

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF LEAKY BODIES

A Feminist Materialist Ethnography of Menstruating Youth



PHD THESIS

Lise Ulrik Andreasen

DPU, Aarhus University

PHD THESIS

Submitted by Lise Ulrik Andreasen

SUBMISSION DATE

June 30 2022

TITLE

The Possibilities of Leaky Bodies. A feminist materialist ethnography of menstruating youth

DANISH TITLE

Lækkende kropes (u)muligheder. En feministisk materialistisk etnografi om menstruerende unge

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION:

Aarhus University (AU)



SUPERVISOR

Laura Gilliam

CO-SUPERVISOR

Dorthe Staunæs

ILLUSTRATION

*"The Menstruator"* by Mette Mut Andreasen

DOI: [10.7146/aulsps-e.471](https://doi.org/10.7146/aulsps-e.471)

ISBN: 978-87-7507-534-8

# Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	5
MENSTRUATION MATTERS .....	8
Introduction: Menstruation; more than human reproduction.....	9
Menstruating young bodies .....	11
Global currents of menstruation .....	13
The menstrual state of Denmark .....	14
The lacuna of qualitative critical menstruation research .....	15
An ethnographic and feminist materialist approach .....	16
The research, “the girls” and their place in it all.....	18
Research aims .....	19
The structure of the thesis.....	20
THEORIZING MENSTRUATION AND BODIES .....	22
Introduction: Bodily subjectivity.....	23
Menstruation-body-assemblages .....	28
Open bodies and leaky becomings .....	31
Posthuman and relational becomings .....	33
Sexual difference.....	34
Young becomings .....	37
Affirmative ethics.....	39
INQUIRING AND NOTICING MENSTRUATION .....	42
Introduction: Fieldwork .....	43
Researcher-menstruation-relations.....	47
Ethical considerations.....	48
What counts as data .....	49
Organizing research and research participants: Children, Youth, Girls, Menstruants .....	52
Researching (with) young menstruants.....	55
Researcher-participant relations .....	56
Interviews.....	58
Crafting an affirmative interview space.....	61
Experiments and enactments .....	63
Analytical strategies .....	64
Noticing menstrual becomings .....	65
A few notes considering language .....	65
PLACE AND PEOPLE.....	67

Introduction: Situating menstruation within people, place and time: “We are not from the block like...” .....	68
Class and everyday youth life in Nørre Søby .....	68
The schools and the youth club .....	70
Tiny dis/advantages .....	71
Menstruating in families .....	76
Parents and menstruation: “You have to tell your mother!” .....	76
Being “good parents” .....	79
Busy life in Nørre Søby.....	81
Sexual and Menstrual Education .....	83
Situating menstruating in class and race .....	85
Racializing menstruation.....	88
<b>BODIES</b> .....	<b>93</b>
Introduction: Affective young bodies and sexed morphologies.....	94
Bodies, age and affect: “The girls have the feelings” .....	94
Different bodies .....	98
Nuances of “the boys” .....	103
“Becoming a Woman” – part one.....	108
Menstrual anger: I can feel...I’m PMSing at the moment.....	114
Menstrual pain: “But this is just what it’s like being a girl” .....	119
In defense of affective bodies.....	122
<b>BLOOD</b> .....	<b>129</b>
Introduction: Flows and stagnations of blood and menstrual-body-matter .....	130
Menstrual body-matter .....	130
Different kinds of blood.....	132
Through the system: Body-blood relations .....	136
Wild Flows.....	139
Menstrual Leakage: “What if...” .....	141
Leaking odor.....	145
Wayward Slime .....	148
<b>THE PAD</b> .....	<b>154</b>
Introduction: “You have to wear a pad” .....	155
Bodies-with-pads .....	156
The labourious art of concealment.....	159
Pads out in the open .....	163
The contagious pad.....	167

THE USED PAD.....	170
Introduction: Pad-blood-relations .....	171
“There wasn’t Madame...” .....	172
Place matters to menstrual body-matter .....	176
“Please remember to wrap your bloody waste!” .....	178
The “somethingness” of the used pad.....	181
The power of the used pad .....	184
Becoming-with used pads.....	188
THE TAMPON .....	194
Introduction: Tampons are scary .....	195
The pain and horror of tampons.....	200
The used tampon .....	203
Tampons inside or exiting the body.....	204
Tampon-youth-(hetero)sexuality assemblages .....	208
Becoming-with tampons.....	213
MENSTRUAL ECOLOGIES.....	218
Introduction: Menstruation as lens .....	219
“Becoming a Woman” – part two.....	219
No room for leaky bodies.....	222
Fighting fluidity .....	226
INSIGHTS AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS .....	229
Introduction: Summing up .....	230
Menstruation is situated.....	230
Ambiguous emergences of menstruation and bodies.....	231
The labour of menstruating .....	233
Menstrual inequality for young people .....	234
What can a menstruating young body do?.....	236
Affirmative menstruation pedagogies .....	238
Research contributions .....	240
Postlude: INTRODUCING THE MENSTRUATOR .....	242
Summary .....	246
Resume .....	248
References .....	251

## Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a long time underway and it has been an unimaginably journey, which for the most parts have been filled with excitement. No matter my continuous interest in young people and menstruation, the joy of the process is exclusively due to all the people and companions, which assisted, inspired, supported and distracted me along the way. The project has been accompanied by two pregnancies, with two children to follow and has survived a global pandemic. These circumstances have made the importance of relations to others extremely clear.

