

'You don't like this blood? Well, too bad!' Alternative cultures of menstruation and the performativity of disgust

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw**Miren Guilló-Arakistain** 

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Abstract

This article explores the 'performativity of disgust' as a feminist strategy that takes place in various instances of menstrual activism. The analysis is based on an ethnographic study in Spain, which focused on alternative politics and cultures of menstruation that question the negative hegemonic Western vision of menstruation. By analysing the debates around gender, feminism, and corporality that arise in this field, the article highlights alternative corporal and menstrual imaginaries. The article contributes to and extends critical menstruation studies by exploring how feminist activists who engage in menstrual politics produce an aesthetic of disgust by reappropriating the abject, and in so doing, question the politics of menstrual disgust and gender inequalities. Paying special attention to collective initiatives that take place in public space, viewed as a place of social transformation, the article sheds light on how challenging the notion that 'menstruation is disgusting' can help us question gender and social inequalities, and promote social transformation.

Keywords

Ethnography, feminist theory, affects, gender, feminist activism, menstrual activism, menstrual blood, disgust, performativity of disgust, the abject body

Introduction

At the beginning of the 2000s, in a working-class neighbourhood in the post-industrial city of Bilbao, in the Basque Country, Spain, a mural appeared on a building wall. The mural showed a woman's face with two red lines on each cheek, symbolising menstrual

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blood, and the Spanish words ‘Somos guerreras’ [We are warriors] written on the wall. In 2014, in the city of San Sebastian, outside a supermarket, a work of graffiti bore the following words in the Basque language, ‘Gure hilekoak alu usaina du’ [Our period smells like vagina]. This slogan, aside from making menstrual blood visible, makes an explicit reference to smell and to the vagina, thereby questioning the politics of disgust. While undertaking research, I observed that public spaces can become places in which to ‘perform disgust’ around the topic of menstruation.

Imaginaries can be transformed, and people can join together to problematise gender inequalities in public spaces. In 2012, the Basque feminist collective EHBFF-Euskal Herriko Bilgune Feminista used the slogan ‘Aluak alu usaina du’ [Vaginas smell like vaginas] as a protest against sexist advertising, criticising the harmful effects of the menstruation industry. To that end, they sought to render menstrual blood visible on the streets: alongside the flyers, small blood-filled bottles, and bloody tampons and pads appeared on the streets of various cities. Maialen (age 25)¹ is a research participant who works on various projects about education and gender, and who participated in an activist working group on menstruation. She told me about the reactions of the public when she and her group held an exhibition about menstrual blood in Barcelona, in 2010. Part of the exhibition comprised little glass jars full of menstrual blood, which some collaborators had collected. The name of the menstrual blood’s owner and the date of the cycle to which it corresponded were written on each jar. The exhibition also included photographs in which menstrual blood appeared in everyday situations:

People were curious and looked at the little jars, but there were some who didn’t dare look at them fully [. . .] Blood on hands, blood on sheets, tasting blood . . . I’d say some didn’t quite ‘see’ why or what we were there for.

Blood generates counterintuitive and conflicting sensations, even among those who advocate for social change. Making ‘disgust’ explicit through performativity is a way of challenging commonly held notions about menstruation, and problematising menstrual stigma as well as gender inequalities.

Alternative politics and cultures of menstruation, in which some activists and collectives re-signify the menstrual cycle and, thereby, seek to counter medical-scientific and cultural hegemonic meanings, have intensified and diversified around the world especially over the last decade. These politics of the body, in turn, are connected to ways of understanding the body, health, and gender, fostering new experiences and imaginaries regarding menstruation, and forming a ‘plural political menstrual body’, following Mari Luz Esteban’s (2018) broader proposal on feminist political bodies.² In this intensification, just as different views of gender are produced, diverse aesthetic and sensorial strategies are also performed, among them, what I have termed the ‘performativity of disgust’. The performativity of disgust involves producing an abject aesthetic to challenge and reappropriate the disgust that menstrual blood can cause in some contexts and societies. Some of the menstrual initiatives that I observed and that key research participants described, play with this reappropriation of the abject, for example, through the use of blood in performances, murals, art installations, and street actions, and not only in a visual sense. Through this performativity of disgust, the proposals render this disgust

explicit and play with its aesthetics, with the precise aim of interrogating, understanding, and questioning the causes of disgust.

