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## Feminism's Forgotten Frontier: Why Menstrual Liberation is Necessary for Addressing Western Society's Somatophobia

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**Feminism's Forgotten Frontier:  
Why Menstrual Liberation is Necessary for Addressing Western Society's Somatophobia**

A Thesis

Presented to the Departments of English and Race, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

Of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Madeline Eileen Eary  
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## Abstract

This honors thesis proposes a solution to the shame and stigmatization of menstruation in Western Society. I begin this conversation by describing the social position of the menstruating body in society through the lens of *somatophobia*, described by Elizabeth Spelman's article "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views". In response to the article, I propose two theoretical frameworks to address somatophobic discourse. The first framework, *embodied subjectivity*, proposes a new way of viewing the body in society based on Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" definitions of subjecthood. My second framework, *menstrual liberation*, rests upon the pillars of self-definition, liberation, and socialist ideology, presented by the Combahee River Collective Statement, and centers conversations about the body in society around menstruation. After defining these terms, I explain their potential through the lens of Menstruators' Sense of Self, Menstrual Healthcare, and Mensuration in the Corporate world. In each of these sections, I provide readers with real-world embodiments of menstrual liberation.

## Introduction

During a mindless scroll on TikTok in July of 2020, I came across a video that I would somehow find both hilarious and exacerbatng. This video was one of the hundreds of videos of menstruators asking their non-menstruating partners, usually straight cis-men: "Where does the pad go?" (Stites 2020).<sup>1</sup> Usually, this question is met with several seconds of silence, dumbfounded sound effects, and some form of the phrase, "on your vag?" (Stites 2020). As a

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<sup>1</sup> The specific video is reference was posted by @audreystites. If you wish to watch more, and be just as disappointed as I was, use the following link:  
<https://www.tiktok.com/search/video?q=asking%20my%20boyfriend%20where%20a%20pad%20goes&t=1680899149619>

menstruator, the answer seems like it should be common sense, yet watching non-menstruators grapple with one of the most basic realities of menstruation was infuriating. This trend was embarrassing for non-menstruators, as it revealed how little they understood about menstruating bodies. To me, it demonstrated how little the society I live in knows about my body as a menstruator.

It was down this rabbit hole that I became fully conscious of the shame and silence that surrounds the topic of menstruation in society. My period was something I struggled to speak openly about with friends and menstruating relatives. I realized that while I identified as a feminist, my experience within my body was heavily policed by the patriarchy through the systemic stigmatization of menstruation.

This evolution of perspective led me to question menstruation's role within both the body and society. Why is it viewed as shameful and a function that must be policed? Why do menstruators tolerate a stigma that makes speaking up about their experiences difficult? In addition to answering these questions, this thesis will offer a solution to the traumatic shame menstruators have endured while simply existing within their bodies.

My thesis explores the social “problem” of the menstruating body in society through the lens of *somatophobia*, as described and challenged by Elizabeth Spelman in her article “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views.” This 1982 article offers an exploration and critique of the Platonian view that the mind/spirit is separate from the body and places this discourse in conversation with past feminist activism (Spelman 119-127). The advancements made by historical feminism in sexual and labor politics are what allow contemporary activism in Western society to question and address the tabooed presence of the menstruating body in society. As a modern feminist scholar, I am now in the position to utilize Spelman’s conceptualization of

somatophobia in the context of menstruation as a result of the social-political strides made by past feminist scholars.

In response to the social attitude Spelman describes in her article, I propose two theoretical frameworks. First, the idea of *embodied subjectivity*, which is conceptualized by placing Spelman's essay in conversation with Hortense Spillers' theoretical work around subjecthood, as presented in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." My second framework addressing the social stigmatization of menstruation is called *menstrual liberation*. It rests upon the pillars of self-determination, liberation, and socialist ideology as presented by the Combahee River Collective Statement and the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and other Black Feminist Theorists.

In the following pages, I will identify the problem of the societal stigmatization of menstruation through blended scholarship and then move to define related key terminology. With these terms, I will explain their potentialities through the context of the formation of (1), Menstruators' Sense of Self; (2), Menstruation in Health Care; and (3), Menstruation in the Corporate World. In each of these sections, I explore the possibilities of menstrual liberation as a theoretical solution to the issue of somatophobia and provide examples of how they are already enacted. The tools for a menstrual revolution are at our fingertips, and it is about time that we, as a society, use them to dismantle this stigmatized shame once and for all.

### **The Problem of Somatophobia**

We live in a society where the function of menstruation is viewed as socially deviant or abnormal. Menstruation is thought to be an experience that is shameful, disgusting, and proof

that the assumptive default human is non-menstruating.<sup>2</sup> The embarrassment this stigma creates is all-encompassing and makes it incredibly difficult for menstruators to feel at home within their bodies. As a menstruator myself, the first decade of my menstruating journey was spent policing my body and believing that my social existence was tainted by the perceived abnormality of a bodily function I had no control over. In short, society taught me to believe that my body was separate from who I was as an individual. This division of my own subjecthood was a result of Western society's belief in *somatophobia*, or an intrinsic separation of the body from the mind when determining subjecthood (Spelman 113). The mind/body/spirit distinction has led to generations of what I call *biological determinism*, which is the belief that an individual's reproductive organs have the power to decide their gender identity and social mobility.

These ideas of somatophobia and biological determinism are incredibly limiting and force the individual subject to view themselves as separate from their bodies. In challenging these limits, I have utilized Black Feminist Thought presented by authors like Hortense Spillers to develop the term *embodied subjectivity* as a response to the critiques of somatophobia Elizabeth Spelman presents in her essay. Building off the theoretical work of Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective Statement, I have created the term *menstrual liberation*, which is rooted in the notions of self-identification, liberation, and socialist structuring of society, as presented by the Black Feminist Thinkers listed above. In the following pages, I will explain the potential for menstrual liberation to rework the existence of the menstruating body in society.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about menstrual shame and other harmful attitudes in a Global context see "Chapter 2: Our Shame" in Dahlqvist's *It's Only Blood*.

