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Free to Bleed or Free to Buy? The Postfeminist Transformation of Menstruation

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INTRODUCTION

A quick Google search of "periods are having a moment" will bring almost 164 million results and an initial search page lined with news articles, published from 2013 to 2019, that all make this same claim. Headlines, including "No Longer Lewd: The Period Is Having a Moment"[1] and "'We're Having a Menstrual Liberation': How Periods Got Woke"[2], send a clear message: menstruation is, now more than ever, *in*. In part, menstruation's trendiness is the result of growing media coverage. From 2010 to 2015, the number of instances the word "menstruation" was mentioned in the five biggest national news outlets tripled from 47 times to 167.[3] In 2015 alone the sheer number of appearances menstruation made in popular culture – from YouTube star Ingrid Nilsen confronting President Obama about the tampon tax to comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele's "Menstruation Orientation" skit that broadcasted on Comedy Central – led NPR to designate it the "Year of the Period."[4] Menstruation remained in the spotlight through 2016, which, amid the buzz of exciting new menstrual products, was declared the "Year of the Women-Led Period Startup" by Forbes.[5] These companies, such as Thinx, Lola, and Sustain, reinvigorated a stagnant menstrual market, introducing environmentally and/or health conscious products with a pro-period and political marketing twist. There has even been a growing politics of menstruation – the menstrual equity movement – which has taken up issues such as the tampon tax mentioned by Nilsen and period poverty, or the inability to afford menstrual products, in both state and national legislature. Meanwhile, in 2019, the Netflix documentary "Period. End of Sentence.," which followed a group of women in India manufacturing menstrual pads, was awarded an Oscar, making headlines for perhaps the first menstrual-related work to be recognized by the Academy Awards.[6] Throughout these pinnacle moments, menstruation – and the stigma and secrecy that

surrounds it – has been portrayed as the final frontier of gender liberation, the last facet of female existence still facing overt discrimination or shaming. Popular interpretations of this increased representation of menstruation within the media, market, and politics view these various cultural phenomena, then, as collective evidence that the "problem" of menstruation has been overcome. Menstruators, so it seems, are now finally free! [1]

The primary purpose of this project is to offer a counter to this unwavering positivity towards the state of menstruation within US popular culture and media, instead approaching these shifts with some level of skepticism or caution. Yet why study, or care, about menstruation enough to challenge these seemingly positive cultural waves, or even care at all? Slowly, but surely, there has been a budding social consciousness of the significance of menstruation as both a political and feminist issue; the emergence of the formal discipline of critical menstrual studies, heavily used within this project, along with the ongoing legacy of groups such as the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, founded in 1977, are signs of its growing legitimacy within academic spheres. Though critical menstrual studies is an interdisciplinary field, ranging from psychology to history to art, this project approaches menstruation from an explicitly philosophical standpoint, adopting a Foucauldian and intersectional feminist conception of the location and nature of power and oppression to deconstruct the narratives surrounding menstruation and to reveal the overall strategies that its cultural representations and discipline ultimately support. Following this basal understanding of the body as a site in which norms are both imposed and reproduced, menstruation should be conceptualized philosophically as a battleground of both

[1] Throughout this project, I use, when possible, the word "menstruator" to refer to anyone, regardless of gender, who menstruates. The bodily process should not be conflated with women; transmen, nonbinary, and genderqueer individuals with uteruses may still experience menstruation, while some women and girls (whether because they are trans, have amenorrhea, or the absence of menses, or are menopausal) may not menstruate,

capitalist and patriarchal norms with enormous implications for social justice, anti-capitalist, and feminist efforts.

The changes in popular attitudes and treatment of menstruation has rendered the bodily process even more significant. These shifts are, as argued in this project, the result of a much greater postfeminist movement to coopt and subsequently dissipate any radical momentum within culture and to uphold – albeit repackaged and in a slightly more inclusive form – a similar set of neoliberal values and structures. This process, a "double entanglement" of feminist and neoliberal ideals, intensifies the scope of discipline while further masking and entrenching the exercise of power, rendering it even more normalized and insidious.[7] Menstruation, then, can be used not only to challenge the systems postfeminist seeks to uphold, but to reveal the unique strategies and language of postfeminism itself. Additionally, its unique location as an intersection of gendered and capitalist norms and rituals allows for engagement with the bodily process to be connected to other social movements challenging similar, and interconnected, structures.

To understand the consequences of the postfeminist transformation of menstruation within US culture, it is important to first know from what historical representations and treatments the bodily process has been transformed and what purposes or strategies this conversion ultimately serves or benefits. The opening chapter of this project, "Contextualizing Postfeminist Menstruation," provides the historical and philosophical setting for the remaining chapters and demonstrates the stakes involved both for the neoliberal paradigm of postfeminism and for feminists concerned with issues of the body, discipline, and capitalism, highlighting the importance of menstruation as a social, political, and economic issue. In doing so, this chapter first delves deeper into its theoretical background, utilizing Foucault and feminist philosophers Sandra Bartky, Susan Bordo, and Iris Marion Young to situate the body and subjectivity as a site

of disciplinary and productive power, and to demonstrate the gendered and racialized differences in experiencing this power. The next sub-section, "Critical Menstrual Studies," discusses how the emergent discipline has used similar theoretical frameworks to identify menstruation as a feminist political issue. The two following sub-sections delve into central themes of critical menstrual studies; "Enforcing Menstrual Discipline" discusses how individual menstruators are disciplined into proper menstrual behavior through every day social interactions and representations, while "The Menstrual Experience" examines the alienating effects of this discipline on the phenomenology of menstruation. Focusing on how these individual-level relations of power support and contribute to the overall strategies of capitalism and patriarchal power relations, "Menstruation as Social Control" considers how menstruation – through its medicalization and commodification – has been used for systemic social, political, and economic control of menstruators. Finally, this chapter concludes with "The Postfeminist Paradigm," a general overview of postfeminism, the ways by which it molds the presentation of disciplinary tactics to maintain patriarchal and neoliberal strategies, and how a similar transformation has occurred within cultural treatment of menstruation during the last decade.

It is within this postfeminist context that the analyses of the remaining two chapters take place. These chapters concern the intertwined and coordinating sites in which the cultural treatment of menstruation has greatly been mediated and reproduced within the last decade: corporate advertisements, along with the marketing and development of new "progressive" menstrual products, and the menstrual equity movement. Within both of these spheres, this project argues, increasing political awareness of issues of menstruation has been channeled, through postfeminist cooptation, into neoliberal systems, effacing the structural origins of these problems and diminishing the potential for radical change.

"Commodifying Empowerment," the second chapter of this project, examines the changing corporate landscape of menstrual products and advertisements, exploring the actions of big-name menstrual product brands, such as Tampax, Kotex, and Always, that have traditionally dominated the menstrual market, along with the emergence of a new sector of start-up menstrual companies who, as previously mentioned, offer socially, politically, and environmentally responsible alternatives such as menstrual cups, period underwear, and menstrual product subscriptions. While the former group of companies has enacted a stark about-face in their corporate language, forgoing their previously shaming messages to instead claim to empower and celebrate menstruators, it is the latter sector that has truly and successfully captured the trendy and rebellious menstrual attitudes of the last decade. The majority of this chapter focuses on this new category of menstrual product producers, reviewing innovations in their consumer outreach, language, and branding strategies and debating the extent to which these interactions with consumers offer any real material change in the patriarchal disciplining and shaming of menstruation. Analyzing the language of these seemingly progressive brands in advertisements and social media posts, "Commodifying Empowerment" finds that they offer a paradoxical engagement with menstruation, claiming to normalize and de-stigmatize the bodily process, while implicitly tugging at the fears of menstrual leaks or odors to incentivize sales. Moreover, these companies have taken advantage of growing pro-period attitudes to even expand the scope of commodification, offering additional, and unnecessary, merchandise and accessories to express one's period pride. The Keeper, a menstrual cup introduced in 1987, is used as a counterexample or foil to demonstrate how menstrual product manufacturers can operate without exacerbating menstrual insecurities or perpetuating unnecessary commodification of menstruators' bodies, challenging the normalcy of expansive profitmaking in corporations,

regardless of their feminist stance. In total, this chapter argues that menstrual product brands have ultimately coopted changing menstrual attitudes for their own marketing and sales and, in the process, have diverted growing political energy around menstruation to consumerist channels. Whether intentional or not, through the language of their advertisements and sale of period-pride merchandise, these companies have equated practicing politics with purchasing products, a conflation that has erased the need for collective efforts for structural change by allowing customers to instead buy into "change" individually.

The third chapter, "Plugging Politics," examines the ways in which the most recent political engagement with menstruation, the menstrual equity movement, has, adopting a neoliberal framework, widely maintained this individualistic, product-based approach to politics. Within this process, this chapter first situates menstrual equity within the greater history of menstrual activism, outlining the political tactics and goals of the women's health movement, consumer safety activism, and punk and third-wave feminism as it pertains to their engagements with menstruation. Identifying the framework of menstrual equity as the more palatable and accommodationist strategy of menstrual politics, the chapter then explores the movement's fundamental principles, as defined by its founder Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, along with its key areas of engagement, which are focused primarily on issues of menstrual product access among homeless, poor, and incarcerated menstruators and on the "tampon tax," or sales tax levied against menstrual products. Then, the chapter considers the primary avenues through which the menstrual equity movement has pursued change. A multiplicity of nonprofits, such as PERIOD and #HappyPeriod, have emerged to charitably distribute products to shelters and other organizations and occasionally engage in advocacy or educational work. Meanwhile, Weiss-Wolf has led the legal advocacy efforts of menstrual equity politics through her own

organization, Period Equity, and partnerships with both state and national legislators. Through her work, Weiss-Wolf has been able to lay claim to several legislative victories, including the elimination of the tampon tax and/or the provision of free menstrual products in schools within several states. Unsurprisingly, there has been a consistent corporate presence within the menstrual equity movement, as organizations partner with both big-name and start-up menstrual product companies to gather largescale donations and support legal projects, acts of corporate social responsibility (CSR) that, heavily concentrated with branding, are more akin to "thinly-veiled corporate PR."[8] The remainder of the chapter unpacks how Weiss-Wolf, and the menstrual equity movement as a whole, have accepted the neoliberal conditions of capitalism, along with the discipline of menstruation, as the de-facto conditions under which their movement must work, rather than as sources of potential change, and the severe limitations that follow as solutions are once again directed towards individual-level access to products.

Having outlined how menstrual politics have, in the most recent decade, greatly ceded to postfeminist neoliberalism, this project ends on a more exploratory note, trying to seek some answers to initial questions of what menstrual activism and the menstrual experience *should* look like. This final component deliberates the ways in which the menstrual experience and menstrual advocacy could be rethought, examining aspects of menstrual embodiment that have been ignored and highlighting the work of menstrual activists who are doing things "right." Additionally, it elaborates upon the potential connections that could – and should – be made between menstrual activism and other social justice movements, offering channels for collaboration and coalition-building. Finally, the project concludes with an examination of the privilege historically and currently present within both the agents and political efforts of menstrual activism, calling for an approach that centers an intersectional understanding of

systemic injustice in order to avoid trivializing or delegitimizing the importance of menstruation as a political issue.

CONTEXTUALIZING POSTFEMINIST MENSTRUATION: CRITICAL MENSTRUAL STUDIES AND PROBLEMATIZING CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MENSTRUATION

This chapter is intended to place menstruation within a theoretical and historical context to illustrate how the bodily process is an important cultural site in which patriarchal and capitalist power relations are reproduced and carried out. This analysis is grounded in the works of Michel Foucault, feminist philosophers Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky and Iris Marion Young, and various interdisciplinary critical menstrual scholars who make use of similar conceptual frameworks. Using these thinkers' understandings of power, discipline, and knowledge, the chapter explores how proper menstrual behavior is enforced and how it fosters the feelings of anxiety, shame, and alienation among menstruators that have been used throughout US history to maintain the overall strategies of capitalism and the patriarchy. Finally, this chapter introduces the recent paradigm of postfeminism, examining how it has ultimately further entrenched these same systems of power by repackaging its disciplinary measures in more palatable forms.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The body, as re-envisioned by Foucault and later expanded upon by feminist philosophers Bordo and Bartky, is continually under the "direct grip" of culture, a hold that reaches the entirety of our material practices, from our daily rituals and habits to the most trivial of rules and comportment.[9] Thus, the ways we act, move, and even experience our bodies are a product of our cultural context. However, the mechanisms through which culture influences our corporeal or material existence should not be understood as a repression or denial of the natural

body. The natural body, or the anatomy "as such," untouched and outside cultural or social interpretation, does not exist.[10] Not even the natural sciences, which claim to identify or "see" the body in objective terms, are immune to culture's unwavering influence, as both the creation and practice of the disciplines are reliant on pre-observational, *cultural*, conceptual categories that determine how information is perceived and processed. Consequently, our bodies and how we perceive them are quite literally entrenched in and are a product of cultural and social relations, continually shaped by a system of power that is a productive and constitutive energy, bent on "generating forces, making them grow, ordering them."[11] Continually navigating these networks of power, the body is both the surface upon which the "central rules, hierarchies, and metaphysical commitments of a culture" are inscribed and the site in which these very same ideals are reproduced and maintained.[12]

Understanding how bodies are produced by culture entails a reconceptualization of the scale, source, and operations of power itself, one best outlined by Foucault. As a creative and productive, rather than repressive, social force, power exists within and between individuals, a relational system that operates at a microphysical level to shape collective behavior and social organization. Thus, power is not tangible or a thing to possess or hold, but a series of interactions and exchanges that occur throughout the social body, organized and enforced from the bottom up.[13] The primary mechanism through which this type of power functions is that of discipline, or a process of correction and training. Within a culture, the norms of the subject are collectively interiorized, legitimized, and come to be expected or demanded. Through these norms, individuals are judged not only by others, but also by themselves, as they surveil and measure themselves and influence their own character and behavior to meet the values they have internalized.[14] Through this process of corrective discipline and self-policing, power obtains a

fine-tuned control of the body, transforming and shaping both it and the mind to uphold and perform certain relations, and thus the body and the subject itself are continually formed and reformed, a product of the technologies of its culture, or the modes by which power shapes collective behavior and by which individuals manipulate or alter their own bodies and subjectivities.[15]

However, throughout the course of his work, Foucault made no explicit acknowledgement of the unique disciplines that produce "a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine," or the forms of subjection that help to create not just the body, but the *female* body.[16] Though we all uphold and function within these webs of power relations, our locations within and experiences of them are not monolithic, as various aspects of our social identities influence the types and forms of discipline we face. Gender and the current gender binary, produced through material practices and rituals, imbued with patriarchal power relations, is one of many factors that greatly mediate our experiences of power and disciplinary practices and the types of subjects we become. As summarized by Bartky, "we are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine."[17]

While the notion that biological – and binary – categories of male/female are objective or exist outside of culture should be challenged as well, Bartky's statement is still useful in pointedly indicating how our social placement determines the ways through which we are taught and encouraged to present and perform and how we experience our own embodiment. The mind-body dualism that has shaped Western thought practically since its beginnings is not simply a philosophical stance, but a "practical metaphysics" that continues to be deployed across constructions of both relationships and selves.[18] Within this framework, femininity has historically, and often denigratingly, been associated with the body, emotions, and nature, the

inferior foil to its masculine counterpart, which has been defined by cool rationality and intelligence. Though femininity does not naturally follow from being female – nor masculinity from being male – these categories have continually been conflated and used to guide social order. With this affiliation, women are sequestered and socialized into gender roles and lives that are continually centered around the body – childbearing, rearing, and caretaking –, thereby rendering "culture's grip on the body… a constant, intimate fact of everyday life."[19] Consequently, the intensity and scope of these disciplinary practices weighs more heavily upon those categorized as women, who are expected, through continual self-surveillance and self-policing, to produce and achieve the expected ideals, behaviors, and appearance of femininity, or the "mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms" from the culture.[20] Within a patriarchal society seeking to control or diminish the agency of women, these implicit or normalized expectations and disciplines of femininity often comes with limitations to the subject.

Feminist body studies, continuing the shift in focus to the unique forces of discipline and normalization that target femininity, serve as a philosophical recognition of corporeality as a site of struggle over the shape of patriarchal power, along with its intersections with other forms of racial and class oppression.

With this undertaking, the framework of intersectionality – attempted to be put into practice within this project – is especially vital. In recent years, intersectionality has experienced a popular and mainstream uptick usage, rendering it difficult to define. Despite its heterogenous use, it can best be described as an "analytical sensibility" that develops meaning through application and use of "an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power."[2122] That is to say, individuals' shared placement within a system of oppression does not guarantee that their experiences of such oppression will be the

same. For the Black woman, her experiences of femininity are continually filtered through her Blackness – and vice versa – and these two categories, race and gender, are inextricable from one another, or from any other aspect of identity, such as disability, sexuality, economic class, nationality, or legal status. In part, the usefulness (and pure necessity) of intersectionality is to challenge ideas of normalcy, and to de-center the automatic assumed categories of white, cis-gender, middle-class, and able-bodied from political analysis, thereby shifting – and deepening – the identified sources of social problems to the central roots of these multifaceted forms of oppression. Thus, the framework of intersectionality can be used as a heuristic tool for strategizing the avenues for social critique and change, necessarily directing efforts towards the structures enabling and enforcing these systems of hierarchy, including patriarchal culture, capitalism, and the prison-industrial complex.

The objective of body studies is to use these conceptions of power, intersectional oppression, and socialization to challenge the normalcy of both widespread cultural representations and everyday material micro-practices, revealing how they reinforce and maintain the norms and inherent limitations of femininity, assumptions of race, and economic relations at the site of the body. Through this process, body studies, like many other feminist disciplines that make use of a Foucauldian microphysics of power, acknowledges that though many of these issues are produced, and thus can also be resisted, by the individual, any widespread or sustainable change will require a systemic change in the cultural expectations and norms.[23]

CRITICAL MENSTRUAL STUDIES

Many critical menstrual studies scholars adopt or share many of the philosophical tools and frameworks pioneered by Foucault, Bartky, Bordo, and other body studies philosophers to

examine a specific function of what has been categorized as the female body, problematizing and politicizing the disciplinary and normalizing production and treatment of the menstrual cycle. Common representations of menstruation are shrouded in mystification, secrecy, and disgust. In fact, it seems as though the only acceptable times to talk about or reference menstruation in public spaces is when it's construed as a problem: complaining about menstrual symptoms (still using euphemisms, of course), mocking menstruators, or selling something related to menstruation.[24] Despite the near homogenous, negative or stigmatizing representations of menstruation in the US, there has been, until only recently, little desire to recognize that menstruation is – as culturally conceived – indeed, a problem. Before menstruation's full-fledged break into the popular spotlight, scholars and activists who had initiated attempts to politicize the bodily process and criticize the existence and consequences of its secrecy or shame were often trivialized, viewed as pursuing matters that are insignificant in comparison to other feminist issues.[25]

Yet the cultural treatment of a bodily process that occurs once around every 28 days, for three to five days, for almost forty-five to fifty years can hardly be labeled as an insignificant portion of women and other menstruators' experiences. Moreover, critiques against the value of studying menstruation widely ignored or overlooked its political significance in justifying and legitimizing gender relations and other systems of power. Though many bodily functions, oftentimes those involving bodily fluids, are or could be construed as embarrassing or disgusting, just as menstruation and menstrual blood often are, they do not typically engender the same gendered politics and ideology as menstruation. As quipped by Elizabeth A. Kissling, earwax has not provoked medical studies to whether its production serves as an impediment to brain functions – but menstruation has![26] Moreover, while, just like for menstruation, there have been

technologies made to extract or remove these different types of bodily fluids, the use of them does not indicate a politically inferior body, nor do these same technologies embarrass or challenge someone's social status when revealed or exposed. After all, menstruators do not go to the same great lengths to hide or disguise their Kleenex's or Q-tip's as they do their tampons and pads. Thus, menstruation, unlike any other bodily process, has served to both distinguish and define those who experience it, and can even be weaponized to control or delegitimate menstruators, waving off rightful expressions of emotion as the whims of uncontrolled hormones or PMS and undermining menstruators' rationality or competency. Consequently, menstruation should rightfully be acknowledged as a site where many of our cultural ideas of the body, gender, and agency intersect. Critical menstrual studies, beginning with this fundamental understanding, thus seeks to identify and deconstruct the cultural roots of our current portrayals and understandings of menstruation, highlighting the political, economic, and social consequences of allowing these narratives to persist.

