There Will Be Blood: Menstruation, Orientation, and the Practice of Resistance

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Abstract: *While feminist scholars have exposed the many ways in which menstruation is used to oppress and marginalize, less attention has been paid to the way menstrual blood is marshalled in practices of political resistance. Drawing on the phenomenolog- ical insights of Sara Ahmed, I argue that the intentional public dis- play of menstrual blood harnesses menstrual blood's abject status to expose and disrupt forms of power. This "mis" or "queer" use of an abject object contests forms of bodily privilege and power and opens up new forms of subjectivity for menstruating individ- uals..*

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Roughly one quarter of the world's population is of reproductive age. That means that on any given day, more than 300 million people have their periods.[1] That's 1.8 billion every month.[2] Those whose bodies shed their uterine lining monthly do so for an average of almost forty years. Despite the ubiquity of this phenomenon, menstruation remains highly stigmatized. Deeply entrenched norms and beliefs, whether instantiated in law and policy or perpetuated by everyday language and habitual behaviors, make public discussion of menstruation and public display of menstrual blood taboo, sometimes even dangerous. Dominant depictions of menstruation in general, menstrual blood in particular, and the menstruating body by association, often render these sources of horror and disgust, giving rise to rituals and narra- tives of purity, concealment, and shame. Indeed, the mere sight of menstrual blood continues to shock and dismay. Condemned at times for being disgusting, inappropriate, or unladylike, the public exposure of menstrual blood often prompts calls for its expulsion from the public realm.[3] Such practices of exclusion and separation of the supposedly dirty from the clean, often referred to as abjection, constitute menstrual blood and the body from which it leaks as abject objects, sources of horror and disgust to be cast aside. Until quite recently, public discussion of menstruation and menstrual stigma was something of a fringe issue, even among feminists and public health advocates. Now,

however, menstruation is "having a moment"[4] and periods have "gone public"[5] as policy makers, activists, and everyday citizens grapple with and respond to the reality and implications of menstrual stigma.[6] As research shows, menstrual stigma, embodied in policies and practices of abjection, jeopardizes individual physical and mental well-being, undermines educational attainment for some, negatively impacts economic secu- rity for others, and engenders a host of human rights violations for many.[7] Irrespective of whether one's personal experience of menstrua- tion is positive or negative, and regardless of whether one menstruates or not, menstrual stigma impacts the way we see and treat people with periods.[8] It often lowers the self-esteem of menstruators while encour- aging bullying behavior on the part of non-menstruators.[9] As such, it forms a central component of gender oppression and severely limits the ability to take menstruation seriously as a matter of public policy and the public good.

In response, scholars and activists, particularly those working in the emerging field of Critical Menstruation Studies (CMS), call for efforts to normalize and destigmatize menstruation.[10] What this means can vary considerably, but it often entails advancing policies and practices that treat menstruation as a natural bodily function that deserves public support. For example, some normalization and destigmatization efforts seek to lessen "period poverty" by ensuring that menstrual products (e.g., tampons and pads) are as available and affordable as toilet paper and that bathroom facilities are accessible and secure. Others work to end the "pink tax" that treats menstrual products as luxury items, or to mitigate "period shaming" by creating educational materials designed to dispel myths, explain the biology of periods, and break down taboos against public discussion of menstru- ation.[11] Whatever form they take, normalization and destigmatiza- tion efforts attempt to reduce the horror and disgust associated with menstrual blood and the menstruating body, to move menstruation, as Iris Marion Young put it some years ago, from the "monstrous" to the "mundane."[12]

While much more remains to be said about the complexity and insidiousness of menstrual stigma, and about the myriad and creative efforts being adopted to mitigate it, I turn my attention to a lesser studied aspect of menstruation: the intentional use of menstrual blood as a disruptive form of political protest.[13] I look specifically at the No Wash Protest by Northern Irish republican women in Armagh Prison in 1980, the South African Women for Water protest of 2009, and Kiran Gandhi's running of the London Marathon in 2015 to argue that, despite occurring in different contexts for disparate reasons, all three practices of resistance harnessed menstrual blood's stigmatized status, mobilizing deep-seated fears of menstrual blood and the menstruating body in their efforts to expose and contest often naturalized forms of bodily privilege and power. Drawing on the critical phenomenolog- ical insights of Sara Ahmed, I suggest that this can be understood as a "mis" or "queer" use of an abject object that disorients those in power. Its value and effects thus go beyond, and

may even be at odds with, the more traditional goals of menstrual advocacy and activism—normal- izing and destigmatizing. Indeed, it is partly their embrace of bloody horror that enables protestors to turn an otherwise abject object into a useful political tool, transforming abject individuals into powerful political actors, and creating forms of subjectivity and community often denied by the dictates of menstrual stigma.

This argument unfolds as follows. In the first section, I explore the social processes of abjection that make menstrual blood an object towards which an orientation of horror, disgust, and concealment is expected. I draw on Sara Ahmed's insights about orientation, objects, and use[14] to show how embodied individuals "reside in space," moving through a world filed with objects, both tangible and intangible, that shape perceptions and identity.[15] Attention to abjection as an orienta- tion reveals that the proximity of varied objects matters, that distinct forms of power direct us towards some objects and away from others, and that orientations instruct us to use objects in ways that make some futures possible while foreclosing others. Orientation's implicit instructions for use shape how embodied individuals come to under- stand themselves and their identity whether they menstruate or not.

In the second section, I explore the radical potential of exploiting the abject qualities of menstrual blood to engender a variety of social changes, some of which are, at least at first glance, unrelated to menstrual stigma.[16] As Ahmed's work makes clear, orientations are never totalizing, perception is only ever partial, and individuals can engage with or use objects in unintended and unexpected ways. The three protests explored in this section illustrate that the mis or queer use of an object can serve as the basis for political resistance and contestation. In fact, when an object is used in a way that rejects the instructions given by those in power, it can engender, though by no means guarantee, the disorientation of those who take their bodily privilege for granted.[17] The public display of menstrual blood, I argue, can be such a misuse.[18]

In the conclusion, I reflect briefly on the implications of an Ahmedian analysis of bloody protests for theorizing resistance more broadly. While much of my argument is focused on the potentially transformative effects of an abject object's misuse, here I reflect on the value of exploring the particularities of lived political experiences, particularly those that receive little attention, despite the often-inde- terminate nature of that political engagement.[19]

MAKING MENSTRUAL BLOOD AN ABJECT OBJECT

Menstrual blood—actually a mixture of blood, cervical mucus, vaginal secretions, and endometrial tissue—is a bodily fluid that is naturally expelled from the body by biological processes. It is often a sign of an individual's

reproductive health. And yet, as I suggested above, the very sight of menstrual blood and, by association, the body from which it leaks, offends and disgusts many. So offensive is it that in recent years Instagram has removed images of menstrual blood from its pages on the grounds that such images violated its community standards, while individuals showing visible signs of menstruation in public places have been harassed, barred from entering certain spaces, asked to leave their places of work, and even fired.[20]

Menstrual blood's treatment as a repulsive object to be feared and cast out from the public realm is nothing new. Indeed, the work of anthropologists and feminists reveals an almost universal, long- standing tradition of defining menstrual blood as abject, as a pollutant, an impure or dirty object from which it is imperative to separate.[21] As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, religion, literature, and traditions teach us of menstrual blood's "baleful powers." It is said to make harvests go bad, fruit fall from trees, and meat rot. It can turn cream sour and opium bitter, and damage fragile objects simply by its proximity.[22] So "cataclysmic" is menstrual blood's supposedly contaminating and polluting power that, according to Julia Kristeva, communities design elaborate rituals of exclusion and construct taboos to keep it at bay.[23] Such practices and narratives of exclusion, which Kristeva calls abjec- tion, include prohibiting men from having sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman or barring menstruating women from cooking because of a belief that contact with menstrual blood causes illness.[24] Abjection may also entail banning menstruating individuals from the home,[25] barring them from entering a house of worship,[26] requiring them to undergo a ritual cleansing, or shaming and harassing them out of public spaces when they have their periods.[27] These are not just frivolous rituals or examples of animus. The purpose of abjection is, according to Kristeva, to establish the boundaries and borders that keep the "clean and proper" social and individual body safe. Indeed, on Kristeva's account the expulsion of menstrual blood, one among a number of abjection rituals that may differ across time and space, is "coextensive with the social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as collective level."[28]

