

abstract

Rising from the ashes of taboo and shame, menstruation has become a hot topic over the past few years which is mirrored in the fast-growing movement of menstrual activism. My thesis focuses on the menstrual movement within the cybergrounds of the social media platform Instagram, where menstrual activism has gained a newfound presence. Within the Instagram menstrual movement I have observed a tension between two perspectives: the spiritual; focused on reclaiming menstruation as the embodiment of womanhood/femininity, a source of power in the face of patriarchy, and the queer; focused on reimagining the cycle beyond the gender and sex binary, with inclusion and diversity at the center. Applying a combination of feminist close reading and visual analysis, my research puts these two perspectives in conversation with each other, to form an expansive perspective on the menstrual cycle; a starting point to see the menstrual cycle differently.

Zooming in on the Instagram menstrual movement and its queer and spiritual perspectives, I build on the archetypes of the goddess and the cyborg they embody and weave the menstrual cycle as a space for the paradoxical, offering a hybrid figuration to challenge normative perspectives. Combining nomadic feminism, feminist new materialism as well as queer theory and crip theory, this research explores how these theoretical frameworks can be used to write the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration. Because I am working with the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration, it is not my intention to move away from the matter, instead I am looking to see it differently. Through a close reading on menstrual matter and its multiple layers (menstrual cycle, reproductive system, hormonal system), the menstrual cycle becomes a vessel for social resistance and a fertile ground for transformation.

for me
there is no other.
because there is no default.
everyone
is
a variation of life.

– the human being | the human gender | the human sex

Nayyirah Waheed, *Salt*

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gratitude¹

Anything I write feels like a birth. This piece in particular has been growing inside of me for a long time, waiting for its due time to join the world. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and I am grateful that my village has so many supportive people who have been by my side throughout this writing process. I would like to thank:

Ilse - for the wonderful guidance and supervision. Thank you for continuously affirming my creativity, my writing, and encouraging me to believe in my capabilities. You made my inner child, who dreamt of becoming a writer, smile brightly every time.

My family - Mom, Dad, Lindsey, Ruben, Samad. The cuties, Rayan and Soufiane. You are what keeps me going in this life.

My chosen family - for supporting me through it all. Maartje, for always reminding me of my abilities within our disabilities. Morgan, for all our affirming conversations about gender and sexuality. And of course, Janilda, Pascalle, Veronica, Hiethem, Tanya, Joie - each of you brings out the best of me in your own ways.

Indiara - it was in the process of loving and losing you that I learned the transformative power of heartbreak; another cycle of life, death, and rebirth which guided me through this writing process. Thank you for supporting me on the way. I can take it from here.

My feminist, queer, crip lineage - all those who came before me, and continue to show me the way: Alice Walker, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Johanna Hedva, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Sara Ahmed, adrienne maree brown, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and so many more. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with the world and teaching me about myself and how to show up in this world, to leave it better than how I came into it.

to Spirit. My ancestors, my guides. My inner child, my future self.

I do it all for you.

¹ I borrow this from adrienne maree brown, who titled her acknowledgments 'gratitude' in her 2019 book *Pleasure Activism*.

introduction

The relationship between me and my menstrual cycle can be defined as “it’s complicated”. I was around eleven years young when I first got my period. Those first years of menstruating were brutal. My bleeds were heavy and often lasted two whole weeks. I have many memories I would rather forget; many situations where I was drenched in shame and I often dreaded going to school or participating in any social gatherings while I was on period in fear of leaking through my pants - which happened often. I can honestly say I hated my periods. When I started using the Pill, prescribed at fourteen as an acne treatment, I quickly started using it continuously to suppress menstruation completely. I felt free and relieved without the monthly burden of shame around my bleeding. Fast forward ten years: I go off the Pill due to undesirable side-effects in relation to my mental well-being. Without the Pill to suppress my cycles and my bleeds altogether, my periods are back, sort of. Now they are burdening me another way; with their irregularity, never knowing when it might come. But I also actually find myself looking forward to seeing those first few red spots in my underwear.

Another year later, at 25, I got diagnosed with PCOS after a long and exhausting period of self-advocating and fighting to be taken seriously. It was during this time I started exploring my gender identity. The constant confrontation with being assigned “woman” or “female” during my medical journey led me to investigate why my whole body tightened up whenever this happened. And, on a deeper level, why I always felt disconnected to the feminine connection that was tied to this burdensome monthly bodily process. As I started to feel more comfortable within my body by seeing it outside the restrictive sex/gender binary, I also learned how to be in relation to my cycle in a new, more expansive way. This all led me to become the menstrual activist I am now; my practice rooted in my own menstrual embodiment which is queer, nonbinary, white, thin, chronically ill, working class.

From this position within the menstrual movement I have observed a tension between the spiritual and the queer perspectives. The spiritualists claim a universal sacredness of womanhood embedded in the menstrual cycle. The queers, however, aim to detach this essentialist coupling and focus on reimagining the cycle outside of binary paradigms. This tension I also hold within my body and practice. I am a highly spiritual person, but find it hard to see myself represented within the spiritual menstrual movement with its focus on divine femininity and sacred womanhood. As Donna Haraway writes in her seminal essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985): “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category, constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (p.295). Therefore, within my practice, I am always in the process of finding ways to hold this complexity and seeing how it relates to the transformative power I believe resides in the menstrual cycle.

This research aims to bring the two perspectives into conversation with each other, in order to see how - and if - they can be merged or conjoined to think the menstrual cycle differently. To uncouple it from its sexed and gendered aspects; a practice known as “queering the cycle”. Doing so, it will focus on answering the question: **How can the tension in the menstrual movement between the spiritualists and the queers be taken as a starting point to create new ways of seeing the**

menstrual cycle? I will answer this question by exploring the following subquestions: How do these perspectives manifest specifically within the framework of Instagram? How do these perspectives relate to the broader social frame surrounding the view on the menstrual cycle? And lastly, how can a potential merging or rethinking of these perspectives inform a revisioning of the menstrual cycle?

First, I weave a theoretical framework combining feminist new materialism, nomadic feminism, as well as the intersection of queer theory and crip theory, in order to root down the research context and contemplate how these critical theories can inform a way of thinking the menstrual cycle otherwise. Building on this framework, I zoom in on the menstrual movement itself, and in particular how the movement manifests itself on the social media platform Instagram, in chapter one. In chapter two, my research puts the spiritual and the queer perspectives in conversation with each other by applying a combination of feminist close reading and visual analysis, zooming in on their use of (visual) language in relation to “the physical, the social and the symbolic” (Braidotti, 2003; Grosz, 1987). Zooming backing out again, chapter three explores how a merging of the spiritual and the queer menstrual perspective can affect transformation on a broader societal scale, by proposing the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration in itself.

theory and method

theory

feminist new materialism

As I am working with the menstrual cycle - a bodily matter - it is not my intention to move away from the matter, as matter cannot be denied, cannot be escaped. Instead, I am working to see, write, and think it differently. While the matter cannot be escaped, its meaning *can* be changed. As Donna Haraway writes: “we need the power of modern critical theories of how meaning and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life” (Haraway, 1988, p.580). One of these critical theories is feminist new materialism, which is one of the core frameworks I am weaving into my web. “A central tenet of new materialist thinking is that ‘matter’ is fundamentally multiple, self-organising, dynamic and inventive, moving between nature and culture, the animated and automated, bodies and environments” (Coleman et al., 2019). Feminist new materialism’s essence of seeing matter as multiple is imperative in this journey as the same goes for the menstrual population: it is diverse, it is multiple. The fact that the menstrual population is not a monolith, but a vastly diverse community with multiple different experiences, cycles and embodiments is what drives this research.

For centuries, the menstrual cycle has been presented as *the* embodiment of womanhood, without acknowledging that even the concept of womanhood itself is not one-size-fits-all². This is rooted in patriarchal binary thinking, which has linked the concept of Woman³ - and in extension the menstrual body - to nature: body, in opposition to culture: mind (Man). Feminist theory and practice has a long history of challenging this man-made connection, critically questioning “what counts as nature, for whom, and at what costs” (Haraway, 1997 - quoted in Barad, 2007, p.369). Thus, “the project of radically redefining nature has long been at the heart of a range of feminist social struggles” (Alaimo, 2008, p.240). An important pivot that happened within this project is the uncoupling of sex and gender. Queer theorist Gayle Rubin is a central figure in challenging what she calls the “sex/gender system”, and located “the origin of gender systems and male dominance in the transformation of raw biological sex into gender” (Flax, 1990, p.144). Therefore, it was imperative to start seeing sex separate from gender, and the concept of gender and all its implications became widely acknowledged to be a social construct; something created rather than naturally evident. However, this uncoupling also created a new binary, and continues to work within the nature/culture binary: positioning sex (nature) vs. gender (culture). Therefore, this remains a fairly limited way of thinking.

The topic of menstruation specifically has also been part of the feminist resistance involved with the redefinition of nature. In the 1970s, feminist theorists such as Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem

2 Many BIPOC feminists have long argued that the concept of Woman is racialized, meaning it only involves white women. Thus, the mainstream notions of womanhood and femininity are not inclusive to all. I will expand on this later in the research.

3 Whenever I use the term Woman, I am speaking of the concept of Woman as the binary opposite of Man.

released critical texts concerning the repressive, patriarchal ideas surrounding menstruation. Germaine Greer's 1970 book *The Female Eunuch* contested many "basic assumptions about feminine normality" (p.14), speaking on subjects such as gender, sex, and the chapter "The Wicked Womb" specifically speaks on menstruation. Here, Greer links the pathologization of menstruation and the womb in general with the 19th century idea of hysteria, stating that "women were assumed to be by nature subject to the tyranny of the insatiate womb" (p.49), which according to Greer has led to the belief that menstruation makes women subject to patriarchal control. Furthermore, Gloria Steinem's infamous 1978 satirical essay *If Men Could Menstruate* challenged the inferiority of this 'female' event by subverting it into a 'male' one. Exposing its constructed nature, she wrote:

Generals, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ("menstruation") as proof that only men could serve God and country in combat ("You have to give blood to take blood"), occupy high political office ("Can women be properly fierce without a monthly cycle governed by the planet Mars?"), be priests, ministers, God Himself ("He gave this blood for our sins"), or rabbis ("Without a monthly purge of impurities, women are unclean") (p.354).

These texts emphasized how the 'naturalness' of menstrual inferiority was actually constructed and upheld by patriarchal ideology positioning 'the female body' as inferior to 'the male body'.

Attempting to escape this patriarchal coupling of 'women' with the body, some feminist movements have tried to move away from it altogether, which can be classified as postgenderism⁴. The idea of escaping the body is mirrored in the suppression of the menstrual cycle (menstrual suppression), for example by taking the pill. Since menstruation is oftentimes seen as troubling, messy, and getting in the way of keeping up with daily life (i.e. capitalism), it has long been the go-to choice for many of those who menstruate - myself included. By working with the matter instead of trying to go beyond it (furthering the alienation of our bodies), I am - to borrow Haraway's words - "staying with the trouble"⁵. The matter of the menstrual cycle will be the red thread throughout this research; what can we learn from the menstrual cycle if we look at it through a different lens - one focused on the matter and not "the cultivated natural"⁶ (i.e. its connection to cis-womanhood).

