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# BREAKING CODES: MAKING THEORIES ON MENSTRUATION ACCESSIBLE THROUGH THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM

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BREAKING CODES: MAKING THEORIES ON MENSTRUATION ACCESSIBLE THROUGH  
THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM

By

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A REPORT

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This report has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF SCIENCE in Rhetoric and Technical Communication.

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ABSTRACT

Men and women respond to situations according to their community's social codes. With menstruation, people adhere to "menstrual codes". Within academic communities, people adhere to "academic codes". This report paper investigates performances of academic codes and menstrual codes. Implications of gender identity and race are missing and/or minimal in past feminist work regarding menstruation. This paper includes considerations for gender identity and race. Within the examination of academic codes, this paper discusses the inhibitive process of idea creation within the academic sphere, and the limitations to the predominant ways of knowledge sharing within, and outside of, the academic community. The digital project ([www.hu.mtu.edu/~creynolds](http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~creynolds)) is one example of how academic and menstrual codes can be broken. The report and project provide a broadly accessible deconstruction of menstrual advertising and academic theories while fostering conversations on menstruation through the sharing of knowledge with others, regardless of gender, race, or academic standing.

## **MENSTRUAL MEDITATIONS PROJECT & REPORT – INTRODUCTION**

Menstruation is still arguably a taboo subject in many cultures. For example, the practice of chaupadi pratha still occurs in rural Nepal today. This Hindu tradition, banishes menstruating women from their homes, to a “chaupadi” (rustic outside structure similar to a small windowless barn or shed). Typically, we do not hear of extreme practices such as this one in urban areas and westernized cultures; however, banishment of menstruating bodies occurs in other ways. The expectation is for menstruating bodies to adhere to specific societal codes (“codes” are often referred to as “norms” in various discourses) surrounding menses. As a woman who experienced menses, I followed the menstrual codes as I learned them through social interactions, academic interactions, and media interactions. Now as an academic, I feel that I’m better prepared to make rigorous argument across various discourses. As a human who has a lot of lived experience, I feel the desire to share my experiences; particularly those that have negatively impacted my life like issues surrounding menstruation. I feel compelled to find a way to break the menstrual codes.

Through my academic research I have come to realize that there is no single “right way” or single foundational theory that will guide me to reaching the social changes I seek. I have come to realize that all too often academic calls to action are left unanswered or, more often, suspended in academic discourse unable to filter outside to those who do not have the privilege of seeking higher education. Through these realizations, I discovered the fact that I was blindly adhering to another set of codes, academic codes. Again, I am compelled to find a way to break them.

In addition to the academic voice offered in my paper, my digital project is driven by my personal experience that informs my work as an academic, as well as, my drive to make

academic work useful beyond the academy. My intent is to influence change by reaching the broadest audience possible. Largely influenced by Iris Marion Young's essay "*Menstrual Meditations*," my project is a digital artifact that uses a blend of feminist, cultural, and digital studies theories along with a do-it-yourself drive to utilize unfamiliar technologies to critique and disrupt the menstrual and academic codes that live by. The project is called *Menstrual Meditations: Visual Rhetoric of Menstruation in Media* and can be accessed online (internet connection required) at [www.hu.mtu.edu/~creynolds](http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~creynolds).

One purpose of this digital artifact is to expose the continued practice of reinforcing menstrual codes in current advertising (as found in technological sources such as print, internet video, and television) as they apply to both women and men. I also address concerns regarding the use and depiction of transgender/transsexual persons in advertising as well as issues of race. By offering a multimodal, personalized, visual and aural journey into the rhetorical tactics of advertisers, this artifact is designed to draw participants to relate to, recognize, and think critically about menstrual codes. This digitally mediated experience provides participants, particularly menstruators, with enough knowledge and resources to subvert these advertising tactics by considering alternatives to repeat purchase commercial products and potentially changing their spending habits. Moreover, it fosters conversation and sharing of knowledge with others, regardless of gender, creating a space where menstrual codes are not adhered to and ultimately broken.

Another important purpose of my digital project is to provide access and an understanding of the importance of Young's argument to an audience beyond academia, across gender, and despite economic status. From the initial disengagement from the accepted form of academic work (an obligatory seven page position paper to which I included embedded images and video) to the construction of the first fully digital articulation of those ideas (I learned to

use four different software programs in a span of two weeks that were previously unfamiliar to me), my approach to the current iteration of the project has always been one that attempts to break the academic codes. This is further demonstrated in the non-linear design of the digital artifact. There are 5 main sections to the artifact: Shame, Otherness, Oppression, Dollars, No Sense, and Fighting Back. There is no programmatic function that dictates which order the sections are experienced. The sections do not build on each other in the same linear manner that traditional written text does, like this report paper.

Moving from the digital project to the report, key influences for this paper include Iris Marion Young, Michel de Certeau, Stuart Hall, and Chris Bobel, among others. Additionally, there are many other brilliant voices, particularly in the third-wave feminist movement, such as Naomi Wolf, Jennifer Baumgardner, Rebecca Walker, and Amy Richards, that have notably raised awareness on issues such as abortion, violence against women, and other bodily concerns. These women have definitive works that embody third-wave feminist ideals, express the personal and political challenges of the body, and attempt to thwart bodily injustices overtly and covertly. However, I have found Chris Bobel's work to be the most closely paralleled to my thoughts and approach to my work. Aside from the obvious focus on menstruation, Bobel uses a narrative ethnographic approach for her research; both align with my project scope and my intrinsic belief that in order to influence change, we must share our personal experiences as a communal voice. Where Bobel examines past and present voices and shares them within limited discourses (feminist, academic, western culture), whereas my digital artifact has the potential to reach out beyond these discourses into a public space that is more accessible by a broader audience.

Why is a broader audience important? My explicit intent is to break the menstrual codes. These codes affect both males and females in different ways. This is even more complex when



considering gender identity. In order to accomplish my goal of disrupting or breaking the codes, I have embraced a different model for identifying two overarching perspectives on menstruation. For the purposes of this digital artifact and project paper, I use the term "menstruator" (and other derivatives) to identify the first perspective, and to illustrate a gap in Young and Kristeva's work. The menstruator perspective is inclusive of women that currently do menstruate, those that did menstruate but no longer do, such as post-surgical and post-menopausal women, and I am also including transgender/transsexual (female to male/male to female) in this category (which Young and Kristeva do not) with the caveat there are additional concerns and considerations that will be discussed. For additional clarification, terms such as "girl" or "woman" may be used to emulate the language within the texts that are being discussed and to call attention to exclusivities and gaps in the author's argument.

The other perspective I will discuss is that of the non-menstruator. This perspective includes men. However, as I mentioned, there is an added complexity when considering gender identity, so I will also include transgender/transsexual (female to male/male to female) in this perspective, again, with the caveat there are additional concerns and considerations that will be discussed.

By using the terminology of menstruator and non-menstruator as general categories, multiple perspectives can be considered within them. These categories embrace the fluidity of gender identity. Menstruation is everyone's issue in so much as we all possess the responsibility and capability of changing the codes by which we live, particularly when codes are detrimental to ourselves or to those close to us (in this case our mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, brothers altered to sisters, sisters altered to brothers, etc.). In order to better understand how to break the codes, we must first understand how they develop, how we are attributing to them, who is affected by them and in what ways are they affected.