Such rituals around and narratives about the abject status of menstrual blood seem to suggest that it is, by its very nature, a pollutant, and that the appropriate response is separation and exclu- sion. However, as other theories of abjection remind us, objects are not harmful, disgusting, or contaminating in and of themselves. Instead, "objects are rendered disgusting or dirty through implicit social agree- ment," according to Michelle Meagher.[29] This agreement may be, as Georges Bataille suggests, an act of sovereign power or it can result from the participation of the collectivity.[30] Indeed, abject objects, writes Imogene Tyler, only come to be through a collective agreement that is generated over time and "through repeated citation." This repeti- tion produces a "disgust consensus" that then informs ways of seeing, thinking,

acting, and governing.[31]

Abjection, on this account, is not a simple process of identifying an already existing object or threat to be expelled, but is rather a gener- ative process that produces both abject objects and abject subjects. As Sara Ahmed explains, "the abject is never about an object that appears before the subject; the abject does not reside in an object, as either its quality or matter."[32] It is, instead, in and through the very prac- tices designed to cast out offending objects, and produce borders and boundaries between what and who is a threat and what and who is "clean and proper," that objects are constituted as abject to begin with. Objects come to be seen as disgusting or dangerous, in other words, through complex social processes that include the very practice of expulsion itself.[33]

Below, I explore the processes by which menstrual blood comes to be an abject object in greater detail in order to illuminate its implications for how menstruators and non-menstruators feel, think, and act. More specifically, I treat our reactions to and rituals around menstrual blood in terms of orientations, objects, and use. Practices of abjection are, that is, manifestations of power that "shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward."[34] Such orientations put certain objects, physical and otherwise, within our reach, directing us towards them in particular ways that also instruct us in their use.[35] This Ahmedian approach to menstruation-related abjection draws our attention to the distinct and varied objects we engage with to produce menstrual blood and the menstruating body as abject. It also highlights the often-implicit instructions for their use that accompany this engagement, and the impressions left behind that inform subjectivity.

ON ORIENTATIONS, OBJECTS, AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

Menstruation-related practices of abjection are, I argue, orienta- tions that teach us not only to see and treat menstrual blood and the menstruating body as an object of horror and disgust, but also to avoid, conceal, or expel it completely from the public realm. The impres- sion left behind is that menstruating bodies are abnormal and have no place in the public realm unless, perhaps, they can conceal their leakage. To be sure, not everyone experiences processes of abjection in the same manner. Much depends on the specificities of one's distinct embodiment and the temporality and geography of one's locale. But whomever and wherever we are, it matters which objects populate the spaces we travel through, which objects are within our reach and which are not, and how these objects come to be present or absent. In other words, that particular objects leave impressions on us is not the result of pure chance, and thus the effects are never simply natural or neutral. Orientations, as Ahmed's work makes clear, are manifes- tations and effects of power, and that power comes to bear on bodies both abject and "clean and proper."

Consider the descriptions of the menstrual experience offered by feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young, as well as contemporary CMS scholars. These descriptions shed light on the specific objects that shape how we engage with and use menstrual blood. For example, Beauvoir reminds us that individuals learn to see menstrual blood and the menstruating body as a source of horror, an object to be avoided, through interaction with objects as varied as Aristotelian philosophy, religious teachings, medical treatises, ancient English poetry, parental advice (or lack thereof), and everyday childish banter. However we encounter and engage these objects, whether as students or parishioners, friends or parents, children or adults, the messages they convey often leave us with the impression that menstrual blood and menstruating bodies pose a threat to every- thing from the natural world to the social order, from the food we eat to the wellbeing of ourselves and our families.[36] These objects thus orient us towards menstrual blood in very specific ways, instructing us through law, culture, policy, and tradition to put distance between ourselves and menstrual blood, to avoid touching it or being in its proximity. And, when that is not possible because it is our own bodies from which menstrual blood leaks, then we are instructed to fear and vilify our bodies and hide both the blood and the body itself from the sight of others.

The concealment imperative which instructs us to avoid and hide menstrual blood and the menstruating body is not always explicit. In fact, such instructions can be reproduced as we engage with objects both present and absent. These objects include workplace expectations of productivity, school day schedules and washroom policies, bath- room locations, silence about the biology of periods, or the absence of affordable menstrual products. Expecting people to work through heavy period flows or excruciating pain, for example, or restricting students' use of bathrooms, locating bathrooms at great distances, and failing to ensure access to knowledge about menstrual products or why bodies bleed monthly leaves behind the impression that the needs and experiences of menstruating individuals are of little importance. So too do they suggest, in the words of Iris Marion Young, that the "normal body, the default body, the body that every body is assumed to be is a body not bleeding from the vagina," and thus there is some- thing wrong with the menstruating body.[37]

Even when objects seem to celebrate the menstruating body or make it possible to conceal bloody flows they can contribute to producing menstrual blood and bleeding bodies as abject. For example, adver- tisements championing menstrual products for providing individuals with the freedom to move through the world undetected, or that repre- sent menstrual blood using blue instead of red liquid, reinforce the idea that there is something wrong with the very sight of menstrual blood and instruct individuals to conceal it at all costs. Engagement with objects like these can leave the impression that one must not only "[k]eep the signs of your menstruation hidden… Make sure that your bloody flow does not visibly leak through your clothes...", but also to do so because

the blood itself is somehow disgusting or dangerous to others.[38]

To be sure, important changes in policy and practice in recent years have lessened these impressions, and the proximity of previ- ously absent objects is often central to this effect. Putting objects like menstrual products and education within reach of menstruating indi- viduals does enable them to align themselves, to a certain extent, with norms privileging bodies that do not bleed from the vagina. Access to these objects makes participation in public spaces like workplaces and educational institutions all the more possible. And yet even here, the instruction is to conceal. News articles focused on making menstru- ation more visible to the public, for example, often reproduce myths about the dangers of menstrual blood.[39] Even well-meaning global educational campaigns designed to mitigate menstrual stigma do the same by emphasizing the imperative to conceal blood, if they mention blood at all. [40] Such objects instruct menstruating individuals to take responsibility for hiding their bleeding bodies from the public if they want to avoid feeling shame and embarrassment.

ORIENTING SUBJECTS AND PRIVILEGING SOME BODIES

If the orientations producing abject objects come with instructions for using them in particular ways—to fear, avoid, and conceal—they also produce subjects, both abject and otherwise. Rituals and narratives of abjection orient us not only toward external objects, that is, but also toward our own bodies and sense of self. Orientations affect how both objects *and* subjects "materialize or come to take shape in the way that they do."[41] This means that menstruation-related practices of abjection inform the way we feel in our bodies and the way we understand our embodied identities.

As contemporary research suggests, many menstruating individ- uals the world over see themselves as abject in some manner. Those with little information on how and why bodies bleed, or who live in communities where myths and taboos remain dominant, often inter- nalize messages that menstruation is a mysterious and dangerous force controlling the body. This lack of knowledge and understanding can lead them to see themselves as ill, shameful, or disgusting. Beauvoir's description, now decades old, remains apt: "It is during her periods that she feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien thing; …the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and then tears down a cradle within it... Woman, like man, *is* her body; but her body is something other than herself."[42] Even menstruating individ- uals who live in resource-rich countries and have access to menstrual products and knowledge, individuals who can more easily pass as non-menstruating, may still experience what Iris Marion Young calls a split-subjectivity.[43] Period poverty or a lack of knowledge are, in other words, not the only conditions giving menstruating individuals a sense that there is a "misfit between women and public places."[44] Relatively educated and economically

privileged individuals who menstruate often feel as if they are essentially "defiled and out of control."[45] While sensing a mismatch between one's body and the norm is not the same as being the target of physical and psychological threats, it is still a form of disorientation in an Ahmedian sense. That is, even under the best of circumstances, menstruation is often experienced as a lived and embodied feeling of being at odds with dominant norms, "of being an object among other objects… of being cut into pieces."[46]

