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Elizabeth Tripp

Sarah Lawrence College

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THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BLOODY: IMAGES OF MENSTRUATION IN
TELEVISION AND IN MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM

Elizabeth Tripp

May 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Sarah Lawrence College

ABSTRACT

My thesis investigates the origins and tactics of the menstrual health movement; examines contemporary representations of menarche (the onset of menstruation) in TV programs; and postulates how these two streams of discourse could and should form a more symbiotic relationship. My first chapter defines menstrual activism, which seeks to destigmatize menstruation, using two different frameworks. The first was conceptualized by critical menstruation studies scholar Chris Bobel in her book *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010). She categorizes the beginning of menstrual activism as either feminist-spiritualism or radical menstruation activism.¹ Both aim to demystify cultural negativity surrounding periods but have very different strategies and belief systems. The second framework was developed by gender researcher Lauren Rosewarne, who has qualified menstrual activism in arguably more comprehensive terms: subtle, moderate, and extreme.² She briefly discusses these camps in *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (2012). Notably, menstrual humor comes up again and again across efforts of demystifying and normalizing menstruation. I argue that menstrual humor can advance the menstrual activism movement depending on the punchline. Significantly, the movement has paid little attention to the way in which menstruation is depicted on television.

Chapter Two traces the history of menstruation in popular culture before assessing the menstrual status quo according to television. I analyze thirteen media portrayals of menarche that aired from 2001-2019. Depictions of menstruation in popular culture proliferated during this time period due in large part to the influx of women working in the television sector. My

¹ Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2010), 65-194.

² Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 164-170.

research is focused on menarche narratives because first periods are more prominently featured than any other period, and I narrow my analysis to television because it is arguably the most pervasive form of popular culture. One might presume that recent menstruation-themed storylines are more progressive than early portrayals, but my research proves otherwise. Stereotyping and taboos run rampant across this trajectory, including in contemporary representations. Fortunately, there is some resistance to these problems within the episodes. Notably, I demonstrate that there are more instances of menstrual activism in episodes written by women compared to those written by men. Another similarity relates to the demographics of the storylines. Almost all of them center on white cisgender girls from a middle- or upper-class background. Media producers are making a statement about whose stories matter.

My conclusion gives concrete action steps that menstrual activists can take to leverage popular culture to positively impact the menstrual rights movement. I highlight the urgency of this matter by relating the implications and consequences of the stigmatized status of menstruation. I do not pretend that empathetic portrayals of periods on TV will totally upend taboos; after all, as famously theorized by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, people engage with the media in uncontrollable ways. But we do have the opportunity to shape the intended message of these narratives. This can move the needle towards normalizing menstruation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate my thesis to the three people without whom it could not have been created: me, myself, and I!

I also want to extend my gratitude and appreciation to my advisors, Priscilla Murolo and Rachelle Rumph. I learned so much. Thank you for your guidance.

Lastly, to my family. To mom, dad, peanut, and Puka. Thank you for your unconditional love and support.

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Introduction: A Missed Opportunity

Gloria: "I got a rotten headache, it's that time of the month again."

Gloria's father, Archie: "Hey, hey, hey there, little girl, try talking delicate [sic] in front of your father." ...

Gloria: "Daddy, it's a normal human function."

Archie: "I don't like to hear about a normal human function."

Gloria's mother, Edith: "Gloria, maybe your father would rather hear, 'It's mother nature come to call.'" [Laugh track]

Archie: "All right, if you gotta talk about it, that would be a little nicer, a little more ladylike."

Gloria: "Why do I have to be ladylike? I mean, what's there to be ashamed of? Would you believe there's a woman who works with me who says, [mockingly] 'I just got a visit from my friend.?'"

Archie: "All right, that's kinda nice too." [Laugh track] ... "That is enough of that. I don't want to hear any more about women's problems."¹

While *All in the Family* (1971-1979) is often described as a television show ahead of its time, the fact that it broadcast the first representation of menstruation on the small screen is typically glossed over. Created by Norman Lear, *All in the Family* revolved around working-class bigot Archie Bunker. In "The Battle of the Month," an episode from season three that aired in 1973, his daughter Gloria is feeling unwell due to her period. She and Archie butt heads over the appropriateness of openly discussing menstruation. Archie is clearly uncomfortable even using euphemisms. Gloria admirably refuses to be shamed for her menstrual status; yet, she also uses a euphemism herself ("that time of the month") and thus accommodates the menstrual communication taboo. Of course, she is doing so on account of the direction given by the writers and the directors of the episode, all men. While the representation of menstruation in "Battle of the Month" is paternalistic and problematic, the show deserves *some* credit for being the first to depict this "normal human function." Thankfully, with changes to the cultural landscape and the influx of women into the television sector, the depiction of menstruation on TV would become more resistant to period taboos. Still, problems persist.

¹*All in the Family*, season 3, episode 24, "Battle of the Month," directed by Bob LeHendro and John Rich, written by Norman Lear, aired March 24, 1973, on CBS.

Menstrual activism, which seeks to destigmatize menstruation, has apparently paid little attention to the way in which periods are portrayed on the small screen. The reasoning behind this neglect is unclear. Perhaps menstrual activists are just one more subset of society that dismisses popular culture as frivolous, unimportant nonsense. In any case, their indifference to on-screen representations of menstruation limits the movement's power to advance the cause. Popular culture is a form of storytelling, and storytelling not only describes the world, but also shapes the world. The way in which menstruation is delineated on television is indicative of cultural attitudes towards periods. Furthermore, the images emblemize how menstruating bodies should behave during their periods.² This episode of *All in the Family* informs the audience that periods are “women’s problems” and an uncouth topic of conversation, let alone analysis.³ Storytelling can also be an act of subversion and resistance. It can problematize menstrual taboos and prevailing patriarchal ideologies, allowing viewers to imagine what a world without them would look like. Popular culture, then, can help eradicate period stigma to a significant degree.

Expanding the Menstrual Activism Movement

My thesis investigates the origins and tactics of the menstrual health movement; examines contemporary representations of menarche (the onset of menstruation) in TV programs; and postulates how these two streams of discourse could and should form a more symbiotic relationship. My first chapter defines menstrual activism, which seeks to destigmatize menstruation, using two different frameworks. The first was conceptualized by critical menstruation studies scholar Chris Bobel. When researching for her book *New Blood*:

² Chris Bobel et al., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 865.

³ *All in the Family*, “Battle of the Month.”

Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation (2010), Bobel discovered that early menstrual activism was mainly comprised of feminist-spiritualists and radical menstruation activists. The former wing celebrates menstrual cycles and valorizes the female body, while the latter is more concerned with upending the patronizing practices of Feminine Care industry.⁴ Both aim to demystify cultural negativity surrounding periods but have very different strategies and belief systems. The second framework was developed by gender researcher Lauren Rosewarne, who has qualified menstrual activism in arguably more comprehensive terms: subtle, moderate, and extreme.⁵ These branches, which are discussed in *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (2012), translate into the refusal to use period-related euphemisms; the attempt to provoke public consciousness; and the placement of menses (menstrual blood) in the public domain. Menstrual humor comes up again and again in both frameworks of menstrual activism. I argue that period jokes can advance the menstrual activism movement depending on the punchline. Significantly, the movement has paid little attention to the way in which menstruation is depicted on television. I contend that this needs to be rectified and that media messaging is a legitimate form of activism.

Chapter Two traces the history of menstruation in popular culture before assessing the menstrual status quo according to television. I analyze thirteen media portrayals of menarche that aired from 2001-2019. Depictions of menstruation in popular culture proliferated during this time period due in large part to the influx of women working in the television sector. My research is focused on menarche narratives because first periods are more prominently featured than any other period, and I narrow my analysis to television because it is arguably the most

⁴ Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2010), 65-194.

⁵ Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 164-170.

pervasive form of popular culture. One might presume that recent menstruation-themed storylines are more progressive than early portrayals, but my research proves otherwise. Problematic period jokes (those that shame women) run rampant across this trajectory, including in contemporary representations. Another theme relates to the demographic of the first-time menstruator. Almost all of these storylines center on white cisgender girls from a middle- or upper-class background. This, clearly, is not reflective of the viewing public. Media producers are making a statement about whose stories matter. An upside to these TV episodes is that there is some resistance of menstrual taboos. I discovered that there are more instances of menstrual activism in episodes written by women compared to those written by men.

My conclusion gives concrete action steps that menstrual activists can take to leverage popular culture to positively impact the menstrual rights movement. I highlight the urgency of this matter by relating the implications and consequences of the stigmatized status of menstruation. I do not pretend that empathetic portrayals of periods on TV will totally upend taboos; after all, as famously theorized by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, people engage with the media in uncontrollable ways. Hall claims that viewers will either have a preferred, oppositional, or negotiated reading of a text. Preferred indicates that the audience accepts the producer's intended meaning of a text; oppositional means that viewers reject the intended message; and negotiated falls somewhere in-between these two frameworks of interpretation.⁶ But we do have the opportunity to shape the intended message of these narratives. This can move the needle on the stigmatized status of menstruation. Familiar with the tactics and coded language that shrouds periods in shame and secrecy, I contend that menstrual activists have a moral imperative to engage with the popular culture discourses. The stakes are too high not to.

⁶ Sue Thornham et al., "Encoding/Decoding," in *Media Studies: a Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 28-38.

As other critical menstruation studies scholars have done before me, I will shift between using gendered (“women and girls”) and non-gendered (“menstruators”) language when discussing menstruation.⁷ I recognize that not all women menstruate and that not all who menstruate are women. Many cisgender women, such as those who are pregnant or postmenopausal, do not experience menstruation for a wide range of health reasons and physical conditions. Until very recently, the menstrual experience of trans and nonbinary individuals has received little scholarly attention.⁸ I also recognize that menstrual negativity is rooted in misogynistic oppression. The onset of menstruation is often conflated with becoming a woman in the United States and around the world. For better or worse, menstruation is irrefutably gendered. By moving back and forth between gendered and non-gendered language, I aim to acknowledge the historical origins of menstrual taboos while also including and valuing all menstrual experiences, regardless of gender identity.

Bloody Important Period Scholarship

My research draws from scholarship that considers menstruation a dynamic category of analysis and a lens that reveals a myriad of social inequities. Scholars such as Chris Bobel and Elizabeth Kissling have been doing this research for decades, but the literature has received new appreciation due to changes in the political and cultural landscape. While the field is rapidly growing and gaining ground, menstrual cycles remain an understudied, niche topic of consideration by scholars. By calling upon scholars and activists to engage in popular culture discourses, my thesis aims to widen both the field of critical menstruation studies and the

⁷ See Breanne Fahs and Ela Przybylo, "Feels and Flows: On the Realness of Menstrual Pain and Crippling Menstrual Chronicity," *Feminist Formations* 30, no. 1 (2018): 206-229, [doi:10.1353/ff.2018.0010](https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2018.0010).

⁸ See Karla Rydström, "Degendering Menstruation: Making Trans Menstruators Matter" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, ed. Chris Bobel et al. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 945-959; Sarah E. Frank, "Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics," *Sociological Inquiry* 90, no. 2 (2020): 371-404, [doi:10.1111/soin.12355](https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12355).

menstrual activism movement. With gratitude, I turn to four informative and engaging texts that my research builds upon.

With great attention to detail, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010) conveys the images of menstruation that were promoted by early menstrual activists, images that remain popular today. Author Chris Bobel is an expert in the circumstances surrounding the development of menstrual activism. As mentioned, she categorizes the first iteration of menstrual activism as having two camps: radical menstruators and feminist-spiritualists. Both aim to smash period stigma but utilize very different strategies. Having completed fieldwork for her book, Bobel provides insight into the demographics of menstrual activism. Most of the activists she interviewed identify as white and queer. Today's menstrual activism movement is certainly more racially diverse than in Bobel's findings. Contemporary activists are greatly concerned with the accessibility and affordability of period products; advocates would do well to review *New Blood* and recall the importance of also fighting stigma.⁹

The current state of menstrual activism is perhaps best encapsulated by Jennifer Weiss-Wolf's recent book *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (2017). A lawyer writing from a human rights perspective, she recounts her role in developing "menstrual equity," a framework that takes into consideration the unique needs of menstruating bodies. To Weiss-Wolf, the normalization of menstruation depends upon a feminist legislative agenda, one that includes a ban on the tampon tax. She is optimistic, clearly believing in the power of the people, even recommending action steps readers can take. Yet she spends disappointingly little time discussing early menstrual activism. It is as if she started the

⁹ Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2010).

movement just a few years back, all by herself. While she undoubtedly helped shine a spotlight on menstrual issues, her disregard of early feminist engagement with menstruation – the work that *her* work stands on – is troubling.¹⁰

Weiss-Wolf contributed an essay about her fight for equitable menstrual policy to *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, published in late July of 2020. Already considered a formative text in the field, the one-thousand-page handbook is an unmatched resource for anyone interested in critically examining the menstrual cycle. *The Palgrave Handbook* includes many different types of scholarship, from academic articles and medical data to manifestos and comics, resulting in an engaging and interdisciplinary resource. Despite its impressive breadth and depth, the text makes only a few passing references to media representations of menstruation.¹¹ While I commend this first-of-its-kind attempt to overview the current state of critical menstruation studies, I propose that this survey is incomplete without a serious analysis of on-screen portrayals of periods. My research helps to fill this gap.

The only book-length text that examines the way in which menstruation is depicted in popular culture is *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (2012). While researching, author Lauren Rosewarne uncovered almost 200 allusions to menstruation across film and television narratives. She discusses both major and minor storylines, highlighting overarching patterns and themes. She briefly discusses resistance of menstrual taboos, both in these narratives and in real life. Rosewarne categorizes this activism as subtle, moderate, or radical, a more comprehensive classification system than Bobel's. According to Rosewarne's research, most representations are problematic in that they ridicule and degrade menstruating bodies. While she asserts that these harmful narratives perpetuate patriarchal ideologies in real

¹⁰ Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017).

¹¹ Chris Bobel et al., *The Palgrave Handbook*.

life, she backs up her claim with little concrete detail. We are left wondering what the implications and consequences of period stigma look like.¹²

A Brief History of the Stigmatization of Menstruation

Menstruation has been stigmatized for millennia. Feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir credits this phenomenon as socially constructed. Her hugely influential book *The Second Sex* (1949) poses the question, “What is a woman?” She proceeds to argue that man is considered default and that woman is always defined in terms of her relationship to him. He is Subject; she is Other. As a result of this tension, traits of Otherness – notably, menstruation – are demonized.¹³ To de Beauvoir, women are not Other because they bleed; rather, menstruation is considered a curse because women are Other.¹⁴

Furthermore, women are socialized to fear and disparage their own traits of Otherness. This remains true today. Women have *essentially* become *essentialized* bodies. We are expected to transcend the reality of our embodiment, to manipulate and “perfect” our abject bodies.¹⁵ We must hide, conceal, and sanitize traits of Otherness so as to make ourselves attractive to men and the patriarchy. Our value is our appearance, and *leaking* is unattractive. The constant self-monitoring and self-policing (“Did I bleed through my clothes?” “Did they hear me open the wrapper of a pad?” “Does my menstrual blood smell?”) is exhausting and time-consuming. Women are expected to manage their bodies rather than society manage its expectations.¹⁶

¹² Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*.

¹³ Simone De Beauvoir, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, and Constance Borde, *The Second Sex* (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 3.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse: the Business of Menstruation* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 4.

¹⁵ Joan Jacob Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997).

¹⁶ Bobel, *The Palgrave Handbook*, 17.

While well-intentioned empathizers have suggested that menstruators out their menstrual status (“I’m bleeding!”) to normalize menstruation, menstrual taboos are pervasive and deep; not every menstruator will be comfortable sharing this information. Moreover, the risk not to uphold menstrual taboos is too high – it is a false choice. Research from the *Palgrave Handbook* demonstrates that the inability to adhere to the concealment imperative leads to self-disgust and feelings of dehumanization.¹⁷ Women of color, especially Black women, have historically been constructed as “unladylike” and even “animalistic” and thus need to uphold “a politics of respectability to secure cultural capital.”¹⁸ Expecting or demanding that women out their menstrual status is simply not realistic given this cultural context.

The Feminine Care (FemCare) industry has long perpetuated and profited off of this problematic ideology. Feminist professor Elizabeth Kissling describes this exploitation in her book *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation* (2006). She contends that FemCare advertisements use coded language that shrouds periods in shame and secrecy.¹⁹ Her theorizing rings true in a 2006 Tampax Pearl advertisement (see Figure 1). With her back turned, a tan woman in a pool is embarrassed because the top of her two-piece swimsuit has fallen off. The tagline reads, “Embarrassment Happens. Leaks Shouldn’t.” Clearly, the media producers wanted to convey the impropriety of menstrual stains. Bleeding through clothing should be avoided at all cost – more specifically, about \$10, the cost of a box of Tampax Pearl tampons. Another example of coded language is advertisers using blue liquid as a stand in for red blood up until 2017.²⁰ Even in our presumably enlightened times, the media producers were apparently

¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

¹⁸ Ibid.; See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45-97.

¹⁹ Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse*, 4.

²⁰ JR Thorpe, “This Is The Actual Reason Pad Commercials Use That Weird Blue Liquid,” *Bustle*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-do-period-product-commercials-use-blue-liquid-the-practice-has-a-long-biz-arr-history-2957963>

uncomfortable with the idea of an accurate representation of periods to sell their products – menstrual blood is just that gross! As menstrual activist Chella Quint has pointed out, no other convenience product uses shame in its promotional materials. Even if the intention is to be humorous, shaming menstruators in ads is wrong, lazy, and upholds the concealment imperative.²¹ While this messaging may seem unworthy of serious scholarly attention, the “it’s just a joke” facade undermines the ability to effectively enact social change. It is dismissive of lived experiences.

Unfortunately, the shaming of menstruation in the media is usually not combatted in educational settings. The onset of menstruation is typically introduced within broader discussions about puberty and sex. A recent study examined forty children’s books that provided information on menstruation. The reviewers reported that the books “shortchanged girls” by presenting puberty as a problem needing to be solved.²² While there is little research on if and how menstrual health is incorporated into sex education programs in schools, what we do know is dismaying. Contributors to *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* revealed that “educational settings overwhelmingly promote negative messages about menstruation, as girls learn to associate menstruation with fear, embarrassment, disgust and revulsion.”²³ Sex education is abysmal as a whole. As of March 1, 2021, 39 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as of 2014, fewer than half of high schools and only a fifth of middle schools taught all sixteen critical sex education topics recommended by the CDC.²⁴ Only the eleventh subject –

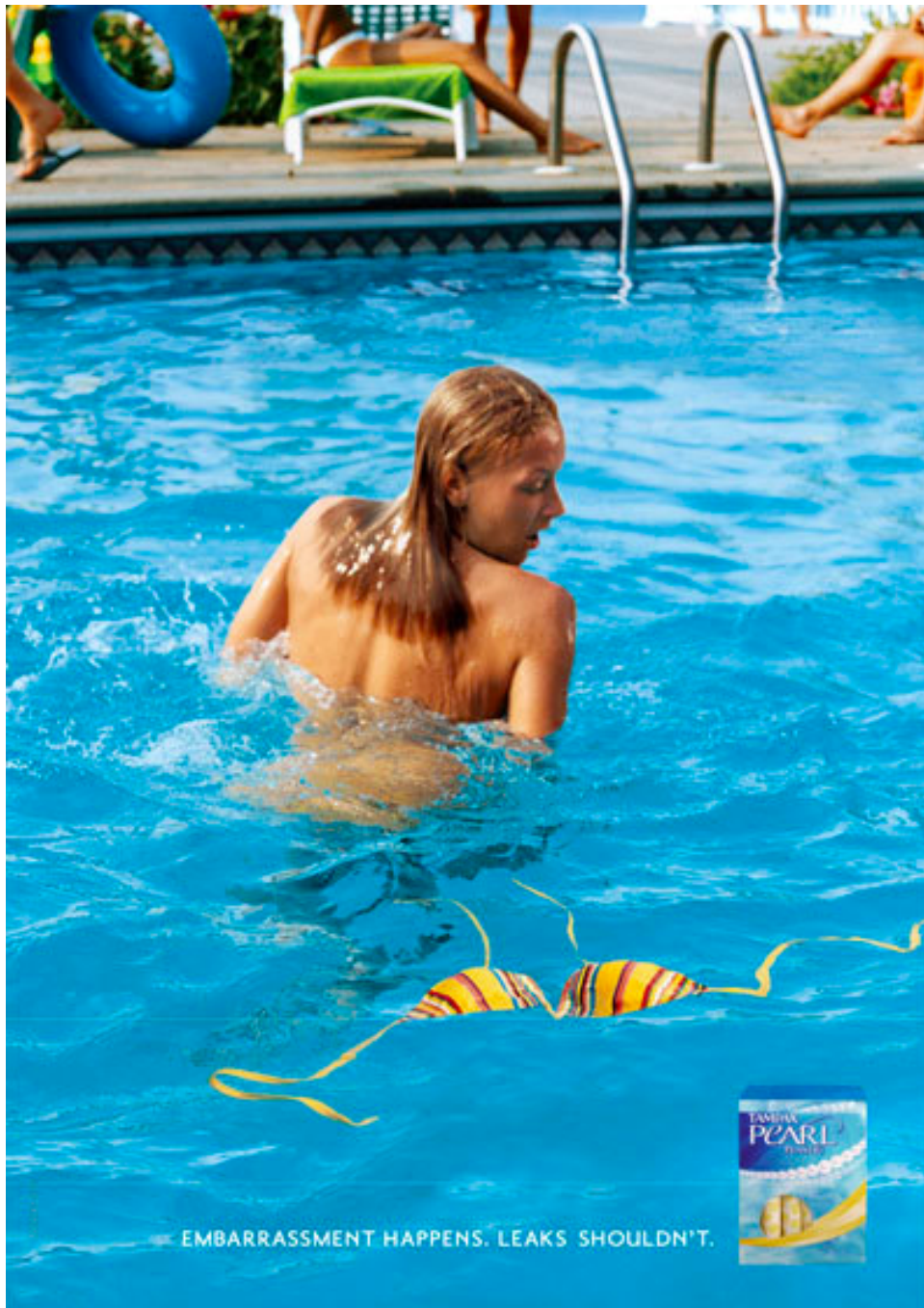
²¹ Chella Quint, “Adventures in Menstruating: Don't Use Shame to Sell,” TedxSheffield, July 5, 2012, video of lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kce4VxEgTAM&list=WL&index=8>.

²² Margaret L. Stubbs and Evelina W. Sterling, “Learning About What's 'Down There': Body Image Below the Belt and Menstrual Education” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, ed. Chris Bobel et al. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 233-252.

²³ *Ibid.*, 963.

²⁴ “What’s the State of Sex Education In the U.S.?” Planned Parenthood Federation of America, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/for-educators/whats-state-sex-education-us>.

Figure 1: Tampax Pearl Advertisement, 2006



A tampon advertisement appeals to the cultural negativity surrounding menstruation.

Source: SIANWEBB. "The Shame Game." *Bristol Woman* (blog). *WordPress*, January 28, 2015, <https://bristolwoman.wordpress.com/2015/01/28/the-shame-game/>.

“preventive care that is necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health” – is directly linked to menstruation.²⁵ Menstrual education has also received criticism for overlooking emotional aspects of periods, especially during the onset of menstruation.²⁶ Life-enhancing, evidence-based standards about menstrual health education are not prioritized – *that* is shameful.

