

International
Institute of
Social Studies

Erasmus

Body Politics and Menstrual Cultures in Contemporary Spain

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Colombia)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Social Policy for Development

SPD

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The Hague, The Netherlands
November 2017

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A mis padres

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Appendix 1: Interviews

Appendix 2: Encounters In the Mountain: On Menstruation, vulnerability, and sorority

Acknowledgements

*“Scientists say we are made up of atoms,
but a little bird told me we are made up of stories”*

Eduardo Galeano

I have always firmly believed that our lives are shaped by the people we meet and the stories we get to share with them. I would like to thank some people who helped me to get to this point, as I write the last lines of this journey. First and above all, I want to thank my parents, who have the most inspiring story of overcoming hardships with dignity, that I will ever know. I want to thank them for their unconditional love and for teaching me all I know about integrity and respect for others. Thank you for having always trusted and supported me. *Los amo.*

I would also like to thank Wendy Harcourt, for letting me tell this story and believing in it from the start, as well as for her constant and caring support throughout this process. Thanks to Jacqueline Gaybor, Jackie, for her time, for guiding me through this process, and kindly and selflessly sharing her knowledge with me.

To my friends, far and near, new and old, for the love, the complicity, the laughter. For dreaming along with me. You are the greatest treasures I have encountered along the way.

To Rem, for always believing in me and being my greatest supporter throughout this journey. For all the comments, all the patience, all the love.

To every woman who opened their heart to me and shared their stories, with trust and affection so this project could be possible: thank you. Specially, I want to thank the women from SOY1SOY4, “*La Manada*”, for becoming a safe space, for all the affection and the teachings, and for inspiring me every day ¡*Infinitas gracias chicas!*

Finally, I would like to thank mi tía Martha, who loved us much much more than we were ever able to love her back. *Gracias por tanto tía.*

Abstract

This research paper aims to identify how women in contemporary Spain are challenging hegemonic ideas on the menstruating body, using their own embodiment as site of resistance; and **how** this in turn, is generating a new menstrual culture and body politics of menstruation.

Through ethnography, netnography and semi-structured interviews, this research identifies the actions undertaken by groups of women in contemporary Spain to challenge the menstrual taboo, as it also explores women's incentives to engage in these actions and finally, how this is all linked to the broader feminist movement.

Using *Situated Feminist Knowledges* (Haraway, 1988) and applying the theories of Body Politics (Harcourt, 2009) and Corporeal Feminism (Grosz, 1994), this research explores the importance of having the body (in this case the female menstrual body) as a subject of research, in order to challenge and transform the patriarchal ways in which it has been conceived, and as such treated in the private, social and political spheres.

Relevance to Development Studies

Women and their bodies have historically been perceived by the international development discourse as passive recipients of technologies, aid, national and international cooperation, and empowerment projects (Razavi and Miller, 1995) and their bodies as sites to be intervened in the name of development.

Recently, gender equality has gained popularity within the hegemonic developmental discourse and many actions are taking place all around the world in order to achieve it and “empower” women. This is a very laudable and long time needed objective. However, I dare to ask: how is this expected to be achieved when girls and women are still highly judged by their bodies? When menstruation is still a taboo in many cultures around the world and some girls don't even have access to FemCare products? When menstrual bodies are rarely listened to or taken into account in the processes of knowledge production,

particularly on topics that directly affect them? When the embodied experience of menstruation is still considered to be insignificant or irrelevant to policy makers and the way decisions are made around it? When menstruation only becomes relevant when profitable or for reproductive purposes?

As long as the female body continues to be looked at from the vertical biomedical gaze as something that can be controlled, intervened and commodified, and as long as access to information on the own body remains undemocratized and highly linked to privilege, no real equality can ever be achieved.

This research expects to contribute in the understanding of the importance having the female embodied experience as key in the processes of knowledge generation within the developmental discourse. It also exalts the practices by women who, through micro-politics and having their bodies as starting point of contestation, have found ways to defy hegemonic discourses on their menstrual bodies and the way they are expected to act and “behave” upon them.

Keywords

Menstruation, Menstrual Activism, Menstrual Cycle, Body Politics, Women, Embodiment, Health, Education, Knowledges, Feminism, Body, Spain

Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2015, Canadian writer and artist Rupi Kaur uploaded on Instagram a picture of herself lying on a bed, with her pyjamas and bed sheets stained with her menstrual blood. The social network took it down alleging violation to their community guidelines¹. In response, she uploaded it again and wrote a powerful statement, questioning why was her picture seen as distasteful or disrespectful in any way:

“(...) a majority of people. societies. and communities shun this natural process. some are more comfortable with the pornification of women. the sexualization of women. the violence and degradation of women than this. they cannot be bothered to express their disgust about all that. but will be angered and bothered by this. we menstruate and they see it as dirty. attention seeking. sick. a burden. as if this process is less natural than breathing. as if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. as if this process is not love. labour. life. selfless and strikingly beautiful.”
(Kaur’s Instagram, March 25th, 2015)

Kaur’s actions were considered to be dirty, unnecessary, disgusting, offensive...something the world is better off not seeing. I could see where the uneasiness came from; it was the same place from where my interest for this topic was born: the way in which we had been taught to see, understand and experience menstruation, not only as women, but as a society.

What I find particularly problematic is the double standard with which menstruation is approached in *modern* societies, creating the false illusion that

¹ “You can not upload pictures or other kind of content that depicts violent images, total or partial nudity, discriminatory, illegal, transgressor, distasteful, pornographic images, or ones with sexual content.” Numeral 2- Instagram’s *Terms of Use*, 2015.

this taboo is disappearing, when it actually has only taken new and subtler ways (Kissling, 2006).

To menstruate is considered to be a normal bodily function women should not be ashamed of, yet it has to be addressed discretely and managed to keep it as clean as possible; it is a natural process that alters the female menstruating body chemically, physically and emotionally, yet women should not mind this and should carry on being active, hiking mountains and smiling for no apparent reason, as advertised on TV. And whenever discomfort appears, which is considered to be *normal*, there is always a pill to help. The patriarchal world we live in has come to terms with the fact that periods exist, as long as they happen in an immaculate, controlled and practically invisible way (Vostral; 2008); menstruation only becomes relevant when profitable or when linked to reproduction. It seems as if the aim then, is to create more and many different ways to help us ignore it or “normalize” it. However, this normalization rather than being a signal of a disappearing taboo, seems to be linked to the idea that the “normal” body, the “default body” does not menstruate; so in order to be treated as normal, women have to conceal their monthly bleeding (Young, 2005).

This naturalized invisibility raised many questions:

Which physiological process experienced by men face such treatment? How could women’s perceptions of their own bodies change if they could openly share their menstrual experiences without fear of being judged as weak or vulnerable? Why the need to deprive the female body from the menstrual experience? How do women experience menstruation anyway? Why cannot menstruation be openly talked about, discussed, researched, in fields other than the bio-medical or psychological? What about taking menstruation away from the dominance of the modern medical gaze and its strict function for reproduction and acknowledging all the socio-cultural and even political implications it has for menstruating bodies and the societies they live in?

Kaur have since become a symbol of a recent movement for menstrual awareness worldwide that is trying to problematize and answer these questions going beyond its biomedical facet and appealing to other socio-cultural dimensions. Her political stand has inspired women and menstruating people all

around the world, to use their embodied experiences as a powerful tool to reclaim and re-signify this physiological process.

Looking at Latin America, Europe and Asia I could see a trend; this topic was slowly gaining popularity and taking many different forms. Some of these actions focus on “health issues related to menstruation (i.e. endometriosis and menstrual suppression); environmental issues such as innovation of sustainable or reusable menstrual products (i.e. menstrual cup, period underwear, reusable pads and sponges); and discussions on the social policy arena related to menstrual management, such as why these products are taxed as luxury items and how this affects girls and women, particularly those in vulnerable situations like inmates, refugees and homeless women, among others.” (Arbeláez, 2017)

As I researched further, I noticed this was happening on social media and on the streets, under many names: Menstrual Activism, Radical Menstruation, *Menstru.Acción*, Menstrual Anarchy, Men(A)archy. In the US and Canada particularly, there is a growing movement to end the menstrual taboo and expose the hazards that FemCare products represent for women’s bodies and the environment (Bobel, 2010); these actions are highly linked to counterculture groups such as punk and queer feminisms.

My RP takes up the particular case of Spain, in order to look at how women are challenging the western biomedical and social ideas of the menstruating body, using their bodies and new ways to experience their periods, as sites of resistance. My **main objective** is to identify and map out the different actions regarding menstruation in contemporary Spain and identify **how** in turn, they are generating a new menstrual culture and body politics of menstruation.

1.1. Research question

How are groups of women in contemporary Spain transforming their embodied menstrual experience and how is this leading to the creation of emerging menstrual cultures and new body politics of menstruation?

Sub-questions

- a) What actions regarding menstruation are taking place in contemporary Spain?
- b) What has driven groups of women to engage in these actions?
- c) How do these actions relate (or not) with the broader feminist movement?

1.2. Structure

This paper is structured as follows: **the second chapter** presents the theoretical framework for this RP. **Chapter 3** explains the setting. **Chapter 4**, the methodology. **Chapters 5, 6** and **7** present the findings of this research: **Chapter 5** looks at actions on the public sphere, using street/online art, advocacy campaigns and policy interventions; **Chapter 6** looks at how women are re-signifying their embodied menstrual experience through menstrual education; **Chapter 7** focuses on alternative menstrual technologies. **Chapter 8** presents the tensions and contradictions these emerging menstrual cultures represent to the women involved. **Chapter 9** presents my conclusions.

Chapter 2 Some Voices to rely on

“To *conceptualize* is to *politicize*” (UNED, 2014)

Despite the wide-ranging literature on Spanish feminisms, as Montes and de Sant’Anna (2016) point out, there is little yet published on menstrual countercultures or actions by women to challenge the hegemonic representations of menstruation. The main body of work that can be found on menstruation is either from a cultural anthropological perspective focusing on the menstrual taboo and cultural practices around it, or from a bio-medical approach and how women have been trying to challenge it (Nogueiras, 2013; Martinez, 2014). The only reference in Spanish academia I located in my research was by Miren Guilló Arakistain (2013, 2014), a menstrual activist who looks at the politics of menstruation and the alternative cultures in the Basque country.

My research has turned then, to broader feminist debates on essentialism; particularly whether the female body should be a focus of academic research or not, specially in relation to its bodily functions, like menstruation and pregnancy (Grosz, 1994; Young, 2005). Research on menstruation has been deemed essentialist by many feminists scholars, adducing that it falls in the idea that it is a *natural* trait that defines what it means to *be* a woman, and it perpetuates the patriarchal notion that our lives are determined by our hormones and bodies.

My approach to women’s embodiment regarding menstruation is neither essentialist nor determinist; however it does recognize the importance of placing bodies, particularly those labelled as female bodies, as key sites of contestation and focus of feminist scholarship.

The following sections will present authors and theoretical frameworks that informed this research and supports the importance of focusing on embodied experiences in order to break the “*gap between bio- medical messages, popular knowledge and lived experience*” (Cornwall, 2002: 219).

I look first at Chris Bobel’s work on **Menstrual Activism** as the jumping off point for this research, as the first scholar to thoroughly research this men-

stration as an important matter in feminist scholarship. The second section focuses on Elizabeth Grosz's **Corporeal Feminism**, which sees the body as central to feminist research and analysis without falling into essentialism. Finally, Wendy Harcourt's **Body Politics**, which positions the body in development studies in relation to practices that regulate bodies and as sites of contestation.

In my RP I join feminist scholarship and development studies in their challenge to capitalism, male supremacy, science and postmodernism that have created knowledge as a disembodied experience (Haraway, 1988: 581). I argue that problematizing the embodied experience, naming it, is a starting point; otherwise theories, policies and interventions cannot effectively improve the life quality of women and tackle discrimination and inequality.