Those who inhabit non-menstruating bodies and thus align with the dominant orientations of being "clean and proper" may never have to experience such disorientation. This feeling of privilege is the result of the very same rituals and narratives that produce abject objects and subjects. Abjection, in other words, may provide one set of instructions for all that, nonetheless, leaves behind very different impressions for those who inhabit different bodies. Non-menstruators often learn to feel as if they have no need or responsibility to consider menstruation,

that it is perhaps even their right never to have to see or think about menstrual blood. They may also be encouraged to engage in shaming and bullying behaviors.[47]At the very least, abjection produces impres- sions that leave non-menstruating individuals feeling at home in their body and able to move freely through the world. Such feelings are, according to Ahmed, forms of bodily privilege.[48]

BLOODY MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM AND THE POLITICS OF MISUSE

Orientations, and the privileges they afford to some, can be difficult to recognize and contest because they are often experienced as natural and inevitable, as if the forms of subjectivity and styles of embodiment we are directed toward emanate from our interior selves. But these orientations need not be accepted as such, nor are the aforementioned impressions abjection leaves behind inevitable. It is always "possible," Ahmed argues, "for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which affects what is within reach."[49] Indeed, as David Abram explains, we are always in dialogue with the objects around us, engaged in an "active interplay… between the perceiving body and that which is perceived."[50] We never engage with an object in its totality, Abrams suggests, which means there is always more and something else to see and feel; the forces designed to orient us towards an object in a specific way are never definitive or totalizing. This makes shifting our perspective on an object possible. Such a reorientation, in turn, changes how we experience ourselves and the world. This reori- entation does not, of course, transform the object altogether, but it can change the impressions that the object leaves behind, opening up (or foreclosing) what we can see, reach, and feel as

well as what we can do and imagine.[51]

In this section, I turn my attention to three political protests in which a reorientation toward menstrual blood mattered greatly to opening up new paths for menstruating individuals. What motivated each of the three protests under examination—the Northern Irish No Wash Protest in Armagh Prison in 1980, the South African Women for Water protest of 2009, and Kiran Gandhi's free-bleeding during the London Marathon in 2015—was quite different. The Northern Irish protest was concerned with the treatment of political prisoners and the realities of British imperialism; the South African protest was about the human right to access clean water; and the London protest was primarily focused on period shaming and period poverty. Despite these distinct goals, each protest mobilized menstrual blood's stigma- tized status to expose and disorient those wielding particular forms of power. Each relied on the very qualities of horror and disgust that inform the "proper" use of menstrual blood in order to alter the paths menstruating and non-menstruating individuals could travel, creating new forms of subjectivity and community along the way. Such alter- ations often rest, I suggest, on orienting oneself towards menstrual blood as simultaneously normal and abject.

BLOOD ON THE WALLS: DISORIENTATION IN A NORTHERN IRISH PRISON

In the mid-1970s, during the period known as "The Troubles," the British government changed the way they treated republicans in Northern Ireland who were charged with crimes against the state. Instead of considering them as political prisoners who had the right to wear their own clothing and use their time as they pleased, the British government reclassified them as "Ordinary Decent Criminals" and required those charged with crimes against the state to submit to the same forms of British authority as other ODCs. The republican pris- oners, who saw the British as invaders in their country illegitimately exercising power, rejected this designation and refused to wear prison uniforms or engage in prison work as directed by the guards.

In response to the disregard and disrespect for their authority, the guards at Armagh Prison, where republican women were held, phys- ically attacked and verbally harassed the prisoners, even periodically strip-searching them, in often sexually demeaning ways. In addition, they locked the women in their cells for long times and, when they let the women out for exercise, sometimes barred them from using the toilets. In 1980, the women joined male prisoners in what is known as the No Wash or Dirty Protest, refusing to use bathrooms to relieve or clean themselves even when given the chance.[52] As their chamber pots overflowed, and their cell windows were boarded up to prevent them from throwing the waste outside, the women, like the men, resorted to painting their cell walls with excrement. But the women added some- thing more to the

decoration—menstrual blood.[53]

Painting cell walls with a combination of menstrual blood and feces may have been, to some extent, a practical response to a horrific situation as it helped to clear the floor of some bodily waste.[54] And, according to one prisoner, the women's decision to forgo using bath- rooms was "forced upon [them]."[55] Nonetheless, I suggest we under- stand the women's No Wash Protest as a misuse of an abject object that exposed and challenged the relations of inequality and the various forms of privilege accorded to the British guards. In addition, it helped to create solidarity and community among the prisoners, ultimately reshaping conversations about the role of women in politics. This act of resistance, while certainly no panacea for the appalling and hazardous conditions the women prisoners were living in, played an important role in disorienting those in positions of power and opening up new paths for the women, both within and beyond the prison walls, despite not being directed at destigmatizing menstrual blood.

The meaning and impact of the No Wash Protest in Armagh Prison must be understood against a backdrop of long-standing Irish taboos against discussing or revealing evidence of menstruation as well as deeply entrenched norms that shamed individuals because of their capacity to menstruate. Such norms and practices of humiliation were not only rooted in religious and cultural traditions, but, for Irish republican women in particular, they were also meted out by British forces who exploited menstruation's abject status to exert authority and dominance. During raids and interrogations of those suspected of crimes against the state, for example, British soldiers and police offi- cers would target menstrual products and menstruating individuals for particular public ridicule.[56] And in the prison, even before the No Wash Protest had begun, guards would force prisoners and visitors to remove menstrual products during strip searches while limiting pris- oners access to menstrual products and mocking women simply for asking for pads.

During the protest itself, menstruation provided the British authorities and prison guards at Armagh with a powerful tool for exercising their authority and orienting prisoners towards subservi- ence and obedience. For example, prisoners reported going six weeks without being given menstrual products and being restricted to only one sanitary towel at a time despite the heaviness of their periods.[57] When they were given menstrual products, these were often thrown, unwrapped, onto cells floors already covered with a mix of urine, feces, and menstrual blood. And, according to one prisoner, the pads would just "lie in the dirt until used."[58] The guards used these prac- tices, along with mocking those who were menstruating, to police prisoners' access to cleanliness and to send a message to the repub- lican women that they were nothing but dirty animals. According to one report, written decades after the protest and rich in first-person testimony, the fact that "[m]enstruation was used as a mechanism of control… degradation and punishment" left many imprisoned women feeling utterly

dehumanized.[59]

And yet, the women banded together and fought back, orienting themselves to their own blood in an unexpected manner and using it for a purpose not intended. Instead of guards using menstrual blood to shame, humiliate, and dominate, the women used the blood to generate solidarity and protection. Indeed, they made painting the cell walls with menstrual blood a rite of passage that initiated new pris- oners into the fold. Instead of orienting themselves towards their own blood with horror and disgust, the women embraced their appalling conditions as best they could, with dignity and aloofness, according to one prisoner.[60] The women rebuffed guards' efforts "to try and break down [their] dignity by petty harassment, and to destroy the unity of the prisoners." The women sought, instead, to "break down the [guards'] morale by ignoring all of their moods" and refusing to see themselves as the guards did, as "sub-human animals."[61]

This reorientation towards and misuse of menstrual blood clearly disoriented the guards. By smearing menstrual blood on cell walls and generating a stench even greater than the one created by feces, the women put the guards in contact with abject objects in ways that shifted how both groups were able to inhabit the space of the prison. Guards were so worried about being sullied by coming into contact with menstrual blood and so put off by the odors that they were loath to enter the cells or even be near the prisoners.[62] Because of blood on the walls, "[w]ardens entered the cell only when they absolutely had to and when they did they wore masks, gloves, rubber boots and 'insu- lating suits' that protected them from the living conditions of the pris- oners."[63]

No longer, then, did the guards control the meaning of menstrual blood or the actions and identities of the prisoners. Instead, the pris- oners wrested from the guards the power to use menstrual blood to shame and humiliate and turned it against them. No longer did the guards experience the kind of bodily privilege that they had had in their place of work. The menstrual blood covering the cell walls stymied their ability to move through the prison with the sense that they were entitled to invade women's bodies and cells. The very space in which guards had felt at home became unfamiliar, as did their orien- tation to menstrual blood itself. In the prisoners' hands, menstrual blood, because of its association with dirt and impurity, and its ability to evoke disgust and horror, became a shield, a barrier, and a buffer, lessening the possibility for physical and psychological abuse and generating a measure of privacy that provided a respite from violence and surveillance.[64] Through the misuse of menstrual blood, an abject object became a powerful tool in the struggle against British power, a "weapon of resistance" in a larger political war.[65]