The Emotional Cost of Period Stigma

Inadequate and problematic menstrual health education indeed shortchanges girls and menstruators. Ignorance of menstruation keeps them from recognizing and realizing their full potential. As feminist scholars Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen pointed out in a pioneering study of the politics of menarche, the lack of knowledge prevents self-determination. Furthermore, “if girls do not understand menarche, they are more likely to believe negative messages about the whole process” and internalize the socially constructed demonization of menstruation.²⁷ The communication taboo prevents many families from discussing menstruation with their children and also cheats menstruators from seeking more information. Truly, periods can never be demystified if we are not able to openly talk about all aspects of menstrual health. Menstrual activism and menstrual education are essential components of creating a more equitable society, empowering girls to enjoy a healthier sense of self. When we do not know our bodies, we cannot fully comprehend our bodies as a source of power and pleasure.²⁸

Lauren Rosewarne postulates that media representations “likely have some complicity” in the negative discourses that surround periods.²⁹ Though the impact of visual culture is hard to

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse*, 73.

²⁷ Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen, *Blood Stories: Menarche and the Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary U.S. Society* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 64-65.

²⁸ Anna Druet, “Is period slang ever useful?,” *HelloClue*, September 19, 2017, <https://helloclue.com/articles/culture/is-period-slang-ever-useful#:~:text=Thesepercent20euphemismspercent20startpercent20inpercent20childhood,whenpercent20theypercent20aren'tpercent20normal.>

²⁹ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 224.

quantify, menstrual activists nevertheless have a moral imperative to engage with popular culture discourses and push media producers to destigmatize menstruation. On-screen stories of menarche can change public opinion and help deconstruct the cultural negativity of menstruation. Importantly, the representations must be self-structured and inclusive. Those similar to the one in *All in the Family* are simply not good enough. While Gloria justifiably resists menstrual taboos, she should not have been shamed in the first place. Menstruators deserve better – they *need* better in order to reach their full potential.

Chapter 1: Images of Menstruation Promoted by Menstrual Activists

I am Strong, I am Invincible... I am Other?

There was very little feminist engagement of menstruation prior to the social justice movements of the 1970s. Upon first reflection, this disinterest can presumably be attributed to the stigmatized status of periods and the underrepresentation of menstruating bodies in academia. However, feminists of this generation made a conscious decision to forgo examining this important topic. Many feared that studying biologically female experiences such as menstruation would, intentionally or not, perpetuate the essentialist ideology that biology is destiny and that women should be defined as sex objects and reproducers.³⁰ In other words, they were concerned that the menstrual cycle would be weaponized against them. Feminists wanted to advance gender equality, and drawing attention to a gendered experience seemed counterintuitive.

There is one major exception: the aforementioned *The Second Sex* (1949). In it, author Simone de Beauvoir describes how women construct themselves and are socially constructed to be Other. Menstruation is not the main focus of her philosophy, but she does elucidate the misogynistic roots of period stigma, asserting that “it is not this [menstrual] blood that makes woman impure, but rather, this blood is a manifestation of her impurity.”³¹ Our patriarchal society has socialized women into fearing and disparaging their own traits of Otherness, including menstruation. Clearly, de Beauvoir did not subscribe to the ideology that biology is destiny.

Though hugely popular, de Beauvoir’s book did not propel menstruation into public consciousness. The field of critical menstruation studies would not be legitimized until a few decades later. Nonetheless, *The Second Sex* forever transformed identity politics and feminist

³⁰ Lee and Sasser-Coen, *Blood Stories*, 6.

³¹ Simone De Beauvoir et al., *The Second Sex*, 170.

philosophy thanks to de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman."³² Many feminists and menstrual activists, including women and gender studies scholar Elizabeth Kissling, as well as myself, ground their activism and scholarship on de Beauvoir's theorizing.

The Little Subject That Could

Greater consideration of menstruation as a dynamic category of analysis in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the pursuit of demystifying menstruation, also known as menstrual activism. As PERIOD founder Nadya Okamoto wrote in her manifesto for the menstrual movement, people did not just wake up and start talking about periods; they started scrutinizing the menstrual status quo *because* larger conversations about social justice were happening during this time.³³ The overlapping concerns of women's health activists, consumer rights advocates, and environmentalists fostered menstrual activism.

Feminists in the healthcare sector – both patients and caregivers – began challenging the male-dominated medical establishment in large numbers. Self-help resources such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970) empowered women to cultivate feminist critical thinking skills and scrutinize patronizing medical practices and procedures. Reproductive and sexual healthcare came to the forefront of such examinations. They recognized that knowledge is power, and they wanted to share that knowledge. To promote body literacy, many women's health activists started clinics and ran classes that encouraged masturbation and exploration of the body. They wanted to take their well-being into their own hands. The development of menstrual extraction exemplifies this notion. In 1971, women's health activist Lorraine Rothman invented a device that enabled

³² De Beauvoir et al., *The Second Sex*, 283.

³³ Nadya Okamoto, *Period Power a Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 203.

menstruators to shorten their periods. The device, Del Em, was originally intended as a self-help means of abortion. Unlike earlier feminists, Rothman and many others centered their activism on their embodied experiences.³⁴

These activists joined forces with consumer rights advocates in the late 1970s during the outbreak of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS). Thousands of women developed TSS and 38 died from the infection. Between 1979 and 1980 alone, 1,365 American women were diagnosed with TSS.³⁵ Researchers discovered that women with TSS were more likely to use tampons, specifically a new synthetic tampon called Rely, which was marketed as the most absorbent tampon available (their tagline: "It Even Absorbs the Worry"). Extended usage of Rely was causing a bacterial infection; the parent company, Procter & Gamble, soon pulled the tampon from the shelves. This medical crisis further cultivated a menstrual consciousness as women began to ask questions about the safety of menstrual products and menstrual management practices. They understandably lambasted the fact that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has never required tampon or pad manufacturers to disclose the ingredients used in these products. There were still some wins, however. The government eventually complied with activists' demand for standardized absorbency ratings and mandated TSS warnings on tampon packages.

Growing environmental concerns also provoked consciousness about the menstrual status quo. Environmentalists teamed up with consumer rights advocates to problematize the usage of disposable period products. Concerned about the biodegradability of said products,

³⁴ Chris Bobel, "Our Revolution Has Style": Contemporary Menstrual Product Activists "Doing Feminism" in the Third Wave," *Sex Roles* 54 (2006): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9001-7>.

³⁵ Maegan Boutot, "Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS) and Menstrual Products: A Short History," *Clue*, April 22, 2019, [https://helloclue.com/articles/cycle-a-z/toxic-shock-syndrome-and-menstrual-products-a-short-history#:~:text=Thepercent20Toxicpercent20Shockpercent20Syndromepercent20outbreakpercent20inpercent20thepercent20Unitedpercent20States&text=Inpercent20Januarypercent201980percent20Cpercent20thepercent200United,diagnosedpercent20withpercent20TSSpercent20\(3\)](https://helloclue.com/articles/cycle-a-z/toxic-shock-syndrome-and-menstrual-products-a-short-history#:~:text=Thepercent20Toxicpercent20Shockpercent20Syndromepercent20outbreakpercent20inpercent20thepercent20Unitedpercent20States&text=Inpercent20Januarypercent201980percent20Cpercent20thepercent200United,diagnosedpercent20withpercent20TSSpercent20(3).).

environmentalists urged women to use reusable period products such as cloth pads, cups, and sponges. Environmentalists rejected the Feminine Care industry's claim that menstruation had to be mediated through consumerism, instead preferring to manage their periods by creating their own products. Along with women's health and consumer rights advocates, environmentalists are some of the earliest menstrual activists.

During the 60s and 70s, menstrual activism was largely unorganized, concentrating in these three pockets of social justice activism. But menstruation also had a growing presence in literature and art. In addition to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the coming-of-age classic *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* was published in 1970.³⁶ Author Judy Blume has been lauded for her endearing portrayal of a young girl's journey through puberty, including the onset of menstruation. The book's protagonist, Margaret Simon, as well as her friends, eagerly awaits her menarche, often discussing who has started and who hasn't. Another Judy, Judy Chicago, an artist, brought periods to the forefront of popular culture when she created three artworks (a play, a photolithograph, and an installation) about menstruation over the course of the following two years.³⁷ These pieces offer close-ups of the menstrual experience, blood and all. Chicago boldly placed this stigmatized subject into the public domain. A few years later, activist and journalist Gloria Steinem published her satirical essay "If Men Could Menstruate," surmising that if menstruation would turn into a "enviable" event whereby men brag about "how long and how much" if the other half of the popular started suddenly having menstrual cycles.³⁸ Many contemporary menstrual activists are quick to point out that some men do in fact menstruate and are working to assemble a more inclusive

³⁶ Judy Blume, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (New York: Bradbury Press, 1970).

³⁷ For more information on Judy Chicago's menstrual-themed work, see Camilla Mørk Røstvik, "Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art Since 1970," *Oxford Art Journal*, 42, 3 (2019), 335-353, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcz021>.

³⁸ Bobel, *The Palgrave Handbook*, 353-354.

movement.³⁹ At the time, menstruation was rarely viewed from a trans or nonbinary lens. The following year, in 1979, *Hygieia: A Woman's Herbal* was published, which encouraged women to view their periods in a positive, celebratory light.⁴⁰ This spiritual mindset is in stark contrast to early feminist thinking that was against bringing any attention to gendered experiences such as menstruation. In 1987, the National Black Women's Health Project, now known as Black Women's Health Imperative, influenced the menstrual status quo via a documentary, *Becoming a Woman: Mothers and Daughters Talking Together*. Over the course of ninety minutes, mothers and daughters intimately discuss various health topics, including menstruation, related to Black womanhood.⁴¹

Slowly but surely, menstruation began to be considered a dynamic category of analysis. As society began to reconcile menstrual taboos and their many consequences, one woman realized that our language fails to fully represent menstruators' diverse experiences of embodiment. Rectifying this problem, linguist Suzette Haden Elgin invented a feminist language, Láaden, in 1984. Created to supplement her science fiction novel, Láaden includes "husháana" (to menstruate painfully); "desháana" (to menstruate early); "weshana" (to menstruate late); and "ásháana" (to menstruate joyfully).⁴² She, as well as other feminists and menstrual activists, attempted to shift the menstrual narrative from shame and silence to acceptance and education.

³⁹ Rydström, "Degendering Menstruation: Making Trans Menstruators Matter," 945-959; Frank, "Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics," 371-404.

⁴⁰ Jeannine Parvati Baker, *Hygieia: a Woman's Herbal* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2011).

⁴¹ *On Becoming a Woman: Mothers and Daughters Talking Together*, directed by Cheryl Chisholm, (Women Make Movies, Inc.: 1987), VHS video.

⁴² Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2010), 30.

Winging Menstrual Activism

Critical menstruation studies scholar Chris Bobel has written extensively about the origins and tactics of menstrual activism. She contends that, in the beginning, the movement had two wings: spiritual-feminists and radical menstruation activists. Again, both are striving towards the same goal, to destigmatize menstruation, and shine a spotlight on the social construction of menstruation as shameful. But they are operating under different assumptions. Spiritual-feminists, once the more popular subset, believe periods to be a marker of womanhood, and thus a source of pride. Radical menstruation activists are more concerned with upending patriarchal systems of power. In her examination of these camps in her book *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, Bobel implies that it is impossible to practice both feminist-spiritualism and radical menstruation activism.

Feminist-spiritualists, originally the larger of the two factions, boast of a long history of rejecting the patriarchal assumption that menstruation is a curse. Starting in the late 1960s, they sought to reclaim menstruation as an empowering experience. It is a privilege to bleed because that's what makes us women. Taking this view is supposed to upend gender-based oppression. In line with cultural feminist thinking, feminist-spiritualists believed that gender equality will be achieved only if traditionally feminine traits, such as nurturance, and feminine experiences, such as menstruation, are seen as valuable by society.⁴³

Activists aim to cultivate a sense of menstrual pride (feminist-spiritualists are also known as Celebrate-Your-Cycle feminists) among women.⁴⁴ To them, menses is what makes women, women. This kind of essentialist thinking is arguably problematic. As already mentioned, not all menstruators are women, and not all women menstruate. Trans and nonbinary people, as well as

⁴³ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁴ Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse*, 121.

some cisgender women, do not experience monthly bleeding for a variety of reasons, including hormonal and biological. With that said, a good deal of cisgender women who have dealt with period stigma have been and remain excited about the idea of reclaiming menstruation as a means to achieve gender equality.⁴⁵

To exchange information and establish a collective identity, feminist-spiritualists create and sell self-help books, zines, and art, including filmmaking, music, poetry, and ritual activities.⁴⁶ They also offer conferences and classes that center on sharing personal experiences. In these discourses, feminist-spiritualism ties menstrual cycles to cyclical events in nature, such as the changes in the moon, tide, and seasons. The materials are usually “rife with words like 'magic,' 'mystery,' 'power,' 'sacred,' 'gifts,' and 'healing'” and “book covers typically feature moons, dragons, flowers in bloom, and goddesses.”⁴⁷ They consider the inclusion of goddess imagery in particular to be “a political act, one that challenges patriarchal control of women’s bodies by referencing powerful images of women throughout history, an alternative to the shame, secrecy, and misinformation that surround women’s experiences of menstruation.”⁴⁸ To be fully in tune with one’s inner goddess, Celebrate-Your-Cycle feminists urge readers to use natural and organic products and holistic methods of healing.⁴⁹

This cultural feminist sensibility has recently been popularized by Alexandra Pope, author and founder of the Red School Movement.⁵⁰ She is known for developing the

⁴⁵ See Miranda Gray, *The Optimized Woman: Using Your Menstrual Cycle to Achieve Success and Fulfillment* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009); Lisa Lister, *Love Your Lady Landscape: Trust Your Gut, Care for 'Down There' and Reclaim Your Fierce and Feminine SHE-Power* (Hay House UK Ltd, 2016); and Maisie Hill, *Period Power: Harness Your Hormones and Get Your Cycle Working for You* (London: Green Tree, 2019).

⁴⁶ Bobel et al, *The Palgrave Handbook*, 1003.

⁴⁷ Bobel, *New Blood*, 85.

⁴⁸ Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style.”

⁴⁹ Bobel, *New Blood*, 65-96.

⁵⁰ See Alexandra Pope, *The Wild Genie: The Healing Power of Menstruation* (Binda, Australia; Sally Milner Publishing Pty, Limited, 2001); Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer, *Wild Power: Discover the Magic of Your Menstrual Cycle and Awaken the Feminine Path to Power* (Carlsbad, CA: Hays House, 2017).

“Menstruality Medicine Circle,” “a means of naming and exploring the ineffable, mysterious forces within a woman—the hidden powers that are released when consciousness is brought to bear on our biological life changes.”⁵¹ She believes that deeply and intimately understanding our menstrual cycle will result in greater efficiency in the workplace and happier dispositions in our personal lives.⁵² Critics such as Jennifer Weiss-Wolf have been quick to point out the privacy concerns surrounding the philosophy of outing your menstrual status: It can be used as a tool of invalidation against menstruators.⁵³ This concern is at the heart of recent menstrual leave debates.⁵⁴

Feminist-spiritualism has also faced criticism for its cultural appropriation. I share menstrual activism demographic information in a later section, but for now, suffice it to say that menstrual activism began as a very white movement.⁵⁵ *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* calls out the usage of Hindu bindis and Native American drums and rattles in feminist-spiritualism rituals. Bobel, who attended a Belly and Womb Conference for research purposes, also noted the activists’ penchant for romanticizing Native American practices and belief systems, such as their usage of moon lodges.⁵⁶ The adoption of aspects of Hindu and Native American culture by white Celebrate-Your-Cycle feminists has apparently received little scholarly attention elsewhere, perhaps because Bobel’s dichotomy is not especially well-known. The activists’ cultural appropriation and essentialist conception of motherhood can

⁵¹ “What is Menstruality?,” Red School Online, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://redschool.net/about/what-is-menstruality/>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017), 207-209.

⁵⁴ For more information about menstrual leave see Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public*, 203-206.

⁵⁵ I freely admit that scholars, myself included, could be operating under false assumptions. Just because I have found little information about the participation of women of color in early menstrual activism does not mean it did not exist.

⁵⁶ Bobel, *New Blood*, 79.

help explain why feminist-spiritualism exists mostly in the margins today.⁵⁷

The second wing of early menstrual activism, according to Bobel, is radical menstruation activism, also known as menarchy. Today's iteration of menstrual activism most closely resembles this camp. Uncomfortable with cultural feminism, radical menstruation activists challenge essentialist ideologies and assumptions about who experience monthly bleedings. They contend that the dichotomous gender structure gives rise to gender-based oppression; hence, the gender paradigm hurts us all. Goddess imagery and the romanticization of menstruation are largely nonexistent in radical menstruation discourse. Menarchists aim to normalize menstruation by calling out structural systems that uphold menstrual taboos. Enemy number one is the problematic Feminine Care (FemCare) industry.⁵⁸

Radical menstruation activists maintain that these corporations are nefariously designed to profit off the disparagement of women. While FemCare executives and advertisers claim to know what is best for menstruators, menarchists have challenged the encoded messages of shame, secrecy, Otherness, and pollution that lurk in menstrual product advertisements. These ads promote the idea that menstruation should be concealed and sanitized – all you need to do is buy their product! This notion is all too apparent in a 2009 advertisement from Always (see Figure 2). A magician pulls a crisp white pad out of a hat, implying that the pad is so absorbent that the user will not even have to see her menses. *She should not have to. It's gross.* The tagline reads, "Have a happy period. Guaranteed." Apparently, a happy period is a blood-free one. This paints the menstruating body as abject, and furthermore does not convey realistic expectations about menstruating. To menarchists, "in purchasing and using these products, women are compelled to buy into the idea of the menstruating woman as tainted and internalize their

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁸ Bobel, *New Blood*, 97-134.

Figure 2: Always Advertisement, 2009



Menstrual blood is rendered so stigmatized to be nonexistent in this 2009 Always advertisement.

Source: Kissling, Elizabeth. "Works Like Magic." *Menstruation Matters* (blog), *Society for Menstrual Cycle Research*, November 2, 2009, <https://www.menstruationresearch.org/2009/11/02/works-like-magic/>.

own otherness.”⁵⁹ Put simply, this is how women are socially constructed to hate themselves. The stigma of menstruation is harming women while lining the pockets of Procter & Gamble and other FemCare corporations.⁶⁰ Radical menstruation activists take issue with the secrecy involved in ad campaigns and in the product themselves. As mentioned, FemCare corporations are shockingly not required to disclose the ingredients used in the creation of pads and tampons. Radical menstruation activists recognize that this information is essential to make informed decisions about how menstruators manage their periods. The obscurity is worrisome because, on average, tampons are inside a woman’s vagina “for more than 100,000 hours over her lifetime.”⁶¹ But unlike earlier menstrual activists who partnered *with* government officials to mandate absorbency standards on tampon boxes, contemporary menarchists purposefully work outside the system. The activists are committed to a Do-It-Yourself ethics. They mostly promote their menstrual narratives on websites and zines. Chris Bobel has analyzed these materials, and describes the images of menstruation they promote:

In most cases, the zines and websites begin with an explanation of what’s wrong with the conventional or mainstream “feminine protection industry” in terms of hazards to women’s health and devastation to the environment. Typically, this expose is followed by a detailed discussion of alternatives to mainstream, commercial, sanitary napkins and tampons. Usually, this in-depth description is written as a personal narrative in which the writer shares her experiences with each of the alternatives. Finally, the zines and websites typically provide a list of resources for further information.⁶²

These outlets give the resource-sharing practices a sense of both informality and earnestness. Gatekeeping is unthinkable. Excerpts from a popular zine called *The Femmenstruation Rites Rag* are shown below (see Figures 3 and 4). These reflect the push for feminist critical thinking skills.

Radical activists are also deeply concerned about the environmental hazards of disposable products. Weiss-Wolf draws attention to the fact that “on average, one person will use

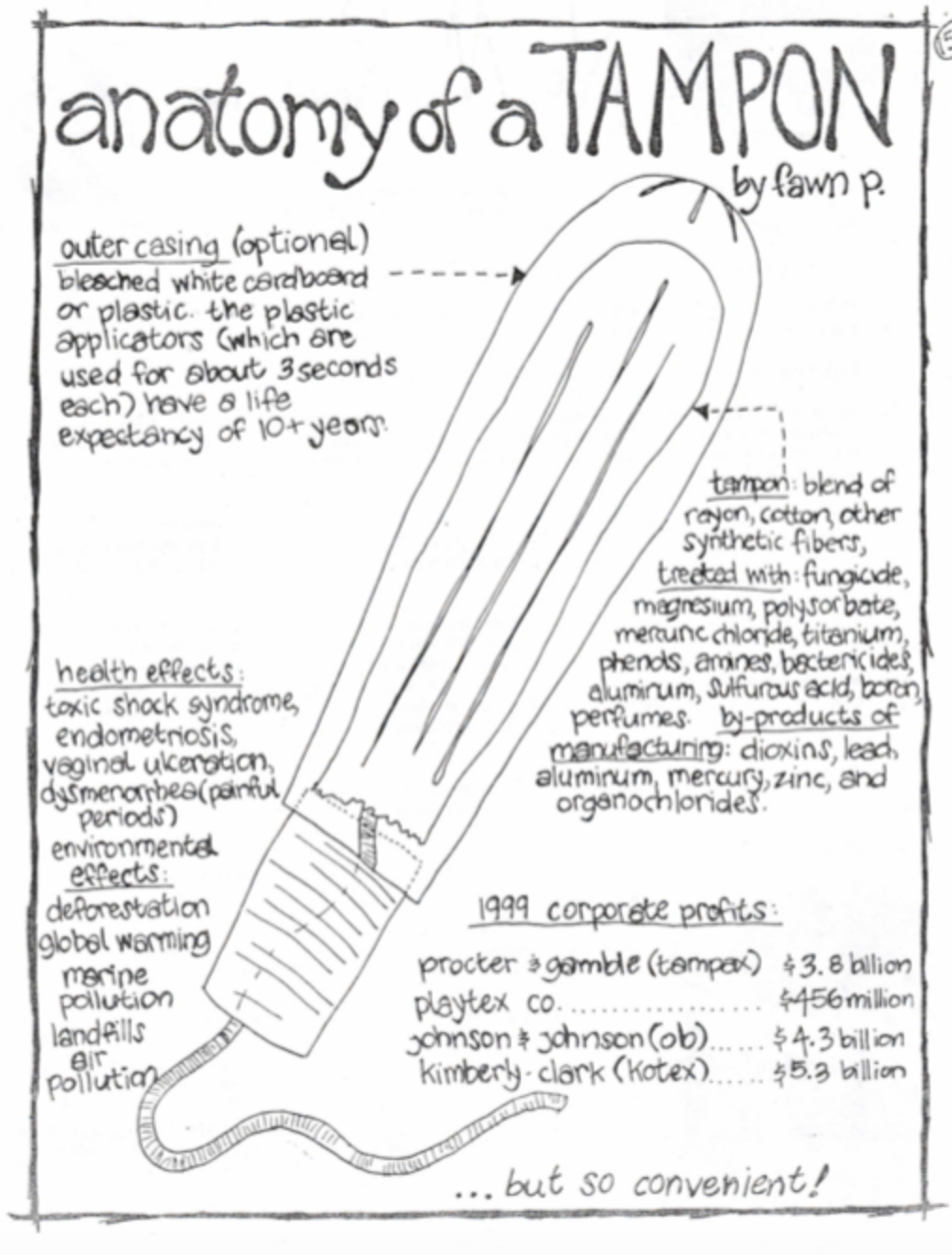
⁵⁹ Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse*, 22.

⁶⁰ Bobel, *New Blood*, 97-134.

⁶¹ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 183.

⁶² Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style,” 336.