Though the definition of who can menstruate is necessarily expanding to include different gender identities, such as transmen, nonbinary, and genderqueer individuals who bleed, menstruation is still a bodily process laden with cultural meaning and images of femininity, and, by extension, reproduction, sexuality, and objectification.[27] Indeed, menarche, or the first occurrence of menstruation, is often viewed as a passage or entrance to femininity and womanhood itself and is one of the first times that menstruators become aware of their own social position due to these identity categories. In a 1978 study, a group of adolescent girls were asked to draw a man and a woman two separate times, six months apart. Those who were post-menarcheal drew notably more feminine women than those who were pre-menarcheal. Even more interesting, those who had experienced menarche between the time of the two samples

drew, post-menarche, women that were drastically more feminine than their previous depictions, accentuating breasts and hips, and even incorporating accessories such as jewelry, heels, and flowers. From these studies, it appears that menstruation introduces and is experienced as a heightened or more radical sense and identity of femininity.[28]

The shame that surrounds menstruation can and should be attributed, then, not to any "inherent" aspect of the bodily process, but to its cultural association with women. From Kissling: "menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is a curse."[29] In a patriarchal world that denigrates women, any bodily function associated with women will be treated much the same. Menstruation's cultural significance as a transition to femininity is thus also an entrance into, and, for menstruators, a sign of, a society that "devalues women through cultural scripts associated with the body" and demands perfect, feminine female bodies always ready and available to be looked upon.[30]

From their first introduction to menstruation, either through menarche itself or through educational or parental guidance, menstruators continually face two seemingly conflicting messages: that their menstruating status is entirely normal and natural, but that it must be vigilantly guarded at all times so as to not be revealed to others. Yet as interpreted by Young, these two ideas, rather than contradictory, naturally follow from one another.[31] The bodily representations that have been reproduced and normalized within our culture are ones that do not bleed. Additionally, the normal or good *woman* – implicitly constructed around norms of whiteness – is one whose body is both sexually objectifiable and pure, therefore not revealing any visible bodily functions.[32] Thus, in order to maintain their previously held status of normalcy, all post-menarcheal individuals must hide their newfound bodily functions.

The stakes and need for successfully hiding one's menstrual status differs along the lines of race and gender identity, as the bodily process poses unique implications for the identities and social impressions of menstruators of color and menstruating transmen or masc-of-center nonbinary and gender queer menstruators. Menstruators of color, navigating a white supremacist culture, face pervasive racist ideology and imagery that construct their bodies as more animalistic, "bodily," and hypersexualized than those of white menstruators.[33] In order to subvert or distance themselves from these presupposed labels, menstruators must often engage in "politics of respectability," modifying their behavior to accommodate the dominant cultural standards, including the culture of concealment.[34] Meanwhile, for trans menstruators, their bodily processes, are viewed culturally (though, importantly, not always personally) as contradictory, or even opposed, to their masculine gender identity. In these cases, then, concealing menstruation is not about conforming to the ideals of womanhood, but instead about maintaining their masculinity within the public eye.

While menstruators face varying imperatives to disguise or conceal their menses, public spaces do not offer provisions for the material, physical, and social needs required for this process.[35] Most obviously, menstruators are expected to obtain their own menstrual products and to continually have them prepared and at-hand, even in the case of any unexpected starts to their period. Only recently has there been an increased push for schools, offices, and other public spaces to make menstrual products available to menstruators working and existing within these buildings. Access to products in public spaces is one of the central tenets of the emergent menstrual equity movement, to be discussed in the third chapter of this project. Yet even in these recent coordinated efforts to include menstrual products in public restrooms, the provision is widely gendered, primarily offering products in women's bathrooms and preventing transmen

from accessing these products in the bathroom of their choice. Moreover, access to products in bathrooms, regardless of their gender, does not change the norms of visiting these facilities. Many classrooms have limits to the number of times students may go to the bathroom during class, a constraint that prevents menstruators from freely managing their menses, and though workplaces often do not have official policies on bathroom usage, frequent trips to the bathroom can portray a worker as irresponsible or lazy. Once again, navigating public restrooms pose even obstacles for transmen who, even if they do have access to products (personal or publicly provided), risk "outing" themselves as trans through the usage of these products, which, even in a stall, can be revealed through the telltale crinkling of plastic packaging or in the process of disposing products in the trash.

As such, the difficulties menstruators face while navigating public spaces is not one of simply obtaining or prepping menstrual products, but rather of living within a culture that systematically denies or scorns the presence of menstruation while simultaneously providing no support for those who must subsequently conceal the bodily process. The burden, then, falls onto the menstruators themselves to conform to these spaces and present themselves as acceptable bodies with effectively hidden menstrual cycles and other bodily functions.

The menstrual mandate – termed by other scholars as menstrual etiquette, or the culture of concealment – is used by critical menstrual scholars to articulate and define the series of rules or expectations for proper menstrual behavior, defining "good" menstruators and periods as those that remain unseen and unknown and that are managed discreetly by the individual, without any reliance on public support.[36] Oftentimes these norms are promoted under the guise of matters of hygiene and cleanliness, portraying menstrual flow as an issue of public safety and health, or by referencing to some abstract value of "privacy" or modesty, labeling menstruation

as an issue that, unlike asking for a Kleenex or displaying Q-tips, is inappropriate to be discussed with others. Under these norms, menstruators are not allowed to acknowledge or speak of their menstruating status (most especially in front of non-menstruating individuals), nor, most importantly, are they permitted to let any evidence or reminders of their menses – from stains or leakages to menstrual products – to be seen in public.[37]

ENFORCING MENSTRUAL DISCIPLINE

Menstruators are often first introduced to and taught these rules by other menstruators themselves, who serve as the primary enforcers of menstrual etiquette. At the start of menarche, adolescents typically receive "the talk" from an older, menstruating relative, a conversation that most often centers the importance of properly using menstrual products to contain their flow. Meanwhile, interactions among peers – such as locker room gossip about the outline of a pad seen through a thin pair of shorts or a visible blood stain – teaches menstruators from a young age not to make the same mistake. In order to meet these implicit standards, many menstruators report that they engage in self-policing and modify their behavior, wearing loose or dark clothing or avoiding certain activities such as swimming while menstruating.[38] Yet even when these precautions are properly followed, one's menstruating status still faces the risk of being revealed. Consequently, menses requires from the menstruator a continual self-vigilance, and serves as a source of hyper focus even to the point of paranoia. One is continually aware of their menstruating status, of the ways in which their bodies might unintentionally expose or fail them, and any feelings of wetness, seen as a signal of potential leaking, can trigger a sense of panic.[39]

Within this discussion of the ways in which the culture of concealment operates, it should be noted that the primarily in-group enforcing and self-policing rules of menstrual etiquette does not render menstruators "culture dopes," blindly following oppressive imperatives and serving as

the naïve perpetuators of their own denigration.[40] Instead, menstruators know that lapses in these rules are followed by penalty and real consequences for their social, political, and economic outcomes. Transgressions against the menstrual etiquette may not induce publicly sanctioned or government mandated punishments, but they will be received with social humiliation and marginalization.

In a 2002 study, Roberts et. al quantified some of the real repercussions experienced by menstruators who disrupt – even unintentionally – these social norms by measuring the perceptions of a female actress who, in a staged scene, accidentally drops a tampon or a hair clip (chosen for its similar association with femininity) from her purse in front of observing participants.[41] Following this experimental manipulation, participants were given a questionnaire examining their attitudes towards their study partner (the actress) and towards women in general. Those who witnessed the woman drop a tampon, instead of a hair clip, were more likely to rank her as less competent and less likable, psychologically and physically avoid her, and exhibit generally greater objectifying views towards women as a category. While the study supports the notion that menstruation is conceptually tied to femininity and objectification among all genders, it also demonstrates the ways in which infractions against the culture of concealment are quietly and implicitly policed and corrected. The perceptions reported by this study would, outside the setting of an experiment, inevitably translate to the ways in which she, and other menstruators like her who happen to infringe the culture of concealment, would be treated – whether in the workplace or in school – and would have repercussions for the possibilities for her success and flourishing. Of course, the experiences of the menstrual mandate should not be considered universal or equal. For menstruators of color facing racialized discrimination, proper menstrual behavior holds greater social consequences and threats to cultural capital than those bearing

white privilege. Meanwhile, for menstruating transmen and masculine, genderqueer menstruators, their infringements on social expectations are twofold, violating the norms of behavior for female bodies by failing to conceal their menses or to conform to the cisgender norms of femininity typically expected of their bodies. These transgressions, when revealed, can risk inciting violence towards the menstruating individual. Experiencing these forms of social isolation and punishment, ranging from subtle to violent and extreme, those who had unintentionally revealed their menstruating status would effectively be cautioned against them occurring once more.

It is important to note that menstruation is but one component or aspect of the disciplinary measures faced by those categorized as women. The constructive discourse of menstruation, imbued with images and meanings of femininity, situates the bodily process within a much larger pattern of disciplinary forms of gender oppression documented by both body studies and feminist critical studies theorists. These various works, including those of Bordo, Bartky, and Young, have studied the diverse ways in which femininity, along with racial and class standards, have been inscribed on the body through seemingly mundane practices of manners, posture, beauty, fashion, and dieting. Through the enforcement of these various rituals and participation in these industries, women learn that their looks, their corporeal and material presence, matter, determining how they are treated and their social and economic life outcomes, often more so than their actual character or capabilities.

Yet as they come to realize the importance of their physical form's appearance and demeanor, women also learn that their bodies, on their own or without manipulation, are, down to the most intimate details, inherently and perpetually insufficient and in need of correction: natural body hair must be removed (along with ingrown hairs, razor burns, or any other evidence

of the removal process), skin brightened and pore-free, the newest proclaimed "problem area" (from fat ankles to touching thighs) tightened and smoothed. Out of necessity to meet these standards, women become their own personal judge and measure themselves against these culturally produced ideals, practicing a chronic self-objectification and surveillance.[42] While this self-objectification may operate at the level of the individual, it also serves to regulate the social body, creating homogenized and normalized expectations and limits for the female body and not allowing, at least without social punishment, the existence of any transgressive representations. These same or parallel processes of self-objectification, self-policing, and normalization are enacted through menstrual etiquette, as well, requiring menstruators to continually be aware of any potential source – from a blood stain to a visible pad line or tampon string – of infraction to maintain the image, and feasibility, of total containment.

THE MENSTRUAL EXPERIENCE

In addition to necessitating a change in habits of self-presentation and behavior, menarche is also experienced as inducing a seemingly unnecessary or unwanted change of familial and platonic relationships and even social status. Menarche, due to the reproductive capacities that come with it, also signals the start of sexual maturation and potential pregnancies and can lead to the sexualization of post-menarcheal adolescents. In an embodied and phenomenological study of the meaning of menstruation, many menstruators reported that they or their peers who started puberty at younger ages – starting their menstrual cycles and developing breasts – were seen as more promiscuous, even as young girls with no active sexual relationships.[43] Meanwhile, menarche was also the time in which many girls stopped socializing or interacting with their male classmates, feeling as though they could, because of their entrance into puberty, no longer be "one of the boys" or that their friendships had a newfound – and

sometimes unwanted – sexual tension. In part, these distancing or dissolving friendships may also be attributed to shifting power dynamics; just as young girls are taught to perform femininity, young boys are socialized into roles of masculinity, which often entail the domination and sexualization of women. Consequently, in addition to feeling differentiated or distinct from their former male friends, pubescent menstruators are also subject to heightened teasing concerning their menstruating status – another source of policing the culture of concealment – and sexual harassment and assault from these same boys.

Meanwhile, parents are more likely to view their daughter's emerging sexuality – believed to emerge at the start of menstruation – as more problematic than that of their son, enforcing double standards for their expected behavior and obedience. In a 1987 study, menarche was seen to be accompanied by greater family turmoil, with menstruators reporting more intensive parental control within the first six months following the start of menstruation.[44] These new rules are often focused on limiting the risk of adolescent and teen girls engaging in heterosexual activity, controlling when and with whom they're allowed to go out.

Thus, in total, the beginning of menstruation is when many menstruators sense that the "rules of the games," of the behaviors allowed to men and women, are different.[45] It is one of the first times that they come to recognize that their body is no longer their own and to be aware of how they are viewed as objects rather than selves, either due to their perceived sexual availability or by the preoccupations with their menstrual cycles rather than their wellbeing. The consequences of this realization can be emotionally and mentally taxing. According to Mental Health Department statistics gathered in the United States, New Zealand, Canada, and Puerto Rico in 1989, the likelihood of severe depression doubles for girls one year after menarche, and across the entire span of their life, women are twice as likely to experience depression.[46]

The totality of these interactions and consequences, widely negative or unfavorable, serves as a mediator through which menstruators experience menstruation itself. Culture, as Bordo claims, most often bears its effects on the body as experienced, as expected disciplinary measures and social practices can change people's potential understanding and perception of their bodies or the meanings of various phenomena.[47] In the case of menstruation, there is no widespread, positive experience associated or represented by the bodily process. Instead, menstruation is the bearer of bad news and the punishment of womanhood: a newfound source of teasing and humiliation that triggers an onset of behavioral limitations and subjects menstruators to a higher standard of cleanliness and self-policing. The menstrual mandate, effectively erasing any trace of menstruation, helps to reproduce and maintain the limited foreseen possibilities of menarcheal adolescents' experiences of menstruation by ensuring that all menstruators are properly sanitized and non-transgressive within public spaces. Consequently, in a world where the non-menstruating body is continually seen as the norm and the only representation provided in our day-to-day lives and media, the monthly act of managing and guarding against menstrual blood must inevitably be seen as an additional and unfairly arbitrary chore.

Thus, the experiences of menstruation itself are filtered through this negative lens, one that labels and blames the bodily process, rendering it more likely to be seen as a problem and nothing else. In fact, menstruators are more likely to attribute negative physical symptoms, such as bloating, irritation, or lethargy, to their menstrual and hormonal cycle, and positive symptoms, such as heightened creativity, sex drives, or energy, to external circumstances, even when they both occur during bleeding.[48] Even the mere belief that one is about to start their period can trigger, or at least heighten awareness of, negative physiological experiences. In a 1996 study, a group of women were told that their periods could be predicted to the exact date by taking scans

of their brain waves. Using these "measures," they were given varying, arbitrary dates to when their menstrual cycle would start. Following this experiment, they had women record their physiological wellbeing. Those who were told their periods were more imminent, regardless of their actual start date, complained of more pain, water retention, and changing eating habits than those who were told their periods were weeks away. These responses, separate from the actual timing of one's menstrual cycle, appear to report more on the dread menstruators experience towards their period than any sort of menstrual symptomology.[49]

Given the negative experiences – of changing social relations, gender expectations, and the constant self-management – with a bodily process that also renders them out of control, menstruators are less likely to consider menstruation as something that is a part of themselves, further alienating the bodily process, and by extension, their body. As described by Emily Martin, most menstruators refer to and talk about their menstruation in passive terms, portraying it as something that happens to them or that they go through, rather than something that is a part of them and their bodies.[50] Menstruators describe themselves as "having cramps" rather than actively attributing the act of cramping to their own bodies, or say that their period "has arrived," rather than claiming that their body itself has begun menstruating. Of course, it is not as simple to claim that reversing these cultural narratives of menstruation would erase all the discomforts that comes with menstruation. However, when menstruators continually are shown representations of menstruation that portray it as a matter of hygiene (and thus unclean), or as the initiation of newfound responsibilities and gender roles, it is hard to imagine that their experiences of the bodily will be anything but of annoyance, distaste, or pain, all of which understandably is viewed as occurring *against* them rather than *by* them. More of the role of

culture in physiological experiences will be further discussed later within this chapter through the topic of PMS.

The effects of these multifaceted disciplines and regulations of femininity expand beyond the bodily process and throughout the feminine experience. The constant self-examination of their bodies from the outside-in, requiring women to psychologically separate themselves from their body, along with the continual cultural reminders of the imperfections and burdens of their body, discourage any connection or positive identification with it, interrupting the self-body relationship.[51] This alienation has implications for the wellbeing and health of women, reducing the knowledge women have of their own experiences and obstructing their ability to understand and meet their body's needs. A 1995 study indicates that women are less able than men to recognize the internal, physiological signals of their body, such as heart rate, stomach contractions, or genital stimulation, and make less use of these bodily clues in general, meaning that they may ignore or disregard their health, or view themselves as ill-equipped in taking charge of their own health.[52] Without the ability to tune into and interpret their own bodily needs, women must rely on or turn to external forces, most often the medical industry or corporate advertisements, to guide or make their health decisions for them. While the use and guidance of medicine is not necessarily or inherently objectionable, the industry is, as will be outlined later within the chapter, not neutral or separate from the cultural forces of discipline that regulate femininity and, instead, has often been a tool for maintaining and reproducing power dynamics.

In response to this growing trend, holistic reproductive health advocates have promoted the notion of body literacy, or the ability to "read" bodily signals, understand their meanings in terms of one's personal health and comfort, and respond to them accordingly.[53] Body literacy was intended to be an act of reclamation, taking the female body back from patriarchal narratives

that discourages its nurturing and pleasure and from the medical industry that widely dictates bodily experiences (and is often influenced by these same patriarchal narratives, as well). While primarily used in terms of self-managing fertility, the fundamental concepts of body literacy could be expanded to offer a more radical path to a reimagined menstrual embodiment. Incorporating practices such as critical literacy analysis in reading menstrual product advertisements could allow menstruators to recognize and disentangle their feelings from ongoing cultural narratives, allowing them to reconsider the ways in which they perceive and treat their bodily process.

MENSTRUATION AS SOCIAL CONTROL

In its totality, the disciplining of gender works to render female bodies mute and subservient, remaining within the current patriarchal power relations. A crucial component of femininity is to *literally* take up less space: dieting and body image standards encourage women to force themselves into smaller bodies, feminine norms for comportment, whether conscious or not, lead women to walk or run with shorter strides and to sit with their legs pressed together, legs or ankles crossed.[54] As summarized by Bartky, "woman's space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized, but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined."[55] The act of denying oneself their own space can translate, again quite literally, to not standing up for oneself or demanding political or social space. As shown by a 2005 study, body shame – which, as a product of not meeting internalized beauty or physical standards, fuels the disciplining of the body – has negative effects on sexual decision making, impeding women's ability to exert their sexual agency or to advocate for their safety and sexual health through the use of protection during sex.[56] More generally, the constant act of self-policing itself – in which one part of women's minds are continually scouring the possible errors

of their posture, demeanor, or beauty, rather than simply learning, working, or living – is exhausting, an expense of cognitive resources not required of men, and without reprieve, as there are always, with the female body, new problems to be found.[57] Its continued practice can disrupt cognitive performances, bearing implications for women and girls' performances in work and school, and even contribute to mental health issues, as self-objectification is considered by many feminist psychologists as a form of depersonalization that can trigger or worsen anxiety and depression.

Consequently, the general discipline and normalization of the female body, including the regulation of menstruation, are longstanding historical tools of social control. Intricately involved in this manipulation of the female body's functions to uphold power differences has been the state. The state, conceived not just as the government but as the various apparatuses of institutionalized power, is, as defined by Foucault, a formal codification of relations of power at all levels across the social body. The various institutions under the state are reorganized to follow and reproduce these various relations in a process of double conditioning, reflecting the values and norms produced at the individual level back onto the social body. Thus, the state, alongside the various outlined practices of discipline, are a series of supports that pursue and enforce the same "overall strategy," a series of interconnected social categorizations and organization that hierarchizes, excludes, and privileges.[58] For example, the discipline of female bodies and the normalization of femininity is inextricable from the processes of commodification and consumerism that the gender performance, enacted through beauty supplies and fashion, necessitates and disproportionately expects from women. Thus, femininity is, in addition to being a tool for reproducing and maintaining gender power relations, a way for the economic systems to maintain an exploitable caste of consumers. The production and disciplining of

menstrual practices, then, can be considered one form or aspect of much larger or widespread social patterns, shaped by and contributing to the organization of power, gender, and economics. Demystifying the origins of the cultural reproductions of menstruation and highlighting their connections to these much larger concentrations of power is vital in understanding the full extent of the bodily process's social and political implications.

Medicalization

As a contested site of corporeal politics, menstruation has undergone a series of changing narratives adopted and reinforced by the state. Since the early 19th century, when the bodily process first entered the scope of their interests, medicine and the medical industry have served as the central arbiters and encoders of the meanings and experiences of menstruation. From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, as medical treatment in general became increasingly institutionalized and secularized, the scope or focus of health experts shifted from the body as a whole to specific deviations or discomforts within the body. Consequently, the goal of medicine transformed from promoting or restoring the vigor or health of an individual to maintaining normality, isolating malfunctions – or pathologies – from the rest of the body and correcting the specific symptoms through intervention.[59]

Thus, supporting this new objective, one of the central, implicit functions of medicine is to promote a particular view of reality and embodiment itself, to normalize certain physiological experiences and to pathologize others.[60] Since the medicalization of their bodies, initially starting with childbirth and expanding to the establishment of the field of gynecology, women have continually relied on medical authority, often times more than themselves, for answers about the meanings of menstruation, seeking medical advice for how to behave, what to use, and what is normal while bleeding. Given their primary role, doctors, based on their diagnoses or

proscriptions, have an enormous power to either calm or incite anxieties of individual menstruators, by validating and affirming or questioning and denying their physiological experiences.