## A Blending of Scholarship

Menstrual shame is a prominent and disgraceful reality in Western society. Bodies that experience a menstrual cycle are viewed as deviant by society because white mainstream feminists were unsure how to navigate conversations around the role of the menstruating body in society. The many waves of feminism have directed time and resources into achieving broad stroke notions of gender equality and equity, and that work deserves to be recognized and appreciated by contemporary scholars. Their efforts, however, may have affirmed the very aspects of the patriarchy they were attempting to dismantle because they “had only one model, one image, one vision of a full and free human being: man” (Friedan 84).<sup>3</sup> Basing models of liberation and subjecthood around the experience of men (or non-menstruating bodies) is highly problematic because it operates on assumptive biological binaries and places them within a hierarchy. This Western ideal is the result of *somatophobia*, which is the phenomenon of viewing a woman’s body, specifically, “as the source of all the undesirable traits a human being could have” (Spelman 118).

Elizabeth Spelman traces the intellectual ancestry of somatophobia back to Plato, who utilized this distinction to justify the exploitation and grouping of certain populations.<sup>4</sup> Her essay, “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,” criticizes and unpacks the impact of Plato’s ideas on Western society. She explains: “the soul/body distinction is integral to the rest of Plato’s views; integral to the soul/body distinction in the higher worth and importance of the soul in comparison to the body” (116). Spelman rejects Plato’s belief that “the mind must be liberated

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<sup>3</sup> The First Wave is associated with the Women’s Suffrage movement (1860s-1920s). The Second Wave is associated with Women’s place in the workforce (1960s-80s). Third Wave Feminism (1990s-2010s) is described as being a modernization of Second Wave motivations. Currently, we are arguably, in the fourth wave of feminism. More information can be found here <https://simmonslibguides.com/feminism/waves>

<sup>4</sup> For more information about intellectual ancestry, see Jacqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces Of A Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*.



from the body” (113) because this rhetoric of rejection is used to assign categories of social worthiness based on an individual's ability to separate their existence from the body.

Spelman, having detailed somatophobia’s etymology, continues to dismiss the distinctions it creates between the mind, body, spirit, and the social construct of gender. She states: “If we are our souls, and our bodies are not essential to who we are, then it doesn’t make any difference, ultimately, whether we have a woman’s body or a man’s body” (Spelman 117). There is no need for biological distinction in a society that centers subjectivity around the soul. This dismissal creates space within Western Culture for a radical re-imagination of the body within society. Through Spelman’s framework, all humans and all bodies will be viewed as intrinsically valuable, an idea I will call *embodied subjectivity*.

I use the term *embodied* to emphasize the need to view the mind and soul/spirit as existing simultaneously and in collaboration with the body. It is a full and complete subject in its entirety. The notions of *subjectivity* utilized in this work are derived from Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” which unpacks the theoretical implications that enslavement has left on notions of bodily subjecthood. Spillers writes: “personhood, for the European observer, locates an immediately outward and superficial determination, gauged by quite arbitrarily opposed secular categories” (Spillers 71). This theoretical framework explains how an enslaved body is denied subjecthood because it is viewed as having the potential to be manipulated and lacks the ability to give consent (Spillers 75). The enslaved body is defined and identified by a system that seeks to maintain its objectification (Spillers 67). Concepts of subjectivity are established by Western society through

gender, or sex-role assignation, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff,  
sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge...as a way to reinforce the

process of birthing...that involves ‘the reproduction of the values and behavior of patterns necessary to maintain the system of hierarchy in its various aspects of gender, class, and race or ethnicity’. (Spillers 79)

Within the context of menstruation and somatophobia, the separation of the mind from the menstruating body allows for the continuation of the stigmatization and systemic disavowal of subjecthood for menstruators. Emphasizing that subjecthood can be achieved through an embrace of the body in its entirety questions society’s creation of hierarchical definitions of meaning derived from biological determination.

Through what I theorize as *embodied subjectivity*, all bodies, regardless of their ability or reproductive function, are recognized as valuable. The human subject is not a mind and soul trapped within a body but a cacophony of all components. The hope of this framework is the total rejection of the social-biological categories that have been embedded within our world since Plato.

During their campaigns for social change the mainstream feminist movement—by which I mean white neoliberal [Second Wave] feminists—built its foundation upon a subject-object distinction born from somatophobia. Many in this movement placed the non-menstruating, white, masculine body at the center of its activism (Freidan 84). Spelman’s work aids in providing a lens through which we can understand how this non-menstruating orientation continued the labor of the patriarchy because feminism was “insisting on a distinction between mind or soul and body, and insisting that mind is to be valued more than the body” (Spelman 124). Continuing to believe that biological distinction determined which populations were considered to be ‘the mind’ called for a deliberate silencing of any individual’s experience of a body that was more demanding than the white, young, able-bodied, non-menstruating model.

Betty Friedan presents an argument in *The Feminine Mystique* that serves as an example of this. She writes: “women were left behind. Anatomy was her destiny; she might die giving birth to one baby, or live to be thirty-five, giving birth to twelve, while man controlled his destiny with that part of his anatomy which no animal had: his mind” (Friedan 82). This statement upholds an assumed hierarchical biological binary, through the use of gendered terms like ‘men’ and ‘women’, and implies those categories are determined by biology alone. The comment affirms the existence of a gender hierarchy in society, but also reduces the experience of the menstruating body to the reproductive function of its organs. The mind/soul/body distinction of somatophobia is being utilized in this context to claim the menstruating body is incapable of achieving subjecthood. Friedan, and the Second Wave Feminist Movement her work resides in, asserted the idea that the experience of certain bodily functions, like childbirth or menstruation, prevented an individual from being viewed as a subject.

