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The Art of Menstrual Resistance

The Experience of Menstrual Artists in Amsterdam and Beyond

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[1] illustrated by the author in reaction to the process of this research

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List of Acronyms

CMS - Critical Menstrual Studies

ABS - Art-Based Approach

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Abstract

Colonial/modern understandings of menstruation are based on the hierarchisation of bodies, emerged as a tool of the European colonial expansion around the world. This narrative of the menstruating body stigmatizes it as polluting, unproductive, disgusting or reduces it solely to the function of reproduction. This paper is a quest to understanding how menstrual artists experience creating menstrual art and though this resisting the colonial/modern menstrual stigma. By guiding the reader through six conversations with different menstrual artists in proximity to Amsterdam this text explores the possibilities of re-imagining menstruation 'otherwise'.

Relevance to Development Studies

The dominant narrative around menstruation is rooted in a colonial understanding of menstruation which relies on control and hierarchization over the body which frames it as polluting. This imposed narrative has resulted in the concealment of menstruation and menstrual blood in westernized public spaces (Bobel et al., 2020). In modern/patriarchal societies, such as Western Europe, menstruation is often associated with uncleanliness and responded to with disgust (Roberts, 2020, p.177). Issues such as period poverty, menstrual health and reproductive justice have been pushed to the margins and the work of menstrual artists brings these conversations into spaces that have historically concealed them (Bobel and Fahs, 2020, p.955). This paper considers the experiences of menstrual artists to present a manifold of menstrual understandings beyond the colonial/modern hegemony. The understanding of experiences of resistance through them, show different ways that artists relate to menstruation. This can offer insight into the enmeshed gendered and racialized oppression of menstrual stigma at different stages of resistance within menstrual discourse and the arts.

Keywords

Menstrual art, Menstrual artists, Menstrual Stigma, Decolonial Aesthesis, Resistance, Healing, Coloniality of the body

Chapter 1

New Moon: sensitive, reflective, insightful

[2]

Sheltered by shadows of a dark night, I am drawn inwards. In the phase of menstruation, of rest and reflection I can hear my body whisper and wonder. The quiet of the new moon allows me to clearly hear the question that has been growing within me; What does it mean to menstruate in modernity? Here, I am at the threshold, ready to listen and begin again.

1.1 Introduction

A stain on my bed sheet, red dropping down my legs and pink water in my sink when I scrub out the remanence from my clothes; hidden, displayed, painful, empowered, sacred, disgusting, flowing, blood, paint? This paper is an exploration into menstruation through art and conversations of menstrual artists woven with my own (re)discovering of menstruation. The plurality of communal and individual menstrual understandings and experiences has been overshadowed and overpowered by colonial structures which maintain and rely on control over the (menstruating) body (Roberts, 2020, p.177). By enforcing hierarchical views on health, purity, and normative bodies, these structures marginalize diverse menstrual practices and impose a perspective that views menstruation as having to be controlled or hidden (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020). Individual menstrual experiences have been systematically constrained and shaped by colonial structures that regulate and politicize menstruation. Through these mechanisms of control, menstruation in modernity is framed as 'polluting' and this shame continues to serve as a tool for subordinating feminized bodies (Murphy, 2011). Activists have been challenging roots of this stigma and demanding a radical rethinking of menstruation (Stone, 2014, pp.111-112). Menstrual artists take part in unveiling

[2] all moon visuals are illustrated by the author to guide the reader through the menstrual-lunar phases

menstrual experiences of modernity (Stone, 2014; Green-Cole, 2020). The research question I depart from is: How do menstrual artists experience resistance to menstrual stigma? To answer this, I ask what it means to menstruate in modernity? How artists experience creating menstrual art and how they are resisting menstrual stigma?

Beginning with an understanding of colonial subjugation of the body, and the history of modern menstrual stigma and menstrual art, I lay out my process of sentipensar and decolonial feminist notions. Thereupon, I present conversations with six menstrual artists, in proximity to Amsterdam, from different artistic practices, about the experience of resistance and healing in the process of creating menstrual art. This leads me to the understanding that menstrual artists experience resistance as a route to rediscovering, through nature, the sacred, visibility, immateriality and connection, menstruation 'otherwise'.

1.2 Positionality

When I started this research, I thought that it was about wanting to be angry, to scream, to resist. Now I am thinking maybe it is about the need to heal.

I decided to undertake this journey because of an urge to take space and time to speak about menstruation, in conversation with artists but also with my own body. Ever since I started menstruating, monthly painful cramps have accompanied me. None of the gynecologists, doctors and herbalists I have visited over the years have been able to help me and most dismissed my cramps as 'normal'. I learned that menstruation is supposed to hurt, and I started to despise it and the patriarchy which I felt was at fault for my returning pains. For film class in high school, I then made a movie together with two friends about menstrual stigma at schools into which I poured all this anger and feeling of injustice. However, when I chose to submit it for my graduation assignment, my older male film teacher told me that the film was inappropriate due to the depiction of blood (ketchup)-stained underwear. Since then, the sense of injustice not only of having painful periods but constantly facing pushback when trying to express it has been with me. I keep finding myself being pulled to this topic with a sense of urgency.

Having grown up in an elite bubble of international school kids I have heard stories about menstrual experiences within different religions and cultures. I started to volunteer for a period poverty organization in Amsterdam and started to understand dynamics of economic injustices and menstrual care. Each menstrual experience is unique and shaped by a plurality of circumstances and structures of domination. The classification and

hierarchization of bodies in colonial/modernity enmeshes menstruators in different layers of oppression (Lugones, 1994). I understand and am constantly in conversation with my own position within these layers of oppressions. Being economically secure, white and cis gender plays a role in my menstrual experience; my access to medical care, health education, products and spaces for menstrual hygiene. Living in colonial/modernity, through my westernized education, media and being raised in a German household I was taught a European universalizing understanding of bodies which will inevitably influence how I approach and make sense of this journey. As a way of staying true to my belief in menstrual justice, for everyone, I tried to participate in this research with the most honest, empathetic and vulnerable version of myself.

My understanding, disconnect and hate of my flowing, cyclical body are part of my colonized self; my learned universalizing of dichotomies, classifications and hierarchization of humans and nature. This research is part of a process of unveiling colonial/modern relations to the body and unlearning the disconnect to my own body. I begin this by reimagining my menstruation as a step towards relearning to relate to my body 'otherwise'.

1.3 Menstruating in Modernity

In the following section I display concepts on which this excursion is based on. To paint the scene for understanding menstrual art and resistance in modernity I consider what colonial/modernity entails, how this influences menstruating bodies as well as present work of decolonial scholars on resistance, healing and aesthesis.

1.3.1 Colonial/Modernity

I have informed much of this research from lessons of decolonial thinkers and researchers. I want to understand what it means to menstruate today and here; in modernity. When I speak about modernity, I refer to the process by which Europe has situated and continues to situate itself above and in contrast to its 'other'. Western domination of knowledge as Dussel explains is "produced by a few men from five countries in Western Europe (Italy, France, England, Germany and the USA)" (Grosfoguel, 2013, p.73). Western epistemic privilege and power is therefore not geographically bound but understood as centralized within specific bodies and a logic of subordination (Grosfoguel, 2013; Dussel, 1993). The idea of modernity as civilized, Western and to be aspired to, is as such a product of this concentrated power (Mignolo, 2011). As Dussel states, "Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as

the 'centre' of a World History that it inaugurates: the 'periphery' that surrounds this centre is consequently part of itself-definition" (1993, p.65) The duality of modernity and the 'primitive'/pre-modern reiterates the narrative of using modernity as the definition for who is human (Mignolo, 2011).

Integral to modernity is the myth of irrationality which naturalizes a rational/irrational binary (Motta, 2016). Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains how through the invention of irrationality, "Europeans arrogated to themselves the category of 'modern humans' and relegated others into the status of 'primitive/pre-modern sub-humans' as they colonized time itself" (2020, p.5) Part of this domination is the enforcement of the idea that there is only one 'correct' epistemology which is the colonial 'rational' western way of knowing (Lugones, 2007, p.188). This frames rationality as the only path to modernity, and reserved to Europeans (Motta, 2016). Modernity therefore reproduces coloniality, the continuous perpetuation of structures of control that were imposed by European colonial powers (Quijano, 2000, p. 533). Colonial subjugation, which informs and is informed by modernity, was formed through a violent domination which used socially constructed and instrumentalized systems of classification which privilege the 'modern self' and marginalizes its 'others' (Quijano, 2000, p. 533; Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo and Vázquez 2013; Dussel, 1993).

1.3.2 Coloniality of the Body

To menstruate in modernity therefore means to menstruate in the site of coloniality. Western European thought naturalizes the categorization of society through the body (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Scientific and specifically biological theories have been used to explain differences between people based on what is seen, to hierarchize bodies (Oyěwùmí, 1997). The body of the 'modern self' was presented as norm and the body of the 'others' became lesser variations of this measure (Lugones, 2007). Bodies that do not fit privileged white, able-bodied, masculine standards are therefore marginalized.

The body of the 'others' "are conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession" and as such a territory (Boehmer, 1993, 270). The construction of 'race' as a measurement of rationality, which was equated to humanity, was a method of justifying colonial violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Quijano, 2000, p.533). Alongside social classification based on 'race', identities were created and categorized based on sexual distinction which is hegemonically referred to as 'gender'. As Oyěwùmí, states, "two social categories that omitted from this construction were the

"man of reason" (thinker) and the "women of the body," and they were oppositional constructed" (1997, p.6). These differences in bodies that are hierarchized create a colonial matrix of power in which oppressions are enmeshed. Lugones (1994) speaks about enmeshed oppressions. She explains how "race, gender, culture, class, and other differences" exist simultaneously and intermesh with each other (p.475). Menstruating in modernity and the stigma of such therefore differs depending on how each subject is enmeshed with these oppressions.

1.3.3 Menstruating Bodies

In westernized spaces menstruation has historically been an indicator for femininity as part of the binary sexual distinction which categorizes people into men and women. When I speak about menstruators and people with menstruating bodies, I refer to people who experience or have possibility of experiencing menstruation not tied to modern categories of gender or sex. Menstruation here is understood as a versatile embodied experience with acknowledgement to the physical circularity of menstruating bodies but beyond modern medical understandings of the material bodily process of sexual reproduction.

Hegemonically, menstruating bodies are understood as mothering bodies, productive only in sense of reproduction. The only purpose and ability ascribed to menstruating bodies is childbearing and raising (Moloney, 2007). Otherwise, menstruation is presented as a deficit that prevents menstruators from being productive members of the market (Newton, 2016). This societal shame and disgust are being exploited which contributes to period poverty and increases barriers for menstruators to manage their menstrual hygiene (Haneman, 2021). Companies producing period products, which by advertising and making profit out of health care and the enforced practice of hiding menstrual blood, contribute to stigmatizing menstruating bodies (Bobel and Fahs, 2020). With this, menstruating bodies become consumers and menstruation a niche in the market, furthering disembodiment of menstrual experiences.

Importantly, not all menstruators are stigmatized the same and the position in the colonial matrix of power beyond being a menstruator such as 'race', gender and sexuality form menstrual experiences and stigma (Lugones, 1994; Murphy, 2011; Green-Cole, 2020). In colonial/modern logic for white cis bodies menstruation is hegemonically seen as a sign of weakness, unproductivity and motherhood whereas for menstruators of colour it is understood as a further argument for irrationality.

Further in colonial logic, knowledge that comes from relational, unmaterialized and ancestral self beyond the materialized and biologicalized body is delegitimized (Chávez and Vázquez, 2017). The colonial/modern understanding of menstruation therefore confines it to the body and its reproductive value. Menstruating bodies deviate from the constructed and centralized 'normative' white, cis, male body. Simultaneously, the reproductive value of menstruation is negated as the disgust that menstruation is engulfed in frames menstruating bodies as natural but innately dysfunctional and wrong (Knoop, 2024). This stigmatizes menstrual blood; the only material proof for non-menstruators that menstruation exists. As menstrual artists and feminist Irigaray states, ""[f]luids are implicitly associated with femininity, maternity, menstruation and the body. Fluids are subordinated to that which is concrete and solid" (Green-Cole, 2020, p. 789). Fluidity and uncontrollable characteristics of menstrual blood therefore oppose the rational and controlled colonial logic (Green-Cole, 2020). Further, this understanding negates the existence of menstruation beyond the material. The lived experience, ancestral knowledge, connection to the body, to nature and to other menstruators is actively omitted from conceptualizations. Therefore, the menstruating body is subordinated through its fluidity (physical and cyclical) but also through its non-presence.

1.3.4 Resistance/ Healing

Creativity and art as a process of resistance is what ignited me to write this paper. I will be referring to Lugones framing of resistance. To her, resistance is realized as "the tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity" (2010, p.746). Therefore, one who resists while being enmeshed in oppressions resists these power structures with their limited but active agency. She understands resistance as non-modern, nonconforming to modern colonial dichotomies and as decolonial. In context of this paper, I understand decoloniality as the process of countering, dismantling, criticizing and resisting coloniality (Lugones, 2010; Quijano, 2000). Therefore, decolonial efforts aim to understand, resist and heal from colonial oppression and offer different practices to understanding the self and the world (Quijano, 2000). The colonial matrix of power also has control over creation and perception of art (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013).