In her essay *Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature* (2008) Stacy Alaimo states that "predominant paradigms do not deny the material existence of the body, of course, but they do tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which

4 The main aspect of feminist postgenderism relies heavily on technological advancements such as artificial reproductive technologies to escape from the patriarchal ideology of seeing Woman as the maternal baby-making machine. For example, Donna Haraway's cyborg figuration is situated in a postgender world.

5 Referring to Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016).

6 The cultivated natural is a term by French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray to describe the notion of 'women's nature'. She writes: "the body is submitted to sociological rules, to rhythms foreign to its sensibility to its living perceptions; day and night, seasons, vegetal growth. (...) The body is no longer educated to develop its perceptions spiritually, but to detach itself from the sensible for a more abstract, more speculative, more sociological culture" (Irigaray quoted in Poe, 2011). Thus, Irigaray argues that what we claim as natural is actually cultural; constructed through sociological ideals and within this process have become alienated from our actual nature/bodies.

casts the body as passive, plastic matter” (p.237). However, by taking the matter as the red thread, I am writing of the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration⁷. This way it becomes active; it has agency. No longer simply the subject constructed of cis-womanhood, blood, and taboo, but rather as the constellation of “the physical, the social, and the symbolic” (Braidotti, 2003; Grosz, 1987). A constellation connecting gender, sex, age, ability, race: a recognition that there is not one subjectivity, but rather a multiplicity of subjectivity. Multidimensional and intersectional. Fluid and ever-changing. Taking its continuous cycle of change; of release and rebirth, to produce new discourse. To quote Karen Barad: “matter is regularly created and destroyed” (2007, p.354). The process of creation and destruction is what (typically) happens every cycle: matter (released egg, thickened uterine lining) is created and then destroyed (shed through menses). In this process lies the valuable lesson of letting go of attachments to certain ideas or beliefs, which is what I see as one of the core aspects of thinking the menstrual cycle differently; or queering the cycle. Letting go of the long held beliefs that menstruation is the gatekeeper to which body belongs to ‘womanhood’, to who is a ‘real’ or ‘natural’ woman. Much like how the menstrual cycle continues on after the menstrual phase, this destruction is not final in any way. As Eva Hayward writes so poetically in *Lessons from a Starfish* (2008): “The cut is possibility” (p.255). By letting go of certain attachments, we open the door to new possibilities; ways of seeing the menstrual cycle outside of normative cis-womanhood.

nomadic feminism and nomadic subjects

To take this process of transformation further, I am weaving in Rosi Braidotti’s notion of nomadic feminism and the nomadic subject, in which she argues for a new embodiment of sexual difference. Building on feminist new materialism and the philosophies of Deleuze and Irigaray, Braidotti (2011, 1994) constructs “feminist nomadism into three phases, all of which linked to sexual difference: ‘differences between men and women’; ‘differences among women’; and ‘differences within each woman’”(p.158). She stresses that “these layers occur simultaneously and that, in daily life, they coexist and cannot be easily distinguished” (p.159). While I do not fully agree with Braidotti’s case, in its essence it is a valuable philosophy to guide the process of reading the menstrual cycle in a new and expansive way. Before I unpack this, it is important to emphasize the concept of sexual difference Braidotti works with here. Rosi Braidotti’s notion of sexual difference as a nomadic subject is not so much a static, fixed essentialist notion of sexual difference, but rather one that leaves space for change. She defines “sexual difference as providing shifting locations for multiple female feminist embodied voices” (p.172). While Braidotti’s nomadic thinking remains focused on ‘female voices’ and limited within the binary gender system, she does acknowledge the complexity within this process. It is in this call for complexity that nomadic feminism is a valuable framework to think, see and write the menstrual cycle differently. As she redefines “the feminine as a moving horizon, a fluctuating path, a recipe for transformation, motion, becoming” (2011, p.114), a similar message is mirrored in the menstrual cycle as a vessel for transformation; no longer a vicious cycle but a healing spiral signaling growth.

7 I will further expand on this in chapter three.

Moreover, an essential part of her nomadic thinking is the concept of ‘becoming’. Here, she builds on Deleuzian philosophy, which sees “becoming [as] the affirmation of the positivity of difference, meant as a multiple and constant process of transformation” (p.111). Furthermore, Braidotti claims that “transformation can only be achieved through de-essentialized embodiment or strategically re-essentialized embodiment: by *working through* the multilayered structures of one’s embodied self” (p.171). This project will work through the multiple layers by using the menstrual cycle as the red thread: zooming in and out of the multiple layers of the matter at hand (menstrual cycle > reproductive system > hormonal system). Following the three different phases of Braidotti’s nomadic sexual difference means that I am not to shy away from the notion of difference. Difference in itself is not inherently a bad thing. It remains a fact that not all bodies have a menstrual cycle: that is a difference that cannot be denied. But it is how we approach this difference that will bring us forward on the journey. For this project that means the journey beyond the binary, not only the man/woman binary, but also the menstruator/non-menstruator binary.

intersection of queer theory and crip theory

Two expansive theories that work within the process of seeing bodies differently are queer theory and crip theory. More recently, scholars such as Robert McRuer and Alison Kafer have linked queer theory and crip theory together as a complimenting intersection. This intersection of theories is the third framework within this web. Not only because it is an intersection that speaks to my own positionality as I am both queer and crip, but also because from this position, I read the menstrual cycle as being both queer and crip. I will explain:

So much of how the menstrual cycle has been presented within popular media is centered around womanhood and femininity. However, this is only one representation and does not speak to the many othered bodies that also experience the menstrual cycle. So, when we talk about queering the cycle, what does that actually mean? What does it entail? Michael Warner states in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) that queer politics and theory is about “how queer experience and politics might be taken as starting points rather than as footnotes” (p.vii). The practice of queering the cycle thus means looking at the menstrual cycle and its social and political implications from a queer experience first rather than from its normative perspective of cis-womanhood. It is about centering the marginalized perspectives, something which has been developed by Black feminism, specifically by bell hooks⁸.

Furthermore, the dictional definition of ‘queer’ puts the menstrual body outside of the ‘feminine’ body. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines femininity as: “*the quality or nature of the female sex: the quality, state, or degree of being feminine or womanly*”. And queer as “*differing in some way from what is usual or normal; eccentric, unconventional; sick, unwell*”. Knowing that the quality or nature of the female sex is defined in relation to Man and based on being soft, nurturing, etc., the menstrual body becomes a stain on this idealized image of the (white) feminine body. Thus, the connection of

8 I will speak more on hooks’ theory in chapter three.

menstruation with womanhood or femininity is paradoxical to say the least. Moreover, the menstrual body in itself is already an outcast. Misogynist arguments claim menstruation as the reason ‘women’ are not able to join the workforce or to be in positions of power as the menstrual body is seen as unruly and uncontrollable. As Sandy Stone writes in *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987): “under the binary phallographic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorized, only one body per gendered subject is “right”. All other bodies are wrong” (p.13). The intersection of queer and crip theory helps us to look at this from a broader perspective. In her compelling essay *Introducing Menstrunormativity: Toward a Complex Understanding of ‘Menstrual Monsterings’* (2020) Josefin Persdotter implicitly points this out. She writes: “many have also used the terms “monster” and “monstrous” to refer to otherized, marginalized, liminal beings, who in one way or another stand outside the realms of “normality”” (p.357). Here we can see the connection between the menstrual body and the queer/trans body and the crip body: all these are/have been considered monstrous as they challenge normative views on what a body should look like. The notion of menstrual monsters is something I come back to in chapter three.

Michael Warner writes: “Being queer means (...) being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what “health” entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet’s environment would be” (1993, p.xiii). I want to zoom in on his mention of “health” here, as it brings me to the ‘cripness’ of the menstrual cycle. In the introduction to his book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006), Robert McRuer states that “able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things” (p.1). As Persdotter also argues, ‘the natural order’ in the context of the menstrual cycle entails the normative view on the menstrual cycle: a 28-day cycle with clearly distinct phases is presented as *the* healthy cycle. Thereby “the most common way to menstruate becomes the “right” way to menstruate whereas other ways are sanctioned” (Persdotter, 2020). This does not only speak to a certain physical ‘rightness’ but there is also a way of connecting to the menstrual body that is presented as the ‘right’ or ‘better’ way, mostly by spiritually focused menstrual activists who promote so-called cyclical living: living in tune with the body’s rhythms. Body dysphoria, for example, does not fit into this idealized cyclical living and is thus sanctioned by various representations of how a(ny) menstruator should be and feel. Kafer’s introduction of her hybrid political/relational model of disability studies in her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) is particularly valuable here. Kafer’s proposed model states that “the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being” (p.6). Furthermore, this perspective “builds on social and minority model frameworks but reads them through feminist and queer critiques of identity” (p.4). Kafer, citing Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, constructed this model with the “intent to “demand an unsettling of its certainties, of the fixed identities of which it is bound up” and to pluralize the ways we understand bodily instability” (p.7), which is what this research also aims to do.

context / case study

The research will focus on the menstrual movement which has established itself within the cybergrounds of social media platform Instagram, where menstrual activism has gained a newfound presence and various feminist accounts are challenging the taboo placed on menstruation for centuries. While Instagram has become a platform to establish (self-)representation outside of the norm presented to us in popular media, such as advertisements, movies, etc., it is important to acknowledge the politics surrounding Instagram. It is a place of duality; on the one hand it has become a space for broader representation, where everyone can carve out their own little Internet bubble. However, that certainly does not mean there are no restrictions to who and/or what is (more) visible. Instagram's algorithm has many problematic aspects that I could write a whole thesis on, but I will only address in short here: Instagram is criticized for shadowbanning accounts/users which disproportionately affects marginalized communities such as queer, Black, Indigenous, and people of color⁹. Their "community guidelines", as well as the recent (default) feature called "sensitive content control" have also been argued to be biased, and affecting "posts that don't necessarily break our rules, but could potentially be upsetting to some people – such as posts that may be sexually suggestive or violent¹⁰", which - in practice - often encompasses sex positive and LGBTQIA+ accounts¹¹. It is inevitable that these restrictions will play a part in the selection of the accounts, as well as the type of content that can be analyzed. For example, during the research process one of the selected accounts (@heroinejournal) was deactivated for allegedly violating the community guidelines by posting unedited photographs of birthing people and (queer) sexual content.

Instagram menstrual movement

Within the Instagram menstrual movement, I have identified a contradiction happening; a tension between two perspectives. On the one hand, there is the spiritual side: these accounts are typically focused on reclaiming the feminine power of the menstrual cycle; (re)claiming sexual difference; getting in touch with the cycle to become (more) empowered. On the other, there are those who are calling for a reimagination of menstruation and the menstrual cycle beyond femininity: usually referred to as "queering the cycle", which entails an exploration of embodiment beyond biological determinism and calls for an inclusion of trans men, trans women, nonbinary folx and everyone who does not fit into the binary of sex and the binary of gender. This is a duality I also locate within myself: I identify both as queer and spiritual and consider myself to be part of the (Instagram) menstrual movement. Thus, it is from my own positionality that I conduct this research, something I will expand upon in the "method" section.