Friedan’s belief that menstruators can only be identified by their bodies is outdated. Her comment relates to the social assumptions made about the body through the use of gender terms to address the concept of biological determination. This language is exclusionary and does not account for the dynamic experience of gender and the body in society. Henceforth, I will use the term *menstruators* to refer to all people who have the capacity to menstruate at some point in their lives, and gender-expansive, trans, and intersex folk, while the term *non-menstruators* will apply to cisgender men. Women and gender-expansive people who do not have the ability to menstruate exist within a society that continues to label them as deviant for other qualities. Thus, my thesis emphasizes that menstrator’s experiences are being invalidated or discredited; and that society’s somatophobia also polices menstrator’s experiences within their bodies. The hope of this is to allow for people of all gender expressions and bodily experiences to be validated and

supported within the concept of *embodied subjectivity*. Not all women menstruate, and not all menstruators are women; therefore, these vocabulary distinctions are necessary to ethically and responsibly navigate the conversation around the menstruating body and society. We need to normalize gender expansive terminology, the terminology I implement within this work.

Current scholarship and proposed solutions to the stigmatization and erasure of the menstruating body range from comprehensive sex education, to paid menstrual leave, to eliminating the pink tax, and developing infrastructure for easily accessible menstrual products.<sup>5</sup> These ideas are helpful, but they also continue to operate towards an end goal of biological liberation that does not address the real issue of somatophobia's mind-body separation. Disrupting the patriarchal and capitalist definition of biological determination is possible through the concept of *menstrual liberation*, as achieved through embodied subjectivity.

At its core, menstrual liberation is about centering the individual experience within the body. It does not cater to ideas of equality—which function under the assumption that a universal bodily experience exists—but rather works through the notion of embodied subjectivity. Menstrual liberation, in placing the comfort and needs of menstruators as the central experience of the world, will inherently dismantle the somatophobic reality we currently inhabit.

Menstrual liberation is heavily influenced by Black Trans and Lesbian Feminist Thought. It is centered around the concept that society is only as free as its most oppressed population, an idea expressed by the Combahee River Collective (CRC) Statement, which was issued by a collective of Black Lesbian Feminists in 1978. The Statement reads:

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<sup>5</sup> The current industry term for menstrual products which includes period underwear, pads, tampons, menstrual cups and disks, is Feminine Hygiene. Due to the gendered language of this term, I am using “menstrual products” to describe the previously listed items.

the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women, this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept...to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough. (CRC)

The CRC creates its statement through self-determination, liberation, and socialism. Rather than looking to society to determine the intellectual framework of their movement, the CRC looks within their own discourse communities to find solutions to all oppression.

The concept of looking inward is similarly presented by Patricia Hill Collins in her essay "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." When unpacking the social construction of the Black menstruating identity in Western society, she utilizes a distinction between self-definition and self-valuation. These ideas work together to echo the notion of self-determination presented by the CRC. Collins explains:

Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally defined stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. In contrast, self-valuation stresses the content of Black women's self-definitions—namely replacing externally-derived images with authentic Black female images. (Collins S17)

The framework Collins presents for the ideological liberation of Black femmes can be easily applied to menstrual liberation. In continuing the work of self-determination and valuation, menstrual liberation has the potential to alter society's perception of the menstruating body because it places the reality of a menstruator's experience in direct conversation with society's somatophobic dismissal of its existence.

In this vein, then, menstrual liberation is also closely related to Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," which highlights the need to place the experience of the body and the individual within it, above society's control. Lorde writes: "when we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs...we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's" (90). Her remark reveals the rejection of personhood that is necessary for existence within our current social structures and directly questions it.

To undo the physical fragmentation of the mind/spirit/body, Lorde suggests placing comfort and pleasure at the center of all social navigation. She believes that "once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors brings us closer to that fullness" (Lorde 88). Embracing embodied subjectivity allows for these sensations to guide a subject's existence. Menstrual liberation will force a restructuring of society that will allow the possibility for menstruators to find comfort at all phases of their cycle.

Acting upon these ideas of liberation and self-determination is vital to achieving menstrual liberation. The CRC statement, while not explicitly discussing menstruation, can be applied therein because Black femmes found "any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic" (CRC). This outright disavowal of biological determination also rejects the separation of the mind/body/soul that has enacted centuries of sex and gender-based oppression.

Menstrual liberation has the ability to dismantle the harmful perceptions of the body in our somatophobic society because it places accountability on the individual rather than the collective. Its motivation for enacting change is self-driven, meaning that menstruators have the

power to reject the rhetoric of shame and bodily deviance being sold to them via their menstrual products. The subject of a menstruating body can choose to view themselves beyond the narrative that they must be physically policed or silenced. Within the context of somatophobia, there is a pervasive separation among mind/body/soul which means that “upon menarche...[menstruators] begin to engage with the world around them while viewing their bodies as deficient sites, experiences that inherently weaken their embodied agency in the world and direct them to channel energy into bodily repair” (Piran 205).