Collectively, as producers of truth, medical officials also shape the expectations of normalcy and proper health at the level of the social body. Examining the various ways in which menstruation has been approached and treated by medicine, Louise Lander introduces in her book *Images of Bleeding* the notion of medical ideology, or the idea that medicine, as a social institution rather than a solely scientific discipline, reflects and produces cultural norms and narratives just as much as it claims to practice biology.[61] However, the discipline's proximity to science allows it to falsely claim some objectivity, granting its representations a higher status of legitimacy over other sources of cultural treatment. Turning to menstruation specifically, many of these historical medical representations, despite earning at their respective times the legitimacy and status of medicine, were often unrelated to or unrepresentative of ongoing scientific knowledge and instead served as a foil to maintain culturally and economically convenient gender roles. As summarized by journalist Karen Houppert, menstruators' "cycles have an interesting way of being recycled at politically expedient points in history."[62]

The 19th century, the period in which menstruation first began to be medicalized, was socially, economically, and politically organized by the doctrine of separate spheres, a gendered dualism that determined the proper roles and settings of women and men by their cultural association with either the functions of the mind or of the body. Within the prior century, industrialization had shifted enterprise and the center of economic activity away from the private household and into the public sphere, now joining the realm of government and universities. Men, considered rational and defined by their mental faculties, were given reign over this sphere,

granting them access to capital, political leadership, and intellectual training. In turn, women, considered more closely aligned with the body and their bodies' reproductive capacities, were relegated to the home and to the acts of reproduction, childrearing, and caregiving. This perception of women's natural role extended to the medical industry's representations of their bodies and their constitutions, which were defined by their all-controlling and irregular reproductive functions, including their menstrual cycles.

In 1873, Dr. Edward H. Clarke, a former professor at Harvard Medical School, published *Sex in Education, or, A Fair Chance for the Girls*, a controversial indictment of women's abilities beyond reproduction.[63] Using the then-typical medical conception of the human body as an economic system of scarce resources, Clarke viewed menses as a period in which all women's energy was put towards maintaining and supporting their reproductive organs. Consequently, participating in non-bodily activities, particularly education, was seen by Clarke as drawing energy from this process of restoration, endangering women's health and their future possibilities of giving birth. Additionally, among other prominent physicians, menstruation was attributed an additional pathological dimension. Viewing reproduction as the "natural" position of women, these physicians characterized menses as a failed opportunity to reproduce and, consequently, an irregular state of the female body. Drawing from both perspectives, the general proscription from medical officials to women was to rest, to remain bedridden and avoid any laborious – especially mentally taxing – activities during their menstrual flow. Notably, women were seen as most vulnerable, and their reproductive organs in most need of energy, at the ages in which young women would be entering high school or college.[64] With the rise of universities, the participation of women in higher education was seen as a threat to the social order, and to the doctrine of separate spheres, posing the risk that well-educated women would no longer be content with

their caretaker roles and eventually overtake what had been reserved as a bastion of male privilege. Clarke's claim that a college education would hurt women's reproductive capacities or negatively impact their menstrual cyclicity continued to persist among the medical community even after women graduated from college, without ill effect, and continued to have families (and menstrual cycles).

However, with the world wars of the early 20th century, women obtained a newfound economic relevancy, filling jobs left by men during the wars and finding employment, albeit in sexually segregated, underpaid industries, during the postwar economic boom. With this shift in the labor force, the typical treatment for menstruation – bed rest – became an economic obstacle and burden for employers, as female workers would call out of work at rates disproportionately higher than male employees.[65] Medical doctrine soon began to trip over itself: the same behavior they had prescribed just a half century before was now seen as economically damaging. With women now too important a part of the paid labor force to spend four days out of the month in bed, the medical industry had to come to a new solution. The emergence of psychology and the rise of prominent theorists such as Freud provided an answer: menstrual discomforts were transformed to a neurological phenomenon and a malleable matter of changing attitudes. Interestingly, many medical officials blamed dysmenorrhea, or painful periods, on their resentment over their reproductive and sexual duties as women, claiming that menstrual discomfort was only experienced when women went against their biologically determined roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers.[66]

Yet unlike the psychosomatic approach of more recent feminist psychologists, these medical officials did not question the systemic forces that naturalized these gender expectations, nor did they challenge the oppressive consequences of imposing these roles. With this newfound

conceptualization of menstruation, the treatment for any painful period became centered on changing women's attitudes towards their periods and in allowing them to accept their bodily functions as a part of their feminine duty. Demonstrating the economic importance of reversing former menstrual habits, employers themselves began to sponsor workshops and trainings for their menstruating employees in the hopes of reducing absenteeism.[67] This theory that menstrual cramps were symptomatic of neurosis, or at least of poor attitudes, remained even after scientific studies had discovered that cramps only occurred during cycles in which ovulation takes place, implying that the biological, and not solely the psychological, plays at least some role in causing dysmenorrhea.[68]

By far one of the most contentious and still-debated examples of gender ideology pervading modern-day medicine is that of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). PMS is characterized as a series or group of reoccurring negative emotional and physical symptoms that appear some time before menstruation. Yet the specifics of PMS have varied widely among both menstruators who experience or are diagnosed with the syndrome and medical officials attempting to encode its symptoms into medical language. Since its first introduction in the 50s and its entrance into common language in the 80s, the menstrual disorder has become more of a catchall for menstruators' medical complaints than a concretely or universally defined medical phenomenon.[69] Subject to immense variance in official medical definitions, over 150 symptoms – both psychological and physiological – have been attributed to PMS, ranging from bloating to soreness of breasts to irritability and depression to crying spells.[70] Within characterizations of PMS, there is also a lack of medical consensus as to what time frame "premenstrual" denotes, ranging from either one to 14 days before menstrual flow or, among common or popular language surrounding menstruation, even including the period itself.

However, what is most striking about the rise of PMS as an explicitly medical issue is the prevalence of the syndrome itself. Over 90 percent of menstruators report experiencing some symptoms of PMS.[71] Given the widespread occurrence of PMS, some researchers and physicians question why the response to these various, common symptoms must then necessarily be one of pathologization, especially given the gendered implications of any pathology targeted towards menstruation. After all, "how large a sphere of human problems we choose to define as medical is an important social decision," one that has stakes in both conceptions of gender, determining the treatment and conception of menstruators, and in profit, offering newfound sources of revenue for medical officials and pharmaceuticals.[72]

Feminist interpretations of PMS view the syndrome not as a pathology of menstruation or menstruators themselves, but as a metaphor for the female experience. One of the most commonly reported symptoms within popular accounts of PMS is a feeling of being out of control, of one's emotions and of one's behaviors.[73] By the time PMS was, in the 80s, popularized and the rate of diagnoses began to skyrocket, the late capitalist economy had required a total shift away from single-income families entirely, fully integrating women, including married women and mothers, into the workforce. However, their full-fledged entrance into the public sphere was not accompanied by a similar entrance of men into the private sphere. Instead, women found, and still find, themselves straddling the duties of both spheres. In a phenomenon termed as the "second shift," women, in addition to now working fulltime paid jobs, are thus still responsible for completing a majority of the unpaid domestic labor, raising the children and maintaining the home.[74] With their changing roles and economic position, women now face an increasing pressure to "do it all": to have a fruitful career, to look after the family, to

be beautiful, and to be leak-free, despite actively facing gender-based barriers and limitations and receiving no systemic support for achieving these pillars of modern success.

To feminists, then, PMS is symbolic of an unconscious protest, a physical and psychological manifestation of the frustration and exhaustion women experience on a day to day basis with the gender-based obstacles and pressure in their lives, exercised during the bodily process that is the embodied symbol of these patriarchal limitations.[75] The very symptoms of the syndrome – irritability, emotional outbursts, depression – all transgress the norms of expected feminine demeanor, which demands that women are always nurturing, devoted, and self-sacrificing. Simply because these emotions are more explicitly expressed cyclically with the menstrual cycle, does not mean that they're any less real or legitimate. Instead, it may simply mean that, in the midst of managing a period and conforming to the culture of concealment, alongside their numerous economic, social, and domestic responsibilities, menstruators are less inhibited from disclosing them.[76]

When these feelings are expressed, often in heated or dramatic outbursts that characterize PMS, those who are impacted or disrupted are not just the menstruators themselves, but often the spouses and children they normally tended to. Thus, with PMS threatening the social order of the family unit itself, the incentives to address the bodily process are different from those of syndromes or disorders that primarily affect the wellbeing of menstruators alone, such as endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome.[77] As many feminist critics have pointed out, "calling these times of rage symptoms of a disease is a handy way of not looking at what women are upset about and why."[78] Pathologizing diverts attention from the sociocultural influences of menstrual discomforts and menstruators' anger and absolves society of the responsibility to take a more holistic or systemic look at the widespread emotional experiences. Moreover,

pathologizing places the blame on menstruators' bodies or fluctuating hormones, perpetuating stereotypes of cyclicity and uncontrollability, and leaves them subject to profitmaking from pharmaceutical corporations intervening to provide now necessary medical solutions. These responses, which have ranged from artificial hormones such as progesterone to mood-correcting SSRIs, have achieved varying levels of success in impacting symptoms across a wide range of menstruators.[79] While none of these attempted medical responses have demonstrated widespread and consistent success, the medicalization of premenstrual symptoms has expanded the potential consumer markets available to those already involved in the production of these treatments, offering a new source of sales and profit.

However, for those who do experience debilitating symptoms every menstrual cycle, the medicalization of PMS and its categorization as a biological issue is not a signal of increased exploitation and vilification, but, instead, of the medical community acknowledging and taking seriously the real pain and emotional distraught faced by menstruators. The recent treatment of PMS and menstrual discomforts is especially welcomed when compared to the label of neurosis given to those experiencing similar symptoms in the half-century before. Feminist critiques of PMS do not intend to deny the influence of the physical body completely; from the aforementioned research on dysmenorrhea, it is well-known that the physiology plays a role in at least one symptom of PMS. However, solely biologizing these experiences mystifies the previously acknowledged cultural factors that can influence the experience of menstruation and prevents any popular acknowledgement of the influence that the social perception of menstruation can have on the production and pathologization of certain phenomena or how these responses favor potentially unnecessary medical solutions that are minefields for profits. Yet unlike the psychosomatic approach of medical officials in the mid-20th century, which left

gender power dynamics unchallenged, such cultural analyses should be approached from a critical lens that centers menstruators and takes an intersectional, structural approach to analyzing the factors that affect their experiences.

This debate has been left widely unresolved as the media and medical trend of PMS was replaced with a newfound avenue of intensifying medicalization of menstruation: menstrual suppressants. Menstrual suppression is the manipulation of the menstrual cycle through hormonal contraception, either reducing the number of total cycles or ending menstruation entirely. In content, menstrual suppressants are practically identical to traditional oral contraceptive pills (OCPs), differing only in that they forgo placebo pills that typically trigger the withdrawal bleeding that occurs with OCPs.[80] In 2003, Seasonale, a drug used to limit menstruation to four cycles per year, was approved by the FDA.[81] While menstrual suppressants were devised to help individuals with debilitating menstrual disorders by eliminating the cycles that trigger their symptoms, the intertwined forces of capitalism and the culture of concealment have encouraged the expansion of its use into a "lifestyle" drug, marketed as a source of empowerment, liberation, and relief from menstruators' monthly inconvenience . With the legitimization of menstrual suppression as a lifestyle choice, the medical industry has portrayed the bodily process, at best, an unnecessary nuisance and, at its worst, a pathology void of any cultural meaning or consequences for overall reproductive health.[82] These ideas are replicated in public opinion, as attitudes towards menstruation are a greater indicator of favoring suppression than any actual symptomology.[83]

Corporate Control & Irresponsibility

While the intensifying medicalization has played a significant role in shaping cultural beliefs towards menstruation, most of menstruators' everyday representations of and interactions

with the bodily process are mediated through corporations selling menstrual products, or goods – such as tampons and pads – used to absorb or contain menstrual flow. These corporations, such as Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, and Kimberly-Clark, have situated themselves – and their products – as the solution to the historic and ongoing mandate of menstrual etiquette and the stigmatization of menstruation by offering what historian Sharra L. Vostral terms technologies of passing, which allow their users to maneuver an explicitly non-menstrual public world without social repercussions by effectively disguising their menstruating status, containing menses and, with technological improvements, making the products themselves less visible.[84]

The implications of these technologies of passing for the political status of menstruation are ambivalent, as the products serve to maintain current power dynamics and disciplinary expectations while providing avenues for resistance and the subversion of these same norms. By their very nature, technologies of passing are useful tools for negotiating the social systems that deny the existence of menstruators entirely. Containing menstrual flow, these products may allow menstruators to feel more comfortable in their bodies, a confidence that could inspire them to assert themselves in the economic or political sphere, to enter industries or job sectors that typically exclude or undervalue women or to talk about menstruation publicly. Additionally, these same products can be used to create or enter the space necessary to overcome stereotypes that menstruators are limited by or victims of their menstrual cycles, granting menstruators the mobility or discretion to achieve tasks for which they typically had been deemed unfit. Offering an example of such potential in her history of menstrual technology, Vostral details the ways in which female pilots in WWII thwarted regulations preventing them from flying during their menstrual flow by using tampons, then a relatively new and controversial product, to more easily hide their menstruating status and continue to fly.[85] However, the act of "passing" through the

use of technology or body manipulation should not be considered a form of true liberation. As described by Vostral, "submitting to technologies to become a part of the dominant view or society reifies the normal idea from which these marginalized individuals were formerly excluded."[86] By conforming to the culture of concealment in order to obtain success, confidence, or even acceptance, menstruators perpetuate the idea that these norms of behavior are not only necessary, but natural or inherent, situating any variation as stark transgressions to the natural order and in needing of social correction and discipline.

Similar to the medical treatment of both PMS and menstrual suppression, the influence of profits has blurred the line between developments that are necessary or beneficial for menstruators and what is driven solely by corporate ideology. The basic design of most commonly used menstrual products – tampons and sanitary napkins – has not greatly changed in the last 30 years. Yet in order to attract new customers and maintain market interest, corporations have introduced innovative "solutions" to menstruators' bodies and "advancements" to their products, offering sleeker tampon applicators, scented products, or more discreet packaging. Each advancement entails an intensification of menstrual etiquette, identifying and highlighting new sources of correction and inefficiencies within menstruators' bodies and subsequently expanding the minimum list of products or behavior needed to meet these growing standards. Thus, the continual "progress" of menstrual product development is inseparable from the intensifying disciplining of menstrual bodies. One notable example of the interplay between technology and the culture of concealment is the development and marketing of noise-proof packaging on sanitary napkins, such as that offered by Kotex. The mere introduction of the product implies that the mere act of opening crinkling plastic in a public restroom stall is behavior that warrants correction, expanding the scope and site of menstrual etiquette to

restrooms and in front of other menstruators. Typically, public restrooms have been a rare site of transgression from the bounds of the culture of concealment; it is not unusual for menstruators to ask one another for a spare menstrual product or to discuss freely these matters between stalls. Yet the sale of this new product conveys a differing message to menstruators – that their bodily processes are not to be mentioned, even in front of their menstruating peers – lessons that they may begin to reproduce during their own interactions with other menstruators.

Corporations have relied on the very culture of concealment that they work to reproduce and expand in order to prevent menstruators from questioning the quality and safety of the products they must accept from corporations. The previously outlined minute changes or advancements to products have allowed corporations to increase the prices of their products and to reap greater profits from the menstruators using them. As Tambrands of Procter & Gamble bragged to shareholders in 1991: "we made product and packaging improvements, reduced the size and price of our packages, and increased our price per tampon."[87] Despite menstruators being a formidable consumer bloc, and menstrual products being a necessity for their users, these changes in price have, until only recently, widely been met with silence – a response that is unique when historically compared to price hikes in similar necessities.

Menstruators are expected to infallibly comply with the strict culture of concealment and silence, even when the technology used to conform itself is subject to failure. The toxic shock syndrome (TSS) scandal of the 1980s starkly revealed the limitations of cultural treatment of or solutions to the "problem" of menstruation focused solely on absorbent or disguising products provided by corporations. In 1980, Procter & Gamble sent out 60 million free samples of their newly invented superabsorbent tampon, Rely, to menstruators across the country. While the product exploded in popularity, quickly stealing 24 percent of the market, and other companies

began to introduce synthetic tampons, as well, the FDA reported a sudden increase in the prevalence of TSS and TSS-related deaths, cases that were eventually connected to the use of these new materials.[88] Internal memos originally shared in 1975 later revealed that the corporation was aware that components of the tampon were potential cancer-causing agents and could also alter the bacteria naturally found in the vagina, a cause of TSS, and that the company was receiving – and dismissing through canned answers – as many as 177 customer complaints per day. By the time Procter & Gamble voluntarily withdrew Rely from the market, 38 women had died from using their products.

In reaction to these events, the government chose to leave further research on the causes and effects of TSS to the tampon manufacturers who prompted the scandal. These corporations' public responses to the risk of TSS blamed menstruators' bodies; rather than acknowledging the role their products played in triggering the illness, they instead shifted the blame to menstruators, claiming that customers improperly utilized the given technology by leaving tampons inserted for too long or using unnecessarily high absorbencies. This lack of accountability was reinforced by the government which, in response to the scandal, imposed only minor regulations on an industry that already faced minimal standards. Rely had been able to streamline its introduction into the market due to the same-shape, different-content product guideline held for any new menstrual products brought into the market.[89] Since Rely did not radically change the actual shape or external design of the tampon, Procter & Gamble could begin selling it with less testing, despite its radically new material. Directly in response to the newfound risk of TSS, the FDA imposed two new restrictions on menstrual corporations, requiring that product packaging advised consumers to choose the lowest effective absorbency and that the range of absorbencies was standardized across all brands. Mimicking the rhetoric of the menstrual product companies,

the burden was placed on the consumer to choose products safe for them, rather than on the corporation to not introduce absorbencies that could be dangerous or that only allow for minimal contact. Moreover, these regulations were not implemented until 1990, nearly 10 years after the TSS scandal, when the illness had already affected 60,000 menstruators.[90]

Just two years after the weak FDA regulations were put into place, another scandal emerged concerning the FDA's oversight on the safety of commercially produced menstrual products. A congressional subcommittee in charge of overseeing the FDA had uncovered internal, unreleased memos from 1989 that disclosed FDA findings of trace levels of dioxins, or highly toxic chemical compounds, within tampons. Though one of the memos reported that the risk of dioxins in tampons can be "quite high," the FDA chose to delete a mention of the risk associated with tampons in a final report discussing dioxins and medical devices.[91] The FDA's responses to the subcommittee's claims, which adamantly denied the risk of dioxin within tampons, references studies completed by the tampon industry itself.

The actual risk of dioxins, specifically within menstrual products, is widely debated. Dioxins are a byproduct of converting wood pulp into rayon, a synthetic fiber that is commonly used within tampons, through chlorine bleaching.[92] Though the levels of dioxins actually measured in commercial tampons are trace, the risk of dioxins come not from immediate contact, but from cumulative and repeated exposure, as the compound accumulates and is slow to disintegrate. As an endocrine disrupter, continual exposure to dioxins can disrupt hormonal signals and reproductive fertility. Tampons are not necessarily the primary source of dioxin exposure, even among menstruators, as dioxins are present in the air, waterways, food chains, and even paper products. Most tampons today, though mostly made of similar or same synthetic materials, are made using a chlorine-free bleaching process, reducing – though not eliminating –

the levels of dioxins found within the products.[93] While the risk of dioxins may not pose as significant of a risk for menstruators, the widespread and continued use of disposable products still presents a growing environmental concern. The average menstruator throws away around 250 to 300 pounds of menstrual product waste within their lifetime – applicators, tampons, and pads made of plastics and other non-biodegradable materials.[94] The growing concerns of waste management will, inevitably, exert a disproportionate impact on communities of color, as race is the greatest determinate of exposure to hazardous waste facilities or landfills.[95] Moreover, the release of these memos has opened questions of what other issues of risk and safety are still not being disclosed to menstruating consumers, concerns that corporate and government institutions have made difficult to address.

Currently, there is no requirement for menstrual companies to publicly list or make available the ingredients of their products, preventing consumers from monitoring the safety of their product choices. In 1997, US Representative Carolyn Maloney introduced the Robin-Danielson Act, named for a woman who died of TSS, which would direct the National Institute of Health (NIH) to conduct independent research to assess the safety of tampons and pads and require the FDA to make the content of these products publicly known.[96] The act offers an avenue through which accountability can be placed upon menstrual corporations, re-centering and acknowledging the needs and safety of menstruators as a consumer body. However, since its original drafting, the bill has been reintroduced 10 times, most recently in 2019, each time failing to advance past committee. From the Congressional treatment of the Robin-Danielson Act, it is obvious that the government does not see the health of menstruators as a politically viable issue, or one that would face push back from constituents. In part, this political analysis rings true: the culture of concealment has reinforced ideas among menstruators that it is their responsibility to

quietly enforce and maintain the silence and invisibility surrounding the bodily process, a duty that does not allow for any public political mobilization or advocacy. However, the emergence of the menstrual equity movement, and its legislative campaigns, have begun to challenge these political assumptions, as to be discussed in the third chapter of this project.