Critical menstruation studies are a growing field (see, for example, the compilation edited by Bobel et al. (2020), which includes different recent critical research from 134 international contributors). Researchers in this area have thoroughly examined the disgust that menstrual blood produces in some societies and the stigma related to it (see, for example, Bobel, 2010, 2015; Esteban, 2001; Fahs, 2016; Gottlieb, 2020; Kissling, 2006; Laws, 1990; Martin, 1987), as well as different forms of activism that question that disgust. Through ethnographic research undertaken between 2008 and 2019, I examined feminist debates, gender practices, and social changes that developed within alternative politics and cultures of menstruation in Spain (Guilló Arakistain, 2020a, 2020b, 2022, 2023a). I extend this line of inquiry by examining the aesthetic performativity of disgust as a feminist strategy with enormous potential to challenge gender stereotypes and inequalities. I describe how these reappropriation processes occur and what their consequences have been. In these times when online activism can attract considerable attention, I have focused on (sometimes anonymous) collective social protests that take place in physical public spaces. Furthermore, this contribution is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, which has allowed me to interview research participants more than once and to observe changes on the ground over time. I use the voices of three feminist activists to explore the opportunities, intentions, modes, and difficulties of the performativity of disgust, with the aim of reflecting on how the performativity of disgust in menstrual activism can contribute to feminist theory and practice. I suggest that challenging the disgust that menstrual blood produces through these initiatives can be a way of questioning gender and social inequalities.

Menstrual blood, the abject body, and the politics of disgust

If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your own menstrual blood – if it makes you sick, you've a long way to go, baby. (Greer, 1970: 58)

In some cultural contexts, the mere appearance of menstrual blood – or even the mere chance of its appearance – can evoke a reaction. The disgust associated with menstruation has been linked to the social marginalisation of women in many societies. In terms of the social body (Douglas, 1966; Esteban, 2010; Schepers-Hughes and Lock, 1987), menstrual blood is a fluid with multiple meanings, and one that, in the Western context, generates rejection due to the visibly liquid and viscous nature of blood (Douglas, 1966), the fact that it is less controllable than other physical fluids, and/or because it comes out of the vagina. As described by Bobel (2010), 'Leaky, liquid, flowing menstruation is constructed as a shameful form of pollution that must be contained [. . .] as a problem in need of solution' (p. 31). However, this negative reaction is, above all, influenced by the fact that menstruation takes place in bodies defined as female, bodies that are linked to dirt, taboo, pathology, and stigma (Bobel, 2010, 2015; Chrisler, 2008; Esteban, 2001; Fahs, 2016; Gottlieb, 2020; Kissling, 2006; Laws, 1990; Martin, 1987; Ussher and Perz, 2020). These negative associations are reinforced by the commodification of menstruation, since the hegemonic menstrual industry proposes the regulation and invisibility of

menstrual blood. Advertising reinforces the idea of menstruation as something uncontrollable that must be governed and hidden, and as something that produces disgust, giving rise to a culture of concealment (Kissling, 2006), or what Iris Marion Young (2005) termed 'the menstrual closet' (p. 106).

The social body of menstruation is also an abject body, an illegible body. Abjection refers to the vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other. In a broader sense, the term refers to the process by which identificatory regimes exclude subjects that they render unintelligible or beyond classification. As such, the abjection of others serves to maintain or reinforce boundaries that are threatened (Phillips, 2014: 19). In fact, the abject, as a process, can be a way of exploring unreadable bodies. Judith Butler (1993) suggests that abject bodies are epistemologically unreadable bodies, that is, those that lack legitimate existence from a normative and political point of view, and that have no specific ontological status. The abject prevents representation and its own definition and, as a result, the difficulty in defining it appears to be inherent. According to Julia Kristeva (1982), the abject is neither an object nor a subject, but challenges both positions and, therefore, can be a process and a stimulus that overcome the boundaries between the two. Both Kristeva (1982) and Butler (1993) understand the abject as a process, and their proposal is, precisely, that this definition of the abject or 'the negative' gains strength when there is an attempt to deny it. The abject, therefore, is an analytical tool for conceptualising experiences and bodies that cannot be divided into normative categories, precisely because it defies the boundaries of those categories. Indeed, the abject nature of menstruation, as something unintelligible or that must be concealed and kept 'in the closet', cannot be understood in an absolute or deterministic way, and certainly not universally (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). However, thinking about the abject nature of menstruation brings us closer to its symbolic, social, and material aspects. For example, in biomedical and cultural constructions of the premenstrual experience as a syndrome, those inhabiting the premenstrual body are expected to exert self-control (Ussher and Perz, 2020), through a form of internalised oppression that acts to enforce gender roles (Chrisler, 2008). In their discussion about broader constructions of idealised femininity and embodiment, Jane M. Ussher and Janette Perz (2020) explore how changes in premenstrual embodiment affect women's acceptance of, and resistance to, the position of the 'monstrous feminine' (as epitome of the female reproductive body as abject, as other, as site of deficiency and disease) and its subsequent self-policing.