## **UNDERSTANDING "CODES" – THEORY INTRODUCTION**

For the purposes of the digital artifact and this paper, "codes" are understood to be a signifying (meaning making) system that organizes signs (objects, words, concepts, images, etc. that have meaning assigned to them) into interpretive frameworks that we use to produce and consume information (Chandler). Codes are often divided in groups to form taxonomies where a fundamental code contains sub-codes. For the purposes of the digital artifact and this paper I will not separate social codes from textual or interpretative, as some scholars do, since appears to be widely understood in Semiotics that codes can and do overlap. I will use the term "social codes" as the overarching code for all subsequent codes (the top level of my taxonomy). I am identifying menstrual codes and academic codes as being subordinate to so social codes. Menstrual and academic codes are constructed of multiple sub-codes. Sub-codes, for example, are verbal language codes, bodily codes, commodity codes, behavioral codes, mass media codes aesthetic codes, scientific codes, etc.

As Stuart Hall explains in his article *Encoding, Decoding*, "there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code" (170). If we each individually assigned different meaning to signs, communication would be impossible. Codes are constructed by our desire to understand one another, to achieve successful communication between individuals and also groups of individuals. The ability to communicate is a powerful thing. Codes are entwined with power; codes are created, fabricated, and disseminated by those in power. For example, Michel Foucault, in part one of *The History of Sexuality*, builds a theory regarding the repression of sex in light of capitalism by identifying the change of focus of pleasure in sex to a focus of necessity to enhance production/consumption. Capitalist government (power) changed the normative social codes regarding sexuality/the body which were "regulating the coarse, the obscene, and

the indecent" (3) from an unconcealed body and "tolerant familiarity with the illicit" (3) to that of confinement and concealment. This was done through economization, policing, and politicizing of sex ("population" control). Foucault argues, "between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issues no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analysis, and injunctions settled upon it" (26). The distinctions between what is acceptable and what is illicit became legal matters. I discuss this to give a picture as to historically who and how codes are created or changed and to what extent can they actively influence us. The change in social codes came during the Victorian era as industrial capitalism began to replace mercantilism. This era not only had a dramatic impact on sex, but on the menstruating body as well. Although menstruators were deemed to be a "source of pollution" prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was at this time that menstruation became characterized as "the curse" (Bobel 32). Additionally, the medicalization of menstruation occurred during this time. Male physicians dominated and took over the definition and treatment of menstruation which had been a primarily a female domain (Bobel 32) and made it sanitary and hygienic. This era marked the beginning of prescribed menstrual codes in the form of medical pamphlets that dictated menstrual etiquette (Bobel 32).

These social codes pertaining to menstruating bodies have changed very little and are still moderated by those in power. In the famous words of the feminists of the 60's and 70's, "the personal is political." Codes affect us in many ways.

### **UNDERSTANDING "CODES" – PERFORMANCE**

Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, discusses how social codes affect us. He mirrors Hall when he states that we live by "codes." He argues that we add and subtract from ourselves in order to comply with social codes in order to keep our bodies in the set norm.

He asks, "where and when is there anything bodily that is not written, remade, cultured, identified by the different tools which are part of a social symbolic code?" (de Certeau 147). These additions and subtractions are exemplified by haircuts, clothing, and general hygiene (bathing), which fit the daily social codes of our communities in various ways. Women in particular are expected to perform by these social codes. Betty Friedan wrote about the internal struggles of women of the time (50's-60's) who were trying to perform to these social codes, trying to be "feminine," as directed by the code written in books, articles, and television. She writes that women were taught "...how to dress, look, and act more feminine...they were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights..." (Schneir 50-51). She identified "the problem with no name" as what she describes as a "strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered..." (Schneir 50) or in other words, a disconnection between the woman they were groomed to be through social codes and who they once aspired to be. In the 70's, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective produced *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in an attempt at educating women about their bodies and effectively attempting to break these social codes built by the previous generations that Friedan had described. They argue that, as women "our bodies are the physical bases from which we move out into the world; ignorance, uncertainty – even, at worst, shame – about our physical selves create in us an alienation from ourselves that keeps us from being the whole people that we could be" (Schneir 359) they continue the argument that this alienation is created "when she [any woman] drains her energy trying to change her face, her figure, her hair her smells, to match some ideal norm set by magazines, movies, and TV..." (Schneir 359). We perform codes sometimes to our own detriment.

History is filled with stories, anecdotes, narratives, and research surrounding the human body experience and the adherence to codes. As I have reviewed thus far, social codes are discussed across many different academic frameworks. I would like to give a greater focus to the feminist framework. Early feminists up through the second wave feminists of today share a specific focus on the female body experience. Third wave feminism expands this focus to be inclusive of marginalized identities. Feminism explores what it is, what it means, what is perceived, what is exploited, and/or what is oppressed all in the context of the body. Here, and in the digital artifact, I am focusing on the menstruating body.

### **MENSTRUAL CODES – MENSTRUATORS**

Menstruators are actively living by menstrual codes. My digital artifact, through my critique of current menstrual advertisement, intentionally breaks any misguided notions that menstrual codes are a thing of the past. These codes are not only our great-grandparents' codes, but our grandparents', our parents', and potentially our children's codes. The potency of menstrual codes has not waned for menstruators. Bobel provides an example of this in her recently published book *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. She writes that "just a few years ago, when I submitted the title of a talk sponsored by feminist faculty at a liberal arts college in the Midwest, I was asked to eliminate the word "menstruation" for fear that it would cause trouble for the college's press office" (Bobel 29). Menstrual codes affect us in more ways than just the process of menstruating conversations and other discourses are also affected. Menstruators are silenced, restricted, oppressed, and othered.

Menstruation does not respect the borders of the physical body, it escapes the womb, and when the monthly blood comes, if it is not contained or suppressed, the woman's identity will be revealed as such. Menstrual codes dictate that menstruators must control their bodies.

Julia Kristeva describes in her book *Powers of Horror* that it is not the actual process of expelling blood that becomes the problem when not controlled, but the disruption of the codes. She argues that "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Menstruators are seen as abject if the menstrual codes are not followed.

Iris Marion Young explicitly describes the menstrual codes in her essay *Menstrual Meditations* as a pressure to conceal the bodily process at all costs. She writes, "...from our earliest awareness of menstruation until the day we stop, we are mindful of the imperative to *conceal* our menstrual process. We follow a multitude of practical rules. Do not discuss your menstruation...leave no bloodstains on the floor, towels, sheets, or chairs. Make sure that your bloody flow does not visibly leak through your clothes, and do not let the outline of a sanitary pad show" (106-07). Menstruators learn the menstrual code even before they menstruate. Menstrual codes are not some vague secret. They are explicit in their directive of concealment.

The performance of menstrual codes for menstruators is a complex balancing act between their bodies and social situations (personal relationships, work, school, etc.). I share a personal story in the digital artifact that embodies this balancing act and how adhering to the menstrual codes affects a menstruator. In my story I describe the feelings of horror I experienced when I stood up to present at an academic conference and I felt menstrual blood run down my leg. My reaction, "I felt horror," is a result of my performance of menstrual codes that had, by that point in my life, become completely engrained in my behaviors. As I look back now, I performed other behaviors as a result of menstrual codes. I intentionally wore loose fitting pants to conceal the extremely thick maxi-pad I was using, and they were black to conceal any potential, and as it turned out, probable leaks. Efforts to contain and conceal menstruation are central to mainstream (and I argue, oppressive) menstrual codes, as are

feelings of horror and shame when efforts to contain and conceal fail. Menstrual codes are performed by all of us, it is important to look at all possible perspectives.