In present day society, the menstruating body is still regarded as needing to be controlled before it is allowed into society. Much of this reality results from mainstream feminism's long entrenchment in somatophobia. Emma Barnett, a contemporary menstrual activist, explains this dynamic:

the outspoken mainstream feminist movement, in its many waves and guises, has always struggled with how to place menstruation, especially in the work context. The aim had to be to show women were as good as men in all contexts...But, in the process of showing we were and are equal, anything expressly female, like periods, was de-emphasized, ignored or played down. (Barnett 113)

Barnett draws attention to how the act of menstruation is a determining factor for assigning the status of *social deviance*. Menstruation is not a conscious or controllable experience—which, under the framework of somatophobia, does not permit subjecthood. Elizabeth Spelman explains how white mainstream feminism utilizes Plato's distinctions in their attempts for equity. She writes, “our bodies are not essential to our identity; in their most benign aspect, our bodies are incidental appendages; in their most malignant aspect, they are obstacles to the smooth functioning of our souls” (Spelman 117). Viewing this statement in a contemporary context

requires us, as readers, to understand how conceptualizing the body as inessential and ‘incidental’ to the human experience is inherently damaging to any attempt to assert embodied subjectivity. This perspective separates the experience of the body from the mind and soul and views bodily sensations as a passive effect of being human. The body is not regarded as having an active role in the creation of subjecthood. Spelman’s statement also places the act of menstruation in direct conflict with the ‘smooth functioning’ of the human soul. Demoting the body to the role of an appendage requires that it be valued as less than the mind; a deeply harmful yet common phenomenon that ensures a stigmatized existence for the menstruating body. As such, to Plato and the rest of Western society, the menstruating body is intrinsically inferior to the non-menstruating body.

To counter the notion of innate inferiority of menstruating bodies, bodily subjecthood needs to become a unified embodiment. Menstrual liberation places the needs and experiences of menstruators at the forefront of the conversation around embodied subjectivity. This will demand that society view menstruating bodies as valuable, capable, and fully human. Using menstrual liberation removes the need for biological distinction in any regard and causes society to realize that biological determination “should not be used to try to justify the unfair distribution of society’s goods” (Spelman 124). The current distribution of rights, resources, and riches within Western patriarchal and capitalist systems is built upon arbitrary notions of distinction, such as class, race, gender, and ability. Menstrual liberation challenges all of that, by insisting the individual experience of the body be respected and accommodated for through social liberation and self-determination.



## Menstrual Liberation In Media Advertising

Menstruators occupy bodies of all shapes, sizes, races, ethnicities, and gender expressions, yet experiences of menstrual shame are often universal. However, because the menstrual product industry has “grounded [its] representations of menstruating bodies on white, cisgenderist, ableist, fatphobic, and heteronormative terms” (Przybylo 375), any body that differs from those qualities and also menstruates faces a double-bind of social “deviance”. This fact affirms the need for the liberatory and self-identifying framework of activism that menstrual liberation would provide. The framework of menstrual liberation actively questions and corrects harmful conceptualizations of the menstruating body.

In a world where “the media continues to reinforce misconceptions around social captivity, restrictions, professional inefficiency, physical, and menstrual discomfort[...] related to menses” (Guidone 275), the FemCare Industry<sup>6</sup> is the largest perpetrator of this shaming propaganda. The “FemCare Industry” or “Feminine Care Industry” is mainstream name for the industry that produces menstrual products and vaginal health items (sanitary wipes, etc.). Menstruators are told the only way to maintain social safety and respectability is to purchase products from certain brands to “prevent embarrassing and shame-producing leaking, staining, and limits to their daily activities” (Przybylo 377). Clearly, the industry relies on feelings of shame and social responsibility in order for its rhetoric of discretion to thrive. The dominant narratives and rhetoric utilized through this advertising reinforce the biological hierarchies that somatophobia creates. In a response to this reality, Ela Przybylo and Breanne Fahs present “cranky menstruation” as a term in their article “Empowered Bleeders and Cranky Menstruators:

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<sup>6</sup> . Przybylo and Fahs give a detailed breakdown, and explain why some menstruators are arguing for a change in the industry name..

Menstrual Positivity and the ‘Liberated’ Era of Menstrual Product Advertisements”. They articulate the reality that menstruating bodies should be allowed to express the pain and discomfort they experience with menstruation, writing:

A menstrual crankiness thus is cranky about a model of bleeding that...represents particular bodies toward selling the period as something that can and must be overcome. Instead, menstrual crankiness recognizes that period pain can prevent sport performance, that periods as they relate to dysphoria trauma, and depression, can and do incite anger, discontent disavowal, and dissonance rather than happy positive feelings. (Przybylo and Fahs 389)

Przybylo and Fahs suggest that menstruators no longer have to live the lie somatophobia creates: bodies cannot be completely controlled by the mind, and their functions do not determine social worth. The emphasis on the experience of the individual is foundational to menstrual liberation and relates closely to Lordean Erotics (Lorde 87) , which place value on honoring bodily sensations as a daily practice of humanity. This ideology validates the pursuit of comfort to which a menstruator is entitled, while also invalidating the pervasive narrative of somatophobia. Through menstrual liberation, “cranky menstruators” will have the tools not only to be vocal about their discomfort, but also to accommodate their bodies' needs.

The “FemCare” Industry would not stand a chance against a menstrually liberated world. Collectively, it profits off the idea that the menstruating body is deviant and should be controlled. This commodification of patriarchal somatophobia exemplifies the vulnerable position of menstruators in society. The menstrual product industry centers its products around the comfort of society rather than the comfort of the menstruator. As Jill Wood explains in “(In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative”: “the commodification of menstruation

through ‘feminine hygiene’ care continues to promise new and improved ways for [menstruators] to keep themselves ‘clean’ and their periods a secret—either by opting out of menses altogether via menstrual suppression or through products that render menses invisible” (Wood 319). The emphasis on this commodification of menstrual invisibility demonstrates the need for a social reorientation of the function of menstruation. Menstruation, in this context, is not a unique and personal experience a subject has within their body, but instead, a universally-shameful secret that demands regular maintenance.