Still, in total, these corporations have been able to reap billions from menstruation without facing any serious regulations or repercussions from governmental forces or from the very consumers who purchase their products. For the last few decades, the menstrual product market has been dominated by three primary companies: Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson/Energizer Holdings (who purchased the menstrual product brands of Johnson & Johnson in 2013), and Kimberly-Clark. Globally, this industry is a $19 billion market, a quarter of which is based in the US. Together, these three corporations (excluding Johnson & Johnson) control 85 percent of the domestic market.[97] The culture of silence and concealment that surrounds menstruation helps to reinforce this exploitation and profitmaking, as few have felt empowered or even the need to mobilize for the consumer issues of centralizing corporate control, rising product costs, and various unaddressed health and environmental risks.

Media Representations

All the while, menstrual product corporations have been central figures in reproducing the cultural messages of concealment and normative menstrual behavior that reinforce their profitmaking. Beginning in the 1950s, corporations expanded the breadth of their marketing outreach and cultural influence by developing educational departments and creating instructional material to be distributed in schools and drugstores.[98] The education services they produced served an obvious economic function, capturing young students at the point of menarche and solidifying a menstrual lifetime of brand loyalty. The material was rampant with product

placement and praises of their own brands, and often came with samples in the hopes that post-menarcheal participants would continue to purchase these same products. However, these materials also functioned to, albeit perhaps unintentionally or unconsciously, communicate and teach dominant cultural norms concerning menstruation and its cultural connections with reproduction and femininity. The discussion of menstruation itself is typically initiated within the context of sex education, which, for female students, focuses on newfound reproductive capacities and potentials – and, with them, responsibilities in managing and protecting their bodies from unwanted sexual advances or pregnancies – rather than notions of arousal of pleasure.[99] Meanwhile, with the topic of menstruation, female adolescents are provided a conflicting message: the general script across menstrual education curriculum is that the bodily process is normal and natural, yet information that follows concerning the bodily process is strictly concerned with the need to cover up or contain the bodily process, discussing hygiene, stain management, and how to use products, rather than menstruation's relevancy to overall health.

Moreover, the message in sex education that menstruation is natural is a message that the average menstruator will only hear once. Following their initial introduction to the bodily process, menstruators are then subject to a lifetime of advertisements supplied by these same corporations that invoke insecurity, embarrassment, or disgust towards the bodily process. For a majority of their history, menstrual product advertisements have relied on using hygiene, shame, and appeals to traditional femininity to drive their product sales. The mass marketing of menstrual products began in 1921 with Kotex's introduction of the first commercially manufactured disposable sanitary napkin.[100] This modern menstrual product was primarily promoted and advertised through medical terminology, using the legitimacy of science and

medicine to both introduce menstruation as an issue of hygiene, thus necessitating a sanitized, technical solution, and to garner trust in their new products as an essential and effective method to contain menstrual flow.[101] Once disposable commercially produced menstrual products became entrenched in the norms for proper menstrual care, advertisers turned to notions of secrecy and shame to portray their products as the best for adhering to the culture of concealment and for ensuring that "no one will ever know you've got your period."[102] In the process, marketing material invoked fears, many of which were not culturally recognized before, and taught menstruators that all aspects of their period – from its smell, its leaks, its bulky absorbers – were points of vulnerability that needed to be monitored and corrected from new scented, safeguarded, and streamlined products. In their totality, these sales tactics were explicitly exploitative and intentionally shaming, reliant on menstruators' embarrassment or disgust towards their periods/bodies so that the companies could situate themselves and their products as the solution or relief to these various intensifying concerns.

THE POSTFEMINIST PARADIGM

By the late 90s, a wide range of cultural factors coalesced to push these marketing strategies and menstrual ideology out of fashion. The women's liberation and health movements, the consumer safety movement, and the Rebel Grrrl punk movement all contributed to generate an analysis and eventual cultural consciousness of the body as a site of political struggle, the structural limitations of femininity, and the capitalist-driven exploitation targeted disproportionately towards women. Meanwhile, the "crisis in girls," marked by an increase in eating disorders and other body-image issues and generally low self-confidence, created a national panic that forced the issue into mainstream discussion, triggering a society-wide examination of how popular and corporate culture exacerbate the prevalence of these issues.[103]

As these exploitative practices were thrust into the spotlight and their contradictions and limitations revealed, there grew an increasing social alienation from traditional conceptions of femininity and from corporations, a divergence from the dominant culture. Thus, public attitudes noticed and pushed back against many of these overt forms of sexism, body shaming, and corporate manipulation that fostered shame towards most of the female body and existence, including menstruation.

This cultural wave posed obvious risks to both capitalism and to the greater ideology in which the economic system operated, neoliberalism. Before examining the transformative manifestations of postfeminism, it is helpful to first provide an introductory or basal understanding of what exactly neoliberalism is. Though traditionally conceived of as an economic framework or government program, neoliberalism now is better understood as an ideology or a series of discourses that, though heterogeneous and often difficult to categorize, serve to uphold certain strategies. The infiltration and subsequent pervasiveness of neoliberalism within US culture has been crucial to the development and exercise of Foucauldian power, viewing the individual subject as the ideal locus of sovereignty and the site of relations of power. This creation and control of the subject, often enacted through state involvement, is designed to subsequently cultivate individualistic, competitive, and acquisitive behavior, an embodiment of self-sufficiency and boot-strap ideology. Yet the crucial significance of neoliberalism to the realm of social justice lies in that the discursive formation valorizes hierarchal social relations found in (capitalist) economic success. While championing profitmaking, neoliberalism recuses itself from any concerns of injustice by claiming to offer individuals an equal chance to compete for these elite statuses (a claim that, in practice, is often unfounded) and while being openly hostile to any visible forms of prejudice and discrimination.[104]

As a system of power, neoliberalism functions as an ongoing, evolving set of discourses and material practices whose discursive and disciplinary formations are fluid and malleable.[105] Consequently, its structures and institutions have been able to adapt to these changing attitudes, reshaping its forms and cultural manifestations to coopt and dissolve critique, re-masking the exercise of its power and ultimately maintaining its overall strategies of gendered, racialized, and classed hierarchization and exploitation. The capitalist and patriarchal paradigm of neoliberalism has responded to its feminist critiques by rearticulating and reframing its own dominant values through the language of feminism itself. In doing so, neoliberalism has dissipated feminist critique of structural forces, thereby rendering the movement redundant or moot, and situated itself as beyond or past the political necessity of feminism. The set of values or sensibility that this strategy of double entanglement has produced and promoted has since been termed by feminist media studies scholars as popular or postfeminism, which, though usages vary, shares common characteristics and ideals entrenched in neoliberalism.[106]

Postfeminism has primarily been allowed its label of feminism because it loudly boasts its celebration and championing of *all* women and their capabilities. Yet any diversification in actual practices or representations brought on by this sensibility is, as termed by Max Gluckman, a mediated ritual of rebellion, a subversion that is contained or limited by the bounds of the dominant culture, allowing for a bending, but not complete upending, of the norms, by providing representation without material change.[107] By allowing and referencing these tokenized concessionary appearances, postfeminism portrays the structural-level political efforts of feminism – striving for full political, economic, and cultural integration, inclusion, and empowerment – as no longer necessary. Instead, the values postfeminism seeks are individual attributes such as self-esteem, confidence, and competence.[108] While, on an individual scale,

these attributes are valuable and may have a potentially positive effect on women, socially, they serve to promote or affirm a neoliberal project of self-reliance and individualism that erases and ignores the structural factors determining access to resources. Recent, popular strains of feminism, such as lean-in or corporate feminism, embody post-feminist tenets, claiming that women are able to "achieve it all," so long as they put in the work and effort, though, in reality, access to such unencumbered paths to success is only widely achievable or attainable by white, middle-class cis-women. The muting of structural inequalities and cultural influences has effectively undone the work of radical feminists, who have spent the last century revealing and detailing the systemic origins of many of the experiences and expectations of femininity and its intersections with race, class, and sexuality.

The promotion of self-esteem and confidence, while simultaneously denying the presence and influence of systemic forces that denigrate women's worth, has necessarily led to an intensification and extension of the forms of surveillance and disciplining of women's bodies, expanding power's reach to the internal self and psyche.[109] Through postfeminist cultural discourse, women are taught that success is gained through the change of one's own emotions and the exertion of their willpower. However, maintaining these attitudes, especially in the face of both domestic and professional responsibilities and increasing social pressure, requires a new form of self-surveillance and self-discipline, correcting one's emotions and reactions to follow this promised path for success, a continual labor and effort that is not demanded of women's male counterparts.[110]

For many, this affect policing has failed to be the solution to low self-esteem or the beacon of prosperity that cultural narratives promise it to be. Yet the very nature of postfeminism itself works to disguise the origins of its own material limitations or failures. Women, rather than

turning their focus and blame towards the structural causes of their ongoing oppression, are instead encouraged to continue to focus inward, comforting and protecting themselves, from the negative attitudes and emotions that they have failed to change. As described by Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "[women] being their own 'mittens' is a mode of self-regulation that gives women the illusion of control, preventing them from directing any anger and critique against the structures that encourage them continuously to 'scratch' themselves – let alone those that may be tearing them to pieces."[111] The messages that postfeminism send are effectively cultural gaslighting, discrediting women's own experiences of sexism and the pushback they face – usually while trying to "lean in" – by ignoring or even denying the existence of structural obstacles they face throughout their lives. Meanwhile, rather than acknowledging the systemic nature of patriarchy, postfeminism portrays sexism as an issue of individual behavior, a matter of poor-mannered or mean persons that is not connected to any other systems of inequality or located within a broader context of neoliberal capitalism.[112]

While the totality of postfeminist values may offer empowerment and confidence for the individual, vital attributes that can play a role in spurring political mobilization, its extent falls short of marginalized populations and, subsequently, weakens any feminist compulsion or duty to act and advocate as a collective body for comprehensive liberation. For those, such as white (or) middle-class women, who widely have guaranteed access to resources, this individualistic feminism offers them a significant, and sufficient, movement, greatly satisfying any political concerns they might have, while those who are systematically denied access to resources or professional opportunities are left behind or excluded from participation outside of any superficial, tokenized representation. With their own needs met, there is little incentive for those who reap the benefits of an individualist postfeminism to empathize with the experiences of

others, to examine structural barriers, or to even question this paradigm. Yet without the foundation of a collective consciousness, the social practices, conditions, and values of neoliberalism cannot be changed.[113] Consequently, postfeminism leaves a de-politicized social body disincentivized to advocate for those excluded from the paradigm of free choice, allowing for the current social relations to reproduce and maintain themselves. Thus, the confidence and empowerment that is brought by this postfeminist rhetoric come at the expense of actual material change in power relations. Even more importantly, the integration of postfeminism within popular social consciousness works to actively shape the conceived potential and capacities of feminism as a movement, filtering future possible political activism through the lens and values of neoliberalism.[114]

What this process has left is a mainstream conception of feminism void of any cause for cross-coalition mobilization or practices used to enact or move towards real material change. Instead, exercise of (post)feminist politics often comes in spectacular, media-friendly performances, representations, and bold statements. One of the most famous examples of this new, performative style of "feminism" is Beyoncé's performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs), in which she sang in front of an emblazoned "FEMINIST" projected behind her, or more recently, actor Natalie Portman's decision to wear a jacket embroidered with the names of female directors snubbed from any recognition at the 2020 Oscars red carpet.[115][116] These spectacularized events are quickly taken up and regenerated within mainstream media, a platform that is itself capitalist and corporate, thus requiring that it must either forgo, or render invisible, certain radical implications.

In both cases, the celebrities who were hailed as feminist icons failed to acknowledge or critique any structural issue or to extend their rhetoric to any change in their own practices.

Though Portman owns a production company that has produced a total of 11 films (eight released and three announced), only one has had a female director, who was Portman herself.[117] Meanwhile, merely adopting the feminist title, as Beyoncé did during her performance, does not mean one actually pursues or commits oneself to the change needed for actual social justice. Despite her stance, Beyoncé is still entrenched in, and actively aiding, the corporate and capitalist structures that underpin both systems of patriarchy and racism. However, under postfeminism, rhetoric is one of the primary political change practices prioritized or encouraged, allowing its followers – or performers – to endorse and trumpet feminist language without changing their behavior or any of the underlying neoliberalist structures. In fact, with the dominance of postfeminist girl-power culture, even the mere presence of women is enough to invoke the label of feminist, regardless of what politics or change this newfound inclusion provides.[118] Finally post feminism encourages the expression of political beliefs and social critiques through consumerist channels, with feminist consumers purchasing products that also utilize or adopt feminist language and promise access to an empowered lifestyle through its branding and products.[119]

A similar, postfeminist transformation has occurred within the cultural treatment and representations of menstruation. Within corporate treatment, media coverage, and general discussions of menstruation, it has become popularly and fashionably subversive and rebellious to have pride in periods, along with, by extension, the natural female body. Alongside this celebration of periods has come the demand to "challenge" the culture of concealment, or to end the silence and taboo that surrounds menstruation and allow the bodily process to enter the public eye. Additionally, menstruators have a much wider range of goods available to them to express this newfound period pride, including alternative menstrual products, merchandise, and

accessories. However, the cultural shift in political attitudes towards menstruation, like that seen in postfeminism, is widely limited to a superficial, triumphal, and performative rhetoric that maintains and reinforces the bounds of neoliberalism and the culture of concealment and ultimately serves capitalism, rather than offering or pursuing any source of radical, material change.

The mainstream cultural treatment of menstruation within the last decade has primarily been produced and mediated in two central sites: corporate advertisements and the marketing and development of menstrual products and the most recent feminist engagement with the bodily process, the menstrual equity movement. The two intertwined cultural agents have often cooperated or worked alongside one another, and the narratives that they both promote adopt the values of postfeminism, offering a narrow political discourse of menstruation that ends at individual-level access to products and advanced technology, erasing the systemic origins of both unequal access to products and of the culture of concealment and failing to critique how they contribute to and support the greater system of capitalism.

The remainder of this project is an analysis of these recent sites of discursive formations of menstruation, conducted under the belief that any promise of salvation or liberation that is adopted and promoted through popular, dominant culture should, given the dynamics of power, knowledge, and discipline, be treated with some measure of apprehension or skepticism. One of power's greatest strategies is its productive capacity to encourage, support, and affirm those who conform to its strategies, feelings that can serve to cloud or disguise the structural implications of their behavior. Yet the insidious and continual discipline of female bodies requires that feminists continue to critically analyze common cultural practices and language, examining whether they truly support or promote gender liberation or reaffirm traditional and dominant views of

femininity, individualism, and capitalism. Throughout history, menstruators have been denied the opportunity to be the arbitrators of their own bodies, bodily processes, and experiences, while sources of cultural influence have been masked and normalized. This chapter has served to outline the various, multifaceted consequences of this continual control and manipulation, problematizing and complicating menstruation as a patriarchal and capitalist issue with psychological, social, economic, and political consequences. This analysis opens several questions regarding the bodily process. First, what alternative experiences or ways of knowing has the disciplining of menstruators' bodies and menstruation hidden? Second, what possibilities are continuing to be missed or overlooked in society's accepting and following of these postfeminist ideals?

Responding to these questions, it is vital to deconstruct and question these emergent, postfeminist narratives of menstruation, as these critiques allow for both the opportunity and space to potentially rebuild a view of the bodily process that centers the experiences and meanings of menstruators themselves, allowing them to produce their own knowledge and treatment of the bodily process, and that serves not to uphold, but to directly and necessarily challenge, the systems of capitalism and patriarchy. More importantly, these critiques can direct scholars, activists, and general social consciousness towards a view of menstruation that is not exclusively white, middle-class, or cisgender, but that instead makes room for a wide variety of menstrual experiences and attitudes and that understands the connections of the bodily process and its experiences to other systems of oppression. Transforming the cultural representations of menstruation has implications beyond providing additional economic or social protections for menstruators; its unique location as an intersection of gendered and capitalist norms and rituals allows it to serve as a unique starting point for immense structural change. As Paula Weideger

describes, “our silence sustains the menstrual taboo and keeps women in our present place of shamed hiding. So far this has not deterred misogynists, but it has limited women’s self-knowledge and helped to create the situation in which we find ourselves today – subject to the prevailing male definition of women. The more we learn about ourselves, the more we will become ourselves.”[120] The struggle for liberation, then, is one of detangling these various systems of power, understanding the ways in which they have produced normalizing disciplinary measures. Though the dominant narratives and cultural agents shaping public attitudes have changed from shame to celebration and from cold and distant corporate and medical figures to menstrual allies, the strategies of gender control, surveillance, and economic exploitation that this language and practices uphold widely have not. The remainder of this project is an attempt to unpack the ways in which these overall intentions have been preserved throughout the postfeminist transformation of menstruation.

COMMODIFYING EMPOWERMENT: EXAMINING THE CHANGING CORPORATE LANGUAGE OF MENSTRUATION

Advertisements and corporate language, like other forms of visual media, play a crucial role in communicating the unspoken rules of expected behavior, providing representations that convey the near-homogenous rules of normalcy through what is included, and, more implicitly, what is not. Within corporate capitalism, the messaging and demands of companies have increasing economic and social influence, serving to correct and direct proper behavior towards or through the solution of consumption. This phenomenon can be seen among menstrual product manufacturers, who have played a vital role in shaping public attitudes and treatment of the bodily process. The recent turn to positive and acceptant language within product advertisements, along with new advancements in product designs and types, may be, especially

for menstruating consumers, a refreshing and encouraging break from the blatant, shame-based concealment imperatives formerly rampant within corporate language and from the once unchanging, and potentially unsafe, range of products. However, under the constraints and enforcement of the culture of concealment, technologies of passing should not be viewed as the comprehensive solution, nor should accompanying rhetoric, still encouraging consumerism, be considered the same in its radical or political potential.

Thus, within the discipline of critical menstrual studies, these emerging corporate tendencies must be approached with some level of ambivalence or skepticism. Situating these common discourses taken up by menstrual product manufacturers during the last half-decade within the contextual rise and entrenchment of postfeminist sensibilities in popular culture helps to analyze and better understand the consequences of this apparent shift in corporate attitudes. Implementing the strategies of postfeminism, these companies have succeeded in appropriating changing attitudes towards periods for their own marketing purposes, aligning their brands with progressive pro-menstruation and feminist causes. In the process, menstrual product manufacturers have situated their respective products, or technologies of passing, as the ultimate menstrual experience and expression of pro-period attitudes, subsequently rerouting growing, mainstream political energy towards consumption, rather than towards structural cultural change or education. The remainder of this chapter provides an in-depth examination and analysis of menstruation's postfeminist uptake within commercial advertisements and product sales, noting the political implications of such corporate trends for current and potential future cultural engagements with menstruation.

Today, as mentioned, the general language and attitudes of menstrual product advertisements have taken a markedly positive turn. The same large corporate figures that once

overtly participated in and contributed to the stigmatization of menstruation, such as Tampax, Always, and Kotex, by portraying menstruators' bodies as defects or troublesome have since shifted focus away from shame-inducing messages and are now concerned with supporting and championing the empowerment of their customers. While they may be more accepting of talking about menstruation, their commitment to the culture of concealment, underlying the sale of their products, is maintained. Thus, within this more emotive and encouraging language, these companies still portray their products and the act of "passing" as the necessary and assumed path to achieving such success. This shift in discursive attitudes within product advertisements, a more positive encouragement to conceal, embraces changing, increasingly acceptant public attitudes towards menstruation and redirects them towards the purchase of their products. As said on the main page of Kotex's website, "everyone is different, especially when it comes to their period. That's why you can choose from a variety of tampons, pads and liners so nothing can get in the way of your dreams."[121] Menstruating individuals, as free agents in a neoliberal, capitalist world, are able to do and accomplish anything (even talk about menstruation!) – but only if their periods are still effectively contained and disguised.

With menstruation's appearances in pop culture and increasing mainstream media coverage, talking (and only talking) about periods has not only become more acceptable, but trendy, popular, and most importantly, brandable, as the companies who dare to do it are lauded as the leaders in the fight against sexism or stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation.[122] Menstruation could be said to have first broke into mainstream coverage with Always' 2015 Super Bowl commercial – possibly the first time a menstrual product company aired a commercial during the highly publicized sporting event. In the commercial, various unwitting adults and children are asked to perform various actions "like a girl."[123] The responses of the

adults, each a degrading caricature of femininity, are sharply juxtaposed to those of the young girls, who intensely commit to their assigned activities. Highlighting the growing issues of self-confidence among young girls, Always then encourages viewers to reclaim the phrase "like a girl," using their corresponding hashtag #LikeAGirl to encourage more dialogue. Though the subject of the advertisement did not directly address menstruation itself, the frenzy of publicity and media coverage after its airing was quick to highlight the nature of the company and the type of products it sold.[124] The popularity of the advertisement set the stage for other big-name menstrual product corporations to follow, providing similar social commentary in their own marketing or through corporate social responsibility projects (CSR) for homeless and poor menstruators, as seen with their most recent partnership with the menstrual equity movement, to be discussed in the following chapter.