The politics of disgust are configured through social stratification. Disgust is not a property of the body, but rather a process related to an unequal division of power that is linked to gender, ability, race, class, beauty, body shape and size, health, sexuality, and age (Nussbaum, 2004; Przybylo and Rodrigues, 2018). Disgust has functioned as a social category that conditions both people's rights and their access to social, cultural, and political spaces, particularly in Western contexts (Przybylo and Rodrigues, 2018). It also fulfils the important function of justifying and maintaining social, political, and visual injustices. In this sense, disgust has been used as a resource by dominant or hegemonic groups to dishonour subaltern groups or label them as inferior (Nussbaum, 2004). Moreover, perceptions of dirtiness and pollution are related to power in society (Douglas, 1966; Laws, 1990). As a result, analysing the politics of disgust can help us understand why some particular bodies are marginalised. In

addition, if the politics of disgust are configured through social stratification, different actors have varying ability to appropriate them, because they are subject to those same interlinked forms of oppression.

Another way of looking at disgust is Michelle Meagher's (2003) proposal that disgust is an affect that causes us to confront our own corporal experience, which is ambiguous and contradictory. Meagher (2003) examines how the work of Jenny Saville (who creates giant paintings of naked women whose bodies deviate from the hegemonic beauty canon) tackles the act of someone experiencing her own body as disgusting and also communicates the cultural components of disgust by locating them in social and cultural frameworks. To the extent that what we negate has an enormous potential to perpetuate itself (Butler, 1993; Kristeva, 1982), the ambiguity created by the aesthetics of disgust presents an opportunity not only to confront reactions to disgust, but to also recognise them in the first place: being aware of the experience of disgust can help us question the origin of disgust itself.

I use the politics of disgust and the abject to analyse how the feminist performativity of disgust is produced and to explore its subversive capacity. Following Butler (1993), instances of performativity have enormous potential to transform social and power relations through the production of collective actions. In appropriating the monstrous menstrual body, other realities, epistemologies and body experiences are generated. It is essential to take an intersectional feminist approach to these considerations, being attentive, among other things, to the Eurocentric bias when scholars ignore different local menstrual cultures (Gottlieb, 2020) and different ways of understanding and inhabiting subversion.

Research methods and cultural context

My ethnographic research took place across Spain, although many participants lived in the Basque Country, an historic territory that is located in the north of the Spanish State and in the southwest of the French State. The Basque Country was a suitable focal point for the research because it has a strong tradition of social and feminist movements, with many young women who are very open to experiencing and working on issues related to the body and health.³ However, the actions of the people who participated in my research belonged to a larger movement across Spain, and I analyse participants' words within this larger sociocultural context.

I carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork with a corporeal focus, attempting to unite the political, corporeal, and affective dimensions of the body (Ahmed, 2004; Esteban, 2010; Gould, 2009; Guilló Arakistain, 2023a), using feminist theory and anthropological theory of the body and emotions (Csordas, 1990; Esteban, 2010; Farquhar and Lock, 2007). Between 2008 and 2019, I conducted participant observation in 34 initiatives, such as workshops and performances, and carried out audio recorded in-depth interviews, using bodily itineraries. The bodily itineraries approach is a theoretical-methodological proposal based on conducting biographical interviews that emphasise corporeal practices and experiences that have taken place over time and relating these subjectivities to the cultural, social, and historical frameworks of which they are part (Esteban, 2010). The participants were 36 people engaged in menstrual initiatives

(menstruators of various gender identities and people who experienced their bodies as female, whether they menstruated or not). Participants were selected due to their engagement with menstruation-related projects: most of them were feminists between the ages of 20 and 40, from diverse urban and rural contexts, who were carving out alternatives in terms of gender, health, environment, or social justice. Some interviews occurred in Basque and some in Spanish. In addition to taking field notes during participant observation and interviews, I also wrote descriptions of all the observed events and transcribed the interviews. I organised the ethnographic material into blocks for analysis, through a coding process based on thematic categories. I established the set of categories as I developed and carried out the study design and objectives. Once the fieldwork was complete, I analysed the ethnographic material using a deductive–inductive process that began from the established theoretical categories surrounding health and biomedicine, gender views and practices, and feminist agency and activism, and highlighted the patterns that I detected in the data. The theoretical foundations of the categories are derived from critical epistemologies, feminist theory and social theory of the body, medical anthropology, and a critical perspective on capitalist consumption.

The data need to be understood in the context both of the recent international rise in menstrual activism and also within their specific context. Over the last decade, as in other European contexts, while conservative ideologies are being reinforced in Spain, feminism is experiencing a particular visibility, and in turn, menstrual alternative cultures are also emerging. In some contexts, this menstrual activism is closely related to a do-it-yourself (DIY) feminist activism philosophy – especially for the subversive initiatives in which disgust is questioned – and various feminist perspectives surface in different initiatives. Besides condemning the culture of negation and stigma, and the menstrual industry that encourages it, both alternative menstrual devices and blood, as part of a performative strategy, have come to the forefront in menstrual politics. Overall, the presence of blood has been increasing in Basque and Spanish feminist imaginaries, and not only when the images deal specifically with menstrual issues; blood is also present in images about sexuality, pleasure, and even anger. But such productions are not new, and many informants refer to various international feminist contexts of the 1960s and 1970s that embraced the body as a battlefield, under the slogan ‘the personal is political’. During this timeframe, and also later, several feminist artists expressed a commitment to reflecting women’s political consciousness (Chadwick, 2002 [1992]). While some works focused on sexual differences, others denaturalised gender or dealt with identity politics. Menstrual blood has also been used in later artistic expression and feminist actions, and this trend has gathered momentum, particularly over the last decade in different geographical contexts (see, for example, Barkardottir, 2016; Green-Cole, 2020; Guilló Arakistain, 2023a; Hughes and Røstvik, 2020; Lewis, 2020).