Toxic narratives like these that the FemCare industry utilizes are deeply harmful to all menstruators because they contribute to a false rhetoric about the experience of menstruation. As Pryzbylo and Fahs explain: “menstrual product advertisements (Mpads), since their early years, have been reliant on misogyny discourses around menstruation, portraying menstruation as shameful and unmentionable; vaginas themselves as the source of squalor and filth; and menstrual blood is requiring containment, concealment, and sanitization” (Przybylo and Fahs 375). Menstruators are constantly being told that their most uncontrollable bodily function marks them as socially unacceptable. Their bodies are deviant, and should be policed or controlled.

Menstrual liberation challenges the social rhetoric of menstrual shame and silence, two phenomena which contribute to what J. Persdotter calls menstu-normativity, or “the hegemonic social system of multiple and contradictory normativities that order and stratify menstruation and menstruating” (Persdotter 358). This term is used to describe a larger, more holistic social attitude around the menstruating body in society. Persdotter uses the term ‘menstu-normativity’ to explain the potential for menstrual autonomy and self-determination in society. It is explained in Klara Rydström’s article “Degendering Menstruation: Making Trans Menstruators Matter”, which utilizes and explains the Persdotter’s ‘menstu-normativity’ that: “normativities are

continuously co-produced by everyone and everything, which means we are all, always, culpable in creating normativities” (Rydström 953). This statement highlights the reality that all systems of oppression are made up of individuals and that all individuals have the capability to question and change the structures they are a part of (Rydström 954). In short, Persdotter is asserting that society is choosing to enforce somatophobia—and, thus, can just as easily decide against the mind/spirit/body separation.

Wood, Rydström, and other scholars working in the field of Critical Menstrual Studies, reveal a rhetoric of bodily control and domination within the menstrual hygiene industry. They communicate a social “menstrual etiquette” which forces individuals “to conceal their menstrual flow and to remain in the menstrual closet if they want to occupy public spaces” (Johnston-Robledo 190). The need for menstrual liberation is made clear via the sentiment that the menstruating body is unfit to occupy space in society without some external method of control. Public spaces are socially controlled, conceptualized, and created in ways that privilege the non-menstruating body, thus forcing menstruators to a disabled positionality that requires them to adjust their bodily experiences to fit those unsupportive spaces.

The rhetoric of shame utilized by the FemCare industry promotes discretion and silence towards a function that is already uncomfortable. Rather than designing products that are meant to address symptoms of menstruation for the comfort of menstruators, menstrual products are often meant to further the fragmentation between the mind/spirit and body. Rydström explains how they and other scholars have “critically examined the representation of menstrual products as mutually constitutive of menstrual stigma and taboo; pads and tampons are depicted as keeping the menstrual blood at a distance, and protecting menstruators from leakage, keeping the body in control” (Rydström 953). Somatophobia encourages the menstruating subject to

physically distance themselves from their bodily experiences through the use of menstrual products designed for the purpose of concealment, rather than comfort. This reality affirms the idea that body policing is necessary in an imperial patriarchal society.

Through the lens of embodied subjectivity, the menstruating body is viewed as wholly human regardless of any bodily or reproductive function. Therefore, “FemCare” and its rhetoric must be reoriented around the idea of personal comfort and menstruator determination. The menstrual product industry is rooted in the external identification of the body rather than being an internal embrace. Menstrual liberation would encourage a social reorientation of the menstrual product industry around the individual consumer, their comfort, and their experience of menstruation.

Menstrual liberation demands that periods not be seen as a gendered function, and it is apparent that the “feminine care industry” is inherently exclusionary in this context. The term itself associates the act of menstruating (and hiding it) with a feminine identity, which causes exclusion of and discomfort for gender-expansive menstruators.<sup>7</sup> Rydström explains this dynamic further, stating that: “when cis and trans menstruators are seen as binary categories given by nature, the intra-actions of cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and mestru[-]normativity make cis women the normative menstruators, standards against which trans menstruators (as in *non-cis* menstruators) are deviant” (Rydström 954). Because menstrual products are marketed as tools for catering to society’s expectations, the gendered perception of menstruation communicates to gender-expansive people that they further deviate from the socially altered, non-menstruating

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<sup>7</sup> The term “gender expansive” is one I first heard while attending Dr. Treva Lindsey’s speech “A Refusal of Non-Mattering: The Multiple Crisis Against Women and Girls” at Butler University on [21 March 2023]. Lindsey defines the term as: witnessing with intention and solidarity.

body. Menstrual shame, in this instance, serves as a double-bind of social policing by 1) enforcing a false gender binary, and 2) insisting that menstruation be hidden.

Many menstruators learn about their bodies through a veil of shame. As such, the bodily processes and hormonal fluctuations that cause menstruation are widely unknown and misunderstood. Somatophobia has created a society that views conversations about bodily functions as taboo, and formal education about the body is typically only given in an institutionalized setting, with the purpose of educating about sexual intercourse rather than bodily health and experiences (Guidone 276). The menstruating body is portrayed in these contexts as something mysterious and shameful. Explanations about the subject of menstruation are often shared in whispers of other menstruators. Heather Guidone explains this reality in her essay “The Womb Wanders Not: Enhancing Endometriosis Education in a Culture of Menstrual Misinformation”. She writes: “menstrual teaching remains hampered by deficient cycles of misinformation. Education and perception are primarily communicated by mothers, sisters, or friends who themselves may lack accurate understanding, with resulting poor body literacy regarding reproductive autonomy” (Guidone 276). The shame somatophobia creates around the individual menstruating body breeds a wider social atmosphere of bodily ignorance. The lack of body literacy Guidone describes is responsible for a plethora of systemic bodily abuses and daily sufferings.