9 The second version of the 'Algorithmic Bias Report', a survey by the online platform Salty in 2021, has shown how Instagram's practice of shadowbanning adversely affects marginalized communities over mainstream communities. <https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/>

10 <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-sensitive-content-control>

11 Many feminist and activist accounts have argued this, see for example @lips_zine on Instagram. Lips is an app especially developed for women-identified and LGBTQIA+ creators to share their creations without censorship.

research question

This research will focus on answering the following question: **How can the tension in the menstrual movement between the spiritualists and the queers be taken as a starting point to create new ways of seeing the menstrual cycle?** I will answer this question by exploring the following subquestions: How do these perspectives manifest specifically within the framework of Instagram? How do these perspectives relate to the broader social frame surrounding the view on the menstrual cycle? And lastly, how can a potential merging or rethinking of these perspectives inform a revisioning of the menstrual cycle?

method

To answer these research questions, my research will entail both a visual and textual discourse analysis, which will focus on a selection of Instagram accounts that are part of the menstrual movement and embody the identified split within the movement. Specifically, the analysis will focus on the visual content, as well the descriptions accompanying those visuals, and the bio's of the accounts (how they represent and position themselves).

selection

I will map out a selection of Instagram accounts which represent the two identified perspectives. The selection will look at (original) content, visual and textual language, and how they are situated within the menstrual movement. I will not limit the selection to a specific country or continent, but rather take a global approach mirroring the global reach of the Internet in general. Of course, as I am also limited by my own knowledge of language¹² I will focus on accounts that use English as their main language. I am aware this choice will mean that the selected accounts will be mostly North American and/or UK-based, and thus will predominantly reflect a Western/Global Northern perspective. Therefore, in my selection I aim to reflect the diversity of the menstrual population in terms of race, gender, sex, age, ability, etc. as much as this is possible.

feminist visual analysis & close reading

As Instagram is a prominent platform in which today's imagery is consumed, it is important to critically engage with the content on there. However, in the process of endless scrolling, its content is often taken in without much thought. As Buikema & Zarzycka write in *Visual Cultures: Feminist Perspectives* (2011): "in an image-overloaded era, certain visual conventions have become self-evident, unquestioned and easily consumed" (p.119). Therefore, the research will be done through feminist visual analysis, as it aims "to look at them more consciously" and is concerned with "the visual traditions as well as the social practices and power relations in which they are embedded" (p.119). Moreover, feminist visual analysis aims to "[develop] an understanding of the way in which images came into being and how they work on their audiences" (p.119). Thus, I will analyse the visual imagery

12 Dutch and English being the two languages I speak fluently.

used within the spiritualist and the queer menstrual activist perspectives in relation to the multifaceted nature of the menstrual cycle, looking at how they represent and relate to “the physical, the social, and the symbolic” (Braidotti, 2003; Grosz, 1987).

In addition to feminist visual analysis, I will use the method of feminist close reading. “Close reading is being used within a variety of feminist interpretative frameworks, including, amongst others, feminist stylistics, deconstruction, postcolonial readings and narratological interpretations” (Lukic & Sanchez Espinosa, 2011, p.107). With its focus on interpretation, close reading is a method that reads between the lines, from the margin. Emphasizing how I specifically, as the reader, read and experience those visuals. Therefore it shows my hand, my position, in how I read and see the two perspectives of the menstrual movement and thus accentuates what I find valuable in them, and what I do not. I perform these close readings on a selection of Instagram posts in chapter two, as a more creative and poetic approach to the visuals. They are kept separate from the main text to emphasize the extra layer they add to the analysis.

positionality

Central to feminist close reading is an acknowledgement of the position of the reader; me. Since the interpretations are rooted in the reader’s (societal and political) position, and thus influence the way the content is read, it is important to know from which position the reader is conducting the reading. To quote Haraway: “positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices” (1988, p.587). As mentioned before, this research stems from a personal significance as I embody the identified duality between the spiritual and the queer side of the menstrual movement within my own menstrual activist practice. However, these are not the only positions from which I am speaking. I am also white, nonbinary, lower class, menstrual, and chronically ill (crip). All of these positions influence the way I read the content, and thus offer an embodied analysis as opposed to being a neutral observing party.

Moreover, the focus on (visual) language is a postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist method of doing research. Both feminist visual analysis and close reading take (visual) language as space for (re-)creation; building blocks for societal transformation. Thus, zooming in to the menstrual movement on Instagram and their use of (visual) language, I “will look for the ways in which power is being performed as a decentralized, localized, discursively and institutionally normalizing process, and which also productively generates various and multiple local forms of resistance” (Lykke, 2010, p.149). My aim here is not to further divide the two perspectives of the menstrual movement, but to bring them into conversation with each other. Through an exploration of language, both visual and textual, I aim to merge and rethink the perspectives in order to inform a reimagining of the menstrual cycle; a process of queering the cycle.

chapter i: mapping the menstrual movement

mainstream menstruation

In general, menstruation is portrayed and presented as the embodiment of womanhood. This is apparent in the use of visual and textual language in popular media such as advertisements for period products (mostly referred to as ‘feminine hygiene products’), but also more generally speaking on how we address those bodies that menstruate: we talk about ‘women’s health’, ‘the female reproductive system’, ‘female hormones’, and so on. In her book *It’s Only Blood* (2018), Anna Dahlqvist writes: “menstruation is, without a doubt, gendered. Even though there are many women who do not menstruate (after menopause, because of various physical conditions, or those who are not cis women, for example) and many who are not women but do menstruate (including trans men and non-binary individuals). Menstruation is something that makes you what we call a woman” (p.36). The way Dahlqvist writes it here, makes it sound like a fact: *it just is*. Which mirrors how the mainstream social perspective makes it out to be; as if menstruation is inherently connected to womanhood. This is visible in how menarche¹³ is presented as a transition from girlhood to womanhood. However, the connection between womanhood and menstruation is constructed, rooted in the patriarchal constructs of sex and gender. Linking menstruation to womanhood is linking sex to gender; something many feminist and queer theorists have criticized over the years by arguing that “the gender system is not the natural outgrowth of biological difference; rather sex differences are created and accentuated by repressing similarities between the sexes” (Flax, 1990, p.144-145). Thus, gendering menstruation not only excludes those who menstruate but do not identify as women, as well as those who do identify as women but do not menstruate, it also upholds restrictive patriarchal ideologies.

Due to menstruation’s link to womanhood and the general inferior position of Woman within patriarchal societies, menstruation is a topic that has been greatly suppressed from mainstream discourse. While there has been a subtle shift happening over the more recent years, it has long been a topic drenched in taboos and shame. Dahlqvist’s *It’s Only Blood* focuses specifically on the shame surrounding menstruation, stating that both the shame and the silence around it is universal and linked to “feeling dirty”; a feeling that is mostly an internalization of societal messages that have rendered menstruation as dirty or unclean. The association of menstruation and menstrual matter with dirt, or being dirty, is rooted in (patriarchal) religions: “medieval Islam, Judaism, and Christianity were united in their belief that a woman was ritually unclean during menstruation” (Green, 2005, p.59). These religious myths continue to be present today and have developed into what Josefin Persdotter calls “the menstrual monster”. The representation of the menstrual body as ‘monstrous’ often seen in popular culture where the (pre) menstrual body is taken as the ‘hormonal witch’, possessed by ‘raging hormones’ turning a regular menstruator/person into an “uncontrollable, raging monster”. These beliefs make the menstrual shame no longer just about the physical or the visible, but about something unattainable; deeply internalized. As Dahlqvist writes: “it is about more than what is visible to the eye, a dirt that goes *beyond* the actual stains” (p.33, emphasis mine).

13 Menarche is the first period. The average age for menarche to occur is 12 years.

menstrual activism

The menstrual movement is an activist movement that works to challenge the taboo, the silence, and the shame surrounding menstruation and the menstrual cycle. Menstrual activism has been on the feminist agenda for decades, but it has not gained much popularity until 2015 - the year “NPR came to call ‘The Year of the Period’” (Weiss-Wolf, p.xviii). Since then, the conversation around menstruation has picked up immensely. Visible, for example, in the rise of start-up organizations (often youth-led) tackling period poverty, such as PERIOD by Nadia Okamoto, Code Red Collective, and many more¹⁴. Overcoming period poverty is one of the political aims of menstrual activism, which also includes fighting the so-called ‘tampon tax’¹⁵ or advocating for menstrual-friendly policies such as menstrual leave¹⁶. US menstrual advocate Jennifer Weiss-Wolf has coined the term ‘menstrual equity’ to frame the collective struggle focused on what she defines is the need to “have laws and policies that ensure menstrual products are safe and affordable and available for those who need them. [As it] affects a person’s freedom to work and study, to be healthy, and to participate in daily life with dignity. And if access is compromised, whether by poverty or stigma or lack of education and resources, it is in *all* of our interests to ensure those needs are met” (p.xx, emphasis in original).

While there is a strong emphasis on political changes in most menstrual activism, there has also been a more commercial approach. For example, companies involved with producing more eco-friendly menstrual products, such as menstrual cups or period underwear have been on the rise as well. All this has resulted in a broader movement of so-called “period positivity”, coined by UK writer and menstrual expert Chella Quint. In her book *Red Moon Gang* (2021), Tara Costello states that “the heart of period positivity is accepting menstruation as a normal, and even healthy, process” (p.199), thus it is a resistance to the negative connotations surrounding menstruation in mainstream discourse.

Instagram menstrual movement

Through social media platform Instagram, the menstrual movement has gained a lot of valuable traction and representation. Here, menstrual activist (and other feminist) accounts are posting images and captions that represent menstruation in a more positive and subversive way. While menstrual activists all challenge the menstrual taboo in one way or another, there are different strands or perspectives within the menstrual movement. As mentioned before, I have observed a tension between two perspectives that both have mainly found their footing on Instagram: the spiritual menstrual activists and the queer menstrual activists. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to further introducing these perspectives and explaining what they stand for.

14 Not only in the US, but also in the Dutch context. For example: Maandverbond (de Bovengrondse), Neighborhood Feminists, and De Menstruatiemeisjes.

15 The sales tax amount put on menstrual products.

16 A few countries in Asia already have some form of menstrual leave, as well as Zambia. As for now, no European or other so-called ‘Western’ countries have any policies to ensure menstrual leave for menstruators.

spiritual menstrual activism

One of the prominent perspectives in the Instagram menstrual movement is spiritual menstrual activism. In her book *New Blood* (2010) Chris Bobel calls this perspective the “‘feminist-spiritualists’ - menstrual activists who work to reclaim menstruation as a healthy, spiritual, empowering, and even pleasurable experience for women” (p.66). The spiritual menstrual activist perspective stems from the intersection of feminism and spirituality which arose during the second wave of feminism, in the 1970s. In her introduction to the book *Feminist Spirituality* (2009) Chris Klassen retraces how this feminist movement came to be. Built from “a concern with patriarchal religious structures which gave little to no place for women to speak with any degree of authority”, the feminist spiritualists found a source of power and revolution in “Goddess imagery and language” (p.2-3). This is mirrored in the spiritual menstrual activists’ aim to reclaim the power associated with menstruation in earlier (matriarchal) cultures. *Reclaiming* is the focus here: it signals a reaching to the past, to nostalgia, as a way out of the taboo and suppression; a return to the time when menstruation was celebrated and honored and bringing those visions and practices into the present. This also includes a reclaiming of nature, and seeing menstruation and the menstrual cycle as a special ‘feminine’ connection to nature. Linking the menstrual cycle to nature is most prominently visible in the emphasis on the similarities between the lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle, as well as those between the four phases of the menstrual cycle and the four seasons. The Red School¹⁷ first presented and taught the menstrual phases as the seasons: winter (menstrual); spring (follicular); summer (ovulation); autumn (luteal or premenstrual), which has since been adopted into most mainstream menstrual writing and education¹⁸.