### **MENSTRUAL CODES - MEN**

Understanding menstrual codes from these two perspectives (menstruators and non-menstruators) is how my project picks up where others such as Young and Kristeva left off. Third-wave feminists, in attempt to break menstrual codes, change their language to be more inclusive and to “disrupt our normative conceptions of bodies which calls into question the biological definitions at the root of gender in Western culture” (Bobel 164). The use of “menstruators” rather than “women” offers a less restrictive lens in which to view the population being affected by these menstrual codes however, they fail to include the male population which is also affected by menstrual codes. My project embodies the ideals of third-wave feminism by reinforcing its language (the use of “menstruator” in lieu of “woman” and the dismissal of consumerism in favor of alternative choice) and through its exploration and subsequent critique of menstrual advertising and the culturally constructed codes that they continue to develop, enhance, and enforce. Within my digital artifact and project paper, I make it clear that living by menstrual codes is something that affects us all despite our gender and gender identification. Bobel’s book provides a rich history of feminism as it pertains to menstrual activism. Bobel, 20 years junior to Kristeva and Young, but in the same vein of thinking, implicitly identifies how menstruation is coded as a “women’s experience” as long as it is attached to the sexed body. (Bobel 156). What feminists like Kristeva, Young, and Bobel have not directly addressed in their discussions is the existence and adherence of menstrual codes by men. Feminists such as Kristeva, Young, and Bobel recognize that the male/female dichotomy exists, and that long-standing patriarchal codes are in place. They thoroughly examine the

female body experience of menstruation; however, they fail to examine how males experience and adhere to menstrual codes.

I can recall a particular moment in my childhood where male menstrual codes became apparent to me. In elementary school the boys and girls were separated for "sex education." The girls received a lecture on menstruation and the female reproductive system, where the boys learned about nocturnal emissions and the male reproductive system. In talking with my peers, there have been many that had similar experiences. Even if this scenario does not apply to all boys, they learn menstrual codes in other ways. They learn by example. They learn the appropriate responses from their peers, their older male siblings, their father, their grandfather, and so on. They also learn from menstruators. When menstruators are following menstrual codes from their perspective (concealment, etc.), this demonstrates to young boys that menstruation is not their issue. They learn that menstruation is not something they need to understand or talk about. They learn that the appropriate response is to react negatively by either acting "grossed out" or "repulsed," to try to "fix" the problem, and/or to completely tune out altogether. For men, the overarching sign in the menstrual codes dictates that they should treat menstruators with difference. This is particularly apparent in product advertising. For example, as discussed in my project, the California Milk Processor Board ran a series of "got milk?" ads that claim milk reduces PMS symptoms. In the ads, men are depicted visually as being sheepishly apologetic however, the text signifies that the apology is unwarranted, but necessary to avoid conflict. Advertisements like this reinforce a male perspective on menstruation that assumes non-menstruators must tip-toe around menstruators and that they must treat them differently. It reinforces the false notion that menstruation is a woman's "problem" and that they can "fix" the "problem" through passive/aggressive interactions, and buying the right products.



## **MENSTRUAL CODES – TRANSGENDER/TRANSSEXUAL**

In addition to the basic male/female dichotomy and adherence to the menstrual codes, the “women’s problem” of menstruation is ripe with other codification issues. Transgender, transsexual, and other biological women who do not menstruate, for whatever reason, should not be excluded from these conversations. Although Young and Kristeva skim the surface by addressing menopausal women, they neglect to be as fully inclusive (in gender and gender identity concerns) as third wave feminists attempt in their work. Assumptions regarding gender are twisted by advertisers to both dupe the consumers and/or to distinguish “the other” in the advertising scenario. An example from the digital project is the Australian advertisement for Libra tampons that depicts a transgender/transsexual woman and a “normal” woman one-upping each other to prove which one is the “real” woman. At the end of the commercial, the trans woman is depicted as losing the competition to the “real” woman when the “real” woman pulls out a tampon as a final defining gesture. The ad reads, “Libra gets girls.” Advertisements like this suggest menstruating is the defining characteristic of what makes a “woman,” a “woman.” The positioning of male and female bodies in an unnecessary competition reinforces the false notion of menstruation being only a “woman’s problem.” A false dichotomy is implied that perpetuates an unrealistic stigma of trans woman as being in competition with “real” women and/or invading “real” women’s space.

The representations of transsexual/transgender (referred to as “trans”) in menstrual advertisements require critique. Although my digital artifact and project paper intends on being inclusive in demonstrating points of view of menstruators and men alike, as I pointed out, gender identification adds an additional layer of complexity. Gender identification needs to be considered when discussing menstrual codes because the trans community has the additional complication of living under/being influenced by menstrual codes from multiple perspectives.

For example, male to female (MTF) transition persons presumably grow up under the influence of the non-menstruator perceptions of the menstrual codes, whereas female to male (FTM) transition persons are presumably influenced by the menstruator perspective. These influences do not just disappear when they recognize they identify their gender differently than what their physical appearance dictates. Furthermore, if they successfully transition MTF or FTM they are expected to perform to the opposite set of menstrual codes. Living by menstrual codes is difficult enough from a single perspective, living by menstrual codes from multiple perspectives results in a deep resistance to being included in the menstruation conversation. For example, Bobel reached out to the trans-identified community in an attempt to be inclusive of this group for her research. An author of a trans topic website responded to her inquiry for menstrual experiences of trans-identified people, they wrote,

First, I don't *ever* bring up subjects like this with the guys;...I mean...would I feel comfortable if one of them asked me a reciprocal question [and]...second, it reminded me, with very bad memories drug [sic] up, of an incident twenty-eight years ago when a transphobic neighbor called me, pretending to be a market researcher, asking the brand of tampons I used...HA HA HA...very funny...so it's rag on the pre-op male-to-female tranny day, HA HA! My advice? Don't include transmen in your work...it would be demeaning to them. And frankly, also Male-to-Female transwomen as well...as the topic is defined as a "women's issue"...and pushing the transmen into that category hurts, but [sic] them and us, think about it for a moment. It would define FTM's as women and MTF's as not women. My request? Don't. (Bobel 161-162)

I don't agree that the trans community should be excluded from the menstruation conversation despite that they live under the burden of menstrual codes from multiple perspectives.

Exclusion would allow us a way to avoid the bigger issue, the perpetuation of menstrual codes from all perspectives. Advertisements, such as the Libra ad, are a double whammy for the trans community. They throw the male-to-female (MTF) transgender community under the proverbial bus by labeling them as not “real” women while at the same time they instill the idea that menstruation is only a “women’s issue” which discounts the female-to-male (FTM) transgender community.