Figure 3: Radical Menstruation Zine Excerpt: anatomy of a TAMPON, 2000



Radical menstruation activist Fawn P. urges readers not to use tampons.

Source: Firecracker, Brackin. *Femmenstruation rite rag: Stories of wimmin's blood and rites of passage*. Zine. 2001.
<https://archive.org/details/TheFemmenstruationRitesRag/page/n23/mode/2up> Accessed March 14, 2021.

Figure 4: Radical Menstruation Zine Excerpt: 7 reasons to make yer own pads, 2000



A well-known radical menstruation zine advises menstruators to make their own reusable pads.

Source: Firecracker, Brackin. *Femmenstruation rite rag: Stories of wimmin's blood and rites of passage*. Zine. 2001. <https://archive.org/details/TheFemmenstruationRitesRag/page/n23/mode/2up> Accessed March 14, 2021.

between ten thousand and sixteen thousand tampons or pads and amass three hundred pounds of related waste in a lifetime.”⁶³ With these mind-boggling statistics in mind, menarchists urge menstruators to make their own products or use a sustainable alternative such as the DivaCup.⁶⁴ As a result of these concerns, radical menstruation activists are more product-focused than feminist-spiritualists. The messaging is not always mindful of local contexts. For example, reusable cloth pads are common in countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, but stigma is what keeps women and girls from properly washing and drying the products. While eco-friendly options have become increasingly available at stores, recent surveys show that “almost 98 percent of women in the United States use a combination of disposable period products, while only ‘2 to 3 percent opt for reusable products.’”⁶⁵ Brand loyalty can help account for this data, though these details are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Radical menstruation activists often poke fun at, and can even be outright hostile toward, Celebrate-Your-Cyclists. A group of the former, the now-disbanded Bloodsisters, regarded the tension as “unproductive and a product of patriarchal patterns of infighting that distracts from issue-oriented solidarity.”⁶⁶ I agree that the schism is unhelpful, but can there possibly be solidarity between two forms of activism that utilize different tactics and have entirely dissimilar belief systems? In her discussion and examination of these two menstrual activism wings, Bobel herself seems to suggest that an activist has not lived and cannot live in both camps. Or was/is menstrual activism more nuanced than she alleges?

Bobel’s menstrual activism dichotomy is arguably both limiting and intimidating. Not all menstrual activism, as we will see, fits neatly into these two categories. There is also overlap

⁶³ Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public*, 168.

⁶⁴ The DivaCup is a type of menstrual cup, which is inserted into the vagina during menstruation to collect menstrual blood.

⁶⁵ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 76.

⁶⁶ Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style,” 339.

between feminist-spiritualism and radical menstruation activism that does not get recognition. I worry that the demands require too much of women, especially during a global pandemic when women have borne the brunt of economic and other hardships amid lockdown.⁶⁷ Pressing women to make their own cloth pads, dictating that menstruation could not possibly ever be an inconvenience, is just not realistic in some contexts. Furthermore, those who have values and opinions regarding menstruation that do not fall squarely within either of Bobel's camp, like me, would be required to compromise. And what if I do not want to compromise? What if I do not have altogether positive feelings towards my menses? What if I prefer to purchase reusable period products instead of making my own? Can these things be true if I also wish to destigmatize menstruation? Bobel's restrictive definitions of the two camps imply that individuals who are not wholly committed to one or the other have no place in menstrual activism. The dichotomy can alienate legions of potential activists, presenting a gigantic problem that has the potential to derail the movement or at least seriously weaken its impact.

Resistance to the status quo can take the form of smaller, quieter acts than Bobel recognizes. Lauren Rosewarne's three-tiered menstrual activism classification system – subtle, moderate, and extreme – is arguably more comprehensive. As the leading expert on critical menstruation studies, Chris Bobel is much more commonly cited in menstruation scholarship. In her book *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television*, Rosewarne briefly refers to Bobel, but stops short of criticizing the dichotomization of feminist-spiritualism and radical menstruation activism. Indeed, the overall discussion of menstrual activism in *Periods in Pop*

⁶⁷ See Megan O'Donnell, "Women Bear the Brunt of COVID-19 Crisis, New Analysis Finds," Center for Global Development, April 21, 2021, [https://www.cgdev.org/article/women-bear-brunt-covid-19-crisis-new-analysis-finds#:~:text=Womenpercent20Bearpercent20thepercent20Bruntpercent20ofpercent20COVIDpercent2D19percent20Crisispercent2Cpercent20Newpercent20Analysispercent20Finds,-Aprilpercent207percent2Cpercent202021&text=Thepercent20employmentpercent20topercent20populationpercent20ratio,forpercent20menpercent20\(IL,Opercent202021\).](https://www.cgdev.org/article/women-bear-brunt-covid-19-crisis-new-analysis-finds#:~:text=Womenpercent20Bearpercent20thepercent20Bruntpercent20ofpercent20COVIDpercent2D19percent20Crisispercent2Cpercent20Newpercent20Analysispercent20Finds,-Aprilpercent207percent2Cpercent202021&text=Thepercent20employmentpercent20topercent20populationpercent20ratio,forpercent20menpercent20(IL,Opercent202021).)

Culture is brief. While Rosewarne does not remark on how her analysis improves upon or diverges from Bobel's, the differences are striking. Rosewarne's terms are expansive, and thus widen the scope of menstrual activism by including a more diverse range of past and present expressions and activities. This framework offers a useful lens for analyzing contemporary representations of menarche.

Subtle activists refuse to use menstruation euphemisms. This form of activism is aware of period stigma but refuses to perpetuate it. Saying "period" or "menstruation" instead of "that time of the month" or "Aunt Flo" erodes menstrual taboos around communication and secrecy. Moderate activists go a step further by educating themselves about the history and consequences of the stigmatized status of menstruation. Armed with knowledge, they actively attempt to move the needle on menstrual consciousness by hosting events such as donation drives, whereby individuals or organizations collect menstrual products to distribute to those who have a high need for them and may otherwise be unable to obtain them. Extreme menstrual activism, the rarest of the forms, moves menstruation out of the private realm and into the public domain. Rosewarne limits extreme menstrual activism to menstrual-themed art.⁶⁸ The visualization of the menstrual experience is in-your-face powerful because of its refusal to abide by taboos. By that definition, media depictions of menses (menstrual blood) are also extreme forms of menstrual activism.

Rosewarne does not seem to consider one type of activism more influential than another. I believe that subtle activism can have an equally transformative impact as moderate or even extreme activism. The importance of talking about menstruation in frank terms has come up again and again in other scholarship about menstruation. It is often referred to as the easiest and

⁶⁸ Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 164-170.

most effective way to change the menstrual status quo. On November 12, 2020, I attended Eastern Washington University's Critical Menstruation Studies Seminar Series, where I had the opportunity to ask two of the editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Elizabeth Kissling and Tomi-Ann Roberts, about how to smash period stigma. Their response? Talk about it! They further recommended talking about periods as a vital sign because it is harder to stigmatize something that is good for you. Another example of this recommendation can be found in *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement*, where author Nadya Okamoto urges readers to "begin dialogues where people can become comfortable saying words like 'period' and 'tampon' and 'menstrual blood' in the sphere of productive conversations."⁶⁹ Because talking openly about menstruation does not fall into Bobel's classification system, the power in rejecting menstruation euphemisms would go overlooked in the fight to demystify menstruation.

Moderate activism manifests as public consciousness-raising. Rosewarne points to Wendy Wasserstein's play *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977) as an example.⁷⁰ The drama is about a group of Mount Holyoke College alums reminiscing about their feminist awakening. One member of the friend group shares that she tasted her menstrual blood. This admission "challeng[ed] both their revulsion and attitudes to their own bodies and attempt[ed] to demystify and destigmatize menstrual blood."⁷¹ To be clear, they *talked* about menses; *showing* menses would be a form of extreme activism. I consider the creation and publication of any menstruation-themed work an expression of moderate activism. Books, zines, essays, poems, blog and social media posts about period stigma all fall into this category. So do actions such as

⁶⁹ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 253-254.

⁷⁰ Wendy Wasserstein, "Uncommon Women and Others" in *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 1-72.

⁷¹ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 167.

hosting donation drives and signing and sharing petitions. These are all worthy efforts that seek to shine a spotlight on the needs of menstruating bodies. They are rendered unhelpful in the radical menstruation activism and feminist-spiritualism division.

According to Rosewarne, works of art that center on public menstruation, use menstrual blood as a medium, or are menstrual-themed in nature are all forms of extreme activism. The aforementioned artworks produced by Judy Chicago are the most well-known examples. By incorporating menstrual blood into her creations, Chicago shines a spotlight on the reality of the menstrual experience and the tradition of relegating menstruation to the private realm. The visualization of menses can also be found in the retail and music industries. In 2013, American Apparel customers could purchase a \$32 t-shirt of a graphic illustration of a woman masturbating while on her period. A few years later, a period parody rap video went viral. Written and performed by a comedy group called Skit Box, “I Got That Flow” mocks the squeamishness that many men feel regarding menstruation (“If you think me talking about my flow is wrong, well that’s the whole reason why we wrote this song”).⁷² These bold and innovative creations are certainly attention-grabbing. These examples demonstrate how Rosewarne’s three-tiered framework expands the scope of menstrual activism in an amusing way.

Laughing Your Way Into Menstrual Consciousness

While Rosewarne’s analysis of menstrual activism does not specifically look at the role and utilization of humor in the movement, Bobel has meditated on the prevalence of joking about periods. I have noticed the same pattern among menstrual activists. It is noteworthy because, as will be discussed in the following chapter, images of menstruation on the small screen also incorporate period jokes. While they can seem rather mean-spirited given the shame

⁷² Skit Box, “I Got that Flow :: SKIT BOX,” directed by Adele Vuko, November 13, 2016, music video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulHzBy8pvIA>.

and embarrassment that shrouds menstruation, humor, in certain contexts, can be an effective conversation-starter and tool for consciousness-raising. Importantly, the humor used by menstrual activists mocks the stigma associated with menstruation, not the menstruator. This can bring some levity to work of menstrual activism. Making fun of menstruators, however, is both cruel and unhelpful to menstrual activism.

Period jokes are rampant in both feminist-spiritualism and radical menstruation activism. The ribbing can be found in zines and essays, culture jamming, and menstrual-themed performances. According to Bobel, who has assessed menstruation-themed zines,

when reading these [menstrual activism] zines, one will likely find oneself smiling, even sometimes furtively at the ribald writing. Make no mistake about it: ‘menstrual product activism is *fun*, the zines seem to proclaim. No one can accuse these young feminists of lacking a sense of humor.⁷³

One example can be found from the aforementioned zine *Femmenstruation Rites Rag*. In a piece called “Cunt Woman,” a hand drawn image of a personified vulva informs the reader about menstrual cramps and period sex in thought bubbles. Presumably, the artist intended to awaken consciousness surrounding the menstrual status quo in a playful yet informative way. For me at least, the mission was successful. The in-your-face approach engages readers in a way that cut-and-dried menstruation education simply cannot.

Steinem’s satire “If Men Could Menstruate” is perhaps the most well-known piece of menstrual humor. In 1980, two years after it originally came out, the essay was republished in *Pulling Our Own Strings*, a collection of feminist humor.⁷⁴ The book includes a section devoted to period jokes that calls out the absurdity of menstrual taboos.⁷⁵ As in *Femmenstruation Rites*

⁷³ Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style,” 330.

⁷⁴ Gloria Kaufman, *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-24.

Rag, these writers presumably injected comedy into their work so that readers would be more receptive to the messaging.

Contemporary examples of menstrual humor include comedy shows and podcasts. Menstrual activist Chella Quint started the hashtag #periodpositive to bring humor and joy into the menstrual activism movement. For similar reasons, she also created a series of zines called *Adventures in Menstruating*, which has since been adapted into a live comedy show. Period jokes are a very popular topic of female comedians. Tig Notaro, Wanda Sykes, Ali Wong, Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer, and Michelle Wolf have all joked about periods in their comedy performances. There are a number of period podcasts, including *The Period Party* hosted by Nicole Jardim, that talk about personal menstruation experiences in an attempt to smash stigma. These performers are, for the most part, intentional about not shaming menstruators. Mocking menstruators is antithetical to the movement and to the goal of normalizing menstruation. When assessing menstrual humor, it is important to question who or what is the butt of the joke. Because all of these examples provoke consciousness about period stigma, they constitute forms of moderate activism.

The Demographics of the Movement

Bobel's *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* is one of few in the canon of menstruation scholarship that discusses the homogeneity in menstrual activism. The notion that menstrual activism is a largely white movement could be misguided. For many years, researchers described feminism as a white women's movement because they (the researchers) focused their data collection and interviews on white groups.⁷⁶ While investigating for her book, she interviewed 65 self-described menstrual activists. Most identified as women

⁷⁶ See Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-17.

(94 percent), were white (88 percent); and about half came from a middle-class background (47 percent). Additionally, a majority of the interviewees identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or in some way not heterosexual (63 percent).⁷⁷

To ascertain how the movement can be at once exclusive of people of color yet popular among queer individuals, Bobel explains the relationship each group has with sexuality. While “a politics of transgression shapes queer activist identity,” women of color, especially Black women, have historically been constructed as “unladylike” and even “animalistic” and thus need to uphold “a politics of respectability to secure cultural capital.”⁷⁸ Of course, just because Bobel was not able to locate more women of color menstrual activists for her interviews does not mean that they did/do not exist. Bobel admits that women of color may intentionally work underground because menstrual activism is high-risk. Women of color are often not given the same latitude as white women when it comes to challenging status quos.

Over the past few years, women of color have created a number of campaigns and organizations working to end period stigma. For example, in 2014, when she was just 16 years-old, Nadya Okamoto founded what would eventually become PERIOD, a global youth-run non-profit “that celebrates menstrual health through service, education, and policy.”⁷⁹ Okamoto, a Japanese and Taiwanese American, soon received a lot of media attention. She recently wrote about her inspiration behind PERIOD and the lessons she learned along the way in *Period Power: A Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement*.⁸⁰ PERIOD has since teamed up with a number of corporations within the FemCare industry to eradicate period poverty.

⁷⁷ Bobel, *New Blood*, 136.

⁷⁸ Ibid.; See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45-97.

⁷⁹ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 9.

⁸⁰ PERIOD severed ties with its founder in mid-2020. See Sophie Peel, “A Portland Student Became the Face of the Menstrual Equity Movement. Others Say She Silenced Them to Become Famous,” *Willamette Week*, July 29 2020, <https://www.wweek.com/news/2020/07/29/a-portland-student-became-the-face-of-the-menstrual-equity-movement-others-say-she-silenced-them-to-become-famous/>

In early 2018, Eva Marie Carney, a dual citizen of the U.S. and the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, founded the Kwek Society (kwe’k means “women” in Potawatomi, a Native American language), which aims to eradicate period poverty in Native American communities. Carney and her team are committed to ensuring that every Native youth is able to maintain dignity during their “moon time.” With this goal in mind, she developed “moon time bags,” colorful cotton bags stuffed with period products, and distributes them to schools and other Native programs across America.⁸¹

About a year later, the Black Women’s Health Imperative (BWHI) developed their Period Positive! campaign to address menstrual product insecurities in Atlanta, Georgia and Kigali, Rwanda. BWHI has a long history of looking after the physical, emotional, and financial well-being of Black girls and women. In recognition of the financial barrier that period products impose on some families, BWHI teamed up with period product company Freedom Cups to provide menstrual cups to under resourced communities.⁸² Like PERIOD and Kwek Society, BWHI is focused on getting products in the hands of those who need them. These efforts are reflective of the contemporary iteration of menstrual activism. Love Your Menses™ also works to connect resources to those who need them. Additionally, the non-profit offers workshops to teach young people to “flow through life unapologetically.”⁸³ These impressive programs deserve our support and recognition.

⁸¹ “Addressing Inequity,” The Kewk Society, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://kweksociety.org/about/>.

⁸² Dforsythe, “Black Women’s Health Imperative Launches Positive Period! Campaign to Address Menstrual Product Insecurities in Georgia and Africa,” Black Women’s Health Imperative, October 3, 2019, <https://bwhi.org/2019/10/03/black-womens-health-imperative-launches-positive-period-campaign-to-address-menstrual-product-insecurities-in-georgia-and-africa/>

⁸³ “About Us,” Love Your Menses, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.loveyourmenses.com/about>.

The Present Popularity of Period Product Activism in the Movement

Much of contemporary menstrual activism is targeted at making menstrual products more accessible and affordable, especially to the unhoused and incarcerated populations. Examples of U.S. donation-driven period organizations include I Support the Girls and #HappyPeriod.⁸⁴ There is also an extensive network of NGOs in the U.S. and other countries, especially in the Global South, addressing this issue. While these pursuits attempt to empower menstruators, the results are not always perfect. The donation-based approach to menstrual activism has faced a number of critiques in recent years for being patronizing and unneighborly. Some projects that center on donation seem to envision the donation's recipient as part of a less-fortunate "them" whereas others seem to see the recipient as part of a collective "us." Other concerns have to do with communication and agency. For example, menstruators living at crisis centers may not feel comfortable asking someone in a position of power, especially a non-menstruator, for period products. The push for donations has also been renounced for contributing to environmental waste. Perhaps the loudest opposition to this approach has been from menstrual activists who maintain that the focus should be on breaking taboos instead of lining the pockets of problematic FemCare corporations.⁸⁵ The executives only seem to care about the bottom line as they refuse to disclose ingredients in their products and market advertisements that shame women. The movement still clearly does not agree on what the central tactic of menstrual activism should be.

In order to make menstrual products more accessible and affordable, menstrual activists such as Jennifer Weiss-Wolf have been calling for a feminist legislative agenda. After all, the inaccessibility of period products is a matter of public policy. Menstrual products are ineligible for food stamp purchases, are not covered by health insurance or Medicaid, are not provided in most

⁸⁴ Bobel, *The Palgrave Handbook*, 40.

⁸⁵ See Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics," *Signs* 45, 4 (2020): 955-983, <https://doi.org/10.1086/707802>.

restrooms, and have a sales tax in most states.⁸⁶ To Weiss-Wolf, if public policy helped create this problem, then the government has the means to be part of the solution. She coined the term “menstrual equity” as a framework for policymakers to address the uniquely important as well as urgent needs of menstruating bodies. They deserve the ability to manage their menstrual cycles with dignity.

Many activists consider the elimination of the tampon tax, which refers to the state sales tax applied to period products, to be a one-size-fits-all solution. While most states are able to make exemptions for various necessities, as of early 2021, there are 30 states that impose a sales tax on menstrual products.⁸⁷ Infuriatingly, some policymakers considered soda and candy as appropriate sales tax exemptions – but not pads or tampons. Weiss-Wolf and others believe the tampon tax was simply an oversight, not an act of hostility. When asked about why the tampon tax was able to pass through red tape, President Barack Obama stated, “I suspect it’s because men were making the laws when those taxes were passed.”⁸⁸ But the rectification is long overdue for a more equitable society. The expense of period management “can add up to more than \$4,000 over a lifetime, and sales tax adds another several hundred dollars to the grand total.”⁸⁹ It is an unnecessary economic hardship.

Weiss-Wolf is passionately leading the fight to end the tampon tax. She is perhaps the most well-known menstrual activism today because her activism has been spotlighted by so many, including *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, and *Newsweek*. She explains why she feels strongly about her work:

⁸⁶ Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public*, 64.

⁸⁷ “30 states have until Tax Day 2021 to eliminate their tampon tax,” *Period Equity*, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.taxfreeperiod.com/#:~:text=30percent20statespercent20havepercent20untilpercent20Tax,Period>.

⁸⁸ Maya Rhodan, “President Obama Doesn’t Understand the ‘Tampon Tax’ Either,” *Time*, January 15, 2016, <https://time.com/4183108/obama-tampon-tax-sanitary/>.

⁸⁹ Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public*, 126.

Taking on and taking down the tampon tax has the potential to accomplish four key objectives: it lifts a small financial burden; it challenges laws that are archaic, unfair, and discriminatory; it helps inch toward a model of economic parity and gender equity; and it is a gateway for getting people to talk and think about the wider implications of menstruation – social, economic, and otherwise – in our policy making.⁹⁰

She is quick to point out that eliminating the tampon tax is not a silver bullet. But it can unquestionably have a positive impact on a very large swath of the U.S. population. She even created a non-profit, Period Equity, to do this work. Through her book, organization, and activism, she has brought some much needed awareness to the movement in recent years.

Accounting for the Mainstreaming of Menstruation

The fight against the tampon tax has helped push periods into the mainstream news and social media. These conversations provoked broader questions about how menstruators managed their periods around the world. In 2014, a German-based non-profit in the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene sector initiated Menstrual Hygiene Day (May 28) to bring awareness to menstrual health management.⁹¹ *NPR*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Newsweek* all declared 2015 the Year of the Period. The same year, “menstruation topped 167 mentions in the five top national news outlets that year, more than triple the four prior years combined.”⁹² In the spring of 2015, Instagram “accidentally” took down a photo of poet Rupi Kaur rocking a period mark on her sweatpants. Kiran Gandhi free bled (did not use any menstrual products) while running the London marathon.⁹³ That summer, Donald Trump suggested that debate moderator Megyn Kelly had “blood coming out of her wherever,” simply because she pressed him to answer questions. A few

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

⁹¹ Like other menstruation studies scholars, I prefer using “health” instead of “hygiene” as the latter presupposes that menstruation is unhygienic and dirty.

⁹² Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public*, 3.

⁹³ Gandhi was not the first female marathoner to be photographed with blood running down her legs. In 1996, Uta Pippig won the Boston marathon despite suffering from menstrual diarrhea. See Jessica Sebor, “What Happens When Your Period Arrives on Race Day?,” Pocket Outdoor Media, December 31, 2015, <https://www.womensrunning.com/health/what-happens-when-your-period-arrives-on-race-day/>.

months later, a Thinx advertising campaign caused a ruckus with its suggestive imagery plastered all over the New York City subway system. At first, these advertisements for period underwear were considered too risqué to get approved. (The ads include an image of a blood orange as a stand-in for a vagina.) Eventually, after public outrage, officials came around. Reaching thousands of New Yorkers, the in-your-face promotions (see Figure 5) pushed the envelope on what is considered socially appropriate. While by no means a perfect company, Thinx has irrefutably helped pave the way for the rebranding of menstruation as a normal conversation topic.⁹⁴ They also challenged the notion that women need special, separate products to handle their period.