By reclaiming the connection of Woman with nature, the spiritual menstrual activists aim to redefine the concept of womanhood as a source of strength instead of inferiority. However, in this perspective “the “woman” category is resignified, but it is still accepted as a rigid, essentialist category since “femaleness” is central to being a woman. Thus, [they] challenge the rigidity of the “woman” category; however after transgressing its rigidity they bind themselves to it, inevitably perpetuating its disciplinary power” (Telford-Keogh, 2009, p.42). The spiritual menstrual activists remain within - and thereby reinforce - the sex/gender binary paradigm, reaffirming the idea that gender is situated in the sexed (biological) body. This concept of “essentializing of the “women within” (..) is instrumental in the exclusion of others in this tradition” (Telford-Keogh, 2009, p.47), as it leaves male-identifying people who have a womb and female-identifying people who do not have a womb out of the conversation.

For my research, I have made a selection of twelve accounts who focus on the connection between the menstrual cycle and spirituality. The accounts I have selected for my analysis are @heroinejournal¹⁹, @jasminealiciacarter, @cycleseeds, @modern goddesslifestyle, @gintong.bathala, @flowwithyourflow,

17 The Red School is a UK-based menstrual educational platform founded by Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer. They are also the authors of a popular book on the menstrual cycle, *Wild Power: Discover the Magic of Your Menstrual Cycle and Awaken the Feminine Path to Power* (2017).

18 See, for example, Maisie Hill’s 2019 bestseller *Period Power*. Maisie Hill is also a student of the Red School.

19 In the process of the research this account got deleted from Instagram. Their backup account @888heroinejournal888 was still accessible, however as this research is going to print this page has also been deleted. There is a campaign going (#bringbackheroinejournal) in an attempt to fight this censorship.

@thecyclicsorceress, @cyclical.woman, @threadedred, @thewombmystic, @meghan.norean, and @sacred.cycle [figure 1].

queer menstrual activism

The second perspective of the Instagram menstrual movement are the queer menstrual activists. They focus more on the practice of *reimagining*: embracing change that is happening in the present, and creating new ways of being in the future. A predominant aspect of queer menstrual activism is the rejection of the notion of ‘woman/women’ in relation to menstruation and the menstrual cycle. Therefore, the term ‘menstruator’ is often used instead of ‘woman’ to refer to someone who menstruates. This specific term as “an acknowledgement of the sexed dimension of menstruation - a bodily process that exists not independently of, but in relationship to, the gendered body - is a progressive development” (Bobel, 2010, p.156). The use of gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language directly challenges the gendering of menstruation by acknowledging menstrual experiences outside of cis-womanhood and the gender binary, such as trans men, nonbinary or gender nonconforming people and intersex people who may experience menstruation.

Due to their core tenet of diversity, the queer menstrual activists can be situated in third-wave feminism as “third-wave feminists are invested in inclusion, multiplicity, and contradiction, not essentialism” (Bobel, 2010, p.103). Thereby, it can be argued that spiritual menstrual activism is somewhat ‘stuck’ in second-wave feminism, as they tend to focus on essentialism and biological determinism (sex defining gender). TERFs (trans-exclusionary feminists) often argue against this queer-inclusive or queer-centered perspective by claiming that it equals a rejection to women altogether. However, instead of aiming to exclude anyone from the conversation, queer menstrual activists strive for an acknowledgement of difference instead of sameness; understanding that not all bodies are the same, as “trans and non-binary menstruation interrupts presumed norms of bodies and interactions” (Frank, 2020, p.371).

Moreover, queer menstrual activism is very political and tends to work within an intersectional framework; acknowledging the multiplicity of identity and oppression. They recognize that “‘Woman’ typically has been mobilized in ways that advance the specific class, racial, national, religious, and ideological agendas of some feminists at the expense of other women; [therefore] the fight over transgender inclusion within feminism is not significantly different, in many respects, from other fights involving working-class women, women of color, lesbian women, disabled women” (Stryker, 2006, p.7). By acknowledging the intersectional nature of the menstrual experience, queer menstrual activists fight for inclusion beyond just gender.

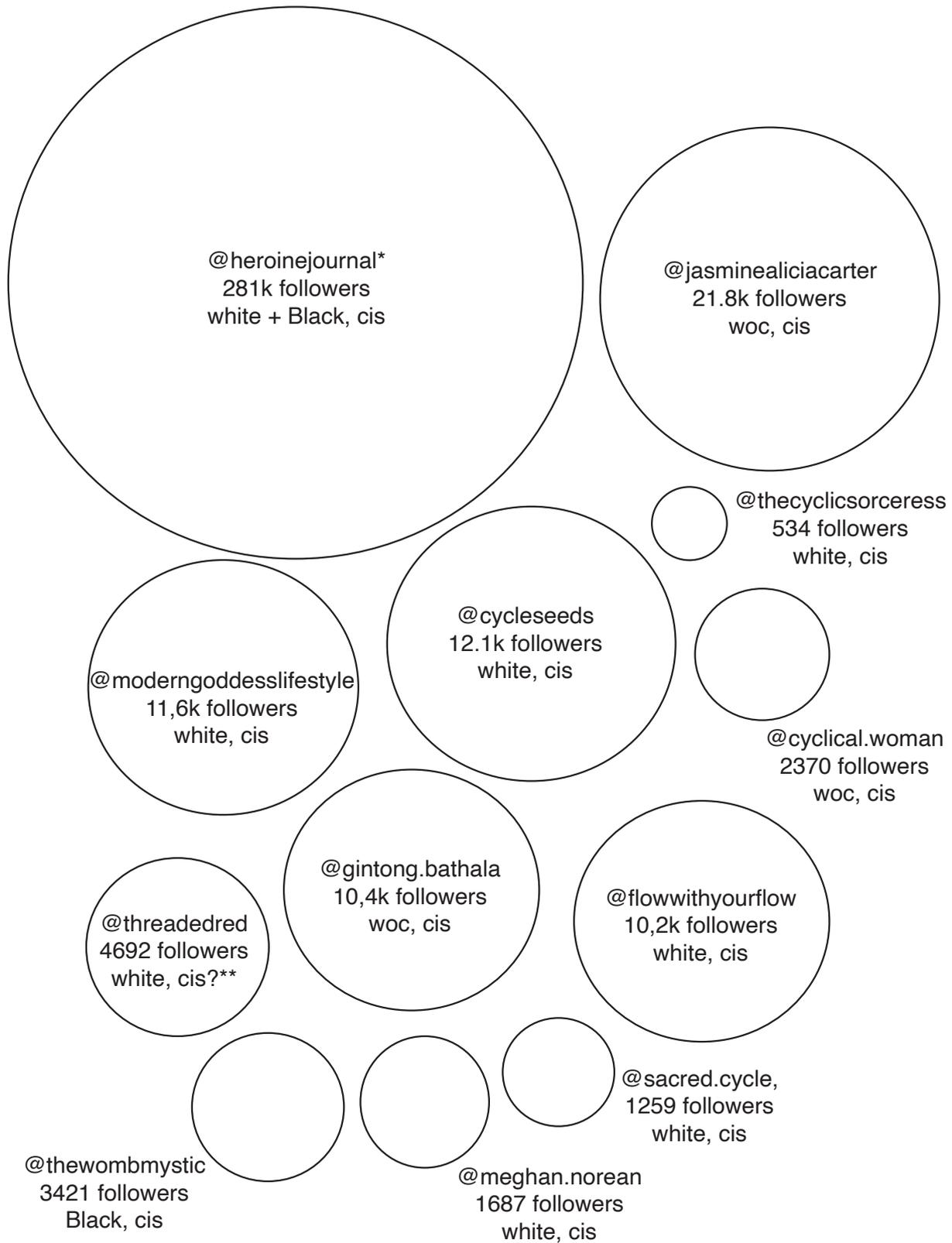
As queer menstrual activism is much more marginalized than the spiritual menstrual activist perspective, my selection for this perspective is significantly smaller: it only includes eight accounts, with some being on hiatus or no longer (as) active. The accounts I have selected for my analysis are @theperiodprince, @theelephantinthewomb, @redmoongang, @nonbinary_baps, @menstrualfolx, @queerbodyliteracy, @queermenopause, and @periodsfordudes [figure 2].

whiteness of the movement

Following an intersectional approach, it is important to acknowledge the social and political position of the people within the (Instagram) menstrual movement. In her research, Bobel emphasizes the “overwhelming whiteness of the movement” (2010, p.80), stating that “of the feminist-spiritualists menstrual activists I interviewed, 92 percent were white and 78 percent self-identified as middle or upper middle class” (2010, p.72). I see this mirrored in the people within the Instagram menstrual movement: both the spiritual and the queer perspective. Out of the 20 accounts I analyzed, 14 of them are white; 3 are Black; 2 are people of color, and other accounts do not have a visible person behind them. Thus, it cannot be denied that the majority of menstrual activists is white, and that I am part of this: another white person taking up space in the menstrual movement.

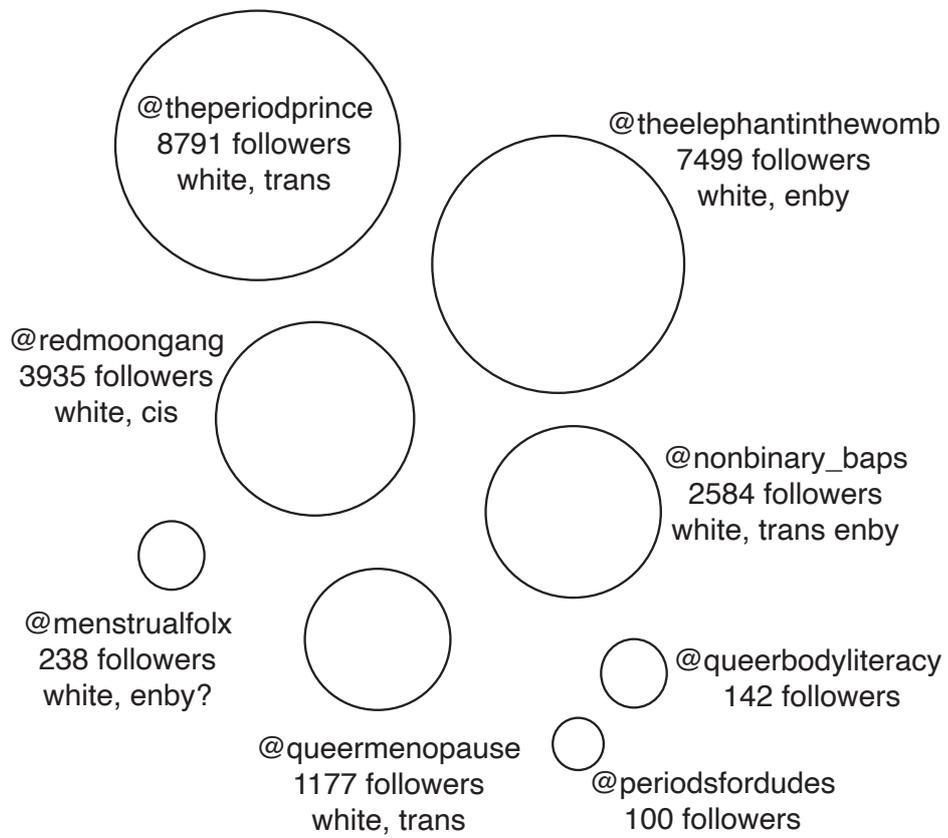
The whiteness of the menstrual movement emphasizes the racialized notion of ‘Woman’ itself. The same goes for the concept of femininity; both are white-centered. Where white women are presented as soft and nurturing, Black women have been presented as angry or loud, and thus do not fit into the white-washed picture of the ideal feminine. While both the spiritual and the queer side of the Instagram menstrual movement aim to challenge and resignify these notions of womanhood and femininity, their racialized aspect is often neglected. Black feminists and feminists of color have argued the whiteness of ‘Woman’ for decades, prevalent in every feminist wave. During the first wave, Sojourner Truth’s famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” questioned the dismissal of Black women within the women’s rights movement. The same question was used by bell hooks as the title of her book about the position of Black women in mainstream feminism during the second wave. Furthermore, fellow second waver Alice Walker coined “womanism”: a response to feminism’s focus on white women’s struggles which reclaimed womanhood for Black women. In the third wave, we have many Black feminists once again building the foundation of feminist practice. For example, Kimberle Crenshaw’s notion of “intersectionality” describes the specific multilayered oppression Black women experience, which has since been appropriated into a theoretical and methodological framework which takes into account coinciding identities and embodiments. Many feminist developments, including the fight for reproductive justice and bodily autonomy, are owed to Black feminism. I myself am highly indebted to Black feminism as it has predominantly shaped my feminist practice, and continues to do so. To quote Audre Lorde: “to imply that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy” (1979, p.12). The same goes in this conversation around menstruation and those who experience it: to imply that all menstruators suffer the same oppression simply because they menstruate is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy: it fails to acknowledge transphobia, white supremacy, queerphobia, etc. Therefore, I want to emphasize that the practice of queering the cycle goes beyond the conversation around sex/gender, as gender is already a multilayered concept in itself. However, due to a limited word count this research will (for now) focus mostly on queering in relation to the sex/gender binary.