Understandably, the stark and dramatic about-face in advertising strategies towards messages of empowerment and promises of progressive change coming from large, big-name corporations has been received with some suspicion and cynicism by feminist scholars and average consumers alike. Given their past exploitative messaging and their legacy of disregard for the wellbeing of menstruators – as showcased by the TSS scare of the 1980s and the ongoing lack of ingredient transparency – it appears to many as though these companies were only making changes that, in response to rising cultural criticism and feminist critique, would help bolster their sales. In the eyes of critics, these messages, superficial in content, were primarily intended to offer clickable or shareable feel-good material that increased attention towards their brand name and spur greater sales of their products – a more progressive rebranding of their same exploitative, profitmaking practices.[125]

With this growing distrust and disenchantment towards big-name corporations and their products, there has been a rise of start-up menstrual product companies that have gained customer trust not only from their smaller scales and "anti-establishment" origins, but from their seemingly more progressive products, which offer various health and environmental benefits. Within the realm of disposable products, nontraditional producers, such as Sustain and Seventh Generation, sell organic or pure cotton tampons and pads with complete ingredient transparency. Meanwhile, brands such as Lola, Cora, and Kali provide customizable subscription services that deliver menstruators' unique range of desired absorbencies directly to their door. Yet by far the fastest growing and perhaps most popular alternatives are period underwear and menstrual cups, both of which are reusable and severely cut down the waste produced by menstruators. Period underwear was first pioneered by Luna Pads, a small, woman-owned company in Vancouver, Canada, in 1993, but their initial efforts have since, in terms of publicity, been greatly eclipsed by Thinx, a NYC-based company started in 2011 that has become practically synonymous with the product. Meanwhile, menstrual cups, a relic of the mid-20th century, was reintroduced in 1987 with the Keeper, but did not enjoy mainstream popularity until 2003 with the Diva Cup. Since the Diva Cup, there has been an explosion of over 40 menstrual cup brands, such as Saalt, Lunette, and Lena, many of which hit the markets within the last five to six years.

These aforementioned companies have taken advantage of the growing feminist and countercultural distaste surrounding corporate control of menstrual products and care, asserting themselves as foils to the environmentally and socially exploitative practices now associated with the names of Kotex, Always, and Tampax, among others and as the embodiment of more "modern," progressive attitudes towards menstruation. While these big-name corporations are

seen as dated, detached, and disconnected from the real world and menstruators, the alternative companies are young, bold, outspoken, relatable, and trustworthy.

The common practices of these new companies differ from that of their multinational predecessors in several ways. Of course, the products themselves, oftentimes ranging from organics to reusables such as menstrual cups and period underwear, are more sustainable than their regular disposable counterparts. Responding to the growing media consciousness of the waste surrounding sanitary napkins and plastic tampon applicators, alternative manufacturers market their product as an opportunity to reduce waste and to lower the environmental impact of one's period. Additionally, these companies position themselves as educational resources for their customers, providing information on sexual, reproductive, and genital health. Nearly every company has their respective blog that dives into a variety of topics, including menopause, queer sex, the anatomy of vulva-owners, masturbation, and sex, oftentimes featuring more personable contributions from popular educators, other social media icons, or everyday customers sharing their experiences.

Finally, their marketing content generally is much younger, personable, and authentic. Most menstrual cup and period underwear brands maintain an active presence on social media platform, offering snarky, and sometimes political, commentary and memes on Twitter and designing curated Instagram feeds full of inspiring quotes, feminist art and graphics, and portraits of diverse bodies. Meanwhile, their official commercial advertisements often contain cheeky and playful references to the common or everyday experiences and drudgeries of menstruation, such as late-night, PMS-induced snacking, cramps, stained clothing, and feeling lazy or unmotivated. These portrayals are framed in a manner that is not shaming of the menstruator, but instead defiant, owning and accepting these experiences as a part of the

menstruating package, or self-deprecating, attempting to de-mystify the embarrassment or horror that these experiences once typically entailed. Throughout their various interactions with customers via advertisements, websites, and social media presences, these companies offer a seemingly radical and socially progressive message, redefining and proudly displaying menstruation as normal and without shame, in ways that appear more genuine than their big-name counterparts.

Most notably, Thinx, a producer of period underwear, has made a name for itself through similar (though more extreme) forms of subversive and overtly political advertising. The company first gained popular notoriety in 2015 after publicizing their dispute with NYC's MTA, which had initially refused to approve Thinx's "provocative" new ad campaign for its subway systems. These advertisements, deemed too risqué for the public transit, featured women in full-length shirts modeling Thinx's underwear and the slogan "Underwear for Women with Periods." Though Outfront, the company that approves most advertising for the MTA board, specifically noted their issues with the ad's copy, upon their refusal they told Thinx not to "make this a women's rights thing."[126] Eventually, after much media coverage, the advertisements were allowed to be placed, and Thinx's refusal to back down to the MTA led them to be championed as a taboo-busting company leading the forefront against period stigma.

Following these initial controversies, Thinx has published a slew of other provocative campaigns. The following year, they entered into another conflict with a different subway system, this time San Francisco's BART system, after trying to publish advertisements that described their product as "pussy-grabbing proof," an obvious political jab at the then recently leaked comments of President Trump.[127] Though this original copy was ultimately rejected, Thinx was still able to post advertisements that labeled their products as "patriarchy proof" and

"glass-ceiling proof." Thinx has also incorporated transmen into their conversations around menstruation, necessarily queering the discourse around the bodily process. This campaign was a purposeful correction of their initial MTA advertisements, adopting the slogan "Underwear for People with Periods" rather than their formerly gendered catch phrase, and featured an extended interview with a transman. The video, a five-minute short, addressed many of the issues faced by trans folks, including the very real dangers of being outed as menstruating in public restrooms and the violence it can provoke.[128]

Thinx's latest ad, MENstruation, is their first nationally televised campaign. Akin to Gloria Steinem's pivotal essay, "If Men Could Menstruate," the advertisement hints at the gendered or sexist origins of menstrual stigma by imagining a parody world in which cismen menstruated, and how differently we would subsequently treat the bodily process. The full-length clip features a montage of scenes that – for the average menstruator – would be deemed mundane, leaking in one's sleep, passing a tampon under the bathroom stall, stretching in front of a mirror to check for any accidental stains, except they are all performed by cismen.[129] The most visually provocative moment of the advertisement is a scene within a men's locker room; the shot is tightly-framed on the back of what is supposed to obviously be a man's hairy upper thigh, and from his briefs hangs a tampon string – an explicit display of menstruation made even more shocking – or perhaps instead more permissible? – due to the gender-flip. The final message of the advertisement claims, "if we all had them, maybe we'd be more comfortable with them," a clear allusion to the gendered nature of menstrual stigma.

Not surprisingly, the commercial has already been banned by several broadcasts, including Disney, Discovery, ABC, HGTV, Lifetime, and TLC, specifically for its inclusion of The Tampon String.[130] Examining these marketing strategies in their totality, Thinx's various

commercials have sought to challenge the boundaries of what is considered "acceptable" discussion and portrayal of menstruation in the public sphere. The responses of censures by several media platforms is a clear indication of how transgressive these advertisements are, and Thinx's steadfast commitment to their messaging, and the widespread reach of their publicity, should be acknowledged as a valuable contribution to reshaping the public's view of menstruation and issues of gender.

However, paralleling the skepticism towards big-name corporations, there have been questions concerning the authenticity and validity of these feminist beliefs and to what extent they are put into practice by the company outside of eye-grabbing advertisements and PR ploys. In May of 2017, Thinx's "She-E-O" (CEO) and founder Miki Agrawal stepped down from her position after reported accusations of sexual harassment, including making inappropriate comments, groping employees, and even undressing in the middle of the office, and of erratic, emotionally abusive behavior.[131] Yet even before these accusations were made public, many pointed out her flimsy commitment to feminist values or practices. In a 2016 interview with *The Cut*, Agrawal shared that, until the start of her company, she did not relate to nor consider herself a part of the feminist movement, associating feminism with "angry" and "ranty" girls.[132] With the start of Thinx, Agrawal openly advertised that she wanted to create a cheerier, more accessible version of feminism that would not alienate customers. But in doing so, Agrawal also reified the stereotypes designed to delegitimize the real political demands of these "ranty" feminists and to deradicalize the identity of 'feminist' itself, creating a more palatable version to be sold to consumers. Tellingly, only a short while after this controversial interview, reports emerged of Thinx's arguably not-feminist working conditions, such as substandard pay, flimsy and sparse health benefits, including accounts of employees struggling to afford their birth

control.[133] From Agrawal's corporate policies, and own personal behavior, it appears as though Thinx's feminist alignment is more rhetorical than practical, an empty promise designed to allure and comfort customers rather than to provide any tangible support to menstruators.

Moreover, from a critical menstrual studies perspective, there are also doubts about the extent to which these companies, not just Thinx, seek to actually challenge or undermine the culture of concealment that still pervade discourses surrounding menstruation, especially given that these disciplinary expectations are the driving motivation for the sale of their respective products. Though these companies' pro-period messaging has in many ways stretched or altered the limitations of public discourse surrounding menstruation, they, too, still widely indicate an implicit acceptance of the necessity of containment, challenging the explicit repression or shaming of menstruation without allowing any "unsightly" exposure or interaction with the bodily process. The result differs very little from that seen with big-name corporations, providing a paradoxical celebration and simultaneous invisibilization of menstruation that allows for the culture of concealment to persist, so long as it uses more progressive language, and provides little space for any truly transgressive or radical forms of bleeding.

In one Instagram post, Saalt writes,

> "PRE-CUP life we all had those leaks that make us feel like moving countries and changing our name (and motivated us to change to cups). But guess what?! We've all done it, so it's ok!!! So let's share! Why the heck not?! Let it off your chest. What happened?! No period shame! PS. Also if you haven't switched to a cup, what the heck are you waiting for?! You'll have less stories!"[134]

The post, as intended, spurred a series of responses and conversations. Under the post, there are 57 comments openly sharing various individuals' experiences with leaks or other related period mishaps, providing an online community space to highlight and ultimately normalize a routine and, regardless of the products used or how vigilant the menstruator acts, inevitable aspect of menstruation. However, the caption of Saalt's post sends a contradictory message: though these stories of leaking aren't embarrassing or shameful, those who interact with the social media post are still encouraged to (if they haven't already) purchase the Saalt cup so that they will have less of them. Thus, the implicit message of the post is that a good or proper menstruator will still try to limit the future number of leaks, and leak stories, they have. Ignoring the fact that cups themselves are (especially for first-time users) susceptible to leaking, Saalt centers their own cup as a purchasable solution to preventing these stories, and does so without questioning why leaking is such a traumatic or shameful event (one, for example, that makes menstruators feel like moving countries or changing names) in the first place.

Meanwhile, the same controversial CEO of Thinx, Miki Agrawal, extends this product-focused discourse of concealment even further, portraying security from potential leaks as necessary for any social or political engagement. In another 2016 interview, she explains,

> "We have a product where women can feel safe and free wearing it – they don't have to have the shameful experience of having a leak or an accident any longer because they have a product that works for them. That gives them permission to be loud and proud about having their period."[135]

Agrawal then goes on to say that being "freed," through Thinx and through passing, from the worries of leaks then allows these women to partake in political and social activism, such as

protesting the tampon tax or the lack of menstrual product access among incarcerated women. As summarized by Agrawal, "From this pride, things change."[136] Notably, within this interview, Agrawal explicitly characterizes leaks as events that are "shameful." Even if this statement is an acknowledgement or characterization of the common perception of menstrual leaks, and not necessarily the opinion of Agrawal herself, she does little to deny or question it or why it might be the case. Moreover, while characterizing pride as the starting point for activism (and simultaneously denying more complex or contradictory feelings toward menstruation as a source of inspiration), Agrawal does not allow for a multiplicity of ways in which this political consciousness can be formed. Instead, she portrays the use of technical solutions, more specifically Thinx, and their supposed assurance against leaks, as the only way menstruators can begin to take pride in their body and to take political action. One can be positive about their period, but only if it is successfully contained and not seen by anyone else. In total, both examples from Saalt and Thinx serve as evidence of how these various companies, under the rhetorical guise of positivity, acceptance, and empowerment, are often, in practice, still complicit in – rather than critical of – the culture of concealment.

These companies' contradictory adherence to the culture of concealment has been spurred by their rampant and continued commodification of menstruation and the narrowing of the menstrual experience to one of consumption, as notions of cleanliness (a common justification for concealment) allow for, or often require, a commodity solution. Though most menstrual cups available today are made of medical grade silicone and require very little cleaning or maintenance to be safe for reuse, nearly every emergent cup producer has created their own branded supply of supplementary cup care, offering products such as liquid soaps, wipes, and other cleaning kits. They advertise these products as necessary for any users of their

menstrual cup, either through claims that the cleaning formula is tailored to the specific design of the cup, appealing to some implicit scientific or technological authority, or by highlighting the dangers that can arise from using "normal" soap. However, many of these risks are greatly exaggerated, and the products themselves are not necessary; given the material from which they are nearly all made, any menstrual cups can be washed simply by boiling, using water and any scent-free soap, or soaking overnight in hydrogen peroxide. Moreover, at times, the marketing of these additional cleaning products openly exploits the very narratives they claim to reject in order to boost their sales. For example, Lunette's cup cleaner is called "Feelbetter," tying relief – either physical, maintaining proper pH balance or preventing infections, or mental and emotional, mitigating insecurities about the cup's cleanliness or scent – to the use of an additional hygiene product. Meanwhile, Saalt's respective formula boasts in its product description of being naturally scented with citrus-essence, leaving cups with an aroma that is "less period, more bouquets of fresh oranges."[137] Once again, periods are free to be celebrated and championed, so long as their most natural byproducts, including odor, are disguised, altered, and perfumed.

Meanwhile, in 2018, Thinx debuted their own version of "supplementary" menstrual care: an exclusive, limited line of ($369) period sex blankets designed with the same absorbent fabric typically used to line their underwear. Upon its release, Thinx promoted the "innovative" luxury blanket as a way to de-stigmatize period sex.[138] Of course, the purpose of the product is to absorb menstrual blood and prevent any potential staining, thus limiting the "mess" necessarily entailed by (good) period sex. Yet the blanket itself is, once again, arguably unnecessary. An entire period, on average, sums up to only a few tablespoons of fluid, and it is unlikely that during sex the flow would be heavy enough to warrant Thinx's patented "four-layer technology."

Consequently, Thinx perpetuates the notion that period sex and period sex stigma inherently need to be "fixed" through special technology, once again ignoring greater, systemic questions of why period sex is shame-inducing at all while using their narrow interpretation as a tool to sell an additional product.

Despite their continued, implicit adherence to the narratives of hygiene and concealment, these alternative companies' overall branding – which loudly stands against any overt expressions of shame or secrecy– still allows them to continue to merchandize new forms of commodities, beyond technologies of passing, that seek to promote an unabashed "period pride." They use their bold and transgressive advertising and brand representation to create additional opportunities for trendy, "guilt-free" consumption, allowing customers to "buy in" to the growing popularity of rebellious and cheeky pro-menstrual rhetoric without necessarily having to pursue any lifestyle changes or collective action in changing the structural sources of stigma themselves. Across the various alternative menstrual product producers, there are a wide range of merchandise available. Saalt offers a ($34) "Period Equality Hat," a simple baseball cap decorated with an embroidered menstrual cup. Despite the product name, both the design and description of the product, which claims that the hat "reps a team with a bigger game to win—period equality and improved period care for all," make little connection to any of the material or political goals of the popular period equality movement or any broader political movement for access to resources.[139] In turn, Lunette sells a ($35) "Taboo Crushing T-shirt," designed to, as made obvious by the product name "crush taboos and inspire conversation surrounding menstruation."[140] Yet of the available phrases printed on the shirt – "This Is Our Period," "Bloody Awesome," and "Fresh AF" – only one explicitly mentions menstruation (though it does not acknowledge the systemic causes, nor even the existence of, menstrual stigma), while

the latter slogan – "Fresh AF" – plays into the very notions of cleanliness used to justify much of the shaming of menstruation in the first place. Finally, Thinx sells a ($37) "féministe" beret, and occasionally releases limited edition series of their underwear for various causes, such as one style embossed with the phrase "GRL PWR." Once again, the sale of this product offers no material change for women or for the cultural treatment of menstruation; yet in a postfeminist world, the mere claim of the label or identity is widely seen as a political or progressive act. While these products may foster a sense of individual pride or confidence for the customer, they do little to spur the sort of long-term systemic change necessary to confront attitudes towards menstruation. Instead, they have allowed commodification to make new inroads into the lives of menstruators, now extending their reach beyond concealment or management of menstrual flow into the expression of or commitment to social and political stances concerning the bodily process.

The sometimes-superficial commitment to feminist values and the heightened commodification and culture of concealment permitted and even encouraged by these companies is all the more apparent when contrasted to the products, marketing discourse, and practices of the Keeper, a menstrual cup brand started in 1987, the first commercial menstrual cup to emerge following their near disappearance in the mid-20th century. The Keeper describes their company values as "no box, no logo, and no nonsense," which, together, uphold their overall commitment to environmental sustainability and to challenging the unnecessary commodification of menstruation and uterus-owners' bodies.[141] Despite the uncertainty it may cause for potential customers, the Keeper refuses to use any unnecessary packaging materials or boxes to ship their cups. Recognizing that the material of the cup is durable enough for shipping, the Keeper instead sends their products in reusable cloth storing pouches, forgoing any other single-use material in

order to reduce their waste and environmental impact. Their cup, and the hand-made bags that they are shipped and stored in, also do not bear any form of the Keeper's logo. Thus, the cup, after being purchased, becomes that of the menstruator, rather than continuing to market and maintain the Keeper's brand name. Finally, the Keeper explicitly rejects the opportunity to include and sell extraneous products such as cup cleaning solutions or accessories. In fact, the only products available on the Keeper's website are two styles of menstrual cups – the original Keeper (made of natural rubber) and their Moon Cup (made of medical grade silicone) – in varying colors. The Keeper explains their simple product selection by appealing to both anti-capitalist and environmentalist beliefs,

> "When we find a product that can accompany our cups and add REAL VALUE, we will add it to our store. In the meantime, our mission is simple, our product is simple, and we don't want to clutter the conversation with magical cup cleaning solutions or other accessories of questionable value. We respect you. We respect the Earth. We will not contribute to landfill just to squeeze more dollars out of our customers with unnecessary items."[142]

Outside of these three central values, the Keeper also works to connect customers with various community, educational, and political resources. Under the "Resources & Links" tab of their website, the Keeper has compiled an eclectic list titled "Our favs," comprised of descriptions of and links to various feminist and environmental organizations and publications, none of which appear to have any formal connection to or partnership with the Keeper itself.[143] In total, the practices of the Keeper radically de-center their own brand and marketability in exchange for a steadfast dedication to anti-corporate, environmentalist, and feminist beliefs. This

model sharply contrasts with the business decisions of the other, more recent menstrual cup companies, in which their brand seeps through all outreach, and even, in the case of their respective blogs, education, redirecting the customers or viewers (either directly or indirectly) back to their products or their branded platforms. The beliefs that Keeper chooses to center, in place of their own brand name, are staunchly unaligned with that of the superficial, cheery rhetorical feminism promoted by the other companies, encouraging readers to take specific, definable political actions. Taking this social and political stance, it is notable that the Keeper, despite their legacy and historic role within the reemergence of menstrual cups, has received little, if any, coverage in the recent explosion of menstrual talk in mainstream media. Instead, those that have gained notoriety, including Thinx and Lunette, are primarily those who have, while providing some transgressive or provocative messaging, continued the process of commodification and maintained many aspects of the culture of concealment. Tampax's introduction of their own branded menstrual cups in 2018 – including a starter kit of two menstrual cups, a plastic carrying case, and 10 scented wipes – demonstrates just how much the alternative menstrual product industry has, since the initial breakthrough of the Keeper, transformed into an exploitable source of corporate profit.[144]

While highlighting and critiquing the process through which menstruation has been subject to increasingly naturalized commodification and consumerism, any analysis should not ignore nor write off the cultural impact and the transformative possibilities that arise from the new productive innovations and emotive advertising and progressive media representations that are widely driving this consumption. This movement of mainstream, corporate pro-period attitudes is one of the first times in US history that menstruators have been encouraged to embrace their bodies and their bodily functions by commercial media and menstrual care

producers. From this increased acceptance and pride comes the opportunity for menstruators to talk about their personal and lived experiences, to learn more about their own bodies, and to develop and share their own forms of embodied knowledge. Meanwhile, the rise of smaller, alternative menstrual product companies and the discussions triggered by their unique marketing advantages have pushed a greater number of consumers to question both their consumption habits, examining the hidden consequences on both the environment and their health, and the exploitative, manipulative practices of multinational corporations that once dominated the industry of menstrual care. To an extent, corporate period positivity has also introduced individuals to previously hidden marginalized identities intersecting with menstruation, such as trans, genderqueer, homeless, or incarcerated menstruators, and alluded, albeit more abstractly, to the patriarchal origins of menstrual taboos and stigmas. The incorporation of these critical ideas within popular culture and media has made them widely and commonly accessible, reaching those who otherwise wouldn't have willingly engaged with such topics, and has the possibility of inspiring individuals to dig deeper into these issues, to learn more, and to even take radical action.