2.1. Entry point: Menstrual Activism

The term *Menstrual Activism* (Bobel 2006; 2010) can be traced back to the 70s Women's Health Movement in the US and Canada. This movement led mainly by white, middle class, feminist women and consumer right activists, aimed to make menstruation visible and raise awareness about health (toxic shock syndrome) and environmental (contamination by mainstream menstrual technologies) hazards that were directly linked to the mainstream menstrual hygiene (FemCare) products. It was the first time the taboo surrounding menstruation was openly talked about; reflections on the politics behind it were held and menstruation started to be perceived as something that exemplified the still uneven power relations exerted over women's bodies. This movement was portrayed by Bobel (2008) as a powerful tool to gain back the control of women's bodies that in this particular dimension had been left to the domain of western medicine, pharmaceuticals and the FemCare industry.

More recently, Bobel (2008, 2010) describes contemporary menstrual activism in the US and Canada, and how this is framed within a new form of

feminism she calls “third wave feminism”. Within this third wave of feminism menstruation is not seen exclusively as a “women’s thing”. That is why Bobel uses the term “*menstruator*” rather than menstruating woman, to remind us that “*not all women menstruate² and not only women menstruate³*” (Bobel, 2010: 11) These “third wavers”, are critical about second wave feminism, which they find to be “stalled”, out-dated and in “*desperate need of new energy, and much richer racial, ethnic and sexual diversity*” (Ibid: 4).

Even when Menstrual Activism framed in this Third Wave Feminism has a highly queer component to it, according to Bobel, it is not diverse as it still leaves behind racialized and working class women.

The author identifies two main groups within this movement: the *feminist spiritualists* who see menstruation as a spiritual, “*healthy, sacred, empowering and even pleasuring experience for women*” (Bobel, 2010: vii); and *radical menstruators*, whose punk and counterculture actions against the mainstream FemCare industry, are quite visible, loud and political.

2.2. Corporeal feminism

In her 1994 work *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz challenges the tendency in feminist scholarship to ignore the body as a relevant and valid source of research. She explicitly states how the body should move to the centre of analysis in order to overcome this “*conceptual blind spot*” (Grosz, 1994: 3). Thus, she highlights that to talk about women’s bodies in a non-essentialist way, is not only necessary, but also possible.

Exploring the ways in which the female body has been perceived over-time, Grosz states how it remains colonized by the biomedical discourse, and

² For example, little girls, pregnant women, women going through menopause, among others.

³ Some trans men menstruate, as well as gender non-conforming/non-binary people.

how bodies in general (male and female) have been considered as “*given, unchangeable, inert, and passive*” (Ibid; x).

Corporeal feminism, instead, calls for an understanding of female bodies as permanently changing and constantly dialoguing with their social and cultural contexts, being active agents not helplessly condemned to biology. In fact, Grosz states in an attempt to justify why researching the body is not essentialist per se, that it is not biology, “*but the ways in which the social system organizes and gives meaning to biology, that is oppressive to women*” (Ibid: 17).

Grosz’ *Corporeal Feminism* exposes the widespread rejection of analysing the female body within feminist philosophers and scholars, who base this reluctance on the assumption that this automatically reinforces ideas of a natural biological inferiority of “women” and the inherent weaknesses that the patriarchy and its dichotomies (mind/body; male/female; science/nature) assign to it. Grosz reminds us that these dichotomies are product of a phallogocentric and misogynistic society and that to acknowledge them, is to play the game on their terms. In order to study the body from a feminist theoretical approach, the author suggests to avoid falling into the exclusive dichotomy mind/body; moving away from singular models of the body considered to be the norm; and trying to avoid any “*biologistic or essentialist accounts of the body*” (Ibid: 23).

Corporeal Feminism suggests the body is an important part of philosophical and feminist research, always crossed by race, culture and class, and has to be understood not as a rigid entity, but as an active site of continuous social transformation and political contestation.

2.3. Body Politics

Body Politics in Development (Harcourt, 2009) provides a helpful framework that allows digging deeper into these questions as it brings the body as a key unit of analysis into the development discourse. Like Grosz’ (1994) approach, Harcourt challenges the idea that focusing on the body is either unnecessary or essentialist as it claims that “*just writing about bodies is deemed a political act*” (Harcourt; 2009:12) in itself.

Women have historically been perceived by the international development discourse as passive recipients of technologies, aid, national and international cooperation, and empowerment projects (Razavi and Miller, 1995) and their bodies as sites to be intervened in the name of development. Harcourt highlights the female body as an active site of contestation and sees “*the embodied experience of the female body (as) an entry point for political engagement.*” (Harcourt, 2009: 24). The body is understood as more than just a ‘skin case’ for the organs, not determined solely by hormones or biological reproduction (Truong and Harcourt’s 2014), but as highly complex and socially constructed by socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. The embodied experience is then, about identity, relations, contestation, belonging and ownership.

Using the framework of Body Politics allows us to make visible daily life issues and gendered bodies’ experiences, deemed irrelevant or insignificant by hegemonic discourses in academia, science and development studies, and asks how, as they influence choices and practices, they too can become political, through diverse mechanisms that rely on informality, communitarian relations, bottom up approaches, non-hegemonic voices and embodied experiences.

Chapter 3 The Setting

My research on the field, took place in **three** sites:

The first one was **Barcelona**, where I was based; the second one, was the **Internet**, where I constantly explored Blogs, news, forums, and social media for discussions on menstruation, with a special focus on the online community for menstrual pedagogy called ***Soy1Soy4***; the third one was a **3 day encounter** with some members of this online community who met in summer 2017 in real life for the first time (See Annex 2- Encounters in the Mountain).

3. 1. Exploring the menstrual cultures in Contemporary Spain

As I researched further on actions to challenge the menstrual taboo worldwide, I noticed how Spanish women were one of the most active groups in Europe engaging in this emerging phenomenon.

I identified actions by women that demanded for menstrual products to stop being taxed as luxury items, arguing this tax was discriminatory against women⁴; read about how some political parties such as EQUOS (green party of Spain), Podemos; PSOE (*Labourist Socialist Party of Spain*), IU (*United Left*), DLI (*Democracy and Freedom*) and la CUP (*Popular Unity Candidacy*), had integration matters related to menstruation on their agendas; found artists, menstrual educators/coaches/therapists, red tents⁵, numerous small business that promote alternative products for menstrual management such as reusable (hand-made) menstrual pads, menstrual cups, menstrual underwear.

⁴ See <http://tamponsfromcanada.com/>

⁵ Spaces where women get together to share and learn through sisterhood and gain power through the menstrual experiences and womanhood

“This is a very politically aware generation. We are aware of our parents’ struggles and particularly of how it were the women who pulled this along.” (Anita, student Soy1Soy4 Community)

In the past decade, Spain has been the scenario of interesting political and social transformations lead mainly by youths in response to the difficult economic situation the country was submerged in (15M and *Indignados Movement* in 2011); this has created the conditions for the emergence of different kinds of organized and strong movements. As Santamaría (2015) points it, feminism was one of the movements, which became stronger under the 15M occupations and mobilizations: *“A renewed strand of the movement, committed to resist the effects of the crisis on women’s lives, focused on the search for alternative economies and exploring new body politics.”* (Santamaría Buitrago in Biekart, K. et al., 2015: 201). After all, much of this economic burden fell over women’s shoulders (Ruíz, 2013).

The feminist movement in Spain has been active since the end of Franco’s dictatorship in the mid 70s (Heras, 2006; Pérez, 2012) and it has become stronger and more visible in the past decades; it has also leaned towards breaking any kind of uniformity, making it harder to talk about one single feminism, and opening the path to many and diverse *feminisms*.

3.2. Activist and feminist Barcelona

It is important to clarify that although I chose Barcelona as one of the niches of my research, and even when I acknowledge the history of activism and associativity of Catalan people as key to create an environment for some of the changes I will describe in my paper to happen, Barcelona does not enter quite as a geographical or even political place in this research, but as the interactions of all the women that coincided there and who, in their own way, were re-signifying the menstrual experience.

Aside from the diverse, plural and dynamic nature of the city, I chose Barcelona as the place for my research because in my first online approach to the topic, some things pointed me in this direction:

- Two very popular artists who where working with menstruation, were Catalans and lived in Barcelona;

- La CUP, a leftist, feminist Catalan political party had created a national controversy for their proposal to introduce cups and sponges in sexual education classes to teenage girls had its headquarters in Barcelona.
- Small business of alternative menstrual management products, as well as many of the women’s circles, groups, and health centres that had menstruation as its focal point, were set in Barcelona;
- There was an association of women who fought for the awareness and visibility of endometriosis.

Barcelona has a long history of associativity and social movements in the Catalan territory and after 15M, the city regained its status of hotspot for collective action.

In 2015 Barcelonans elected their first female city Mayor, Ada Colau (former activist in 15M), who runs “*the first municipal government to declare itself feminist*” (Colau in Navarro, 2016).

In the summertime of 2017 the *Ajuntament of Barcelona* (Barcelona’s City Council) placed stands to prevent and tackle sexist (*machista*) violence, on many of the city’s neighbourhood parties. Moreover, each neighbourhood had their own feminist stand and even one of them (Poble Sec), created a protocol for *Parties without Machismo* (Pobla Sec Feminista, 2017).



Photo 1: Stand of “Barcelona Anti Machista” Campaign.

Source: Fieldwork, 2017.



Photo 2: Guide for bloc parties without *machismo*- *Poble Sec Feminista*

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

As I focused on the study of the Body Politics of Menstruation, it seemed Barcelona was the right place to be. However, once in the field it became a challenge to focus exclusively in Barcelona; this is a big city with a history of migration of people from all over Spain, which also attracts people from all over the world. Many of the women I met and the processes I witnessed, converged due to a mix of interests experiences, cultures, stories, actions and experiences regarding menstruation that were not circumscribed to Catalunya as a region, or Barcelona as a city.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This RP used qualitative research methods and an inductive approach.

Primary Data

In order to gather this information, I used ethnography, participant observation, elements of *netnography* and semi-structured interviews; all of this, traversed by Haraway's *Situated Feminist Knowledges*. These techniques gave me the tools to approach the women in this research in the respectful way I intended, as well as they helped me obtain a robust body of data to better understand the phenomenon I wanted to explore.

Secondary Data

Secondary data was collected through online research and literature review. I went through Spanish press (national and local), as well as social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), which appears as an important site of display and exchange of initiatives, ideas, and debates that can be followed in real time. I also reviewed academic literature relevant to my research.

4.1. *Embodied Knowledges*: A critical position from feminist epistemology

As I started this research process, I noticed I needed to find my voice and an epistemological standpoint from where to tell the stories I found in the field and how to analyse them. The “traditional” scientific method and its constant emphasis on ‘objectivity’ excluded the feelings and embodied experiences, which I considered to be pivotal in order to address the questions raised in the RP. I needed to find a standpoint other than the traditional, patriarchal and masculinized way of doing science with the driving idea of *objectivity*. I opted for a feminist research methodology based on the need for an embodied vision and a situated epistemological gaze.

Instead of objectivity, Haraway speaks about partial perspective. In writing this paper, I am aware that even when my aim is to map out the different actions taking place regarding menstruation and how groups of women are living this

changes in contemporary Spain, I cannot give an exhaustive insight of the situation for these women, nor can I talk about the embodied menstrual experiences of all Spanish women as a whole. This, my RP is based on my exploration of specific niches and my findings are based on the specific interactions I had with the women I met during my fieldwork.

Using a feminist approach as my epistemological standpoint, I position myself within the research as a narrator, and aim to show how my personal understanding of menstruation shaped the way I approached the story as well as how I chose to tell it, based on what Haraway calls “*feminist empiricism*” (Haraway, 1988: 580).