### **MENSTRUAL CODES – RACE**

It is equally important to recognize that menstrual codes are also racially coded as well. Although feminist ideals may be articulated as excluding none, particularly racial minorities and under-represented groups, there are very few racially marginalized groups that are represented or are generating alternative content that engages in menstrual discourse. This gap of racial inclusion is another marked difference between third wave feminism and that of our predecessors, including Young and Kristeva. The digital artifact bears witness to the inescapable exclusion of representations of racially diverse menstruators in advertisements. Advertisements, not only in the United States, but other “westernized” countries, like Poland and Australia depict menstruators as white females. I found very few depictions of African American menstruators and no representations of indigenous peoples (Native Americans, Australian Aboriginals, etc.). Even in the Spanish speaking commercial, the menstruator is not visually represented as Hispanic or Latina. Although she has dark hair, she is has a very fair skin tone.

Bobel also notes that in her research she found very limited resources that contain race information in the context of menstrual experiences. She admittedly framed her own research in “white terms” and it was not until she conducted an email interview with Sharon Powell, an African American health educator/artist, that she became aware of her folly. The definition of

“activism” in and of itself is challenged by Powell as an artificial separation between doing the act (of activism) and living life. In the interview, Powell stated, “there are women of color (and men of color) talking about these things in other spheres. There is an African Holistic Health movement that has different ideas about the meaning of menstruation for women’s health, particularly women of African descent...we do not call this activism” (Bobel 143).

Why the added secrecy for women of color, African American women in particular? The exploitation of women of color and the abjection of all women are equally embedded in the lived experience of menstrual codes. Michel de Certeau outlines this power struggle and resulting otherness.

Every power, including the power of law, is written first of all the backs of its subjects. Knowledge does the same...Books are only metaphors of the body. But in times of crisis, paper is no longer enough for the law, and it writes itself again on the bodies themselves. The printed text refers to what is printed on our body, brands it with a red-hot iron with the mark of the Name and of the Law, and ultimately affects it with pain and /or pleasure so as to turn it into a symbol of the Other, something *said, called, named*...it is a living memory of this experience aroused when reading touches the body at the points where the scars of the unknown text have long been imprinted. (de Certeau 140-141)

To be othered is to be marginalized. Women of color, transgender, Latinas, and women in general have “long been imprinted,” restricted, and socially oppressed as a result of social codes. Although de Certeau argues that, “marginality is becoming universal” and that “a marginal group has now become a silent majority,” he recognizes “that does not mean the

group is homogeneous” (xvii). This lack of homogeneity is made indelibly clear by Kristeva’s, Young’s, and (most explicitly) Bobel’s research.

Current representations of Black social class (low/untamed/need to control – middle to upper/tamed/in control), along with the belief that the onset of menarche is the marker that girls are ready for sex, heightens the urgency for black menstruators to hide menstruation, to adhere to the menstrual codes. Menstrual codes are different for the black body. As critiqued in my project, Tampax uses a famous black athlete, Serena Williams, in their “Outsmart Mother Nature” campaign. The ad reads, “a *champion* [emphasis mine] like Serena Williams doesn’t let Mother Nature’s Monthly gift interrupt her game” (Proctor & Gamble). Critiquing the stereotype of the black body as an athlete is not new. The advertisers here however, still use that stereotype to identify the controlled black body. Based on research of Clarissa Scott and others, Bobel hypothesizes that the difference between races is in “how bodies are represented, perceived, and acted on” (Bobel 147). The lived experience of African Americans, even in recent history, is filled with evidence of how social codes are imprinted and thus lived, rather irrationally, by only the color of one’s skin. (The recent events resulting in the death of Trayvon Martin come to mind.) African American women have experienced genital mutilation, rape, slavery, and redefinition as less than human as they have lived by social codes. This was clearly demonstrated by the medical work of Dr. J. Marion Sims who used black slave women as test subjects to practice experimental gynecological surgery to correct fistulas<sup>1</sup> caused by childbirth. It is well documented that he performed multiple surgeries, without anesthetic. One woman, Anarcha, was subjected to 13 operations without anesthetic. Dr. Sims, despite his unethical experimentation on powerless black women, is still revered by many as “The Father of

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<sup>1</sup> Fistulas are a connection between organs or vessels that normally do not connect. For example, childbirth can cause a rectovaginal fistula between the large intestine and vagina.

Gynecology,” (Ojanuga 29). A statue of his likeness still stands today on the perimeter of Central Park in New York.

Black women have not forgotten these and other exploitations. Bobel, in an interview with Opeyemi Parham, describes this lived experience by black women. She says, “‘down there’ is loaded for women of color, not only the site of pleasure and for some, procreation, but also a site historically exploited. ‘Down there’ is a painful and dangerous subject” (148).

### **ADVERTISING – CONSTRUCTING THE CODES**

Menstrual codes are refashioned, again and again, by manufacturers to sell more products. Take for example, “Kotex Control” commercial example found in the digital artifact. The Kotex advertisement refashions a long-standing menstrual code that menstruators must control their menstruating bodies. Not only does it contain the normative message (menstrual control/prevent leaks), but embellish on the “problem” by including “smell” as something menstruators need to control. Naturally their product can be purchased and consumed to control this problem. Corporations encode their advertisements with the menstrual codes they wish consumers to believe and “buy” into. In this vein Young argues, “advertising campaigns by companies like Kotex replace the view of menstruation as debilitating with an understanding of menstruation as a healthy process that is nevertheless dirty, presenting a hygiene problem that needs managing with their products” (Young 103). Menstrual products are designed and marketed for the basic purpose of absorbing menstrual blood; however, advertisers for menstrual products use aspects of menstrual codes as messages for what they believe that consumers will buy into as new, better, and/or improved.

Stuart Hall explains that there is a heavily coded process in which advertisers (encoders) create and disseminate messages (advertisements) and distribute them within various

mediums. Consumers (decoders) receive the messages (consumption) and ultimately elicit a response as a result of their interpretation of the message (reproduction). Hall argues that the encoded messages must have some mutual meaning for both the producer and the consumer before the message can be meaningfully decoded (168). That is not to say that the message will be decoded as intended by the encoder. For example, de Certeau makes the argument that consumers may be operating from a differing set of codes in comparison to the codes that were used and infused into the message by the producer. Furthermore, the message cannot force itself to produce a particular response in the consumer.

However, consumers aren't always able to operate outside of the producers' codes. As I have discussed, menstrual codes are learned from a very early age. They are also widely distributed, in this case, globally. Hall informs us that in these situations, codes learned at an early age and widely distributed codes, the codes do not appear to be constructed because they have been so widely distributed. He says that instead they appear to be "naturally given" (511). The tour de force of corporate advertising continues to shape and re-shape how menstruation is viewed by menstruators and men alike. Corporations are forcing how we perform menstrual codes, but because menstrual codes are *naturalized* it seems barely visible, this is what makes them so dangerous.