Over the last two decades, activists have called out the assumption that only women bleed, and this too has contributed to menstruation's rebranding. The accelerating movement for transgender rights has given rise to the queering of menstruation. In 2016, Dr. Jen Gunther, a gynecologist, faced allegations of transphobia after posting #IfMenHadPeriods on Twitter. The hashtag went viral and many users were quick to point out that the post erased the experiences of trans men. If Steinem's "If Men Could Menstruate" essay was published today, it would surely face a swift and justifiable rebuke. Slowly, the menstrual activism is becoming more inclusive.⁹⁵ In late 2019, Procter & Gamble removed the female Venus sign from the packaging of its Always pads. As one activist in the U.K. pointed out, using non-gendered language and messaging is an effective strategy to combat shame: "If you say that menstruation is an

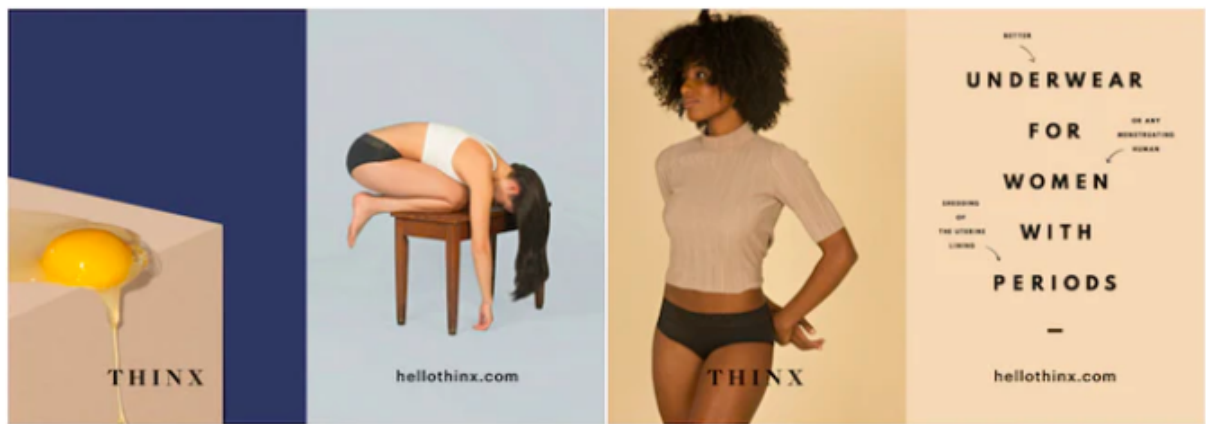
⁹⁴ In 2017, founder and CEO Miki Agrawal faced allegations of sexual harassment. See Noreen Malone, "Sexual-Harassment Claims Against a 'She-E.O.' Thinx boss Miki Agrawal wanted to break taboos about the female body. According to some employees, she went too far," *The Cut*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/03/thinx-employee-accuses-miki-agrawal-of-sexual-harassment.html>.

⁹⁵ For more on queering menstruation, see Karla Rydström, "Degendering Menstruation: Making Trans Menstruators Matter" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, ed. Chris Bobel et al. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 945-959 and Sarah E. Frank, "Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics," *Sociological Inquiry*, 90, no. 2, (2020): 371-404, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12355>.

Figure 5: Thinx Advertisement, 2015



Thinx/Miki Agrawal



Thinx/Miki Agrawal

A Thinx marketing campaign received a lot of attention due to its provocative imagery.

Source: Kutner, Jenny. "Will the New York City Subway Ban These Ads for Using the Word "Period"?" *Mic*, October 20, 2015.

<https://www.mic.com/articles/127022/will-the-new-york-city-subway-ban-these-thinx-ads-for-using-the-word-period>

experience that both men and women have, you open up for [sic] a conversation about why menstruation is so gendered and perceived as negative. If it's no longer categorisable, it's hard to control."⁹⁶ But an experience should not have to be universal to be validated. Even if only women menstruated, they should not be shamed for this fact.

While menstrual activism artwork and humor continue to grow and expand, new forms of activism have also developed. In 2014, two female high school students created a video game called *Tampon Run*, in which users throw menstrual products at enemies. The game begins by noting the importance of destigmatizing menstruation. There are also period coloring books, such as *The Adventures of Toni the Tampon*, that promote the same messaging.⁹⁷ With the advent of social media, online activism has exploded. #PeriodsAreNotanInsult went viral on Twitter as a response to Donald Trump's ludicrous remark about Megyn Kelly. Shortly thereafter, Republican politician Mike Pence claimed he knew what was best for women and signed a controversial abortion bill into law. In typical in-your-face fashion that is a trademark of menstrual activism, many women took to Twitter via #PeriodsforPence to relate intimate details of their menstrual cycles to their new "doctor." These examples of menstrual activism bring some much-needed levity into the movement. This is essential for long-term sustainability of activists and for reaching a large swath of the audience.

The most recent developments in menstrual activism are perhaps the most exciting. In 2019, a short documentary about menstruation won an Oscar.⁹⁸ In November of 2020, Scotland became the first country in the world to make period products freely available to all who need

⁹⁶ Anna Dahlqvist and Alice E. Olsson, *It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2018), 38.

⁹⁷ Cass Clemmer, *The Adventures of Toni the Tampon: A Period Coloring Book* (Bloody Queer, 2016).

⁹⁸ *Period. End of Sentence*, directed by Rayka Zehtabchi (Netflix, 2018), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81074663?trackId=13752289&tctx=0percent2C0percent2C5518eea8f3e4143165a8575eba699cc4d9de5a75percent3A088ebb548ae3a541e61536e8825346d2bdad6490percent2C5518eea8f3e4143165a8575eba699cc4d9de5a75percent3A088ebb548ae3a541e61536e8825346d2bdad6490percent2Cpercent2C>.

them. This accomplishment is a hard-fought win for menstrual activists. While much remains to be seen about how the measure is implemented, the Scottish law provides a menstrual window of opportunity to think critically about menstrual equity. While providing products will not eradicate stigma, the Scottish bill is extremely valuable in that it offers short-term solutions and, hopefully, will serve as an entry point into menstrual activism. Similarly, New Zealand announced in early 2021 that all schools in the country will offer free period products to combat period poverty. Again, this initiative is commendable and celebratory, but we must also think beyond products. The accessibility of period products is not the magic bullet that many consider it to be. A *New York Times* article noted that replicating something akin to Scotland's law in the United States would be difficult given the vast differences in size between the two countries.⁹⁹

Because of the aforementioned competing tactics and belief systems, today's menstrual activism movement is difficult to define. A recent definition can be found in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*: "a mobilizing effort that challenges menstrual taboos and insists that menstruators have the support they need to live healthy happy lives, throughout their cycles and throughout their lives."¹⁰⁰ Notably, editors Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs are careful not to place too much high emphasis on product-focused activism as they believe it actually accommodates stigma. This approach says, *use these products to manage your menses and let's be done with talking about periods*. This approach essentially sanitizes menstruation. Recognizing stigma as the problem, Bobel and Fahs recently contributed an article to *Signs* calling for the movement to return to its radical roots of challenging cultural negativity surrounding menstruation.¹⁰¹ Their reconceptualization "does not prescribe a 'proper' way to

⁹⁹ Emma Goldberg, "Many Lack Access to Pads and Tampons. What are Lawmakers Doing About It?," *New York Times*, January 13 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/tampons-pads-period.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Bobel, *Palgrave Handbook*, 1002.

¹⁰¹ Bobel and Fahs, "Shifting Menstrual Politics," 955-983.

menstruate” and instead advocates for the erosion of any and all menstrual mandates.¹⁰² They must be questioned, probed, challenged, ridiculed, vilified, and eliminated. This can be accomplished through a myriad of ways, including by leveraging the power of popular culture.

Activists’ (Largely Nonexistent) Examination of Menses in Popular Culture

To the detriment of the movement, this tactic has been unjustly overlooked. Popular culture is rarely mentioned by either menstrual activists or critical menstruation scholarship. As mentioned, *Periods in Pop Culture*, which was published in 2012, is the only book-length text on this relationship. Elizabeth Kissling researched and wrote about representations of menstruation in film and television in the early 2000s.

Kissling’s article “On the Rag on the Screen: Menarche in Film and Television” (2002) examines the portrayal of first periods in three movies (*Carrie*, *My Girl*, and *A Walk on the Moon*) and four episodes of various television series (*Something So Right*, *King of the Hill*, *7th Heaven*, and *Roseanne*). At first, these depictions seem beneficial to the menstrual activism movement as the inclusion of a menarche storyline directly challenges the idea that menstruation is an uncouth topic of conversation. However, writing from a critical, feminist perspective, Kissling argues that the representations actually reinforce gender stereotypes and differences. A few years later, she expanded her analysis in her book *Capitalizing on the Curse* (2006). She, like Lauren Rosewarne, discovered that menstruation is overwhelmingly portrayed as a crisis on the screen. It is furthermore an embarrassing crisis: Girls conceal menstrual products and their menstrual status from the male figures in their life. The material is rich, with far-reaching implications. Yet, Kissling does not call upon other menstrual activists to continue examining the representations of menstruation in pop culture. Rosewarne, on the other hand, asserts this

¹⁰² Ibid., 974.

analysis “an important act of feminist media studies.”¹⁰³ Besides the above texts, analyses of media depictions of menstruation in the U.S. is mostly limited to a few magazine articles and podcast episodes.¹⁰⁴ Excitingly, there does seem to be some growing interest in the subject. Media studies scholar David Linton discusses “seeing red” on the screen in his recent book *Men and Menstruation: A Social Transaction* (2019).¹⁰⁵ Dr. Maria Tomlinson, a menstrual activism scholar and activist in the U.K., is putting together a conference about menstruation in the media, scheduled to take place in October 2021.

...

For the most part, menstrual activists do not recognize the lack of engagement with popular culture as a missed opportunity regarding destigmatizing menstruation. At the same time, activists have not overtly dismissed popular culture, making the lack of engagement difficult to account for. They very well could be of the opinion that film and television are simply enjoyable pastimes and irrelevant to menstrual activism. But they could not be more wrong. Media messaging is a powerful form of activism. Given the spread and reach of media, TV is a key site through which we can begin to change the cultural landscape around menstruation.

¹⁰³ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 223.

¹⁰⁴ See Anney and Samantha, hosts, “The Curse: Supernatural Menstruation Horror,” *Stuff Mom Never Told You* (podcast), October 14, 2020, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-curse-supernatural-menstruation-horror/id304531053?i=1000494736904>; “The 28 Most Significant Period Moments In TV & Movie History,” *Bustle*, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.bustle.com/period-timeline>.

¹⁰⁵ David Linton, *Men and Menstruation a Social Transaction* (New York: Peter Lang Inc, 2019).

Chapter 2: Contemporary Images of Menarche in TV Programming

The Elevation of Television

By the time Gloria and Archie butted heads over euphemisms for menstruation on *All in the Family*, the show was TV's biggest hit, grabbing the number one spot in the Nielsen ratings for the 1973-1974 season.¹⁰⁶ Clearly, something special was happening. The loud, blunt opinions of Archie Bunker resonated with many Americans.¹⁰⁷ For the first time, a U.S. network television program was discussing and depicting controversial subjects, such as racism and sexuality, that had previously been considered unsuitable and improper for a TV series to address. The gamble paid off, and television would never be the same.¹⁰⁸

Across the nine seasons of *All in the Family*, however, television watching was almost always looked down upon as an ignoble, brain-cell-killing activity. It was a way to kill time, a diversion too mainstream to be celebrated as art. It was not *elevated*. It was not *transformative*. It was not, in other words, *film*. According to television critic Emily Nussbaum, even throughout the 1980s, as the storylines became more complex, TV was still disregarded as silly nonsense, even by those who actually watched it. "The idiot box" had a generally bad reputation until just before the turn of the century, when *The Sopranos* essentially legitimized television as a serious, even genius, art form.¹⁰⁹

Just as *All in the Family* had been some 30 years earlier, *The Sopranos* was celebrated for ushering in a new era of television. The David Chase series, which follows the unraveling of a

¹⁰⁶ Maintained by Nielsen Media Research, Nielsen ratings determine the audience size of television programming in the U.S.

¹⁰⁷ *All in the Family* creator Norman Lear intended for Archie Bunker to be a parody of racism. See Emily Nussbaum, *I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way through the TV Revolution* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 36-48.

¹⁰⁸ For more information about the cultural impact of *All in the Family*, see Jim Cullen, *Those Were the Days: Why All in the Family Still Matters* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Nussbaum, *I Like to Watch*, 5.

mafia family over the course of six seasons, brought a cinematic flair to the television industry. Suddenly, thanks to the show's high production values, TV looked better than ever. The show is noteworthy for eschewing certain conventions that made a lot of TV series predictable; for example, a central character on *The Sopranos* might suddenly get killed. The change in aesthetic and formulaic narrative took the shame out of television watching. *The Sopranos* was virtually every critic's darling and is still considered by many to be the best television series of all time.¹¹⁰ The show aired without commercial interruptions on HBO, the first subscription television service. Customers were paying monthly fees to watch this particular series.

As Nussbaum points out in her book *I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through the TV Revolution* (2019), the passionate praise of *The Sopranos* underscored the kind of programming that was *not* considered genius or even worth watching. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sex and the City* were remarkable in the sense that there was nothing else like these shows on TV, and they certainly garnered attention, but they were not considered serious works of art. Nussbaum has explained that these kinds of deliberations prompted both implicit and explicit deliberations over

whose stories carried weight, about what kind of creativity counted as ambitious, and about who (which characters, which creators, and also, which audience members) deserved attention. What kind of person got to be a genius? Whose story counted as universal? Which type of art had staying power?¹¹¹

There was and remains a gendered logic at play. Women's stories, especially positive ones, ones that portray women enjoying their lives, apparently were antithetical to serious, high-quality television. This gendered dismissal is also prevalent in literature, where certain novels are often

¹¹⁰ Rob Sheffield, "100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time," *Rolling Stone*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/er-110349/>; Sam Parker, "15 Moments That Made 'The Sopranos' The Greatest Show Of All Time," *Esquire*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/tv/news/a7040/the-sopranos-greatest-scenes/>; Calum Marsh, "Twenty Years After Its Premiere, The Sopranos Remains The Greatest Show in Television History," *National Post*, January 17, 2019, <https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/television/twenty-years-after-its-premiere-the-sopranos-remains-the-greatest-show-in-television-history>.

¹¹¹ Nussbaum, *I Like to Watch*, 12.

described as “chick-lit” in an attempt to demean female-centric stories. What is clear is that television went from being considered frivolous to having the potential for genius in a relatively short period of time. And, given contemporary viewing habits, it is safe to say that television is here to stay.

For one, TVs are widely accessible. As of 2019, over 96 percent of U.S. homes have “at least one operable TV/monitor with the ability to deliver video via traditional means of antennae, cable set-top-box or satellite receiver and/or with a broadband connection.”¹¹² According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, on any given day, nearly 80 percent of Americans watch television.¹¹³ Moreover, we are watching television at an astonishing rate; almost eight hours per household per day.¹¹⁴ (This dazzling statistic could be misleading as there is no way to determine whether television is actually being watched or is just turned on.) Research shows that, “on average, [Americans] spend about a quarter of our lives watching moving pictures on a screen.”¹¹⁵

There are some noteworthy TV watching trends based on gender, age, and ethnicity. In 2011, Nielsen Media Research reported that women watch nearly 16 more hours of traditional TV per month than men. Men, however, consistently spend more time streaming video online. Those who are 65 or older tune in more than twice as much traditional TV as teens. The same

¹¹² “Nielsen Estimates 120.6 Million TV Homes in the U.S. for the 2019-2020 TV Season,” Nielsen Global Media, August 27, 2019, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/nielsen-estimates-120-6-million-tv-homes-in-the-u-s-for-the-2019-2020-tv-season/#:~:text=Accordingpercent20topercent20Nielsenpercent27spercent20Nationalpercent20Television,0.6percent25percent20increasepercent20frompercent20lastpercent20year>.

¹¹³ Rachel Krantz-Kent, “Television, Capturing America’s Attention at Prime Time and Beyond,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2018, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-7/television-capturing-americas-attention.htm>.

¹¹⁴ Alexis C. Madrigal, “When Did TV Watching Peak?,” *The Atlantic*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/when-did-tv-watching-peak/561464/>.

¹¹⁵ “Nicole F. Roberts, “Psychological Research Explains Why TV Viewing Is Higher than Ever,” *Forbes*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicolefisher/2019/12/04/psychological-research-explains-why-tv-viewing-is-higher-than-ever/?sh=28609dcc3b0b>

report noted that African Americans watch “nearly 213 hours of traditional television per month, more than twice as much as Asians and roughly 57 hours more than whites.”¹¹⁶

Clearly, TV watching is one of America’s favorite pastimes – but why? A recent study indicates that TV viewing meets the human psychological need to relax and escape, a “cheap, familiar, reliable, easy to use, and increasingly ubiquitous means of entertainment.” It “may help viewers relax by automatically inducing a pleasant, comfortable mental state, reflected in a relatively high incidence of alpha waves.”¹¹⁷ As one article notes, it helps viewers forget their bad boss, bills, and break-up.¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, TV watching has surged since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁹ Many people, myself included, seek solace from television in times of uncertainty and stress.

I have always been an avid television watcher. Watching TV is like building a friendship. At first, you want to get a feel for a new acquaintance’s personality and see if you are a good fit for each other. Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly if things are going well, you establish an emotional connection. Yes, this friendship is essentially a one-way street. But you still want to check in and see what they are up to. You want to celebrate their wins and cry with them at their low points. Of course there are going to be disagreements and surprises. They will not necessarily be there for you, but they will *be there*. You value their friendship; you stand by them unless they become absolutely unbearable. You value them even when others are telling you to break up with them, to break up with the whole industry. You know that, one day, they will leave you. Maybe it will be announced ahead of time, or maybe not. You will miss them. You will treasure the time you had together. If it is a really meaningful friendship, you know it is not

¹¹⁶ “American Video Habits by Age, Gender, and Ethnicity,” Nielsen Global Media, August 1, 2011, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2011/american-video-habits-by-age-gender-and-ethnicity/>.

¹¹⁷ Roberts, “Psychological Research,” Forbes.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “COVID-19 TV Habits Suggest The Days Are Blurring Together,” Comcast, May 6, 2020, <https://corporate.comcast.com/stories/xfinity-viewing-data-covid-19>.

really good-bye because you will find them again. You will buy some memorabilia in the meantime. You know that those *others* who do not watch TV, who shame TV watching, are missing out. If they want to live in a world without *The Durrells in Corfu* and *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* (two of my favorites) – well, that is their loss.

Media as a Form of Meaning Making

The aforesaid statistics on TV watching prove that television is a very pervasive form of popular culture. By extension, then, it is a far-reaching and powerful disseminator of cultural messages, including menstruation taboos. Because of this impact, we as viewers need to think critically about the media we are engaging with. The implications are profound. Media researcher Lauren Rosewarne, author of the only book that examines representations of menstruation in popular culture, elaborates:

Our heavy consumption of screen content presents, as well as *reinforces* a cavalcade of ideas – often contradictory – about politics and society and most notably about *the female body*. In the case of menstruation, the downplaying, if not *demonizing*, of menstruation helps to reinforce popular ideas related to taboo, stigma, and secrecy.¹²⁰

What we watch shapes our understanding of the world and our socialization and identity-formation processes. Because media is a form of meaning making, menstrual activists have a moral imperative to enter popular culture discourses in order to help move the menstrual activism movement forward.

To effectively make noise and create change in these discourses, menstrual activists must first recognize that media producers cannot control how viewers respond to the media. Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model explains why. Media producers strategically embed their texts with particular messaging based on their knowledge and beliefs as well their technological

¹²⁰ Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 3.

capabilities. In other words, they encode the texts. But the meaning of the text is determined by how the audience decodes it. The process of decoding is similarly based on the viewer's understanding of the world, belief systems, and technological capabilities.¹²¹ For instance, a radical menstruation activist would likely have a dissimilar reaction to a media representation of a menarche party than a feminist-spiritualist. Hall contends that viewers respond to the media in one (or a combination) of three ways. The audience either has an oppositional, dominant, or negotiated reading. An oppositional response means that they have rejected the producer's intended message. The decoder understands the aim of the media producer, but because of differing knowledge or beliefs, rebuffs the text. A dominant reading, also called preferred or hegemonic, is what media producers want; the intended messaging is uncritically accepted by the audience. A negotiated reading falls between dominant and oppositional; viewers accept some of the desired messaging and rejects others.¹²²

To illustrate these three notions of how audiences read texts, let us return to the 2006 Tampax Pearl advertisement discussed earlier (see Figure 1). With her back turned away from the camera, a tan woman in a pool is noticeably in distress because the top of her swimsuit has fallen off. The tagline reads, "Embarrassment Happens. Leaks Shouldn't." With these words, the media producers categorize the menstruating body as abject. While flustering accidents are simply a normal part of life, your menses is *your* problem and should remain *your* dirty little secret. Inadvertently bleeding through clothing is entirely unacceptable. A dominant reading would agree with this idea and with the menstrual mandate that periods should be relegated to the private sphere. An oppositional reader – say, a menstrual activist – would grasp this meaning, but would disagree and ultimately reject the messaging. A menarchist would spurn the idea of

¹²¹ Sue Thornham et al., "Encoding/Decoding," in *Media Studies: a Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 28-38.

¹²² *Ibid.*

painting the body in disparaging terms, recognizing that menstruation is a normal bodily function. A negotiated reading might agree that menstrual blood needs to be concealed, but perhaps not with products from the problematic FemCare industry. For the purposes of my research, I am focusing on the media producer's intended, dominant meaning and applying a critical eye to the dominant meanings of these texts.

Those Were the Days: Early Media Depictions of Menarche

According to Rosewarne, the earliest depiction of menstruation on a television series was in the aforementioned scene in *All in the Family*. While Gloria admirably refused to be shamed, her frankness did not inspire a trend in the television industry. On the contrary, media narratives were more inclined to cater to Archie's preference not to talk about this normal human function. This inclination is perhaps surprising given the magnificent amount of feminist activism taking place when the episode aired in 1973. However, as television critic Joy Press asserts in her book *Stealing the Show: How Women Are Revolutionizing Television* (2018), the women's movement actually had a minimal impact on the television industry: "there were Mary and Rhoda, there was Maude, and there was the working-mom sitcom *One Day at a Time*... but that was about it."¹²³ Producers and writers apparently deemed women's stories unwatchable and women's voices unworthy of air time. Women's underrepresentation on television may not seem like an urgent problem, but if popular culture does not show women's lives in the fullest terms, then patriarchal ideologies are all the better equipped to bloom in real life.

¹²³ Mary and Rhoda are characters from the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977); Maude refers to the show of the same name airing from 1972-1978. Joy Press, *Stealing the Show: How Women are Revolutionizing Television* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 6.

The very first period product advertisement aired on television only two years after Archie told Gloria to “speak delicate” [sic].¹²⁴ Ten years later, in 1985, a young Courteney Cox became the first person to use the word “period” during a commercial, for Tampax tampons.¹²⁵ Progress – that is, the chipping away of the menstrual communication taboo – was very slow going.

As of 2012, when Rosewarne’s book *Periods in Pop Culture* came out, menstruation had been referenced on film and television fewer than 200 times in total.¹²⁶ Rosewarne’s research showed that “first periods get a starring role in narratives far more frequently than any other period,” presumably because meeting this milestone is an unforgettable experience for many menstruators, as well as their families, and are thus deemed TV-worthy.¹²⁷ Dissecting the early media narratives of menarche will contextualize the more recent representations.

Before television depicted the onset of menstruation, it appeared in films. Strikingly, the menarcheal experience on the movie screen is usually traumatic. One of the earliest film narratives is arguably the most iconic. In *Carrie* (1976), an adaptation of a Stephen King horror novel, the titular character gets her first period, as well as telekinetic powers, when she is sixteen years old. Shy, self-conscious, and entirely ignorant about menstruation, she is bullied and abused by her classmates and her mother when her menstrual status is revealed. On prom night, classmates douse Carrie with pig blood, a stand-in for menses. Fed up with all of the maltreatment, she kills almost everyone in her life.¹²⁸ The cultural impact of *Carrie* can be

¹²⁴ *All in the Family*, season 3, episode 24, “Battle of the Month,” directed by Bob LaHendro and John Rich, written by Michael Ross and Bernie West, aired March 24, 1973, on CBS.

¹²⁵ Nadya Okamoto, *Period Power a Manifesto for the Menstrual Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 203.