Alongside resistance, I want to introduce the idea of decolonial healing, not as a destination or finite accomplishment but as a process that may accompany resistance (Burrough and Walgreen, 2022, pp.3-6). Burrough and Walgreen, write,

> "The wound is the land of healing. To overcome the disconnection to ourselves, to each other, to the earth, and the universe mandated by coloniality, the healing we require is not so solely physical nor mental but emotional, political, historical, technological and spiritual" (2022, p.4).

This disconnection also manifests in stigmatization of menstruation, and locating the stigma offers possibilities to start a process of healing. "There are infinite rivers in which decolonial healing can flow, to nourish the soil of our hearts so we can bloom into who we were designed to be" (Burrough and Walgreen, 2022, p.6). When speaking of healing throughout this paper I speak about finding oneself on one of these rivers, within the process of unlearning and transforming from this menstrual stigma, healing rather than being healed.

1.3.5 Decolonial Aesthesis

Menstrual art practices disobey social norms by presenting the stigmatized, unpalatable aspects of the body and through this challenge dominant conceptualizations of beauty. Mignolo and Vázquez name hegemonic contemporary understandings of art and beauty; aesthetics (2013). They explain that in the 18th century aesthetics was defined in opposition to rationality and a determinant of what is beautiful. Mignolo states, "aesthetics is the image that reflects in the mirror of imperial/colonial aesthetics" (2014, p.201). This normative understanding of art is shaped by colonial power structures which determine how to perceive and create (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013). Artistic practices that challenge colonial aesthetics by either re-centering the marginalized or radically confronting coloniality of contemporary art spaces are what Mignolo and Vázquez call aesthesis. Further, aesthesis can be a tool in the process of resisting and healing the colonial wound which "cuts across social classes, and it is both racial and patriarchal" (Mignolo, 2014, p.201). Decolonial aesthesis therefore does not exist for the dominant gaze nor contributes to the hierarchization of different aesthetics (Machado, 2022). Menstrual art actively transgresses modern restrictions of menstruation and offers different (e.g non-material, non-stigmatized) ways of relating to menstruation. Aesthesis is a practice of sensing and connecting to the cosmos that goes beyond the duality of vision and mind (Machado, 2022). Through this, aesthesis bridges the border between art and epistemology and is within itself a way of knowing (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013).

Decolonial aesthesis is resistance and is inseparable from a process of liberating oneself from colonial/modern dichotomies. This process of resistance is simultaneously a

process of healing. Fanon wrote, "'the war goes on. And for many years to come we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonialist onslaught" (Fanon as cited in Ureña, 2019, p.1641). Decolonial aesthesis offers a practice of, "at once the unveiling of the wound and the possibility of healing. It makes the wound visible, tangible; it voices the scream" (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013, p.18). Aesthesis therefore not only rejects the Western modern canon and through this resists, but also approaches healing.

1.4 The Period of Menstruation/ from Stigma to Canvas

"the planet is heaving mourning our ignorance
the moon tugs the seas
to hold her/to hold her
embrace swelling hills/i am
not wounded i am bleeding to life

we need a god who bleeds now
whose wounds are not the end of anything"

- Shange, 2017

1.4.1 Menstrual Stigma

The word menstrual stigma is used throughout this paper and is understood as a result of colonial/modern control over the menstruating body. The word stigma originates from ancient Greece where it was used to describe people who were branded to indicate that they were of lower status, for example criminals or enslaved people (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2020, p.182). Stigma continues to refer to a stain or mark that indicates that a person is blemished, deficient or ill and is expected to be reacted to with disgust (Roberts, 2020). Consequence of menstrual stigma is a culture of concealment around menstruation in modern spaces (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2020, p.182). Any indication of menstruation is associated with shame and forced to the private (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2020, pp.182-183).

In Western research the word 'taboo' is often used to refer to the culture of concealment around menstruation (Risling Baldy, 2017, p.26). 'Taboo' originates from the indigenous Polynesian term "tabu" or "tapu" which means "to make something holy, sacrosanct, or to "mark thoroughly" (Risling Baldy, 2017, 26). However, the Western re-interpretation of the word carries a negative connotation which in consequence presents Polynesian

menstrual taboos as inaccurately stigmatized (Risling Baldy, 2017). I chose to use the word 'stigma' instead as I refer to a harmful and marginalizing narrative. Menstrual stigma encapsulates the multiplicity of beliefs about menstruators which in Western discourse frame them as disgusting, ill and out of control.

1.4.2 'Other' Understandings of Menstruation

The colonial/modern, patriarchal, capitalist world order has imposed a singular menstrual narrative which relies on Western science. Therefore, hegemonically menstruation is understood as an essential part of the hormonally driven sexual reproductive cycle and more recently is starting to be recognized as a sign of overall health of menstruators (Tan et al., 2017; Patterson, 2013). In a modern understanding of the menstrual cycle, menstruation often overshadows the rest of the cycle as it is the most physically visible phase. Beyond the westernized understanding of the body there is a pluriverse of relationships to menstruation, through spirituality, the earth, ancestors, the sacred (Tan et al., 2017; Moloney, 2007; Fallon, 2012). The Māori understood menstruation to be the manifestation of Atua, meaning goddess (Murphy, 2011, p.19). Different cultural groups throughout the world have plurality of relations to menstruation and believes vary throughout the group or society; there is no monolith understanding. In Hinduism for example there are a multitude of menstrual understandings ranging from celebrating menstruation at festivals, to connecting it to the sacred (Krasskova, 2019). However, as the dominant narrative overshadows, delegitimize and reinterprets and displaces beyond colonial/modern menstrual practices they are difficult to find and recount accurately.

Some known menstrual understandings that deviate from dominant narratives connect it to the lunar phases or to the environmental seasons (Tan et al., 2017). Similarly, the understanding that menstruators synchronize with each other when they spend time together is shared by different spiritualities (Tan et al., 2017; Moloney, 2007). Other understandings explain how menstruation connects menstruators to nature and the benefits of menstrual rituals such as bleeding onto earth or painting with menstrual blood (Tan et al., 2017; Roberts, 2020). A widespread understanding is that during menstruation there is heightened spirituality (Moloney, 2007; Balikienė and Balikienė, 2023). In this paper, when speaking about menstruation I speak of the phase in the menstrual cycle in which the uterine lining is shed as well as about a cyclical sensed, spiritual, emotional, physical, personal and shared experience beyond.

1.4.3 (Some) History of Modern Menstrual Stigma

It is difficult to say when menstruation first became associated with uncleanliness in the Western European dominant narrative. As a starting point, I will take ancient Greece and Rome which are often understood as the basis of European modernity, an idealized social order that should be imposed on all (Malkin, 2004, p.341). Dussel questions this "distortion of history" which centralizes Europe and presents time as linear and the present as superior to the past (2000). Modern Western thought is heavily informed by ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle as they are understood as the root of modern knowledge (Malkin, 2004, p.341). Aristotle argued that proof for female inferiority is that men can produce sperm, and women solely have sufficient energy to generate menstrual blood (Dean-Jones, 1989, p.179; Newton, 2016, p.22). In Ancient Rome, natural philosopher Pliny the Elder, warned society of the dangerous qualities of menstrual blood (Newton, 2016, p.25). He outlined the toxicity of menstrual blood, which he claimed; withers crop, makes livestock infertile and makes razors go dull (Newton, 2016, p.25). Newton explains, "women's menstrual blood posed a threat to men, as well as to men's creations, causing agricultural crops to fail and manmade material things to lose their lustre" (2016, p.25).

Menstrual stigma is also anchored in religion and, importantly Christianity, which many modern Western countries have grounded their social organization and values in (Mazokopakis and Samonis, 2018). One of the first mentions of uncleanliness of menstrual blood can be found in the Old Testament of Leviticus (Mazokopakis and Samonis, 2018, p.184). In the religious text it is stated that during a woman's period, she is physically and morally unclean, and therefore should not be touched by anyone for seven days to not infect others with her menstrual dirtiness (Newton, 2016, p.20). Further she should not participate in any sexual acts with a man or her "menstrual impurity" would be passed on and "he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean" (Mazokopakis and Samonis, 2018, p.184). Similarly, a common early Christian belief was that pain of contractions during childbirth as well as cramps during menstruation are a manifestation of the punishment of Eve's original sin (Newton, 2016, pp.20-21).

In the 16th century the start of the European colonial expansion around the world as well as the rise of capitalism was shaped by the idea of 'modernity'. Dussel refers to this as "first modernity" which began with colonial conquests in America (2000). Building up on the "first modernity", the "second modernity" begins with what is known as the Enlightenment in which the naturalization of hierarchies of bodies emerged through justifications of

'modern science' (Dussel, 2000; Lugones, 2010). While the belief that menstrual blood had damaging, supernatural properties, such as turning milk sour remained, a fixation on the medicalization of feminized bodies began (Newton, 2016, p.27).

European women were understood to be biologically without sexual desire, weaker and less intelligent than men (Mies, 2014). Any deviation from the way women's bodies were expected to be perceived was abnormal (Mies, 2014). Therefore, both presence or absence of menstruation or premenstrual symptoms was often classified as a sickness or disability (Strange, 2000, p.617). Further, menstruation was often connected to hysteria (Newton, 2016, p.27). Hysteria, derived from the Greek word "womb", was for centuries believed to be a mental illness that women who had strong emotions, felt sexual desires or deviated from the 'ideal housewife' were often diagnosed with (Guidone, 2020 p.274). To treat hysteria, women were placed in psychiatric institutions where they often experienced violence (Strange, 2000, p.617).

Through the formation of the colonial/modern order in which Western knowledge has epistemic privilege, the binary and hierarchical sense making of bodies was imposed across the world. The colonial/modern menstrual narrative was no exception to this domination of knowledge (Murphy, 2011). Christianization as well as colonial anthropological research played a large role in re-interpreting and enforcing menstrual stigmas (Murphy, 2011). British colonialists informed their understanding of menstruation from the Old Testament (Murphy, 2011). An illustration of this is when Christian ethnographers misconstrued the Māori pre-colonial understanding of menstruation from being the manifestation of Atua (goddess) to a weakness (Murphy, 2011, p.19). As Murphy explains, "Through the colonial domination of knowledge, menstrual traditions have been infiltrated and severed by Christian doctrines of menstrual impurity and patriarchal disgust toward the female body" (2011, p.122). Conceiving and narrating indigenous menstrual understandings as oppressive by interpreting them through a colonial logic, ethnographic research perpetuates the idea that 'other than' colonial/modern menstrual practices are 'primitive' (Risling Baldy, 2017).

Concurrently, this scientific legitimization of hierarchies was a tool used by European scientists to justify violence in the colonies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The process of dehumanization of indigenous people was explained through the naturalization of 'race' by studying differences between racialized bodies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Johann Blumenbach, who studied both racialized and gendered bodies, claimed that white European women should not travel to colonized territories because the warm climate would intensify menstrual

symptoms that would end up in killing them (Schiebinger, 2004, p.238). This indication of European women as fragile and 'sick with menstruation' stands in contrast to how the imposed gender framework "subordinated European bourgeois women to European men and dehumanized the colonized into 'bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful' non-beings, on the other side." (Lugones, 2010, p.743). Anything that did not fit in the clean, civilized order of modernity, such as bodily fluids of menstruation, was framed as animalistic.

From the 18th to 20th century, common scientific belief was that menstruation is an essential part of women's health (Newton, 2016, p.30). If a woman was not menstruating it was seen as unhealthy and methods, from eating herbs to bloodletting were used to 'release' menstrual blood (Newton, 2016, pp.30-31). Menstruation was, and remains to be today, seen as inherently tied to femininity and the lack of it seen as a defect to womanhood (Newton, 2016, p.31). Paradoxically it is simultaneously framed as undesirable, reiterating the conception that femininity is naturally inferior to masculinity. Menstruation remains stigmatized in prevalent Western discourses and is still heavily associated with uncleanliness and weakness (Bobel andFahs, 2020, p.956). This stigma has been shaped by the historical naturalization of inferiority of menstruating bodies as a means of oppression.

1.4.4 (Some) Menstrual Art

menstrual art or art of menstruation?

To decide to do this research inevitably brought me to a point where I had to decide what I understand as art. As I do not aspire to distinguish art from non-art, for the scope of this paper I decided to speak of art as the output of a self-proclaimed artist. Following the spirit of "anyone can categorize their craft as they see fit" I understand artists as people who self-categorized their craft as art (Radio Zapatista, 2016).

The tradition of menstrual art is ancient and has taken different forms. The oldest known depiction of a menstruating body was found in a temple in Göbekli Tepe, Turkey and is estimated to be 12,000 years old (Fallon, 2012). Even though menstruation is stigmatized in westernized societies, menstrual art has nonetheless existed (Shillington, 2004). Contemporary menstrual art in the West is understood to be a product of second wave feminism (Green-Cole, 2020). Contemporary art by definition is art of the current historical time (Smith, 2006, p.683). By this understanding, contemporary art is plural and can be made by

anyone in any context of today. Hegemonically however, contemporary art in the West refers to art of modernity influenced by the mainstream, globalization and technology (Smith, 2006, p.683). While art can be a means to resistance, it is important to acknowledge its contribution to the subjugation of the body through perpetuating colonial and patriarchal narratives and the often elite access to contemporary art spaces (Jørgensen, 2019). Osborne criticizes the visual essentialism of contemporary art discourse in which the visible is idealized and centralized (2004, p.652). Further, in westernized spaces exhibition of art, in for example museums, relies on a dichotomy between spectator and object. (Jørgensen, 2019). These characteristics of contemporary art have played a role in the othering of bodies, which have been portrayed or excluded from art that is given a stage (Osborne, 2004).