I am positioned as a Colombian masters student, at an international Institution. I am also a young feminist from the global south, user and advocate of the menstrual cup and other alternative methods for menstrual management. As someone inhabiting a female body I am concerned about and interested in the ways menstruation is perceived and managed in contemporary societies all over the world and the effects this has on girls’ and women’s access to rights as well as their embodied experience with menstruation.

4.2. Semi-structured Interviews

Taboo feeds itself with silence, and in order to break it and to better understand the Body Politics of menstruation in contemporary Spain, the voices, fears, perceptions, stories and claims by the women who were challenging traditional perceptions on menstruation, need to be heard and expressed with their own words. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to do this.

Most interviews needed half an hour or so to break the ice and generate a safe space where we could talk at ease. Given that this topic appeals directly to women’s bodies and processes that are usually kept on the private sphere and that sometimes lead to painful stories and memories, I found it important not to hold a superior or distant position as a researcher, but rather to be actively involved in a horizontal dialogue as a menstruating person.

At the beginning of every interview I let them know I was recording them, but I did not feel comfortable taking notes as they were talking. Even when I had specific questions prepared, the interviews became conversations where many life stories came up and I felt that the notepad was a barrier between them and me.

I did a total of 19 interviews in total, 11 of which were done online⁶.

4.3. Ethnography and Participant observation

I spent 40 days in Spain. Due to the summer, many collectives and associations were not working and regular activities were on hold until September. However, I could get a grasp of the feminist movement in Barcelona from the streets and its cultural offer. I also managed to attend to a workshop on Natural Gynaecology and Menstruation and to participate in the first encounter of the online community *Soy1Soy4*. I participated as a member of the community as well as a researcher. Since the encounter was a safe space where stories (many personal and intimate) were shared, I felt that using that moment to interview some of them would be disrespectful and would take time off from their experience. The interviews were done some weeks later via Skype.

4.4. Netnography

“Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography for the online world—for the contingencies of online communities and online cultures.” (Kozinets, 2011)

I used some elements of netnography to explore the online community for Menstrual Education *Soy1Soy4*: I took some of the online courses, participated in the chats and forums and became member of some of the groups available at the platform. Since I am an active member, I did participant observation of the community for over 6 months (still going on today).

⁶ Look at ‘*Annex # 1: Interviews*’, for further detail on the interviewees.

Chapter 5 *Let it Bleed: Art, Policy and Campaigns*

During my time in Spain, I noticed how women who were challenging the menstrual taboo, calling for its normalization and visibility, did it from many different fronts. For this RP I focused on 4: **art**; **Advocacy** campaigns; alternative **menstrual technologies**; and their embodied experience through **menstrual education**.

5.1. Menstruation and Art

5.1.1 *Radical Menstruators*⁷

“*Repulsive Claim: Feminists use pads stained with blood in a protest*”. So read the headline of an article at an online Spanish journal I found when entering the words *menstruación+España* in the search engine, back in June 2017. It talked about a “nasty” demonstration in which several used menstrual pads were hanging from a clothesline at *La Pasarela de la Exposición*, at the centre of the Spanish city of Valencia. It was promptly removed by police officers after the complaints of the neighbours and passers by. The pads had signs with them stating how menstrual blood was “*not dirty, it’s life*”, claiming justice on femicide cases and calling out how in Spanish society menstrual blood was more disgusting than the women and girls that were killed by sexist violence in the country everyday.

⁷ Here I use the term “Radical Menstruator” used by Bobel (2010) to refer to people who do risky in-your-face activism on the streets. However, unlike Bobel’s, the ones in Spain did not have LGBTQ community rights as their core struggle; it was part of it, but came as a secondary trait.



Photo 3: Menstrual pads displayed in Valencia, Spain.

Source: La Gaceta <https://gaceta.es/noticias/feministas-utilizan-manchadas-sangre-protesta-14062017-1111/-> June, 2017

The intervention in Valencia last June has not been the only of its kind.

One that received significant display by online media and social networks, was the performance by the collective *Sangre Menstrual* (Menstrual Blood), who in 2010, walked around Malasaña neighbourhood in Madrid, wearing white pants and skirts, stained with red paint and menstrual blood in a campaign called “*El Barrio en Regla*”⁸ (*The Neighborhood in order*). This happened after the work by artist Mar Cejas “*Mi Periodo*” (My Period), was removed from a exhibit in Valencia, because it was considered “tasteless” by the merchants.⁹ Mar Cejas then wrote the *Manifiesto for the Visibility of Menstruation* (*Manifiesto por la visibilidad de la Regla*), in which she challenges the menstrual taboo as a way to re gain ownership over the body and menstruation, “*to make menstruation visible, to make visibilize the body as a political space.*” Several feminist groups, blogs and campaigns have since used this manifesto.

⁸ This is a Word play using the spanish Word “*regla*” usually used as an equivalent for “*period*”, which also means rule or can be used to express that things are in order.

⁹ <https://sangremenstrual.wordpress.com/about/>

“El Barrio en Regla” Campaign, 2010:



Photo 4: Sangre Menstrual on the streets of Malasaña, 2010.

Source: Playground http://www.playgroundmag.net/noticias/actualidad/rebeldia-muslos-ensangrentados_0_1332466748.html



Photo 5: “My Body is political. My blood is political”

Photo 6: “I’m not sick” “My body is a political site”

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gaelx/sets/72157619501259740>. Creative Commons.

That same year, feminist association *Cala Dona* in Barcelona held an edition of FemArt yearly exhibit. The theme was *Hygiene and Cleanliness*¹⁰ (*Caladona, 2010*). One of the selected pieces, by Miren Guilló depicted glass containers filled with menstrual blood that people had collected during different cycles. Some of them were labelled with female names, some other with male names, and some were empty. This, to represent that not all bodies that menstruate are female and that there are also women who do not menstruate (Guillo, 2013).

¹⁰ <https://arxiufemart.wordpress.com/higiene-i-neteja-2010/>

These actions have a limited audience, as they are displayed in specific places and among closed circles, usually from the countercultural, feminist and anarchic scene. The Internet, on the other hand, has become a platform for menstrual art to reach broader and more diverse audiences.

5.1.2. Lola Vendetta and Zinteta: glittery menstruation and feminism(s) for millenials.

Lola Vendetta

I met Raquel (27) in a hot and sunny summer morning at El Borne, a hip Barcelonan neighbourhood. She's the creator of *Lola Vendetta*, a feminist character who fights patriarchy and sexism and promotes female empowerment every chance she's got.

Raquel uses her illustrations to condemn taboos on the female body such as menstruation, free nipples and breastfeeding. Her profiles on social media have been censored several times; people consider her work to be very violent. But is precisely because of this that she started drawing about menstruation. She questioned why in her society it was ok to see/talk about aggressive movies, wars, femicides, but talking/drawing about menstrual blood was “violent”.



Photo 7: “Lola Vendetta: humour, blood and katanas to fight against Patriarchy”

Source: Playground: http://www.playgroundmag.net/articulos/entrevistas/Lola_Vendetta-ilustracion-feminismo_0_1740425958.html

She then reflected on her own experience. Why were women shamed for this natural process? Why this “self-censorship” to pretend it did not exist?

Why were women and men so disgusted about it? And why weren't there spaces to openly discuss menstruation and share everyone's experience with it?

As we walk by the centre of Barcelona, we are approached by a group of young girls who ask her for a picture together. Raquel, like her character *Lola*, calls herself a feminist; she is one of the most visible faces of mainstream feminism in Spain today. *Lola Vendetta* currently has 185K followers on Instagram and 195K on Facebook, mostly young Spanish women. One of her catchphrases is: "*Feminism is to be enjoyed.*"

She tells me she uses art and humour as tools to spread her message, as she feels it gets to people easier. Also, by being online, more people can approach feminism, from a more "relaxed" perspective, even when they are still very hesitant about it. This is particularly appealing to younger girls who are not part of any activist or political collective.

She mentions the rejection she has felt from feminists who accuse her of using an essentialist topic to discuss feminist issues, and to do it in a very light and shallow way. She recalls how at one of her talks, an older "punk" woman took the word to call out how hers was no *real* feminism, as she explained what they did on the streets running away from the "*los grises*"¹¹ back in the day of Franco's dictatorship, "*that was feminism! Not this nonsense that is taking place here!*"

Zinteta

The summer of 2017 was huge for Catalan artist Cinta Tort Cartó (22), known as *Zinteta*. Her art project on menstruation: "*I stain and I'm not disgusted*", made headlines all over the world. She uses vibrant colours and glitter to "stain" tampons, menstrual pads, and underwear as a way to make people reflect on the still existent taboo around menstruation. She recently hit 64K followers on Instagram and her work has been featured in local and national TV,

¹¹ Armed Franquist Police, known for their repressive and violent actions.

international media like BBC, the Huffington Post, women's magazines like Cosmopolitan, feminist blogs, Facebook pages and Instagram accounts.

I contacted her through Instagram, and even though she was on a tight schedule, we managed to meet.

Her discourse is anti racist, anti sexist and inclusive of all kind of sexual and gender identities as well as non-binary and non normative bodies, and she translates this into her art. She aims to exalt what is traditionally perceived as ugly or disgusting even, like stretch marks, overweight, body hair and menstrual stains.



Photo 8: Art by Zinteta
Source: Zinteta Instagram

She tells me how her embodied experience led her to using the body as the centre of her art. She suffered from an eating disorder for many of her teen years and stopped having her period; once she was recovered and got her period back, she realized how little she knew about menstruation and the menstrual cycle.

Having a deeper and more comprehensive menstrual education at schools is something she considers to be key in the learning process of any girl and to help eradicate the still strong menstrual taboo in Spain.

Her initial objective was not to be activist but as she noticed her increasing popularity, she decided to turn to conscious activism, to make menstruation visible.

Her main platform is the Internet but she also works in Barcelona, where she holds expositions and workshops usually at squats or occupied and/or self-managed houses/cultural centres.

5.2. ‘*Les Nostres Regles*’

While in Barcelona, I found out about a campaign in all Catalunya to break the menstrual taboo. It was called “*Les Nostres Regles*” in Catalan (*Nuestras reglas* in Spanish- Our rules in English)¹², and its slogan was “*For a feminist, ecologic and popular menstruation*”¹³.

The campaign, which was launched on May 2017, was born as a response to the International Menstrual Hygiene day, a global platform in which NGOs, governments, media, private sector and individuals promote Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), fight menstrual taboo, and raise awareness on lack of WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) facilities and technologies for menstrual management some girls face around the world (Menstrual Hygiene day Organisation, 2017).

These Catalan youths, however, claimed that in a society where menstruation is still a taboo, this International day was a reminder of how menstruation and menstruating bodies are still considered to be dirty. The taboo they said, is a result not only of the way menstruation is perceived, but of the lack of information and education on menstrual matters, fed by sexist and unrealistic

¹² In Catalan as in Spanish, the Word “*regla*” is usually used when referring to menstruation. It is a similar as how the English Word “*period*” is used. In Spanish and Catalan, *reglas/regles* also means “*rules*”, so this campaign used a wordplay to in one phrase say: “*my period, my rules*”.

¹³ <http://espai.casaldejoves.org/2017/05/30/per-una-menstruacio-amb-les-nostres-regles-des-duna-perspectiva-feminista-ecologica-i-popular/>

advertisement which reinforces the idea of a sanitized menstruation and that states as a fact that to menstruate is painful, but that it should be ignored and overcome. They claimed for menstrual education, as they say that knowing our bodies is a way to generate social change. The visual campaign (7 posters) was supplemented by workshops held by the different youth centers in the areas of Barcelona, Llobregat and Vallès-Osona; there, young people got together to learn and discuss the way they wanted menstruation to be perceived, lived and understood.

The workshops were held by Mandrágores, a collective for menstrual and sexual education ran by Laura and Carlota, who I got the chance to interview.