¹²⁶ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹²⁸ *Carrie*, directed by Brian de Palma (Red Bank Films, 1976), <https://www.hulu.com/movie/carrie-214f8238-ece2-4d46-a5e3-b92359019fa0>.

demonstrated by its many parodies in popular culture, a recent example being an episode of the teen hit *Riverdale*.¹²⁹

Other early examples of menarche plotlines in film include *The Blue Lagoon* (1980) and *My Girl* (1991).¹³⁰ In the former, a young Brooke Shields and a male cousin have been shipwrecked on a small island with just each other for company. Like Carrie, she is frightened by her first period, entirely unaware of what is happening to her body. This is the only menarche reference that foreshadows pregnancy. Vada, the protagonist in *My Girl*, is also ignorant about her menstrual cycle, and thus terrified when she starts bleeding (“I’m hemorrhaging!”).¹³¹ Her father’s girlfriend is, fortunately, able to provide some guidance... off screen. That *Carrie*, *The Blue Lagoon*, and *My Girl* all feature a traumatic menarche is a pattern both striking and distressing. Young girls deserve to know what reaching menarche means and entails. Notably, these movies were all written by men.

The onset of menstruation, as we will see, is a more positive experience on television programs. Before the start of the new millennium, menarche was spotlighted on six television series: *Roseanne* (1989), *The Cosby Show* (1990), *Blossom* (1991), *Beverly Hills 90210* (1994), *7th Heaven* (1996), and *King of the Hill* (1999). No traumatizing experiences to see here. Notably, these episodes were all written by women.

Starring in three popular sitcoms (*Roseanne*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Blossom*) in three years, menarche seemed like the Next Big Thing in television. A pattern was definitely and finally taking hold. The earliest menarche representation on the small screen is in an episode of *Roseanne*, a comedy about a white working-class family in the Midwest. Towards the end of the

¹²⁹ *Riverdale*, season 2, episode 18, “Chapter Thirty-One: A Night to Remember,” directed by Jason Stone, written by Arabella Anderson and Tessa Williams, aired April 18, 2018, on The CW.

¹³⁰ *The Blue Lagoon*, directed by Randal Kleiser (Columbia Pictures, 1980); *My Girl*, directed by Howard Zieff (Columbia Pictures, 1991), <https://www.amazon.com/My-Girl-Dan-Aykroyd/dp/B000I9YUZO>.

¹³¹ *My Girl*.

first season in 1989, tomboy Darlene claims her “life is over” when she gets her period, but her mother Roseanne tries to convince her otherwise, calling the menstrual experience “magical.”¹³² While the episode also includes a number of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) jokes, the messaging is overall life-enhancing as Darlene develops a more positive attitude towards her menstrual cycle by the end of the episode.

About a year later, the most popular TV show of the time, *The Cosby Show*, had its own menarche storyline, which can also be categorized as relatively positive. When Rudy gets her first period, her mother wants to mark the occasion by having a “Women’s Day.” After initially not wanting to follow this family tradition and preferring instead to be with her friends, Rudy eventually realizes she needs maternal guidance. The episode is relatively empowering for its refusal to shame either the menstruator or the menstrual process. It is also noteworthy for being one of the few menarche storylines involving a girl of color.¹³³

Blossom’s menarche episode aired just a few months later. In *Blossom*, the titular character wishes she could talk to her absentee mother about the changes that are happening to her body. She is too embarrassed to talk to her father or older brothers. Her desire for maternal guidance is so strong that she dreams of Clair Huxtable, the mother from *The Cosby Show*. Blossom eventually reveals her menstrual status to her father, and he ends up taking the family out to dinner to celebrate the occasion.¹³⁴

The next two menarche storylines take place in dramas. The first, which aired in 1994, is from the global pop culture phenomenon *Beverly Hills 90210*, which follows a group of

¹³² *Roseanne*, season 1, episode 15, “Nightmare on Oak Street,” directed by John Pasquin, written by Grace McKeane, aired February 14, 1989, on ABC.

¹³³ *The Cosby Show*, season 7, episode 8, “The Infantry Has Landed (and They’ve Fallen Off the Roof),” directed by John Bowab, written by Lore Kimbrough, Gordon Gartrelle, and Janet Leahy, aired November 8, 1990, on NBC.

¹³⁴ *Blossom*, season 1, episode 1, “Blossom Blossoms,” directed by Zane Buzby, written by Racelle Rosett Schaefer, aired January 3, 1991, on NBC.

beautiful, mostly rich, mostly white teens living in an upscale community in southern California. When Dylan's sister (at least he *thinks* Erica is his sister...) complains of stomach pain, he thinks she is just stalling her upcoming swimming lesson. When she embarrassingly reveals her menstrual status, his relaxed response and composure are quite endearing. Not knowing how to help, he takes her to see his friend's mom, who welcomes Erica to womanhood.¹³⁵

Two years later, Lucy Camden is anxious to be welcomed to womanhood on *7th Heaven*, a religious drama. If the *90210* episode offers the most easy-going menarche storyline, this one from *7th Heaven* is the most peculiar. Lucy badly wants her period, and her father is eager to talk to her about menstruation and help guide her through her menarcheal experience. But she wants mom instead. He eventually takes a step back, but when Lucy finally gets her period, he treats the "women of the house" to a woman-only dinner.¹³⁶ This strong desire to menstruate is not apparent in any other representation of menarche on television.

After the *7th Heaven* episode, the onset of menstruation becomes more of a crisis. It is used for shock value. Menarche returns to comedy, first in *King of the Hill* in 1999. Connie, who represents a stereotypical Asian student as a smart go-getter, is staying at a neighbor's house when she gets her first period. Too uncomfortable to say out loud what has happened, she reveals her menstrual status via a notepad. Her parents are out of town, so the male neighbor is forced to conquer his fear of Aisle 8A, the feminine hygiene aisle.¹³⁷ This fear is a recurring theme in later representations.

By airing episodes that included storylines about menarche, *Roseanne*, *The Cosby Show*, *Blossom*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, and *King of the Hill* helped break down the menstrual

¹³⁵ *Beverly Hills 90210*, season 4, episode 17, "Thicker Than Water," directed by Michael Lange, written by Lana Freistat Melman, aired January 12, 1994, on Fox.

¹³⁶ *7th Heaven*, season 1, episode 1, "Anything You Want," directed by Sam Weisman, written by Brenda Hampton, aired August 26, 1996, on The WB.

¹³⁷ *King of the Hill*, season 4, episode 5, "Aisle 8A," directed by Allen Jacobsen, written by Garland Testa, aired November 7, 1999, on Fox.

communication taboo. Furthermore, half of these narratives celebrated menarche. Bobel's feminist-spiritualist camp are surely receptive to this kind of messaging. Unlike the depictions of menarche on film, TV shows did not always portray menarche as traumatic, although it was embarrassing. Four of the six representations appeared in comedies; viewers are supposed to laugh about the character's embarrassment. According to Rosewarne, "the idea that menstruation – that the menstruator, that her blood, that the products used – are abject, are disgusting is the dominant way that periods are presented on screen"; but these early storylines indicate she overstated her point.¹³⁸ Another important theme amongst these early examples is that they are relatively racially and socioeconomically inclusive. The very first menarche narrative on the small screen involved a working-class girl, and two of the storylines involve a girl of color.

Fast forward to today, and representations of menarche have proliferated. This mushrooming will surely further chip away the menstrual communication taboo. In the past twenty years, there have been at least nineteen depictions of menarche in television series.¹³⁹ It is tempting to think that the contemporary representations are more progressive compared to earlier portrayals. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Almost all of the recent ones center on a white, cisgender girl from a middle- or upper-class background. Additionally, there is an increasing amount of what I call problematic period jokes (menstrual humor that shames menstruation and/or the menstruator). Even though progress has been made, we still need to think critically about the kind of images we are producing and consuming.

¹³⁸ Roswarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 93.

¹³⁹ The onset of menstruation is discussed in *Braceface* (2001); *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001) *7th Heaven* (2003); *Everwood* (2005); *Californication* (2007); *According to Jim* (2008); *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2011); *Mad Men* (2012); *Game of Thrones* (2012); *Superstore* (2016); *Schitt's Creek* (2016); *Odd Mom Out* (2017); *Anne with an E* (2017); *Alias Grace* (2017); *Big Mouth* (2018); *Black-ish* (2018); *Modern Family* (2019); *PEN15* (2020), and *The Queen's Gambit* (2020).

Thank You, Next: The Proliferation of Menarche on TV

Why, then, did TV programming increasingly depict the onset of menstruation at the start of the new millennium? For one, menstrual activists had worked hard to normalize (as well as, in some instances, romanticize) menstruation. But there were also systemic changes specific to the television industry. That is, women became more involved in media production. A 1974 Writers Guild of America report revealed that “only 6.5 percent of prime-time shows in the 1973-1974 season had hired even a single woman writer.”¹⁴⁰ In contrast, women accounted for 36 percent of writers across broadcast network, cable, and streaming programs in the 2019-2020 season.¹⁴¹

Joy Press has summarized this change in the television landscape:

For most of TV history, broadcast networks had focused on series that could deliver a mass audience to advertisers, with particular emphasis on eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-old guys. Entertainment executives, who were mostly men, seemed to believe viewers wouldn't put up with complex female leads. . . . In the early years of the twenty-first century, though, those tightly held beliefs began to loosen. The TV industry was in crisis, threatened by an onslaught of cable and digital outlets. Where once ABC, CBS, and NBC divided up the entire American viewing populace among themselves, now they had to fend off an ever-multiplying number of rivals. The crisis became a moment of opportunity; cable and digital executives grew more receptive to programming that appealed to niche populations, and anxious broadcast networks took a few more risks in response. As a result, women began to enter through the ever-widening cracks in the system.¹⁴²

The underrepresentation of women on television (often referred to as “symbolic annihilation”) was finally being addressed and it was because of women themselves.¹⁴³ Tellingly, it was not being approached from a gender equality perspective; it was considered a profit-making enterprise.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴¹ Martha M. Lauzen, “Boxed In 2019-20: Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes in Television,” The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, accessed April 12, 2021, https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2019-2020_Boxed_In_Report.pdf.

¹⁴² Press, *Stealing the Show*, 2.

¹⁴³ See Tuchman, Gaye. “The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media.” In *Culture and Politics: a Reader*, edited by Charles Lockhart and Lane Crothers, 150-175. New York, NY: St. Martin Press, 2000.

The entrance of women into positions of power both in front of and behind the scenes had a positively powerful and powerfully positive ripple effect. With women making decisions about television scripts and storylines, all aspects of a woman's intimate life, including menstruation, were given more air time. They used the opportunity to share their own experiences; menstruating media producers led to menstruation storylines. And "complex female leads" turned out to be quite popular and transformative.

As the television industry employed more women, programming became both menstruation- and vagina-friendly, and thus more robustly reflected real life experiences. Showrunner Krista Vernoff explains that, before the Shondaland-produced hit *Grey's Anatomy*, "you could say *penis* in a medical context in TV without anybody raising a flag, but you couldn't say *vagina*." This normalization is her proudest career achievement because, now, "more and more people are raising [daughters] to call their anatomy by its proper name and not thinking of it as a dirty word."¹⁴⁴ Yet, as noted by menstrual activist Nadya Okamoto, as recently as 2010, "an ad for the tampon brand U by Kotex was banned by major US television networks because it mentioned the word 'vagina.'" Even when the company used the expression "down there" instead, some of the networks still did not approve the ad.¹⁴⁵ Slow going, indeed.

In addition to the influx of female media producers, women's blogs like *Bitch*, *Feministing*, *Jezebel*, and *The Hairpin* (now defunct) can also help explain the proliferation of menstruation on the small screen. Press explains that these blogs expanded "online space for young women to talk among themselves, making them increasingly comfortable about sharing frank details from their lives."¹⁴⁶ Like the menstrual activists discussed in the preceding chapter, these bloggers helped normalize menstruation by simply and candidly talking about it. For

¹⁴⁴ Brackets in original; Press, *Stealing the Show*, 117.

¹⁴⁵ Nadya Okamoto, *Period Power*, 204.

¹⁴⁶ Press, *Stealing the Show*, 169.

example, in 2007, *Feministing* interviewed Madeleine Shaw, self-proclaimed “flow lover” and designer of washable menstrual products.¹⁴⁷ *Bitch* even ran a few articles about menstruation on the screen. In 2004, it called menstruation “the last taboo of reality tv.”¹⁴⁸ (Is it still? A 2010 episode of *Jersey Shore* titled “Dirty Pad” indicates otherwise. After finding a used pad in the shared bathroom, a male cast member calls the menstruator in question “the dirtiest girl I’ve ever met.” It’s worth noting that he repeatedly mistakenly refers to the pad as a tampon....¹⁴⁹)

Despite such menstruation-shaming media narratives, feminists and feminist storytelling have made great gains in the television industry over the last twenty years. *Stealing the Show* points out that “more than a dozen new female-centric series created by women premiered in 2015 – as many as had emerged in the three previous years combined.”¹⁵⁰ While these achievements are commendable, Joy Press warns that the situation is precarious. History has shown us that, with every feminist advance, including those in popular culture, there has been a backlash.¹⁵¹ Even so, we must continue to critically examine the way in which menarche is represented on television because of the high stakes involved. It may seem frivolous or ridiculous to many television producers and watchers, but we have to push forward with our agenda in order to help advance the menstrual activism movement.

The Bloody Contemporary Menstrual Status Quo on TV

How is the most pervasive form of popular culture depicting menarche these days?

¹⁴⁷ Celina, “Madeline Shaw: Flow Lover and Founder of LunaPads,” *Feministing*, 2007, http://feministing.com/2006/05/27/madeleine_shaw_flow_lover_foun_1/.

¹⁴⁸ Wendy Weiner, “The Last Taboo of Reality TV,” *Bitch Media*, December 31, 2004, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/period-pieces>.

¹⁴⁹ *Jersey Shore*, season 2, episode 9, “Dirty Pad,” aired September 23, 2010, on MTV.

¹⁵⁰ Press, *Stealing the Show*, 2.

¹⁵¹ In her aptly titled book *Backlash*, Susan Faludi discusses the backlash that occurred in the media, film, television, fashion, and beauty industries after the women’s movement.

What images are being promoted by media producers and what should menstrual activists make of them? While at least eighteen depictions have occurred over the last twenty years, I limited my analysis to series set and situated in twenty-first century North America.¹⁵² Finding them was not difficult. As someone who watches a great deal of television, I recalled a few relevant storylines. I also used IMDb, an online database of film, TV, and celebrity content, and the aforementioned *Periods in Pop Culture*, which includes a media reference list.¹⁵³ In the end, I discovered thirteen television narratives that fit my parameters. The narratives unfold in episodes of *Braceface* (2001); *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001); *7th Heaven* (2003); *Everwood* (2005); *Californication* (2007); *According to Jim* (2008); *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2011); *Superstore* (2016); *Schitt's Creek* (2016); *Odd Mom Out* (2017); *Big Mouth* (2017); *Black-ish* (2017); and *Modern Family* (2019). Just as in the early examples, most of the recent representations are situated in comedies and are written by women.¹⁵⁴

Braceface (2001), an animated comedy series recounting the travails of teenager Sharon, a girl with magical braces. After getting her first period on her first date, she ends up in the emergency room because her crush thinks she has appendicitis (which, seemingly to Sharon, makes a better story than the truth).¹⁵⁵ A more empowering representation of menarche can be found in *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2002), a drama series featuring an ensemble cast of students at the fictitious Degrassi Community High. When Emma bleeds through her new white

¹⁵² While *Mad Men* (2012), *Games of Thrones* (2012), *Anne with an E* (2017), *Alias Grace* (2017), and *PEN15* (2020), *Queen's Gambit* (2020) all have a menarche storyline, they are not set in a contemporary time frame; hence, they are not included in my analysis.

¹⁵³ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 227-231.

¹⁵⁴ *Braceface*, *According to Jim*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Superstore*, *Schitt's Creek*, *Odd Mom Out*, *Big Mouth*, *Black-ish* and *Modern Family* are all slated as comedies. *Degrassi*, *7th Heaven*, and *Everwood* are drama programs. *Californication* is a comedy-drama. The menarche storyline in *Braceface*, *Degrassi*, *Everwood*, *Superstore*, *Odd Mom Out*, *Big Mouth*, *Black-ish*, and *Modern Family* were written by at least one woman.

¹⁵⁵ *Braceface*, season 1, episode 8, "The Worst First Date Ever. Period." directed by Charles E. Bastien, written by Alyse Rosenberg, aired July 14, 2001, on Disney Channel.

skirt and has to wear a two-sizes-too-big pair of gym shorts, she refuses to be shamed for her menstrual status.¹⁵⁶ The following year, menarche is depicted in *7th Heaven* (2003) for the second time. Unlike Lucy, who complained of feeling like a freak for being a late bloomer, younger sister Ruthie conceals her menstrual status from everyone, not wanting to make a fuss.¹⁵⁷

Menarche is featured on *Everwood* two years later. A recently widowed hot-shot brain surgeon from the Big Apple relocates his family to a small mountain town in Colorado. Daughter Delia loves to play hockey, but quits the team after her menstrual status is revealed to her coach and teammates.¹⁵⁸ Another two years pass before menarche pops up on *Californication*, a comedy-drama centering on womanizer Hank and his womanizing ways. His daughter is more mature about the onset of her menstruation than he is.¹⁵⁹ The first period storyline on *According to Jim* (2008), starring a suburban father with slacker sensibilities, has a similar theme. When his daughter starts menstruating, Jim is forced to conquer his fear of the grocery store's feminine hygiene aisle... and of the word "period."¹⁶⁰ *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2011) rounds out the representations of menarche centered on a male figure, this time the socially inept Larry David. He is ordering cookies from a Girl Scout when her eyes suddenly widen. She just *knows* she got her first period. He helps and makes no big deal of the occasion.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, season 1, episode 9, "Coming of Age," directed by Bruce McDonald, written by Tassie Cameron and Susin Nielsen, aired May 13, 2002, on TeenNick.

¹⁵⁷ There are two menarche storylines in *7th Heaven*. The first depiction occurred in 1996. Ruthie's older sister Lucy was vocally eager about wanting to start menstruating. *7th Heaven*, season 1, episode 1, "Anything You Want," directed by Sam Weisman, written by Brenda Hampton, aired August 26, 1996, on The WB; *7th Heaven*, season 7, episode 22, "Life and Death: Part 2," directed by Tony Mordente, written by Chris Olsen and Jeff Olsen, aired May 19, 2003, on The WB.

¹⁵⁸ *Everwood*, season 3, episode 12, "Giving Up the Girl," directed by David Paymer, written by Sherri Cooper, aired January 24, 2005, on The WB

¹⁵⁹ *Californication*, season 1, episode 12, "The Last Waltz," directed by Scott Winant, written by Tom Kapinos, aired October 29, 2007, on Showtime.

¹⁶⁰ *According to Jim*, season 7, episode 7, "Period Peace," directed by Leonard R. Garner Jr., written by Mike Murphy and John Schwab, aired February 12, 2007, on ABC.

¹⁶¹ *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, season 8, episode 1, "The Divorce," directed by David Steinberg, written by Larry David, Alec Berg, David Mandel, and Jeff Schaffer, aired on July 10, 2011, on HBO.

Viewers saw two menarche storylines on television in 2016. The first occurred on *Superstore*, a workplace comedy following employees at a Walmart-type store. Amy sneaks her daughter into work, but is pulled into a meeting; the daughter leans on Amy's male coworker Jonah to guide her through her menarche. Notably, the *Superstore* example is one of just a handful that center on a girl of color, in this case a Latina.¹⁶² The second 2016 menarche storyline is from the Emmy award-winning *Schitt's Creek* (2016), which centers on a family of four adjusting to their sudden loss of status and wealth. When the son is looking after his boss's young daughter, Mandy, she gets her first period and inadvertently leaves a menstrual mark on his bed. He awkwardly tries to help, offering "health accessories" and a sweater to tie around her waist.¹⁶³

Two other recent depictions of menarcheal experiences on television are unconventional in that they feature menstrual songs. Recent years have seen a proliferation of musical numbers and musical episodes on the small screen. The staging of a musical element in a television program can be a daunting task, and it does not always go over well with viewers. It takes a certain type of show to be able to pull off the feat successfully. With their quirky tones and spirited attitudes towards life, *Odd Mom Out* (2017) and *Big Mouth* (2018) are exactly the type of shows in question. *Odd Mom Out* follows a family of one-percenters living in New York City's Upper East Side. When daughter Hazel expresses disdain about starting her monthly bleedings, her mother breaks out in song and encourages her to "Go With the Flow" while describing periods in entirely negative terms.¹⁶⁴ A year later, the critically acclaimed animated series *Big Mouth* showcased its own menstruation song. After Jessi gets her period during a

¹⁶² *Superstore*, season 1, episode 5, "Shoplifter," directed by Ruben Fleischer, written by Jackie Clarke, aired January 11, 2016, on NBC.

¹⁶³ *Schitt's Creek*, season 2, episode 10, "Ronnie's Party," directed by Paul Fox, written by Matt Kippen, aired March 8, 2016, on POP.

¹⁶⁴ *Odd Mom Out*, season 3, episode 10, "Blood Bath," directed by Peter Lauer, written by Jill Kargman and Lara Spotts, aired September 13, 2017, on Bravo.

school field trip at the Statue of Liberty, a human-sized tampon performs “Everybody Bleeds,” which briefly and crudely explains where menses come from.¹⁶⁵ Menstrual musical numbers are certainly innovative and seem to be a hit with viewers. A YouTube user complimented “Go With the Flow” as “woderfull [sic] and witty.”¹⁶⁶ One fan categorized “Everybody Bleeds” as #periodpositive.¹⁶⁷ These are questionable appraisals since neither song’s lyrics describe menstruation as a self-structured, affirming experience. These positive reviews demonstrate that simply discussing menstruation is considered a good thing. But in order to demystify period stigma, media producers and audience members alike need to be critical about how menstruation is framed in these discussions.

In 2018, almost thirty years after Rudy reached menarche on *The Cosby Show*, a second Black girl got her first period on television. This time the setting was the show *Black-ish*, a sitcom about a stubborn advertising executive trying to instill a sense of cultural identity into his children. To the chagrin of his family, daughter Diane’s sharp tongue becomes sharper when she starts menstruating.¹⁶⁸ The final representation of menarche that meets my research parameters is from another family-centered sitcom, *Modern Family* (2019), and also involves a girl of color. Mitchell and his husband Cameron, who are both white, are at a loss at how to support their adopted Vietnamese daughter Lily after she gets her first period and subsequently locks herself in the bathroom. She eventually lets them in – figuratively and literally.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ *Big Mouth*, “Everybody Bleeds,” episode 1, season 2, directed by Bryan Francis, written by Kelly Kaluska, aired September 29, 2017, on Netflix.

¹⁶⁶ Irena Toroš, comment on “Odd Mom Out: An Musical Number About Getting Your Period (Season 3, Episode 9) | Bravo,” *YouTube*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=732jHjzekkY>.

¹⁶⁷ Crake Eades, comment on “R.E.M. | Everybody Bleeds | Big Mouth,” *YouTube*, October 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3jdn6_yNBw.

¹⁶⁸ *Black-ish*, season 4, episode 6, “First and Last,” directed by Lina Mendoza, written by Laura Gutin, aired November 7, 2017 on NBC.

¹⁶⁹ *Modern Family*, season 10, episode 16, “Red Alert,” directed by Julie Bowen, written by Jessica Porter and Ryan Walls, aired February 27, 2019, on ABC.