While remaining critical to discourses around contemporary art, I recognize that it has also been a marker for social change and used by different political movements to unveil injustices. The Photolithograph *Red Flag* created by American feminist artist Judy Chicago in 1971 is often referenced as a turning point in contemporary menstrual art (Guidon, 2020; Green-Cole, 2020; Cruz, 2020). Chicago explores stigmatization of menstrual blood and gender in various of her works, however *Red Flag* is her most famous work which sparked both enraged reactions as well as conversations around menstrual empowerment in the US at the time (Cruz, 2020). Japanese artist Shigeko Kubota performed her *Vagina Painting* in New York in 1965 where, in front of a crowd of people, she used a paintbrush attached to her vagina to paint red lines over a white surface (Green-Cole, 2020, p. 791). According to Zhang, Kubota highlights the commonality of women's experience while situating herself in interaction with social structures that form her experience as a female Japanese artist performing in the US (2023). This theme of menstruation as a unifying struggle for women, even though radical within the culture of concealment at the time, shows how some contemporary artists generalize menstruation; as a struggle that is universal for all feminized bodies. Not only have feminist artists thematized menstruation but they have used menstrual blood as a medium. In 1973, British artist Judy Clark showcased a collection of textiles stained with menstrual blood (Green-Cole, 2020, p. 789). Today this tradition continues with Chilean artist Carina Úbeda or US American artists Portia Munson who use their own menstrual blood in their art (Low, 2023). More recently known menstrual artists include Swedish feminist illustrator and muralist Liv Strömquist, Indian artist Shilpa Gupta and Cass Clemens, a US American trans illustrator who published a colouring book to teach children about menstrual diversity (Bell, 2017; Gaybor and Harcourt, 2021, p.2395).

Further, social media has opened a new space for artists and activists to share menstrual art publicly. One example of this is a photo Rupi Kapur posted in 2015 of herself with a period stain on her pants and bed which received a lot of backlash (Gaybor and Harcourt, 2021, p. 2395). Today countless menstrual artists post their works on social media ranging from painting with menstrual blood, to using menstrual care products to create art, poetry or film (Green-Cole, 2020). Doubtless, menstrual art exists beyond popular frames and spaces of contemporary art, not made for the modern gaze, for profit or simply made for a non-westernized audience. This menstrual aesthesis however is difficult to find due to exactly the mechanisms of colonial/modernity and exclusionary spaces of contemporary art that it resists.

Chapter 2

Waxing Moon: social, active, motivated

With the waxing moon, light begins to build, each sliver a reminder of the depth of knowledge within each of my encounters. My body is rested and craves authentic interactions and empathetic connections. Motivated to look forward, exchange experiences, share emotions and connect carefully.

In following chapter, I will introduce the approach, location and process I decided to take to answer my question. To detach from colonial/modern control of menstruation and connect to the embodied experience I chose to refract from the hegemonic way of doing academic research. Therefore, while keeping to some limits of the structures of academic writing and research I approached this journey using my senses and emotions. I recognize the relevance and limits of CMS and ABS and explain the decolonial feminist approach to my sense making. I end the chapter by explaining the process, ethics and constrains of my conversations with the artists.

2.1 Sensing and Drawing: sentipensar

While doing this research I reflected on my own interconnected journey regarding my body and menstruation through drawing and writing. I drew from the onto-epistemology of sentipensar. Sentipensar stems from a manner of living originally from river communities in northern Columbia and has recently been used in Latin American decolonial research as a resistance to the coloniality of knowledge (Medina, 2021. p.98). Vaguely translated to sensing-thinking or feeling-thinking, it uses connection to oneself, the environment, earth, and other beings through senses and feelings to know (Trejo Mendez, 2019). The coloniality of knowledge has naturalized a Western understanding of epistemologies which is inherently

linked to the suppression of the irrational (Motta, 2016, p.35). Consequently, epistemologies which do not centre the mind and 'rational' thought and include "emotional, embodied, oral, popular and spiritual knowledge" are repressed and discredited (Motta, 2016, p.35).

Sentipensar does not aim to fit into hegemonic epistemologies of Western knowledge (Trejo Mendez, 2019). Sentipensar challenges the Western modern binary that understands mind and body as separate entities (Allen et al., 2022, p. 455). It allows for a rethinking of knowing that understands sensing, feeling and thinking as a part of learning together (Trejo Mendez, 2019, p.28; Allen et al., 2022, p. 455). As Trejo Mendez (2024) explains, sentipensar aims to challenge the "dominant gaze on gendered and racialized bodies" by learning and co-creating knowledge through emotions, affections and intuition. Throughout the time of working on this paper I had to find out what it means for me to use sentipensar as a way of sense making within academia and as a person from the West. To let go of the focus on the 'rational' and let my senses guide me throughout this process was both cathartic and challenging. I kept a journal and sketchbook to observe my senses and acknowledge these as part of the lessons of this research. I noticed that using drawing was for me the most comfortable way of connecting to my own emotions and enacting sentipensar. This made me feel connected to the artists I talked to and helped me understand the experience of creation with regards to menstruation and regrounded me in my own connection to myself and the environment through the act of putting lines on paper.

2.2 A Decolonial Feminist Approach

The enforcement of the idea that there is only one 'correct' epistemology which is the colonial European way of knowing, frames rationality as the only path to modernity, and as reserved to Europeans. (Lugones, 2007, p.188). Decolonial approaches to research open a space to heal from this by recognizing that some knowledge has structurally been marginalized. Feminist decolonial approaches aim to provide "counter narratives" to the colonial patriarchal domination of knowledge production. This includes understanding coloniality of gender and how modern power structures benefit from the construction of gender, 'race' and other categories (Lugones, 2010). How and why people are positioned and treated in society depending on gender is integral to situating knowledge in historical, political, social and cultural structures and experiences (Manning, 2021).

However, Western feminisms have historically excluded women of colour from their resistances against the patriarchy and have therefore perpetuated structures of oppression

(Lugones, 2010, p.187). Decolonial feminism is an endeavour to challenge this domination by "understanding the oppression of women who have been subalternized through the combined processes of racialization, colonization, capitalist exploitation, and heterosexualism." (Lugones, 2010, p.747). Decolonial feminist methodologies advocate for acknowledging emotion in the research process and considering embodiment of knowledge (Dupuis et al., 2022, pp.4-5; Manning, 2021). In my research I aim at understanding menstruation from a decolonial feminist perspective to look at how the dominant epistemology has impacted and shaped our understanding of menstruation. To investigate the multitude of experiences of menstrual artists I will use a decolonial feminist approach which considers how their markers of enmeshed oppressions influence their experience (Misra et al. 2021, p.9).

2.3 Critical Menstrual Studies

CMS is a recently expanding academic field of study centred within feminist studies. The term CMS was coined by Bobel in *The Palgrave Handbook on Menstruation* in 2020, the first published handbook showing the large scope of the field (Bobel, 2020, p.4). CMS aims "to capture the menstrual cycle across the life course, including, but not limited to, menstruation itself" (Bobel, 2020, p.4). CMS frames menstruation not only as a biological process but as a connection between the political and personal (Winkler, 2020, p.9). Menstruation is an embodied experience that differs for everyone and is often dependent on the social and geographical position of the menstruator (Bobel, 2020). Therefore, socio-political oppressive structures such as economic injustices, structural violence, culture, religion, sexism, queerhate or coloniality all influence the embodied menstrual experience (Bobel, 2020). CMS recognizes socially positioned experiences of menstruation however investigates them using dominant prevailing paradigms. This incongruity enables CMS to fill a niche in Western social science research but may fall short when conveying localized experiences through these frameworks. Nevertheless, CMS opens a space for investigation within mainstream feminist academia, about the role of menstruation in the life of menstruators and the power structures that influence menstrual care and stigma (Bobel, 2020, p.4).

2.4 An Arts Based Approach

By not only including but recognizing that art and creativity are a part of knowledge creation I want to counter the dichotomy often presented in Western research between 'modern science' and arts (Citron, 1974). As part of decolonial feminist sense making I hope to

understand menstruation through a lens that values the lessons taught through art and creativity. During conversations with the artists, we also looked at and talked about art that they created. By doing this I applied an ABR approach, incorporating art into the research process. (Greenwood, 2019, pp.2-3). In ABR, researchers and participants discuss together how they interpret their response to the art; what feelings, meanings and messages arise (McNiff, 2008, p.32). This approach understands art as a tool for research rather than distinct or in opposition to scientific sense making (Greenwood, 2019, p.1). When researching menstrual art and the experience of artists, their creative process is a core aspect, so I spoke with them about this process, the decisions they made and how they experienced this creation. The artworks are included in Chapter 3 as they are part of the learnings and lessons and integral to the understanding of each artist's menstrual experience.

To avoid misrepresenting, rationalizing or imposing my interpretation, I do not attempt a visual analysis or describe the artworks, rather I include them for the reader to discover their own connection to each work. ABR also suggests for researchers to participate in the creation of art as a way of knowing (McNiff, 2008, pp.30-32). Throughout this research I therefore also drew, sketched and wrote about my own menstrual discoveries, through my encounters with each artist and my own body.

2.5 Canvas of Amsterdam

The point of departure for this research is the city of Amsterdam. All artists that I spoke to throughout this research have either lived in, studied in, have shown their art in or have some other connection to the city. Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, is a space where many international artists come together with a growing menstrual movement that calls out the retaining menstrual stigma. Amsterdam has both a large international artist and feminist community. During the 1960s and 70s Amsterdam became known for having an international art scene with many artists from around the world based there (Delhaye, 2008). In the 1970s spaces like, Latin American and European collective "In and Out" and international feminist art space "de Appel" were founded (Delhaye, 2008). In the 1980s the Cosmic Theatre was founded by two Antillian artists who wanted to provide a space for intercultural theatre practices (Delhaye, 2008). Today Amsterdam has a large international art community to which feminist and menstrual artists belong.

A name that reappears often when looking at the history of menstrual activism and art in Amsterdam is Elly Brink. She is known as one of the first people to fight against the

stigmatization of menstruation in the Netherlands on a national level (Knoop, 2024). Elly wrote about the topic of menstruation, collected and published stories of menstruators and in 1982 was part of organizing, the said to be first, exhibition around menstruation in Amsterdam (Knoop, 2024). The exhibition showcased visual and cinematic art as well as letters, period care products and educational material around menstruation (Knoop, 2024).

Amsterdam is also the location of my own advocacy around menstruation. I worked with the period poverty organization *periodic.nl*, who are based in Amsterdam, therefore I am familiar with the menstrual activism in and around the city (Periodic.nl, 2024). Currently, there is a growing menstrual activist movement in Amsterdam, feminist organizations such as *Neighborhood Feminists* have worked on providing free period product stations for the last five years (Neighborhood Feminists, 2024). I chose Amsterdam as a point of departure because throughout my work with *periodic.nl* I have witnessed the creative approaches that activists use to pull attention to menstruation.

2.6 Finding and being found

After I chose to do research in Amsterdam, I first started to look at menstrual art. Both as a way to find artists based in or connected to Amsterdam but also to see and feel the work that is out there. I revisited works of Liv Stromquist (*Fruit of Knowledge)* who is a feminist cartoonist I have admired for many years and spent hours on Instagram scrolling through hashtags (#menstruation, #periodart, #menstrual art, #periodblood). Following this initial peak into the world of menstrual art I started to contact feminist organizations, people who do menstrual advocacy and menstrual artists themselves. I messaged in total 41 parties, 26 of whom were artists. All artists I contacted have posted art about menstruation or referred to their art about menstruation on Instagram. Two of the artists I had known of prior to searching on Instagram. Their art found me before I was even looking. I came across MJ's art on a flyer of a menstrual care workshop I attended and Lucy's photography at an exhibition I attended in The Hague. Prior to contacting artists, I evaluated whether, to the best of my knowledge, they were based in or had a connection to Amsterdam or surrounding. After explaining my research, six of the artists I talked to agreed to have conversations with me. Due to people traveling and/or not living in Amsterdam I met four people online (two over Zoom and two over Google Meet) and two people in person at a location of their choosing. Overall, I spoke to one performance artist and five visual artists. Each conversation had a different length, ranging from one to three hours.

2.7 Conversational

2.7.1. Ethics

As this research opens conversations into personal experiences, I approached it with careful considerations and regard for the interpersonal and societal consequences of my actions. Menstruation is a sensitive topic especially for people who have experiences of trauma connected to it. I entered each conversation with empathy and sensitivity and tried to honour the wishes and concerns of each artist. In efforts to avoid dominant patterns of knowledge extraction in research and to not replicate colonial performativity of research I attempted to be as vulnerable as possible. As Icaza and Vazquez write, "vulnerability indicates the possibility of remembering ourselves from before the modern/colonial performative enframing" (forthcoming). Therefore, as part of my ethics for this research I challenged myself to be vulnerable and authentic, not only as a commitment to the artists I spoke to but as a reaction to the colonial/modern separation of emotions from scientific research.