Photo 9: Workshop by Mandrágores within the Les Nostres Regles Campaign.
Source: Casals de Joves Twitter

Their main objective is to create spaces for women to openly talk about their sexualities and their bodies. They focus on natural gynaecology and “friendlier” alternatives for *blood gathering*. They are very emphatic as to how their approach does not relate to the spiritual or mystic strand that uses menstruation as a way to celebrate femininity or womanhood, as they find it to be problematic and limiting.

They believe Knowledge leads to empowerment, and that this can fight patriarchy since “*a pillar of patriarchy is the control over the bodies*”, Laura says.

5.3. Policy

During my research, I identified two cases that are representative of how this menstrual awareness goes to the field of social policy in the need to improve the life quality of the menstrual bodies and the access to information required in order to achieve it.

5.3.1. *EndoCataluña*

Menstrual pain, a seemingly private matter, caught Spaniards attention when the possibility arose to implement a “menstrual leave” for women with severe pain during their periods. This started to be considered after Italy became the first country in Europe to push this motion, in March 2017. In the Iberian country, the debate became algid; men and women were discussing menstruation on a policy level. While some feminists supported the idea, some others strongly disagreed, saying it could be counterproductive affecting (even more) women’s labour rights. The answer was “no” from the political parties, but for the first time, Spanish people, had an open debate on Endometriosis, the name of the disease that originated this bill.

Most women have rarely heard of Endometriosis. It is a chronic and very painful disease that affects around 20% of women “making it more common than asthma, diabetes, epilepsy and AIDS together” (EndoCataluña, 2017). Aside from the severe pain it causes, which can sometimes become disabling, it is also highly associated with infertility.

During my research, I talked to Cristina, co-founder and volunteer at Endo&Cat (*Association of women Affected by Endometriosis in Cataluña*), to know further about this matter.

EndoCataluña was created in 2014. Their advocacy has focused on accompanying women who suffer the disease, providing them with resources and access to information about the condition, such as letting them know how to

get to a specialist or what to do for example when they need emergency in-vitro fertilization¹⁴. They also raise awareness on Endometriosis through social media, fundraising events and talks with experts.

But their work is not only focused on the patients. They hold periodical meetings with members of political parties, ministers, politicians and the regional ministry of Health, in order to lobby so that new health politics around the disease are created. They are currently developing a protocol that aims to be incorporated in the regional Health plan, which will contain information and procedures on the detection and treatment of endometriosis.

Correct diagnosis is one of the really tricky aspects of endometriosis, Cristina comments. Due to the fact that this is so under researched and doctors are not trained to detect or treat this disease, the average time for women to be correctly diagnosed is from 6 to 8 years. In the meantime, they are just prescribed with pain medication and in some cases, anti-depressants to cope with its emotional and psychological effects.

When I asked Cristina, who also suffers the disease, why she thinks there is so much ignorance on the topic, she says first, it's because women's health is not a priority for the Sanitary System, and second, because of a normalization of pain in menstruation that is transmitted across generations.

When it comes to the treatment, she says as association they have a very clear position: they respect what every woman wants to do about the diagnosis and how to deal with it (alternative treatments), but as association they stick to the medical discourse, which is hormonal therapy and regular echographies.

5.3.2. *La CUP's Motion*

La CUP (*Candidatura de Unidad Popular*) is an extreme left, feminist and pro-independence political party of Catalunya. The CUP from Manresa (a Cata-

¹⁴ Emergency IVF is a method to preserve fertility in women with endometriosis. It's called "emergency" IVF since doctors have short time before the surgery (usually ovarian removal), to preserve the eggs, either directly by fertilization or by cryopreservation.

lan city) became the centre of a national debate when in April of 2016 they proposed a motion that promoted girls to be taught about alternative ways for menstrual management (like menstrual cups, sponges, washable cloth pads, and even *free bleeding*¹⁵). The controversy came after news headlines stated how “these feminists” were promoting a “*war*” against tampons and menstrual pads, and “*forcing*” women to practice *free bleeding*. This news received not only local coverage, but made national headlines and stirred a public debate on why a “private” matter such as menstruation should (or shouldn’t) be discussed at the public sphere.

After talking to Clara Sánchez, the woman in charge of the gender issues at La CUP national headquarters in Barcelona, she advised me to talk to Gemma Tomás, Councillor (*Consejera*) of the CUP- Manresa, and member of the group that drafted the controversial motion.

Talking to Gemma, I found it interesting to learn how at the beginning this bill was not about menstruation per se; rather than focusing on the embodied experience of menstruation and the cycle, or the taboo around it, its departing point was a feminist approach that considered better information on the alternatives for *blood gathering*, would improve the menstrual experience for girls, thus, improving their quality of life, as they had experienced it on their own.

Aside from the educational part, the motion also proposed SIADs (Service of Information and attention to Women) to have diverse options for menstrual management available for people to see them, learn about them and make an informed choice when choosing one.

¹⁵ As Gemma explained, contrary to what people usually think, free-bleeding is not necessarily about going around staining everything with menstrual blood, but to get to know our menstruation and the muscles of our pelvic floor so well, that you can “feel” when the blood will come, so instead of using any technology for menstrual management, you go to the bathroom and discharge your menstrual blood there.

Another interesting point of this motion was that they also included boys, as they considered it important for them to learn about menstruation so they could empathize with girls and to demystify it. Also, La CUP felt that having girls locked in a classroom attending these workshops, while boys were playing outside, reinforced the patriarchal idea that menstruation is something that limits girls, making them miss out on life.

This motion was presented in the CUP Manresa, in April 2016, but was not approved citing administrative problems. The CUPs from other cities asked them for the original draft and adapted it based on their particular context. In some municipalities, like Tarrasa, it was actually approved.

For them, even when the motion was not approved in Manresa, the amount of media exposure this case got, was already a victory, because there were people on national TV explaining what menstrual cups, sea sponges and cloth pads were, and how they worked.

“What we wanted to be explained in the classrooms ended up being explained on TV.”
(Gemma, 2017. Personal Interview)

Chapter 6 Menstrual Education: lessons from the embodied experience

“‘My body, my choice’ is powerful but I don’t think it goes far enough (...) it should be: ‘My body, my right to information, my choice.’ Until we have access to good information, we can’t make truly liberatory choices.” (Bobel, 2010/bitchmedia.com)

Not everyone who aims to challenge the menstrual taboo in Contemporary Spain, do it through large-scale advocacy or activism. During my research I could see how this phenomenon also takes place on a more personal, communitarian, and much less visible level, having the own body, the first territory we inhabit, as a starting point.

“What needs to be changed are attitudes, beliefs, and values, rather than the body itself.” (Grosz, 1994: 17) Menstruating bodies are not flawed, sick or dysfunctional; it’s patriarchal society who is.

This chapter will focus on menstrual education, as one of the vehicles that had allowed Spanish women to re-signify their embodied menstrual experience. I talked to some menstrual educators as well as some women going through this learning process, to understand their experiences while on this road to self-knowledge and body literacy.

On general terms, menstrual education acknowledges the cyclic menstrual body, beyond the biomedical gaze; it is highly linked to health and usually uses holistic approaches like women’s circles, diets, belly dance, meditation, self-exploration, natural gynaecology, among others. Some educators problematize its biopsycosocial and political implications from a very pragmatic approach, while some others focus on ancestral Cosmo-visions and its mystic-spiritual meaning, having menstruation as a core of womanhood that will help them reconnect with their *femininity*.

Despite their different approaches, menstrual education has three common traits I identified:

1. **Link with Health, alternative treatments and natural gynaecology:** Most of the women I met during this research have experienced issues related to menstruation and/or their female embodied experience: illness, medical malpractice and/or extreme pain. Menstrual education has allowed them to revisit these experiences, with better information. This in turn led them to question choices such as years of consumption of oral contraception, painkillers, medication for depression or anxiety to treat PMS, or the use of not so health friendly FemCare products, etc. This also leads to looking for alternative therapies or seeking ways to manage their own menstrual health, with techniques by natural gynaecology.

Having a better menstrual health and overall experience, is also highly linked to the notions of **self-care** and self –love as ways to empower women.

2. **The cycle:** Menstruation is usually perceived as the monthly event of bleeding, and only considered in its cyclic dimension when it comes to discussing (in) fertility or “disorders” like PMS or PMDD¹⁶). Menstrual education highlights the importance of understanding the cyclicity of the menstrual body (all its 4 phases: menstrual, follicular, ovulation and Luteal) and all its hormonal, physical, emotional, psychological and even social dimensions.
3. **Live it, learn it, share it:** Menstrual education come from people who have a menstrual body, and as such have experienced it. It cannot be taught, unless you’ve lived it. It’s a very interactive and horizontal learning experience and to some extent, these women are all teachers and students at the same time. It also works as a snowballing effect, in which every women who begins this journey, becomes a multiplier of the knowledge and information gained.

¹⁶ Pre Menstrual Syndrome and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder.

6.1. Divine Menstruation – A Natural Gynaecology Workshop

While in Barcelona, I attended a drawing workshop on menstruation and *Natural gynaecology*.

The person in charge was Paula, a Chinese Traditional Medicine Therapist, specialized in conscious gynaecology, natural medicine, menstrual cups and nutrition. *Divina Menstruación (Divine Menstruation)* is the name of her project; she is one of the most visible names in the countercultural scene in Barcelona when it comes to menstruation.

During the workshop we discussed some natural gynaecology options with medicinal herbs for pain and for cleaning the uterus, a technique she said indigenous women in Mexico use after birth and that helps expelling tampons residues kept in our uterus. She also talked about the importance of our uterus as a powerful centre of energy that could be enhanced on a more spiritual level with exercises and the help of, for example vaginal eggs. Herbs and eggs were available for purchase.



Photo 10: Natural Gynaecology workshop

Source: Collage using pictures from Fieldwork, 2017 and Divina Menstruación Facebook.

This workshop showed me, as it was later reinforced throughout my research, that to talk about menstruation is never *just to talk* about it. Issues like

the acknowledgment of the overall ignorance of our own bodies, diseases, relationships, motherhood, (in) fertility, feminism(s), Gender Based Violence, friendlier methods for *blood gathering*, responsible consumption, natural gynaecology and alternatives for contraception, sexuality, traditional knowledges, cervix exploration, are common topics that arise as discussions on the female body are held.

6.2. Somiarte¹⁷

On my web research I came across with a project called *Somiarte*, ran by Diana Pinzón. In the webpage, she describes herself as a menstrual educator and therapist, advanced Moon Mother¹⁸, Red tents activator, Art-Therapist, Doula and Guardian of Ancestral knowledges. We initiated contact through Instagram. When we finally met in her city Manresa, we noticed to our surprise we were both Colombian.

She tells me how this process of self-knowledge and posterior teaching, came from her own embodied experience after two specific events made her question the influence and control that the biomedical approach exerts over the female body and its natural processes.

First, when she was giving birth in Manresa, she was victim of obstetric violence and discrimination; she had no say and she was repeatedly called “*ignorant Sudaca*”¹⁹; 3 years later, Diana was diagnosed with a chronic and “incurable” disease. After years of medication, horrible side effects, and no real progress, she was advised to attend a women’s circle. There she started a learning process, through an awareness of her menstrual cycle, planting her menstrual blood and sharing experiences with other women.

¹⁷ <https://www.somiarte.com/>

¹⁸ “A Moon Mother is a woman called in her heart to hold the vibration of the Divine Feminine (...) so that she can personally pass it on to other women in awakening and deep healing.” <https://wombblessing.wordpress.com/2015/11/24/what-is-a-moon-mother/>

¹⁹ Derogatory way to call people from South America.

She noticed how they were all struggling to keep up with the expectations of Spanish society; their hectic life in function of production, left them no time to listen to their bodies, thus, relying on western medication in order to cope.