figure 1



*has since been reported and deleted by Instagram. See also their backup account: @888heroinejournal888

figure 2



** the ? means I am not 100 percent certain about their gender identity.

chapter ii: in conversation

The following chapter puts the spiritual and the queer perspective of the Instagram menstrual movement in conversation with each other. As “the body or the embodiment of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the material social conditions” (Braidotti, 2003, p.44; Grosz, 1987), I am using these three angles to guide the conversation. To further illustrate the analysis, I perform a close reading on two Instagram posts per angle; one for each perspective. I close off the chapter with an examination of the impact and influence of the perspectives.

the physical

the physical; the matter at hand. the blood, the menses, but also the cramps, the breakouts, the womb, the ovaries, the hormones. the menstrual body in all its layers.

Since menstrual matter has long been hidden from the public view (for example menstrual pad advertisements using blue liquid), the visualization of menstrual blood is fundamental within menstrual activism. Especially within spiritual menstrual activism there is a strong visual emphasis on contact with the matter - menses - itself. Popular imagery and rituals among the spiritualists centers on the practice of ‘free bleeding’²⁰, or using menstrual cups to collect menses - as opposed to tampons or pads. This direct approach to menstrual matter creates “a kind of body-consciousness interaction that is rare in today’s disposable, menstruation-averse culture” (Bobel, 2010, p.82). Many spiritual menstrual activists take this way of connecting with their matter even further and use their menses in ritualized practices. Blood masks, painting or writing with blood²¹, using it as plant fertilizer and offering it back to the earth; all visuals that are revisited regularly within spiritual menstrual activism [figure 3]. All these practices radically challenge the thick wall of shame surrounding menstruation by taking it out of the abject, out of hiding, and into the visual sphere. In that sense, it is a direct response to Germaine Greer’s words in *The Female Eunuch* (1970): “if you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your own menstrual blood - if it makes you sick, you’ve got a long way to go, baby” (p.51). Therefore, by interacting with their own menses, the spiritual menstrual activists emphasize their menstrual emancipation from the patriarchal chokehold.

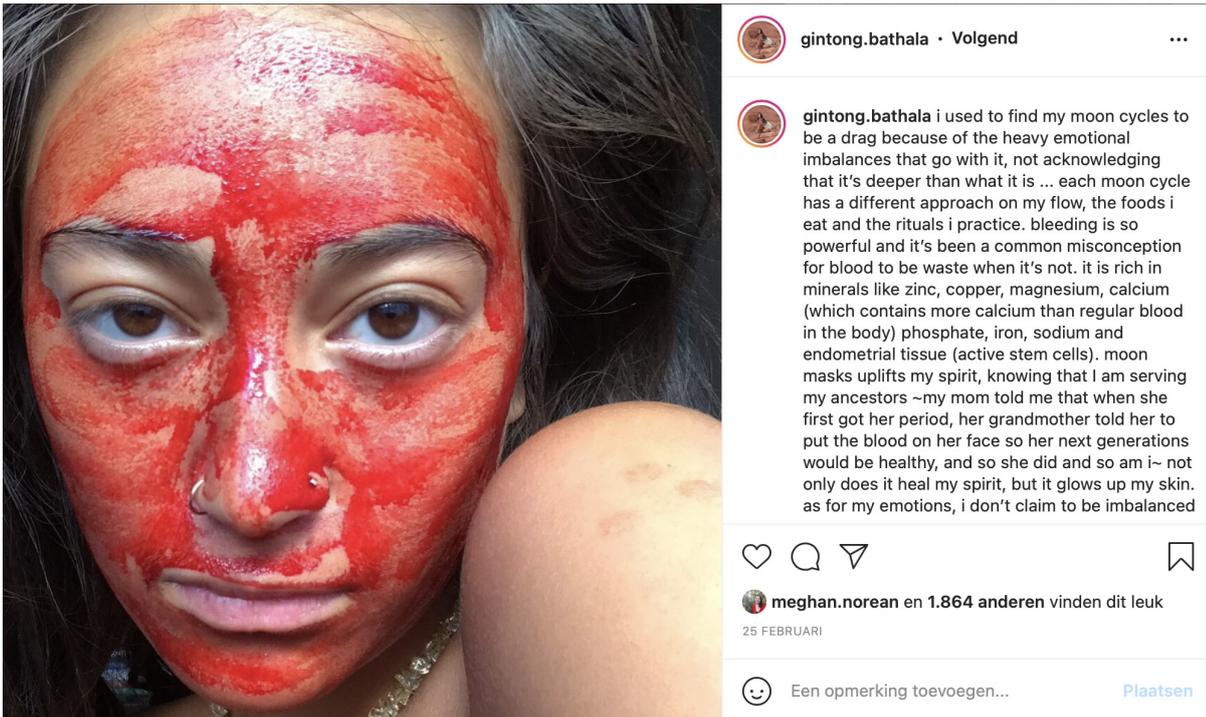
The queer menstrual activists tend to take a less direct approach to the physical matters, although that does not mean they do not also engage with it. For example, @theperiodprince was one of the first trans menstrual activists to publish a photograph of his male-presenting body showing a period stain [figure 4], thereby subverting the stereotypical imagery showing feminine bodies menstruating. More prevalent in queer menstrual activism, however, is their focus on the physical beyond the

20 Free bleeding is the practice of not using any menstrual products to ‘manage’ the menstrual flow. The practice of free bleeding became more known after Kiran Gandhi, also known as Madame Gandhi, went viral after running the New York marathon in 2016 while free bleeding.

21 For example, see @menstrualartmovement.

visible; the blood. They often reflect on menstrual matter in relation to the hormonal system. Their (visual) discourse holds space for representation of menstrual/hormonal disorders such as PCOS or endometriosis, but also how hormonal replacement therapy affects the menstrual cycle. Trans menstrual activist @kennyethanjones, for example, often writes about how he does not experience bleeding anymore, but does still experience cramps or changes in his moods depending on where he is in his cycle. By expanding the conversation, queer menstrual activism is creating a body of knowledge that goes beyond the (stereo)typical: a queer body literacy - mirrored in the account name of @queerbodyliteracy.

figure 3



@gintong.bathala

painting faces with menstrual blood. a fuck you to all the checked stains that were not even there. a fuck you to being told our blood is a stain on society; something to be hidden. something to keep to ourselves. we give you back your marks and grant us our own. we are marking ourselves. unashamed. unapologetic. using blood to anoint ourselves. using blood as ritual. you may see a monster; fear what you want. the stare holds power. the blood holds power. it screams “i dare you”.

figure 4



@theperiodprince / @tonithetampon

manspreading. exposing a menstrual stain. in public. would already be considered courageous in any situation. but this is not a woman. it is a man who bleeds. not only challenging the societal shame on menstrual stains, but the societal strain on who even gets to have this - who is supposed to have this.

the social

the social; interaction with the surroundings, the environment. the bigger picture. the external influences, the public sphere. politics and policies.

As I mentioned before, queer menstrual activism is the most politically inclined perspective of the two. Not only do they aim to transform the way non-cis menstruators (are made to) feel about their menstrual bodies, they also focus on implementing societal change. Their more activist nature is visible in their posts, which entails more graphic design and textual statements, such as “people menstruate”, “periods transcend binaries”, or “some men menstruate too” [figure 5]. The repetition of these words - which also come back in the hashtags - turns them into slogans. Moreover, their visuals are reminiscent of protest signs; words holding power, words igniting change. The focus on the written word also manifests through the making of zines (@nonbinary_baps) or even books (@redmoongang). By making and selling these products, the queer menstrual activists bring their perspectives into the world beyond Instagram - not only to those who might be unaware of queer menstrual experiences but also within their own network/bubble, thereby creating an expansive body of knowledge. Furthermore, the social and political inclination of the queer menstrual activists also means they have a strong intersectional approach: not only do they address queer and trans*²² menstrual experiences, they also speak on other marginalized positions such as disability, race, class, or age (@queermenopause). They are seemingly aware of their own social positionings, and tend to speak up for social injustices outside of their own experiences.

In contrast to the queer menstrual activists, the spiritual menstrual activists tend to turn away from the social and the political. In her book *New Blood*, Bobel also points out how the spiritual menstrual activist perspective is mostly about self-transformation instead of social transformation. As Bobel writes: “among the feminist-spiritualists, the very way one thinks about menstruation and responds to one’s menstrual cycle is where the change happens” (Bobel, p.72). Therefore, they put more focus on the individual and their own process of ‘healing’; from patriarchy, from hormonal imbalances, and such. However, this focus on the self can create an ableist paradigm, leaving space to blame those with menstrual or hormonal disorders that might not be curable, or a lack of recognition for menstruators who might experience body dysphoria in relation to their menstrual cycle. It implies a claim to personal judgment: a “if you suffer, *you* are not doing it right” attitude, instead of acknowledging the wider social and political implications. Moreover, within spiritual menstrual activism there is a strong emphasis on the need for isolation, or moving away from society, especially during the menstrual phase. As one description of @gingtong.bathala states: “*a woman should be isolating herself because this is the time when she is at the height of her powers. It is a time for rest and relaxation... a time to dive deeper into the depths of her womb*”. The practice of

22 By trans* I mean all experiences that can be put under the trans umbrella; all those outside of the sex and gender binary.

isolating often happens in so-called Red Tents²³. The call for isolation emphasizes their return to nature and escape from culture/society [*figure 6*]. Bobel also talks about the privilege, and I would add ableism, in some of these practices and messages. For example, the call to rest and retreat whenever the body needs to is not maintainable for many menstruators who cannot afford to take time off from work, raising children, and so on.