For the artists to enter the conversation prepared and to have full transparency I provided everyone with a consent form that outlines the goals, themes and data usage of the conversation (Shaw et al. 2020, p.1). Each of the 6 people wanted to have their name included to be recognized for their contribution and work. In addition, I include the various platforms on which the art of each artist can be found and supported to both give credit to their labour and to allow the reader to take in their entire body of work. I plan to continue to stay in contact with all the artists and follow their future work. Further, I hope to organize an exhibition of some of the art that gives more people the opportunity to encounter their art.

2.7.2. Sharing a cup of blood together

This phase I call 'sharing a cup of blood together' because I aspired to talk to each artist in the spirit of chatting about periods while drinking a cup of tea. Since I ended up doing four of the six interviews online the teatime atmosphere was a little disrupted by the screen separating us. Nonetheless, I tried to keep these interactions as free as possible, actively rejecting a structured interview frame. The performativity that traditional research requires in which we cosplay researcher and participant dissolved as the conversations continued (Swain and King, 2022). The interaction enabled a knowledge exchange in which we both shared our

expertise, our experiences and our understandings of art and menstruation. Knowledge exchange in research acknowledges the positioned knowledge of the person doing research and the person participating which aims to foster a dialogue in which everyone teaches and learns (Swain and King, 2022).

I did not enter the conversations with a planned list of questions and tried to limit my own expectations in which direction the conversation would flow. I came in with my own curiosities about the person and together we built up a relationship throughout the conversation. We talked about our periods, about art and creation, the body and activism. I shared how their art touched me, and I listened to why and how they create and where their creativity comes from. In the two conversations that took place in person I was able to come closer to 'sharing a cup of blood together' with the essence of conversation that I hoped for. Not only did most of the artists collect their own blood in a cup but they also warmly welcomed my excited enthusiasm about the how's and whys.

2.8 Constraints

This exploration had certain constraints which impacted the conversations I had, the process of writing and the extent to which the research question can be answered. I often felt limited in giving justice to having free conversations because of the expectations of writing a research paper. The signing of a consent form, the phone recording the conversation, the pre-decided topic of menstruation, me being the researcher and them being the artists, all weighed down on the openness and trust that I would have liked to establish. This paradox of conducting decolonial research while having institutional expectations of conducting research in the first place did shape these interactions (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Despite this I did feel a connection to each artist. I went into each conversation as myself, 'a menstruation obsessed fangirl' and I found that I met each artist through this authenticity.

Another constraint that I came across is the limited subjectivities of the artists. To what extent I talked with each artist about their gender, nationality and 'race' depending on the flow of the conversation varied however to the best of my assessment and knowledge all artists I spoke to presented as feminine, cis and most as white-passing. When looking for artists over Instagram I already noticed that the majority of menstrual artists I found were white cis women and therefore ended up only finding and contacting one trans* artist and one Black menstrual artist in Amsterdam both of whom did not reply to me. I suspect this disproportionate representation could be for several reasons, one that I did not find the

access to the right organizations to give me access to spaces in which POC and/or trans* artists share their work. Secondly this discrepancy shows again the barriers for artists without cis, white-passing, able-bodied bodies to gain access to contemporary art spaces.

Lastly, a struggle throughout the journey of this research was how to incorporate my own vulnerabilities and emotions through sentipensar while remaining to follow academic expectations and giving myself enough distance from this research for my own wellbeing. I noticed that my struggles with my internalized understanding of my body and menstrual stigma at times made me question the validity of the research. To overcome this internal friction, I incorporated these doubts within the research paper as they are a part of my journey and the lessons I learned.

Chapter 3

Full Moon: inspired, creative, vital

The full moon illuminates the mess and beauty of creativity and shows me the artworks that have been summoning me. I witness here the resistance and healing of each artist I encounter and connect with. Inspired, vital and eager to listen deeply I slowly start to see my own body in the light of the moon.

Throughout this journey I healed and resisted alongside, and because of, the artists I talked to. While I saw their art and listened to their stories of pain, anger and hope, I continued my own unlearning of the colonial logic about how my body is (not) supposed to be; menstruating, messy, bleeding, in pain. When I started this process, I was filled with anxiety about the pain that comes with healing from the learned shame, control and disconnect to my menstruation. I chose to have these conversations because I wanted to learn about this art in which I recognize myself and but that meant having to discover and confront my own internalized stigma. I now approach the core of my research question; how are menstrual artists experiencing creating menstrual art? The following chapter delves into conversations I had with each artist, chronologically. Together we explore resistance within menstrual art experience, creativity and their practices and understandings of menstruation.

Resistance here is understood as the friction that occurs in everyday life by not conforming to colonial/modern expectations (Lugones, 2010, p.746). The healing process at the same time is resistant as by unlearning the menstrual disconnect, it is a resistance of the coloniality of the body (Burrough and Walgreen, 2022, pp.3-6). By taking steps to heal from the colonial wound through (re)connecting with menstruation, the artists are resisting. Each artist, through drawing, painting, performance, installation art or photography, used creativity to connect to their menstruation through processes of healing and resistance. I argue that

relating to menstruation in non-modern, non-conforming, connecting ways allows for the possibility of breaching the coloniality of the body. This breach is intertwined with a journey of personal healing which the artists and I find ourselves on.

3.1 A Menstrual Mess/the messy process of healing

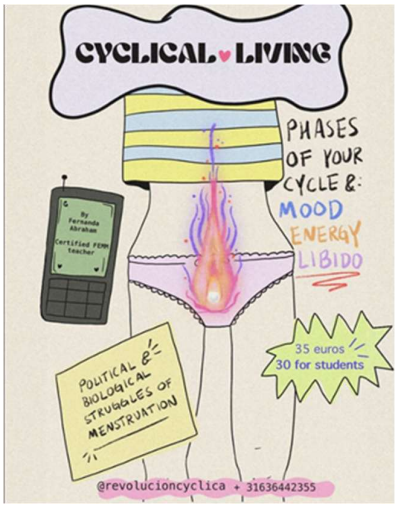
Society's expectations to keep menstruation neat and controlled led me to assume that resisting stigma meant being calm and accepting of my period. A fear I brought with me into the following conversations was that I would learn that the way I live my menstruation is not harmonious 'enough'. Therefore, even after understanding that not conforming with the physical and emotional control over feminized bodies can be resistant, I still hung tight to the belief that my bloody, messy and angry way of menstruating was not proper. MJ, the first artist I spoke to on this journey, taught me the power of being messy.

I reached out to MJ because her flyer caught my attention at a menstrual care workshop by *Revolucion Cyclica* I attended. It reminded me of my own menstruation, both passionate and painful. At this point I was not actively looking for menstrual art and to hold the flyer in my hand and see myself in it felt like a sign. The day I talked to MJ, I was about to start my period but could not distinguish whether the cramps in my stomach came from my contracting uterus or the fear of the video call. MJ is an artist, designer and therapist who studied art and psychotherapy. Her experiences as a therapist are blended with her creative expression and interconnected with her sensitive understanding of menstruation. This conversation, just like all the others to come, was the first time I met the artist in front of me beyond their artwork. I entered the conversation feeling intimidated but after a few minutes a calmness came over me as I sensed my passion mirrored in hers. Early into our conversation MJ told me about her experience with the concealment of menstruation and how she first encountered the possibility of speaking about it,

> "You grow up and you don't have like the information and it's something like almost like taboo, you know? Here in Mexico is like very, you cannot speak about it. You cannot like ask to give me a tampon or something. You have to like whisper to your friends. It's like the, yeah, it's not a thing you want to talk about in public. It's like embarrassing. Yeah. Like growing up, it was like that. But then, Fernanda [founder of *Revolucion Cyclica*] and her sister, although, they started like I don't know talking about it in a different way. Like letting us know that it was like our right to know more" (Maria Jose Lopez, personal communication, 2024).

In addition to this understanding of injustice, her art is shaped by the embodied consequences of the disregard for feminized bodies in medicine. She told me about how after taking years of the birth control pill she finally decided to stop and how a year later she was diagnosed with Hashimoto, an autoimmune disease that can be caused by an excess of estrogen, which is the main component of the birth control pill. This sense of injustice, about Hashimoto and her painful and difficult menstruation fuels her unapologetic and loud creative expression of her menstruation. "I'm very, like, passionate and angry and like, I really need to be heard, you know? So, it's fine being, like, soft and calm. I feel like I'm not being heard, so I need to be, like, more aggressive" (Maria Jose Lopez, personal communication, 2024). This passionate and angry craving for justice also showed up in the flyer which had led me to her.

Figure 1 - Flyer designed by Maria Jose Lopez



Source: Revolucion Cyclica, 2024

When MJ told me the meaning of the flyer, I recognized myself in the wish to be heard and in the anger, she talks about.

> "The pearl being like my emotional self and like my self-care. That kind of, like, pretty space within me that takes care of me. And it's very sensitive and emotional, but around it, it's like this anger and this pain and this, wish of being heard and also, like, retributed, like, why am I suffering all these side effects, you know, and also the fire, like it's beautiful too" (Maria Jose Lopez, personal communication, 2024).

She made the flyer when Fernanda, the person leading the *Revolucion Cyclica* workshop, reached out to her and asked if she would do it. She told me about her process sketching the

design; in her bedroom, not having showered for days sitting in her underwear on her period, drawing. She said, "I was living it, you know?". She explained to me this connection between how she creates art and how she menstruates.

> "I'm really, really messy. Like when I studied art, that was like my in some classes, it was like my. Ability. And in others that was to my detriment like there's so messy like, how to say like, dirty. That's how I live it. Everything. Like my creative thinking, like my way of being, even with my period, like, just messy and all over the place, angry and loud. So, it's funny how there's a way that everything connects, like how you live that and how you express yourself. It's kind of similar." (Maria Jose Lopez, personal communication, 2024)

Letting go of the understanding that the menstruating body has to be controlled and to just feel, rage and bleed is allowing menstruation to just be. There is resistance in the act of allowing oneself to do this as MJ told me, "we have to, like, let it out. And it's messy and dirty and sometimes it's gross (...) I love it that way now though, and it scares people." (Maria Jose Lopez, personal communication, 2024)

Messy, dirty and gross are all attributes that contribute to this stigmatization of menstruation because they are viewed as undesirable but the way MJ used them made me understand their value and power. The messy resistance that MJ embodies through her creativity, her reflections and her practices defies the colonial/modern control over the feminized body. Beyond resisting the culture of concealment, MJ embraces the chaos of the bleeding menstruating body and with this, questions the way modernity regulates menstruation. I tried to take this (un)learning into both my own creative process of writing this thesis and my own relationship with menstruation, embracing its messiness.

Find MJ's art on Instagram @raya.dsgn

3.3 Connective/ Collective Resistance

The second person I spoke to, Nouf, is a multidisciplinary theatre maker currently pursuing her second master's in drama and theatre studies. As a polyphonic theatre maker, she seeks to present multiple voices across languages, locations, and perspectives. Nouf co-created and performed in *Bloody* Marie, a play by the collective Nouf founded, *Pitjes United* (Pietjes United, 2024). When I asked Nouf how she would like to be known and what motivates her she told me,

"How to be myself as a polyphonic theater maker where I can be and present multiple voices at the same time. I'm originally from Syria where I lived 20 years of my life and from there I escaped to the Netherlands where I started my journey with a bachelor's study and right now, I am living in Ireland, in Dublin. This is also an experience that switched in my mind, what is exactly theater. Which way I have to talk with the audience, as you know theater is very national, the language etc. But for me I started to think about how to make my approach wider and in which way I can work with multiple languages at the same time.

I feel like stupid questions at some point, that will immediately label me as a Syrian theater maker working about oppression from my own perspective as a Middle Eastern theater maker. This question let me think about very clear about is oppression actually related to one place or is oppression kind of a layer under our skin as women and from that I started to make also the topic of oppression, oppressed women, very wide where I am very aware talking about this topic is not related to a place or a culture maybe this kind of its about which countries are less oppressed right now but you cannot forget the history of all other places"(Nouf Rafea, personal communication, 2024) .

Figure 2 - Photographs of *Bloody Marie*

Source: Nouf Rafea, 2020

A Performance by Pitjes United: Meriyem Manders, Sally Jabour Saron Tesfahuney, Nouf Rafea (by theatermakers and actresses), José Huibers (dramaturg), Marwa Mezher (Visual artist) and Charlotte Roels (Production manager)

The name *Bloody Marie* honors Mary Kenner, a Black American inventor who, despite designing an early version of the sanitary belt, was denied a patent due to racial

discrimination. Through both our conversation and her performance, Nouf shared the story of Mary Kenner who never received credit for her contributions to menstrual care. Her story reflects the systemic erasure of Black women's contributions to menstrual care and serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing resistance against and enmeshment of racial and menstrual stigma.

Before coming across the multiple menstrual stories that *Pitjes United* ended up enacting in *Blood Marie,* Nouf had an experienced which shaped her understanding of menstrual injustice. Nouf shared that her desire to address menstruation in her performances stemmed unconsciously from a personal experience.