Menstrual codes are **not** natural. Suppressing codes and code enhancers (corporations/pharmaceutical "marketing machines") perpetuate the acceptance and adherence to menstrual codes. Bobel similarly argues that it is those with the power that speak for us. They shape and refashion the codes we live by. She argues,

When women ignore their bodily processes or, worse, recognize them merely as problems whose solutions are available only through consumerism, internalized oppression takes over. I am suggesting not that detachment from the body –

from what Adrienne Rich calls “its bloody speech” – is women’s fault, but that when women participate in the silences around menstruation, they allow others to speak for them. Today it is rarely women who define the meaning of their bodily processes and take self-directed action to experience them in ways that are healthy, sustainable, and, for some, enjoyable and renewing. Menstruation is one of those bodily processes . . . [that] are similarly co-opted by social institutions and discourses. Not those who inhabit the bodies, but physicians and other health-care providers, along with corporations, pharmaceutical companies, and their marketing machines, shape our cultures of embodiment. (27)

Despite Hall and de Certeau’s arguments that human agency exists, Bobel and Young (and implicitly Foucault) argue that through enactment of menstrual codes and the maintaining of silence, personal power has been given up to the money machines of consumerism. If corporations are freely given the power through our silence, then advertisements will continue to shape the codes that we live by. By putting menstrual codes under the spotlight in my project, I reveal the messages, I reveal the power, and I offer alternatives to the codes themselves. Within the Fighting Back section of the digital project I explore some of the other options that are available for menstruators. Options such as cloth menstrual pads offer a completely safe, inexpensive, environmentally friendly, and non-commercial way to experience menstruation. Cloth pads can be made at home or, if time is a concern, they can be purchased through non-commercial methods such as through etsy.com (a collection of internet stores that offer all hand-made goods which are predominantly made in the United States). The use of alternative products like cloth pads allows menstruators to take their power back. For example, by talking openly about menstruation or by using products from companies that do not enforce



menstrual codes (such as the use of some menstrual cups, or the use of home-made cloth pads) menstruators stop participating in the silence. They stop letting corporations speak for them. An example from the digital project comes from a blog written by Susanne Myers (known as Hillbilly Housewife on her blog). In one of her blog posts she discusses her switch to cloth pads. She writes,

One of the ways that we can achieve more personal freedom and attain genuine control over our circumstances is to snip those strings every time we find a self-sufficient alternative. For me, this means turning to cloth pads exclusively. I would rather get my hands wet than give Corporate America one more ounce of control over my budget or even more importantly, my body. (Myers)

Informed by theoretical arguments and the desire to enact agency, my project is expressly designed to be an informational resource for participants. It provides a venue for exploring alternative options, which is a step to breaking free from menstrual codes. Through its discussion and critique of advertising and advertising tactics, participants recognize the embedded codes and are better prepared to enact their own agency over how they view, act, and react to menstruation. Four sections in the project (Shame, Otherness, Social Oppression, and Dollars, No Sense) through visual, aural, and textual interactions show participants exactly how menstrual codes are being enforced and re-enforced.

### **ADVERTISING - ENFORCING THE CODES**

Corporations are constantly enforcing and re-enforcing menstrual codes upon menstruators and non-menstruators through corporate advertisements found in traditional media sources such as television, magazines, and now on the internet. Disturbingly, there are

companies that viewed as being different when they truly are not. They talk the talk and claim they want to change the codes however, they do not walk the walk and their advertisements enforce menstrual codes rather than change them. One such company, Hello Flo, repackages and redistributes menstrual pads and tampons monthly based on the customer's choice of plans, first day of last menstrual cycle, and frequency of menstrual cycle. On the home page of the company website (and shown in the project) they have an internet-only video advertisement for their "period kit" service. I discovered this company and their product as a result of their advertisement video going viral.<sup>2</sup> I included this video in the project for several reasons, but predominantly because it was getting a lot of positive viewer and media attention. Internet media outlets like Huffington Post, ABC News, Fox 13 News, and BuzzFeed (a website that detects viral content) had praising titles such as "*Camp Gyno*" Ad Gets It Oh-So Right, *Makes Us Proud to Be Women*, and "*Camp Gyno*" Ad is an Amazing Breakthrough in Tampon Advertising. After reading the BuzzFeed article, and subsequently watching the video advertisement itself, I am not convinced that this ad is either "perfect" or "amazing" as described in the article. Spaces like BuzzFeed are designed to be the "what's hot" on internet-based on algorithms and what they believe will appeal to viewers. They are a media feed that brings a bunch of other media under one website. The author of the article uncritically describes what I claim to be an inherently big problem with the HelloFlo ad. The article boasts, "But, if you get them loving your product/service early, and you're good at it, chances are better that you've got a customer for a long time. Brilliant" (Copyranter). In order to break menstrual codes, we must break away from looking at menstruation from a marketing perspective. Positioning this advertisement as a rhetorical success because they play a good

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<sup>2</sup> In internet terms, "viral" means to have received a lot of views on its hosting page. In the case of this video, according to Kelly Wallace a writer for CNN, the video received over 5 million views in one week. (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/05/living/period-power-talking-to-girls-about-aunt-flo>).

marketing game only serves to re-enforce menstrual codes, not break them. When someone has an experience for the first time, they are particularly vulnerable to suggestions from others. In the case of menstruation, new menstruators typically don't have a true choice of what products they use if they don't have their own source of income. Their parents or guardians make the purchasing decision for them. The problem with this can be that menstrual codes are passed down from generation to generation through these purchasing decisions. If their parents buy them a particular brand of commercial maxi-pads or tampons because that is what they use (and have no knowledge of other options or do not advise on other options), new menstruators are likely to adopt the product without question. New menstruators are not likely to switch unless they are exposed to an additional solution that is particularly attention grabbing such as HelloFlo's ad.

The HelloFlo ad is likely seen as revolutionary among menstrual products because it uses the same tactics other successful advertisers do: humor, bribery, and shock value (oooh...they used the word "vagina"! this is SO groundbreaking!) might lure in the young consumer to buy their product. In doing so, however, the HelloFlo advertising campaign and business model do not break menstrual codes at all, but find fresher (and thus less obvious) means of enforcing those codes. For example, in the video advertisement, the "camp gyno" girl announces the receipt of "the red badge of courage" with a smile on her face as if she was excited about getting her first period. However, the advertisement quickly degrades into the "camp gyno" oppressing other camp goers when they get their periods. The "camp gyno" shouts to another girl who is experiencing menstrual cramps "suck it up and deal with it.... this is your life now!" The "camp gyno" also publicly shames a fellow camper when she screams through a megaphone, "I know it's that time of month for you because I know your cycle!" The shame and embarrassment is obvious as the young girl walks by with her hand covering her

face. Needing to control and conform is implied through the music choice at the end (military march). The company creator herself (Naama Bloom) claims that she started the company and created this advertisement because she was sick of walking through her office with “a practically see-through plastic bag” (Wallace). Obviously, the company creator is living by the menstrual codes (whether consciously or not, she is perpetuating menstrual codes through her personal statements and company advertisement). Women don’t want to be seen carrying tampons through the office because menstrual codes tell us we must conceal our menstruation. The HelloFlo advertising video implies that menstruation is a burden, something to loathe and/or feel disdain for (one of the very things Bobel argues advertising perpetuates, not relieves). Moreover, although this company Hello Flo is selling to all menstruators, it is unavoidably clear with their choice of color, iconography, and age of actors in the video advertisement that they are targeting young girls who are about to, or have recently experienced menses to ensure they keep coming back as customers. This is not a new industry practice. Bobel noted that “in the wake of World War II, mothers, who had been a fixture in menstrual product advertisements, faded away. At that point, the industry began marketing directly to young girls and cleverly cultivating brand loyalty” (Bobel 33). Get them young, and keep them coming back; and, in the process, teach and reinforce menstrual codes that ensure the product’s place in a menstruator’s life.

