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## Re-Coding Blood: Menstruation as Activism

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# Re-Coding Blood: Menstruation as Activism

## **Abstract**

This reflection seeks to untangle the stigmatic ways we culturally frame menstruation. It explores the reasons why the FemCare industry and our contemporary culture position menstruation as abject and as embarrassment. It also offers contemporary strategies that can serve as activist modes of reframing the act and connotations associated with menstruation.

## **Author/Artist Bio**

Dr. Shayda Kafai is a lecturer at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona's Ethnic and Women Studies Department. She earned her Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from Claremont Graduate University. Her dissertation titled, "Re-inscribing Disability: The Performance Activism of Sins Invalid" explores the performance art and disability justice work of Sins Invalid, a San Francisco Bay Area based performance project. As a queer, disabled woman of color, she is committed to exploring the numerous ways we can reclaim our bodies from intersecting systems of oppression. Shayda lives in Los Angeles with her wife, Amy.

## **Keywords**

menstruation, activism, blood

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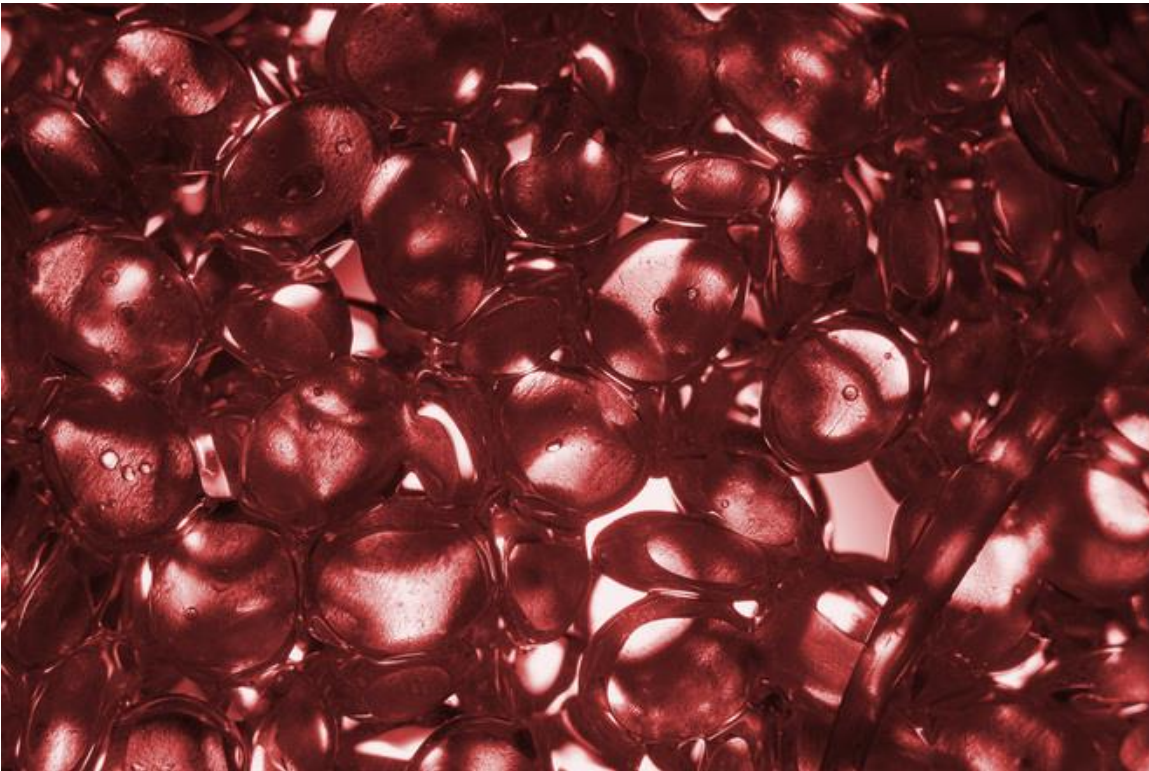


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## **Re-Coding Blood: Menstruation as Activism**

*Shayda Kafai*

I have been thinking about menstruation and the role of the bleeding body, what it means, and how we are taught to interpret it. It is after all the cyclical process that I journey through each month. I write this meditation knowing that our bodies are more than matter and bone. They are aesthetics and initiators of policy. They are keepers and tellers of stories. Menstrual blood, by extension, is more than tissue and cells. It holds rigidly crafted narratives.