> "When I escaped from Syria to the Netherlands I experienced to be with men in general and I was on my way for 22 days long, where I experienced menstruation. I was in Macedonia and what happened actually we were in a very dirty train station and one of the men said okay we have to wait we can't do anything while I was on my period and I stayed for I think two days long without taking any showers just to feel relaxed in my body and I was the tension was very very high in my whole body and as I used to do it, had to have it as a secret in my life. But in this particular moment, I forgot all the things that they talked about.
>
> And I said if you are not experiencing that period that you cannot say that we can stay in this dirty station because what I really need right now is just to change my underwear just to feel relaxed in my body just to do anything. Please don't talk with your own privilege about, 'yes we are men we can stay here and that's it'. So, I was very mad at this moment, and I think from there that played the role of unconsciousness to talk about this performance and how to represent that" (Nouf Rafea, personal communication, 2024) .

When Nouf shared her experience with me, I felt a wave of emotions that were difficult to organize. I was angry at the unjust and misunderstood treatment of menstruation; at the way she was forced to navigate vulnerability in a world that offers no space for such needs. Mixed with this anger was a deep admiration; for the strength it takes to hold onto one's dignity and power. As she spoke, I was struck by the sharp contrast between her experience and my own, and it became clear that while I will never truly know the depths of what she lived through, I feel her story resonates within me.

Hearing this intimate story, I felt the weight of Nouf's trust, and the power of her resilience. Her story is not just about shared vulnerability and her bravery, but about the

connection we create when we are moved by someone else's story, and the ways we allow those truths to transform us. Sharing truths is also what Nouf wanted to do in her performance.

Bloody Marie tells stories "about women in difficult circumstances and they experience their period" (Nouf Rafea, personal communication, 2024). Nouf and the other members of *Pitjes United* told real menstrual stories (their own and of others). Her explanation of *Blood Marie* reminded me of the connection I had felt when I listened to her own experience.

> "We worked in a very human way, while the whole stories where very very very heavy and through having some laughing together, we aimed actually to create this connection to our audience" (Nouf Rafea, personal communication, 2024).

Through their collective experience of performance, they allowed for a shared understanding of the pain that menstruating in modernity can mean. When she performed, Nouf created a connection to the audience beyond the material.

> "My connection will be at the moment of performance with the audience more than myself and my body because my body is going to be bigger (...) while I take this confidence from the audience to give it to myself as a performer" (Nouf Rafea, personal communication, 2024) .

The connection she has to herself, her body and her menstruation as a source of creativity is inseparable from her performance. In the act of performing, she transcends the physical boundaries of her body and the audience, challenging the colonial fragmentation of the modern body (Chávez and Vázquez, 2017; Kowalski, 2011). This fragmentation, the disconnection from our embodied experiences imposed by colonial/modern domination, is for her actively reassembled through performance. Although I have never performed this way myself, it feels to me like a manifestation of liberation; to let go of the bodily boundaries and reassemble through shared experience, fusing together in resistance and healing.

Find Nouf's work on Instagram @novoshka and www.pitjesunited.nl

3.4 Invisible/ Visible Blood Stains

Ella was the first artist I met in person, which to me added another layer of anxiety. With her sitting across from me, there was no screen to retreat behind, no way to escape the expectations of keeping the conversation flowing. With Ella I was exposed to the vulnerability of in person interaction.

Ella is an interactive media artist exploring sensitive technology and sensitive materials. We met in a small cafe and sat outback in a sheltered garden. Warm sun on my face and the wind whistling, we started to talk.

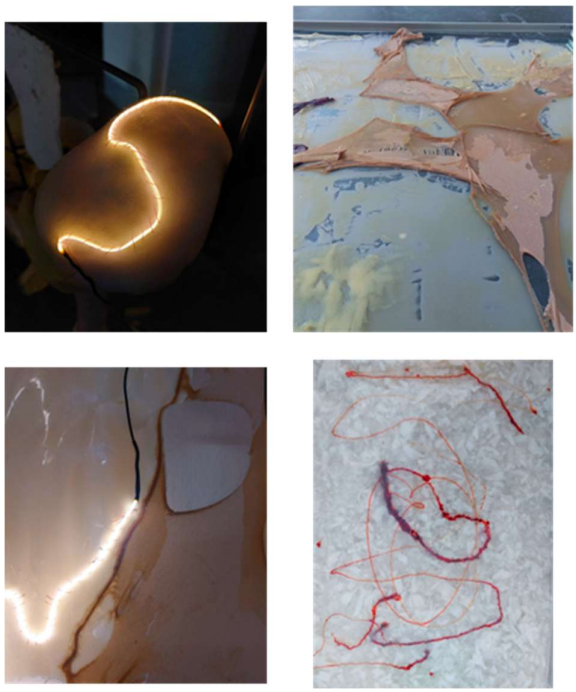
> "How I describe myself is, yeah, interactive media artist, exploring, like, sensitive technology. But also just, sensitive materials I want to play around with too and I'm interested in how in, like, the collision of the systems. Right now, it has been a lot of nature and technology, human body and new rhythms and stuff, but, yeah, like my thesis was also for the Technosphere, of course, about artificial light for the example of the Technosphere because it's also very influential on our hormones and rhythms of our bodies" (Ella Suzanne, personal communication, 2024).

In her work *Periodically True,* Ella explores menstruation through an installation representative of her body, playing with various sensitive materials.

> "...made out of metal and, latex and pantyhose and, all sewn together as well but this red thread. (...) made out of the synthetic material trying to create this organic being out of it" (Ella Suzanne, personal communication, 2024).

She also created a calendar and a manifesto written on paper she made herself using her own menstrual blood.

Figure 3 - Photographs of "Periodically True"



Source: Ella Suzanne, 2024

The installation was a form of rebellion against the commodification of menstruating bodies. Ella criticizes period tracking apps as exploiting the need for sexual reproductive awareness and understanding of the menstrual body for profit. Therefore, as she explains, she does not feel understood by these apps as they do not prioritize care.

> "It becomes a commodity. And that's what I really wanted to counter, periodically true. It's not a commodity. It's mine. (...) I remember in my exam, we made a presentation. They looked at the calendar and somebody said, oh, yeah, you can easily sell that to a business. A business who wants to make use out of, female body products to the companies. If I'm going to make a commodity, I'm not going to make it for a business, making use of female bodies. It'll be for bodies. [*we laugh*] So they can understand bodies" (Ella Suzanne, personal communication, 2024) .

The obviousness in her tone made my heart warm. When the menstrual experience is not concealed in modernity it is exposed to serve a purpose to the system, in this case to benefit capitalism. Ella uses her installation to explore an understanding of the menstruating body with the focus on the well-being of the body.

From the variety of art I encountered throughout this journey, the art that incorporated menstrual blood as a material or instrument within the creative process struck me as the most radical. While I recognize that showcasing menstrual blood is only one way to resist menstrual stigma, it did elicit shock or confusion by people who saw Ella's installation. Menstrual blood in art disrupts the fixation of modernity on controlling all visual aspects of the body (Røstvik, 2021).

Even though menstrual blood is a familiar liquid to me, having learned to hide menstrual stains or trying to find the most leakproof menstrual care products I also notice myself stunned at the rule that is being broken. To me however, the shock and radicality of the menstrual blood excites me as it is a reminder of the possibilities of resisting stigma, potentially beyond the visual, material.

Figure 4 - Photographs of menstrual blood in "Periodically True"

Source: Ella Suzanne, 2024

Viewing images of Ella's exhibition stirred in me a mix of discomfort and liberation. The unapologetic visibility of menstrual blood, something one is conditioned to conceal, felt both jarring and freeing. Seeing this hegemonically hidden part of the body so openly displayed challenges the colonial impulse to fragment and control the body by keeping its 'messiness' invisible. Menstrual blood in art is a reminder to me of the possibilities of unveiling; whether it is stained bed sheets, menstrual cramps or period cravings.

> "the blood in the space and making the blood paper. (...) and having it occupying space. Strange. Because every time I look at it, I see. Yeah, that came out of my body. (...) and now people are looking at it and taking pictures of it" (Ella Suzanne, personal communication, 2024) .

The idea of taking a part of myself and laying it down in the middle of the room to be observed makes me shudder. I had not realized how comfortable I was with concealing. It's not just the act of making something deeply personal public; it's exposing the parts of myself that I've learned to protect. There's a vulnerability in allowing people to witness something so intimate, knowing it will be scrutinized, interpreted, or even dismissed.

Ella surprised me when she told me about her own doubts which sounded so like mine, whilst writing this paper.

> "A lot of friction with myself. Wait, but what am I actually doing or why am I collecting this blood, why am I walking around with a mason jar? (...) I did catch myself sometimes, wondering if this was worth occupying space for" (Ella Suzanne, personal communication, 2024).

At many points in this process I felt seen in new ways, I was experiencing the same highs and lows, was learning the same lessons, experiencing the same reactions as those described to me by the artists. While remaining within the realm of visual representation, the act of visualizing menstrual blood is a resistance to the culture of concealment. Ella's decision to display her menstrual blood directly opposes the colonial/modern insistence on concealment, in which menstruating bodies are only accepted as natural if they are hidden from the public (Bobel and Fahs, 2020; Green-Cole, 2020, p. 789). This defiance allows for possibilities of understanding menstruation otherwise, beyond the hidden and potentially beyond the physical. Our conversation left me wanting to whip out a brush and paint.

Find Ella's work on Instagram @ellasuzanne_ and /ellasuza.github.io/studio

3.5 Irrational Creativity and Encountering Rage

My anxieties throughout this journey of understanding and (un)learning have often ended up pushing me to release control; of my emotions, my expectations, and the protective distance I usually maintain. Letting go became a lesson in vulnerability and authenticity, revealing just how much I cling to order as a shield against discomfort. The pain that this sometimes resulted in made me understand how much shame I place on my anger and how scary it is to allow myself to heal. The idea of trusting in myself and the other person to allow for connection meant facing my own reliance on control; control over my body, control over my period, control over what I share and what I don't, what I let flow and what I force back inside. The power of anger and authenticity in this ever-controlling sexist racist modernity is what Lucy showed me. She helped me see anger not as a loss of control, but as a form of self-affirmation. She showed me that embracing my anger, especially as a menstruator, is itself an act of resistance.

I met up with Lucy in a bar in Amsterdam, she is an artist and photographer with a feminist angel. As we sat together at a table near the window, Lucy told me how she would like to be known,

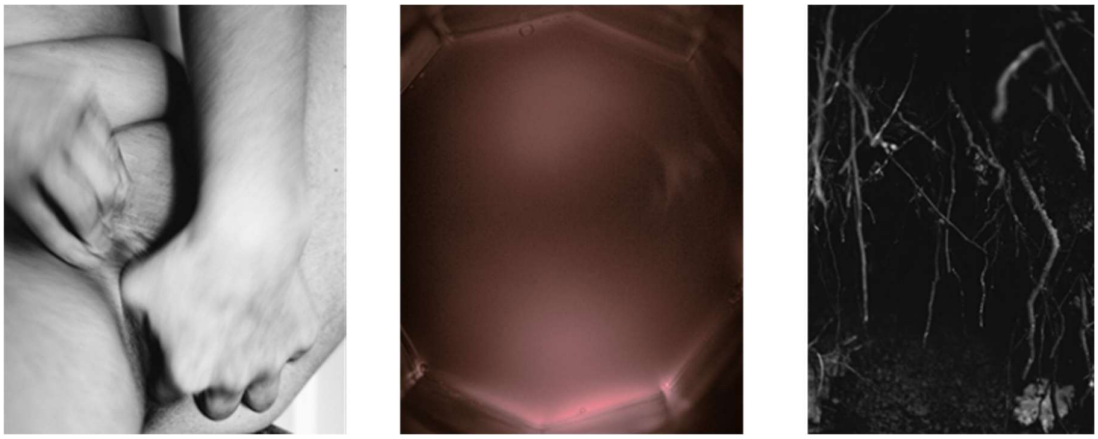
> "Sometimes I just introduce myself as an artist and sometimes a photographer, I think during this project I describe myself more as an artist because there were a lot more mediums involved and I also work a lot more with text or poetry and I think multimedia is not really the right thing which sounds like I do a lot of digital shit which I don't" (Lucy Bink, personal communication, 2024).

Lucy told me how six months after she went off birth control she started to feel very anxious, had an irregular period and cystic acne. These changes in her body became part of her art, fueling her exploration of the shame, anger, and stigma imposed on feminized bodies.

> "I was very confused, what was happening to my body, and I think also this internalized stigma, this shame, it was very weird, like completely uncomfortable. And on the other hand, I felt like I was kind of leaning into this irrational crazy female trope and it was really hard. I didn't really know how to react to that, like on one side it is this trope but then I also felt really connected to this hysteric primal feelings of aggression and frustration and hopelessness" (Lucy Bink, personal communication, 2024).

She wanted to channel this feeling of 'irrationality' as she calls it, into her art and use this raw anger to create. Within institutions that are founded on the colonial logic of knowledge in which rationality is equated with authority and objectivity, prioritizing intuition and emotion is defiant (Mignolo and Vázquez, 2013). Through photography, painting, writing and audio stories, she created *Luteal; A Quest into my Shame,* which I saw exhibited in The Hague. Photographing menstruating bodies and nature she fuelled her creativity through her 'irrationality'.

Figure 5 - Photographs from "Luteal: A Quest into my Shame"



Source: Lucy Bink, 2024

Yet, within the institutional setting of her art school, Lucy faced constant pressure to justify her process, as though every choice had to be neatly reasoned. This expectation of rationality clashed with her purpose; to express frustration and aggression without censoring herself. The institutional expectations stood in direct opposition with her desire in the way she wanted to create.