In addition, the history of Spanish and Basque feminist activism related to reproductive and sexual health is important for understanding the genealogies of these initiatives, especially during the 1970s and 1980s in Spain. This politically changing period, at the end of the Franco dictatorship and the beginning of the democratic period, was characterised by consciousness-raising among women, the denunciation of androcentrism in the medical system, and the construction of health knowledge based on collective methods to promote bodily empowerment and self-management (Esteban, 2018). At that point, the feminist

movement grew and fought for women's sovereignty over their bodies, sexuality, and reproductive rights. In the 1980s and 1990s, feminism began to enter the academy and other institutions. Similarly, as gains were made with regard to sexual and reproductive rights, feminist health activism became less central. However, the body and health have since regained political significance due to the resurgence of, and transformations within, the feminist movement, particularly in the past decade. In addition, in Spain, the tradition of social movements and associationism remains an important aspect of social life.

Although in the menstrual cultures that I describe, feminist technologies (such as menstrual devices) and workshops are the main focus of initiatives, it is primarily on murals, in street actions, performances, art installations and other visual protests where blood is used subversively as a form of feminist social criticism. I analyse these sensorial strategies through ethnographic observations of grassroots social initiatives, organised around the voices of three key research participants: Lide, Mar, and Nahia. The analysis of what is shared by these three voices is part of a broader ethnography. I chose to highlight the stories of these participants because they come from different contexts and social movements and have interpellated menstrual disgust in different ways. While these cases are not meant to be seen as representative, they offer a glimpse of the range of ways in which menstrual disgust is performed, allowing me to examine the subject in depth.

Lide: 'I'm not dirty. I'm not ill. Nothing's wrong': Challenging gender stereotypes through the subversion of disgust

I first interviewed Lide (29) in 2009 in the squat where she lived with several friends on the outskirts of a town where the rural and the industrial were interwoven. She ran a menstrual pad-sewing DIY workshop and produced a menstrual fanzine with her friends. I met her at the launch of the fanzine at a local social centre. Lide had conducted university studies in natural sciences and was currently a theatre actress. She had previously lived a communal lifestyle in several rural or semi-rural areas. Lide and her friends started politicising menstruation, especially as they began to read zines, became mistrustful of mainstream menstrual products because of their environmental and health impacts, and learned about the menstrual cup. Lide talked to me about the importance of analysing the impact of the menstrual cycle from a personal perspective. However, looking beyond the personal, she told me that collective social criticism had been the main path for her and her friends to reconsider menstruation from a feminist perspective. She was intrigued by the possibility of using the disgust that menstruation socially produces in a subversive way.

Lide described to me a performance focused on menstruation that she gave at a feminist festival in her town:

I started picking on people. I took out my used pad and showed it to the audience. I got blood on my hands [she was menstruating at the time] and added ketchup and went towards people: 'I'm not dirty, I'm not ill, nothing's wrong'. People were very receptive.

These kinds of interactions always create some sort of reaction in the people who participate in them: surprise, unease, mixed feelings. As I have observed, these

performances make menstruation explicit and often lead to openness and curiosity among the audience.

Lide attached her ideas about menstrual disgust to their cultural and temporal context, something that it is also changing, as neoliberalist capitalism evolves. She thought that women of previous generations were not as disgusted by the sight of blood, even if it was ‘something impure, something marginalised by religion and society itself’. She believed that they experienced it ‘more naturally, they weren’t as squeamish about blood, and they washed their own pads’. It seemed to her that menstrual blood elicits more disgust today, or at least, in a different way: ‘I think we live in a society where, when it comes to hygiene, we’ve reached a point at which we’ve got to sterilise everything. That shows that we don’t accept our bodies, doesn’t it?’ The last time I interviewed her, 10 years after the first interview, in 2019, Lide told me that, paradoxically, ‘society is becoming increasingly estranged when it comes to the body, where we are sold “body worship” and desirable and “healthy” bodies. Yearning, desire, but not an acceptance of our body’. Social and feminist advances have given women more freedom and the right to decide over their own bodies. But, as I will show below, these advances have coincided with the emergence and reinforcement of an industry related to the consumerist cult of the body, which intensifies the culture of concealment of menstrual blood through new menstrual technologies, as Lide pointed out.