This impact was felt beyond the prison walls. A photograph showing one of the political leaders, Mairéad Farrell, standing in front of a blood-stained cell wall, was smuggled out of prison and circulated widely, sparking a robust

conversation about the status of women in politics. The photograph, along with news stories recounting the women's squalid and deteriorating conditions, served as an object that put the public in contact with menstrual blood, an abject object more often relegated to realms of privacy and silence. This changed the public's perception.[66] Some outside the prison were appalled by the treatment women were receiving; others were appalled by the behavior of the women themselves. But all recognized that the image in the photograph did not match up with the dominant image of a pure, model Irish woman.[67]

And yet, or perhaps because of this disconnect between gender norms and women's conditions in the prison, the prisoners' misuse of menstrual blood helped foster an important conversation about women's role as political actors. The conditions in the prison brought "to the fore a different kind of suffering, one systematically obscured in social life and in cultural constructions, devalued in Catholic religion and Nationalist ideologies…": the suffering associated with menstru- ation. [68] That women were willing to risk their lives and health for a political cause could no longer be ignored, and their status as political actors—indeed, as freedom fighters—became more widely accepted and celebrated. This was evidenced by the fact that "republican papers… began to publish articles about the historic role of women in Irish nationalism and about their supposedly advanced liberties in Ireland before the island was tainted by British values."[69] The public exposure of menstrual blood not only upended "the balance of power inside Armagh," but also rallied members of the political communi- ties outside. It "strengthened opposition to the prison regime on the outside by making the republican movement tackle problematic issues within its own ranks."[70] In refusing to be oriented towards shame for either their menstruating bodies or their political actions against the British, the prisoners asserted a form of political subjectivity that prison guards, republican politics, and the general public had long denied to women, especially menstruating ones.

BLOOD IN THE STREETS: EXPOSING THE CONDITIONS OF BODILY PRIVILEGE

Decades later, both near and far, menstruators continue to be oriented towards feeling shame and horror because their bodies bleed from the vagina, and they continue to be instructed to conceal their periods or hide their bodies altogether. This can occur whether one is a young girl living in rural village or a prominent figure with political power, and it can occur irrespective of the country in which one resides. And yet, some individuals choose to display their menstrual blood publicly rather than abide by these instructions, making this choice under conditions far less dire than those experienced by the women in Armagh. What are we to make of an intentional flaunting of the dictates of menstrual stigma, of the refusal to be oriented towards menstrual blood in a

specific and singular way, particularly when opportunities to conceal blood or engage in other acts of resistance are available?

MISUSING MENSTRUAL BLOOD IN THE FIGHT FOR WATER RIGHTS

In the early 2000s, the South African government began installing prepaid meters in homes in an effort to privatize water access. As a result, South Africans lacking the economic resources to purchase water after their prepaid allotment ran out found themselves without water for cooking, cleaning, and washing. For individuals with periods, this economic barrier posed additional challenges. Menstruating indi- viduals were unable to wash clothing stained with menstrual blood, clean their bodies of its sights and smells, or flush away evidence of their period. This, as plaintiffs explained in a court case, left them vulnerable to being shamed in their own homes, limited their ability to appear in public, and compromised their ability to adhere to South African norms of dignity.[71] As the Coalition Against Water Privatisation argued, forcing people to pay for water not only violated a funda- mental human right, but also compromised women's dignity, a dignity defined in terms of their ability to conceal menstruation.[72]

In addition to taking the South African government to court, members of the Coalition took to the streets. In 2009, individuals from Phiri township marched through Johannesburg in underwear stained red to signify menstrual blood, dropping their bloody under- wear at the foot of riot police standing guard in front of a government building.[73] Though the signs they carried linked water access with human dignity, protestors chose to march in soiled garments because they thought it would be more effective at conveying their concerns and engaging the public. The Women for Water protest was meant, as one protestor explained, "to drive home the humiliation and violation faced by women who found it difficult to carry out personal hygiene or do their laundry effectively owing to inadequate access to water."[74] Whether the protestors were successful in sending this message to the general public is unclear, as little has been written about the public's reaction to that specific event. Nonetheless, an Ahmedian attention to orientations, objects, and use reminds us that the potentially disrup- tive effects and political value of this misuse of menstrual blood are not reducible to that outcome alone.

Understanding this protest as a misuse of an abject object begins with recognizing the way the protestors, like the women in Armagh, reoriented themselves towards menstrual blood. Instead of reacting to the sight of it with horror and shame, or fearing public derision and condemnation for exposing it in the streets, the protestors approached menstrual blood with joy and playfulness, celebrating their bleeding bodies and their political power through jubilant expression in the streets.[75] By proudly walking and dancing through the streets in bloody underwear, the women attempted to turn shame

away from menstru- ating bodies and back onto the public, to expose the government for lacking compassion for those marginalized by poverty, particularly those who menstruate. The very object that was meant to require their exclusion from the public realm actually brought the women together as political actors and citizens claiming their space in the public realm. Menstrual blood and the leaky body were not objects that the protes- tors feared.

Of course, the point of the protest was to shed light on the plight of those for whom a public display of menstrual blood would not be an occasion for solidarity and joy. Misusing menstrual blood was an act of resistance on behalf of those who could face punishment if they failed to abide by the concealment imperative. The protest was meant to enhance some individuals' ability to use menstrual blood "properly." But the protest's efficacy rested, in part, on both its misuse and the mobilization of its abject status. In other words, for the protestors to convey their grievances effectively, the public sight of menstrual blood would have to evoke shock and disgust, or at least pity or sympathy. For the desired impression to be left behind, menstrual blood would have to both remind people of menstruating individuals' needs and threaten that if menstruators did not have access to a sufficient amount of water, the public could be confronted with sights they really did not want to see. Somewhat paradoxically, then, intentionally spilling menstrual blood in public was directed towards making it easier for other menstruating individuals to adhere to the imperative to conceal- ment, enabling bleeding bodies to appear in public as if they were not menstruating at all.

From a critical phenomenological perspective, we can under- stand this effort to make people engage with an object that they are taught to avoid as initiating a reorientation on the public's part. Of course, as Ahmed reminds us, there is no guarantee that others will engage an object in the desired manner. Forces may orient individuals towards objects in particular ways, but individuals are still capable of shifting their orientations and ignoring the instructions implied. And, unfortunately, evidence suggests that the public, or at least the South African court, did not orient themselves towards menstrual blood as the protestors had hoped. The Court ultimately upheld the govern- ment's water policy.

Although the protest neither displaced the imperative to conceal menstrual blood nor garnered the desired policy outcome, its effects are still important to recognize. Indeed, the public display of menstrual blood revealed at least two forms of bodily privilege that might have otherwise gone unnoticed, particularly by non-menstruators. One is the highly gendered nature of the body around which water policy is often shaped: the non-menstruating body. The needs of menstru- ating individuals were simply not part of the calculus for water allocation. The second comes in the form of class privilege. For menstru- ating individuals with money to purchase more water, allocation limitations matter little, as they jeopardize neither their human rights nor their dignity. For those without economic resources, however, it matters

greatly when a water allocation fails to recognize their needs or to appreciate how this failure, in the context of menstrual stigma's reality, could lead to serious harm. The protest thus highlighted the reality that not all menstruating individuals move through the world and engage with objects in the same way, and not all experience period poverty or vulnerability to menstrual stigma in the same manner.