> "the purpose for me was to be fully irrational about it to expose the frustration and aggression and just lay it out on the table and to be as primal as I can" (Lucy Bink, personal communication, 2024) .

The hegemonic understanding of 'irrationality' which frames it as the polar to rationality and as non-human has been used to justify the subjugation of the other. Menstruators have been framed as being controlled by their hormones and therefore not able to make their own decisions or act emotionally which is narrated to be irrational and therefore used to dehumanize. It is important to acknowledge that while femininity is associated with the irrational, this framing is also deeply racialized. Whiteness is positioned as the standard of rationality and self-control, while Black, Indigenous, and people of color are historically portrayed as 'primal' or emotionally unrestrained, reinforcing a hierarchy that devalues non-white experiences (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020, p.5). Through her commitment to irrationality, Lucy denounces the binary division of mind and body that colonial/modern thought upholds, a division that places logic over feeling and mind over body. Her art seeks to dissolve this hierarchy, embracing the body's emotional truths as equally valid.

Being angry as a menstruator in westernized societies is connoted with weakness and directly linked to the trope of the hysteric women. The diagnosis of hysteria frames women as being controlled by their emotions, and therefore supports the narrative that women are irrational and therefore inferior. "In a way women are conditioned to not be upset" *(*Lucy Bink, personal communication, 2024). Lucy shared how this narrative has instilled in her a shame around anger, especially in relation to menstruation and sexual reproductive rights. She felt that showing anger would only reinforce these harmful stereotypes, making her retain her rage.

> "I was not very comfortable or used to expressing that [aggression] at all so it was also a little bit of a challenge for me on how to get that out there yeah how do I relate to anger and how do I allow myself to express anger and I think that really helped with it" (Lucy Bink, personal communication, 2024) .

The negative connotation of anger in relation to menstruation and how this was used to discredit and portray menstruating people through photography is also a large part of Lucy's research. In Western medicine in the 1900s, hysteria was named as a symptom of menstruation and a diagnosis which encapsulates the duality of the irrational menstruator (Strange, 2000). Through the manipulation of light, angle, posing and setting photography

has historically been used to depict menstruators as 'hysteric' and unreliable (King, 2020). As a reaction to this, Lucy wants to use photography to reclaim and portray the rawness of feminized bodies.

The coloniality of gender narrates that menstruators are controlled by their emotions (their womb) and portrays this as a threat to control and rationality (Motta, 2016; Lugones, 2010). This narrative is placed on menstruators differently depending on how they are enmeshed in oppression within modernity and relies on the hierarchization of bodies through the creation of cis white able-bodied male 'rationality' as the standard (Motta, 2016). Lucy's journey and creative expression reminded me of the power in connecting and listening to my emotions, in trusting my own 'irrationality' as a guide. To not only permit myself to be angry but to listen to, follow and express that anger is part of letting go of my dependency of controlling my own menstruating body.

Find Lucy's work on Instagram @lucy_bink, @binkfotografie and www.lucybink.com

3.6 Reconnecting with the Sacred

On a socio-political and even academic level, I have for the longest time tried to position myself as part of nature and not separate from it. Within the modern narrative which frames nature as an object of control and distance, this belief is both a personal and political stance. The modern narrative that places humans above and outside of nature feels like an injustice, one that justifies environmental degradation and alienates us from our own bodies. This disconnect fuels my anger and deepens my need to understand my body as inherently connected to the earth and its rhythms. To allow for my own menstruation to enter this conception of being part of nature meant overcoming my own disconnect from my body.

I spoke about this with Charlotte, whose eco-feminism is integral to her work as a visual artist, photographer, somatic movement facilitator, and menstrual cycle awareness educator.

> "I use my own body specifically to talk about our relationship to earth as humans. Kind of like blurring the boundaries that we have in our mind about (...) earth and humans and how that can potentially heal this catastrophic situation that we find ourselves in (…) it really feels like a rewiring that this whole work is about like deeply getting rid of all this guilt and then really stepping into, this through connecting with

our blood, our menstrual cycle and beyond that connecting it of course there is the severed connection to earth" (Charlotte J Ward, personal communication, 2024).

When Charlotte talked about healing from this 'catastrophe', referring to the environmental and bodily disconnect driven by modern life, I realized how deeply this disconnection affects my own relationship with menstruation. My menstruation, which I still secretly and shamefully view as a patriarchal 'curse,' can instead be seen as an intrinsic part of nature, and, in that light, something to be honoured rather than hidden.

Charlotte's creative practices, whether shared with other people or solely with nature are inseparable from her art. In her aesthesis I found that Charlotte's art is deeply rooted in its processuality, echoing the cyclicality of nature itself.

"...one of the first things was a visual diary of my menstrual cycle where everyday I went to the studio and like I would photograph day one, day two, so that was a twenty five day cycle so for everyday... (Charlotte J Ward, personal communication, 2024) .

Figure 6 - Menstrual Cycle Awareness Visual Diary: a 25 day cycle 21/04/20 to 15/05/20. Self portrait photography

Source: Charlotte J Ward, 2020

"I would just embody for whatever it was this overarching sense I had that day, and then create this grid which was really trying to show that women who bleed not like linear masculine creatures, (...) we flow, like the waves of the ocean or the wind" (Charlotte J Ward, personal communication, 2024) .

Figure 7 - Moon Blood, Day 7. Self portrait photography

Source: Charlotte J Ward, 2020

Figure 8 - Moon Blood, Day 27 ("full moon bleed approaching") Self portrait photography

Source: Charlotte J Ward, 2020

Through aesthesis she gives meaning to menstruation through the connection to nature and her spirituality. Her work emphasizes the embodiment of menstruation which within the modern menstrual stigma is understood as a sign of impediment. Therefore, not only portraying a cyclical, changing body but also re-imagining the imagery of a menstruating body. Charlotte spoke of how the disconnect from these bodily rhythms became a shared struggle among artists she encountered. This awareness deepened for her through readings like *Wild Powers* by Pope and Wurlitzer, which highlight the cyclical power inherent in menstrual awareness and the importance of re-aligning with nature's rhythms

> "I noticed the difference when I was younger, I would wear tampons and pads and throw them in the bin and then I started and now it's like unthinkable (...) Its holy, it's an incredible life force and how can you throw it in the bin? how can I just disregard it ?" (Charlotte J Ward, personal communication, 2024)

Then she started her journey of healing through re-claiming the sacredness of menstruation.

Figure 9- Three works of Moon Blood. "an ongoing eco-somatic exploration into the realms of the Menstrual Cycle." Photographs of menstrual blood in bodies of water

Source: Charlotte J Ward, 2020

> "every menstrual cycle I collect my blood for sure and sometimes I photograph it, I don't photograph it every time, it depends where I'm at and how I feel but I always always collect it, I use a menstrual cup, and at the end of my cycle I go to nature and I give it back you know to a tree or anywhere, it's a waterbody" (Charlotte J Ward, personal communication, 2024) .

The coloniality of gender relies on the idea that the 'other' is closer to nature and therefore inferior. Therefore, the account of the inferiority of the feminine depends on the narrative of the inferiority of nature (Schiebinger, 2004). To bridge this, disconnect, Charlotte physically and spiritually honours herself and her blood as one with nature, a waterbody like any lake or raindrop. This practice of resistance concurrently allows for a new understanding of belonging.

To me Charlotte's ritual which is inseparable from her art, beautiful, calming, harmonious, simultaneously feels like it's aggressive and powerful and loud. Here I caught myself feeling envious of her and embarrassed of my own menstrual connection. Yet, through her art and words, Charlotte invited me into her practice, encouraging me to see nature as my home and my body as part of its sacred cycles. In that moment, I felt a shift, a permission to release the shame I've carried and embrace a new sense of safety.

Find Charlotte's work on Instagram @charlotte.jward and www.charlottejward.co

3.7 The Creative Cycle/ menstruation as creativity

Anika was the last artist I spoke to, though I didn't know it at the time, and I was feeling drained. The emotional intensity of revisiting my relationship with menstruation had taken

its toll; instead of the power I'd hoped to feel, I was beginning to see my cycle as an academic project, dissected and distant. My uterus became a subject to be analysed. Speaking with Anika reminded me that my relationship with menstruation, and the connections I've cultivated with myself, the artists, and the earth, extend beyond the confines of academic analysis. She showed me that menstruation is as much a lived, intuitive experience as it is a topic to be studied or a battle to be fought.

Anika, a self-taught artist, works intuitively, embracing her creative instincts rather than adhering to structured, institutional practices of art. Through starting to work with plant medicine and indigenous teachings Anika began a journey of self-discovery and was brought back into her creativity. Anika introduced herself to me,

> "I'm an artist, I work very intuitively and I taught myself. I always liked to paint and draw but then I left the arts for a bit. I kind of scattered around, I started studying various things around creativity but never really being fully in my creative self and then eventually decided to come back to it, yeah. It's all very intertwined also in teaching around like more indigenous teachings. Also working with plant medicine brought me back into my creativity but also brought me into a journey of yeah I guess self discovery. (...) But whatever reason it's not like I chose it, I see the connection between menstruation and actually how that actually connects everyone together" (Anika Nixdorf, personal communication, 2024).

Anika described how, in a sense, menstruation 'chose' her as a subject, emerging as a theme in her art without conscious intention. For her, this calling felt intuitive, a natural alignment of her creativity and her body's rhythms

> "It was just this kind of very mysterious unfolding. It just started with one thing, just one color and just goes from there but even before that I was drawing shapes. You know, like the yoni, but I wasn't drawing yonis, I was drawing eyes. That was just the shape and seeing them everywhere on church buildings and in the arches it was just like when you start to focus on one thing and you start to see it just everywhere without really meaning to." (Anika Nixdorf, personal communication, 2024).

Figure 10 – Unknown Title, Embroidery

Source: Anika Nixdorf, n.d

> "I do associate red with anger as well so what I have realized recently is that in a way they are the same things the energy and creativity is sort of the energy that you put into it that's this creative life force channeled in a different way" (Anika Nixdorf, personal communication, 2024) .

Anika showed me how the color red, whether in paint or menstrual blood, serves as a bridge to the non-material, embodying both raw anger and the life force of creativity. This view disrupts colonial/ modern frameworks that see the body purely as a biological entity, limiting menstruation to its material function. For Anika, red holds multiple meanings; it is at once anger, creativity, and vital energy. This disrupts colonial binaries that separate rationality from emotion, reclaiming red as a color of strength and interconnectedness.

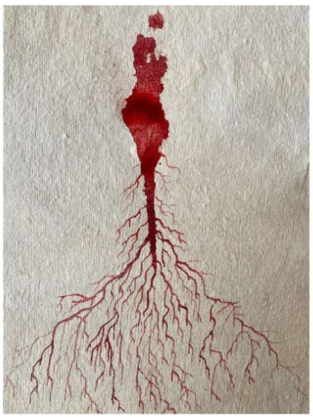
Her art brings to life a holistic view of the body, rooted in rhythms and cycles. Red in this case not only signals menstrual visibility on a material level but opens up ways of communicating experiences beyond the physical, embodying emotions; relating 'otherwise'.

Figure 11 - Womb I, Womb II, Womb III. Ink on Paper

Source: Anika Nixdorf, 2016

"So I think because it's also a creative center for me [the womb] I think when I create I automatically have just an essence of that because I feel like very rooted in it (...) if I draw a lot of like root systems and I put a lot of that kind of symbology in and it always reminds me of like a flow of a river or the flow of blood as well." (Anika Nixdorf, personal communication, 2024) .

Figure 12 – Unknown Title



Source: Anika Nixdorf, n.d

Anika speaks about her menstruating self and her artistic self as inseparable, together a grounding force in her daily life. Her understanding of creativity and menstruation resist the modern/colonial binary of the body and mind as distinct and fragmented. Further, this connection too is rooted in earth, as she said, "we bleed downwards (…) into the ground."(personal communication, 2024).

Anika connects menstruation to the earth, imagining the flow of blood that binds us to our origins. For her, menstruation symbolizes not just a biological process, but a cycle of existence that extends beyond the material, connecting us to the rhythms of nature.

Not only did this remind me of Charlotte and her menstrual rituals and recognition of the cyclicality of nature and menstruation but also made me understand how menstrual understandings, creativity and reflection can root the self. This re-understanding of menstruation as a source for creativity offers another different menstrual understanding. By re-imagining the body as a source of creativity Anika is, "using menstruation as a creativity in oppose to just making art about it" (personal communication, 2024). She resists the modern/colonial stigma of menstruation which frames it as solely biological and reproductive and instead celebrates it as a dynamic force which fuels her creative practices. After Anika's conversation I sat by myself for a while, trying to take in the feeling of ease. By speaking with Anika about the interconnectedness and extend of menstrual experiences I was reminded of the significance of this topic, which has changed my own understanding of my body and reached far beyond this academic exploration.

Find Anika's work on Instagram @anikanixdorf.artist and www.anikanixdorf.com

Chapter 4

Waning Moon: introverted, mature, looking forward

As the moon begins to wane, my journey shifts to introspection, to understanding what has been gathered and what must now be let go. In this phase, I take a step back into the shade, to ponder the lessons I have learned.