However, the transformative potential this shift in corporate narratives and treatment offers is not a straightforward or clear liberation from the historic stigmatization and exploitation of menstrual shame. Rather than overturning the culture of concealment, the progressive rhetoric of these companies has maintained, and even partly expanded, the criteria and requirements of the culturally accepted menstruator. Now, the good menstruator must not only avoid leaks and successfully contain their menses, but do so in a manner that is environmentally, politically, and socially conscious and while boasting unapologetic positivity towards their period and their body. While, for the most part, these imperatives might initially seem beneficial or constructive,

they are used to further encourage and uphold postfeminist norms and behaviors of consumption and individualism, allowing menstrual care companies to portray their products as the path to becoming and practicing this ideal. This postfeminist translation has subsequently dissipated or diverted any progressive potential that could have risen from these shifting attitudes.

Instead, the modern menstruator, still searching for a technical solution to their inherent bodily or social deficiencies and to align themselves to the culture of concealment, has continued to be defined by their consumption habits. Today, with the intensification of branding, these choices are inextricably tied to corporate marketing and messaging that accompany the product. Subsequently, the purchase of a product also becomes the purchase of whatever experiences, feelings, or types of lifestyles that are promised by the brand image. When choosing a consumer experience, brands' political alignments are becoming increasingly important. According to a 2015 study, 87 percent of women ages 18 to 34 considered corporate social responsibility a central factor in guiding their purchasing decisions, while 75 percent claimed they were willing to pay more for socially or environmentally responsible products.[145] Within the new menstrual imperative, alternative menstrual companies have secured a privileged position amongst consumers, situated and portrayed as the new, trendy, and, most importantly, progressive solution to bleeding. By providing more environmentally sustainable products, daring to portray deviant images, and taking rhetorical, pro-menstruator political stances, they have separated their branding from that of the now out-of-style practices often associated with big-name corporations, establishing a form of prestige around the consumption of their 'better' (more "feminist" – as defined by postfeminism –, sustainable, and trendy) products. Customers of these companies are portrayed, through their purchases, as directly contributing to social problems: slogan t-shirts are now described as "taboo-crushing," luxury blankets "de-stigmatizing," and the switch to reusable

menstrual care in itself is, as explained by Saalt the solution to climate change. As they describe in one Instagram post, "[one customer] switched over to a cup to make her dancing life easier. THEN she realized she was also saving the environment! SHE IS, and YOU ARE TOO."[146] With the successful incorporation and cooptation of progressive ideals into this new age of postfeminist marketing, consumption of certain menstrual care and accessories becomes one of the primary forms of social critique, subsuming, for those privileged enough to access them, all other forms of action. Menstruators are now able to buy into the politics of their respective brands and reap the emotional satisfaction and social capital of their do-gooding, without actually having to change or sacrifice anything within their material conditions or social relations.

The consumption-driven concern with prestige and making the "correct" product choices – rather than enacting genuine political or social change – is reinforced by the fact only a certain privileged group of (middle-class, able-bodied, and straight-sized) people can obtain or use most of these progressive products – a disparity that, notably, but not unsurprisingly, goes unmentioned by the companies who sell them. The most celebrated forms of consumer menstrual "activism" – menstrual cups and period underwear – are only available to those who are either able to afford the $25-30 upfront costs for cups and the $30-40 for each pair of underwear (and the average menstruator usually needs at least 3 pairs per cycle) or to physically use them. Though alternative menstrual products are often portrayed, through marketing language and advertising visuals that incorporate varying genders and body types, as universally accessible, they are not compatible with all bodies. The insertion and removal process of menstrual cups – reaching inside one's vaginal canal to secure or break the cup's seal – requires a level of mobility and flexibility that many fat and/or disabled users have reported to be nearly impossible to

achieve.[147] Meanwhile, period underwear brands have been notoriously exclusionary in their sizing, with few brands offering sizes higher than 3XL.[148] As these products, through this current trend of marketing, become more important in defining a menstruator and in politicizing menstruation, these groups will continue to be increasingly excluded, even vilified, for not utilizing these products.

Yet the focus on the choices that the consumer makes, rather than the systems that make these options available to some and to others not is one of the many consequences that follow from the postfeminist rise of corporate pro-period attitudes and its commodification of empowering feminist language, symbols, and objectives. The transformation of the politics of menstrual stigma and exploitation – issues that are inherently collective and structural in nature – into opportunities for consumption is a postfeminist cooptation in which engagements with the social problems are done through an individual choice of consumption. The availability of period pride, or challenges to the menstrual stigma, as a consumable choice that one may freely decide to or not to buy into not only mystifies the structural barriers that actively prevent certain individuals still from obtaining it, but reinforces many of these oppressive systems, perpetuating exploitative capitalist ideals and socioeconomic differences. The mere fact that these ideals have become purchasable portrays de-stigmatizing menstruation as an optional accessory or add-on, rather than vitally necessary for social liberation and justice.[149] Once those who are able to access these products do so, they have little incentive to identify, examine, or even involve themselves in any collective, structural action. While these individuals may now be able to revel in their period pride rebellion, their emotional affects do little to change the cultural context that renders such expressions in the face of continued gendered stigma and exploitation necessary.

In total, this emerging corporate discourse, employing appropriated terms of empowerment, period positivity, and feminism to encourage increased consumption of menstrual care and accessories, has eclipsed other forms of engagement with the bodily process and subsequently restructured the ongoing politics of feminism and menstruation itself, rendering them safer, palatable, and more accommodating of neoliberalism and the continued patriarchal disciplining of female bodies. Corporate discourse has transformed menstruation's potential as a political issue from one of collective and radical action to one instead of consumption and individual choice. Under this new paradigm, individual empowerment becomes something to be purchased and an end in of itself, rather than a means for material change or collective social justice. Of course, this empowerment is simply a postfeminist repackaging of the freedom to purchase, to meet the trendy aesthetics of a brand, and to perpetuate the exploitative system of capitalism and commodification. Entrenched in these individualist notions of choice, the empowerment that corporate narratives offer is also ultimately one that serves those who are already privileged in access, reach, and benefits.

PLUGGING POLITICS: THE POSTFEMINIST LIMITATIONS OF THE MENSTRUAL EQUITY MOVEMENT

The most recent political engagement with menstruation, the menstrual equity movement, has widely failed to push mainstream politicization of menstruation beyond the same consumerist and product-based scope promoted by corporate advertisements. Instead, it has operated within – and even embraced – these neoliberal and postfeminist ideals by continuing to prioritize individualized, commodity-based solutions to "period poverty" and menstrual stigma and favoring within-system strategies for change, such as nonprofit charity, legal advocacy work, and private-public collaborations with various menstrual product producers and other

corporations. Though the menstrual equity campaigns have, like the recent shift in advertising language, contributed to the increase in media and political attention directed towards the bodily process and have brought legislative and cultural advances improving the material conditions faced by menstruators, they, too, leave many fundamental and politically crucial assumptions about menstruators' bodies and the treatment of menstruation unchallenged. Focusing solely on access to products, without any accompanying critique of the culture of concealment or capitalist exploitation, the menstrual equity movement reifies and permits the continuation of the disciplining and corporatization of menstrual embodiment and severely limits the radical potential of menstrual activism. As described by Bobel and Fahs, "while menstruation has 'come out of the closet,' there is still a deep investment in concealing" it.[150] The following chapter is an outline and subsequent analysis of the principles and goals of the menstrual equity movement, the main actors spearheading the movement, and the limitations inherent to the neoliberal approach to politics that it adopts.

The politicization of menstruation and menstrual activism, though often on the fringes or margins of feminist politics, boasts a long history, one that began with the woman's health movement in the 1970s.[151] At this time, feminists were greatly concerned with establishing the autonomy of their health and bodies outside of the influence and control of the patriarchal, male-dominated medical industry. This process naturally extended to include the bodily process of menstruation, as seen by Lorraine Rothman's innovation of menstrual extraction and her "Del Em" apparatus, which, though originally designed to provide at-home abortions, was used to extract the uterine lining and shorten menstrual cycles to mere hours. By the 80s, the TSS scandal introduced new issues of consumer rights in safety. In response to widespread corporate neglect, women's health activists, along with consumer rights activists, attempted to work with

the FDA and menstrual product industry to establish reforms, efforts that were widely unsuccessful.

In the following decade, with the onset of third-wave feminism and increasing punk influences, menstrual activists turned their back on the menstrual product industry and most institutionalized avenues for change completely, challenging the entirety of the "menstrual status quo" – from commodification, to environmental degradation, to stigmatizing advertisements, to the gender dichotomy perpetuated in cultural and material treatments of menstruation. As an extension of third-wave feminism, there was a conscious effort to avoid the white, middle-class, and cis-focused label often attributed to its second wave predecessors. Embracing a more intersectional approach, third wave menstrual activists included trans, intersex, and gender queer voices in political discourse and extended their analysis to make connections to racial and class lines. These radical third-wave feminists changed not only how menstruation was conceived, but also how it was treated; immersed in DIY activism, they made their own reusable menstrual products and created zines, or self-produced magazines, that discussed the exploitation of corporations and the intimacies of menstruation and menstrual blood.[152] Many of these same values carried into the early and mid-aughts. As the movement expanded and evolved, it adopted other names, such as radical menstruation, menstrual anarchy, or menarchy (a meld of the words "menstruation" and "anarchy"). Menarchy especially focused on making menstruation radically visible, using transgressive and purposefully repulsive displays of menstrual blood to subvert norms of the culture of concealment and of feminine embodiment in general.[153] Artist Ingrid Berthon-Moine's engagements with menstruation, including a photo series in which she photographed women wearing "lipstick" of their own menstrual blood, embody the sorts of transgressive, in-your-face menstrual militancy promoted by menarchists.[154]

Yet their approaches, unsurprisingly, were subject to immense pushback and critique, particularly within mainstream media.[155] With the turn of the following decade, and with very little recognition of its radical predecessors, a much cleaner and more respectable version of menstrual politics, the menstrual equity movement, emerged. This most recent political movement was formally termed in 2015 by Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, attorney, Vice President for Development at the Brennan Center for Justice, and now leading voice for menstrual policy within the US. Weiss-Wolf's menstrual awakening came when she saw a Facebook post advertising for a community donation drive for menstrual products to bring to a local shelter and that fostered her menstrual consciousness. From that initial realization, she co-founded the first law and policy organization for menstruation, Period Equity, and gradually refined the goals and principles of menstrual equity, which she outlines in her book *Periods Gone Public*:

> "In order to have a fully equitable and participatory society, we must have laws and policies that ensure menstrual products are safe and affordable and available for those who need them. The ability to access these items affects a person's freedom to work and study, to be healthy, and to participate in daily life with basic dignity. And if access is compromised, whether by poverty or stigma or lack of education and resources, it is in all of our interests to ensure those needs are met."[156]

The menstrual equity movement has been a continuation of the issues historically introduced and challenged by women's health and consumer safety menstrual activists. Product safety, ensuring that the content of tampons, pads, and other menstrual products are safe for extended and/or internal use, is still a central concern of current activists, who are pushing for

greater transparency from corporations to disclose their ingredients, along with conclusive research and studies of the long-term effects of using said products.

The movement has also served to introduce and problematize new aspects and intersections of menstruation with incarcerated and poor or homeless menstruators. These newly politicized experiences of and interactions with menstruation are primarily concerned with access to menstrual products. Within prisons, menstruation-based abuses range from providing limited or insufficient rations of menstrual products, to purposefully withholding products as a form of punishment or humiliation, to requiring violative behavior, such as requiring incarcerated menstruators to display their used products to prove their necessity or to change products in front of guards – and while handcuffed – during transport. Incarcerated menstruators who are denied necessary products from guards or prison administration have limited routes to accessing products on their own. Though menstrual products are often purchasable through commissary, the exploitation and privatization within prisons inevitably extends to menstruation. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons Commissary Price List, a package of eighteen generic tampons costs incarcerated menstruators $7.65, compared to an average price of around five to six dollars in most stores.[157] With the hourly working wages of prison labor ranging in the mere cents, incarcerated menstruators without outside financial support may find affording these prices impossible. The experiences of incarcerated menstruators, though outlined by Weiss-Wolf in her book, have accrued a much smaller portion of attention and coverage from the general menstrual equity movement. Yet those who have been involved have worked to highlight these abusive practices and are pushing for consistent and adequate provision of menstrual products within prisons.

Most attention has instead been directed to the prevalence of financial barriers such as homelessness and poverty to "properly manage" one's period. According to a recent study, 1 in 5 women in the US struggle to purchase menstrual products on a monthly basis.[158] Meanwhile, Lisa De Bode's reporting on homeless menstruating women in New York City for *Al Jazeera America* helped to highlight the unique experiences of homeless menstruators, including not only lack of menstrual products, but also access to adequate and private hygiene facilities for changing and/or cleaning products.[159] Current social and welfare policy does little to mediate these disparities. Menstrual products are not eligible for purchases made with public benefits such as food stamps, nor are they covered by Medicaid or included in Flexible Spending Account (FSA) allowances. Moreover, shelters and food banks are usually not offered public funding designated specifically for menstrual products. Thus, one of the goals of the movement is to provide charitable distribution of products and implement policy that allow for the public provision of menstrual products.

Despite the growing popularity of reusable products within the menstrual market (as discussed within the previous chapter), product distribution within charitable outreach has, for the most part, been focused primarily on gathering donations of disposables. The reasons for this decision are likely pragmatic. Reusable products, such as menstrual cups, period underwear, and reusable pads, often necessitate steep learning curves that typically require additional guidance to facilitate and ease use – knowledge and resources that may not be feasibly provided in large scale distributions or by the local shelters facilitating the final, direct provision to homeless and poor menstruators. Moreover, the well-documented difficulties in accessing clean water and private sanitation facilities (as covered by De Bode) raise concern about the feasibility of using such products. Finally, reusable products, though experiencing their "moment," are still

considered the alternative choice, meaning they are not necessarily the top choice of either individuals donating to the organizations or of homeless or poor menstruators requesting products.

The most widely covered issue of the menstrual equity movement is what has been dubbed the "tampon tax," or taxes menstruators must pay while purchasing their monthly supply of products. Though often mistaken as or conflated with a luxury tax, or a special, additional fee targeted towards specific nonessential goods, the tampon tax is, in actuality, a sales tax.[160] Sales taxes are defined and levied by individual states, and each state determines and provides a list of items that are deemed "necessities," or exempt from the sales tax. However, the varying lists of exempt items across states are more indicative of diverse industries' successful political bargaining than any real necessity. Tax-exempt items include cowboy boots, Mardi Gras beads, and Viagra, but, in 30 states, not menstrual products.[161] Currently, the tax on menstrual products generates an annual revenue of $120 million across all states.[162] In a world where effective containment of menstrual blood is certainly an economic and social necessity, and where menstruators are already, through gender pay gaps, economically disadvantaged, the decision to continue to earn revenue from menstruation, while still carving ridiculous provisions out of tax policies, is viewed by menstrual equity activists as unjust, symbolic of the patriarchal standards encoded in legislature.

Though perhaps unintentionally, menstrual equity advocacy is a rejection of much of the prior strategies of menarchists, offering a more respectable, and, unsurprisingly, more popular, form of political engagement with menstruation, by focusing on the "cleaner" aspects of menstruation (i.e. products) and pursuing change through state instituted and acceptable avenues

of advocacy. Within the movement, most of menstrual equity advocates' efforts have coalesced around nonprofit work, legal advocacy, and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Addressing the intersects of homelessness, poverty, and menstruation, a crop of nonprofits has emerged to help collect and distribute menstrual products to those who cannot afford them. Though there are countless organizations and even informal drives that have popped up around the country, two notable figures within the menstrual equity movement are worth discussing at length: #HappyPeriod and PERIOD. #HappyPeriod, based in Los Angeles, was founded in 2015 by Chelsea VonChaz, whose menstrual consciousness was sparked after witnessing a homeless woman with obvious menstrual stains on her clothing.[163] Meanwhile, PERIOD started in 2014 by Nadya Okamoto after, during her own stint of housing insecurity as a teen, talking to homeless women about their experiences of menstruation.[164] Both of these nonprofits are organized around the same basic structure, serving as central distributors of products to established community partners and offering avenues for other passionate individuals to start their own reproducible donation drives, or even "chapters," which typically host reoccurring donation drives, within local communities throughout the country. Through this process, both #HappyPeriod and PERIOD have been able to scale the size of their nonprofit and their outreach. What was once an informal, individual collection led by VonChaz is now a nonprofit with chapters that span across 30 cities within the US and that provides volunteers the resources to start their own donation drives. PERIOD, collaborating primarily with schools and universities, now has 230 high school and college chapters, which engage in product drives and/or campaigns for various menstrual equity issues, such as free and accessible products within their institutions' restrooms and eliminating their states' tampon taxes. Additionally, they host a

gala, the State of the Period, which draws celebrity and corporate sponsorship to fundraise for the organization and educate attendees on the state of menstrual equity.

These organizations have also begun ventures that expand beyond the gathering of donations and the provision of products. #HappyPeriod has developed a youth-centric curriculum focused on period health and self-efficacy. Published on helloimmenstruating.com, the free period guide for youth is titled SELF and is designed to promote a positive experience around menstruation and reduce stigma.[165] Units within the educational guide include self-care, which explains the basics of menstruation and provides information on a variety of menstrual products; self-aware, which offers information on menstrual disorders and cycle-tracking; self-love, which promotes natural remedies to menstrual discomforts; and self-empowered, which promotes acceptance of menstruation – and accidental menstrual stains. The illustrations accompanying the curriculum feature Black menstruators, a notable contrast to typical mainstream menstrual educational materials that have, like the bodily process' political movement, been predominately white-centered. Meanwhile, PERIOD has initiated several political advocacy projects. On October 19, 2019, they hosted the first-ever National Period Day, organizing 61 rallies across 50 states and five countries, and releasing their national petition, Free the Period, which calls for products within schools, shelters, and prisons and for the elimination of the tampon tax.[166] On this same day, they launched the #MenstrualMovement Coalition, a group of nonprofits, health providers, and corporations that support the causes of the menstrual movement.

Thus, some of these organizations, especially PERIOD, have been vital in pursuing, in addition to charitable distribution, what Weiss-Wolf considers "meaningful systemic change" through government intervention. Since developing her menstrual consciousness, Weiss-Wolf has used her legal background to develop and push for policy that measures up to the "menstrual

lens," centering the unique needs of menstruating bodies within legislature to provide the most widespread and efficient change. With this intent, she co-founded her organization Period Equity. Utilizing what it describes as the "traditional tools" of law, policy and legal advocacy, thought leadership, and media strategy, Period Equity focuses on three core issues: the tax, eliminating the sales tax placed on menstrual products; access, working to provide free menstrual products in schools, shelters, and jails; and safety, collaborating with scientists, nonprofits, and attorneys to make products safer and provide consumer warnings.[167] In addition to providing frames for policy interventions, the organization also works with media to keep the issues circulating within mainstream media, generating the popular and cultural discourse necessary to move the issues into political relevancy.

Under their "Take Action" tab on their website, Period Equity currently offers only one avenue for other menstrual equity advocates to get involved with the efforts of their organization, redirecting visitors to the site for their one-year "Tax Free. Period." campaign with Lola, a customizable menstrual product subscription company that offers 100 percent cotton products and complete ingredient transparency. The purpose of "Tax Free. Period." is to demand a nationwide elimination of the tampon tax by Tax Day 2021, extended from their previous deadline of Tax Day 2020. As a part of their efforts, they are requesting visitors of their site to sign their Legal Action Declaration in support of tax-free products. Additionally, they are coordinating the "largest sale tax protest" in modern history, a collective action towards the process of initiating lawsuits against the remaining states that still levy sales taxes on menstrual products. The protest takes place within bureaucratic channels: participants must purchase a box of menstrual products (the protest instructions casually mention that Lola is an option for purchase), complete a claim for a refund contesting the sales tax on the receipt as

unconstitutional, and mail the form and receipt to their respective state's Department of Revenue.[168] Outside of this basic plan of action, there is little information regarding future tasks or the usefulness of the protest in connection to state lawsuits.