The videos of menstruators asking their non-menstruating partners about menstruation, mentioned in the introduction, sparked a menstrual revolution of sorts and turned social media into a tool for menstrual liberation. Some users began posting videos and infographics with information about menstruation, with the goal of countering the systemic silence around the subject. Media influencers like Kim Rosas, aka @periodnirvana on TikTok, began reviewing,

explaining, and demonstrating menstrual products. They answer the questions menstruators have been unable to ask, and the products they review range from menstrual underwear to menstrual cups and discs, all with the goal of helping every menstruator understand the products they need (Rosas). Rosas' bio reads: "every person's body is unique, and finding products that manage your cycle with comfort and convenience is our top priority. Period Nirvana is the educational arm that provides helpful resources, a matchmaking quiz, and video guides to make reaching period Nirvana easier" (Rosas). Rosas also has a YouTube channel that goes in-depth about menstrual cups and disks, and publishes articles about breaking news in the world of menstruation on her website. Her articles answer questions menstruators are often afraid to ask, like "can you pee with a menstrual cup in?"(Rosas) and "do menstrual cups make you loose?" (Rosas). She approaches these topics by removing the taboo feeling associated with asking questions about the menstruating body. Her questions do not shame her audiences or cause them to feel bad for their lack of bodily literacy; instead, Rosas's use of TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms makes her information easily accessible and understandable to her target audience.

Placing comfort and ease at the center of menstruators' experiences embodies everything menstrual liberation stands for and improving the experience of each individual menstruator is the driving goal of Rosas' organization. The information they provide is meant to cultivate a sense of joyful embodiment for the menstruating subject and help them to meet their body's needs in a dignified way. Rosas's work also normalizes conversations about menstruation, as they can appear on a consumer's feed alongside videos of dogs and photos of a friend's brunch, depending on the algorithm. Learning about the menstruating body through taking action and

engaging with this content has the potential to empower menstruators and educate around menstruation commonplace.

### **Menstrual Liberation for Healthcare**

Menstrual liberation has the potential to drastically alter the healthcare industry, as it would reject further fragmentation and dismissal of the menstruating body by healthcare professionals. Generally, menstruating patients are less likely to be taken seriously when describing pain and other symptoms of menstruation, and their symptoms are often dismissed as exaggerated or a result of stress and anxiety (Guidone 274). Additionally, the menstrual stigma makes it difficult for some menstruators to discuss their experiences with menstruation due to the feelings of shame associated with the taboo.

Health conditions associated with the menstruating body, such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), can affect menstruators on a daily basis, yet the symptoms and implications of these conditions are not widely understood (Guidone 276). These conditions go underdiagnosed, largely due to the lack of easily approachable or understandable information in society (Guidone 272). Currently, the underdiagnosis of endometriosis and PCOS is due to the reality that “some patients may simply fail to seek timely medical help due to their own inability to identify symptoms as ‘abnormal’— a failing of our menstrual education system” (Guidone 276). Menstrual liberation would create space for menstruators to have conversations about their experiences, which would help to both educate individuals about their bodies and also help them to understand its functions. In creating a conversation between the menstruating body’s functions and the impact they leave on menstruators, menstrual liberation highlights the notion that there is no universal experience of the menstruating body. It also allows individual menstruators the



opportunity to engage in dialogue with society about their needs and experiences, through menstrual liberation's pillar of self determination.

Within the context of menstrual healthcare, this framework will challenge notions of sexism and unconscious biases that contribute to high rates of misdiagnosis and a general dismissal of pain experienced by menstruating patients (Guidone 276). Because of lingering somatophobic ideology, the menstruating body is always viewed by society as biologically deviant from the white, non-menstruating, healthy, able-bodied subject who serves as the baseline for medical and anatomical knowledge. As such, Guidone explains the impact of menstrual bias found in Western Medical contexts and the experience of pain. She writes: “symptoms are routinely misdiagnosed or otherwise dismissed...those suffering may be disparaged as ‘menstrual moaners’ or portrayed as simply unable to ‘cope with normal pain’” (Guidone 272). Here, the comment that pain is, or should be viewed as “normal” to the menstruating body is extremely troubling and problematic, because the implication is that the mind and spirit need to ignore signals from the body. Pain is a signal that something is wrong, and dismissing the pain of menstruators implies their bodies are deviant or unnatural. Without menstrual liberation, our society will continue to view the experience of menstrual pain as one that should be overcome or mastered. This is disgraceful and implementing ideas of menstrual liberation and embodied subjectivity are vital to changing this injustice. The experience of pain in any body should be viewed as something to be treated and accommodated through systemic pain management. Anything less is a denial of humanity.

Menstrual liberation is already enacted through Somedays, a Canadian brand of menstrual care products, that I believe is revolutionizing the industry. Their products offer natural relief to pelvic pain and other symptoms of menstruation. They offer creams and gels that

are applied topically to the abdomen, heating pads, tea, and bath soaks— all of which are meant to alleviate the discomfort and pain associated with menstruation. The entire company is oriented around the comfort of menstruators, a condition that is commonly ignored by society.

Somedays, like Period Nirvana, utilizes digital campaigns across social media to raise awareness about menstrual health. Their “Period Pain is Not Normal” campaign creates space for discussion regarding endometriosis and informs members of society that menstruators should not be expected to suffer in shameful silence over an involuntary function. The videos posted on their socials show non-menstruating people, usually cis-men, experiencing menstrual cramping through a simulation; the device they are attached to has ten levels of sensation and Somedays employees stop at each level to explain the type and prevalence of cramping non-menstruators are experiencing (@getsomedays 2023). The goal of this exercise is to challenge the idea that menstruators should have to work through their pain to maintain a presence in society. In a world where period pain “is estimated to impact up to 93% of all adolescents...and between 45 and 95% of all people with periods” (Guidone 272), this type of activism is vital to nurturing a social shift away from somatophobia and towards bearing with-ness<sup>8</sup>. Providing non-menstruating bodies with the experience of pain and discomfort of a menstrual cycle is liberatory because it places the needs and sensations of the menstruating body at the center of the company’s interaction with the outside world. The shift to embodied subjectivity and menstrual liberation cannot occur until the experience of menstruation is understood; however, that understanding, in contexts that are saturated in somatophobic discourse, like the corporate world, require the empathy this simulation sparks.

