Here, the familiar icon of innocent girlhood is seated alone in the corner of an otherwise bland page looking very angry. Her eyebrows are redrawn, arched at a severe angle, and her mouth is down-turned. She sits opposite the page that features a manipulated box of Always® maxi pads, which is altered to read “Go Away.” The message to the manufacturer is: “We don’t want you or your dangerous product.” This form of activism is called “culture jamming,” a term coined by the San Francisco-based band Negativeland in 1984, and defined as “the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages” (Klein 1999, 280). Culture jammers, according to Klein, boldly reject the passive absorption of advertising and challenge what is intended as the one way flow of communication from advertiser to hapless, uncritical consumer, to a “talk back” where the consumer reveals the truth in advertising, the story beneath the ad.

Taken together, the uses of humor, reappropriation, and culture jamming subvert the feminine protection industry’s control over women’s bodies. Menstrual activists laughingly redefine the symbols of femininity and challenge the gender binary at its core. With a wry smile and a wink, menstrual activists claim a stylized space where bleeding is normal and every menstruator exercises agency and autonomy over “that time of the month.”

**Sources**