The menstrual blood spilled in the streets of Johannesburg did not, unfortunately, change water policy, and may not have evoked the public response protestors sought. Nonetheless, it shed light on the unique and often overlooked consequences that water access barriers present to menstruating individuals. It drew attention to the complex array of objects that must be within reach if menstruating individuals are to follow the instruction to conceal or hide, and it brought greater awareness of the bodily privilege accorded to non-menstruating and/ or wealthier individuals. At the same time, it allowed the public to see that menstruation does not disqualify one from being a political actor, and that inhabiting a body that bleeds from the vagina does not mean that one is incapable of participation in the public realm.[76]

RUNNING A MARATHON WHILE FREE-BLEEDING

A similar protest occurred several years later. In what is one of the most well-known and widely covered instances of spilling menstrual blood in public, musician and activist Kiran Gandhi ran the 2015 London Marathon while letting her period blood flow freely. When interna- tional news circulated photos of Gandhi in stained running tights after the event, the responses were striking through hardly surprising. Some celebrated Gandhi for her bravery, but many were outraged and disgusted and took to ridiculing and harassing Gandhi online.[77] And while Gandhi was vilified for bleeding in public, men who posted pictures of themselves bleeding from the nipples as a result of chafing were celebrated as heroes.

Gandhi responded to the vitriol and derision by offering both personal and political reasons for her decision to free-bleed. As she explained after the fact, she chose to forgo wearing a pad or tampon in order to be more comfortable. When the start of her period coincided with the day of the race, uneasiness about cramping and pain almost made her drop out. Gandhi realized that if she ran without a pad or tampon she could avoid possible chafing and pain, and she would not be preoccupied with finding bathrooms along the route to change products if and when needed.[78]

At the same time, Gandhi was very clear that her decision to free- bleed was also a political act.[79] She knew that publicly exposing her bleeding body was likely to draw negative attention and that she would be shamed for her choices. Gandhi hoped her actions would bring attention to precisely that response and shed light on period shaming and the still-dominant taboos surrounding the public

discussion and sight of menstruation. In addition, she saw her decision to run while free-bleeding as a way to expose the barriers that so many menstrua- tors face in their efforts to avoid such public shame and humiliation. As Gandhi explained, she "ran with blood dripping down [her] legs" on behalf of others, "for sisters who don't have access to tampons and sisters who, despite cramping and pain, hide it away and pretend like it doesn't exist. [She] ran to say, it does exist, and we overcome it every day."[80] Gandhi, in other words, willingly exposed her menstrual blood in public and made herself the target of derision and disdain in order to remind people that many menstruators around the globe cannot make such choices. When lack of access to affordable menstrual prod- ucts makes it nearly impossible to conceal bleeding bodies in public, the only option left for many is to remove their bodies from the public realm altogether.

Given her explanations, it would be fair to understand Gandhi's political protest as an effort to normalize and destigmatize menstrua- tion. Indeed, Gandhi's act initiated a robust global conversation on the subjects of period shaming and period poverty, just as she had hoped. Here, however, I suggest that we read Gandhi's protest as a reorien- tation towards and misuse of menstrual blood that is not reducible to normalization and destigmatization alone. Indeed, as a practice of resistance it relies on the very stigma that it also challenges, drawing power from the abject qualities it seems to call into question.

Like the protests described above, Gandhi's began with a reori- entation towards objects considered abject—menstrual blood and her bleeding body. Once again, we see a political actor refusing to see her leaky body as disgusting and shameful, and rejecting both the instruction to conceal it from the public and to feel hurt by the nega- tive reactions that followed. Instead, Gandhi exuded joy in her post- race pictures, celebrating her efforts to engage in an arduous physical activity—and to do so while bleeding freely—as "bad-ass."[81]

Like the other protests, Gandhi's reorientation to the abject object was meant to impact others' orientation to the object as well. In making her bloody body publicly visible, Gandhi forced the public to engage with an unexpected object: an object which, according to menstrual stigma, they should not have to engage with. She put a new object in the path of marathon spectators with the intention to impact how they moved through the world. Indeed, the fact that many reacted with shock and dismay suggests how disoriented they felt seeing her bleeding body. And while this disorientation may not have been as severe as the kind experienced by individuals who often face physical and psychological threats to their well-being because they menstruate, it is still a feeling of being off kilter, askew, out of sorts in some manner. This shift marks both an exposure and contestation of the privilege accorded to the non- menstruating body. Gandhi's free-bleeding body blocked spectators from being able to move through the world as they had before, as if menstruation did not exist at all.

Gandhi's act of political resistance also exposed and contested a set of gendered expectations that are at once particular to, and exceed, the realm of marathon running. As she explained in the stories and interviews that followed the race, her decision to free-bleed was based, in part, on a concern with the proximity or rather distance of partic- ular objects. She was concerned about finding a bathroom should she need to change menstrual products and found little information about the effects of running long distances while wearing a tampon. This lack of information about being comfortable running while menstru- ating was made all the starker by the fact that there was considerable information available on how to protect oneself from chafed nipples.[82] Gandhi's concerns thus made visible the fact that the body around which marathon courses and instructions for well-being are designed is not a menstruating body. At the same time, the reaction to her deci- sion to free-bleed exposed the expectation that she was responsible for making others comfortable by cleansing the public realm of her bleeding body. Gandhi's decision to bleed in public served, then, as both a refusal to be shamed or bullied into hiding the fact that she was menstruating, and a refusal to allow others to dictate her decision and priorities, particularly about which parts of a woman's body would be available or unavailable for public consumption.[83]

Gandhi, of course, could choose whether to bleed or not to bleed in public, a choice unavailable to the "sisters" on whose behalf she ran. Her misuse of menstrual blood thus exposes a form of bodily privilege that can accrue to menstruating bodies depending on their class and status location and on whether they have particular objects other than menstrual products within reach. For Gandhi, these objects included family, friends, and socio-economic status. Gandhi admitted that she was concerned about being embarrassed by free-bleeding, particularly in front of her father and brother, but at no time did she worry that her physical safety or her economic and social well-being were jeop- ardized. Her career choice and public standing protected her, as did the support of friends. And she was pleased and relieved to see only excitement and support on the faces of her family members despite the fact that she was running in bloody tights.[84] Gandhi's intentional public exposure of menstrual blood thus reminds us that the proximity of objects like status and support are not available to all people with periods, and that it is not just barriers to accessing menstrual products that limit the ability of menstruating individuals to appear in public. It is also the case, as the South African protest shows, that familial support and socioeconomic resources of various kinds may be neces- sary to make participation in the public sphere a reality for menstru- ating individuals.

CONCLUSION

If spilling menstrual blood in public as part of a political protest can work

to expose and disrupt forms of bodily privilege often implicated in subordinating menstruating individuals, does this suggest that practices of bleeding freely in public should be more widely adopted? Does the radical potential of misusing an abject object like menstrual blood lie in its ability to imagine and enact a world in which menstru- ating individuals free-bleed? And what is the value of an Ahmedian attention to orientations, objects, and use for understanding practices of resistance beyond bloody menstrual protests?

The answer to the first two questions, as the above analyses suggest, depends greatly on context and purpose.[85] There were very specific reasons for protestors to expose their menstrual blood in public: some chose the tactic to make a point that they might not have been able to make otherwise; others had it "forced upon" them to a certain extent. In all cases, though, the public display of menstrual blood was just one of a number of different acts of resistance meant to engender social change; the protests were part of larger political projects employing a variety of tactics.[86] Moreover, the protestors had no guarantee that their specific acts would achieve their goals, whether they were to lessen abusive treatment in prison, increase access to clean water, or prioritize access to menstrual products to address period poverty. As an Ahmedian analysis suggests, the fact that an individual or group changes its orientation towards an object and misuses it by placing it in a location from which it was previously excluded does not deter- mine how others will engage the unexpected object itself. Attempts to initiate a change in the way others move through the world does not mean that others will move as one would like. Indeed, one could read the protests, particularly the South African one, as failing to reorient others in the way or to the degree desired.

At the same time, however, an Ahmedian attention to orientation, objects, and use reminds us that the value of a political act involving queer use, like the intentional public spilling of menstrual blood, is not reducible to whether it produces a specific policy change or inaugurates radical shifts in the dominant orientation. To answer the third question, then, the value of misusing of an object goes beyond a specific policy goal or path opened. According to Ahmed, what queer use does well is to "bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background."[87] Queer or misuse does important work to make visible relations of power and inequality, opening up new ways to imagine and enact a future. What those new ways are, of course, can differ even for those who orient themselves towards objects in a similar manner.