Within the women's circle she started following Miranda Gray, a spiritual healer and educator that uses the menstrual cycle as a means to achieve feminine awakening, with whom she started a spiritual process to heal her own "wound" and to come to terms with the "ancestral shaman" within her. She quit the medical treatment, started a detoxification process from the medication and relied on alternative therapy. Two years later she was fine. She then decided she would use her own experience, to bring menstrual healing to other women.

"But it's not only from shamanism and women's circles, but also from theory, from the deconstruction of patriarchy, from understanding how the bio-politic instruments work in women's bodies; because I had felt it all in my own body. It is impossible to do feminism if is not through the own body!" (Diana Pinzón, 2017. Personal interview).

Diana started with women, and now also works with girls and teenagers. Her bet is for them to have a healthier relation with their menstrual bodies from an early age, which in turn leads to higher self-love. *"If you know your body"*, she says, *"if you care for it and respect it and love it, you make others respect it. So this is prevention of Gender Based Violence"*.

She is a feminist and tells me that she is aware that she can be perceived as a hippie, because of the mystical importance she gives to menstruation. We then discussed how menstrual education and awareness tend to be labelled as essentialist, even by some feminists. On this, she says:

"Yes, it is essentialist (...) there is a biological reality that eco feminism defends, which I like: the place where science still hasn't been able to reach, is the creation of life. Yes, there is in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, but those are desperate attempts to manipulate this process (...) And all the political apparatus that is built around neo-liberalism, commodification of bodies, women's consumerism, what aims to, is to separate women from the fact that is her and her fertile body only, the only capable of carrying life (...) without a women's fertile, menstruating body, there is no baby. So

yes, it is essentialist to the bone. But it's real! (...) So how can one not be 'essentialist', or eco feminist about this? How can one not vindicate the power of creation the uterus has?"

(Diana, 2017. Personal Interview)

Interesting to see how this “*ignorant sudaca*” was using knowledges she had learned from indigenous people in Colombia, to help heal Spanish women’s experience with menstruation, when their own doctors, couldn’t.

6.3. Erika Irusta and SOYISOY4²⁰

Erika Irusta (34) is a Basque woman who has been working for 7 years combining pedagogy tools with a feminist, anthropological, sociological and scientific understanding of the menstrual cycle.

Self defined as the “only menstrual pedagogue in the world” she is also one of the most well known figure for menstrual education in Spain nowadays and the only Spanish member of the Society of Menstrual Cycle Research.

She became popular in Spain with her blog “*El Camino Rubí*” (The Ruby Path), which has today over 20K subscribers. Under the motto “*To know you is to live you. To live you is to love you. To love you is to be free*”²¹, Erika creates content towards a menstrual experience beyond patriarchy, emphasizing the political dimension of the diverse menstrual bodies, using a technique she coined “*cuntwriting*” (*Coñoescritura*); to *cuntwrite*, as she describes it, is basically to write from the own cyclic and changing body in an organic and corporeal way.

Despite her hectic agenda, we managed to find a spot in her agenda and set an interview.

²⁰ <https://www.elcaminorubi.com/>

²¹ “*Conocerle es vivírte. Vivírte es amarte. Amarte es ser libre.*”

First we talked about her journey through menstrual pedagogy. Her early influences were Miranda Gray and Sophie Style, which were the only references in terms of menstrual education back in 2010; however, she grew to become critic of their mystic/spiritual approach, as she urged for tools to understand menstruation as a physiological process, from a body politics perspective.

Menstruating bodies, according to Erika, have been historically perceived as defective, and as such are treated (medicated) and studied. Her point precisely, is that it not our bodies that are malfunctioning, it is not about them being prone to sickness or mental breakdowns. It is about the patriarchal society in which we live in that has placed the female body on a lower level; about feeling ashamed of our own bodily functions; about growing up with the idea that we are inadequate, because we do not have the normative (male) body that does not go through any of this; menstruation hurts in our society, she says, because we ignore our body and how it works, and we only see it in function of what is expected from the system (produce, reproduce and consume).

What she wants women to know is that we are not crazy, hysterical, unstable or dysfunctional. We are cyclic. But we live in a culture that does not acknowledge this.

She is also emphatic about how getting to know and accept the menstrual cycle, lets us recognize and accept our vulnerability, which she reclaims over the idea of empowerment. For her, the notion of empowerment has an intrinsic idea of generating power over others on an individualistic level, which she finds to be a patriarchal ideal. When we recognize our vulnerability, she says, we also recognize the need to create networks, bonds, and affective ties even. This is closer to a care culture, which is better suited for menstrual bodies, than today's patriarchal society and the growing obsession with self-care disguised as self-love.

“Self-care can be learned and practiced, yes, but it must emerge in collective, for a culture of care (...) people should learn about self-care but not as a consumer good that you keep to yourself (...) it has to be oriented to creating a collective care and to create collective knowledge” (Erika, 2017. Personal Interview)

I then ask her about how this idea of reclaiming vulnerability of menstruating bodies, might risk falling into what many feminists call out as essentialism or biological determination; which would be accepting our inferiority with respect to men, precisely what feminists tried to fight against back in the 70s.

Erika uses Audrey Laurde's phrase: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", to explain that as long as we play on the terms of the patriarchy, at its binary logic (male/female; rationality/emotion; mind/body; science/nature, etc.), the limitations and the defective body will still be there; the flaws and the inherent inferiority will prevail. As long as we keep on understanding the menstrual body using patriarchal terms, nothing will change.

As Erika deepens into the importance of self-knowledge and menstrual education, I ask her about the fact that in order to access this information some conditions of privilege, class and socio-economic position are still needed in Spain. She agrees on the commercial and elitist turn this process of self-knowledge, self-care and menstrual education is taking. Also, she is aware of her privilege and her partake in this capitalist system we all are part of. However, she is constantly looking for ways to make her work inclusive and approachable by a diverse community.

She recognizes the fact that women need the privilege of money, time and Internet access to enter her menstrual school. Her aim, however, is for the women who make up this online community, to become aware of privilege and actively begin to share the knowledge and information gained from it, with women wherever possible. *"I trust each person in the community has a social commitment to share their knowledge and won't stay home just focusing on their self-care"*.

Finally I tell her how during my research I noticed a "menstrual boom" when it comes to products or services related to menstruation in Spain, and that this might be (yet another) way of neoliberalism to commodify the menstrual experience. Even though this visibility might help to destroy the taboo around this, it might also twist the discourse generating further needs, and thus, further consumption.

Her main concern in this case is the proliferation of “*menstrual therapists*” in Spain, “*a solution for something that shouldn’t be a problem to begin with*”. Creating therapies to treat menstruation is perpetuating the discourse that it is a disease, which needs professional help outside our bodies, to be solved.

“If we had a quality (menstrual) education and tools, we wouldn’t need to be constantly generating services that the system can profit of. In the end, these needs are becoming market niches.”

SOY1SOY4

In 2015 Erika, creates the Soy1Soy4 community, the first and only menstrual school in the world. Soy1Soy4 means “*I am one, I am 4*”, referring to the 4 different women each women become, depending on the phase of the cycle they’re in. Today, the community has 556 students from 20 countries.

This virtual platform is made up by 3 main parts: a social network, where the students create their profile, make friends and post content; a continuous learning platform, where the courses are available and students can keep track of their progress; and a laboratory, where members can research and create their own content.

The main objective of the community is to become a safe and affectionate space, where menstrual bodies come to learn and share their experiences, knowledges, doubts and fears, in order to transform the way they had been living their bodies without quite inhabiting them.

In order to join the community, women have to wait for new places to be announced, which happens few times a year. According to Erika, this is to keep a safe space, where students feel comfortable to share and interact among them; also, it is important to have a controlled number of students for the learning experience to be more fruitful. Another prerequisite to enter the community is to state that one is or have been a *menstruator*:

Chapter 7 Sustainable menstruation: ecological awareness and responsible consumption

One of the most recurrent discoveries women make about FemCare products when they start learning further about menstruation, aside from the amount of waste pads and tampon generate, is that they contain dioxins that can be harmful to people's health, and have been linked to cancer (WHO, 2016).

During my research I noticed women in Spain were producing new alternatives for menstrual management; some on a bigger scale, and others at a crafting level.

7.1. The Crafters

Looking through Instagram I came across two profiles of women based near Barcelona who create washable cloth menstrual pads and pantyliners: Semilla Roja (Red Seed) and LaikiPads. I contacted them and it turned out they had been trying to meet each other for a while, so Bea, Ce and I arranged a get together on a Saturday afternoon at Parc de la Ciutatella. The drums playing in the background were the perfect ambiance for this encounter.

Bea (29) learned the importance of collecting her menstrual blood and observing her menstrual cycle, from indigenous women in Mexico. Then after "healing" her own menstruation, she started making cloth pads for other women. Ce (33), learned to sew menstrual pads in Aureville, a famous utopic and hippie community India, where she spent 3 years. Though they coincided that they do not like labels, they sympathize with the ideas of ecofeminism, which is reflected on the way they relate to nature and the environment; not as a revolutionary claim or a political act explicitly, but as a way to take care of themselves and the environment.

Both of them sell their products online, and sometimes at eco-fairs, yoga retreats or occupied cultural centres. This provides them with some income, but agree that they do not see this as a business.

They have been offered to massively produce for bigger companies, but both have declined because they want to have a closer relation with the customer and their product; each fabric has its story and they want to share it with love.

Ce also shares her knowledge at free workshops, where she teaches women to make their own pads. To get some perspective, the menstrual industry generates over \$2 billion in sales in the US, not even considering other related products such as pain medication for PMS or how much is spent in its advertisement (Kissling, 2006). What better way to boycott the big companies and reclaiming your periods, that to manage it yourself?

“Learn to do it yourself! Learn that you don’t need to rely on any company in order to take care of yourself” (Ce, 2017. Personal Interview).

7.2. The Companies

On the same line, but on a bigger scale, I identified 3 major brands ran by and for women that create alternative FemCare products in Spain, as a way to re-claim the menstrual experience from the big multinational companies. All of them link their product with an environmental awareness. They also highlight the importance of menstrual education and its relation with women’s health.

1. **NUR Organic: The Natural and Responsible Alternative:** Within their products they have the Nur menstrual cups, floral essences, and organic menstrual pads and panty liners. On their webpage they state that *“to connect with our cycle is to connect with the natural power of women”*²².

²² <http://www.nur.organic/es/quienes-somos/>

They also have the NUR Project, which aims to make menstruation visible and less of a taboo, using arts and culture²³.

2. **CYCLO. Sustainable Menstruation:**²⁴ Through their online shop, IloveCyclo, they sell products like organic panty liners, cloth pads, floral essences, heating pads to alleviate pain and infusions. They also hold free workshops on sustainable menstruation, to “*inform and empower women*”. Their main objective, according to their website, is to promote **menstrual education**. So whenever someone buys their products, they are contributing to this mission.
3. **Cocoro. Advanced Lingerie for Periods**²⁵: the only brand of period underwear in Spain, was born after a crowd founding campaign by the cooperative Femmefleur SCCL, which also runs the biggest platform for commercialization of menstrual cups in Spain and other period-related products²⁶.

²³ Nur Project: <http://www.nur.organic/es/proyecto-nur/>

²⁴ Cyclo: <https://www.ilovecyclo.com>

²⁵ Cocoro: <http://www.cocoro-intim.com/es/>

²⁶La Copa Menstrual: <http://www.lacopamenstrual.es/>

Chapter 8 Towards menstrual cultures: tensions and contradictions

8.1. Menstrual Cultures

“To listen to our bodies for other purposes than production and reproduction, I find it to be very revolutionary, very subversive” (Enara, 2017. Soy1Soy4 Student. Personal Interview)

Although *Menstrual Activism* (Bobel, 2010) is the term generally used to encompass all the activities and actions that use menstruation as a mean to challenge the patriarchy and western biomedical ideas of the menstruating body using it as a site of resistance, it is not a term that is owned by most of the women in this research, nor they call it a movement or recognize themselves as activists.