I write this piece knowing that this sometimes regular, sometimes irregular, or nonexistent process is loaded with connotation. It is something that we speak of using euphemisms: Aunt Flo, shark week, the rag. We discuss this seemingly normative bodily

act in whispers. I use the word normative remembering that we must also destabilize our understandings of menstruation; it is not an act limited to women nor do all women menstruate (Bobel, 2010, p. 11). Here is a biological function read as embarrassment, fear, and taboo. I have distinct memories of being in middle school and reaching into my backpack, hiding my pad in my hands, hoping it doesn't fall onto the classroom floor. I remember standing up, feeling the release of blood and praying that I don't stain my light blue jeans. These are learned behaviors, reactions taught to the collective, menstruating we: we have seen plenty of movies where menstruation is the source of shaming, bullying, and taunting laughter. Remember *Carrie* or *Mean Girls* or *The Runaways*? They were movies that foregrounded "the period" as stigmatic, as abject.

Rooted in her book, *Power of Horror*, feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1982) names menstrual blood as abject, as that which is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (p. 1). Central for Kristeva is the argument that this act is not simply unclean or dirty, but rather, that it "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p. 4). Perhaps this is why menstruation is not spoken about with pride or with just plain practicality. It is something that instead frames the menstruating individual as erratic, emotional, and disgusting.

Our FemCare industry and our popular culture reinforce the terror and unthinkability of menstrual blood. Elissa Stein and Susan Kim (2009), authors of *Flow: A Cultural Story of Menstruation*, remind us that in both Western and non-Western cultures, menstruation is hidden in "... a figurative box (scented of course), stuffed deep inside the great medicine cabinet of American culture: out of sight and unmentioned" (p.

ix). Hegemony teaches us to sanitize the fact that some of us menstruate once a month; it is the unspoken secret. Part of this sanitation informs the socially constructed belief that menstruation and menstrual hygiene products emasculate. In a 2010 print advertisement from Kotex, we see the image of an open road with a car driving down the highway. The text in the foreground reads, “I tied a tampon to my keyring so my brother wouldn’t take my car. It worked.” We are taught that as an extension of femininity, feminine hygiene products repel men. The “tampon run” storyline—a man running to the store to get a tampon or pad for his friend of significant other—depicted in movies and television also perpetuates the myth of abjection, of the dread and shame associated with anything and everything menstruation (Rosewarne, 2012 p. 28).

The menstruating “we:” our bodies are entangled with this problematic mythology. What would it look like to shift the discourse around menstruation? When I think of this question I think of feminist M.I.A. drummer Kiran Gandhi’s public action to run the London marathon in April 2015 without wearing a pad or tampon during her period. She wrote on her blog,

I ran the whole marathon with my period blood running down my legs ...  
If there’s one way to transcend oppression, it’s to run a marathon in  
whatever way you want. On the marathon course, sexism can be beaten.  
Where the stigma of a woman’s period is irrelevant, and we can re-write  
the rules as we choose. (Gandhi, 2015, n.p.)

Gandhi’s decision to run without any sanitary (an odd, though fitting choice of word given the cultural construction of menstruation) products serves as a bold and necessarily

loud way to start the conversation. She removed menstruation and blood from the discourse of sanitation and secrecy and demanded that we look, that we consider, that we talk. Her public reveal of something that we have been taught to isolate to innuendos resulted in coverage in news sources such as the *New York Times* and *The Telegraph* to more social sources like *People*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Buzzfeed*. The image of Gandhi standing, smiling with her fellow runners and bleeding resounded. She showed us what we are not “supposed” to see. In this public venue, she demanded our looking and consideration.

I also think of New York City’s June 2016 passing of the first legislative package in the U.S. that allows for free access to tampons and pads in public spaces like schools, shelters, and prisons. Julissa Ferreras-Copeland, the sponsor of the bills, stated that, “Providing menstrual hygiene products privately, immediately and for free is also about sending a body-positive message by not perpetuating shame and humiliation” (as cited in Rinkunas, 2016, n.p.). Although the bills still needs to be signed by New York City major Bill de Blasio, these set of bills serves as a powerful, legal form of discursive revision.

These are only two in a series of diverse historical and contemporary moments in menstrual activism, a movement that began in the 1970s. The menstruating “we:” at one point or another we have been made to feel shame about our bleeding bodies. Commercials, magazines, movies, and jokes all teach us the same rhetoric of embarrassment and stigma. Let us shift the conversation and familiarize ourselves with the history of menstrual activism. Let us incorporate conversations of menstruation and abjection into our fourth wave feminist movements. Remember the intersectional discussions that we need to inject into the FemCare industry: the need for access to pads

and tampons for homeless folks and incarcerated folks. Remember to include queer, gender non-conforming, trans, and intersex folks in the dialogue. Intrigued? Here are a few names to start your travels: Rupi Kaur, Jen Lewis, Miki Agrawal, and Chris Bobel.

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