Lide told me about another experience of disgust and the female body. At a theatre course she attended, students were given the assignment of provoking disgust in an audience. They all found the exercises difficult, but especially the women. Lide reported feeling a deep discomfort. Stereotypes of femininity are incongruent with the deliberate production of disgust. Therefore, it is generally socially more problematic for women than for men to provoke disgust. The discomfort – which she herself questioned – came from her knowledge that using menstruation to create disgust is anathema to hegemonic femininity: ‘Socially it seems that a girl can generate far more disgust with her period, and that’s why I think that disgust and all that stuff around periods should be questioned’. Notably, Lide linked menstrual disgust directly to the gender system – that is, the way that people are hierarchically positioned in a complex network in which material conditions and symbolic conceptualisations interact within social structures and meanings, where gender identities and practices are materialised (Bullen, 2003). Because menstrual blood is unacceptable in politically correct discourse, it can be used to challenge gender stereotypes. As noted earlier, the aesthetics of disgust can lead to discussion about the abjectness, ambiguity, and unreadability of the body, with the aim of questioning rules of normality and beauty. As such, the subversion and reappropriation of disgust constitutes a way of challenging gender stereotypes. This, however, is not its only use – for many of the participants it is also a way of criticising the commodified contemporary cult of the body. The commitment of Lide to a collective DIY feminist activist philosophy led her to question hegemonic femininity and gender inequalities, in addition to engaging in environmental issues and the production of alternative collective knowledge about the menstrual cycle.

The two situations Lide described, in which menstrual disgust was reappropriated, are examples of how the performativity of disgust can create small cracks in the gender system from a place of productive discomfort.

Mar Cejas: 'I realised that even something as visceral as disgust is a social construct'

Because menstrual activist actions are often subversive, they frequently lead to controversy, and the ensuing controversy can itself lead to further collective action. This is the case of visual artist Mar Cejas and the Sangre Menstrual collective⁴ in Madrid, in which we can observe a chain reaction between joint action and its consequences. When Mar Cejas started using a menstrual cup, she realised that she was disgusted by blood: 'Why is it unpleasant? Where did I get all this about my blood and my own body being unpleasant?' In 2009, tired of the stigma, taboo, and commodification of the menstrual cycle, she wrote a manifesto⁵ about its visibility on one of her bleeding days. She then went out for a walk in her neighbourhood without wearing a menstrual device:

And off I walked, real cool, letting my period flow. I thought that there was a chance that I would leak, and that people would see the stain. That's when I decided that that was the experience I wanted to have. Deciding that it didn't matter at all.

Upon arriving home, she took off her pants and framed them, and presented them as her piece for a collective art show, alongside the manifesto.

After the opening of the exhibition, the gallery censored her piece. In protest, the curators took down the entire exhibition, causing an uproar. Mar, and other people who joined her, organised street actions in which they displayed blood, walked the streets wearing white pants with blood-stained crotches and painted graffiti on the walls. In performing these actions, the group – which became the Sangre Menstrual Collective – uncovered, and then questioned, the source of disgust.

There were public reactions. In particular, some criticised that 'need to show blood', pointing out that no one expresses a need to display excrement or semen. They said, dismissively, 'So I shit, and I don't feel the need to defend shitting' and 'Why don't they do this with sperm?' 'Such ridiculous things, right?' Mar told me. 'All sorts of prejudices like that'. Feminists who carry out these actions well know that whatever is considered scatological in a given society is symbolically powerful in that society. They are also aware that when others criticise their public actions, this criticism tends to be founded on an a priori rejection of feminism, rather than a political or epistemological reading of dirtiness. This is a reflection of how hegemonic disgust can be used to devalue certain bodies or collectives, such as women (Douglas, 1966; Laws, 1990; Nussbaum, 2004; Przybylo and Rodrigues, 2018). The use of disgust in this way remains current, as right-wing populist discourses take hold; as seen in the next example.

When I talked to Mar for the last time, in 2019, she told me that the Sangre Menstrual project took on 'a life of its own': 'It moved without help, and this was as much about complicity as about hate'. In 2016, a right-wing digital media outlet used a photograph of a menstrual initiative by the collective to accompany a fake news story unrelated to them. In the article, the outlet reported falsely that members of Spain's leftist political party *Podemos* had worn blood-stained trousers to congress, as a social protest. The faces of Mar and other collective members were visible in the photo that accompanied the story, making them targets of hate speech. The social media backlash against them was

brutal and included death and rape threats. Here, menstrual disgust was combined with other variables (including opposition to leftist ideologies and feminism and the generalised atmosphere of violence on social media). Once again, this example shows the disgust provoked by menstrual blood, and also the ways in which disgust is used to justify certain positions and actions. In this case, the right-wing activists found menstrual disgust to be a powerful weapon to wield against their leftist political rivals, regardless of the fact that these rivals were not themselves menstrual activists. Because menstrual blood is construed as ‘naturally’ disgusting, the violent responses to it could also be justified as natural. Mar Cejas, referring to what happened, told me that ‘I realised that even something as visceral as disgust is a total social construct’.