23 Red Tents are spaces where women/menstruators can come together for a time of inward reflection while they bleed. As Bobel also points out; this is a tradition mostly comparable to Native American (moon lodges) and other indigenous cultures (p.74). These Red Tent practices are not limited to cis-women per se: for example @threadedred (Red Tent facilitator and menstrual teacher who is queer-inclusive), and @bleeding.thunder hosts a queer-centered practice: their “groundswell circle”.

figure 5



@nonbinary_baps

the faceless body says looks do not matter. how one presents does not matter, only the visible tampon string may tell you they menstruate. which still does not determine their gender. what matters is creating space for both menstruators who do not identify as women, and women who do not menstruate. people menstruate, and some of those are women.

figure 6



@flowwithyourflow

emerged into nature. standing with the trees. becoming one with the green. becoming a tree. blending in. no grey, no cities, no concrete, no people. escape from it all. nothing but solace and serenity. centering oneself. centering the self.

the symbolic

the symbolic; the language, the imagery. sign and signifier. how meaning is ascribed.

The spiritual menstrual activists center and embody the goddess archetype in their practice; presenting the menstrual cycle as an embodiment of the “Divine Feminine” [figure 7]. The goddess archetype is a powerful anti-patriarchal archetype as it holds the power of reproduction: she is the creator of life, symbol of fertility (and in extension motherhood). The spiritual menstrual activists mainly focus their perspective of the menstrual cycle as part of the reproductive system, with at the center of it the womb. Spiritual menstrual activists see the womb as *the* source of “feminine” power or divinity, mirroring the sentiment of the 1970s feminist-spiritualists. As Gallant writes: “For Starhawk the Goddess tradition opened up new possibilities. It confirmed for her that her body, “in all its femaleness, its breasts, vulva, womb, and menstrual flow, was sacred.”” (2009, p.18, quoting Starhawk). The suggested sacredness of these body parts and bodily processes is very prominent in the language many spiritual menstrual Instagram accounts use: menstrual blood is often referred to as “my sacred bleed”; or “moon blood”. It also comes back in account names, such as @sacred.cycle, @moderngoddesslifestyle, or @thewombmystic. Furthermore, they refer to themselves as “Sacred Feminine Mentor” who will “guide you back home” (@jasminealiciacarter) or “Womb Priestess” (@moderngoddesslifestyle), “Womb Cycle Guide” (@flowwithyourflow), and so on. Thus the spiritual menstrual activists locate women’s power within the (assigned-)female body, particularly held in the womb and the reproductive system. It is a return to, a reclaiming, of the patriarchal connection of Woman to nature.

It is important to address the cultural appropriation which happens within (feminist) spiritual practices²⁴, and so also within spiritual menstrual activism. Spiritual practices from Eastern cultures and/or African traditions are often appropriated by white spiritualists without addressing and acknowledging its history. Especially the powers associated with menstruation originated mostly in non-Western cultures²⁵ which have often been violently erased and marginalized by colonialism. Therefore it is imperative to acknowledge the histories and recognize the implications of claiming these practices as our own within the menstrual movement.

While the spiritual menstrual activists embody the goddess, I would argue the queer menstrual activists are an embodiment of the cyborg. The cyborg is a feminist archetype first developed by Donna Haraway in her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Haraway states “the cyborg [as] a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (p.292), challenging us to think differently about

24 The whiteness of the spiritual movement is very well addressed in Audre Lorde’s *An Open Letter to Mary Daly* (1979) in response to Daly’s book *Gyn/Ecology*. In her book, Daly speaks against the patriarchal power of the Church, of religion, of Christianity, and celebrates feminine spiritual power. Lorde’s critique of Daly centers on the exclusion and dismissal of African (and other non-white) heritages and Goddesses. Lorde rightfully addresses the “long and discouraging” history of white women failing to acknowledge Black women’s perspectives (p.10).

25 For example, Dianne E. Jenett describes in her essay *Menstruating Women/Menstruating Goddesses: Sites of Sacred Power in South India* how poetry written two millennia ago in southern India celebrated “*ananku*”: “a sacred power associated with [women’s] sexuality that was considered particularly potent during menarche and menstruation” (p.176), and led to the belief that “women and their bodies were also understood to have generative, healing, and protective powers” (p.177).

bodies; challenging what we see and ‘know’ as nature. For example, with all the medical inventions, the external influences written on our bodies, are bodies still as natural as we claim them to be? This is similar to the queer menstrual activists who ask us to think beyond the assigned meaning to menstruation based on sexed and gendered matter, by presenting their own non-binary, queer menstruating bodies [figure 8]. Furthermore, Haraway stresses the importance of text and language within the cyborg archetype. This mirrors the prominent use of language within the queer menstrual activist practice as I mentioned before.

figure 7



 **moderngoddesslifestyle** · Volgen
Princeville, Hawaii

 **moderngoddesslifestyle** The masculine and feminine archetypes are in your menstrual cycle.

Before you bleed, in your late luteal phase, the veil is thin. You are entering the "in between" as the inner world is about to release (uterine lining) into the outer world, and **emotions rise to be felt and transmuted.**

In order for the inner feminine to release and go through this natural womb clearing, **it needs to feel safe.**

If you don't feel safe to take up space, the wild feminine is repressed and can internalize into physical symptoms like PMS, irritability, headaches, blemishes, food cravings, and cramps.

The masculine essence provides structure and space of safety for the wild feminine to express.

 **lunaboxmagic** en 538 anderen vinden dit leuk

16 NOVEMBER 2020

 Een opmerking toevoegen... [Plaatsen](#)

@moderngoddesslifestyle

coming together in sisterhood, or is it cis-terhood? wearing white robes; symbolizing purity, virginity - divinity. gathering in prayer: eyes closed, vision inwards. hands drawn to, connected to, the womb space. channeling inner strength. channeling the goddess within.

figure 8



@kennyethanjones

at first glance, we might ask “why?” why is a man posing next to pads? why is a man advocating about periods? on closer look we see the scars: the visible ones on his chest. the invisible ones are written on the pads. why? all the questioning around simply experiencing a bodily matter. it brings up other questions, more questions: why do we see periods only linked to women? why do we gender blood? why do we gender bodily processes and bodily matters?

impact and influence

As the Instagram menstrual movement does not exist in a vacuum, both perspectives relate to a broader scale of menstrual activism and social influence. In order to take their perspectives forward, it is important to further examine their impact and their influence.

As I have pointed out earlier, the spiritual menstrual activist perspective is the most prevalent on Instagram. This is an interesting development within the wider context of menstrual activism, especially compared to Chris Bobel's observations on the matter in 2010. Back then, Bobel noted that "feminist spiritualism persists *merely on the margins*", which she ascribed to "a false ideal of unity - the assumption that common bleeding connects all women - combined with an essentialism that fails to challenge the social construction of womanhood" (p.73, emphasis mine). However, it seems that over the course of the past eleven to twelve years this perspective has moved out of the margins and into the center, especially going by the amount of these accounts as well as their follower counts in comparison to the queer-centered ones, as is visible in my mapping of the movement. Building on Judith Butler's work on identifying the processes "required to maintain heterosexual hegemony", Robert McRuer argues in *Crip Theory* (2006) how repetitive performances of certain identities create a kind of normalcy, in his case compulsory able-bodiedness (p.9). Thus, the more people express a certain way of being or doing, the more its influence increases, thereby establishing a norm. This process of repetition is emphasized within the context of Instagram, as its algorithm favors certain images and thereby controls what we get to see more of, and what less. The repetitive practice is very prominent within the spiritual menstrual activist perspective; many of the accounts look quite similar as they (re-)create the same imagery. Within queer menstrual activism the repetition lies more in the language, the slogans - which does has its own effects as there has been a subtle but visible shift within spiritual and other non-queer centered accounts as they have started to actively use more inclusive language.

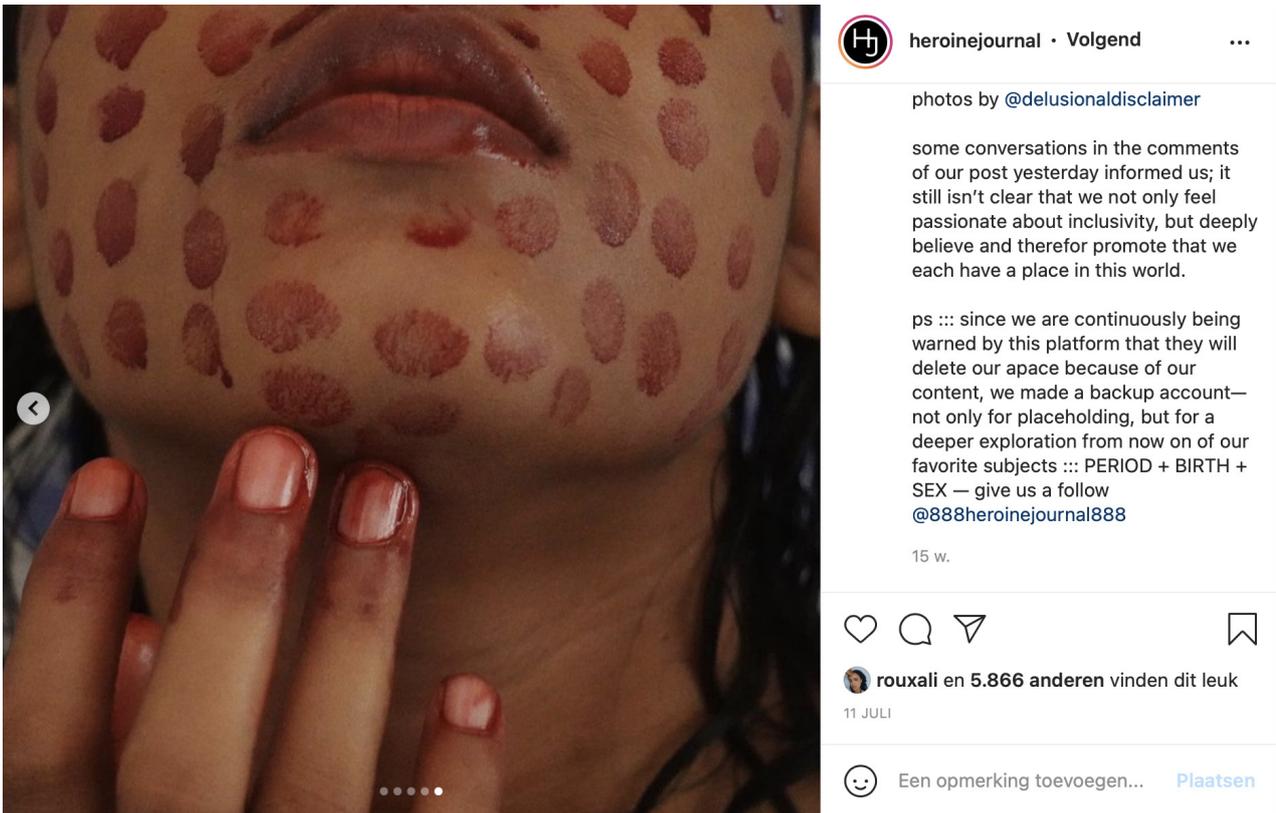
However, there is a difference between being queer-inclusive and being queer-centered. Some activists claim to be inclusive, but it does not really show in their content. It poses the question: are you really queer-inclusive if the imagery continues to focus solely on stereotypical 'feminine' aspects, or by using 'menstruators' every now and then? [figure 9]. While the shift is needed, I am left to wonder how much of these small, shallow changes are only performative - and if that is not equally as harmful? The practice of inclusion does not always bring forth change as the main message still perpetuates the dominant hierarchical structures. Moreover, the practice of shadowbanning queer accounts keeps their more radical stances quite literally in the margin. Thus, when the more popular spiritual accounts only integrate what suits them, the message gets lost and takes away space from those who actually experience it.