Recognizing this value may be complicated by the fact that to bring background conditions of bodily privilege to the fore, political actors may need to mobilize "a potentiality that already resides in the things *given* how they have taken shape," exploiting the very qualities of an object that put it in service of privilege and inequality in the first place.[88] In other words, to return to the specific example of the bloody menstrual activism, the protestors may have reoriented themselves toward menstrual blood in a way

that downplayed its abject qualities, allowing them to build community amongst themselves and enact a previously unrecognizable form of political subjectivity. But these effects, and the intention to both expose and disrupt various forms of power and privilege, still relied on and, to some degree, reinforced menstrual blood's abject status in ways that perpetuated elements of menstrual stigma.

One might see the public display of menstrual blood then, partic- ularly as it is meant to elicit observers' disgust so as to enable easier concealment, as a political practice that is not "on 'the side' of the progressive."[89] At the same time, Ahmed cautions against assuming that practices that appear to reinforce the status quo are always "mean[s] assimilation." To do so would be to ignore that "the points of deviation might… be hidden" within efforts "to live according to certain lines."[90] Indeed, in the case of menstrual stigma, sometimes concealment is an act of survival for those whose very survival is an act of resistance.

My point in drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed to raise these issues is to show how a critical phenomenological analysis of acts of resistance brings attention to the complexity, ambiguity, and indeter- minacy at their heart. This Ahmedian analysis of bloody menstrual protests is not meant, then, to offer a blueprint for how one must or should contest forms of power, or even to suggest what it should look like to expand ways of living for those subordinated by menstrual stigma or other forms of power and privilege. This is not an argument for free-bleeding as either a required political tactic or a required way of living, nor even for misuse as the only form of political resistance. It is, rather, an argument for exploring practices of resistance, partic- ularly those involving misuse of abject objects, in ways attuned to the multiplicity of objects engaged along the way, and to the dialogical relationship of this engagement. It is also an argument for recognizing that the effects of acts of resistance like those discussed above are never singular nor purely transformative. Like other work that seeks to move beyond purely instrumental assessments of resistance and that attend to lived experience of those engaged in protest,[91] I hope to have high- lighted the value of embracing an approach to politics that forgoes the assumption that definitive solutions to problems are the only or even primary marker of value and success .[92]

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Holloway Sparks, Bal Sokhi-Bulley, and Inga Winkler.

NOTES

1. "Menstrual Health and Hygiene," World Bank, accessed March 27, 2023, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/menstrual-health-and-hygiene.
2. "Menstrual Hygiene" UNICEF," accessed July 1, 2024, https://www.unicef.org/wash/menstrual-hygiene.
3. In 2015, for example, two young women were admonished for standing in front of the British Parliament in tights stained red as they protested the tax on menstrual products and, in 2023, Kenyan Senator Gloria Orwoba was asked to leave the senate floor and vilified on social media for appearing in pants stained with menstrual blood. See Maria Mercedes Lara, "Women Protesting the UK's Tampon Tax by Free-Bleeding in Front of Parliament," *Peoplemag*, November 9, 2015, https://people.com/health/women-protesting-the-uks-tampon-tax-by-free-bleeding-in-front-of-parliament/; Evelyn Musambi, "With Stained Pants, Kenyan Senator Gloria Orwoba Fights Menstruation Taboo," *PBS NewsHour*, March 8, 2023, sec. World, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/with-stained-pants-kenyan-senator-gloria-orwoba-fights-menstruation-taboo.
4. Inga Winkler, "Menstruation Is Having Its Moment – Let's Turn It into a Movement," Healthy Debate, December 21, 2020, https://healthydebate.ca/2020/12/topic/menstruation-a-movement/.
5. Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (Arcade Publishing, 2017).
6. Menstrual stigma can be produced by and transmitted through a variety of sources including sociocultural norms, advertisements, laws and public policy, medical and parenting advice, religious teachings, and science. See, for example Nay Alhelou et al., "'We like Things Tangible:' A Critical Analysis of Menstrual Hygiene and Health Policy-Making in India, Kenya, Senegal and the United States," *Global Public Health*, December 9, 2021, 1–14; Maride Espada, "What Period Stigma Looks Like Across the World," *Teen Vogue*, May 28, 2018, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/period-taboo-around-the-world; Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 68, no. 1–2 (2013): 9–18; Kiera MacLean, Christopher Hearle, and Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, "Stigma of Staining? Negotiating Menstrual Taboos amongst Young Women in Kenya," *Women's Studies International Forum* 78 (January 1, 2020); Mary M. Olson et al., "The Persistent Power of Stigma: A Critical Review of Policy Initiatives to Break the Menstrual Silence and Advance Menstrual Literacy," *PLOS Global Public Health* 2, no. 7 (July 14, 2022).
7. See, for example, "Removing the Shame and Stigma from Menstruation," OHCHR, July 8, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/07/removing-shame-and-stig-

ma-menstruation; Mary M. Olson et al., "The Persistent Power of Stigma: A Critical Review of Policy Initiatives to Break the Menstrual Silence and Advance Menstrual Literacy," *PLOS Global Public Health* 2, no. 7 (July 14, 2022).

8. Since not all individuals who menstruate identify as women or girls, I use the inclusive phrase "menstruating individuals" throughout this essay except when I am quoting a source that uses "women" or "girls."

9. Catarina de Albuquerque, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation (A/HRC/21/42)" (United Nations, 2012), https://reliefweb.int/report/world/report-special-rapporteur-human-right-safe-drink- ing-water-and-sanitation-catarina-de-0.

10. For an overview of Critical Menstruation Studies scholarship, see Chris Bobel et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

11. For review of recent efforts to mitigate menstrual stigma that emphasize normalization and destigmatization, see Olson et al., "The Persistent Power of Stigma," July 14, 2022.

12. Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a Girl" and Other Essays*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford University Press, 2005), 122.

13. To the extent that the purposeful public exposure of menstrual blood is studied, examples tend to come from the worlds of art and media. These studies focus on whether and how bloody protests challenge gender norms, particularly around menstruation itself. Here, I expand on the range of acts studied, the details to attend to, and the implications of the phenomenon. For analyses of bloody media imagery see, for example, Kristin Marie Bivens and Kirsti Cole, "The Grotesque Protest in Social Media as Embodied, Political Rhetoric," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (January 2018): 5–25; Jacqueline Gaybor, "Everyday (Online) Body Politics of Menstruation," *Feminist Media Studies*, November 11, 2020, 1–16; Marsha Rosengarten, "Thinking Menstrual Blood," *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 31 (March 2000): 91–101; Maria Kathryn Tomlinson, "Moody and Monstrous Menstruators: The Semiotics of the Menstrual Meme on Social Media," *Social Semiotics* 31, no. 3 (May 27, 2021): 421–39. On using menstrual blood in art to make a political statement, see, for example, Camilla Mørk Røstvik, "Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art Since 1970," *Oxford Art Journal* 42, no. 3 (December 2019): 335–53. For a discussion of menstrual blood in an act of protest against an individual employer, see Charles T. Lee, *Ingenious Citizenship: Recrafting Democracy for Social Change* (Duke University Press Books, 2016).

14. On orientations, see, for example, Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006); Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 543–74; Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness,"

15. Feminist Theory 8, no. 2 (August 1, 2007): 149–68; Sara Ahmed, "Orientations

Matter," in New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Duke University Press, 2010), 234–57. On use, see Sara Ahmed,

16. *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* (Duke University Press Books, 2019).

17. Phenomenology suggests that the "space" in which we reside is both physical and temporal. That is, "our current milieu" is shaped by and contains within it a history that informs how we inhabit our bodies and interact with the objects that populate this space. Ahmed uses the term "orientation" in varied ways: to refer to the direction one is facing, the process by which we come to be facing a certain way, the feeling of being at home or capable of finding one's way in the world, or some combination any and all of these. Her focus is on orientations associated with sexuality, gender, race, and their intersections. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

18. Thank you to my reviewer for this framing.

19. Ahmed, *What's the Use?*. On mis- or queer uses as a basis for political contestation, see Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 174-179.

20. One could also think of those who spill menstrual blood in public as willful subjects and feminist killjoys who point out the problems around them and, in so doing, become the problem. On the relationship between the killjoy affect and a politics of resistance, see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Duke University Press Books, 2017); Andrew Dilts, "How Does It Feel to Be(Come) a Problem? Active Intolerance and the Abolitionist Killjoy," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 2 (2021): 637–43.