Pare feminist collective: Plastering the neighbourhood and combining sensorial strategies

Another ethnographic example in which disgust was used to challenge the very foundations of that disgust was the initiative ‘Red May’ organised in 2012 by a collective of young feminists called Pare, in Bilbao. The catalyst for this initiative was the reaction triggered by a calendar that the collective had published shortly before. In one of the months, there was a photograph of a pair of pants stained with menstrual blood. Several people who were generally sympathetic to their cause told them that ‘they couldn’t put up the picture for that month anywhere’ because of the disgust it could produce in others. In response, the collective, both upset and inspired by the discussion, scheduled an entire month devoted to the visibility of menstruation. They plastered the neighbourhood walls with a poster made with the image that had initially sparked the argument, accompanied by the question ‘Do you think it’s disgusting?’ They also organised a documentary screening, a workshop, and an exhibition about menstruation. Even though the starting points of such actions are manifold, several participants told me that the controversy flared up when those new menstrual imaginaries became public, leading them to feel compelled to act.

The opening of the exhibition about menstruation was on a hot day in May, in the cultural space of a very frequented local bar, a collective joy prevailed in a lively atmosphere. A vulva had been painted on top of the entrance door, and from there hung a red piece of fabric that reached the floor. Upon entering, a familiar smell could be detected, due to the pieces made out of blood that had been there for a few days. Inside, there were a number of images, drawings, and pieces, and behind them were mixtures of black and red fabrics: a thoughtful DIY scenography, all made by the collective members. Among the images were bellies, trees and plants, blood-stained pants, and a symbolic statue of their city, painted red. Various aesthetic and sensorial strategies, all came together within this single event. There was a great variety among the images displayed, including images made with blood, some of which were lighter, others darker, and some showing their bond with natural elements. Some played with the abject, toying with the aesthetics of disgust, while others were beautiful and pleasing drawings (bearing in mind that the politics of beauty are as normative and political as the politics of disgust). But smell was also mentioned as a topic of conversation: Should they leave the smell of blood that had been fermenting for a few days, or should they ‘hide’ it? Ultimately, the collective

decided to burn incense, but the possibility of having allowed the smell of blood to remain also lingered in the air. In this regard, we can see that in a single situation, a range of different sensorial and aesthetic strategies were in operation.

One of the pieces of that exhibition was by Nahia (32). I met her at feminist workshops long ago in the city of Bilbao, and I interviewed her for the first time in 2012 (and again in 2019). Even though Nahia was not part of the group, her work was included because of her previous politicisation of menstruation in an installation she had created some years before. She talked to me about empowerment through disgust:

Nowadays I just go about it like a statement. There was a time that it was quite insane [. . .] it made me feel really embarrassed but at the same time it made me really angry: it was like 'so what? I'm on my period'. I stain and that's the end of it'. But in a way, yeah, I was embarrassed, I covered myself. These days I don't give a fuck, I go to the beach, I go to nudist spots, I don't wear anything. I make a mess on the towel, people look at me, and I love it. I mean, it's like 'There you go! You don't like this blood? Well, too bad!

We can see in her testimony this journey from problematising disgust, to inhabiting it, to feeling pleasure around it. This reappropriation of the abject as well as questioning the politics of disgust, also directly challenge the experience of shame, which is strengthened by a culture of negation. If that which is rejected is maintained, the feminist political production of menstrual disgust consists of the reappropriation of this negative view of menstruation. Thus, the culture of negation of the menstrual cycle, the biopolitical regulation of bodies, and the gender system are all questioned. In other words, menstrual blood has significant potential and, beyond its representation, can trigger emotions as well as provide a stimulus for reflection. When Nahia uses the expression 'Well, too bad!' it reflects what many other informants reported feeling and desiring. As mentioned, just as different affects and emotions such as pleasure, curiosity, and passion can be the spark for action, others, such as, for instance, rage, anger, disgust, shame, sadness, and exhaustion can also be productive emotions for social transformation. They can activate highly reflective states, a rejection of the existing order, and the desire to achieve social change.

Menstrual politics of disgust to defy normativity: Effectiveness, potential, and limits of subversion

In the trajectories of people engaged in the politicisation of menstruation, such as Lide, Mar, and Nahia, performing menstrual disgust is an act of subversion and freedom. In this process, they denounced menstrual stigma, the culture of concealment and the biopolitical regulation of bodies and sought to empower themselves individually and collectively. The importance of a DIY feminist activist philosophy can also be observed in the questioning of the hegemony of menstrual disgust, for example, in the workshops and fanzines in which Lide and her friends were engaged. Furthermore, the desire to collectively create knowledge, affective relationships, and the pleasure of subversion,⁶ have also been key elements in promoting social transformation regarding menstrual experience.