Within this legal battle, menstrual equity leaders have found a committed legislative ally in Representative Grace Meng. Earning herself the nickname of 'period lady' in Capital Hill for her steadfast, albeit unsuccessful, dedication to the issue of menstruation, Meng has introduced several bills within the last five years encoding the goals of menstrual equity into policy.[169] In 2016, she introduced a legislative package that would promote increased access to menstrual products, including bills such as The Menstrual Products Tax Credit Act, which would provide a $120 refundable tax credit to low-income individuals who regularly use menstrual products; the Accurate Labeling of Menstrual Products Act, which – a more limited take on the Robin-Danielson Act – would require ingredient labels on menstrual products; and the Menstrual Products for Employees Act, which would require large employers (with 100 or more employees) to provide free menstrual products.[170] Similar policies have been reintroduced since. In 2017 and again in 2019, she introduced the Menstrual Hygiene Product Right to Know Act, a renamed version of the Accurate Labeling of Menstrual Products Act that would require ingredient transparency.[171] Finally, in 2019, Meng introduced a more comprehensive version of her Menstrual Equity for All Act of 2017. The bill, which sweeps across nearly all issues of the menstrual equity movement, would do the following:

1. Give states the option to use federal grant funds to provide students with free menstrual products in schools.

2. Ensure that incarcerated individuals detained in federal, state, and local facilities have access to free and unrationed menstrual products
3. Allow homeless assistance providers to use grant funds that cover shelter necessities to also use those funds to purchase menstrual hygiene products.
4. Allow individuals to use pre-tax dollars from health flexible spending accounts to purchase menstrual hygiene products.
5. Require Medicaid to cover the cost of menstrual products.
6. Direct large employers to provide free menstrual hygiene products to its employees.
7. Require all public federal buildings to provide free menstrual hygiene products in restrooms.[172]

While Meng's legislative attempts have all failed to gain traction within Congress, the menstrual equity movement has been able to celebrate some notable legislative victories on both the state and federal level. Since Weiss-Wolf and Period Equity's 2015 national petition against the tampon tax, in collaboration with Cosmo, seven states (CT, FL, IL, NV, RI, OH, and UT), two cities (Chicago and Denver) and the District of Columbia have overturned their tampon tax, and California has temporarily suspended their own. Continuing these efforts, Period Equity led a legal challenge against the tampon tax in New York State (NYS) in 2016, filing a class action lawsuit that pushed state legislators, just 10 days later, to eliminate their tampon tax, as well. In this same year, Period Equity also worked alongside the NYC Council to pass a legislative package that required free menstrual products to be provided in schools, shelters, and jails. [173]

Two years later, in 2018, these same measures were passed in a statewide law, making New York the third state – behind California and Illinois – to require menstrual products to be provided in schools.[174] Meng herself was able to work alongside the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program (administered by FEMA) to allow homeless shelters to purchase menstrual products with grant funds, changing internal regulations to include menstrual products within the list of acceptable purchases.[175] Meanwhile, the FIRST STEP Act, signed into law by President Trump on December 21, 2018, includes, alongside sentencing reforms, a provision that requires the Federal Bureau of Prisons to provide menstrual products to its inmates at no charge.[176] In October 2019, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the Menstrual Products Right to Know Act, which requires all menstrual product packages in NYS to contain a plain and conspicuous printed list of all the ingredients used within the products, granting product manufacturers 18 months to comply with the new regulation.[177] Finally, and most recently, on March 27, 2020, a $2 trillion stimulus bill in response to the COVID-19 pandemic included a provision that would allow individuals to use health savings accounts and flexible spending accounts to pay for menstrual products.[178] The act does not specify whether these changes will remain in tax law following the pandemic.

Throughout these charitable and political endeavors, corporations have been ever-present partners and supporters of the menstrual equity movement. Presumably to support or allow for an increasing scale of products to be distributed, nonprofits, including Period and #HappyPeriod, have partnered directly with menstrual product producers, who donate their products in bulk through CSR commitments. Unsurprisingly, many of these private business allies include the "feminist" brands discussed in the previous chapter, such as Thinx, the Diva Cup, Saalt, Lunette, and Lena, that embody the sort of fresh and trendy period pride that pervades the menstrual

equity movement. However, as discussed, most large-scale collections and distributions of menstrual products are more readily supplied by big-name disposables, such as Always, Tampax, and Kotex. Thus the menstrual equity movement, focusing on widescale distribution of products as one of their central political issues, has granted – with some notable exceptions to be discussed – these corporations a central role in their campaigns, even as they face growing feminist and mainstream criticism for their shaming advertising strategies and their disregard for safety or sustainability. Yet like most CSR, this involvement is more often than not, as described by Bobel and Fahs, "thinly-veiled veiled corporate PR," forgoing only small portions of their profits, and sacrificing little else, for opportunities to align their brand name with the political movement.[179]

In 2018, Kotex became the founding sponsor of the Alliance for Period Supplies, a coalition of community partners that collect, warehouse, and distribute period supplies to homeless menstruators in various local communities. Customers are able to, according to Kotex's website, contribute to the alliance by donating money or to bring their "U by Kotex" products (no other brands were specifically mentioned) to designated donation centers.[180] Meanwhile, Always started in 2019 a new hashtag campaign, #EndPeriodPoverty, which focuses on the effects of period poverty among young schoolgirls. Additionally, they have established their own buy-one, get-one model, providing a donation to NGOs with every engagement with Always' social media posts or purchase of their products.[181] Finally, both Kotex and Tampax are a part of PERIOD's #MenstrualMovement Coalition, situating themselves in support of policies that would increase the accessibility and consumption of their own products.[182]

Despite their claims of allegiance to the menstrual equity movement, these larger corporations have, in practice, exhibited a much more limited dedication to all its pillars or issue

areas. In the face of other efforts, such as those to disclose product ingredients, that endanger their profits, these brands have pushed back and protested. In response to the threat of menstrual product manufacturers being required to release their ingredients, the Baby and Adult Hygiene Products Association (BAHP), which represents the interests of Procter & Gamble and Kimberly Clark (makers of Always and Kotex, respectively), claimed that they were: "concerned that this new requirement will result in confusion for consumers and disrupt the availability of these products in the states."[183] Such rhetoric serves as scare tactics to minimize both the campaigns of menstrual equity activists, who are obviously also dedicated to the accessibility of menstrual products, and to disincentivize state or federal regulation.

The contradictions within both the commitments of these big-name manufacturers of disposable products and the menstrual equity movement's goals of distributing large amounts of products (which typically tend to favor cheaper, big-name disposables) while still advocating for consumer safety has opened space for another menstrual product industry to get involved in the menstrual equity movement, implicitly offering their products as the more ethical option – for both donors and consumers invested in menstrual equity – in the face of heightened scrutiny towards the safety of products. These newer start-up companies such as Seventh Generation, Sustain, and Lola manufacture and sell disposable products, with a "woke" twist: advertising full transparency in their ingredients and/or using organic materials in their products. Like their bigger name competitors, they too have situated themselves as supporters of the most recent menstrual movement, encouraging the distribution of products and the elimination of the tampon tax. To demonstrate its own commitment to menstrual equity, Seventh Generation has changed its product packaging, which now features silhouettes of various women embossed with the message "on a MISSION," and is now donating $0.43 for every pack of tampons, pads, and

liners sold – up to 1 million packs per year – to grassroots organizations helping to provide access to products.[184] Additionally, the company partnered with PERIOD to host the organization's first National Period Day, featuring their logo, alongside PERIOD's, in promotional videos, rally signs, and t-shirts.[185] Meanwhile, Sustain has been notably active in campaigns for ingredient transparency, collaborating with legislators in New York State. Finally, Lola has been an active supporter of Weiss-Wolf's organization, Period Equity, collaborating with the legal advocacy organization to co-found their campaign "Tax Free. Period."

Once again, throughout these various forms of outreach, branding is inseparable from political commitments, providing favorable PR and media features that only enhance the companies' progressive image and boost their sales. With their product-focused political goals, the success of the menstrual equity movement offers benefits to these manufacturers, as well; increased access to products may, in part, translate to increased purchases of their own respective product. Unlike Always, Kotex, and Tampax, these companies have also vocalized support for the menstrual equity movement's goal for ingredient transparency, a regulation that would certainly advantage them over their big-name competitors who have shrouded their products in secrecy for the last half-century.

It's interesting to note that it is not just menstrual product producers who are engaging in CSR and providing resources or financial support to menstrual equity actors. PERIOD's #MenstrualMovement Coalition, a long list of menstrual product manufacturers, reproductive or sexual health organizations, and other private supporters of the movement, also includes Adidas, while their 2019 State of the Period Gala's primary sponsor was Nike.[186] Meanwhile, Weiss-Wolf's own actions were initially spearheaded through partnerships with Cosmo, with whom her organization Period Equity partnered to start its first nationwide petition to eliminate the tampon

tax.[187] Thus, the menstrual equity movement, through its intentional partnership with corporations, has provided the opportunity for a variety of brands to align themselves with an increasingly popular political movement.

The menstrual equity movement's partnership with corporations, though a sharp departure from former menstrual activists, especially those of third-wave and punk feminism, is altogether not a surprising or out-of-character decision given its larger philosophical and political framework. Nor is it out-of-place within the greater cultural context of postfeminism and neoliberalism, in which countless progressive causes have been engulfed by corporatization and nonprofit bureaucratization.[188] However, these political decisions have fundamental implications for the outcomes and impact of the movement, dulling the potential radical edge that can, and historically has, emerged from menstrual activism.

The first chapter of this project served as an outline of the ways in which menstruation – its stigmatization, concealment, and economic exploitation – is a systemic cultural issue, one that must, adopting an intersectional approach, target and transform the structures at play to provide any sense of comprehensive liberation. However, Weiss-Wolf, and the menstrual equity movement as a whole, have taken many of these systemic forces involved, primarily neoliberal capitalism, corporatization, and the culture of concealment (as it pertains to the patriarchal discipline of female embodiment), and – in true postfeminist fashion – accepted them as de facto conditions, natural or inevitable forces through which change must be made, rather than being potential sites of change themselves. With this stance, any solutions offered by the movement must adhere to and accommodate – rather than challenge – the rules, norms, and assumptions of these systems, forgoing the radical change that only a systemic overhaul can bring in exchange for small, incremental (and sometimes symbolic) forms of change. While they make bold

promises of empowerment or liberation (such as PERIOD's petition to "Free the Period"), they bring, in actuality, only small changes (such as eliminating menstrual products' sales tax) to current material conditions and, in the process, distort the root causes and sources of these very issues, rendering the more radical avenues to bring about change less visible.

Examining the specific goals and rhetoric of menstrual equity, the movement claims to bring menstruation into the spotlight and to diminish the discomforts and embarrassment surrounding the bodily process by making access to menstrual products a public issue and priority. While menstrual stigma, fueling the culture of concealment, is often mentioned, its introduction is then quickly pivoted to a separate issue of accessing products, claiming that one can find pride, confidence, relief, and – to be discussed further – *dignity* from their consumption. With this rhetorical bait and switch, there is no examination of stigma's patriarchal origins, nor are there any connections made to other ways in which female bodies – including its fat, hair, and beauty – are socially disciplined and contained. Thus, with this postfeminist transformation of menstrual activism, the issue becomes not that certain individuals are subject to greater disciplinary control and economic exploitation because they menstruate and exist in bodies assigned female, it is that they are unable to conform to these standards of disciplinary control that are required of their menstruating bodies. Meanwhile, any barriers – racial, gendered, or economic – that may exacerbate the severity of disciplinary control or prevent them from accessing these resources, or technologies of passing, are effaced or ignored, while the systems that work to reproduce these barriers are reified and further normalized as the natural, even if unpleasant or in cases problematic, conditions within which menstrual activism must operate.

By focusing on menstruation in terms of concealment, the menstrual equity movement also completely overlooks other potential sources of political or social engagement that involve

aspects more deeply engrained in the experience and embodiment of menstruation itself. Unlike its radical predecessors, the current political movement exhibits no responsibility or need to reclaim menstruators' relationships to their bodies from consumption, as would occur through practices aligned more with bodily literacy. With the exception of #HappyPeriod's emerging project, SELF, there has been no widespread or mainstream push for better public reproductive and sexual education to promote a more holistic and diverse representation and understanding of menstruation, challenging its current portrayals as a chore, an entrance into womanhood, or as central to female puberty (often at the expense of other experiences such as sexuality or pleasure). However, Weiss-Wolf's conscious decision to separate her movement from such "controversial" policy issues, to be discussed further, eliminates the possibility of this inclusion entirely.

While organizations like #HappyPeriod have begun to fill these gaps, their educational initiatives have not been enacted on the same scale, or received with the same support, as those for distributing products to individuals in need. Finally, with a movement focused on promoting universal conformation to the culture of concealment, there is no space or encouragement offered for forms of radical bleeding, or conscious bleeding habits, such as free bleeding, that directly confront the shaming effects of stigma. The menstrual equity's decision to forgo these alternative forms of engagement with the bodily process, ones that directly challenge the stigmatization and shaming of menstruation, to prioritize access to products is even more glaring in the face of research measuring the efficacy of these strategies. As highlighted by Bobel, research – particularly in the Global South – demonstrating the connections between access to products on school and job attendance and success are still inconclusive.[189] However, academic understanding, especially in the discipline of psychology, of the effects of menstrual stigma on

wellbeing are much more widely documented. With shame begetting more shame, offering de-stigmatizing education and menstrual representations has far more measurable effects on the health and potential of menstruators.[190]

Forgoing these potential engagements with menstruation, subsequent outreach and solutions offered by the menstrual equity movement are limited primarily to promoting access to products, or the technologies of passing that allow menstruating bodies to conform to their settings. After all, there is no shame for those who successfully conform to the culture of concealment, nor are there acceptable frustrations towards the responsibility and burden of accessing technologies of passing when they are provided in public arenas and freed of unnecessary taxation. Yet with this approach, there is also no longer a collective responsibility to question cultural expectations of proper menstrual behavior or to alter the economic systems of wealth and resource distribution as was once seen in third-wave feminist and punk engagements with menstruation, which challenged the norms of bleeding and widely critiqued the patterns of exploitation and profit seen as inherent to the functions of corporations. Instead, the issue becomes a matter of ensuring that enough individuals have access to products that the culture of concealment is not to be seen as an undue or unfair burden. Meanwhile, the justifications for menstrual equity's policies, including the more "socialist" measures of providing free products that appear to come in conflict with a capitalist agenda, are entrenched in capitalist notions of worth tied to productivity and contributions to the economy. Throughout her book, Weiss-Wolf reminds the readers that access to menstrual products allows menstruators to be "productive members of society," and that any inability to obtain these products has implications for the well-being of our society, or, rather, our society's systems, as a whole.[191] Echoing similar narratives following WWII that encouraged women into the work force, or even more recent responses to

PMS, Weiss-Wolf thus frames the harmful experiences currently tied to menstruation (though misidentifying their root source), as important not solely because they affect menstruators, but because they have consequences for the stability of current economic and political systems.

Weiss-Wolf's dedication to these systems has impacted how menstrual equity understands the issues it claims to address. Within the menstrual equity movement's various topic areas or issues of engagement, listed earlier in this chapter, the respective root of each problem is (mis)interpreted or (mis)read as an access to products, leading to public discussions that obfuscate the true nature of these structural challenges and public responses that have limited material impact on their underlying conditions. The menstrual equity movement has highlighted the unique forms of exploitation and humiliation experienced by incarcerated menstruators because of their bodily process: withholding access to products as a form of punishment or control and requiring excessive amounts of surveillance of product usages. Given these documented patterns of abuse, the FIRST STEP Act was championed by menstrual equity activists as a vital measure in resolving this issue by ensuring that all federal prisons provide their inmates with free, unrationed, and sufficient access to menstrual products. Following their reasoning, with incarcerated menstruators now legally guaranteed unrestricted access to products, these degrading practices, reliant on maintain a product scarcity, would no longer be able to occur. However, the act only impacts those held under federal prisons, which hold only 16,000 of the 219,000 individuals who are assigned female and incarcerated, the remainder of which are held in state prisons that do not fall under the jurisdiction of the federal policy.[192] Moreover, while access to menstrual products may remove a tool by which guards and prison administration control and abuse incarcerated menstruators, it does not address the greater issues underlying these practices or the systems that produce these patterns of humiliation, such as the

differential power relations between inmates and guards encouraged and bred by the prison-industrial complex, thus allowing them to persist in other forms. [193] Though incarcerated menstruators *should* be ensured access to products, the rhetoric used to bring about that change should not disguise or mask this structural context.

Meanwhile, the complex range of obstacles faced by homeless and poor menstruators are attributed fundamentally to a lack of menstrual products. Without these products, according to menstrual equity activists, these individuals are unable to navigate the world or perform to their best ability, preventing them from reaching what would be an otherwise free or unmediated path to academic, professional, and, subsequently, economic success. Big-name menstrual product producers, as a part of their commitment to the issue, have led the research efforts to quantify and empirically support the narratives present within the menstrual equity movement, linking access to their products to issues such as school attendance. For example, according to a study conducted by Always, 1 in 5 girls have missed a day of school because they did not have access to menstrual products.[194] The intent of this discussion is not to discount the reality of this issue: in a world designed for non-menstruators, access to technologies of passing provide tangible benefits, while breaching the culture of concealment can bring real, measurable social punishment. These penalties are disproportionately severe for menstruators who are operating within the intersection of poverty or who are trans, as classism and transphobia force even more stringent restrictions and expectations upon menstruators, and, in the case of trans menstruators who are "outed" by their bodily processes and openly transgress the patriarchal gender binary, pose heightened risk of violence. Instead, it is to call into question the implications surrounding this ongoing narrative and the subsequent responses proposed by menstrual equity advocates and menstrual product corporations alike. Within the accounts of menstrual equity campaigns, period

poverty and the resulting class immobility, are extracted from a much greater context of various, interwoven obstacles, including the gendered wage gap, austerity cuts to welfare support, widespread employment discrimination against trans people, all of which have contributed to the increasing prominence of trans folks and cis-women within measurements of poverty and homelessness. Within this greater context, other issues can drive missed school days or job absenteeism: a lack of childcare, illnesses exacerbated by healthcare disparities, or difficulty obtaining or affording transportation. These various factors go unmentioned within the menstrual equity movement's public discourse.

Ignoring or overlooking these structural issues, the solutions that they subsequently offer, rooted in within-system change and supporting corporate figures, are widely limited, focused primarily on the tampon tax and direct provision of products. In justifications for its elimination, the tampon tax is often portrayed as yet another financial barrier or additional cost menstruators face, in the face of gendered economic discrimination, for managing a natural part of their bodies.[195] Thus, its elimination is seen as a measure to at least partially ease the financial burdens of obtaining these products. While perhaps symbolically important, the tampon tax itself does not bring much material change or difference for accessing products; the mere pennies added onto the cost of a six-dollar box of tampons is often not the problem for those who struggle to afford it. In search of more impactful changes to product affordability, the campaigning efforts made for the tax's elimination – a policy that is in of itself a relatively safe and inexpensive policy for states – could instead be directed towards the producers of menstrual products themselves, highlighting the stifling oligopoly that currently controls the market and their rising consumer prices for practically unchanging products.

Fortunately, the narrow impact of removing the tampon tax was recognized and acknowledged by Weiss-Wolf, who has vocalized her support not only for charitable interventions, but for direct, government-sponsored provision of products in public spaces. In the eyes of menstrual equity activists, this newfound accessibility will have resounding effects on the prospects of homeless and poor menstruators, freeing them to pursue the education and jobs they were held back from presumably only because of their lack of access to these products. However, these solutions simplify these experiences and render the other obstacles of poverty and homelessness invisible. Intended or not, these efforts also absolve the state of any responsibility to intervene in or correct the structural economic issues driving and creating this poverty and homelessness by individualizing these conditions. If menstrual products are the sole impediment to menstruators' prosperity, and if these products are now freely provided, then homeless and poor menstruators' ability to improve their socioeconomic status is solely dependent on their own personal decisions and behavior. Thus, implicitly, if they fail, then the fault lies not within some greater system, but within themselves. This sort of individualistic, boot-straps rhetoric is rampant within menstrual equity campaigns promoting the distribution of products. In a video created by the Alliance for Period Supplies, access to products means that "they (menstruators) can all achieve their potential."[196] Meanwhile, a young girl who no longer struggles to afford products asserts: "because I don't have to worry about my period, I'm going to make sure I become somebody."[197]

If access to products is not characterized as instrumental to academic and professional success for poor and homeless menstruators, and, by extension, to maintaining the "fairness" of economic and political systems, it is often rhetorically grounded in the moral or even human rights-based cause of ensuring "dignity." Within these narratives, the necessity of access to

menstrual products transcends pragmatic political or economic concerns; it is a matter of obtaining something seen as fundamentally and basally human: the proper concealment of menstruation through technologies of passing. Yet the reliance of such discourse in a movement that also claims to eradicate menstrual stigma poses a certain paradox. As succinctly captured by Bobel and Fahs, "when the trope of dignity is leveraged to argue for menstrual product access, the underlying assumption is that the body that discloses its menstrual status is necessarily *un*dignified."[198] Thus, in trying to ensure that all menstruators are able to bleed without experiencing shame, the menstrual equity movement perpetuates and reifies the very beliefs of menstrual stigma. Once again, the intentions of this critique are not to diminish the importance or benefits of accessing menstrual products. Impoverished individuals are not required to become martyrs for the radical menstrual cause, forced to free bleed in the name of challenging taboo, while those who can afford, and do, contain their menses are allowed to continue without any similar criticism of their own complicit practices. Instead, the aim is to redefine what the source of such humiliation or indecency is within these situations. The biggest tragedy or misfortune of the phenomenon of homeless or poor menstruators being forced to soil themselves should not be that they have stains on their clothing, but that they are in an economic system that purposefully exploits, excludes, and denies these same individuals access to resources – including menstrual products – to ensure that others profit. This distinction starkly reveals the inherent limitations and shortcomings of the menstrual equity movement, which, by nature of its politics, is so fundamentally acceptant of these systems that they cannot extend their scope of analysis to critique them.