Perhaps the biggest differences among these thirteen portrayals of menarche on television have to do with the way the menarcheal girl feels about getting her first period. Ruthie from *7th Heaven* (2003) and Becca from *Californication* (2007) are the most composed of the bunch. They are not embarrassed and relatively undisturbed about starting to bleed. When Becca's dad fusses over her, she placates him: "Are you there, dad? It's me, Becca. I'm not going to die or anything. I just got my period."¹⁷⁰ Ruthie understands menstruation in straightforward and rational terms: "I know what's happening to my body. It's not a miracle, it just happens."¹⁷¹ Kyra, the Girl Scout from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, becomes frustrated when learning how to use a tampon, but is otherwise calm and collected. The menarche storyline in *Schitt's Creek* is the briefest of the bunch. Mandy admits she's not embarrassed, but scared. We do not hear from her again after she is offered period products.¹⁷² Gracie in *According to Jim* is proud that she got her period before her older sister and calls herself a "woman."¹⁷³ *Degrassi's* Emma remarks that she is "so not ready for this" but is unafraid to share her menstrual status.¹⁷⁴ In sharp contrast, *Modern Family's* Lily is so embarrassed that she hides from her family for the duration of the episode. The first period experience in *Odd Mom Out* is paradoxical, perhaps more so than any other narrative. At first, Hazel is excited. Then, she is grossed out. Then she is okay with it, but does not want to make a big deal of it. In the end, she relishes having a loud and proud menarche party.¹⁷⁵ There is also some back-and-forth on *Black-ish*; Diane intentionally holds back from talking about her menstrual status, but eventually decides to open up.¹⁷⁶ Arguably the most cringe-worthy menarche occurred on *Big Mouth*; Jessi is understandably flustered when starts

¹⁷⁰ Becca is referring to the popular young adult novel *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume; *Californication*, "The Last Waltz," Showtime.

¹⁷¹ *7th Heaven*, "Life and Death: Part 2," The WB.

¹⁷² *Schitt's Creek*, "Ronnie's Party," POP.

¹⁷³ *According to Jim*, "Period Peace," ABC.

¹⁷⁴ *Degrassi*, "Coming of Age," TeenNick.

¹⁷⁵ *Odd Mom Out*, "Blood Bath," Bravo.

¹⁷⁶ *Black-ish*, "First and Last," ABC.

menstruating on a school field trip without access to period products.¹⁷⁷ In *Braceface*, Sharon's strongest feeling about her first period is mortification that her crush knows about her menstrual status.¹⁷⁸ Similarly, in *Everwood*, Delia remarks that her "life is over" because her hockey teammates *know*.¹⁷⁹ As Lauren Rosewarne notes in *Periods in Pop Culture*, and as these thirteen narratives illustrate, "there is no typical menstruator on screen."¹⁸⁰

Still, there are a few striking similarities among the narratives. For one, the writers display an affinity for injecting menstrual humor in their menarche stories. Just as in the early examples, most (nine) of the portrayals I analyzed are situated in comedy programs. By definition, the menarche storylines are meant to generate laughs.

A few of the representations poke fun at traumatic and embarrassing menarche experiences. As mentioned, *Braceface*'s Sharon and *Everwood*'s Delia are mortified when their menstrual status is revealed in public. When Jessi from *Big Mouth* is unable to get hold of menstrual products after starting her period at the Statue of Liberty, she has no other option but to wrap the 9/11 Never Forget towel around her underwear. (When Jessi tells her friend Andrew that she got her period, he proceeds to vomit. Twice.)¹⁸¹ Though normally feisty and intimidating, Lily from *Modern Family* is deeply embarrassed about starting to menstruate, so much so that she locks herself in the bathroom for the entirety of the episode, not wanting to be around even her family.¹⁸² Although the *Black-ish* episode about menarche focuses on Diane's first period, we also hear about her older sister's and mother's menarches, both of which are less than ideal to say the least. The older sister had to wear the bottom half of a school mascot; the

¹⁷⁷ *Big Mouth*, "Everybody Bleeds," Netflix.

¹⁷⁸ *Braceface*, "Worst First Date Ever. Period," Disney Channel.

¹⁷⁹ *Everwood*, "Giving Up the Girl," The WB.

¹⁸⁰ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 224.

¹⁸¹ *Big Mouth*, "Everybody Bleeds," Netflix.

¹⁸² *Modern Family*, "Red Alert," ABC.

mom inadvertently bled through her clothing onto a couch, and was subsequently called “Spot” for a year.¹⁸³

It is troubling that these and other storylines invite audiences to laugh at distressing experiences of menarche. First periods are almost always awkward and complicated as it is a sensitive time for many first time menstruators. Making fun of their discomfort and embarrassment can feel just plain cruel. These are very young girls, after all (the average age of menarche is about twelve years old.) Still, I recognize the value in making light of something that may seem like the end of the world; this can provide perspective and be therapeutic. But laughing cannot be the whole story. There needs to be a redemption by the end. Embarrassment cannot be the conclusion to the tale. That would perpetuate period stigma and thwart the aims of menstrual activism movement.

Cringe-worthy menarche stories are not the only type of menstrual humor used in these narratives. To their laughable discomfort, a male character “handles” a girl’s menarche in five of the episodes. The men are forced to step in because a mother or another maternal figure is unavailable. In *According to Jim*, Gracie gets her period when her mom happens to be busy out of town.¹⁸⁴ When Becca, who shuttles back and forth between her divorced parents’ homes, menstruates for the first time on *Californication*, her father jokes, “[it] makes perfect sense it would happen on my watch, doesn’t it?”¹⁸⁵ The most sarcastic character on *Schitt’s Creek*, David, is babysitting his boss’s daughter when she gets her first period.¹⁸⁶ On *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Kyra happens to be at Larry’s house when she needs a tampon.¹⁸⁷ Finally, on *Superstore*, Amy’s daughter starts her period under the supervision of her mother’s male coworker.¹⁸⁸ These comedy

¹⁸³ *Black-ish*, “First and Last,” ABC.

¹⁸⁴ *According to Jim*, “Period Peace,” ABC.

¹⁸⁵ *Californication*, “The Last Waltz,” Showtime.

¹⁸⁶ *Schitt’s Creek*, “Ronnie’s Party,” POP.

¹⁸⁷ *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, “The Divorce,” HBO.

¹⁸⁸ *Superstore*, “Shoplifter,” NBC.

programs intentionally delegated hapless men to “deal with” menarche. Are we really not past this old joke? I cannot help but wonder if, at this point, the gag is lazy writing. Viewed in a more positive light, these storylines demonstrate that men, just as much as women, need to have an awareness of and compassion around menstruation. They need to step up and support young people through their menarche experiences. It is unfortunate that these (revolutionary) concepts are not already a given at this point.

Perhaps the most common type of menstrual humor in TV programming is PMS jokes. When a woman is about to start her period, she is irrational. She is emotional, aggressive, wrathful, and prone to crying. At least, that is what some of these images (and the patriarchy at large!) would have you think. It may come as a surprise to hear that PMS jokes are found in episodes written by women. In *Degrassi*, Emma becomes annoyed when her friends do not take their study session seriously. When she gets her period the next day, her best friend (a female) remarks, “Yesterday, I thought you were psychotic. Turns out it was just PMS.”¹⁸⁹ Because girls of sound mind could not possibly want good grades! In *Black-ish*, the already sassy Diane has thrown her parents for a loop with her increasingly hostile behavior. Upon learning she got her first period, her father remarks, “It all makes sense now. The moodiness, the threats of arson.” At the end of the episode, her twin brother reveals that he is tracking Diane’s cycle: “It’s for my own personal safety – we share a room!”¹⁹⁰ Tracking also comes up in *According to Jim*. Jim’s wife is disappointed that she was not in town when their daughter Gracie got her first period. Her feelings soon intensify, and Jim looks at his watch before responding, “It’s the 15th, isn’t it?”¹⁹¹ While intended to be funny, these scenes are incredibly problematic and counterintuitive to the menstrual activism movement.

¹⁸⁹ *Degrassi*, “Coming of Age,” TeenNick.

¹⁹⁰ *Black-ish*, “First and Last,” ABC.

¹⁹¹ *According to Jim*, Period Peace, ABC.

The usage of menstrual humor in television programming seems positive because it breaks the taboo of speaking about menstruation. But, depending on the punchline, menstrual humor can legitimize the stereotype that menstruating bodies are monstrous. Lauren Rosewarne asserts that jokes that shame women for their menstrual status “reinforce the idea that women are ruled by their hormones, by their emotions, unlike men, and thus are *biologically* less rational and less trustworthy and less able to make sound decisions.”¹⁹² This kind of humor says, *women are crazy and irrational and monstrous!* It says, *to be biologically female is to be biologically crazy!* The *According to Jim* episode offers the most problematic jokes of the thirteen narratives discussed here. There are numerous instances in which the show’s titular character blames menstruation for traditionally unfeminine emotions like anger. When Gracie pushes back against his use of euphemisms, he jokes, “Oh, you got it [menarche] all right.” When his other daughter, who has not started menstruating, expresses annoyance at him, he quips, “Are you sure you’re not starting it?”¹⁹³ This is another very old joke, and its longstanding existence is indicative of cultural negativity surrounding menstruation. It is furthermore emblematic of how the media producers feel about menstruation. There does not seem to be a correlation between the number of problematic period jokes in a narrative and the narrative writer’s gender. Apparently, even those who menstruate have internalized menstrual taboos and perpetuate cultural negativity surrounding periods via menstrual humor.

With that said, period jokes are not inherently problematic. Shaming the stigmatization of menstruation can be quite effective in consciousness-raising efforts. Take, for example, Jessi’s mom’s tidbit of menstruation education in *Big Mouth*: “Did you know that tampons are taxed as a luxury item? Yeah, it’s a luxury to stick a wad of cotton up your crotch.”¹⁹⁴ On *Curb Your*

¹⁹² Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 195.

¹⁹³ *According to Jim*, Period Peace, ABC.

¹⁹⁴ *Big Mouth*, “Everybody Bleeds,” Netflix.

Enthusiasm, after Larry is given a hard time for providing a menstruator with a tampon, he remarks, “If her nose was running and she needed a tissue, I would have given her a tissue. It’s the same thing.”¹⁹⁵ These remarks bring some much-needed attention to the affordability of and stigma attached to period products. Some period jokes are right on the line between harmful and helpful. On *Odd Mom Out*, when Hazel exclaims she is grossed out by menses, her mom responds, “That is what the patriarchy would have you believe, when in fact it is completely natural.” Hazel retorts: “So is animals eating their young.” Mom admits, “Good point.”¹⁹⁶ Hearing the patriarchy called out on television is delicious! But comparing menstruation to animal behavior? Not so cute.

Of course, menstrual humor did not originate in media narratives. As discussed in Chapter One, menstrual activists have long used humor as a subversive strategy to “do” menstruation differently, mostly through culture jamming, social media, and zines.¹⁹⁷ Even advertisers have started invoking humor in their promotional materials. The aforementioned HelloFlo’s “Camp Gyno” commercial is one example.¹⁹⁸ The protagonist turns into quite the menstruation tyrant after getting her period before anyone else in her cabin. Period jokes are also a popular topic of female comedians, as seen in two recent Netflix specials. In the first, which aired in 2018, Ali Wong directly and humorously confronted stigma attached to period sex. When she told a romantic partner that she was on her period, he responded, “let’s make a fucking mess, Ali.” Wong excitingly remarks that, “to this day, that is the most romantic thing anybody

¹⁹⁵ *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, “The Divorce,” HBO.

¹⁹⁶ *Odd Mom Out*, “Blood Bath,” Bravo.

¹⁹⁷ Menstruation studies scholar Chris Bobel has written extensively on menstrual activism zines. See Chris Bobel, “Our Revolution Has Style”: Contemporary Menstrual Product Activists “Doing Feminism” in the Third Wave,” *Sex Roles* 54 (2006): 331-345, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9001-7>

¹⁹⁸ “The Camp Gyno,” written and directed by Jamie Mccelland and Pete Marquis, *HelloFlo*, July 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XnzfRqkRxU>.

has ever said to me.”¹⁹⁹ A year later, Amy Schumer openly lamented the shame associated with menstruation. She remarks that girls and women “are made to feel ashamed about a normal bodily function that ultimately brings life,” exclaiming that most of us are unable to even ask for a tampon openly.²⁰⁰ It is indeed ridiculous. Even though period jokes are popular and prevalent across our culture, we need to be mindful about what – or who – is the punchline. In these examples, Ali Wong and Amy Schumer call out taboos and use menstrual humor as a tool for consciousness-raising.

Nevertheless, She Resisted: TV Menstruators Challenging Period Stigma

In addition to the usage of menstrual humor, there are a few other notable similarities among contemporary images of menarche on television. For one, there is a significant amount of menstrual activism, though the characters/writers do not outright categorize their episodes in these terms. Activism is often traditionally associated with protests, sit-ins, and political advocacy, but media messaging can also serve as a powerful form of activism. On-screen storytelling shapes our understanding of the world. Instances of resisting menstrual taboos can lead to action; they can help change the menstrual status quo. Among these thirteen storylines, there are examples of all three of Lauren Rosewarne’s categories of menstrual activism: subtle, moderate, and extreme. It is remarkable that, with two exceptions, all of the activism takes place in episodes written by a woman.

The notion that subtle menstrual activism can be quite powerful is best exemplified in *Degrassi*. When Emma has to change clothes after getting menstrual blood on her white skirt, a male classmate teases her, thinking she has urinated in her pants. Emma shoots back: “I just got

¹⁹⁹ *Ali Wong: Hard Knock Wife*, directed by Jay Karas, featuring Ali Wong, 58:08 to 59:20, (Netflix, 2018), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186940>.

²⁰⁰ *Amy Schumer: Growing* directed by Amy Schumer, featuring Amy Schumer, 26:41 to 32:08 (Netflix, 2019), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81037077>.

my period for the first time. Menstruation? You may have heard of it, it happens to, oh, 50 percent of the population. Perfectly natural, nothing to be ashamed of.”²⁰¹ The teasing immediately ends. This admission by a twelve year old is pretty striking; not every menstruator has the wherewithal to out their menstrual status.

Given the stigmatized status of menstruation, simply explaining what periods are constitutes a form of subtle activism. We see this in *Superstore*. After Jonah asks a male coworker what he knows about periods, the response is refreshingly straightforward: “It’s bleeding from the uterus that’s released through the vagina. Happens every 28 days, give or take a few, depending on the lady. They all snowflakes.”²⁰² The explanation itself is unique for representations of menarche on television. Still, it could have been more inclusive, especially given the cultural and political landscape of the time it aired in 2016. Not everyone who menstruates is a lady. To assume otherwise goes to show that even the most recent episodes are not as progressive and helpful as they could and should be.

Television’s depictions of menstruation include many missed opportunities for subtle activism. Instead, there is a surplus of menstrual euphemisms that send the message that directly talking about menstruation is still taboo. For example: in *7th Heaven*, “become a woman”; in *Everwood*, “it came” and “Aunt Flo”; in *According to Jim*, “become a woman,” “the change,” “started her thing”; in *Californication*, “it happened.”²⁰³ Somehow *Schitt’s Creek* was able to depict a girl’s menarche without saying “menstruation” at all or even referring to it with a euphemism.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Degraasi, “Coming of Age,” TeenNick.

²⁰² *Superstore*, “Shoplifter,” NBC.

²⁰³ *7th Heaven*, “Life and Death: Part 2,” WB; *Everwood*, “Giving Up the Girl,” on The WB; *According to Jim*, “Period Peace,” ABC; *Californication*, “The Last Waltz,” Showtime.

²⁰⁴ *Schitt’s Creek*, “Ronnie’s Party,” POP.

This euphemistic language reveals a deeply rooted discomfort with a normal bodily function. It furthermore demonstrates a culturally constructed hatred and fear of women's bodies. Using more so-called appropriate terms to refer to menstruation has a long history. "Period" has been used to describe menstruation since the early 1800s.²⁰⁵ Clue, a menstrual health app, discovered over 5,000 expressions for menstruation across 190 countries. The researchers noted that most were nondescript in nature: "In describing blood flow from the vagina, they [the euphemisms] tend to be altogether bloodless, and vaginaless." Examples include "erdbeerwoche" (German for strawberry week), "Caperucita Roja" (Spanish for Little Red Riding Hood), and "Les chutes du Niagara" (French for Niagara Falls).²⁰⁶ While some of these terms are playful and clever, at the end of the day, they perpetuate period stigma. Still, resisting the communication taboo can be challenging. Menstrual euphemisms are so ingrained in our culture and vernacular that we often do not realize when we are using them. "Period" has become so synonymous with menstruation that many do not realize the former is a euphemism for the latter. (I use "period" in my writing because of this universality element as well as for the sake of variety.) With that said, being more mindful of the language we use to describe all aspects of menstruation is an influential tool in effecting social change.

Educating others on the problematic nature of menstrual euphemisms is a form of moderate menstrual activism. We see this briefly in *All in the Family* when Gloria mocks her coworker's euphemistic language.²⁰⁷ Other examples of moderate activism can be found in *Degrassi*, *Odd Mom Out*, and *Big Mouth*. In the first, Emma does not have access to period products when she starts menstruating at school. The episode closes with her starting a petition

²⁰⁵ Anna Druet, "Is period slang ever useful?," *HelloClue*, September 19, 2017, <https://helloclue.com/articles/culture/is-period-slang-ever-useful#:~:text=Thesepercent20euphemismspercent20startpercent20inpercent20childhood,whenpercent20theypercent20aren'tpercent20normal.>

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *All in the Family*, "Battle of the Month," CBS.

to install a tampon dispenser in the girls' bathroom.²⁰⁸ This activist messaging brings attention to how the lack of accessibility of period products can affect student menstruators. Similarly, as we have seen, *Big Mouth* and *Odd Mom Out* prompt viewers to consider the implications of menstrual taboos and stigma. In the former show, Jessi's mother informs her daughter about the absurdity that is the tampon tax. The latter reminds viewers that menstruation is "completely natural" despite what "the patriarchy would have you believe."²⁰⁹

The visual representations of menses in *Degrassi* and *Big Mouth* (see Figures 6 and 7) are a form of extreme menstrual activism.²¹⁰ In making this argument, I expand Rosewarne's classification system. Not only do the episodes at hand overtly discuss menstruation, but they also *show* menstruation. Both Emma (*Degrassi*) and Jessi (*Big Mouth*) bleed through their white bottoms. Viewers are forced to look at menstrual blood – or at least fabricated menstrual blood. (*Degrassi* used mint-flavored candy syrup; *Big Mouth* is animated.²¹¹) These visualizations are remarkable in light of television advertisers' refusal to use red liquid to represent menstrual blood until 2017.²¹² This may seem like a small change, but it is a significant one. Menstrual blood is indeed red; pretending otherwise has no purpose other than shrouding the reality of menstruation in secrecy, shame, and stigma. Realistic portraits can help budding menstruators understand what is to be expected. Furthermore, the visualization of menses in *Degrassi* and *Big Mouth* force viewers to take stock of their feelings with the sight of menses, and by extension,

²⁰⁸ *Degrassi*, "Coming of Age," TeenNick.

²⁰⁹ *Odd Mom Out*, Blood Bath, Bravo.

²¹⁰ *Big Mouth* also depicts menses in their fourth season. For the purposes of this paper, I am referring to only the first instance. See *Big Mouth*, "The Hugest Period Ever," episode 4, season 2, directed by Bryan Francis, written by Kelly Kaluska, aired December, 4, 2020, on Netflix.

²¹¹ Jamie Primeau, "Degrassi's Period Episode Set An Example Of Being 'Unashamed,' According To Miriam McDonald," *Bustle*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/emmas-period-episode-on-degrassi-was-just-as-impactful-for-actor-miriam-mcdonald-as-it-was-for-fans-12081897>.

²¹² Nichole Fratangelo, "Here's How Much Period Ads Have Changed in 100 Years," *Revelist*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.revelist.com/wellness/100-years-period-ads/11613>.

Figure 6: Visualization of Menses on *Degrassi*, 2001



Emma Nelson (played by Miriam McDonald) examines the menstrual mark on her skirt.

Source: *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Season 1, episode 9, “Coming of Age.” Directed by Bruce McDonald. Aired May 13, 2002, on TeenNick.

Figure 7: Visualization of Menses on *Big Mouth*, 2017



Jessi Glaser can't find any toilet paper after getting her first period while on a school field trip.

Source: *Big Mouth*. Season 1, episode 2, “Everybody Bleeds.” Directed by Bryan Francis. Aired September 29, 2017, on Netflix.

their feelings toward menstruation.²¹³ Historically, a menstrual mark has produced much anxiety and even panic in our culture. Breanne Fahs, one of the editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, asserts that the sight of menses has been equated with “disease, corruption, [and] social violations” as well as “failed reproduction” and “disability” across various cultures and times.²¹⁴ For these reasons, women have long been socialized to worry about bleeding through their clothing when menstruating. These two episodes normalize what I call marking, or what is commonly referred to as leaking or staining.²¹⁵ To not follow this menstrual mandate, to make a mark, is to be dirty and disgusting. Making a mark is often considered one of the most embarrassing things that could happen. Emma and Jessi are certainly red-faced when it happens to them, recognizing the societal expectation that their menses remain invisible.

These are important scenes in the history of menstruation on the screen, indeed the history of menstrual activism, in that they render the invisible visible. Menstruation is moved into the public domain. The representations of menarche in *Degrassi* and *Big Mouth* exemplify the fact that Rosewarne’s three-tier framework of menstrual activism is more encompassing than Bobel’s. The significance of the visualization of menses in TV programming would be lost in the dichotomy of radical menstruation activism and feminist-spiritualism.

Braceface, *7th Heaven*, *Everwood*, *According to Jim*, *Odd Mom Out*, and *Black-ish* all have instances of activism that can be described as feminist-spiritualism because they categorize menarche as an empowering and uniquely female experience. In *Braceface*, menstruation is a “girls club” and the person admitting Sharon to the fold is “Mother Nature herself.”²¹⁶ *According*

²¹³ The representation of menarche in *Mad Men*, *Game of Thrones*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Queen’s Gambit* also includes a visualization of menses.

²¹⁴ Breanne Fahs, *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 24.

²¹⁵ Leaking, like staining, has negative connotations, categorizing the menstruating body as abject. Hence, I prefer using the expression “making a mark” or “marking.”

²¹⁶ *Braceface*, “The Worst First Date Ever. Period,” Disney Channel.

to Jim features a menarche party; this celebration is one of two instances of menstrual activism in a TV episode written by men. The “moon party” is thrown together at the last minute, and the honoree, Gracie, considers it a failure.²¹⁷ While I can appreciate the male writers trying to frame menstruation in a positive light, this menarche storyline has arguably the most problematic period jokes out of all thirteen episodes. Put simply, the bad outweighs the good. (The second instance of male-written menstrual activism is from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, in which David regards giving a girl a tampon as no big deal.²¹⁸) The menarche party in *Odd Mom Out*, on the other hand, is lavishly decorated and a huge success, complete with uterus piñatas and all.²¹⁹ In *Black-ish*, Diane’s grandmother Alicia wants to “mark the sacred rite of Diane’s first cycle” by “danc[ing] in a circle around her.” Alicia later proclaims menstruation “a gift from Mother Gaia. It means you can make life.” And my personal favorite from *Black-ish*: “May the sacred flow of your menses topple the patriarchy and bind you to the goddess.”²²⁰ A fitting motto for feminist-spiritualism.

The menarche storyline from *Modern Family* is unique in that there are numerous instances of different types of activism. This stems from the fact that many characters directly state their feelings towards menstruation. Lily’s young step-grandmother calls menarche “a beautiful rite of passage that’s going to connect you with women everywhere.” Lily’s cousin pushes back, “Let’s not get poetic; it hurts like hell.” The cousin supplies educational pamphlets that “will help make [Lily] more comfortable with her menses.” She clearly does not want Lily to abide by a romanticized notion of menstruation. And apparently Lily does not either. When another cousin (a male) arrives asking to “talk to the earth goddess,” Lily quickly shuts him

²¹⁷ *According to Jim*, Period Peace, ABC.