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<sup>8</sup> “With-ness” is a term I first heard at Dr. Treva Lindsey’s speech “A Refusal of Non-Mattering: The Multiple Crisis Against Women and Girls”. It is used to explain the concept experiencing a moment in solidarity rather than just as a passive observer.

Somedays also operate outside of the assumed gender binary. The website reads: “we are a mix of queer, disabled, gender diverse people who live with chronic pain and endometriosis. We are deeply passionate about and committed to the advancement of holistic and inclusive period care” (Somedays). Placing gender-expansive people at the center of their mission to end period pain is menstrual liberation. Creating products meant to ease the discomfort of their bodies and others is menstrual liberation. Encouraging non-menstruating people to experience menstrual pain is menstrual liberation. All of these actions place the individual experience of the body at the forefront of conversations around the role of the body in society.

It is important to note that these last two examples of menstrual liberation in action—Period Nirvana and Somedays—are still businesses, meaning they profit off the menstruating body. The inclusive and ethical practices they employ are ultimately benefiting from menstruator discomfort as it addresses an existing market gap. However, their campaigns do not add social harm to the menstruating body through an enforcement of somatophobic ideology, as most other menstrual companies do. Yes, true liberation is incompatible with capitalism, but the aspects of menstrual liberation that these companies address, encourage systemic change in society.

### **Menstrual Liberation in Capitalism**

In the context of capitalism, society’s somatophobic framework requires the mind and spirit to deny the body's needs in order to create profit and maintain productivity. The experience of menstrual pain or discomfort serves as a reminder of menstruators' lack of bodily control and, as such, is silenced in the workforce. Emma Barnett, a UK journalist and menstrual activist, wrote her book *Period* about this dynamic. Barnett explains that menstruators “fear being seen as

weak in the workplace, so say nothing about menstruation and any issues they might be having” (Barnett 14). Menstrual cramping, headaches, or other symptoms are denied or hidden in an effort to appease the somatophobic separation of bodies from the mind/soul that capitalism enforces.

This notion of sacrificing or enduring the experience of the body for the benefit of the mind is a remnant of Plato’s mind/body/soul distinction. American capitalist society functions by enforcing this division. Just as the FemCare industry profits from the stigma it helps produce, American labor is built around the idea that the mind is only as useful as the body allows it to be. Spelman explains this idea of Plato’s through the context of war arguing that: “to have more concern for your body than your soul is to act just like a woman; hence, the most proper penalty for a soldier who surrenders to save his body when he would be willing to die out of the courage of his soul is for the soldier to be turned into a woman” (Spelman 115). Arguably, in replacing the term ‘woman’ with ‘menstruator’ the intention of the statement is preserved. If one places the physical condition of their bodily experience before that of their mind, they may be seen as weak, inefficient, and feminine. Most of the oppressive shame perpetuated by engaging in the politics of somatophobia are the result of societal reliance upon the idea of biological determinism.

The systemic denial or reduction of menstrual suffering occurs beyond the workforce and is a contributing factor to nearly all experiences of somatophobia in the menstruating body that have been mentioned previously. Piran explains this reduction, writing: “within patriarchy and related ideological systems [like capitalism], the stigma, silencing, and lack of social and system support marks menarche as a biological event associated with embodied demotion in social power and ruptures in relational networks and communities” (211). In essence, a menstruator’s

first period marks a moment of social renegotiation over their body. It may also mark a moment of confusion, uncertainty, and potential misinformation, often originating from the stifling stigma surrounding menstruation.

The solutions proposed to the issues presented thus far may seem redundant. However, this redundancy highlights the complexity of the issue being discussed. Somatophobia is so deeply ingrained in our society that menstrual liberation must be addressed on multiple fronts. There is no possible one-size fits all solution, but instead a smaller list of cultural shifts that are necessary for menstrual liberation to be achieved. The existence of the menstruating body in society is nuanced and contradictory, as each body experiences menstruation in a different way; yet the stigma, silence, and taboo that control the menstruating body is almost universal. Naturally, the solution of menstrual liberation is just as complex and nuanced as the conflict it addresses. In its simplest form, menstrual liberation is a conversation between the menstruating subject and the world. It is impossible to exist as a menstruator in today's society without engaging in the mindsets, behaviors, and attitudes that contribute to menstruation's stigmatization. Jill Wood explains this reality, writing: "when [menstruators] internalize menstrual discourse, they become disembodied, self-objectify and willingly engage in their own self-surveillance and self-discipline...Resistance to the menstrual concealment imperative must begin with making it visible" (Wood 331). Facilitating conversations about menstrual liberation and embodied subjectivity is vital for the future self-sovereignty of our society and the people within it.

The good news is menstrual liberation has already begun. During my semester abroad, I learned that menstrual liberation was a global movement. As a student at the University of Edinburgh, I was entitled to free menstrual products from HeyGirls as part of a university policy

initiative. This policy is a result of the *Access to Free Period Products - Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021*. The policy “places duties on local authorities and education providers to make period products attainable free of charge to anyone who needs them” ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot)). This policy is a huge step toward eliminating period poverty—the inability to access menstrual products due to a lack of financial resources or infrastructure— in Scotland. While implementing this policy does not eliminate all inability to access products, it does ease the burden of menstrual accessibility for menstruators. Scottish menstruators now have guaranteed access to the products necessary for living socially and economically mobile lives.