I want to begin by thanking my participants, who were courageous, generous and kind to share their precious teenage time and their experiences with menstruating, for the sake of science. I immensely enjoyed talking with you, and your reflections exceeded my wildest imagination. Only because of your important contribution, this study ended up as interesting as it did. Also thank you to school leaders, teachers and an especially warm thanks to the pedagogues at Nørre Søby Youth Club, who trusted me and backed me in the process.

Secondly, I want to thank my supervisor and my co-supervisor, for their excitement for my project, for carefully reading my messy drafts and providing qualified feedback. Thank you, Laura Gilliam, for always being kind and allowing me to explore theory and creative analytical paths while providing the perfect balance of critique, support and ethnographic expertise. Because of this, I have always felt safe to explore new territory and to experiment along the way. I am forever grateful for how you have made space for my affective flows and my pregnant body x 2, which has meant the world to me and to the success of this project. Also thank you, Dorthe Staunæs, for years of inspiration of how to do research differently, long before I embarked on this project. I am a longtime fan of how your brain works and both your readings of my project and your kindness have been inspiring. Thank you so much, Dorte! Thank you both, for including me in the EDU research network, and thank you to everyone there for giving me insights into their work progresses, for listening to me and providing qualified feedback.

The VBFG, Stine Rath Hansen and Thilde Juul-Wiese, I am at a loss for words to describe how important you have been. I can honestly say that you have made an essential difference to the process. Not only due to your qualified critiques and your interest in the project, but as smart and kind friends. Our day-to-day support has been indispensable and our writing retreats together stand as the best memories of my PhD years. VBFG 4 ever <3

Thank you everyone at the department for Educational Anthropology at DPU, Aarhus University for their inspiring work, kind collegueship and interest in my work and qualified feedback. It has been a

pleasure to come in and chat with you all in the kitchen. Thanks to Bjørg Kjær, for gifting me with important books on laughter and leaky bodies.

A special thanks to my fellow Phd colleagues at the department of Educational Anthropology, at Aarhus University. Especially Naja Dahlstrup Mogensen, Anne Jørgensen, Ida Elbæk, Lærke Cecilie Anbert, Maya Acharya, Gabriella Musaya, Asger Bruun-Martiny, Charlotte Sun Jensen, Kira Saabye Christensen, Stine Karen Nissen, Rihanne H. Hesselvig, Steffen Bering Kristensen, Narges Ghandchi, Dalir Barkhoda, Todd John Wallenius and all the rest I have crossed paths with through my many years as a PhD student. Thank you for reading, giving feedback, hanging out and mostly for being in this together.

Thank you to my Phd colleague Gry Ellegaard Thorsen, for incredible support, honest conversations and for providing a safe space for thinking and learning together.

Josefin Persdotter and Saniya Lee Ghanoui, thank you for being my first menstruation research colleagues and the most kind friends. Thank you for taking me under your wings and being generous with encouragement and support. And thanks to Mie Kusk Søndergaard, Camilla Mørk Røstvik and Matleena Frisk from the menstruation reading group, for stimulating discussions and great inspirations through the last three years. I look forward to continuing working with you all.

Nina Lykke og E.J. Renold I am grateful for not only your inspiring research and thinking, but for getting to enjoy the privilege of your close, kind and generative reading and feedback at my WIP seminar.

A lot of people outside of academia has made this work possible, and to them I am grateful:

The brilliant and knowledgeable Laila Thórsheim, who inspired me to think differently about and to notice menstruation, even though it was right there in front of me all the time.

My dear friends, Lise Margrethe for always understanding exactly what I mean, for us being synchronized in research and thought, for genius conversations, for dragging me out to enjoy arts and for being the smartest and kindest person I know. And Eva, for being a true heart-friend, for inspiring conversation, for our shared love of teenagers, for your work, which has touched me immensely and for giving me the courage to engage deeply with people. Thanks to feminist friends and sisters I have known and will know forever: Maj, Jenny, Inez and Clara, thank you for still being here, after my years of absence. To Sarah for being a witchy sister, who inspires me with your talent for dance and art and with your kind and bodily being. Julie, thank you for being my friend since the

beginning of my academic journey and still being part of it. I have learned, and still do, so much from you. Thanks to my old friend, Thomas Styg, for providing me with suitable tunes to smooth the last part of the ride. I am grateful to Kris and Emil for providing not only excellent neighbourship, but also for extra office space and chocolate, when I needed it the most.