As an ad for a specific product line, the viral HelloFlo video actively forecloses any alternative menstrual products or methods for young menstruators to address their bodily needs, aside from the commercial standards of tampons and a particular **brand** of pad. Although I respect that she desires a better way for her daughter “I just wanted to talk the way women talked...the way I am teaching my daughter to talk” (Wallace) she is still missing that she is enforcing the menstrual codes with her product and aspects of her advertising video. This

ad rejects a model of open discussion amongst menstruators in particular (but not exclusive of non-menstruators) that could break menstrual codes instead of enforce them. The HelloFlo advertisement suggests that it is more appealing and even safer not to talk to their peers (despite the reality that most girls will not behave anything like “camp gyno”). By including the “progressive” language (like the word “vagina”) into the spoken discourse of the advertisement it makes us laugh and shocks us (potentially makes some of us pleased to see a young girl using a grown-up feminist word), but this open talk is overshadowed by negative menstruation messages that oppress and shame. The ultimately scary approach to menstruation (the “camp gyno” menstruation demonstration) may be seen as humorous to some, but scary to others and enhances the stigma that the vagina itself is something to laugh at, and equally disturbing, to be afraid of. How is this at all progressive? HelloFlo offers only one alternative, a silent and secret box delivered monthly. The secret box ends any discussion; discussion is not necessary. The problem is solved. The box shows up at your doorstep and no agency is required. There is no choice to make. Bloom has undermined her own goal of teaching young girls to talk about menstruation. Instead, she enforces and re-enforces the same old menstrual codes like the necessity to conceal and do not discuss. Keep it quiet, and let the corporation take care of what your friends/family could help you with, or you could do on your own. Moreover, Naama Bloom makes the false assumption that her product and subsequent advertisement aligns with the feminist agenda based on, as discussed within this text, the counter consumerist movement of third-wave feminism.

The feminist agenda asks questions that companies like HelloFlo avoid. For example, Bobel describes that media does not cover vital questions like “why, exactly, do nearly all women hate their periods more than other bodily processes?” and “how do culture, gender ideology, and consumerism shape these reactions?” (Bobel 7). She argues that, for third-wave

feminists, “these questions are at the core of menstrual activism and drive activist efforts to confront negative representations of menstruation, which impede the development of safe products, the distribution of comprehensive information, and honest, informed dialogue about this bodily process” (Bobel 7). Naama Bloom’s personal and business message, via her company Hello Flo, fails to answer these important concerns.

One consequence is menstruators are poorly informed by advertising campaigns such as the one by HelloFlo. Menstruators do not receive enough information to make informed choices. Choices like avoiding potentially unsafe products. Toxic Shock Syndrome is still a potential risk for tampon users. Other risks, such as possible chemical absorption into the body from the processed tampon materials, should be considered. HelloFlo does not offer alternatives to commercial consumer products, which subsequently does not provide fully “comprehensive information” and “informed dialogue” that third-wave feminists seek. There are many costs that aren’t often considered when discussing the topic of menstruation such as the cost to personal health and the cost to the environment. We can’t discuss any of these costs without discussing advertising.

### **ADVERTISING – COST OF THE CODES**

The sole purpose of advertising is to sell products, not educating young girls about their bodies. In the United States alone, millions of dollars are poured into advertisements annually. Companies would not invest so heavily into marketing campaigns if they did not pay off in billions of dollars in revenue. These companies are making a huge profit by our adherence and their re-enforcement to menstrual codes. My project explicitly reminds us of this fact. Within the digital artifact I examine advertising expenditures and revenues with the focus on 3 of the “big

4" companies in the feminine care industry. In the digital artifact I show by example how menstrual codes are enforced through the encoded advertisements.

Bobel provides a profile of the femcare industry which includes sales figures, and market percentages. She identifies the "Big Four" United States based (multinational) corporations that dominate the FemCare market as: Procter & Gamble (Tampax and Always), Kimberly-Clark (Kotex), Johnson & Johnson (OB and Stayfree), and Playtex Products (Playtex) as trying to maintain or increase profits in the stagnant U.S. market by vying for market share through advertising, trying to convince consumer to use "innovative" products that have a higher profit margin, and capitalizing on trends in consumer attitudes, among other strategies. In their quest for market share companies of course advertise the quality and performance aspects of their products, such as the proper level of absorbency to meet needs or increase ease of use. But they also appeal to and reinforce the menstrual taboo. (Bobel 107)

Companies are profit driven. If they do not make money, they do not survive in the capitalist economy. In order to keep their profits they must stay ahead of their competition. They have to continually reinvent their products as the best new thing; however, these schemes only re-enforce menstrual codes. As people become increasingly savvy to the rhetoric in advertisements, corporations respond with equally savvy marketing campaigns. It is a cycle of decoding and encoding as described by Hall between producer and consumer as previously discussed, and also depicted in the "dollars, no sense" section of my digital project. In order to break out of the cycle, we must seek out alternative information to what is given to us by traditional sources. There are several examples in the digital project of consumer created informational content, such as information on cleaning cloth menstrual pads, which offer an

alternative to commercially found products. This is not information found in advertisements, nor is it found in places of learning like academic journals.

### **MOVING BEYOND THEORY - BREAKING THE ACADEMIC CODES**

From my very first peek into higher education decades years ago, to my current experience as a graduate student, I have been acutely aware of the both the privilege and disadvantage academic institutional systems possess. The privilege of specialized knowledge, and the disadvantage of not having access to the specialized knowledge, is embedded in the academic codes built into the institutional system.

In order to obtain higher education, even to enter the system, one must comply with academic codes. One must possess certain privileges, such as the means to pay, and proof of one's ability to speak the academic languages (e.g., written entrance exams or ACT/SAT scores). The institutional system, as a result of these criteria that make up the codes, becomes an elite group; not all are included. Bobel describes the problem feminism faces as a result of academic codes she comments that "perhaps the most impenetrable barrier to access to feminism is the privileging of so-called academic feminism. In an attempt to shape a stronger, more inclusive movement, third-wavers reject the intellectual and professional elite that dominate much of feminist writing" (Bobel 18-19). To start a revolution you cannot sit around and muse about it. You certainly cannot do it on your own. You have to get others to join. If you block them at the gate with standardized testing, and/or a couple writing samples judged by a panel, is that really a fair assessment of what a person has to offer the academy or their communities?

In the spring of 2010 I applied to graduate school at Michigan Tech. It had been 15 years since I completed my undergraduate degree in a non-research based program. I almost



did not get accepted. Luckily, I had one person who believed in me, but if it weren't for that person, I would not have made the cut. Yet, here I am walking into my final semester with a 4.0 GPA, 2 conference presentations, and one academic journal publication already on my vita. Reminds me of the old adage "don't judge a book by its cover."

If we follow Howard Gardner's model that describes multiple intelligences, we understand that not everyone learns in the same way. It would be logical to say that not everyone can provide insight of their knowledge in the same way either. In my personal experience, I know I am a terrible test taker despite my understanding of the material. Yet, we have a mold for accepting students into academic programs based on criteria such as test scores. Some options for changing this model might be including personal interviews, or acceptance of alternative forms of proof of knowledge. An example of alternative forms might video essays or multi-modal portfolio constructions.