One of the starkest indicators of the menstrual equity movement's lack of radical potential is its widespread governmental – and, even more notable, bipartisan – support.

President Trump, who made press for comments that alluded, degradingly, to the menstruating status of Fox News host Megyn Kelly – during his presidential campaign, was the unlikely signee of the FIRST STEP Act that mandated federal prisons to provide free menstrual products to their inmates. Meanwhile, the Republican governors of Illinois, Ohio, and Florida all approved removing their respective states' tax on menstrual products.[199] Finally, figures such as Texas State Representative Drew Springer, a "lifelong conservative Republican" with endorsements from Texas Right to Life, Alliance for Life, and Conservative Republicans of Texas, have vocalized their support for eliminating the tampon tax.[200] This cross-party support, certainly unique for any policy intended to support female bodies, is the intended result of policy-framing strategies pursued by Weiss-Wolf. While developing the pillars and goals of what she would later term menstrual equity, Weiss-Wolf purposefully and explicitly separated the bodily process from other related issues of sex education and reproductive rights (while failing to even acknowledge its separation from critiques of capitalism). As she pragmatically explains in her book, the latter topics are more "controversial" policies, ones that have historically been sources of immense contention and, within recent politics, have gained little traction within Congress.[201] While this observation is certainly true, these issues are divisive, in part, because they open much larger questions of the expectations and control over female bodies and the allowed behavior under the norms of femininity.

Thus, the choice to focus on products literally sanitizes the scope of menstruation's politics. This political relocation, situating menstruation within the norms of consumption and bodily concealment, renders it a more palatable (and, necessarily, less radical) topic for political engagement. When further examined, then, Representative Springer's support for menstrual equity, particularly the elimination of the tampon tax, is not all that surprising. As he himself

frames the issue: “we have the ability to say, ‘I’m going to buy a Coke.’ I make that *choice* freely. Ladies don’t have that same option.”[202] The *choice* discussed here should not be misidentified – it is not one of exerting or pursuing greater bodily autonomy, but rather of having freer participation within and access to the consumer economy, ideas of agency and freedom that are entrenched in neoliberalism. As such, the heavy governmental – and Republican – presence within the menstrual equity movement, rather than a hopeful indicator of progressive politics, should instead serve as a canary in a coal mine, signaling the true implications of the policies at hand, that is, that they offer little substantive challenge to the current political and economic systems.

In the face of increasing commodification of the bodily process (expanding now to public affects and attitudes), the menstrual equity movement has only made it easier for these trends to persist. To put it simply, the menstrual equity movement is not about disentangling bodies from the current and ongoing forms of discipline or even about removing the systems of economic exploitation that is exerting an increasing grip on the bodily process and its political engagements. Its assumption that simply more products are the solution is the expression of an ideology rooted in capitalism and acceptant of the culture of concealment. The specific responses menstrual equity has offered, the tampon tax and public provision of products, are, in reality, symbolic save-faces of capitalism, and of a broader ideology of neoliberalism and individualism, that create an easy-to-achieve, and non-disruptive, “feminist” and pro-menstruator political symbol for policymakers to point to as evidence of their progressiveness and of the “equality” of menstruators. Therefore, in its totality, the menstrual equity movement offers what Bobel and Fahs characterize as an “anemic” form of politics, one that forgoes comprehensive (and necessary) structural change in exchange for marginal gains and further normalization,

reinforcing the fundamental oppressive systems of discipline and commodification that continue to shape menstrual behavior.[203]

CONCLUSION

Throughout most of US history, the menstruating body has been the invisible and overlooked site at which patriarchal and capitalist disciplinary rituals have been enacted, reproduced, and reinforced. Yet just as the stigmatization and corporate control of menstruation had entered the margins of feminist consciousness and concerns as another controlling expectation of femininity, the topic broke into mainstream coverage and, subsequently, cooptation. The radical potential that third wave feminists had carefully and analytically garnered around menstruation, challenging the corporate industry and reclaiming the abject of menstruation, was quickly subsumed by the bodily process' postfeminist adoption in popular culture, which has since ensured that further cultural engagements with the bodily process are redirected, albeit now through seemingly progressive or empowering channels, to neoliberal, capitalist norms of individualism and consumption. Postfeminism has successfully maneuvered this transformation by rebranding patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism's disciplinary measures under progressive and pro-menstruator affect and language. The new companies quickly breaking into the markets and popularized by mainstream media now offer a much gentler and supportive (yet still ever expansive and tightening) grip on menstruation and menstruators' bodies, portraying their products as expressions of political and social commitments. Meanwhile, while the menstrual equity movement promises to be a path to break through the menstrual glass ceiling and offer a period-positive future for menstruators, the change its advocates offer return participants to these very same companies, implicitly confirming reliance on technologies of passing as inevitable or normal rather than challenging or uprooting the culture of concealment

itself. Thus, with their projects widely intertwined, both menstrual product manufacturers and the menstrual equity movement have, while bearing smiles and rebellious messages of in-your-face periods, greatly maintained the oppressive discipline and commodification of menstruation and menstruators' bodies. Moreover, by portraying the solutions of these various problems surrounding menstruation (from environmental concerns to period stigma to period poverty) as ending at accessing or purchasing products, these cultural agents diminish the possibility, or even perceived need for, a critique or analysis of the structural roots of these issues or of menstruation's location within these greater systems of oppression.

This project has been an attempt to provide an alternative perspective to the unwavering optimism and celebration typically offered in response to the most recent rebellious and vocally acceptant cultural attitudes surrounding menstruation. Rather than simply accepting these positive representations and rhetoric as an indication of the liberation of menstruation and of complete empowerment for menstruators, it has sought to instead generate some ambivalence and healthy skepticism towards these shifting public attitudes and discourse by "unmasking" and directing attention towards the fundamental, and often hidden, effects or implications of such changes, primarily that menstruation has widely *not* been untangled from patriarchal and capitalist systems of disciplinary control and commodification. In the process of illustrating these concerns with the cultural treatment of menstruation, this undertaking has offered two contributions to the conversation of menstruation within the last decade. First, it has, levying the work of body and critical menstrual studies, legitimated the significance of menstruation in terms of body, gender, and class politics, providing an overview and historical context leading up to the postfeminist era. The majority of the project then has focused on identifying the uptick of progressive advertisements and products within the menstrual market, along with the emergent

politics of the menstrual equity movement, as the result of a much greater postfeminist cooptation of any insurgent feminist or radical ideals within US culture, deconstructing the ways in which this various messaging serves to actually heighten consumption and further entrench the culture of concealment into expected menstrual behavior.

Having now a deeper awareness of how menstruation's discipline and commodification has been transformed under this postfeminist paradigm, subsequent analysis must return to the initial questions introduced within the first chapter, namely, what alternative experiences or ways of knowing has the disciplining of menstruators' bodies and menstruation hidden? What possibilities are continuing to be missed or overlooked in society's accepting and following of these postfeminist ideals? These questions then, understanding the specific manifestations and consequences of postfeminist menstruation, could be more directly rephrased to "how could menstruators experience their bodies if their cultural setting directed them not to conceal or plug their bodies or to simply buy into a limited and exclusive form of freedom, but instead to pay attention to their bodies, and to critically examine and challenge their locations and roles within the greater systems of power?

The historical and now intensified culture of concealment and commodification of menstruation has made it difficult for an alternative to even be imagined. Transgressive bleeding, through "free bleeding" or other blatant infringements of the culture of concealment, creates the space for a range of menstrual experiences and embodiments, as it breaks through the homogeneity produced by the menstrual mandate to question the immutability and necessity of such norms. Yet transgressive bleeding certainly should not be the newest regime of menstrual behavior to be imposed onto menstruators – one extreme simply replacing another – and to be expected and practiced universally. Instead, political engagements with menstruation must move

towards a relationship with the bodily process that, while acknowledging and accepting the inevitable use and convenience of menstrual products (especially when navigating a non-menstruating society) and even the gratification some products can bring (such as reusable products, which often require a more intimate interaction with menstruation), is still committed to the belief that containment should not be the sole focus of menstruators' relationships to their own bodies. In order to do so, menstrual advocates must lift the pressures and anxieties associated with the culture of concealment, along with the stigmatization and mystification it breeds, so that menstruators can instead freely learn of, engage, and interact with other aspects of their menstrual cycles, such as tracking the mental and physiological symptoms of their cycles and blood flow. These factors, which can serve as indicators of period health and normalcy or help to provide a better understanding of one's unique physical and emotional needs throughout all stages of their cycles, certainly have more relevance and benefit to menstruators' wellbeing and relationship to their own bodies than whether they have stained their clothing. Consciously choosing to pay attention to these bodily intimacies is, in the face of patriarchal expectations of femininity and the shaming of female bodies, a rebellious act, challenging cultural notions of what bodies are not to be seen, explored, or appreciated.

Fortunately, even the adaptive strategies of postfeminism could not allow the menstrual mandate and commodification to maintain a complete, monopolistic hold on the cultural treatment of menstruation. In the midst of growing popular support for commodified menstrual solutions, there are still advocates and educators who are working towards this more embodied and anti-corporate conception of menstruation, attempting to shift away from product usage and to move the cultural discussion beyond the limited political engagement offered by menstrual product advertisements and the menstrual equity movement.

One of these notable figures is writer, educator, and comedian Chella Quint, who, though based in Sheffield, England, has been a pioneering expert in media and menstruation literacy in both the US and the rest of the world. Her menstrual career first began in 2005 when she created a one-time zine entitled "Chart Your Cycle," which encouraged readers to do exactly that, providing a 10-year chart along with information on reusable products, anatomy, and menstrual myths.[204] This initial project led Quint to develop the "Adventures in Menstruating" a series of zines that used biting and pointed comedy to unpack the shaming messages of menstrual product advertisements. A year after she produced "Chart Your Cycle," Quint coined the term "period positive" and began the #periodpositive movement. Period positivity, modeled after the neutral and holistic approach of similar cultural movements, such as body positivity and sex positivity, was created under the belief that one does not have to love or enjoy menstruation in order to talk about reproductive health openly and without shame. #periodpositive, unlike other hashtags discussed throughout this project, is not a branding scheme, but rather, akin to a fair-trade certification, a campaign-turned-trademark-turned-charter-program whose mark can be claimed by schools, nonprofits, and even companies who have demonstrated a commitment to a specific set of inclusive values known as the Period Positive Pledge.[205] In its totality, the Period Positive Pledge holds claim to 20 different commitments, which, together, offer a complex and radical cultural understanding of menstruation, recognizing gender diversity, encouraging cycle awareness (even beyond menses), and acknowledging that any material change in how menstruation is viewed and treated must necessarily entail education and conversation. Specific standards include, "#4: it's period positive to learn and teach about the entire menovulatory lifetime, because we all deserve to know what happens from menarche to menopause and beyond."; "#7: It's period positive to advocate for menstruators on the margins because

oppression is intersectional"; and "#8: It's period positive to center education, training, and choice in rigorous holistic solutions to period poverty because anything less is ineffective long-term." Like her work in the Adventures of Menstruating, Quint's educational outreach through #periodpositive has continually challenged the corporate control over representations of menstruation, explicitly advocating for unbranded education and media literacy to foster awareness of the strategies and motivations of menstrual product manufacturers, allowing menstruators (and non-menstruators alike) to filter and unarm any stigmatizing messaging.

Meanwhile, returning domestically, holistic nutritionist, writer, and podcast host Amanda Laird has sought to redefine menstruation from a nuisance or monthly inconvenience in need of plugging up to a fifth vital sign, equally as valuable as pulse rate, temperature, respiration rate, and blood pressure in indicating the overall health of an individual. In her private practice, she uses her training as a holistic nutritionist to help menstruating individuals develop a better relationship with their period. Since 2017, she has also been the host of *Heavy Flow*, a body positive and feminist podcast that covers a range of reproductive health topics, from birth trauma, to DIY gynecology, to perimenopause, to decolonizing menstruation, through interviews with other reproductive health experts, activists, and scholars.[206] Throughout her episodes, Laird and her guests offer a feminist approach to health, critiquing the misogyny and racism within the field of medicine and promoting body literacy as a subsequent act of resistance. In 2019, Laird released her first book, *Heavy Flow: Breaking the Curse of Menstruation*, which focuses specifically on the topic of menstruation and body literacy.

Finally, Cass Clemmer, better known as the "Period Prince" has made headlines for highlighting the experiences of trans and nonbinary menstruators who must grapple with menstruation's cultural association with femininity. Clemmer first went viral after posting a

picture of themselves sitting on a bench, legs spread wide and marked by a telltale red stain, holding a sign that reads "periods are not just for women. #bleedingwhiletrans."[207] Since then, they have developed their own character, Toni the Tampon, and a coloring book, *The Adventures of Toni the Tampon*, designed to provide a resource for children to navigate gender, sexuality, and menstruation, working to reverse the current, gendered cultural conceptions of menstruation.

These activists, and many others partaking in similar work, have already begun to depict menstruation as a complex, structural issue that can play a role in the broader conversation of and struggle for social justice. Yet the bodily process's connections to forms of oppression must still be granted a more central and explicit role in menstrual politics, allowing its advocates to create allies and coalitions that can collaborate and strategize together to uproot the systems of oppression at play. There is a myriad of linkages that can, and should, be made, all of which would serve only to deepen and further the menstrual movement.

The political status of menstruation is, in part, an issue fundamentally concerned with Western, capitalist cultures' treatment of bodies, particularly the determination of which configurations of bodies are normal, accepted, and allowed, and which are not and subsequently subject to discipline or pathologization. Menstruation, designated as Other for its association with femininity, has continually been pathologized, framed as a debilitation or source of irrationality, while menstruators have been forced to accommodate and, through technologies of passing, shape themselves to a world that simultaneously stigmatizes their existence. Similar patterns drive the systems of both ableism, or the systems of power that target and exclude those who are mentally and/or physically disabled, and fatphobia, or discrimination against fat individuals. Both anti-ableist and anti-fatphobia political and academic efforts have addressed the ways in which structures are built around normative, cultural defaults and assumptions of

which bodies are allowed in public spaces, leading to the invisibilized and normalized exclusion of those who do not conform. Meanwhile, activists challenging fatphobia have highlighted how bodily insecurities and fears of fatness are invoked by, and ultimately serve, capitalism to drive consumption across all body sizes, spurring the billion-dollar diet and exercise industries. The connections between menstruation and the two movements are obvious. Menstrual politics should build upon the foundations established by these movements, while also beginning to challenge the ways in which ableism and fatphobia have persisted within its own efforts, such as the inaccessibility of certain reusable menstrual products and the dearth of menstrual education offered specifically for those with cognitive and physical disabilities.

As an issue of health, menstruation's pathologized Othering has also rendered it vulnerable to patriarchal medicalization. As discussed, the focus of the medical industry has been widely skewed towards this alienated view of the bodily process, narrowly focusing on issues such as PMS, that assume the pathology of menstruation, rather than acknowledging menstruation's role in overall reproductive – and general – health. Ironically, other menstrual disorders, such as PCOS, endometriosis, and dysmenorrhea, are often understudied and its medical research underfunded or underattended. Menstrual advocates have already been calling attention to these still-pathologizing portrayals of menstruation and of subsequent medical disparities; Laird, in addition to advocating for menstruation as a fifth vital sign, has released several podcasts sharing the experiences of those with endo and PCOS and exposing the systems of discrimination within medicine, while one of Chella Quint's Period Positive Pledge tenets (#18) acknowledges the complex experiences of menstruation, leaving room for those to explore or identify perhaps unhealthy menstrual cycles. The lack of research and understanding of menstrual disorders specifically is significant given that they, in addition to causing disruptive

and debilitating symptoms, can, when left untreated, have severe impacts on reproductive health and fertility. Thus, menstruation, already a crucial (albeit often unrecognized) factor of reproductive health, can, through these menstrual disorders, create more explicit connections to the framework of reproductive justice, necessitating an analysis of not only how gender-based discrimination persists within medicine and menstrual health, but how systemic racism, classism, and transphobia can subsequently create further disparities within accurate diagnoses and effective treatments of these still relatively understudied disorders.

Likewise, those who have been involved in efforts concerning the environmental effects of the continued, mainstream use of disposable products should turn to the framework of environmental justice, which utilizes the basal understanding that some communities or demographics (primarily Black and brown individuals) are subjected to greater and disproportionate environmental harm and endangerment, to guide their critiques of the disparate regulations and exploitative behaviors of manufacturers of disposable menstrual products. As they protest the pollution generated both by the production and disposal of these products, enviro-menstrual advocates should use their platform to highlight the racialized effects of said environmental degradation and understand that centering and allowing communities of color to advocate for their own safety is crucial to the menstrual cause, as well.

Finally, menstrual activism should be skeptical of the ways in which the culture of concealment and period poverty can be used as figureheads to introduce neocolonialist programs of neoliberal economic development through the menstrual hygiene management movement, a global outreach campaign – primarily focused in the Global South in countries in Southeast Asia and Africa – addressing the lack of effective or safe period products that, according to its advocates, has caused widespread issues of school absenteeism, reproductive infections, and

poverty.[208] In similar fashion to the menstrual equity movement, the menstrual hygiene management movement has widely served to erase historic global inequities by claiming these differences are solvable simply through access to a pad. Moreover, menstrual hygiene management programs, in attempt to mediate these issues of access, have opened many countries up to the big-name companies, such as the now-familiar brands of Kotex, Always, and Tampax, operating at multinational level. Subject to global power differences, consumers within these countries are vulnerable to even further exploitation, as seen by the viral online hashtag #MyAlwaysExperience, which revealed how menstruators in Kenya experienced rashes and other problems of irritation while using Always pads, opening the question of whether the corporation was selling lower quality products specifically to African countries.[209]

The inclusion of and connections to these varying issues are not just enhancements or optional additions to menstrual politics, they are necessary for the creation of a legitimate, intersectional movement pushing for authentic structural change. The philosophical and political power of menstruation lies in its positionality; situated within the intersections of gender, the body, and commodification, it allows academics and activists to grasp a multiplicity of oppressions at the root. The postfeminist representations of menstruation – portraying products as political and political solutions as accessible through products – has, through the erasure of structural factors, completely severed these linkages. In part, this conclusion has served to highlight the channels through which these connections can be restored. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the privilege that still remains within menstrual politics, even outside of the menstrual equity movement.

The majority of individuals engaging with menstruation and any of its political movements have, historically, been white, cisgender, and middle-class, positions that grant

enormous systemic power. In part, the concentration of whiteness in menstrual activism comes with the privilege of having the ability to actually engage in the politics of menstruation in the first place. Any outward and political discussion of menstruation challenges ideas of respectability, an act that, for people of color whose bodies bear historical denigration and racial representations or imagery of savagery or hyper-sexualization, is especially dangerous.[210] Meanwhile, the development of technologies of passing have granted menstruators a freedom that, albeit temporary, short-term, and still disciplinary, many other intersections of oppression do not have, allowing menstruators to "opt out" of being the recipients of more direct and confrontational manifestations of stigmatization. Consequently, even if a commitment to transgressive bleeding eventually comes to the forefront of popular and mainstream menstrual activism, the movement must continue to center intersectionality, understanding that menstrual stigma is experienced differently across identities, and structural analyses of the systems that surround menstruation and that connect its to other issues of justice. Without this radicalized conception of menstruation as an issue with connections to nearly all forms of oppression – from patriarchy to capitalism to racism to ableism and colonialism – the overt, in-your-face engagements with menstrual stigma are trivial, a mere performance playing or temporarily dabbling in the experience of oppression, rather than channels for meaningful material change and liberation. Fanta Sylla, in a 2015 Tumblr post, best describes the privileges the menstrual activism risks effacing, asserting, "so you can put period blood war paint on your face, and YES, in your context, it will probably be subversive and revolutionary. For the rest of us just going outside, walking in the streets, exposing our vulnerable, repulsive bodies is subversive and radical."[211] These are the stories that should determine the direction of future menstrual movements.

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