²¹⁸ *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, “The Divorce,” HBO.

²¹⁹ *Odd Mom Out*, “Blood Bath,” Bravo.

²²⁰ *Black-ish*, “First and Last,” ABC.

down, yelling, “Get the fuck outta here!”²²¹ Even though Lily is very embarrassed about reaching menarche, a redeeming aspect of the representation is that the writers were comfortable and willing to have her family openly discuss the menstrual experience at length. *Modern Family* employs an ensemble cast; there are usually three storylines per episode. The representation of menarche was featured in “Red Alert” – it was the largest of the three storylines. Yet, menarche is not delineated as a self-structured event. The audience does not see Lily once. This is notable given the fact that *Modern Family* is arguably the most well-known and mainstream of all the shows I am looking at.

My analysis shows that women are moving the needle on reframing menstruation on the small screen. Of the thirteen episodes, eight (*Braceface*, *Degrassi*, *Everwood*, *Superstore*, *Odd Mom Out*, *Big Mouth*, *Black-ish*, and *Modern Family*) were written by at least one woman, and six of these include one occurrence of menstrual activism at minimum. The visualization of menses would arguably not have occurred had it not been for women.²²² Of the five episodes written by men (*7th Heaven*, *Californication*, *According to Jim*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Schitt's Creek*), two attempt to normalize menstruation in a notable way.

My research shows that the influx of women in the television sector not only aided in the proliferation of representations of menarche but also in making said representations more positive. Those that are written by women actively seek to normalize menstruation, often in humorous and effective ways. Menstruators are more in tune with the consequences of period taboos and stigma, having encountered them first hand. These real life experiences inform the messaging of menarche-themed storylines. This, in effect, is how menstrual activists can

²²¹ *Modern Family*, “Red Alert,” ABC.

²²² The menarche episode of *Degrassi* was written by a woman, Susin Nielsen. The appearance of menarche *Big Mouth* can be credited to a woman, Kelly Galuska, and a man, Victor Quinaz.

influence the intended messaging of media representations of first periods: by supporting and advocating for more women behind the camera.

Are You There, God? It's Me, Privilege

Returning to the similarities among the thirteen episodes at hand, most of the representations involve a white cisgender girl from a middle- or upper-class background. This is troubling because it is nowhere near reflective of the real-life menstruating population in North America. The lack of racial diversity in these portrayals is both shameful and unsurprising. Most female characters across television programs are white. According to The Center for the Study of Women, of the 2019-2020 TV season, 66 percent of female characters were white, 20 percent were Black, 8 percent were Asian, 5 percent were Latina, and 1 percent were of some other race or ethnicity.²²³ It is no wonder that white girls dominate representations of menarche.

In 2016, *Superstore* became the first TV show since *King of the Hill* to portray the menarcheal experience of a girl of color. It only took seventeen years! *Black-ish* and *Modern Family* soon followed *Superstore* and included a depiction of menarche. Emma (*Superstore*) is Honduran; Diane (*Black-ish*) is Black; and Lily (*Modern Family*) is Vietnamese.²²⁴ *Superstore* and *According to Jim* are the only narratives since *Roseanne* to portray menarche from a working-class perspective. Girls and menstruators of all racial identities and socioeconomic backgrounds deserve to have their stories reflected in media culture. By excluding the voices and experiences of traditionally underrepresented and marginalized communities, the media is saying that their stories do not matter. As we have seen, though most cultures have a generally negative

²²³ Rachel Montpeller, "'Boxed In' Report: Streaming Programs Feature More Female Protagonists Than Cable or Broadcast," *Women and Hollywood*, September 11, 2020, <https://womenandhollywood.com/boxed-in-report-streaming-programs-feature-more-female-protagonists-than-cable-or-broadcast/>.

²²⁴ Emma and Diane share their racial identity with their family; Lily was adopted by two white men.

attitude towards menstruation, some cultural and ethnic differences exist. These differences are worth expanding upon in media narratives. Media producers have a moral obligation to be more inclusive in their portrayals of first periods.

Another similarity among the representations relates to menstrual management. Viewers get a visual of period products in almost every storyline. This prevalence is significant because, as we have seen, today's iteration of menstrual activism is largely focused on getting products to menstruators. These episodes underscore the fact that menstruation is mediated through consumerism. Menstruators are taught early on that they are expected to purchase numerous products to manage their bleeding, including but limited to, pads, pantyliners, tampons, Midol, and a heating pad.²²⁵ *Everwood*, *According to Jim*, and *Odd Mom Out* even showcase a trip to the feminine hygiene aisle and comment on just how many period products are available to consumers.²²⁶ In *According to Jim*, the father and uncle characters essentially buy up the whole aisle, demonstrating their ineptitude about menstruation.²²⁷ Product preferences of the characters/writers, like in real life, are varied. Some representations (those in *Braceface*, *Degrassi*, *Everwood*, *According to Jim*, *Superstore*,) promote pads; others (from *Californication* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), tampons. The preference is usually not stated out loud but can be assumed by which period product the menarcheal girl uses. *Big Mouth* is the only show to discuss the "readiness" factor with regard to tampons. When Jessi asks her mom to teach her how to use them, her mom laughs, "Let's finish basic training before we go to Fallujah."²²⁸ She is referring to the discomfort that many menstruators deal with when inserting a tampon. The

²²⁵ For an in-depth look into how a menstruator's relationship to their menstrual cycle is mediated through consumerism, see Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse: the Business of Menstruation* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006).

²²⁶ *Everwood*, "Giving Up the Girl," The WB; *According to Jim*, "Period Peace," ABC; *Odd Mom Out*, "Blood Bath," Bravo.

²²⁷ *According to Jim*, "Period Peace," ABC.

²²⁸ *Big Mouth*, "Everybody Bleeds," Netflix.

promotion of tampons in these narratives is remarkable considering the fact that, not too long ago, tampons were a difficult sell. When they first popularized in the late 1930s, many parents believed a daughter would lose her virginity if she used one.²²⁹ The episodes of *Odd Mom Out* and *Modern Family* are the only two that even mention reusable period products. In the former, Jill purchases washable underwear at the store.²³⁰ In the latter, Mitchell purchases “this thing called a DivaCup, cause I don’t know, it sounded kinda cute.”²³¹ These representations take the accessibility of period products for granted. Each girl and each family purchases their product of choice without a second thought. This, again, is not reflective of the real-life menstruating population, and demonstrates that media producers are continuing to make assumptions and decisions about whose stories matter.

...

In many ways, the representation of menarche in contemporary TV programming looks much the same as it did when first given airtime back in 1989. It is categorized as a uniquely female and an embarrassingly funny experience. With that said, the increase in women producers and writers has had a positive impact on the portrayals. With menstruators at the helm, menstruation storylines are more activist-oriented. Taboos are demystified, stigma is ridiculed, and girls are empowered. Knowing that television is one of the most persistent disseminators of cultural messages, menstrual activists must recognize the importance of advocating for and supporting female-created television. We furthermore must demand that portrayals of periods are socially significant and self-structured. The stakes are too high not to.

²²⁹ Additionally, most of the early representations of menarche promote tampons.

²³⁰ *Odd Mom Out*, “Blood Bath,” Bravo.

²³¹ *Modern Family*, “Red Alert,” ABC.

Chapter 3: Forming a More Perfect Union

The Consequences and Costs of Period Stigma in Pop Culture

Because television is a powerful and popular disseminator of cultural scripts, the way in which menstruation is depicted on the small screen can directly influence the stigmatized status of menstruation. This is no small thing. The way in which we menstruators regard our menses profoundly impacts our relationship with our body, our sense of self and self-worth, as well as how we relate to our sexual and reproductive lives. Hence, the stakes are too high not to engage with popular culture discourses.

Making fun of menstruators is, in this day and age, essentially making fun of children. Age of menarche has been slowly decreasing since colonial times. In 1780, the average age at menarche in the United States was about seventeen. By the time of my menarche in 1992, the average age dropped to twelve and a half. The average remains about the same today. Early puberty may be triggered by changes in nutrition and hormones added to certain food. Electricity may even play a role. One girls culture expert observed, “Bodies are programmed to enter puberty after exposure to a certain amount of light, which comes much earlier in a woman’s lifetime in an age of electricity.”²³² Some girls are getting their first periods as young as nine years old. The change in development does not coincide with the progression of emotional and cognitive skills. Our culture makes minimal effort to deal with this lag. Girls do not have the capabilities (yet) to respond or engage with the on-screen representations in an entirely healthy, productive manner.²³³

²³² Anna Dahlqvist and Alice E. Olsson, *It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2018), 56.

²³³ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, (New York, Random House, 1997), 5.

As Dr. Mary Pipher, author of the landmark text *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, puts it, “Adolescent girls are saplings bent to the ground in a hurricane of changes.” In addition to dealing with changes at the developmental level, they are also “moving into [a] broader culture that is rife with girl-hurting ‘isms,’” including sexism and racism. It is during puberty that girls are expected by society to emotionally distance themselves from parents – just when girls need support and guidance more than ever.²³⁴ Puberty is a sensitive time. A bad day, an embarrassing situation can feel like the end of the world. Making light of these experiences (especially to someone’s face and in real time!) can be unnecessarily cruel and harmful.

During this sensitive time, affirmational on-screen messages can go a long way. In a *Bustle* interview, Miriam McDonald, who played Emma in *Degrassi* noted, “I think teenage girls need something like that [episode], because it's [menstruation] an awkward topic, it's not usually something that comes up casually in everyday conversation." (Though of course it absolutely should. Her comment underscores the necessity of menstrual activism.) When filming the storyline, Miriam was twelve and “mortified” because periods seemed like a “scary secret.” Looking back, she is happy to have played a self-assured menstruator: "Emma set a great example for just being proud and unashamed of being who you are and being a woman."²³⁵ I remember watching the episode as a young girl; the empowering narrative was quite memorable; I knew I wanted to include it in my analysis. Marsai Martin, who plays Diane on *Black-ish*, was also nervous to film her menarche scenes. At the same time, she recognized that her character’s first period “was a really good topic for the writers” to include because “people can relate to it.”

²³⁴ Mary Pipher and Sara Pipher Gilliam, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 8.

²³⁵ Jamie Primeau, “Degrassi’s Period Episode Set An Example Of Being ‘Unashamed,’ According To Miriam McDonald,” *Bustle*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/emmas-period-episode-on-degrassi-was-just-as-impactful-for-actor-miriam-mcdonald-as-it-was-for-fans-12081897>.

Overall, she explained in a *Yahoo* interview, filming the episode was “fun.”²³⁶ Both Miriam and Marsai seem to recognize the potential impact of empathetic storytelling regarding first periods.

Compassion is all the more necessary during this time because menarche often jumpstarts the “the body project,” a term coined by Joan Jacobs Brumberg referring to the idea that girls need to perfect their bodies.²³⁷ Many girls are greatly concerned with their outward appearance. They believe they need to “fix” aspects of themselves in order to fulfill Western ideals of beauty, often to the detriment of their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Menstruation is one such trait in need of fixing. Menstruation is often socially constructed as dirty and disgusting, and something to be hidden and concealed at all costs, especially from men. This is an oppressive social norm and perpetuates the idea that girls and women *need* to accommodate and appease men. The self-monitoring inherent in menstrual etiquette takes up a lot of time, energy, and money. Just imagine what menstruators can pursue and achieve if menstruation is no longer stigmatized. The menstrual mandate stops us menstruators from recognizing and reaching our full potential. Our health and our opportunities are curtailed by the taboos. We cannot live full lives if we are solely worried about satisfying men and oppressive social norms. As one activist remarked, “When the menstrual blood and everything that reveals its existence must be hidden from the rest of the world, the one who menstruates is not free.”²³⁸ A world of possibilities will open up when menstruation is irrevocably demystified.

Media narratives of menarche also have the potential to be impactful for non-menstruators. If boys, men, and others who do not menstruate are neither talking nor

²³⁶ Elena Sheppard, “13-year-old Marsai Martin talks 'Black-ish,' girl power, and her character's first period,” *Yahoo!*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/13-year-old-marsai-martin-talks-black-ish-girl-power-characters-first-period-002953890.html>.

²³⁷ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, (New York, Random House, 1997).

²³⁸ Dahlqvist and Olsson, *It's Only Blood*, 48.

learning about menstruation due to taboos, then these storylines are going to at least partially shape their understanding of periods and their attitudes towards the gendered experience. Shame-free representations of menstruation will (hopefully) prompt non-menstruating bodies to challenge period stigma when it does come up.

Intentions, Intentions, Intentions

One must not imagine that affirming portrayals of menarche on television will completely upend menstrual taboos. For one, TV programming is far too Eurocentric and presumptuous to resonate with the entire viewing population. The landscape is very slowly becoming more representative. A recent report from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film revealed that, since 2010, “while the percentage of Black females has more than doubled (12 percent to 26 percent) and the percentage of Asian females has increased (5 percent to 8 percent), the percentage of Latinas has remained the same (5 percent)” in broadcast network programs.²³⁹

While I cannot find a study analyzing the representation of socioeconomic status in TV programming, critics have often lamented the fact that poor and working-class families are essentially nonexistent on the small screen.²⁴⁰ The representations of menarche assume that menstruators are urban, well educated, and in possession of disposable income. Media producers take the accessibility of period products for granted. These assumptions, along with TV’s Eurocentrism, restricts the medium’s potential to reshape popular consciousness around periods. Large portions of the population, including those that are the focus of the current iteration of

²³⁹ Rachel Montpeller, “‘Boxed In’ Report: Streaming Programs Feature More Female Protagonists Than Cable or Broadcast,” *Women and Hollywood*, September 11, 2020, <https://womenandhollywood.com/boxed-in-report-streaming-programs-feature-more-female-protagonists-than-cable-or-broadcast/>.

²⁴⁰ See Kathryn VanArendonk, A Timeline of TV’s Working-Class Sitcoms, *Vulture*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/working-class-sitcoms-timeline.html>; Joanna Weiss, “Why Won’t TV Show People Who Aren’t Rich?,” *Politico*, November 12, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/11/12/tv-shows-economic-diversity-215818/>.

menstrual activism, the unhoused and incarcerated, are left out of the narrative. A lack of representation deprives viewers of cultural learning and perspective. We must continue demanding more inclusivity in TV programming and lift up the voices of others who are doing this work. Notable advocates include Dino-Ray Ramos, an associate editor at Deadline Hollywood who reports on the representation of Asians in film and TV. In 2019, producer Amanda Idoko started #ShowUsYourRoomChallenge, a Twitter campaign encouraging television showrunners to post a group picture of their writing staff.²⁴¹

Nevertheless, even if the television landscape were to become more reflective of the viewing public, positive depictions of menarche would not be a magic bullet for menstrual activists. Stuart Hall's theory on encoding and decoding media texts has demonstrated that viewers engage with media in different, uncontrollable ways. However, if the menstrual activism movement does not engage with popular culture, then advocates do not have a voice in the implicit and explicit scripts embedded in the representations. Menstrual activists cannot influence how audiences engage with images, but they can shape the intended messages. If we can successfully do this, we can help destigmatize menstruation once and for all.

One strategy is to call out images that shame or silence menstruators and the menstrual process and praise those that normalize periods. This can take place in everyday conversations and online via various outlets, including social media platforms. Social media, especially Twitter, has proved to be a powerful tool for organizing in menstrual activism, as demonstrated in the #PeriodsForPence, #PeriodPositive, and #HappyPeriod campaigns. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, social media may well be the best avenue to advance the cause at this point in time.

²⁴¹ Nina Metz, "Hollywood may say it's all for diversity, but TV writers tell a different story," *Chicago Tribune*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-mov-equality-and-inclusion-in-tv-writing-still-a-problem-0322-story.html>.

Thoughtfully examining the storylines should take place from a critical feminist perspective. What information about menstrual cycles is being included and excluded? Why? How do the menstruator's friends and family treat them after they reveal their menstrual status? Do viewers get the menstruator's point of view? How are they feeling and are those feelings being validated? Are menstrual euphemisms used? For example, the menarche storyline in *Schitt's Creek* is relatively unassuming, but could be vastly improved if one of the characters actually used the word "period." This small change – a form of subtle activism – normalizes menstruation. As far as what needs to be taken out of these episodes, the worst convention is problematic period jokes. There are certainly better ways to incorporate menstrual humor than by shaming menstruators. Spreading this knowledge through everyday conversations and via online platforms will help change the menstrual status quo.

The most productive and helpful of such discussions that seek to demystify menstruation are centered on stigma. Early menstrual activism, argued Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs, was more radical than today's iteration in the sense that advocates were more focused on eradicating the root cause of menstrual taboos. Bobel and Fahs have urged for a return to radicalness.²⁴² This does not mean that activists should leave things like Menstrual Hygiene Day behind. It does not have to be either/or, but there does need to be a significant change in priorities in order to irrevocably topple the stigmatized status of menstruation. As Bobel and Fahs asserted, "No quest to sanitize menstruation or make it respectable will ever meet the fundamental needs of menstruators."²⁴³ Contemporary menstrual activism seeks social acceptability, making it "dangerously accommodationist."²⁴⁴ Product-based activism primarily aims to empower

²⁴² See Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics," *Signs* 45, 4 (2020): 955-983, <https://doi.org/10.1086/707802>.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 977.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

menstruators to have a dignified experience managing their menses *out of sight*. A worthy short-term goal, no doubt. With that said, this approach will only drive the movement so far. Stigma is at the foundation of the stigmatized status of menstruation. We need to knock down the foundation in order to build something new, something better.

Favoring the Female Gaze Framework

Admittedly, discerning whether a media representation is advantageous to the menstrual activism movement can be tricky. Utilizing the female gaze framework, developed and popularized by Joey Soloway, the creator of *Transparent* and *I Love Dick*, can provide insight. Soloway took up the conception of the female gaze some forty years after feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term “male gaze” in her legendary article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). The male gaze refers to the extremely common act of producing visual art from a heterosexual male viewpoint and for a heterosexual male audience. The male gaze positions women as objects existing to appease and please men. Women are not the sexual subjects of their own lives in the male gaze.²⁴⁵ This assumption is everywhere in our culture. As Soloway joked,

What is the Male Gaze? Um, well, everything. Pretty much everything you’ve ever seen, most TV shows, all movies, super hero and action movies, of course horror movies and torture movies, movies intended to that objectify women, like *Wolf of Wall Street* and James Bond and, well, intentioned movies like *Her* or *Ex Machina* that dream up women who ooze ether, or *The Revenant* or *There Will be Blood* or *Ocean’s Eleven* for the way they ignore women. *Entourage*. *Two and a Half Men*. Did I say everything? Pretty much everything.²⁴⁶

The male is so popular it is virtually omnipresent. The presumption that “viewers wouldn’t put up with complex female leads” is the male gaze at play. Thankfully, due to the influx of female

²⁴⁵ See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, 3 (1975): 6-18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

²⁴⁶ Joey Soloway, “Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016,” Tiff Talks, September 11, 2016, video of lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I>.

artists, creators, writers, producers, directors in the television and film industries, the male gaze has been challenged more and more in recent years. Soloway has taken the lead in giving this confrontation a name.

The female gaze is not quite the opposite of the male gaze. It's not as simple as replacing protagonists with females or producing "fireman calendar[s]."²⁴⁷ The female gaze is a conscious effort to generate empathy. Soloway: "I take the camera and I say, hey, audience, I'm not just showing you this thing, I want you to really feel with me." Soloway also uses the camera to attempt to compare how it feels (oppressive) to be the object of the gaze and how it feels (comforting) to be seen. The female gaze is a way of reclaiming the body. It does not essentialize women; it does not objectify bodies through the act of looking. The female gaze instead dares to return the male gaze and sends the message, "I don't want to be the object any longer, I would like to be the subject, and with that subjectivity I can name you as the object."²⁴⁸ The female gaze thus illuminates how the male gaze divides women and all of society. Obscuring complex realities, the male gaze typically categorizes women as madonnas or whores. The female gaze rejects this dichotomy, demanding that women's bodies and identities remain whole.

Media narratives of menarche that utilize the female gaze are few and far between. To deduce which representations do so, we first must determine whose perspective is given. Above all else, depictions that employ the female gaze need to proceed from the viewpoint of the first-time menstruator. The focus should *not* be on how the parent manages the situation. It is also essential that the menarcheal experience unfolds in a way that kindles feelings of empathy and understanding. This goes beyond treating the protagonist with kindness and respect. Portrayals of first periods need to inspire viewers to walk in the protagonist's shoes. The

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

audience should be prompted in no uncertain terms to consider what the menarcheal person is going through and how they are feeling. The application of the female gaze does not mean that the onset of menstruation occurs in perfect circumstances and is a problem-free experience. Menarche is often awkward. I see no need to wipe away the awkwardness. To do otherwise is not rooted in lived experiences. Again, starting to menstruate is often a very sensitive time during a menstruator's life. They are often unsure of themselves and their place in the world. They can be anxious about the changes happening to their body. The menstruator's humanity should never, ever be questioned or ridiculed.

Of the thirteen storylines, those in *Braceface*, *Degrassi*, and *Big Mouth* most closely align with Soloway's conception of the female gaze. *Braceface* is told entirely from the perspective of braceface herself, Sharon. While she at first is horrified when her menstrual status is inadvertently revealed to her crush, by the end of the episode, Sharon is much more comfortable with her body and herself.²⁴⁹ Because *Degrassi* follows an ensemble cast, the episode is not told from the perspective of one person. But Emma's menarche is told from Emma's perspective. Thanks to some wise words from her mother, she unabashedly refuses to be shamed for bleeding.²⁵⁰ The same can be said for Jessi's first period experience on *Big Mouth*. Moreover, the viewer empathizes with the cringe-worthy circumstances, especially during the scene when a tampon sings "Everybody Bleeds."²⁵¹ These representations, each of which was written by a woman and directed by a man, are not perfect examples of the female gaze because they include problematic period jokes. But by using the female gaze framework, we can see that they are at the top of the list. Soloway's theorizing can be used to determine if a menstruation

²⁴⁹ *Braceface*, "Worst First Date Ever. Period," Disney Channel.

²⁵⁰ *Degrassi*, "Coming of Age," TeenNick.

²⁵¹ *Big Mouth*, "Everybody Bleeds," Netflix.

narrative is humanizing and self-structured and thereby beneficial to the menstrual activism movement.

Soloway, who is nonbinary, has asserted that the female gaze can be successfully utilized by those of any gender identity. While the male gaze is basically “everything,” they remarked that a few films, in addition to the television shows that they created, meet the aforementioned criteria. *Fish Tank* (2009), *Margaret* (2011), and *It Felt Like Love* (2013) all center on the trauma of a teenage girl. In each, the protagonist is given time and space to deal with her conflicting feelings.²⁵² *Margaret*, which questions whether the titular character intentionally caused a car accident, was written and directed by a man. That anyone can leverage the female gaze in the creation and development of a movie or TV program is welcome news. These examples can serve as models for media producers who are fed up with the male gaze and want to create more feminist-friendly narratives.

Where To Go From Here: Action Steps for Media Producers

Moving forward, in order to advance the menstrual activism movement, media producers must use the female gaze framework and achieve at least one of Rosewarne’s levels of activism when crafting a menarche storyline. This will reframe menstruation from being a parental crisis to a normal occurrence in young girls. Additionally, using this framework would end problematic period jokes once and for all. These are all too common in recent and contemporary representations of menstruation. Media producers need to normalize the exclusion of comedic

²⁵² Ibid.; *Fish Tank*, directed by Andrea Arnold, featuring Katie Jarvis and Michael Fassbender (BBC Films, 2009); *Margaret*, directed by Kenneth Lonergan, featuring Anna Paquin and Mark Ruffalo (Fox Searchlight Pictures: 2011); *It Felt Like Love*, directed by Eliza Hittman, featuring Gina Piersanti (Bay Bridge Productions Inc.: 2013)

remarks that shame menstruators. This does not mean the end of all period jokes because, as demonstrated, there is a right way to do menstrual humor. The punchline is what matters.