Third-wave feminists are trying to expand upon, not restrict, who does feminism and in what form the feminist conversation takes. Bobel argues,

third-wave writing does express, in the aggregate, an earnest attempt to construct a feminist movement that all people can imagine themselves a part of. The writing expresses this value of inclusiveness through the use of personal stories expressed in candid, accessible, jargon-free language. This is a feminism that not only claims to be inclusive, but also demonstrates this value through its discursive practices. (Bobel 19)

Third-wave feminism is about **doing-it-yourself**. Third-wave feminists speak on a plane that is accessible to those that don't have privileged access to specialized knowledge gained in academic institutions. Their work may not be found in academic journals, instead it might be found on a personal internet blog, or published as a zine. Their work often speaks in

personal narrative, uses contractions in sentences, and doesn't fit into linear analytical patterns. My digital artifact embodies third-wave feminism. It takes an important academic work, and not only tells the reader why it is important in an engaging format akin to how the world is viewed today (ex. social media), but it shows them using personal narratives and images. Then it provides resources for them to do something about it. What good is feminist theory, or any theory, if it is not widely accessible? If it is locked up in the ivory tower and only disseminated and shared within and amongst the elite, the privileged?

Some academics seem to lose sight of the fact that there are people outside the walls of the institution that could benefit from hearing what they have to say. This is not to ignore the work of scholars such as Steve Parks (Literacy and Composition studies), but to call to attention constraints within the academy. There is important work being done, but much of the work is only accessible for the privileged few. Many academic journals require payment for articles, and if you are not affiliated with an academic institution, you do not have access to their library resources. Additionally, academic institutions would benefit from embracing new approaches to scholarship. David Parry discussed these problems (paying for journals and restrictions on knowledge sharing) in his keynote presentation at the 2012 Computers and Writing conference. He calls for a more open source or sharing approach overall. His specific ideas can be found on his blog called *AcademHack*.

A digital artifact, such as the one I have created, has value. By design, it shares information openly. Other formats of open information sharing such as feminist blogs, zines, and other non-academic formats that are used for raising awareness to important issues have value as well. As argued by de Certeau,

the imaginary landscape of an inquiry is not without value, even if it is without rigor. It restores what was earlier called "popular culture," but it does so in order

to transform what was represented as a matrix-force of history into a mobile infinity of tactics. It thus keeps before our eyes the structure of a social imagination in which the problem constantly takes different forms and begins anew. (41 de Certeau)

Societal problems are critiqued in many spaces and are produced and reproduced in many varied forms inside and outside of academia which is important so we do not lose sight of them. Although my digital artifact is not constructed using traditional or comfortable methods for many academics, it does not render it "without rigor." My work (digital project) is valuable on its own without additional supporting documentations. At times the academy seems forget that it has been, and should continue to be, on the front lines of new ways of learning, building, and sharing content.

### **DIGITAL ARTIFACTS – GAME CHANGING COMMUNICATION**

From the early research in packet switching to the birth of the first internet networks, academia has been on the front line in the research, development, and deployment of what has become one of the most powerful communication tools available to us, the internet. One view of internet is that it is a "mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard to geographic location" (Leiner et.al. 2). The power of knowledge sharing with almost anyone in the world at the touch of your fingertips. Although the backbone of the internet architecture was driven by a core group of designers (Leiner et.al. 8) the explosion of growth of horizontal networks within the internet are game changers for who can produce information and how it is consumed. These networks are not driven by media, business, or government, so they allow the emergence of what is called "self-directed mass communication" (Castells et.al. 13).

Content, initiated by individuals or groups, bypasses the media system and potentially spreads across the globe. This comes in the forms of blogs, videos, and interactive content. What is exciting and notable about horizontal communication networks, according to Manuel Castells et.al., is that “for the first time in history [horizontal communication networks], allow people to communicate with each other without going through the channels set up by the institutions of society for socialized communication” (Castells et.al. 13). The game has been changed for how, where, and with whom we communicate.

I have discussed throughout this report how people learn to live by social codes which are constructed by those with the power to disseminate them (governments, industries, corporations, and companies). This is not a new concept. Obviously, neither is the concept of using academic platform to build upon the existing scholarship and to point out the gaps in the scholarship and injustices found in social constructions like the codifications that have been discussed within this text. We perform social codes as they have been constructed by those in power, however, the codes do not necessarily “stick” or advance by those in power, but by those who “embrace” them. Digital technologies have changed power structures. The internet has given people a platform to disseminate our own oppositional messages.

My digital project is ideal for tapping into platform that allows for the quick and broad dissemination of information. I intentionally designed it to look and interact like a standard web page that contains links, buttons, and media content such as videos. Because it is web based, the URL can be shared in dynamic range of ways such as email, blogs, social media applications (Facebook, Twitter, Pintrest, etc.), among other possibilities. I intend to target social media sites in particular to reach the broadest audience possible. Many of these social media sites utilize the concepts of six degrees of separation. A concept that we are all connected by six, or fewer, steps away. So, even if I only share it with a handful of friends, if each of them share it

with a handful of their friends, it will not take long to make a difference and influence people to break the codes.

### **MOVING BEYOND THEORY - BREAKING THE MENSTRUAL CODES**

One might ask, why is a project like this more influential than sending around an electronic copy of Young's "Menstrual Meditations" essay through social media? What my project does, that theory alone cannot do, or advertisements like "camp gyno" and cannot do, is present critiques and information in multiple perspectives, in multiple voices, and in ways that are attractive to a broad audience. Bobel recognizes this struggle when she argues, "Because of the ubiquitous strength of the menstrual taboo, activists meet a range of negative reactions from apathy to outrage when they articulate a menstruation-positive perspective. Thus, the burden is on the menstrual activists to present this unfamiliar information in ways that attract rather than repel" (Bobel 84). She also recognizes that through the use of available technologies third-wave feminists cultivate awareness by bring the ideals and tactics (such as consciousness-raising promotion of personalized social change) of their predecessors (first and second-wave feminists) into the current century (Bobel 117). In approaching the creation of this project as a multimodal learning experience, I believe that I have inherently included the feminist ideals while also breaking the academic codes by taking theory and converting it for the purpose of everyone's use. It is a use that is not limited to those that have had the privilege or disadvantage of living within the academic codes.

Menstruators and non-menstruators alike should be able to talk about menstruation openly. They should not fear leaks, and they certainly should not feel horrified, or shameful when they experience them. They should not feel that is necessary to follow the menstrual codes and "conceal," as Young pointed out, their menstruation. They should not want or need

products like the “period kit,” as previously critiqued. Products like these enhance the menstrual codes by re-enforcing the false need to keep menstrual products concealed which in turn keep your identity as a menstruator is hidden. Moreover, they limit your choice to a particular brand of disposable pad and tampon, without providing options or resources for alternatives to corporate branded products. Menstruators should have a multitude of options and resources open to them. They should not be limited to a choice of 20 different types of non-recyclable plastic applicator tampons, all of which still do carry the risk of toxic shock syndrome and vaginal irritation, without knowing that there are safer (no risk of TSS), non-irritating, and environmentally responsible alternatives such as sea sponges.