The performativity of disgust occurs through alternative menstrual initiatives that are presented as a social critique against hegemonic disgust about menstruation, menstrual blood, and the gender system. It also activates feelings of empowerment among the activists, contributing to social transformation through their engagement in instances of performativity that problematise power relations. These instances of performativity align with feminist and artistic genealogies, while, within them, several aesthetic and sensory strategies converge, often involving a range of emotions and affects, including subversion and pleasure. In this article, I have examined a specific strategy – the performativity of disgust – but this is only one possible aesthetic and sensory strategy. Not all of the projects I observed aimed to provoke disgust. In fact, many of them aimed to produce aesthetic enjoyment through beauty and to identify menstruation as a positive sensorial experience (very common, for example, in workshops and in menstrual education. I analyse other experiences in Guilló Arakistain, 2023a). Different aesthetic and sensorial strategies are used for these menstrual imaginaries, and contrasting imaginaries and sensorial strategies can even coincide in the same initiative, as we have seen in the exhibition of the Pare Collective (above), revealing the menstrual political body to be both plural and dynamic.

Returning to the affordances of the object, we must remember that not all menstruating bodies have the same possibilities to subvert, to reappropriate the object and challenge it. Blood can indeed be subversive. However, some bodies are always already perceived as subversive within ableist, heterosexist, and racist structures, since they are intrinsically read as object: ‘Thus, the entire black body, trans body, disabled body and fat body, for example, are read as object-as deficit and thus, at risk’ (Bobel, 2015). Fanta Sylla (in Bobel, 2015) has written:

So you can put period blood war paint on your face, and yes, in your context, it will probably be subversive and revolutionary. For the rest of us just going outside, walking in the streets, exposing our vulnerable, repulsive bodies is subversive and radical.⁷

Following Lucrecia Masson (2019: 169) who examines sexual and bodily dissent from anti-colonial positions, I ask which culturally embedded ideas serve as launch points for conceptualising freedom.

If, following the cited authors, we understand the object as a process and a way of exploring epistemologically unreadable bodies, then we must observe how the politics of disgust and abjection are constructed, examine how they intersect with other variables, and consider their material consequences and effects on power relations. Hence, the following question arises: Who can choose to be subversive? The object is read within a context or, rather, is not read. Taking an intersectional feminist perspective helps us to question our own positionalities, allowing us to continue discovering power relations and inequalities in political activism.

The performativity of disgust can be read as disobedience and mutiny against a culture that promotes the concealment and control of the menstrual cycle: menstrual blood and metaphors of it (such as ketchup), and their symbolism, are made visible, exaggerated, and played with. In performing disgust, feminist activists challenge ‘the menstrual closet’. For research participants, such as Lide, Mar, and Nahia, taking menstrual blood

into public spaces and making this disgust explicit is an opportunity to refuse to live as if their bodies were disgusting. Thus, the abject menstrual body – and the abject body more generally – tell us much about what it takes to successfully live in accordance with the cultural and social imperatives of constant self-control and self-surveillance. In addition to resisting this monstrous body (Ussher and Perz, 2020), the activists (re)make it their own. To reappropriate the abject is to challenge those imperatives. By using monstrous identities, or by defending the abject body, the menstruating (and non-menstruating) bodies that form the political body of menstruation refuse to abide by gender norms, albeit in very different ways. Using monstrous identities is a way of challenging the culture of stigma, polluted femininity, rigid binarism, and the normativity of bodies and gender, and exhibiting, through the monstrous, more dissident positions.

Sometimes, the effectiveness of a corporeal politics of the abject is questioned, suggesting that these proposals can often trigger the opposite effect, as happened to both the *Sangre Menstrual* and *Pare* collectives when they were questioned for representing menstruation so explicitly. However, we must keep in mind that these initiatives can have very different goals. For example, the intention of these projects is not necessarily to persuade or educate, or to get others to 'like' these actions or understand the injustices they highlight. Rather, sometimes the intention is to empower the self, trigger a reaction in people who are already interested in the subject, or spark the curiosity of those who are not. This was the case for *Lide* when she played with monstrosity in her performance, pulling out a bloodied menstrual pad during a performance; for *Mar* and the *Menstrual Blood Collective* when they protested and gave rise to creativity in the neighbourhood; and for the *Pare Collective* when they organised a menstrual exhibition after being questioned about their calendar. In exploring unreadable bodies, the more the abject is denied, the more it becomes evident. In these actions, we see that different aesthetic strategies are being used in the alternative politics and cultures of menstruation. This is so, first, because the goals of the people driving and embodying those politics vary and, second, because there are many ways of transmitting their messages to others. In the midst of this multiplicity of meanings and sensations, unease can co-exist with pleasure, empowerment, and a sense of freedom.