21. Here I draw insights from discussions in critical phenomenology that go beyond Ahmed's work. See, for example Lisa Guenther, "Six Senses of Critique for Critical Phenomenology," *Puncta* 4, no. 2 (2021): 5–23; Johanna Oksala, "The Method of Critical Phenomenology: Simone de Beauvoir as a Phenomenologist," *European Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (March 27, 2022): 1–14.

22. Gaybor, "Everyday (Online) Body Politics of Menstruation"; Deepa Fadnis, "Feminist Activists Protest Tax on Sanitary Pads: Attempts to Normalize Conversations about Menstruation in India Using Hashtag Activism," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 1111–14; "I Was Fired From My Job as a 911 Call Taker for Getting My Period at Work" *American Civil Liberties Union* (blog), August 25, 2017, https://www.aclu.org/news/womens-rights/i-was-fired-my-job-911-call-taker-getting-my-period-work; Musambi, "With Stained Pants, Kenyan Senator Gloria Orwoba Fights Menstruation Taboo"; Abigail Radnor, "'We're Having a Menstrual Liberation': How Periods Got Woke," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2017, sec. Society, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/11/periods-menstruation-liberation-women-activists-abigail-radnor.

23. Menstrual blood is just one of several bodily fluids (e.g., vomit, excrement, pus, sperm) that are treated in this way, though it is unique even among these because it signifies sexual difference, reproductive power, and the gender binary, according to Kristeva, and because it emanates from only certain bodies and is both predictable and seemingly uncontrollable, according to Buckley and Gottlieb. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, eds., *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of*

Menstruation (University of California Press, 1988), 26 ; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez, (Columbia University Press, 1982), 71.

24. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-
25. Chevallier, 1st edition (Vintage, 2011), 168–70.
26. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 77.
27. Anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that such rituals rest on an identification of menstrual blood with dirt and impurity and are necessary to produce social order. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 2002). Anthropologists Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, suggest that such rituals can, in a few cultures and circumstances, be interpreted as treating menstrual blood and menstruating individuals as sacred and offering a respite from daily drudgery. Buckley and Gottlieb, *Blood Magic*. In Nepal, for example, despite efforts to ban the sometimes deadly practice of chhaupadi, which relegates menstruating individuals to huts while they are on their periods, it was still occurring as of 2019. Madhusudan Subedi and Sara Parker, "Menstrual Exclusions in Nepal: Some Evidence of Transition.," *Dhaulagiri: Journal of Sociology & Anthropology* 15 (January 1, 2021): 1–9; Rojita Adhikari, "Bringing an End to Deadly 'Menstrual Huts' Is Proving Difficult in Nepal," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 368 (2020): 1–2; Emily Vaughn, "Menstrual Huts Are Illegal In Nepal. So Why Are Women Still Dying In Them?," *NPR*, December 17, 2019, sec. Goats and Soda, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/12/17/787808530/ menstrual-huts-are-illegal-in-nepal-so-why-are-women-still-dying-in-them; Buckley and Gottlieb, *Blood Magic*.
28. In India, a law banning menstruating women from entering houses of worship was only overturned in 2018. Adam Withnall, "India's Top Court Strikes down Ban on 'menstruating' Women Entering Hindu Holy Site," *The Independent*, September 28, 2018, sec. News, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/women-periods-hindu-holy-site-sabarimala-temple-kerala-india-supreme-court-menstruat- ing-female-a8559531.html.
29. "Menstruating with Dignity Is a Human Right," United Nations Population Fund, accessed July 1, 2024, https://www.unfpa.org/menstrual-health.
30. Kristeva, 68.
31. Michelle Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," *Hypatia* 18,
32. no. 4 (2003): 32.
33. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (Zed Books, 2013), 23; Georges Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," in *More & Less*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Y Shafir, vol. 2 (Semiotext(e), 1993), https://www.scribd.com/document/400904654/Georges-Bataille-Abjection-and-Miserable- Forms.
34. Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 24.
35. Ahmed, "The Skin of the Community," 103.

36. Ahmed, “The Skin of the Community,” 104.
37. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3.
38. Objects, according to Ahmed, can be physical artifacts such as couches and tables as well as take the more amorphous forms of “capacities, aspirations, techniques, even worlds.” Sara Ahmed, “Mixed Orientations,” *Subjectivity* 7, no. 1 (April 2014): 100.
39. See also Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 70-78. For more contemporary accounts of prevailing abjection rituals and narratives see, for example, “7 Alarming Myths about Periods We Have to End Now,” UNICEF South Asia, accessed July 2, 2024, https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/7-alarming-myths-about-periods-we- have-end-now; “Menstruation and Human Rights - Frequently Asked Questions” United Nations Population Fund, https://www.unfpa.org/menstruationfaq#Taboos%20and%20Myths%20about%20menstuations.
40. Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 107.
41. Young, 106–7.
42. At the same time, there is no denying that myths about menstruation continue to circulate. See Inga Winkler and Chris Bobel, “‘Bizarre’ and ‘Backward’: Saviorism and Modernity in Representations of Menstrual Beliefs and Practices in the Popular Media,” *Feminist Formations* 33, no. 2 (2021): 313–39.
43. See, for example, Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs, “From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public,” *Signs* 45, no. 4 (June 1, 2020): 955–83.
44. Ahmed, “Orientations Matter,” 235. This is not necessarily an immediate process. As Ahmed explains in *Queer Phenomenology,* it requires repetition over time.
45. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Vintage Books, 1989), 29. For discussions of the way menstruation shapes subjectivity see, for example, Argha Basu and Priyanka Tripathi, “Comprehending the Bleeding Body: Epistemological Violence and (Un)Tabooing Menstruation in Selective Media Texts in India,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 24, no. 6 (October 10, 2022); Lindsay Kelland, Sharli Paphitis, and Catriona Macleod, “A Contemporary Phenomenology of Menstruation: Understanding the Body in Situation and as Situation in Public Health Interventions to Address Menstruation-Related Challenges,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 63 (July 1, 2017): 33–41; Olson et al., “The Persistent Power of Stigma, July 14, 2022; Marni Sommer et al., “Comfortably, Safely, and Without Shame: Defining Menstrual Hygiene Management as a Public Health Issue,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 7 (July 2015): 1302–11; Marni Sommer and Murat Sahin, “Overcoming the Taboo: Advancing the Global Agenda for Menstrual Hygiene Management for Schoolgirls,” *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 9 (September 2013): 1556–59.
46. Young, *On the Female Body Experience*, 109.
47. Young, *On Female Body Experience,* 98.

48. Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 109. On the experience of menstruators in resource rich countries, see, for example, Lina Lyte Plioplyte, "Talking About Periods Is Taboo. So We Talked About Them.," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2024, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/11/opinion/periods-menstruation-taboo.html; Natalie Moffat and Lucy Pickering, "'Out of Order': The Double Burden of Menstrual Etiquette and the Subtle Exclusion of Women from Public Space in Scotland," *The Sociological Review* 67, no. 4 (July 1, 2019): 766–87; Dani Jennifer Barrington et al., "Experiences of Menstruation in High Income Countries: A Systematic Review, Qualitative Evidence Synthesis and Comparison to Low- and Middle-Income Countries," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 7 (July 21, 2021).

49. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 160. According to Ahmed, disorientation can be a momentary feeling of being lost or unsettled. It may pass quickly or come and go on a regular basis. Or it can also be long-lasting and quite violent experience, a sense of absolute devastation that calls our sense of self and our "involvement in the world… into crisis" Ahmed, 159.

50. de Albuquerque, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, (A/HRC/21/42)."

51. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. The feeling of being at home in the world comes from being aligned with dominant social norms and expectations, by engaging with the objects that reside in our space in particular ways, and by having objects within our reach that open up possibilities for our future. Feeling oriented is, according to Ahmed, a privilege or rather the effect of inhabiting a particular kind of body or adhering to dominant norms regarding embodiment. Such forms of bodily privilege are themselves the product of the way orientations work to put some objects within our reach and others outside of it as well as the way orientations provide often implicit instructions for how to engage with those objects with reach.

52. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 7–8.

53. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, First Edition (Vintage, 1997), 57.

54. According to Ahmed, any use, proper or queer, transforms an object in some manner, but nothing in her description suggests that the qualities of an object are wholly transformed through queer use. Queer use, she writes, is often about "releasing a potentiality that already resides in things *given* how they have taken shape." Ahmed, *Use*, 200.

55. The women's protest was part of a larger protest begun by male prisoners in Long Kesh prison.

56. This discussion is indebted to the work of Begoña Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest: Symbolic Overdetermination and Gender in Northern Ireland Ethnic Violence," *Ethos* 23, no. 2 (1995): 123–48; Theresa O'Keefe, "Menstrual Blood as a Weapon of Resistance," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 535–56; Azrini Wahidin, "Menstruation as a Weapon of War: The Politics of the Bleeding Body for Women on Political Protest at Armagh Prison, Northern Ireland," *The Prison Journal*

99, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 112–31.

57. Margaretta D'Arcy, *Tell Them Everything: A Sojourn in the Prison of Her Majesty Elizabeth II at Ard Macha* (Women's Pirate Press, 2017).

58. Mary Doyle in *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* (Prison Memory Archive, 2015), https://vimeo.com/439246407.

59. Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest"; O'Keefe, "Menstrual Blood as a Weapon of Resistance"; Wahidin, "Menstruation as a Weapon of War."

60. Phil Scranton (Ed.), "'I Am Sir, You Are a Number,' Report of the Independent Panel of Inquiry into the Circumstances of the H-Block and Armagh Prison Protests 1976-1981" (Béal Feirste/Belfast: Coiste na nIarchimí, 2020).

61. Mairead Farrell, quoted in Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest," 128.

62. Scranton (Ed.), "'I Am Sir, You Are a Number,' Report of the Independent Panel of Inquiry into the Circumstances of the H-Block and Armagh Prison Protests 1976-1981," 51.

63. D'Arcy, *Tell Them Everything*.

64. D'Arcy, *Tell Them Everything*, 60–61.

65. Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest," 137–38.

66. O'Keefe, "Menstrual Blood as a Weapon of Resistance," 547.

67. Wahidin, "Menstruation as a Weapon of War," 118.

68. O'Keefe, "Menstrual Blood as a Weapon of Resistance."

69. The misuse of menstrual blood may have engendered disorientation and trans- formed certain forms of bodily privilege in Armagh, but it was not without conse- quence. Indeed, it required the women prisoners to risk their health as they lived amongst the squalor.

70. Laura Weinstein, "The Significance of the Armagh Dirty Protest," *Éire-Ireland* 41, no. 3 (January 4, 2007): 21.

71. Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest," 140.

72. Weinstein, "The Significance of the Armagh Dirty Protest," 22.

73. Rachel Oppenheimer, "'Inhuman Conditions Prevailing': The Significance of the Dirty Protest in the Irish Republican Prison War, 1978–81.," *Eire-Ireland* 49, no. 1/2 (March 1, 2014): 157. An example of this is that "[b]y the end of 1980, a policy document on women's rights was approved for the first time in the Republican movement. Two years later…a Women's Center was opened also for the first time in the working class Nationalist ghetto of Falls Road." Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest," 143.

74. *Mazibuko & Others v. City of Johannesburg and Others* (2008). Plaintiffs explained that they suffered psychological and health risks for being unable to flush away menstrual blood and or unable to bathe. For more on the case, see Antina von Schnitzler, "Performing Dignity: Human Rights, Citizenship, and the Techno-

Politics of Law in South Africa," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 2 (May 1, 2014): 336–50. See also Jacquie Dugard "Choice From No Choice; Rights for the Left? The State, Law and the Struggle Against Prepayment Water Meters in South Africa," in *Social Movements in the Global South*, (2011); Dugard "Rights, Regulation and Resistance: The Phiri Water Campaign," 24 *South African Journal on Human Rights* 3, 593–611 (2008).

75. For more on the way that human rights and human dignity function in this protest, see Karen Zivi, "Hiding in Public or Going with the Flow: Human Rights, Human Dignity, and the Movement for Menstrual Equity," *Human Rights Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (February 2020): 119–44.
76. von Schnitzler, "Performing Dignity."
77. Marcelle C. Dawson, "Protest, Performance and Politics: The Use of 'Nano-Media' in Social Movement Activism in South Africa," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 17, no. 3 (August 1, 2012): 329.
78. von Schnitzler, "Performing Dignity."
79. Unfortunately, in the end, the court case was unsuccessful, and the Constitutional Court found the government's restrictive water policy to be constitutional despite the South African Constitution's recognition of the state's role in advancing human dignity and socio-economic well-being.
80. See, for example, Char Adams, "Runner Defends Letting Period Bleed Freely at London Marathon: 'Women's Bodies Don't Exist for Public Consumption,'" *People*, August 13, 2015, https://people.com/celebrity/kiran-gandhi-period-runner-speaks-out-against-critics/; Oliver JJ Lane, "Apparently 'Free Bleeding' Is a Thing Now and Social Justice Warriors Want You to Know All About It," Breitbart, August 10, 2015, https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2015/08/10/apparently-free-bleeding-is-a-thing-now-and-social-justice-warriors-want-you-to-know-all-about-it/; Kiran Gandhi, "Here's Why I Ran the London Marathon on My Period and Didn't Wear a Tampon," *The Independent*, August 14, 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/heres-why-i-ran-the-london-marathon-on-the-first-day- of-my-period-and-chose-not-to-wear-a-tampon-10455176.html.
81. See, Kiran Gandhi, "Sisterhood, Blood and Boobs at the London Marathon 2015," *Madame Gandhi* (blog), April 26, 2015, https://madamegandhi.blog/2015/04/26/sisterhood-blood-and-boobs-at-the-london-marathon-2015/.
82. Kiran Gandhi, "Here's Why I Ran the London Marathon on My Period and Didn't Wear a Tampon," *The Independent* (2015).
83. Char Adams, "Woman Runs London Marathon Without a Tampon, Bleeds Freely to Raise Awareness," *People*, August 7, 2015, https://people.com/health/kiran-gandhi-m-i-a-drummer-runs-london-marathon-without-tampon/.
84. Matt Stopera, "Can You Make It Through This Post and Still Want to Run A Marathon?" BuzzFeed, accessed August 16, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/can-you-make-it-through-this-post-and-still-want-to-run-a-ma. Elizabeth

Licorish, “Kiran Gandhi’s Marathon Menstruation Was a Smashing Success,” *PhillyVoice*, accessed August 16, 2017, http://www.phillyvoice.com/kiran-gandhis-marathon-menstruation/.

85. Helin Jung, “26-Year-Old Woman Free Bleeds Proudly Through Her First Marathon,” Cosmopolitan, August 6, 2015, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/health-fitness/q-and-a/a44392/free-bleeding-marathoner-kiran-gandhi/.
86. 83 Erin Hanfy, “Kiran Gandhi—the Menstrual Badass of the London Marathon—Speaks Out,” *Well+Good*, (2016), https://www.wellandgood.com/good-advice/kiran-gandhi-london-marathon-period/.
87. Gandhi, “Sisterhood, Blood and Boobs at the London Marathon 2015.”
88. Context, as in what objects are within or beyond our reach, matters for our ability both to be in dialogue with objects in ways that are at odds with dominant expectations and to inaugurate different forms of engagement with the object on the part of others.
89. To be sure, Gandhi’s protest was not part of an organized political campaign in the way that the Armagh or South African protests were, but her act takes place in the context of a multi-pronged effort to address period poverty and shaming.
90. Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*, 198.
91. Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*, 200.
92. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 174.
93. Ahmed, 174–75. Exploring the disruptiveness of acts that appear to follow instruc- tions for proper use is beyond the scope of this project.
94. Here I am thinking of works such as Çiğdem Çıdam et al., “Theorizing the Politics of Protest: Contemporary Debates on Civil Disobedience,” Contemporary Political Theory 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 513–46; José Medina, The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance (Oxford University Press, 2023).
95. Guenther, “Six Senses of Critique for Critical Phenomenology.”