Though Joey Soloway rightly stated that those of any gender can utilize the female gaze in the creation of art, media producers must include women and menstruators in the development of menarche narratives. Hiring women pays off economically. By the end of 2009, shortly after Showtime launched a string of female-led shows created by women (*The L Word*, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, *Nurse Jackie*, *United States of Tara*, and *The Big C*), the pay cable network had increased its subscribers by more than 25 percent. The idea that viewers will not “put up with complex female leads” is nothing more than a myth.²⁵³ While employing women is a profit-making enterprise, it is also, more importantly, the right thing to do. Those who get periods can speak to their lived experiences regarding all aspects of menstruation. Similarly, they presumably recognize the importance of including a diverse representation of menstruation experiences.

When reframing menstruation on the screen, media producers would do well to include emotionally intelligent male characters and non-menstruators in storylines about menarche. The idea that only mothers can guide their daughters through the menarcheal experience places unrealistic and demanding expectations on mothers. Girls culture experts contend that mothers are often held solely responsible for the totality of their children’s well-being and happiness.²⁵⁴ More fathers and brothers should at least *try* to be supportive regarding the onset of menstruation; the trope of socially inept male characters should wither away. It is no longer funny (and I am not sure it ever was) to be ignorant of menstruation. It is no longer funny to use euphemisms. Until we as a society can all openly discuss all aspects of periods, menstruation

²⁵³ Press, *Stealing the Show*, 2.

²⁵⁴ Pipher and Gilliam, *Reviving Ophelia*, 144.

will remain shrouded in shame and secrecy, and thus continue to curtail the health and opportunities of menstruators.

Equally important, media producers must prioritize actually including more periods, especially first periods, in their programming. As Lauren Rosewarne observes: “In real life, while approximately one in seven women will be menstruating at any one time, on screen the statistics are nowhere near this high.”²⁵⁵ I am not necessarily advocating for periods to get starring roles in TV programming. It would be revolutionary to see smaller, quieter, more mundane depictions, such as using a hot water bottle to alleviate cramps or unbuttoning pants because of bloating. These kinds of images are essentially non-existent in popular culture.²⁵⁶ They would have a big impact as far as normalizing menstruation. If these acts were tied to first periods, all the better. Menarche is a memorable milestone, and the way it is marked will influence the menstruator for years to come. Research has demonstrated that women who have a positive menarcheal experience tend to report positive feelings about menstruation later in life.²⁵⁷

Most menarche storylines do not sufficiently explain the purpose of menstruation. Media producers must take advantage of this opportunity to edutain (that is, educate in an entertaining way). Monthly bleeding should furthermore be categorized as a fifth vital sign (along with body temperature, blood pressure, and heart and respiration rates). Menstruation is indeed a meaningful marker of health. For example, a number of menstruators, including PERIOD founder Nadya Okamoto, do not bleed when they are under an enormous amount of stress. If there are changes to someone’s cycle, their body is trying to tell them something. Highlighting this information goes beyond the simple fact that menstruation is normal. Viewing your menses

²⁵⁵ Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture*, 223.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁵⁷ Marianne E. McPherson, Lauren Korfine, "Menstruation across time: Menarche, menstrual attitudes, experiences, and behaviors," *Women's Health Issues* 14, no. 6 (2004): 193-200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2004.08.006>.

as a sign of good health has the powerful potential to improve your relationship with your menses. As Elizabeth Kissling explained in conversation with me on November 12, 2020, it is harder to stigmatize something that is good for you.

Categorizing periods as a vital sign expands the scope of menstruation education, which is often discussed in solely procreative terms. Plenty of women and menstruators are not interested in becoming a parent; this reframing would be more inclusive of the lived experiences of all menstruators. Media producers should not shy away from incorporating the process of menstruation, but must yield to the science. And the science is iffy on the connection between menarche and fertility. In their book *Blood Stories: Menarche and the Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary U.S. Society*, Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen draw attention to this fact:

[The connection] is somewhat erroneous since early menstrual cycles tend to be anovulatory, and a mature menstrual cycle, characterized by regular fluctuations in hormone associated with ovulation and menstruation, is not immediately in place at menarche, but may take several months to become established.²⁵⁸

While the discussion and display of female sexuality is without a doubt a valid subject, defining menstruation only in a reproductive capacity is a disservice to menstruators, first-timers and veterans alike. Excitingly, Kissling has done some investigation on this subject. Some research suggests that menstruation occurs because the cyclical shedding of the endometrium is less costly than having to maintain constant readiness. Other theories propose that it protects the uterus, keeps the female reproductive system free of contaminants, and gives the body a break from estrogen.²⁵⁹ Admittedly, these ideas might be a little hard to seamlessly inject into media narratives. But if we can have twenty-three Marvel movies in the past fourteen years, I am confident that media producers will figure something out.

²⁵⁸ Lee and Sasser-Coen, *Blood Stories*, 31.

²⁵⁹ Kissling, *Capitalizing on the Curse*, 62.

Checklist for Producers:

- Employs the Female Gaze**
 - Generates empathy**
 - Told from the menstruator’s perspective**
- No Menstrual Euphemisms**
- No Problematic Period Jokes – But Other Menstrual Humor is OK!**
- Incorporation of Menstrual Edutainment**
 - Menstruation considered a vital sign**
 - Menstruating bodies as not *merely* reproductive**

Where To Go From Here: Action Steps for Viewers

Talk the Talk

Over and over again, pioneers in the menstrual activism movement, including Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, Chris Bobel, Breanne Fahs, Elizabeth Kissling, and Tomi-Ann Roberts, emphasize the importance and effectiveness of demystifying menstruation through dialogues.

Compassionately conversing about menstruation is arguably the most simple, practical, and effective strategy. This means pushing menstruation euphemisms into the ash heap of history. “That time of the month,” “a visit from my friend,” “Aunt Flo,” or even “it,” reinforce taboos. These seemingly harmful expressions hinder people’s ability to seek support or information. If we cannot even say the word “menstruation,” how can menstruators ever expect to have a healthy relationship with their body?

Consider: How are you talking about your period with your healthcare provider? Your friends and family? Your partner? *Yourself*? Shocked expressions and dismissive remarks only illustrate the need for your activism and the menstrual movement at large. Of course, there are many other social justice causes that deserve attention, especially during a global pandemic when many people are struggling to make ends meet. As Nadya Okamoto explains, menstrual activism intersects with all of them, “whether we’re discussing infrastructural development around the globe, creating equity in education, or breaking the cycle of poverty for those who

feel economically trapped.”²⁶⁰ Talking the talk must be prioritized given the high stakes that have been hitherto elucidated.

Productive, endearing, and humorous conversations surrounding all aspects of menstruation have already been taking place across social media platforms. In the summer of 2020, a viral TikTok video addressed just how little the male populace seems to know about menstruation. A male teenager genuinely thought that menstruators attached pads to their “coochie” when bleeding. His girlfriend subsequently laughed in disbelief and corrected him. The video has garnered over twelve million hits.²⁶¹ Menstruation-themed TikTok videos range from the farcical to educational. There is also a discernible menstrual activism presence on Twitter. Be sure to follow menstruation studies scholars (@ChrisBobel, @Kissling93) and menstrual health organizations (@MHHub_Global). Retweet relevant public policy updates. Engage with #PeriodPositive conversations. Use the menstruation emoji!²⁶² You can help change the status quo and bring awareness to the cause with a click of a button.

During these discussions, advocates must remember to make menstrual health inclusive to everyone. Again, all those who menstruate are not women and not all women menstruate. When we exclusively refer to menstruators as women and girls, we are erasing the experiences and livelihoods of those who do not identify as cis-women. Using inclusive language (“menstruators” or “menstruating bodies”) makes the movement more inclusive and

²⁶⁰ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 11.

²⁶¹ Abby Gardner, “Young Men Are Learning How Menstrual Pads Work on TikTok—And the Videos Are Hilarious,” *Glamour*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.glamour.com/story/young-men-are-learning-how-menstrual-pads-work-on-tiktok-and-the-videos-are-hilarious>.

²⁶² The menstruation emoji, which was released in 2019, has been criticized for being multifunctional. The symbol, a drop of blood, represents not only periods but also blood donations and medicine. Earlier designs, such as an image of menstrual marks on a pair of underwear, would be better suited to smash stigma. Still, the drop of blood is an exciting achievement. See Malaka Gharib, “Why Period Activists Think The ‘Drop Of Blood’ Emoji Is A Huge Win,” *NPR*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/02/08/692481425/why-period-activists-think-the-drop-of-blood-emoji-is-a-huge-win>

representative of the menstruating population. Menstrual activism cannot hope to achieve its goal of normalizing menstruation without including the experiences of all menstruators, including and especially those from marginalized communities.

Talking the talk will encourage people to ask clarifying questions in order to fully understand all aspects of menstruation, the good, the bad, and the bloody. It is far too normal for menstruators to not know what is happening to their body at their menarche. When Delia from *Everwood* is picking out period products with her father, she becomes confused after reading the name of a particular brand. “Always?” Her father: “No, no, it only lasts 3 to 7 days.”²⁶³ If the daughter of a doctor, someone who should theoretically be knowledgeable about menstruation and comfortable talking about it, does not fully understand menstruation, then what hope is there for the rest of us? Menstrual activism seeks a new normal, one where first-time menstruators are informed about periods and know what to expect during their cycles. That is (sadly) a revelation.

Normalizing menstruation may also improve the menstrual experience on a global scale. Being more comfortable talking about periods helps medical professionals diagnose conditions, raises awareness about the demand for more research, and most importantly, contributes to a future where all menstruators feel empowered to understand their menstrual cycle and seek support if needed.²⁶⁴ Refusing to use euphemisms is, in a sense, a public good.

For these and other reasons, Bobel and Fahs advocate for widening the scope of the current iteration of menstrual activism. As discussed, they have called for a return to the movement’s radical origins. This shift must translate into conversations about menstruation. The eradication of the tampon tax and the proliferation of donation drives cannot be the end goal of the movement, nor can conversations end there. We must not only praise the Scottish bill for

²⁶³ *Everwood*, season 3, episode 12, “Giving Up the Girl,” directed by David Paymer, written by Sherri Cooper, aired January 24, 2005, on The WB.

²⁶⁴ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 41.

providing free period products, but must address why they have not been readily accessible in the first place.

Find the Humor; Be the Humor

From the start of menstrual activism in the 1960s and 1970s, humor has played a vital and productive role in demystifying menstruation. Humor has proven to be essential to the vitality and continuation of the movement. It is not only good for activism purposes, it is good for the activist. It can transform the cultural landscape by raising awareness and opening up a dialogue; equally important, it has a positive effect on our health and well-being. Jocularly is transformative and therapeutic. Research proves that laughing lowers stress levels, unlocks creativity, and boosts resilience.²⁶⁵ Having a sense of humor in the activism world is critical to long-term sustainability and avoiding burnout. Let's laugh our way into social consciousness.

Explore and Follow Period Policy

Taking the initiative to educate oneself about relevant governmental policies is also a critical next step in doing this work. Understandably, many people believe that the system is so broken that governmental mandates cannot possibly do the movement any good. It is incredibly frustrating that federal period legislation to address tampon safety and research has languished for about two decades in Congress. Still, while there is no denying that the government is slow-moving, mandates at the state and federal level have the potential to benefit a huge swath of the population. Put simply, menstrual equity legislation ensures a more equitable society. As

²⁶⁵ Gretchen Rubin and Elizabeth Craft, hosts, "314: Re-Engage with Your Resolutions, a Hack for Helping People to Give Gifts, an Outdoors Demerit, and Why Humor Is Such a Powerful Tool at Work and in Life," *Happier with Gretchen Rubin* (podcast), February 24, 2021 accessed March 14, 2020, https://gretchenrubin.com/podcast-episode/314-why-humor-is-a-powerful-tool/?utm_content=buffer79408&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

menstrual equity architect Jennifer Weiss-Wolf has remarked, “the laws we pass make a societal statement about the very values for which we stand.”²⁶⁶ Policy measures and social change deeply influence and shape one another. Nadya Okamoto explains: “We can’t change policy without public opinion becoming more progressive on issues such as menstrual equity, and we won’t have effective policy implementation unless people understand why it’s important and needed.”²⁶⁷ Laws recognize the unique needs of menstruating bodies will shape the greater cultural landscape. Hence, it is absolutely crucial that we keep our finger on the pulse of the latest developments.

As mentioned earlier, much of the recent relevant legislation pertains to the affordability and accessibility of period products. The CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security) Act, passed in March of 2020, authorized the purchasing of menstrual products with money from health saving and flexible spending accounts.²⁶⁸ A year earlier, Congresswoman Grace Meng introduced the Menstrual Equity for all Act, the first comprehensive bill to address the accessibility of period products. As of this writing, the fight against the tampon tax lives on. A full 30 states still tax menstrual products, even while exempting things like donuts and gun club memberships. Tax Free Period, a nationwide coalition in the menstrual equity sphere, highlights this ludicrousness via an interactive map of the United States.²⁶⁹ WASH United, a non-profit organization aimed at improving menstrual hygiene, created a global map of the tampon tax.²⁷⁰ Additionally, to keep an eye on period policy measures, sign up to receive a

²⁶⁶ Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public*, 122.

²⁶⁷ Okamoto, *Period Power*, 177.

²⁶⁸ Emma Goldberg, “Many Lack Access to Pads and Tampons. What are Lawmakers Doing About It?,” *New York Times*, January 13 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/tampons-pads-period.html>.

²⁶⁹ “30 states have until Tax Day 2021 to eliminate their tampon tax,” Period Equity, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.taxfreeperiod.com/#:~:text=30percent20statespercent20havepercent20untilpercent20Tax,Period>.

²⁷⁰ “Global Period Tax Map and Database,” WASH United gGmbH, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://periodtax.org/map.html#clickmap>

monthly memo from The Menstrual Health Hub, a nonprofit global female health collective that works to unite and lift up menstrual health achievements across the globe.²⁷¹

Staying informed about worldwide efforts is important because menstrual activism in the United States tends to shy away from consideration of local contexts. There is a big push encouraging women and menstruators to switch over to reusable menstrual products. But in some contexts, disposable ones are not only much more readily accessible but more suitable in areas where taboos are pervasive and strong. For example, some cultures in Kenya, Uganda, Bolivia, and Bangladesh believe that just *seeing* menstrual blood causes women to become infertile. Thus, encouraging a more environmentally-friendly way to manage periods will presumably have little impact in these circumstances. We must think critically about what strategies of menstrual activism are most effective in any given context. Furthermore, we need to be thoughtful with regards to our expectations of menstruators.

Hone Media Literacy Skills

We also need to think critically about the images we consume in order to productively engage with the media. Media literacy is an essential skill for viewers to practice and perfect. This means, first and foremost, determining why the text in front of us was made. What information is included and what is left out? What is the point of view and why does this matter? By asking these kinds of questions, viewers become more thoughtful and informed consumers. To put this application to use, I will return to HelloFlo's "The Camp Gyno" commercial. The viral advertisement is told from the perspective of a young girl at camp. She becomes popular after she is the first one there to get her period. She fancies herself a menstruation expert and offers counseling services and distributes menstrual products. The two-minute video boldly

²⁷¹ See <https://mhhub.org/>

challenges the menstrual communication taboo. But we need to recall that the end goal of this debunking is to sell a product. Towards the end of the commercial, viewers are introduced to HelloFlo's monthly period kits, which include products and candy ("It's like Santa for your vagina!").²⁷² "The Camp Gyno" is certainly refreshingly for its unabashed inclusion of all aspects of periods, but HelloFlo is not exactly trying to smash period stigma here; they are trying to make a profit.

Support Female-Created Shows and Demand for More Inclusive Representation

In addition to calling out problematic images and praising empathetic ones, another strategy on how to advance menstrual activism through popular culture is by demanding more inclusive representation behind the camera. As discussed in the preceding chapter, women's intimate lives tend to get a starring role on screen if women are in a position of power behind the scenes. A recent report from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that "programs with at least one woman creator employed substantially greater percentages of women in other key behind-the-scenes roles and featured more female characters than programs with exclusively male creators." The same can be said of programs with at least one woman executive producer.²⁷³ The logic goes that if more menstruating bodies were involved with media production, the depictions of menstruation would presumably be more inclusive, realistic, and empathetic – at the least the intended messaging would be. As discussed in the preceding chapter, my analysis of the most recent television representations of menarche demonstrates a correlation between episodes that are female-written and episodes that have more instances of all

²⁷² "The Camp Gyno," written and directed by Jamie Mccelland and Pete Marquis, *HelloFlo*, July 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XnzfRqkRxU>.

²⁷³ Rachel Montpeller, "Boxed In' Report: Streaming Programs Feature More Female Protagonists Than Cable or Broadcast," *Women and Hollywood*, September 11, 2020, <https://womenandhollywood.com/boxed-in-report-streaming-programs-feature-more-female-protagonists-than-cable-or-broadcast/>.

types of menstrual activism. Being informed about the status of women in the TV industry and its implications will enable audience members to have more productive and meaningful conversations surrounding the demand for more inclusive representation. Research from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film can give viewers the necessary language and information to carry out this task. Perhaps most importantly and funnest of all, viewers, (continue to) support female-centric shows!

Checklist for Viewers:

- Support Female-Created and Female-Led Series**
- Demand for More Inclusive Representation**
 - Use social media**
 - Stay informed via the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film**
- Hone Media Literacy Skills**
- Explore and Follow Period Policy in the U.S. and Beyond**
- Talk the Talk – Not Just About the Tampon Tax**
 - No euphemisms!**
- Lean on Levity**

...

Television, one of America’s favorite pastimes, could very well be the solution to ending period stigma. This mode of communication sends implicit and explicit messages about cultural values and norms. Menstrual activists must harness this power and promote menstruation as a normal bodily function. We must take extra care to advance this script around depictions of menarche. As noted, a positive menarcheal experience correlates to positive feelings about menstruation later in life.²⁷⁴ Affirming period narratives on the screen can combat the dismal status of menstrual wellness education in real life. Far too many menstruators reach menarche in ignorance. This has damaging health effects, as reported by a *Reproductive Health* article, including the “weakening of girls’ sense of self-confidence and competence, which in turn may

²⁷⁴ McPherson et al., "Menstruation Across Time."

comprise girls' abilities to assert themselves in different situations, including in relation to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health."²⁷⁵ Quite frankly, menstrual taboos are wreaking havoc on our culture. We thus have a moral responsibility to deconstruct popular attitudes of menstruation. This is not going to be effortless; we are working against patriarchal ideologies that have been around for millennia. But entering popular culture discourses is a productive and entertaining starting point. *Miss Representation*, a documentary about sexism in mainstream American media, put it best: Activists must "go where the people are – and the people are watching TV."²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Marni Sommer, Carla Sutherland, and Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, "Putting menarche and girls into the global population health agenda," *Reproductive Health* 12 (2015), doi:[10.1186/s12978-015-0009-8](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-015-0009-8).

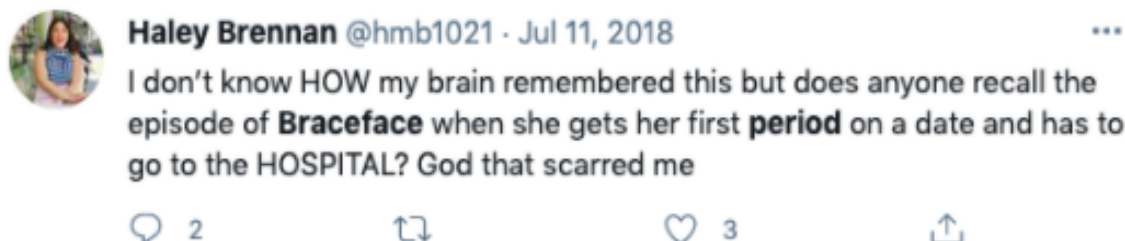
²⁷⁶ *Miss Representation*, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom (Girls' Club Entertainment, 2011).

Coda: Online Menstrual Activism Examples

Engaging in menstrual activism can be as simple as tweeting. Calling out and lifting up representations of menarche online can start a conversation and advance a movement. May these examples inspire you to watch more television and assess depictions of menarche, whether they are good, bad, or bloody.

Calling Out

Braceface:



Everwood:



Black-ish:

 **Adiba Jaigirdar** @adiba_j

Replying to @dypalie

I love black-ish and it has some really clever, informative episodes, but if I'm totally honest, I was disappointed by its menstruation episode. 😞

9:40 AM · Nov 15, 2017 · Twitter Web Client

 Tweet your reply Reply

 **Deepali** @dypalie · Nov 15, 2017

Replying to @adiba_j

oh! I liked it, but perhaps am giving it a lot of credit and cookies for just trying, since nobody else even tries on TV?

 1   

 **Adiba Jaigirdar** @adiba_j · Nov 15, 2017

The first half of it was very positive but then it seemed to subside into the whole LOL WOMEN ARE SO EMOTIONAL AND ANGRY ON THEIR PERIODS, and left me feeling very icky overall. It did better than other shows for sure but it was still not good imo.

Calling out problematic portrayals of first periods can prompt media producers to be more mindful of their intended messaging. These tweets recognize television as a powerful disseminator of cultural values and norms. They advocate for better representations, ones that do not paint menarche as a crisis, are rooted in lived experiences, and challenge harmful menstrual taboos and stereotypes.

Lifting Up*Big Mouth:***Jessica** @JessicaGoldstei · Feb 24, 2019

...

Big Mouth should get an Emmy for the 1st **Period** episode.**Pri** ✨ @LoonyBeanie · Sep 25, 2020

...

I still remember how scared and confused I was when I got my first **period**. As I was watching **big mouth** today, I felt a sense of relief that kids hitting puberty have things to watch to understand the hormonal changes.*Degrassi:***mere** ❤️ **ACAB** @meredeathmetal · Dec 10, 2017

...

Remember when Emma got her **period** on **Degrassi** and the boys teased her so she started a petition to have a tampon dispenser in the girls bathroom? Iconic.*Schitt's Creek:***Julia Keefe, MM** @Julia_Keefe · Mar 19

...

Can we talk about the **period** scene in **Schitt's Creek**? It is SO IMPORTANT to have positive messaging for young women experiencing their first **period**. "Nothing is more natural" 🌞 Yes! No shame! This show is like a how-to guide for being a good human.

Odd Mom Out:

 **Katherine** @KatJEngel ...

Odd Mom Out sang about a girls first period and that's the shit that we need more of on tv.

8:22 PM · Sep 14, 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

 Tweet your reply Reply

 **Katherine** @KatJEngel · Sep 14, 2017 ...

Replying to @KatJEngel

Like they through a party for that girl for getting her period.

 1   

 **Katherine** @KatJEngel · Sep 14, 2017 ...

I'm going to start throwing parties.

 1   

 **Katherine** @KatJEngel · Sep 14, 2017 ...

I'm always down to talk about the menstrual cycle. And NO ONE should feel ashamed about it.

Lifting up narratives that can advance the menstrual activism movement serves as a helpful reminder that periods are in fact entirely normal and nothing to be ashamed of. There is a need and a demand for positive and compassionate media representations of menarche. Such a depiction must become the norm in order to help menstruators recognize their full potential.

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