The chapter below is the collection of some of the lessons I learned throughout my interactions with the menstrual art and artists. To encapsulate the extent to which each conversation shaped and guided me on my own re-imagining of menstruation feels unfeasible. The unique and plural understandings of the connection between creativity and menstruation taught me that menstruating in modernity can feel fragmented, infuriating and painful. The artists also showed me how engaging with this mark has possibilities that offer a relation to menstruation beyond the colonial/modern control over the body. Here I return to the question, how are menstrual artists resisting menstrual stigma? I speak of the understanding of fragmented bodies, the friction and blisters of resisting, the power and concerns of visibility, the danger of universalizing the wound and the possibility of relating 'otherwise'.

4.1 Lessons, Learnings and Unlearning's

4.1.1 The Fragmented Body

The fragmentation of the body is linked to the conceptualization of the body as a territory which needs to be discovered and controlled (Kowalski, 2011, p.5; Lugones, 1994). The reduction of the body to solely a biological, material tool frames menstruation as a nuisance,

pollution, market potential or reproductive function. This mark, wound or fragmentation was brought up by each artist in the conversations I had. The consequences of being a menstruator in modernity, entrenched with menstrual stigma was felt by each person differently. Both MJ and Lucy told me about their physical disconnect and mistrust in their body as a consequence of the effects of contraceptives. Ella shared how she feels misrepresented and exploited in the way technology handles menstrual data and Charlotte spoke about her learned concealment of menstruation. I found the experience of being misunderstood, mistreated, not listened to or misinformed in each of the artists' stories. The experience of living with a menstruating body which deviates from the body of the 'modern self' results in a disconnect from understanding menstruation beyond the modern frame. The narrative of menstruation as a sign of inferiority has constrained what it means to live in a menstruating body and connect to it. The confusion, shame and anger that was expressed to me and which resonates with me as someone menstruating in modernity is experienced as a fragmentation and disconnect. The anger, sadness, frustration, hope in regard to this fragmentation finds its way into the artists creative expression and artworks.

4.1.2 Friction/Blisters

Resistance is the embodiment of the tension between the dichotomies that are being rejected and the connected "non fragmented multiplicity" (Lugones, 1994, p.475). This tension materialized in the self, as anger, sadness, pain, self-doubt and in the reactions, institutional, relational, socially, in the experiences the six artists shared with me. The creative process, which after the conversations I had, I understand as inseparable and enmeshed with the practice of living the menstrual cycle, is a painful one because of the learned universalizing of bodies and menstruation. This shows up in the institutional tension that arose from the requirements to rationalize art and make it comprehensible to non-menstruating persons. However, the process of resisting also brought up internal friction like the doubt of the importance of the work which exemplifies the pain of unlearning. Unlearning and unveiling seem to be constantly accompanied with reminders of the stigma, through the reaction to the art by others and by oneself. My own process was mostly accompanied by self-doubt of the viability, importance, purpose and shame of not only speaking about menstruation but exposing my own vulnerabilities. The simultaneous inner and outer reactionary tensions create a charged process. Through our conversations it emerged that the creative process of menstrual art is in constant tension with the patriarchal colonial dimension of modernity.

This friction that the artists and I experience arises when menstruation is started to be conceived 'otherwise'. The friction as seen through the stories of each artist can both spark anger and form blisters.

4.1.3 (In)Visibility

The unveiling of menstruation and menstrual blood through visual arts but also performance holds power as it disobeys the culture of concealment around menstruation. Especially the stigmatized fluid of menstrual blood, which is connoted to be disgusting, unhygienic and dirty, disrupts this stigma and modern control over the menstruating body. Originally, this resistance is what intrigued me about menstrual art and artists. However, menstruation is hegemonically, even though concealed and banned from public spaces, understood as a physically visible process. Therefore, making visible the concealed remains within the modern/colonial logic of the body as material. The visible aspect to art and making visible stigmatized issues therefore is only one part of re-imagining menstruation and the body beyond the modern/colonial. However, I understand this making visible of menstruation as an initiation of going beyond the material; a door to the immaterial. As I learned from each artist how they experience their menstruation and their creativity, the practice of making visible is simply a representation of their own process of reconnecting to menstruation beyond materiality. Resistance through creativity therefore goes beyond the visible product of the art and manifests itself in connection with other menstruators, with their own body, nature or the sacred.

4.1.4 Not all wounds bleed the same

Throughout this journey, each artist's response to menstrual stigma has manifested in unique ways, shaped by their diverse subjectivities and positionalities. While every artist engages with menstrual stigma as a 'wound' that marks the body, this stigma is neither experienced nor resisted uniformly. Not all wounds bleed the same. Each artist's relationship to menstruation is enmeshed in colonial/modern constructions and categories of the body; race, gender, sexuality, or social status, which affect how their menstruating bodies are perceived, controlled, and represented (Lugones, 1994). The experiences of whiteness and white femininity are distinct within the context of menstrual stigma, as these subjectivities are more closely aligned with the normative ideals of menstruating bodies determined by modern/colonial frameworks. In colonial logic, whiteness is a determinant of the 'modern self' that is intertwined

with ideals of purity and containment (Lugones, 2007). This framing allows for certain levels of social validation and control, especially in contrast to the experience of non-white menstruators, whose menstruation is depicted as a sign of primitiveness or irrationality (Lugones, 2007; Boehmer, 1993). This disparity illustrates how whiteness can privilege certain menstruators within the colonial matrix of power, affording them a level of narrative control over their own bodies that is often denied to racialized menstruators. Thus, even as white menstruators are still constrained within a patriarchal structure, their proximity to whiteness offers relative privilege, reinforcing a strict and contained menstrual norm. Further, modern/colonial narratives of menstruation rely on a binary gender order in which bodies are categorized by sexual organs. Within this, cis menstruators are conforming of the expectations while trans* and non-binary menstruators transgress them.

The lack of visibility of trans*, Black, indigenous and other artists whose subjectivities do not conform to the hegemonic standard of white, cis femininity, in Amsterdam engaging with menstruation reveals the gap and barriers that exist within menstrual and art spaces. When menstrual art centres on experiences of white, cis femininity, it risks reproducing the very structures it aims to resist, subtly framing menstruation within familiar colonial and patriarchal narratives. Therefore, while speaking to artists who are majorly located in Western Europe, are cis and white-passing, I echo the question of Agustina Solera; "Is every wound colonial?". The modern narrative of menstruation is racialized and gendered however not every menstruator is wounded by this menstrual stigma in the same way. Universalizing the mark, resistance, re-imaginings or healing process would do injustice to the possibilities of relating 'otherwise' to menstruation.

4.1.5 Relating 'otherwise'

The six artists showed me how creativity and art open the possibility of relating 'otherwise' to menstruation beyond the modern/colonial stigmatized menstrual narrative. Through rituals, connection to nature, anger, messiness, relationality, storytelling, activism, performance, embodiment and reflecting, they experienced a re-imagining of the menstruating body. The creative engagement with the body and menstruation from different subjective perspectives opens up space for collective understandings of menstruation. I learned that menstruation can be a reminder of cyclicality and interconnectedness of embodied beings and nature. Further there is a connection that is created by acknowledging the shared experience of menstruation, through the conversations I had with the artists and by experiencing their art. I

understood the possibility of connection beyond the individual that menstrual aesthesis offers. The experience of having a menstruating body creates a shared material reality within Western dichotomies of the body.

However, beyond this physical dimension of embodiment the connection through aesthesis offers a relationality to the earth and each other. For example, Nouf's performance and Charlotte's menstrual diary breached the materiality of the body. Chavez and Vázquez (2017) wrote, "The relational body overflows the present/presence as the sole dimension of experience; the relational body is not confined to the surface of immanence, to the metaphysics of presence." The rejection of menstrual inferiority, concealment, control and universalization of experiences and the myth of irrationality is provoked through the relationality of the body through menstrual art. Menstrual art grants a collective unlearning of the stigma through the commonality of collective healing and resistance. Relating 'otherwise' through the conversations I had meant also relating together on a collective journey of unlearning and re-imagining menstruation.

Chapter 5

The New Moon: reflective, calm, at home

Under the darkening sky of the new moon, I return to where this journey began. Yet, this darkness now holds growth, in the shadows a reminder of the connections I have formed. As this new moon settles, I know that this is both an end and a beginning; changed by the cycle and ready to begin again.

5.1 Conclusion

There once was a girl in a garden, who wondered one day what she'd be
Her soul and her mind did not harden, while watching the death of the leaves
She dug her hands in the dirt-filled ground, grasping for something unseen
Knowing that her powers had no bounds, she held on to the nothing in the leaves

Then suddenly, the earth gave a strong loud boom
And the dirt on the ground was nowhere to be found
And the girl turned into the moon, the girl turned into the moon

- Luna (Iniko, 2022)

The conversations I had with artists I met throughout this journey opened for me a possibility to have a conversation with myself, one that revealed my own internalized perspectives on menstruation, creativity, and the body's connection to nature. I found myself on my own creative journey writing this paper, re-imagining menstruation alongside the artists. The connections I made in practice and how the art touched me have become part of my own menstrual experience that will continue cycle by cycle beyond this research. To embrace relating 'otherwise' to menstruation means allowing it to exist beyond modern sense

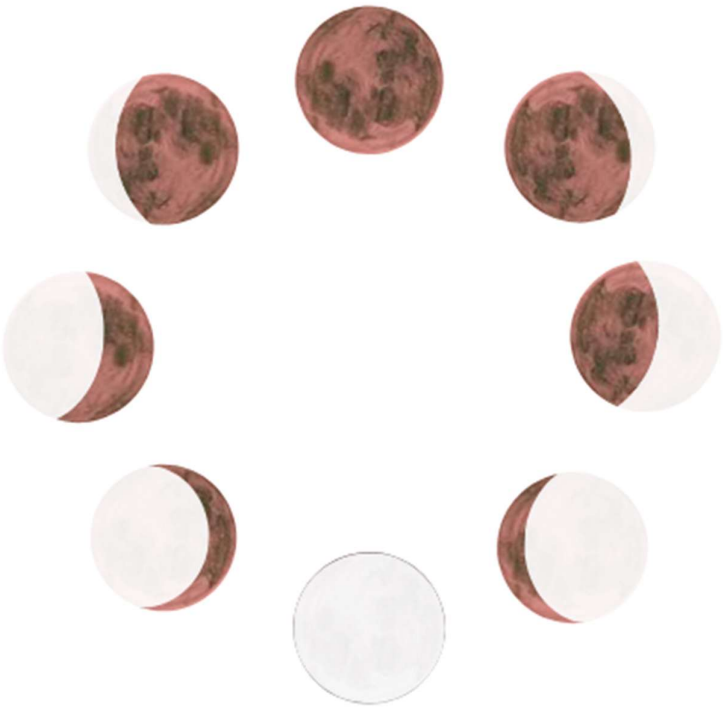
making and beyond academic research. While the artists and the menstrual art are not liberated from the modern/colonial structures and sense making but still engulfed within I have encountered people who are practicing menstruation 'otherwise'. Now I find myself back at the beginning; how do menstrual artists experience the resistance to menstrual stigma? This journey has shown me that menstruation resists neat categorization, and discovering menstruation as experienced, cyclical, flowing, sacred and embodied provides possibilities of (re)connecting with the body beyond modern hierarchies.

My query for this journey was concerned with how artists experience the creative process and resistance to menstrual stigma. There are questions however that I did not include in depth in this research due to the scope but maybe also because I feared the answer. The question of whether menstrual art may inadvertently reinforce modern/colonial views haunted me, raising fears that even in resistance we might replicate the hierarchies we seek to escape; confining the body, even subtly, within established narratives. I, the art, and the artists remain influenced by learned structures that view bodies as hierarchical, racialized, and gendered. While we resist certain aspects of these perspectives, we are not free from their influence; instead, we navigate and challenge them within our art, mindful of the complex forces shaping our understanding that view bodies as hierarchical, racialized, and gendered.

Therefore, even though I learned of the possibility of relating 'otherwise', resisting and healing from colonial/modern menstrual narratives, menstrual artists are not free from the structures they are resisting. For more understanding into menstrual art and menstruation I would want to approach this question of how simultaneously resisting, healing and re-imagining from structures of domination might also be reproducing them. The act of creating menstrual art opens a door to relating 'otherwise'; bridging stigmatized views that frame menstruation as something to control or hide. By challenging the modern logic that relies on rationality and cleanliness, menstrual art invites new perspectives on the body, embracing fluidity and cyclical nature. The creative process opens spaces to re-imagine menstruation that may heal the disconnection to the menstruating body.