As a student at the University of Edinburgh, I was able to fill out a brief HeyGirls survey asking about my menstrual product preferences, and I received my products in the mail a few weeks later. Rather than assuming all menstruators have the same product preferences (as most bathrooms that provide products do), they offer six bundle options to choose from: “2 x pair of reusable period pants {underwear}, 1 small period cup (suitable for age 25 and under, and not given birth vaginally) & sterilising pot, 1 large period & sterilising pot, 6 boxes of pads, 4 boxes of tampons, Pack of 5 reusable pads and travel bag” ([surveymonkey.co.uk](http://surveymonkey.co.uk)). Each menstruator is allowed to select up to two bundles, which helps to guarantee they have enough products to meet their needs. The survey also includes information about how to determine the correct cup size, and the reusable options also offer a level of self-sufficiency not normally granted from disposable products, as they do not have to be repurchased. While there are currently only two cup options available, providing any menstrual pot or product for free is a step in the right direction. HeyGirls also provides menstruators with a free sterilizing cup, which gives them the resources necessary to safely use their cup for multiple cycles without having to boil their cup in

communal pots if they do not wish to do so.<sup>9</sup> The HeyGirls program provides students with the opportunity to reclaim their menstrual status. Not having to worry about affording products that engage in respectability politics allows students to spend more time thinking about their studies and less time worrying about how they are going to access menstrual products.

Spain is another country drastically reconsidering its perception of the menstruating body. In February, 2023, the Spanish government passed the amendment “Organic Law 1/2023 of February 28, on sexual and reproductive health and voluntary interruption of pregnancy”. This amendment officially requires employers to provide menstruating employees with paid time off for pain related to their menstrual cycle. Making Spain the first “Western” country to do so. Paid menstrual leave is a rejection of somatophobia. It provides menstruators with the agency to address sensations of pain associated with their menstrual cycles, without veiwing their experiences of discomfort as something to be conquered. This legislation is menstrually liberated because it allows menstruators to respect their body’s needs without facing social or work-related consequences.

The above examples of menstrual liberation in action demonstrate the immense potential for a radical shift in society’s perspective of the body. Somatophobia works for no body, as it does not account for the existence of chronic illness or disability. The menstruating body currently occupies the place of the marginalization in society due to its gendered and policed existence. Utilizing menstrual liberation as a tool for achieving embodied subjectivity will help to make the world a more comfortable place for all. Menstrual liberation has already begun. Period Nirvana and Somedays are revolutionizing the menstrual product industry by anchoring their business practices around menstruator education and comfort. Scotland and Spain have

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<sup>9</sup> Menstrual cups must be sterilized after each cycle, typically they are boiled for 5-7 minutes. (cite). With sterlizing pot, a cup can be microwaved in the pot with water for 5-7 minutes, instead of using a kitchen pot.

changed how governments view menstruation by providing menstruators with the support they need to comfortably navigate the world around it without having to ignore their own functions.

In the US, a program like HeyGirls would help address the growing epidemic of period poverty. Currently, in the US, it is estimated that roughly 1 in 4 menstruating students have difficulty affording menstrual products (Thinx and PERIOD). In the same study, 51% of students surveyed revealed they have “wor[n] period products for longer than recommended” (Thinx 2021). In addition to this, one-third of students (33%) reported missing out on school because they did not have access to the menstrual products they needed (Thinx 2021). Menstrual liberation would eliminate this systemic stigmatization of the menstruating body. Centralizing the menstruating body within society will make it impossible for period poverty and other limiting experiences of menstruation to continue. All schools and government organizations should have free menstrual products to ensure that the menstruating subject is supported and their presence is valued.

## **Conclusion**

Realizing I was a contributor to my own bodily policing helped me understand how restrictive society is toward the menstruating body. The pervasive mindset of somatophobia creates a world where bodies that menstruate, have chronic pain or illness, or exist with a disability are not frequently viewed as fully human. Society does not have to continue to exist within this shameful reality. Scholars like Elizabeth Spelman and Hortense Spillers have proven the necessity for change and initiated a framework for inciting it, through their definitions of subjecthood. Embodied subjectivity places the mind in conversation with the body and recognizes all humans as full and socially acceptable subjects.



Menstrual liberation furthers the idea of embodied subjectivity by demanding society view menstruators as complete and valued individuals. This term is rooted in notions of self-identification developed in Black Feminist Thought and presented by Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective Statement. Menstrual liberation's close alignment to BFT necessitates the complete restructuring of Western culture to embrace all aspects and experiences of menstruation so that menstruators are supported. The framework utilizes ideas of socialism, as seen in the University of Edinburgh's menstrual product policy. Menstrual liberation encourages the menstruating subject to connect with their body and meet their needs in a way that is simultaneously comfortable and sustainable; these ideas are reflected @periodnirvana's mission to help menstruators find the best products for them and Somedays' campaign against pelvic pain. Through catering to the needs of each individual body, menstrual liberation will address the stigmatized silence that confines menstruators to an existence of shame and complacent discomfort. Implementing this ideology will create a world where menstruating subjects can send the email: "My menstrual cramps are too bad, today. I will be working from the comfort of home," to their non-menstruating bosses, without fear of social consequences.

## **Aknowledgements**

This project is the result of over a decade of grappling with menstrual shame, discomfort, and anger. My experiences with menstruation are the only reason I am writing this honors thesis and as such, I would like to begin by thanking my body, for its constant role as my protector and the determinant of my experience of reality.

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