The shift of the spiritual moving into the center is especially interesting as the conversation around sexual and gender diversity has been growing and essentialist practices and views are criticized more and more. Even with the essentialist aftertaste, it is clear there is something in the spiritual perspective that people respond to; something valuable. The growing acclaim of spiritual menstrual activism goes hand in hand with the rise in popularity of witchcraft and the image of the Witch in popular culture as well as feminist practices over the recent years. Within oppressive (patriarchal)

societies and times, witchcraft gives people a way to take their power back, to reclaim their agency²⁶. For spiritually inclined menstruators, this is an important aspect of (re-)connecting with their menstrual cycle and other bodily processes deemed inferior by patriarchal ideology. Personally I stand by this notion of returning to the body as we have continuously been alienated from it. I agree it is a powerful source for claiming our strengths. However, it is important that these practices are inclusive to non-cis menstruators as well and thus do not perpetuate oppressive systems. Therefore, I would argue it is more valuable to be queer-centered. Centering queer voices and experiences is to utilize bell hooks' notion of centering those who are in the margins in order to create change for everyone. As hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), creating knowledge from the margin is to have an awareness of "the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center". It is only from living within the margins which provides a different worldview that allows for a "wholeness and a broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences" (preface). Thus, in order to form an expansive view of the menstrual cycle it is important to center queer and marginalized experiences and to realise this does not take away from (cis)women's struggle - it only strengthens it. As hooks emphasizes, it is not about switching their positions of power, but rather materializing a holistic perspective where both (or all) sides come together. Thus, what would it entail to propose a menstrual activist body of both margin and center; *of both queer and spiritual?*

26 Silvia Federici's seminal book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (1998) is an excellent example which speaks on the relation of the Witch and patriarchal ideology, capitalism, colonialism and such.

figure 9



@heroinejournal (photo by @delusionaldisclaimer).

focus on the description here: “it still isn't clear that we not only feel passionate about inclusivity, but deeply believe and therefore promote that we each have a place in this world”. you can claim to be inclusive but if it is not clear, how inclusive are you really? how are you actively showing what you claim to stand for?

chapter iii: moving forwards / queering the cycle

Now that I have analysed the spiritual and the queer menstrual perspectives, we can further explore how these two perspectives might be combined or expanded upon in order to rethink the menstrual cycle within a bigger framework, outside of Instagram. I am not here to argue for one side, or to perpetuate a sense of hierarchy. Instead, I am looking to see what would happen if their strengths and differences are embraced. What could become if they come together?

both/and: spiritual/queer: cybergoddex

Central to the practice of queering the cycle is holding space for difference, for complexity. Therefore it is important to work within a both/and framework instead of the binary either/or paradigm. The both/and framework is valuable as it allows space for difference to co-exist. Not only as two separate perspectives with each their own value, but for both perspectives to exist within one body.

That menstrual activism can be both spiritual and queer is shown by a few accounts within the Instagram menstrual movement. Most prominent are @bleeding.thunder, a “community project that uplifts trans, genderqueer, non-binary, & intersex experiences of menstruation”, and @know.your.cycle, who practices “queer centred cycle magick”. Their spiritual and queer perspective on menstruation and the cycle explores the understanding that spirituality is not inherently essentialist, and works to rewrite the menstrual experience as queer. Emphasizing the queerness already existing within spirituality, these hybrid menstrual activists demonstrate that “when a myriad of bodies and identities may be enacted when addressing the divine, rather than constructing the divine into one restrictive category, women as well as queer-identified people may still find divine representation” (Telford-Keogh, 2009, p.46-47). Furthermore, they apply the transformative power assigned to the menstrual cycle by the spiritual menstrual activists to create collective transformation as they de-center the ‘self’ and focus on how a collective effort can bring about greater societal change [figure 10].

Within this process, the goddess and the cyborg archetypes are brought together. In her essay *Between Monsters, Cyborgs, and Goddesses* (1996), Nina Lykke proposes such a hybrid archetype, which she refers to as “the cybergoddess”. To emphasize its queerness, however, I will call it the cybergoddex²⁷. She argues that the divide between the cyborg and the goddess should be merged, writing that:

“These differences between cyborgs and goddesses may collapse into a split along the lines of the modern divide between ‘the artefactual’ and ‘the natural’. But to me this collapse looks like a misplaced act of purification that represses *their kinship as feminist monsters*, who/which in important ways contribute to the deconstruction of the great divide between human and non-human. In my opinion, feminist science studies should reject neither the goddess metaphor nor the cyborg metaphor. Why not instead talk much more about *their monstrous sisterhood*? Why not explore the potentials of cybergoddesses?” (p.28, emphasis mine).

27 Substituting the -x for the -ss is generally used to make a term more gender neutral. This is not my intervention, but a way of how the internet and social media has evolved language.

Lykke's proposal asks to rethink the division between the two archetypes, and claims the transformative implication of them both. Therefore, combining them can be a powerful move to bring forward new ways of thinking and relating - in the context of this research - to the menstrual cycle, the menstrual body. Similarly, a merging of the spiritual and the queer menstrual perspectives, combining their individual strengths, has the potential to bring menstrual activism further, to break out of the margins and thereby reach a wider audience. What is at stake in this process is something I call 'to re-define and re-divine'. The queer menstrual perspective holds a re-definition of the menstrual body; one no longer defined in terms of femininity or womanhood but rather the matter at hand. The spiritual menstrual perspective holds the potential for a re-divination; expanding the concept of sacredness in relation to the menstrual body. The call to co-create and re-imagine our own identities and embodiments which is embedded in the cybergoddess and the merging of the spiritual and the queer, "represents (if ironically) a kind of affirmation - not of solid, inherent 'identity', a 'self' in opposition to 'nature', but of *a networking life that is polymorphous, changing and so potentially more liberated*" (Martin, 1996, p.107, emphasis mine). Thus, a collaborative, holistic spiritual and queer approach to the menstrual cycle and menstrual activism in general, involves taking the inner work of the spiritual (reconnecting to one's body and inner divinity) as a catalyst for the outer work of the queer (community building, creating social change). Thereby constructing a menstrual activist body that connects the personal, the individual, to the collective and emphasizes that not only the personal is political²⁸, but the spiritual is political²⁹. It is about honoring their similarities and embracing their differences as points of entry to gather and connect and therefore affect new ways of thinking.

menstrual monsters: embracing difference

Building upon Lykke's "monstrous sisterhood" between the cyborg and the goddess, I want to expand upon the notion of the 'monstrous' in relation to the menstrual body and other marginalized bodies such as trans bodies and disabled bodies. I briefly touched upon this in the 'theory and method' chapter, which I want to further develop here, as the monster archetype is another valuable figuration to help write the menstrual cycle differently.

Josefin Persdotter's notion of menstrunormativity explores the so-called "boundless menstrual monster". To Persdotter, "menstrunormativity circles something like *sets of menstrual standards and conventions that seek to order and stratify menstrual life*; creating hierarchies of existence; menstrual insiders and outsiders, menstrual "normals" and "abnormals," regulating what menstrual worlds come into being, what menstrualities become possible or impossible; which menstrualities become uncomplicated, effortless and easy and which become difficult, burdensome, and painful" (p.360-361, emphasis in original). Thus, menstrunormativity is all the meanings ascribed to menstruation and the

28 "The personal is political" is a popular slogan which originated in the 1960s and has been widely used by feminists since the second wave.

29 A play on the aforementioned slogan, in line with many feminist witches and spiritualists who recognize that spirituality needs to be politically aware. This is not my intervention, but I do stand behind it.

cycle by all of us: “we all create menstrunormativity, all the time” (p.365-366). Therefore it is not something fixed; rather it is explicitly fluid and multiple. Furthermore, menstrunormativity builds on concepts such as heteronormativity; concepts which determine a specific embodiment labeled as “the norm”. However, in Persdotter’s concept of the menstrual norm - “the menstrunormate” - the norm does not exist: it is a “mirage” (p.362). I find this particular notion extremely valuable as it leaves so much space to detach the coupling of womanhood with the menstrual cycle. As she writes:

“The transwoman (Berg 2017) and women with ambiguous female genitals (Guntram 2014) become menstrual monsters herein. Relatedly, the menstrual monster identifies incorrectly, or rather, though it menstruates, it identifies as other than ciswoman (for example, transmen, non-binary). Recent scholarship highlights how transgendered menstruators become monstrous as their bleeding bodies conflict with their non-woman identities (Chrisler et al. 2016). The menstrunormate is cisgendered, but the cisgendered (woman) menstruator is also monstrous as that subject-position is positioned as wrongfully privileged in many feminist spaces. Therein, you are monstrous if you menstruate and do not identify as woman, *and* if you menstruate and identify as woman” (p.364-365).

Thus, if there is no norm to go off, there is unlimited potential for queering the cycle and challenging the normalcy around the widely accepted gendered aspect of the menstrual body and experience. Moreover, the paradoxical nature of the menstrunormate emphasizes the performative aspect of gender in general, which has been broadly developed by Judith Butler. That is “to say that it does not need a material referent to be meaningful, is directed at others in an attempt to communicate, is not subject to falsification or verification, and is accomplished by “doing” something rather than “being” something” (Stryker, 2006, p.10). In relation to the menstrual experience, womanhood is performed through its signification with the feminine. However, by detaching this assigned meaning it creates space for fluidity; for perspectives outside of the sex and gender binaries.