What I found instead, was a very heterogeneous phenomenon, made up by women who starting from their own embodied experience and using diverse expressions of the self, through *“contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing”* (Haraway, 1988: 585) menstruation, allowed for new **menstrual cultures** to emerge.

Rather than massive actions or formally organized groups, these Menstrual Cultures happen in specific niches and are nurtured by *“everyday life or micro-politics that shape (their) knowledge and experience of the lived gendered body.”* (Harcourt, 2009: 17).

The emergence of these menstrual cultures, however, has created some tensions and contradictions among the women involved, as they try to reconcile the ideas of **feminism, womanhood, vulnerability and empowerment** they learned growing up, with the ones proposed by these new menstrual cultures.

8.1.1. Understanding of Menstruation

White (2012) exposes 3 main ways in which the menstrual taboo still operates and interfere with the understanding of menstruation: concealment taboo, which means the need to keep it as a secret; the activity taboo, which refers to the fact that menstruation limits women's physical activity; and the communication taboo, which "prohibits open discussions on menstruation"(White, 2012: 65).

These new menstrual cultures come up as a response to the form in which menstrual taboo is still found in contemporary Spain. Though there is no explicit prohibition to discuss menstruation openly, it is not a common topic to address. In Spain, menstruation is not understood as a limitation, on the contrary, society has internalized that it cannot, under any circumstance, become something that limits women.

Women's options then, are "secrecy and silence, (or) supra-performance" (Gatrell, 2011); all of them perceived within these new cultures as highly violent and oppressive. This, and many other aspects that made up the "*menstrual status Quo*" (Bobel, 2010), in Spain, is what these women are challenging. These emerging Menstrual Cultures call up for popular perceptions of menstruations to be transformed or at least, questioned. They want women and people in general to talk about it, learn about it and overall make it visible.

The menstrual cycle is usually associated with its most visible form: the "bleeding". This is what in popular belief generates shame, disgust, jokes and secrecy, and it's the aspect that has been more widely re-appropriated through menstrual art, in order to demystify it and break the taboo. These menstrual cultures, however, both the mystic-spirituals and the more pragmatic ones, all highlight the importance of the whole cycle in its 4 phases and its implications in women's health, beyond reproduction.

8.1.2. What kind of Bodies?

One of the core messages of these menstrual cultures is that connecting to our femininity would lead us to see how amazing it is to be a woman. This reminded me of the slogan for the 2009 Caladona Feminist Festival (Barcelona) I

saw online, which read “*It’s fucking great to be a woman*”; Peruvian artist Daniela Ortiz intervened the piece and added: “*Spanish, white and middle class*”.

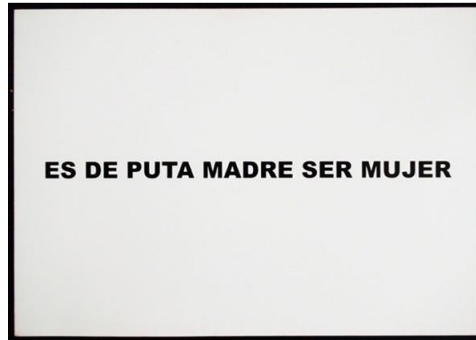


Photo: Festival Postcard

Source:<http://angelsbarcelona.com/en/artists/daniela-ortiz/projects/frase-para-el-festival-feminista/86>



Phrase for feminist festival. Black paint over white wall 5.70 x 3.20 m. / Frase para festival feminista, 2009
Pintura negra sobre pared blanca de 5.70 x 3.20 m.

Photo: Ortiz' Piece in response to the Postcard.

Source:<http://angelsbarcelona.com/en/artists/daniela-ortiz/projects/frase-para-el-festival-feminista/86>

This made me reflect on two things: the idea of femininity and womanhood these new menstrual cultures privilege (which will be explored in the section on feminism); and the bodies that can actually become part of this phenomenon.

Even though I noticed on their discourse that these new menstrual cultures are open, heterogeneous and **inclusive**, there is still a blind spot when it comes to real inclusiveness of racialized, queer and working class bodies.

These menstrual cultures are mainly made up by young²⁷, white, educated, middle class, Spanish, cis women.

8.2. Feminisms

Before going to the field I was not expecting there to be a strong connection between these new menstrual cultures and the feminist movement, as I have read about the apprehension some feminists have about researching on and advocating for, causes that put the female body and its physiological processes at the centre, as they considered them to be essentialist and reduce women to their biological determination²⁸. Also I have read how women involved in these actions in other parts of the world were reluctant to subscribe to feminism. In this research, however, feminism (s) proved to be key as they were the entry point to this path of menstrual awareness for most of the women involved.

Women in Spain perceived a transformation in feminism(s), but unlike what Bobel (2010) saw in the US and Canada, they did not criticize or try to step aside from 70s feminism, nor did they deem it to be stalled and something to be overthrown. They all proudly called themselves feminists and considered the theoretical basis that the 70s feminism had brought, were essential in the shaping of these new menstrual cultures, as they warned about neo-liberal traps in which menstruation, as well as feminism, might fall.

This research unintendedly ended up being a way to see how, through women's embodied experience with menstruation, feminism(s) in cotemporary Spain are being re-visited and transformed.

²⁷ The women in this research range from mid 20s and early 40s.

²⁸ One notorious exception is the pro-abortion movement in Spain, which for decades has congregated feminists from all strands.

8.2.1. Double Burden

In the foreword to Bobel's *New Blood* (2010), Judith Lorber explains how talking about menstruation back in the 70s would have been considered unnecessary and even retrograde within the feminist movement. For many second wave feminists like her, she explains, one of the most striking accomplishments of the movement was being able to have full-time careers, at the same as they had a family; something like menstruation would just get in the way, so they perceived it as something to be "*minimized, managed and made invisible*" (Lorber in Bobel, 2010: xi).

One of the most remarkable things I noticed during this research was how as women re-think and re-configure their embodied menstrual experiences, they become more critical of the multiple and demanding roles they are to play in their society; roles that have been internalized as unquestionable accomplishments by the feminist struggle.

Every woman involved in this research, with no exception, praised the achievements of the 70s feminist movement in Spain and highly valued their work in women's struggle to gain control over their bodies. However, they also mentioned how despite all these achievements, they felt that Spanish women were increasingly unhappy about their lives and disconnected from their bodies. There was an extreme feeling of exhaustion, as they had to be students, partners, full time career women, mothers... they had to do it all, and they had to do it well. Usually this ended up in many Spanish women burnt out and sometimes even resorting to psychiatric medication to cope, as was mentioned to me by Diana from Somiarde in her interview.

Could this be a contemporary Spanish version of Friedan's (1963) "*problem that has no name*"²⁹? Even when the situation of the Spanish women is very different to the one of US women in the 50s, they both had in common that their highly patriarchal societies, felt there was nothing to complain about, as they had achieved *everything* a woman could dream of. For women in Friedan's research it was marriage, kids and financial stability; for women in Spain, it was having sexual and reproductive rights, been able to vote, have careers and economic independence. So why weren't these women happy? What else could they possibly need?

What my research found was that for Spanish women despite all the great achievements by the 70s feminists and the huge transformations this brought, society did not adapt along with them. As a result they endured a lifestyle of disembodiment, and self-neglect became the norm alongside the privileges of success, independence and financial stability.

The consequence of women's insertion into the work force has been analysed in academia and feminist studies and named as the "double burden" (Harvey and Shaw, 1998). Women moving out of the household to work and seek economic independence, still had to cope with the demands of housework alongside their working lives. So even if women made it outside the home, things inside remained the same.

²⁹ Betty Friedan questioned why US middle class women 'housewives' during the 50s were not happy even when they were married, had children and had financial stability; the answer was, women wanted more than that. Inclusion in the labour market was one of the ways to get some independence and sense of worth, as an individual and not in relation to anyone else (their husband, kids, church).

8.2.2. Challenging essentialism and reconfiguring Feminism(s) through generational change

On Essentialism

For years, menstruation was considered to be “*the most elementary and obvious aspect of womanhood*” (Delaney, Lupton and Toth, 1988: 4).

These kinds of affirmation made feminist scholars drift away of the female body as the centre of analysis, as they considered that speaking about the body was to fall into essentialism (Harcourt, 2009; Grosz, 1994). Categories like “woman”, “female”, “womanhood” and “femininity” became challenged and problematized, generating constant debate, particularly within the feminist epistemologies.

Essentialism is often used interchangeably with biologic determinism of the female body. Such an approach is limiting as it portrays the femaleness of the body (linked to processes like menstruation and pregnancy) as the unique trait that defines womanhood. What I found was that this essentialism is highly contested, not only in queer and constructivist theories, but also by the women who take part in the creation of these new menstrual cultures in Spain. These groups of women understand bodies, identities, sex and gender to be fluid. It is not the bodies then, but the system we live in, which determine their material value or limitations.

Going beyond essentialism allows us to understand that to menstruate does not *make* a woman³⁰, even when for some of them it has definitely helped their sense of self to re-signify it, dignify it and re-appropriate it from the medical terrain.

³⁰ Little girls, pregnant women, menopausal and post menopausal women, women with hormonal or eating disorders, women without uterus and ovaries as well as trans women, do not menstruate. That does not mean they are any less of a *woman* than the ones who do.

The strategy to overtly ignore the body in feminist epistemology or activism in order not to fall in essentialism, however, can become yet another way of silencing female experiences overlooking femaleness and forcing it to fit into the normative category of what is a “normal” body, which in this society is a body that does not bleed monthly (or has or will or should), hence, the male one. (Young, 2005)

Herein lies a dilemma: Since the body has been used to define women in a negative way, it is difficult to re-define it and re-claim it away from the belittlement of the patriarchal gaze. What I found in my research is that in modern Spanish culture, menstruation has become an experience that should not limit women, and as such the experience of menstruation has to be overcome and silenced. For women who are trying to shift this imaginary, the very silence is violent because it perpetuates the historical neglect of the female body and women’s embodied experience in the biomedical model. When the silence extends to the feminist academia, they find it to be even more contradictory and hurtful. They feel such a silence goes against feminist spirit of ending women’s oppression and fails into the patriarchal constraints of what the female body can and should be.

This ongoing dilemma leaves the door open for further debate and discussions for feminist epistemological positions.

Mi Madre no Lloro³²

*"Mi madre no llora.
Mi madre, que de niña soñaba con casarse y hoy está divorciada, no llora.
Mi madre, que se sentía fuerte cuidando y hoy le ayudan a ducharse, no llora.
Mi madre, que enjugó nuestras lágrimas y ahora ve como caen por ella, no llora.
Mi madre, que siempre escuchó a todo el mundo y ahora tiene un teléfono mudo, no llora.
Mi madre, que luchó por mi independencia y ahora depende de mí, no llora.
Mi madre no llora y lloro yo por ella."*

(Fragment of the Poem "Mi Madre no Lloro" by Nerea Aguado, Student in Soy1Soy4).

A question I asked all of the women during my research was how did they conceive womanhood and femininity. In other words what did it mean for them to be a *woman*?

How important was it to have a uterus, to menstruate, to get pregnant? Was motherhood a choice? Was being a woman about being caring, weaker, more vulnerable? Or was it about renouncing the notion of the weaker sex and the confines of motherhood?

Most of the women I met during my fieldwork are in their late 20s or early 30s; they were raised by women who had experienced Franco's dictatorship, which imposed highly moral catholic values and restrictions on women and their bodies, and suppressed the feminist movement. My respondents spoke about 1975 as an important moment. The Spanish dictatorship was over, and feminism re surfaced in Spain with a renewed spirit to catch up after almost 40

³¹ Collective creation Soy1Soy4

³² Translation to English:

"My mother doesn't cry.

My mother, who as a girl dreamed to get married and is divorced today, doesn't cry

My Mother, who felt strong taking care of others and now's been helped by others to take a shower, doesn't cry.