As I have shown earlier, feminist activists used local controversies about the visibility of menstrual blood in public spaces to make explicit the hegemonic social disgust in relation to menstruation explicit. These local controversies also stimulated new, transformative activist initiatives, which, depending on the geographical and historical context, are interpreted in different ways. We could ask what we understand to be transgressive or subversive in a given context and when it stops being so. The increasing presence and visibility of these menstrual initiatives in different contexts, however, means that these actions are currently perceived differently from before. When a set of actions is read as transgressive (in this case, performative menstrual disgust), there was often an earlier set of similar actions that were not read at all (i.e. actions that were not understood and, therefore, not seen as having political potential). Now, such initiatives, rather than being socially unintelligible, seem to have gained enough of a foothold that they are read as legitimate proposals for transgressing accepted norms relating to menstruation, gendered bodies, and gender inequalities.

The culture of concealment of menstruation is dynamic, since the capitalist culture that commercialises the body affects both the social relationship with bodily fluids and the politics of disgust, while the neoliberal system reshapes these bodily and social needs through new consumer technologies. On one hand, social stigma surrounding menstruation is now more likely to be disputed and, on the other hand, menstruation is increasingly handled through a neoliberal industry related to the consumerist cult of the body. Cleanliness as a feminine standard was highly valued by previous generations during the 20th century in some Western societies, including Basque society and Spanish society more broadly (see, for example, Del Valle et al., 1985; Thuren, 1994). However, menstruation concealment culture has become more sophisticated, and, as a result of the neoliberal economic model, the technologies used to make blood invisible and regulate the menstrual process have multiplied and diversified, even appropriating feminist discourses in advertising and creating new contradictory normativities. For example, women are held individually responsible for ‘inhabiting the cycle in a positive way’, but there is no recognition of responsibility for the social context in which the stigma against menstruation is produced (Przybylo and Fahs, 2020). The urge to hide menstruation becomes a matter of self-discipline in Foucauldian terms, through a range of disciplinary menstrual practices that respond to the normativity of the menstrual hegemonic ideology; this process reinforces the abject even more.

Furthermore, this menstrual self-regulation is part of the corporeal regulation that is reinforced through neoliberal consumer society, due to its prevailing Western canons of beauty and the heterocentric, cis-centric, ableist, and racist body regulations on which they are based. Because of these links, feminist collectives sometimes use menstrual blood to make demands that go beyond menstruation per se. In these contexts, menstrual blood becomes a powerful symbolic element that defies the hegemonic normativities on which gender and social inequalities are based. In this sense, when people like Lide, Mar, and Nahia refuse to self-regulate and instead reappropriate menstrual disgust, they are challenging these structures of inequality.

Conclusion

I have shown how the performativity of disgust is used as a feminist strategy to problematise menstrual stigma and the gender inequalities it underpins. When activists perform menstrual disgust, they lay bare the ambiguity, abjectness, and illegibility of bodies, while breaking with the prevailing norms of beauty and normality. In so doing, they are disobeying the culture of denial that sustains the invisibility and control of the menstrual cycle. If that which is rejected is maintained, the feminist political production of menstrual disgust consists of the reappropriation of this negative view. Thus, the culture of negation of the menstrual cycle, the biopolitical regulation of bodies, and the gender system are all questioned. Through generating alternative imaginaries using menstrual blood a political body of menstruation is forged, and both individual and collective processes of corporeal empowerment are generated. My analysis contributes to gender studies and feminist theory by examining the ways in which activist menstrual initiatives question the politics of disgust as a cultural and political construct, from a critical feminist position, focusing on the agency and empowerment of people that

participate in them. The performativity of disgust and the abject can offer theorists an interesting perspective for analysing both feminist activism and body politics, as well as the agency of gendered bodies.

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Notes

1. For ethical reasons, all names are pseudonyms, except for those of one artist and a few collectives. This research has followed the code of ethics for the practice of professional anthropology as established by the Association of Anthropology in the Spanish State (<https://asaee-antropologia.org/asaee/orientaciones-deontologicas>).
2. Esteban (2018) analyses the different feminist political bodies based on the notion of a political body 'that can recall those representations, images, ideas, attitudes, techniques, and conducts incarnated in and consciously and unconsciously promoted by a social movement that individually or collectively takes specific form' (p. 394).
3. Basque feminism, which gained strength around the end of the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), was articulated around the fight for equal rights, specially tied to labour, sexual violence, homosexuality, and abortion. The new century marked a new stage in this multifaceted feminist movement, with the development of academic and institutional feminisms. It also moved beyond the base movement to develop views, practices, and discourses (such as trans-feminism), which brought new elements into feminist debates (Hernández García, 2018).
4. <https://sangremenstrual.wordpress.com/about/>
5. <http://cuerpopolitico.blogspot.com/>
6. I have observed that in these subversive initiatives, pleasure arises more than I initially expected, playing an important role in these political socialisations of participants into do-it-yourself (DIY) feminist activism. The importance of pleasure in menstrual activism is beyond the scope of this article, but I have described it at length elsewhere (see, for example, Guilló Arakistain, 2023a, 2023b).
7. <https://gendersociety.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/the-year-the-period-went-public/> (accessed 1 November 2020).

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