This not only includes trans* perspectives, but also holds potential for the inclusion of other queer, marginalized perspectives such as disabled menstruators. In her essay *What About Disabled People?* (2021), Shona Louise writes about the exclusion of disabled people in (most) activist spaces, including the menstrual movement. She speaks on inaccessibility to healthcare, feeling judged for not making the switch to reusable products (“cost, mobility difficulties, chronic illnesses are just a few reasons why some of these simple changes aren’t always possible”), and general assumptions that disabled people do not “experience normal bodily functions like periods or engage in sexual activity”. Moreover, applying Kafer’s hybrid political/relational model of disability to the multitude of the menstrual experience, or menstrunormativity, emphasizes that the negative associations around menstruation do “not reside in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being” (Kafer, 2013, p.6). By understanding how external systems perpetuate one stereotypical view on the menstrual cycle and the menstrual body, it offers the possibility to challenge that. Thus, in line with Persdotter’s menstrunormativity, the inclusion of disabled perspectives and experiences within the process of

queering the cycle is necessary as it further emphasizes the need “to pluralize the ways we understand bodily instability” (Kafer, 2013, p.7), and asks us to critically reflect on how broader social systems and implications affect the multitude of the menstrual experience in many ways. Not only is there a need to be inclusive to trans* and disabled experiences, people that menstruate also include fat bodies, black bodies, brown bodies, muslim bodies, old bodies, neurodivergent bodies. All of those bodies that do not conform to the bodily norm set by white patriarchal capitalism; all of those bodies that continue to be marginalized or overlooked in menstrual activism. Thus, how can we bring all of these different bodies together without losing sight of their unique needs and values?

queering the cycle: menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration

I propose the menstrual cycle in itself as a queer feminist figuration, building on the “cybergoddess” and the “boundless menstrual monster”. Both these archetypes emphasize “this space of questionability in which a body cannot be placed into the binary, when the body becomes “object”, [which] reveals the rigidity and the falsity of restrictive gender identity” (Telford-Keogh, 2009, p.54), and are therefore valuable concepts to build upon in the process of queering the cycle. However, instead of looking to an external archetype, I propose the menstrual cycle in itself to be a figuration that holds potential for change. Building on Braidotti’s definition of feminist figurations, Lykke writes that “a feminist figuration is “a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity” (Braidotti 1994, p.1), that is, an alternative subjectivity articulated in a figurative form that points to ways out of hegemonic, gender-conservative discourses about gender/sex in its intersections with other sociocultural categories” (Lykke, 2010, p.37-38). Moreover, rewriting the menstrual cycle as a feminist figuration emphasizes its alignment with Braidotti’s notion of nomadic subjects. While Braidotti does not explicitly mention the spiritual, the queer, or the menstrual in relation to her nomadic subjects, I do read it as such. Its focus on ‘becoming’ mirrors spiritual discourse and signals growth and expansion, which in affect calls for transformation; mirroring queer discourse. Thereby are nomadic subjects about allowing fluidity, rather than restrictive fixed categories, to be the guiding force of transformation - which is also to be said for the process of queering the cycle.

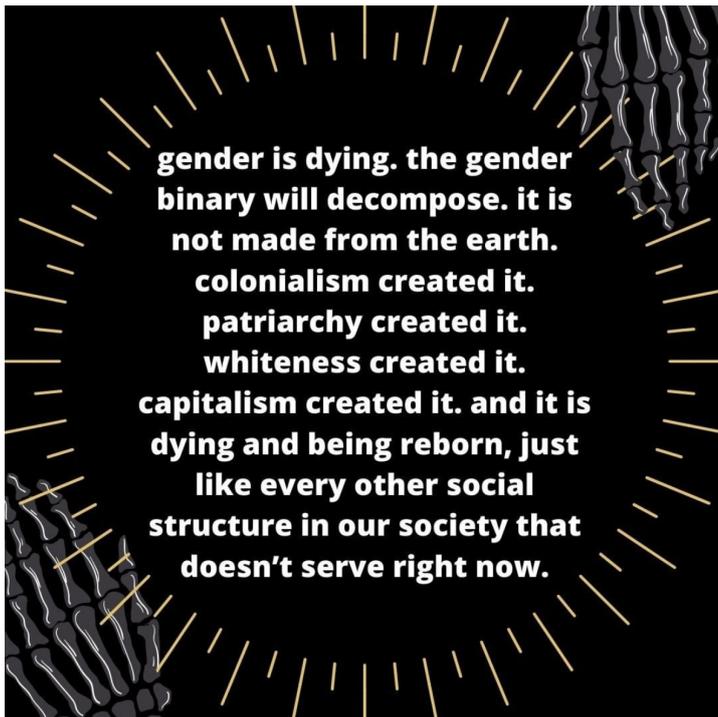
My proposal of the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration centers a return to the matter in its earthly, elemental state. I do so because matter is inescapable; it is matter of fact. The baseline from where it all starts, where we all come from. Therefore I am building on Eva Hayward’s critical poetics of *Lessons of the Starfish* (2008) in which she describes a practice of “re-form”, exploring “how *re-* (as in re-turn or re-new) and *trans-* (as in elsewhere) [are] differently embodied” (p.251). Thus, rather than calling for transformation (elsewhere), it is about revolution (within). Furthermore, by centering the matter I am engaging with Braidotti’s call for a “de-essentialized embodiment or strategically re-essentialized embodiment” (1994, p.171). De-essentializing: breaking away from sex or gender, as “the biologically sexed body guarantees nothing” (Stryker, 2006, p.10), while going back to the source, the *prima matter*: re-essentializing. It is a reinterpretation - *a re-form* - of the matter itself.

Menstrual matter is in constant flow; it is cyclical. Therefore the menstrual cycle is something that transgresses the binary. Not only because not all women menstruate and not all those who

menstruate are women, but also in the literal sense of the word. A cycle is non-binary in itself. Within a cycle it all comes together; in one menstrual cycle we experience creation (ovulation) and destruction (menses). They are one and the same, and yet different. Just as the spiritual and the queer perspectives are two parts of a spectrum, one bigger system, so is the menstrual cycle. In relation to the menstrual cycle this means zooming out to the multilayered system it is a part of: the reproductive system, and the hormonal system. The interconnection between the three layers are, to borrow Sandy Stone's words; "a set of embodied texts whose *potential for productive disruption* of structured sexualities and spectra of desire [which] has yet to be explored" (1987, p.12, emphasis mine). While Stone writes this as a proposal to "constitute transsexuals not as a class or problematic "third gender", but rather as a *genre*" (emphasis in original), I find this applicable and valuable in the practice of writing the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration as well, as it implodes (binary) sexual difference, much like Stone's transsexual. To illustrate, I want to connect these three layers to Braidotti's three-layered nomadic sexual difference. However, instead of thinking sexual difference in terms of the gender binary (woman and man) as Braidotti does, the menstrual cycle becomes a genre in itself, thereby speaking of the difference between menstruator and non-menstruator; differences among menstruators; and differences within one menstruator. It is important to emphasize here that the imposed binary here between menstruator and non-menstruator is not a fixed division: a menstruator can become a non-menstruator (menopause, HRT, etc) and a non-menstruator can become a menstruator (menarche, no longer suppressing menstruation, etc). Thus, it disrupts any fixed definitions of sex and emphasizes its fluidity.

To see the menstrual matter in constant relation to the reproductive system and the hormonal system acknowledges that these bodily processes are interconnected and occur simultaneously, while still holding (and adding) their own meaning, their own value. Similarly, writing the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration offers a both spiritual and queer approach to the menstrual experience. The hormonal system (the queer) is a recognition of the broader spectrum, expanding beyond the visible, and highlights how matter is always in relation with the external. It signals the overlap of the menstrual experience with bigger systems, such as societal and political climates. The reproductive system (the spiritual) holds the power of production; a fertile space where new life and meaning is developed. The menstrual cycle symbolizes the evolution; the on-going process of shedding that which is no longer viable. The menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration then embodies this multifaceted structure and becomes a vessel for social resistance and a fertile ground for transformation: signalling the (r) evolution of the menstrual cycle.

figure 10



 **bleeding.thunder** · Volgend ...

 **bleeding.thunder** gender is dying. the gender binary will decompose. it is not made from the earth. colonialism created it. patriarchy created it. whiteness created it. capitalism created it. and it is dying and being reborn, just like every other social structure in our society that doesn't serve right now.

more and more cis people are starting to wake up to the fact that gender, as we have known it, cages them too. of course, trans and gnc people are deeply aware of this. healing is needed for everyone. "there are no trans issues, there are only cis peoples issues they have with us" - alok menon.

gender is dying and being reborn. will you join in the transmutation? will you resist it? <3
#transdayofvisibility #genderliberation

 **know.your.cycle** en 298 anderen vinden dit leuk

31 MAART 2020

 Een opmerking toevoegen... [Plaatsen](#)

@bleeding.thunder

an announcement; a warning; a spell. saying gender is dying gives it life - as life and death are inextricably bound with each other. everything that lives, dies. everything that dies, is alive. gender is a human creation - "not made from the earth". everything created, can be destroyed. will be destroyed. will change. symbol of the fall of social structures; symbol of revolution.

conclusion

Due to a common lack of proper sexual health education and a general alienation from our bodies, many people (including myself for many years) see the menstrual phase as the ending of the cycle, whereas it is in fact the beginning. Or rather, it is both/and, as all endings are also beginnings and all beginnings also endings. It is a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The cyclical nature of the menstrual cycle shows us how every cycle, every person's experience varies; it flows. Nothing is fixed or static. And so, we must continue to evolve.

The process of queering the cycle, and the creation of the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration is an on-going process, which I aim to develop further as my research continues to expand. The intervention I hope to make by proposing the menstrual as a queer feminist figuration is to establish a menstrual activist body which implodes the sex/gender binary imposed on the menstrual body and to encourage a fluid, ever-shifting process of redefinition and reformation. Visualizing a spiritual and queer menstrual activist body which centers the material reminds us that even within all our differences, we are all made out of, and come from, the same matter. However, I want to emphasize that the conception of the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration does not call for a one-size-fits-all perspective, but rather an expansive framework which continues to evolve. It is an acknowledgment that matter is constantly (re)created. Moreover, it is not exclusive to those who fit into the 'menstruator' category - either currently, in the future, or in the past. The intervention of the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration embodies a flexible understanding of sex/gender. Therefore it does not matter if you menstruate or not, if you have a womb or not - to live cyclically is not dependent on those bodily processes. Trans women can embody this, cis men can embody this, genderfluid people can embody this. It does not depend on sex, or gender, or even a connection to the lunar cycle. To live cyclically varies from one body to the next; there is not one normal - everyone has their own. It is to encourage breaking away from categorizing everything as either female/feminine or male/masculine; to think beyond the binary and embrace multiplicity, complexity. Similar to the non-binary scope of spirituality - there is more than just the Sun (symbol of masc energy) and the Moon (symbol of femme energy) - we only get a whole picture when we zoom out and look at the entire constellation, and see how it is all in relation to each other. Feeding on each other, working together, in a process of continuous (r) evolution. Therefore I visualize the menstrual cycle not as a closed circle, or a never-ending feedback loop, but rather as a spiral; ever-growing, learning and adapting. As even within one menstruating body, the cycles will change. Either due to internal changes, external changes, or a combination thereof.

I see a spiritual and queer view on the menstrual cycle as a holistic resistance to a multiplicity of oppressive and suppressive systems. As I have said before, this is about much more than the conversation around sex and gender. We can start there and continue to evolve, to grow. To continue to explore and examine how the conversation can be expanded. For example, something which has been growing in my mind-matrix is the relation of the menstrual cycle to time. How it is a challenge to the perception of time as linear, something rooted in Black radical thought (see for example The Nap Ministry) and disability studies (crip time). How notions as queer time, crip time, "women's time" or

cyclical time challenge perception, not only of time, but also the material. And how this can be adapted and applied to strengthen the resistance against capitalist, patriarchal, ableist and racist systems that continue to control the relation to our bodies.

A final consideration, the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration is a retelling of the material, the physical, which releases the before-told meanings restrained in stories of gender, sex and limiting boxes. Cutting cords with stories that once had great meaning but have come to be outdated. It is unlearning and relearning all that the present moment, this present matter, can teach us. Because the practice of queering the cycle - the (r)evolution of the menstrual cycle - is not a matter of philosophizing an alternate or future utopian reality. This is reality for many of us: a present matter. I am in full understanding that this story will once again also become outdated again, therefore the intervention of the menstrual cycle as a queer feminist figuration holds a commitment to constant adaptation, to release any attachments to the created narratives. It does not do away with the past, but rather learns from, and builds on it. Thereby shaping the future within the present.

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