My mother, who wiped our tears and now sees how they fall for her, doesn't cry.

My mother, who always listened to everyone and now has a mute telephone, doesn't cry.

My mother, who fought for my independence and now depends on me, doesn't cry.

My mother doesn't cry and so I cry for her."

years of repression. They fought intensely for sexual and reproductive rights, the right to divorce and abortion and many other vindications to improve women's conditions as citizens (Pérez, 2012: 340). They broke away from anything that meant control or domination over their bodies, and in turn, became a strong, rebellious, counterhegemonic and tough generation of women, who nurtured the robust contemporary feminist movement in Spain.

From the stories shared with me during this research, I could identify 2 main archetypes of female figures with whom these women grew up. The first one was the strong, tough, educated, independent “super woman” of the 70s/80s, who were in complete control of their sexuality and were politically active and aware. The second were the women who did not have access to education or a career, remained as housewives and had a submissive position within the household. Regardless of the model they had growing up, the message they received from both was clear: it was vital to be strong, educated and independent either to follow the steps of the first, or not to repeat the story of the second.

In exploring how this new generation experienced their menstrual cycle I found it very interesting how they realized they were detached not only from their bodies, but also from their feelings and emotions in general. They wanted to claim them back, not only to move away from submissive traditional roles assigned to women but also from the feminist counter response that emerged after the dictatorship. They felt both typologies of women forcibly distanced women from their embodied experiences and fed into patriarchal binaries.

I found a tension between the “*hegemonic female*” (strong feminist) that still prevails broadly in the Spanish imaginary, and a “*vulnerable body*”, (passive homebody). The women I interviewed wanted to move beyond these tensions and find their own sense of embodied self in these menstrual cultures.

This desire to create a new menstrual culture can be seen in the stories of wanting to know how their cycle worked and getting in touch with their bodies as part of embracing feelings and emotions. These emotions were not only the ones that had been traditionally linked to femininity, hence being a synonym of weakness (vulnerability, tenderness, sensitivity, warmth), but also the “masculine” ones (rage, anger, violence).

I was told it is still a challenging and slow process to interiorize that being vulnerable does not mean being weaker, less capable, or limiting oneself to biology, and that the automatic association of feminine- vulnerable- weak/ masculine- inviolable-strong, reinforces the patriarchal notions we are immersed in.

For them, as Ahmed (2004) also explains, to reclaim these emotions is a rebellious way to dismiss the idea that emotions, the “feminine”, and the “embodied thought” (Ahmed, 2004: 170) are inferior and should be avoided and overcome at all cost.

“I think that is the struggle of this generation: learning how to integrate the independence that our working mothers gained, with allowing ourselves to feel and have emotions. It seems like you can only be successful if you are ruthless and suppress all emotion, but I want to believe this is not the way.” (Mariu, 2017. Soy1Soy4 Student. Personal Interview)

This reconciliation with the need to feel, understand and accept themselves as vulnerable bodies becomes powerful and liberating and is where many of them have found strength.

8.3. Education and Access to Information

“Menstruation won’t be a curse when women determine how they relate to their menstrual cycles on their own terms” (Kissling, 2006: 126)

From my research I can conclude that the education Spanish women receive on menstruation, is limited to the biomedical discourse. A comprehensive menstrual education with access to clear information on the menstrual cycle was identified as key if women were to reclaim control over their bodies away from the biomedical gaze and for Spanish culture to change attitudes towards menstruation.

In answer to Harcourt’s question of “*which bodies are producing knowledge about which other bodies?*” (Harcourt, 2009:13), in the case of menstruation, the normative (male) bodies are the ones theorizing, drafting policy, and intervening from a disembodied biomedical gaze, while women and their embodied

experience still has little say. Spanish women creating a culture of menstruation want to claim knowledge of their bodies. They argue that they know about their bodies and can make informed decisions about anything that has to do with managing their menstrual cycle and/or their menstrual health.

Since the medical system does not provide them with that type of education, together they are shaping new menstrual knowledges. They highlight in particular the importance of providing information to adult women, since the little that is available, is currently targeted at teenagers, women going through menopause, or women suffering menstrual-related illnesses or disorders.

While some of them use mystic, spiritual teachings based on the notion of *feminine sacrality*, visiting red tents or women's circles, the majority of women I came across during this research, were looking for pragmatic answers on how their bodies, their hormones and their cycles function.

8.3.1. Menstrual Education and Health

I found many of the women enter a path of self-knowledge about menstruation after experiencing health issues related to our menstrual cycle. During this research I found how most of the women I talked to, like me, have always experienced menstruation through pain and discomfort and this was deemed to be *normal*, as this was what we learned growing up. The widespread idea to equate menstruation with being sick once a month has led to the excessive medicalization of menstruation, which has been widely studied and called out by feminists (Kissling, 2006).

What I saw is that remarkably women (me included) came to know in a process of body literacy that menstruation is not supposed to hurt. If it does, the pain can be easily overcome with a specific diet, exercise, meditation, rest and overall healthy lifestyle. When pain is severe it is usually associated with serious health complications like endometriosis or polycystic ovarian syndrome.

Another interesting *discovery* is the importance of ovulation to our health. Oral contraceptives, commonly known as *the pill*, once the emblem of sexual freedom of the women's liberation movement back in the 70s, is today a point of contestation by women in Spain in their re-signification of the menstrual

experience. A huge number of the women I interviewed had been taking oral contraceptives since their teen years. Even when none of them referred to this as an imposition, they did say this was not free choice or an informed decision, since it was offered as the unquestionable unique option provided by physicians to treat any discomfort related to their periods, like irregular cycles, pain, acne, mood swings, etc.

What most of them did not know and what is still rarely explained by gynaecologists who prescribe them without further elucidating their anovulatory properties to their patients, is the importance of ovulation for women aside from its relevance for a potential pregnancy. Ovulation is extremely important in the production of estradiol and progesterone, hormones that benefit women's metabolism and overall health (Briden, 2014).

Many Spanish women within these menstrual cultures have renounced *the pill*, as they see it tends to impose “*an idealized, docile, non-menstruating feminine body, ready for full-time participation in the neoliberal economy.*” (Kissling, 2006: abstract).

They have resorted to more “respectful” ways to improve their menstrual health based on holistic approaches that use natural gynaecology or alternative treatments. Some of them come from ancestral knowledges of places like China or Latin America. Also techniques like cervix and vulva explorations are popular in this road to self-knowledge as a way to reclaim their bodies from western gynaecology.

Knowledges from cultures that for centuries have been ignored and conquered, regain significance in this particular realm, as they provide women with alternatives to experience their health on less patriarchal terms.

8.3.2. On Privilege: education and Self-care

“I believe in a feminism of class, of a working class. The idea of sorority doesn't quite make it for me; I feel much more empathy with a male comrade than with Merkel (...) and when you go and see, which feminism is winning? A high-class feminism, which actually is not targeting all women” (Gemma, La CUP- Manresa, 2017. Personal Interview)

A key notion mentioned by all menstrual educators I met, is that menstrual bodies are cyclic and they function based on phases of production and rest. Women should prioritize rest and self-care, in order to improve their embodied menstrual experience, meaning calmer and less painful periods.

Women in this research identified reclaiming the right to rest or take a break, without shame or fear of being judged as the weaker sex, as one of the biggest gains in this road of self-knowledge had given them.

This made sense to me based on my own embodied experience with menstruation. However, I could not help considering how the right to rest is nowadays a matter of privilege; it requires time and money, which are highly valuable and scarce assets in this hectic, neoliberal and highly productive modern societies we live in, specially for women.

Aside from La CUP- Manresa and EndoCataluña who were aiming for a democratization of information related to menstruation, other forms of menstrual education I identified in this research were limited to who had the money and time to afford it.

I am part of this privileged group; not only am I a member of the online menstrual school Soy1Soy4 where I pay a monthly fee of 19,99 euro, but thanks to a scholarship, I was able to dedicate nearly 5 months of my student experience in Europe to exclusively researching this topic, which has provided me with knowledge that have benefited me on a personal level.

For some women this self-care is, as Audre Lorde³³ put it, a way to rebel against the capitalist productive system that has over exploited women and their bodies for years. I met some women who after having studied and learned

³³ *“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”*
Audre Lorde.

about the menstrual cycle, have made major life changes, quitting their jobs and turning to a less consumerist life based on de-growth.

However it is also interesting to see that for this to happen, specific privileges are needed; they could made these life decisions, risky from a financial perspective, because they were reassured that as Spanish citizens, the State would provide them with a minimum living standard. To claim one's menstrual rights is then a matter of privilege, not just "*a matter of will*" (Bobel, 2010: 87).

Indeed, what I also saw was that self- care has become commodified. Yoga, mindfulness retreats, menstrual therapies, organic food, are all becoming consumption products targeting individuals within this self-care market.

I was interested to look at how embodiment and excessive promotion of self- care, encourages a liberal individualism that goes against collective action (Petchesky, 2015), and if self-care could be reclaimed under any other paradigm.

By joining in the Soy1Soy4 community, I saw how women have found ways to solve this tension: self-care is seen as a way to strengthen individuals but as part of a shared community, where collective healing, affection, love and acceptance of vulnerability are key.

8.4. Sustainable Menstruation

"This is a sign that something is changing and you're doing things right: the system wants to take part and make it profitable" (Mandrágores, 2017.
Personal Interview)

Emerging menstrual cultures in Spain link body, environment and gender as they call for a critical approach to available technologies for menstrual management (tampons and disposable menstrual pads), based on an ecologist and responsible consumption approach.

These technologies are perceived not only as pillars of a capitalist driven FemCare industry that has proven to have negative effects on women's health and the environment (Bobel, 2008), but also keeps on perpetuating an idea of menstruation as disposable and the need for its concealment. As a result, women seek to consume alternative products for menstrual management, or to make the products themselves.

In Spain there is a growing market of menstrual-goods. Most of them are more expensive than the ones offered by the hegemonic FemCare Industry. It is true that their price is due to the use of organic materials, or because the initial "investment" is pricy, but in the long run I saw how it translates into a saving, as well as lessening the impact on the environment.

There is a paradox here. As the menstrual cycle becomes more visible, which is the objective of these emerging menstrual cultures in Spain, it also becomes more prone to be commodified. And since these are not cheap options, the message remains that pleasant and sustainable menstrual experiences, are only available for middle/upper class women.

It seems then, that even when the aim of the new menstrual cultures is to have a green, feminist and responsible menstruation, there is an unavoidable truth: *"in our postmodern era, a woman's relationship to her menstrual cycle is mediated through consumerism"* (Kissling, 2006: 5)

8.5. A reversed gaze

As I recall my initial fear of finding a significant and unbreakable distance between Spanish women and me, a Colombian woman, an image of one of the first events I attended while in the field, come to my mind:

As I waited for the workshop to begin, I noticed most of all the young women arriving (12 in total, aged 24-30) knew each other; they had similar

clothes styles, they were all Catalan, and spoke the language. It was evident that I was an outsider. However, as the workshop went by, I noticed something that was to become a constant in my research: beyond our backgrounds, careers, sexual orientation, political views, type of feminism we subscribed in, language even, etc., the embodied menstrual experience became a powerful meeting point for all of us, creating a sense of complicity and understanding that led the way to an open and sincere dialogue. I too had experienced what it means to own a menstrual body in a culture that is not open to talk about it. My own relation with contraception, menstrual pain, the use of the menstrual cup for over 6 years, as well as being in a process of body literacy and menstrual education, allowed me to engage in a horizontal and heartfelt dialogue with them. After all, as one of the participants said: *“every woman, every single one, has a story with their menstruation and we’re rarely allowed to share it”*.