This process of creative engagement has shown me the importance of honouring my body's rhythms and embracing cyclical reflection as a source of insight and healing. Understanding why and how my own relationship to menstruation is deeply informed by the fragmentation of my body as well as other bodies similar and different to mine and unlearning this disconnect is a constant practice I hope to install. The resistance and healing I witnessed through each artist were at once loud and visible, in bold statements of menstrual art, and

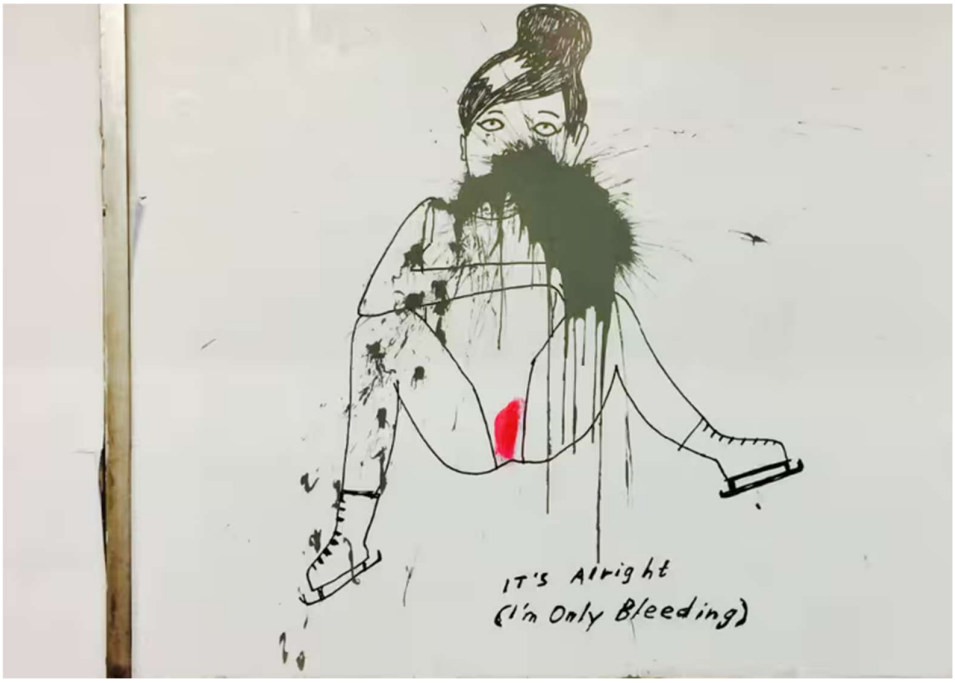
quiet and reflective, woven into gentle rituals of reconnection. Both forms taught me that resistance can be powerful in its subtlety and equally transformative in its boldness. The creativity in the process of relating 'otherwise' showed me how art is not restrained to painting, drawing or performing but is enmeshed in a way of living and sense making. Relating 'otherwise' to menstruation opens the possibility of re-imagining all bodies beyond material confines and binary categorizations. This invites us to see the body as whole, inclusive, and interconnected, challenging the fragmentation imposed by colonial structures.



Appendices

Appendix A

Illustration by Liv Stromquist, Slussen Subway Station



Source: Hunt, 2017

Appendix B

Table of artist access points: Instagram and Websites

Artist		
	Art Access Point	
	Instagram	**Website**
MJ	Design: @raya.dsgn Personal: @majjj__o	
Nouf	@novoshka	Pietjes United www.pitjesunited.nl
Ella	@ellasuzanne_	https://el-lasuza.github.io/studio
Lucy	Photography: @binkfotografie Personal: @lucy_bink	www.lucybink.com
Charlotte	@charlotte.jward	www.charlottejward.com
Anika	@anikanixdorf.artist	www.anikanixdorf.com

Appendix C

Lucy Brink - Supporting Materials

Lucy Brink Artist Statement:

"I use photography as an investigative and poetic tool. My focus often lies on the hysteric woman and how she is reflected in society, either in the past or present. I explore this through topics like medical history, intimacy, the body, religion, mental health, and nature. I mix reflective and intuitive methods such as writing, painting, photographing, and performance as a force of empathy. Through this, my goal is to revisit patriarchal narratives and allow discussion of intimate matters."

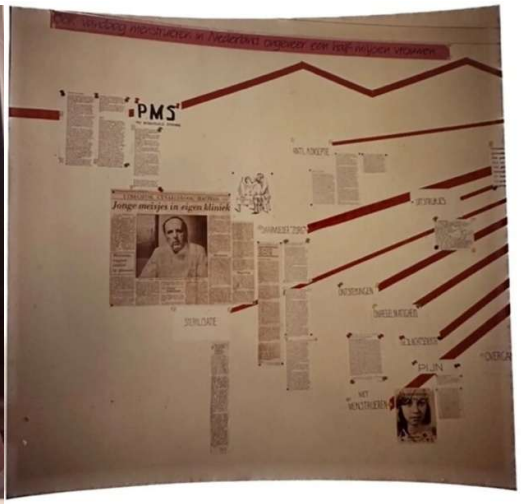
Lucy Brink's description of Luteal:

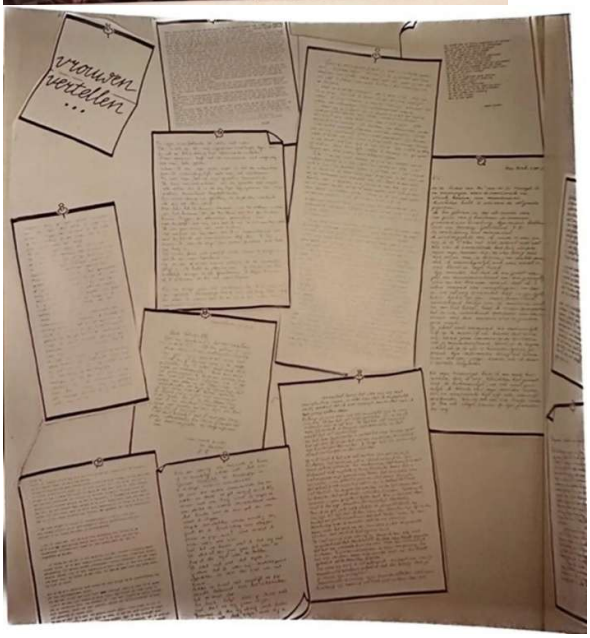
"Luteal investigates myths and shame surrounding menstrual cycles. It explores feelings of frustration, aggression, and hopelessness. Through drawing, photography, and interviews, I dive into the woods, both literally and metaphorically. Seeking solace in a mystical world where reality and myth intertwine, I question societal narratives. Through conversations with friends, I dissect the impact of myths and taboos in the absence of proper education from schools and medical professionals. This series explores a space of conflicted feelings due to centuries of stigmatization, aiming to provide comfort to the questioning and awareness of the curious.

Appendix D

Photographs of 'Appears Monthly about menstruation'

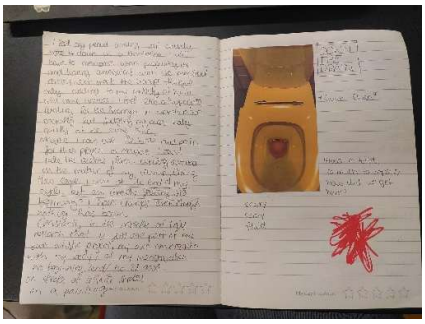
1982 by Elly Brink and collaborators (Knoop, 2024)

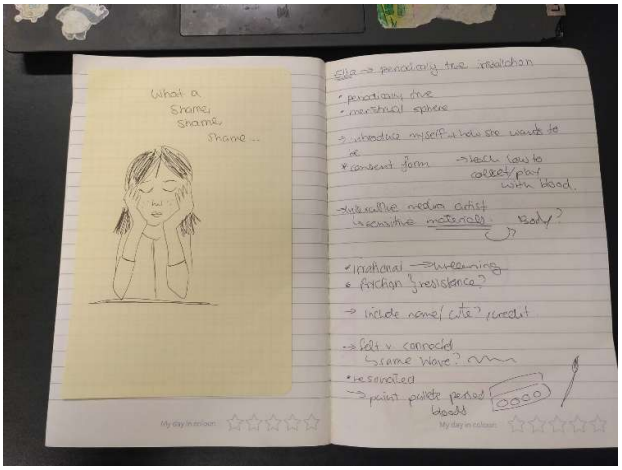


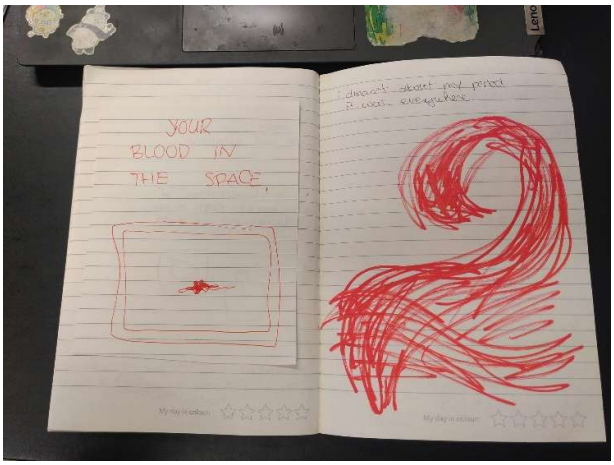


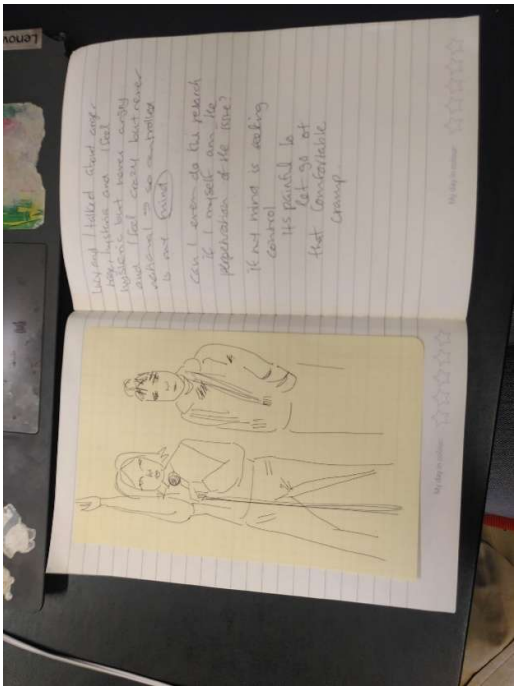
Appendix E

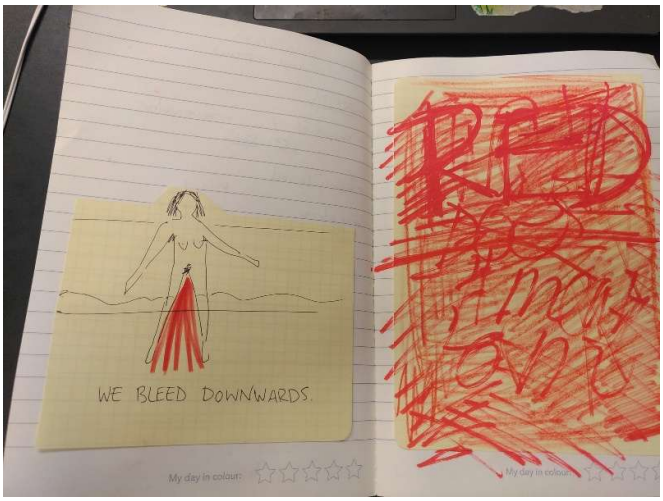
Drawings and Excepts from my Journal

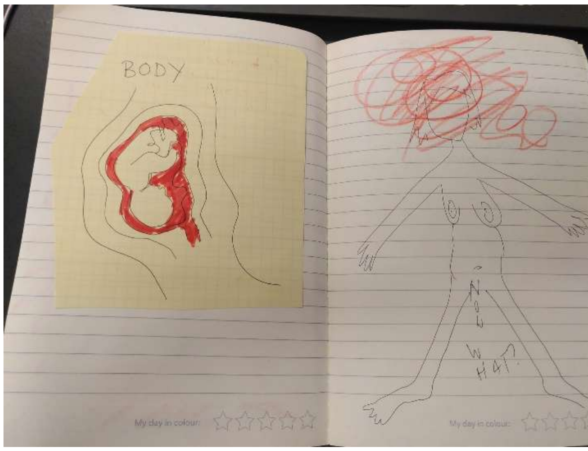


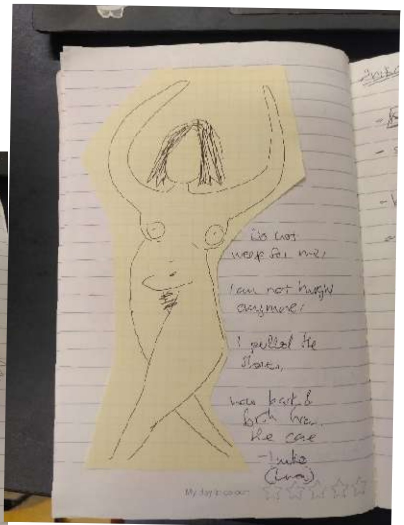


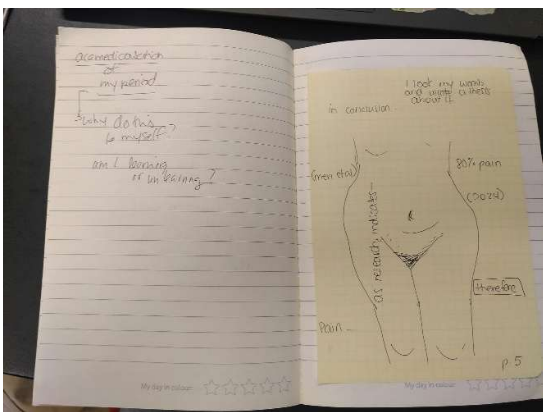





WE BLEED DOWNWARDS.
My day in colour:


BODY
WHAT?
My day in colour
My day in colour


Do not weep for me,
I am not hungry anymore.
My day in colour


my period
why do this to myself?
am I learning or unlearning?
I took my womb and wrote a thesis about it
in conclusion
(men et al)
80% pain
(2024)
as research indicates
therefore
Pain
p 5
My day in colour
My day in colour

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