According to Bobel, third-wave feminisms intent “is to mobilize consumer power in a boycott of toxic polluting products. Because their activism combines critique with a plan of structural change enacted in the everyday, it is both radical and revolutionary” (Bobel 111). Not forgetting the feminist ideas of reform that the second-wave so adamantly pushed for, today’s menstruation activists take aim through a strategy of disengagement with the consumer production machine (the Big Four as Bobel describes, as mentioned I focus on three in my project). This change in strategy is a significant shift from previous attempts at breaking menstrual codes. According to Courtney Dailey one of the founders of The Bloodsisters, a radical menstrual activist group, “Helping women to know that they can take control of their menstruation back from scientists and multinational corporations is very exciting, as it can lead to thinking about taking back a lot of power, as well as planting seeds of critical thinking about the world and how we live in it” (Bobel 106). The result is a sharing of do-it-yourself knowledge which encourages menstruators to take the power over their bodies back. My project is a testament to menstruators taking their power back. The “fight back” section in particular, but the project as a whole, demonstrates there are menstruators and non-menstruators alike that

can break through the codes or by opening up dialogue and/or participating in community dialogs, and by making informed choices on how to spend money on menstrual products, as exemplified by this project, and exemplified within how-to videos/consumer product reviews. These are a couple of ways in which to stop the silence inherent and demanded by menstrual codes.

The digital project is not only my story, but a collection of personal narratives. It is a sharing of do-it-yourself knowledge within the digitally networked era. It is representative of many cultures, races and gendered bodies. My project embodies what Iris Marion Young calls the "moody meditation." What is even more important to understand is that I have used my moody meditation to create something that can, and has, made a difference to some of those that have experienced it. Bobel identified how the personal narrative is a familiar strategy of feminists. For example she writes,

This strategy of sharing personal experience – the good, the bad, and the ugly – reassures the reader that s/he is getting at least one woman's true account, in contrast to the slick advertising campaigns most of us must decode and decipher when making a product choice. The activists work hard at speaking consumer to consumer, and steer clear of painting a solely positive picture. Personal experiences are not sanitized here; they are real and messy and sometimes contradictory. (Bobel 118)

The narrative in this project is blunt. It uses personal experience to discuss the realities of menstruation, the realities of menstrual codes, the realities of menstrual advertising, the realities of the products we consume, and the realities of what we can do to change the negativity within. Through this "prosumer to prosumer" approach we can decode the menstrual

codes. Moreover, it is educating academics how to break free from the academic codes, and to embark on a different way of consuming, producing, and disseminating information.

Both Young and de Certeau provide additional examples for the need for alternative approaches to consuming, producing, and disseminating information. Young argues, interviews and focus groups with teenage girls, as well as recollections of older women of their early menstruating years, seem to indicate that the knowledge girls crave is not scientific but practical...while some girls get answers to these urgent questions from mothers, teachers, or tampon manufacturers' pamphlets, many get their answers from other girls. In contemporary advanced industrial capitalist societies, moreover, much of what we learn is how to consume "hygiene" products. (Young 103)

Although traditional sources of information may be present, often it may not be the information that menstruators, particularly young menstruators, are seeking (or in the case of HelloFlo there is no discussion allowed). Practical matters such as how to remove a "stuck" tampon, or how to remove blood out of clothing are questions that young menstruators (in particular) need answers to in order to handle the situations when they arise, and they will arise. Menstruation can be messy and blood does stain. For menstruators "leaks" are a practical matter. Leaks are normal, just as menstruating is. However, it isn't practical to bleed on every chair you sit in. I'm not arguing that leaks (or other practical concerns) should not be a part of the conversation. The problem is how practical concerns, like leaks, are presented in advertisements that enforce shame (and other aspects of menstrual codes) instead of addressing a simple practical matter. In order to break menstrual codes that we each live by, we must first recognize how we individually manifest them (in our speech, actions, etc). I have intentionally included personal narratives and "how-to" videos in the digital project that demonstrate how real people (not just



actors in advertisements) perform menstrual codes through how they express themselves about the topic of menstruation. These narratives and videos also demonstrate that they have actively taken the step from being silenced through their choice to openly talk about menstruation in real practical contexts in a heavily viewed public setting. For example, the video on menstrual cups (in the Fighting Back section) covers many practicalities that are important to menstruators such as how to use a menstrual cup (including insertion and removal), how to clean it, how to manage heavy flow when using it, and how to empty it in a public restroom. Advertisements do not contain practicalities of use. In the video dialogue, the creator discusses how to prevent leaks when using the cup; however, her manner of speech is very matter-of-fact. She discusses how to get the cup to seal correctly without equating embarrassment to leaks (unlike Proctor and Gamble who implicitly equates embarrassment with leaks in their *Tampax-Pool* ad – found in the Shame section of the digital artifact). There is a vast difference in the use of language between producers and consumers of products. She isn't using the word "vagina" to make us laugh, or to shock us. She is using real language to talk openly about using a menstrual cup. Personally, I would trust the discourse of someone that uses appropriate terms and has used a product extensively, not to mention has taken their personal time to make a review of it, than some paid actor in an advertisement. Who is more credible?

Some medical professionals would most likely argue that the information they provide is the most credible, rendering the voices and everyday stories of women as secondary, not-to-be-privileged sources of knowledge. Product advertising cashes in on this hierarchy of knowledge in attempts to use "safety" as their credibility point. However, something to consider is de Certeau's notion of "knowledge [that] is not *known*" (de Certeau 71). He writes,

in practices, it has a status analogous to that granted fables and myths as the expression of kinds of knowledge that do not know themselves ...Concerning

them it occurs to no one to ask *whether* there is knowledge; it is assumed that there *must* be, but that it is *known* only by people other than its bearers...It belongs to no one...It is an anonymous and referential knowledge. (de Certeau 71)

Knowledge isn't owned. Medical professionals, academics, corporations do not hold the keys to the entire database where menstrual knowledge is stored. Much knowledge is gained through the practice of everyday life. Often we are left unaware that we possess specialized, embodied knowledge. We all have the ability to break the codes that silence our embodied knowledges through sharing our lived experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

*"as long as we continue to be socialized in a way that creates and environment where menstrual bleeding is yucky, a bother, and something that interferes unnecessarily with my good time, then we are in trouble. I am hopeful, however, that as we truly share information and skills, and encourage people to interrogate what we think we know, this will change. Not just for menstrual cycle work, but for everything" – the Coochie Lady (Bobel 179)*

More academics must learn to mutate their work into an assemblage of both theoretical, and practical knowledge if their goal is to truly influence change. Although my focus for this digital project, and subsequent report paper, has been on academic and menstrual codes, this blend of academic knowledge and grass-roots "do-it-yourselfness" can be used to disrupt many social codes through the breaking down of binaries, making academic theory accessible to a wider audience, and offering real lived experience and alternatives to the experiences.

My digital artifact is an example of the importance of changing how we *think* and *act*, how we *create* and *disseminate* information, how we *meld* and *blend* the borders between academia and those that may not have the resources to get there, and how we *consume* and become *prosumers* of information and products. My project shares a range of information and skills in a manner that is poignant enough to interest academia, but grounded enough to reach out to a broadly diverse audience. It is an interrogation of what I know, and perceive to know, regarding menstruation and the codes menstruators and non-menstruators live by. It is an interrogation of the boundaries between academia and everyone else. It encourages others to interrogate what they know about these issues, and shows them a path to breaking free from the social codes that continue to bind and blind the way we think and act in many aspects of our lives.

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