I then noticed, that it was not only our shared menstrual experience which had brought me closer to each one of the women I met during this journey, but it was our shared modern gaze. Even if I came from Colombia, where emerging menstrual cultures have found source of traditional medicine, I had none of that knowledge. Like Spanish women I understood my body through the Eurocentric biomedical model.

I come from a city where everything is hectic, people hardly ever listen to their bodies, and medicine is highly trusted. Traditional knowledges are used as an act of faith and a last resort. Although I have always been aware of indigenous knowledges from my country, some of which I can see still surviving in the remedies by my grandmothers, aunts and mother, I always deemed them as esoteric, and nothing more than “good back ups”.

I heard many times how these women in Spain ignored their roots and so they resorted to traditional knowledges and techniques from Latin America, China and India, in order to re-signify their relation with their health and their bodies. Every time I heard this, I couldn’t help but thinking how I also ignored mine. I am a mix of Spanish, indigenous and black, I know, but I cannot trace down the extent of my heritage; also, I cannot claim their knowledges as my own, because they are not anymore.

As part of this modernized and highly globalized world, and analysing my own privilege, I now notice with sadness and concern, how my embodied experience is much closer to women in Barcelona, than to the women in any of the 102 indigenous groups in my own country.

Something I did not expect to be an outcome of this research, but I now find to be fascinating, is how learning and understanding the body, creates bonds as it allows to identify points of encounter, as well as it becomes a great vehicle to trace down knowledge, traditions and heritage and reflect upon them.

“We are just beginning. This is just getting started!”³⁴- Conclusions

Back in The Hague, as I try to make sense of all the information gathered and the life changing experiences of the past 5 months, I revise the questions, which guided every step of this journey.

First, I wanted to identify and map out the **different actions regarding menstruation** undertaken by groups of women in contemporary Spain to challenge the menstrual taboo still existing in their society; second, I wanted to understand **what had motivated women to get engaged** in these actions; and finally, **how this was all linked (if so) to the broader feminist movement in Spain.**

Regarding the mapping of the **different actions**, what I found in Spain could not be easily framed within a cohesive movement, nor is it possible to classify women involved in these actions as activists, mainly because the majority of them do not call themselves so. Rather, what I found were diverse groups engaged in actions that problematized what it means to “own” a menstruating body in a still highly patriarchal society like the Spanish, in the aim to open up the space for the emergence of new menstrual cultures.

During my research, I came to identify 4 main fields: online and offline **art; advocacy** campaigns aimed to impinge the public opinion as well as policy makers; the creation of alternative **menstrual technologies**; and the struggle to get access to a comprehensive **menstrual education**, far from the narrow and limited gaze of the biomedical discourse.

³⁴ Anita, Soy1Soy4.

The actions I identified in **Art**, resorted to diverse artistry resources and expressions of self, ranging from punk, controversial and anti-establishment pieces that resonated in a specific audience, to more mainstream proposals, that used social media as platform to get menstruation into the pop culture scene.

In the area of **campaigns and policy**, I highlight 3 very interesting actions. First, the motion by **La CUP from Manresa** to change the way education on menstruation is delivered to girls and boys in public schools. This caused a huge public debate as some people ruled the motion as unnecessary and ridiculous even, and this at the same time revived the discussion of how much of a taboo menstruation still is in Spanish society. Second, the advocacy by the women from **EndoCataluña** who accompany women who suffer from endometriosis and raise awareness on the disease as they share information about it, and lobby to impinge policy makers and the public health system, so to push in the agenda the need to train physicians in the detection and treatment of this very unknown, but not so rare disease. The question remains open as to if endometriosis is so under-researched and generally ignored because of the menstrual taboo per se, or because women's health in general is not a priority to the biomedical system, as it also happens with fibromyalgia, a disease that affects almost uniquely women.

Third, the **“Les Nostres Regles”** campaign by Casals de Joves in Cataluña, where they had a public incidence campaign to reclaim menstruation on their own terms (feminist, ecologic and popular). This campaign came up as a very interesting way to protest the understanding of menstruation that is becoming hegemonic in the development and international discourse, promoted by the International Menstrual Hygiene Day organization. These youths considered this approach to perpetuate the patriarchal and capitalist ways in which menstruation is perceived.

Regarding **menstrual technologies**, I came across a growing niche for consumption and production of alternative technologies for menstrual management, based on responsible consumption, ecologic awareness and respect to women's health, which they didn't get from the mainstream FemCare industry.

Finally, on the realm of **menstrual education**, I found the widest variety of options. It is also where the efforts of these emerging menstrual cultures are focused, since every woman I met during this research (each from their own interest) identified access to a comprehensive menstrual education, to be the main way to overcome the menstrual taboo and for them to get a real sense of control of their embodied menstrual experience from how to live it, to how to manage it. The main message they want to get across for women to embrace is that menstruation matters beyond its reproductive purposes, that it should be understood within the logic of the whole cycle and that it could be experienced without pain.

It is important to highlight that access to menstrual education and the self-care it promotes, become matters of **privilege** in this neoliberal system. Since this information is not democratized, the ones who can access it require certain socio-economic condition to invest in courses, therapies and sustainable Fem-Care products, as well as time to go through with the lessons, attend the retreats or indulge in the moments of rest that menstrual education preaches every woman should have.

This also brings awareness on the tension between these menstrual cultures promoting responsible consumption and rejecting the overall commodification of menstruation, and the neoliberal system using its recent visibilization as a marketing opportunity as yet another way in which Women's *empowerment* becomes a business.

Moving on to the question of what had **motivated women to get engaged** in these actions, I identified they all were driven by one or more of the following entry points:

Feminism, as they found re-claiming and re-signifying the menstrual body as one of the ways to defeat patriarchy; **Health issues**, as embodied experiences of illness, extreme pain regarding menstruation and mistreatment by medical practitioners, made them reflect on the need to improve their

knowledge about their menstrual cycle, and even to resort to alternative DIY treatments to take matters their own hands; finally, **Environmentalism** concerns on the strain that disposable FemCare products creates in the environment, made women not only shift their choices when it came technologies for menstrual management, but also made them advocates of alternatives, to the point of creating them themselves.

Finally, regarding to **how this was all linked (if so) to the broader feminist movement in Spain**, I did identify feminism to be key in the creation of new menstrual cultures in Contemporary Spain. Not only was it one of the main vehicles that brought women to engage in these actions but also, as this happened, the broader movement on feminism movement itself faced questioning and some interesting transformations.

As women entered this journey of self-exploration having menstruation and their menstrual bodies as a starting point, they problematized how their own understanding of notions like womanhood, femininity and vulnerability was a result of the feminist heritage they received from the 70s. Even when they highly praised the accomplishments by the post-Franco generation, they also realized how connecting with their embodied experience, made them drift away from the archetype of the tough and strong woman they grew up with, and let them feel a kind of liberation and control not experienced before.

Emerging Menstrual Cultures and Body Politics of Menstruation

Body Politics of menstruation, allowed me to see that to talk about menstruation with women is never *just* to talk about that (Harcourt, 2009). It allows for such a rich insight of how women perceive every aspect of their embodied experiences beyond the essentialist and biologically determinist gaze, as well as it shows how society perceives and treats them and what women make of that.

The new body politics of menstruation let us see how every day choices and activities that have the body as a starting point, can also be highly political: resorting to reusable technologies that challenge the big corporations as an environmentalist stand; using a menstrual cup where there is direct contact with

the blood instead of just discarding it; stop using contraception; using cloth pads that need to be washed instead of tampons; turning into natural/DIY gynaecology; embracing the cyclicality and vulnerability of menstrual bodies; challenging the biomedical gaze of the menstruating bodies and questioning their excessive medicalization; fighting for access to information, and if they don't find it, creating their own. This is all highly political and counter hegemonic.

This new body politics of menstruation do not necessarily take place in a massive way, but are also not isolated; it links individuals through national and global knowledge networks, to other women who want to explore these same topics.

As these groups of Spanish women embark on a process of using the embodied menstrual experience to generate their own menstrual education, these emerging cultures now face the challenge of turning this new-found information into a comprehensive set of knowledges, inclusive of all menstruating bodies, that can actually “*supersede the current menstrual culture*” (Kissling, 2006:122) as it steps aside from the position of a subculture, to become embedded in the heart of Spanish widely spread popular knowledges.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interviews

Name	Project	Place of origin / residence
Art		
Raquel Riba Rossy	Illustrator and author of Lola Vendetta. www.lolavendetta.net	Catalan, lives in -Barcelona
Zinteta	Young artist who has become very popular recently for her work to make stretch marks and menstruation visible. https://www.instagram.com/zinteta/	Catalan, lives in Barcelona
Politics		
Clara Sánchez	La Cup. Twitter: @cupnacional	Barcelona
Gemma Tomás	La Cup – the city of Manresa. @cupmanresa	Manresa
Dr. Sonia Ruíz García	Director of the Gender Mainstreaming Strategy in the Barcelona City Council	Barcelona
Menstrual Technologies:		
Celeste	LaikiPads. Creates and sells washable cloth pads and pantyliners. Sells menstrual cups and other products related to menstruation	Italy, lives in Barcelona
Beatriz	Semilla Roja. Creates and sells washable cloth pads and pantyliners	Barcelona
Health		
Endo Cataluña	Associations in Spain that work in the process of raising awareness about Endometriosis. http://www.endometriosiscatalunya.com .	Barcelona
Menstrual education		
Diana Pinzón	Menstrual Educator/ Somiarte. www.somiarte.com	Colombian, living in Manresa
Mandrágores	Collective for sexual and menstrual education.	Barcelona
Erika Irusta	Founder and creator of El Camino del Rubí and Soy1Soy4. Renowned menstrual educator and researcher. www.elcaminorubi.com	Basque
Members and Students of Soy1Soy4 Community		
Ari		Basque Country

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Anita		Valencia, living in England.
Angélica		Madrid, living in Cataluña
Enara	http://viviendoenciclico.com	Basque Country
Mariu		Segovia
Cinthy		Madrid, living in Guatemala
Belén		Andalucía
Eva		Catalan, living in London
Nerea	https://laduendearayas.wordpress.com	Navarra – living in Villava

☐

Appendix No. 2: Encounters In the Mountain: On Menstruation, vulnerability, and sorority

My stay in Barcelona, coincided with the first encounter of the Soy1Soy4 community, that took place in Benasque, a city in the Spanish Pyrenees, from August 11th to August 13th, 2017. It was the first time all of us would meet in person, after some had been online friends for around 2 years.

The day before the trip, I received the final agenda. It included yoga, workshops for pelvic floor strengthening, belly dance for menstrual pain relief, a hike to a close by waterfall, shooting stars shower observation and ... *cunt exploration*. WHAT? I had to read again. Yes, it said it: “*Exploración de coños: What do we need for this activity? Your speculum, lube and a mirror*”. Apparently we were going to have one of those sessions of group vaginal exploration, to observe the cervix and vulva, that I had read so much about from the women's health movements back in the 70s and 80s and the experiments conducted by the gynepunks in Calafou (Cataluna) I had researched with much awe.

Once in the shelter, I noticed we were a very heterogeneous group: 22 women (20 of which were Spanish from all over the country) between 28-40 years, very different among us, but all menstruating bodies happy to have found their herd and wiling to learn, share and exchange with love.

For three days, we discussed how having menstruation as a point of encounter had given us some sense of relief, understanding, and healing even. Topics such as painful menstruations, infertility problems, physical and psychological abuse, stalkers, relationships, childhood, mothers, partners, etc., came up. Feelings were a central element of this sharing, as well as the tension and contradiction we all faced having to live up to the expectation of what a “strong” woman is, and how this meant in many cases neglecting what our body was telling us, renouncing to what we sometimes feel. We discussed what it meant to be a socially constructed woman and what femininity meant, and how exhausting it was carrying this labels in a highly patriarchal and masculin-

ized world which doesn't even allow us to recognize we are in pain, or how vulnerable we can feel sometimes, because immediately this is all translated into weakness.