I am grateful for my family: Farfar Anders, thank you for picking up the children and providing the best ocean view for writing and for all of your support. Thank you to my niece, Inas, for providing me with inside intelligence from the world of young menstruants. Mor, thank you for caring, reading, inspiring, teaching - and for menstruating and giving birth. And, thank you Far, I know you would have been so proud. Thank you both, for giving me three amazing sisters and the best aunts for my children, Lene, Helle and Mut, who have helped me through this process. I am so lucky and I could not have done this last part without your support. Thank you. A special thanks to Mut, for always caring and sharing, working hard, reading, sharing experiences, being the most brilliant feminist co-thinker and analyst, and for always helping with everything. Mostly, thank you for taking care of my children and being their third parent, through all these years.

Thanks to my beloved companion species Ailbhe, who was with me for the first part of the journey and who left the living dimension gifting me with extreme patience and the understanding and importance of non-human existence. Special thanks to Freddy, and the magpies and crows of Copenhagen for assisting in this task.

Thank you to Simon, for always supporting me, for staying calm, for being smart and fun and for being the best partner to me and father for our children. Lastly, thank you Robin and Svenne. Thank you for distracting me, demanding of me to stay calm and present and reminding me of what really matters. You have both been born into this project and you have waited patiently all of your lives for me to finish "my book", while still cheering me on. I am so lucky to have you, I love you, and now is the time.

*Chapter 1:*

# MENSTRUATION MATTERS

The body changes when you evolve from being a girl to becoming a woman. Among other things you will have breasts - you will get menstruation - you can become pregnant.” (Libresse, 1992, p. 179)

We are bodies of water (Neimanis, 2012)

### **Introduction: Menstruation; more than human reproduction**

This is a feminist materialist ethnography about menstruation and so it begins with blood. It is a cold afternoon in November 2019, and I am sitting in a classroom in a public school together with two girls, who have agreed to tell me about their embodied experiences with menstruation. We are in a suburb north of Copenhagen in Denmark, where mainly white upper-middleclass families live in large houses with gardens. I am doing the last part of my fieldwork, where I am conducting group interviews about menstruation in four 7th grade classes in a public school. The two girls I am having a conversation with are both 14 years old, they are best friends, and they have both had a menstrual cycle for a little more than a year. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed, and we are enjoying a cake I brought. I ask the girls if they have ever experienced leakage of menstrual blood in a public space and Karoline and Luisa share the story of when Luisa bled through her pink shorts. Luisa begins:

I was wearing pink shorts that day. Actually, I didn't know I had it that day, right...ehmmm...it was like, luckily it was the end of the day, so I went to the toilet and then I saw it and I was very surprised. It could have been there for an hour or something like that! And, yes, it was because it was fairly irregular in the beginning...I had...it was before it was painful...yes, and then I took a pad, because, yes it was only the girls in the class who knew I had it ... ehm ... Did you pee your pants? I think somebody said, so I went back to the class, then I pulled my pants back up, then I went back into class and quickly walked to my bag, took a pad up into my hand ... I took it like, because I was busy, I grabbed it in my hand, like a ball of paper, and then somebody said something.

Karoline continues: Frederik thought you were crying and then...Luisa replies: Yes, and you were like: Yes, don't follow her! And I was like...and then I shouted: I've got my menstruation, ok?! And then I walked out. Karoline continues again with great intensity: Yes, and all the boys were like: Oh Shit! I then, as the researcher, start to wonder about the social context of the situation and so I ask: Was everybody in the room? Luisa quickly replies: Yes because everybody was like: What's wrong with Luisa? Karoline continues in an animated voice: Yes, and she was like: Yes, just go away, I've gotten my menstruation ok! Luisa picks up in the same animated tone: Yes because everybody was like, what's wrong with Luisa? Then I think you followed me. Karoline replies: I think it was Anna, but then Chris was like: What has happened? And then you did this...you did this: Look Chris!!! Karoline

spreads her legs, looks down while she pulls up an imaginary blouse before she continues: It was sooo hilarious! A totally sickening big laugh!<sup>1</sup> I find everything the girls are saying very interesting, so I want Luisa to tell me more, and I ask her: How did you do...so you could see the blood or? Luisa replies with great eager: Yes, it was because I thought it was sort of funny because he was terrified of something like that. He is just a little bit fussy sometimes and then I thought it was a bit of fun.

Luisa and Karoline's story introduces this study of menstruation-youth relations, as it illustrates the multiple ways that menstruation showed itself as it emerged from the body of data produced during fieldwork in Nørre Søby. It shows the attempted concealment, and how the risk of exposure causes panic, which leads to strategies of subversion. It furthermore illustrates how menstruation is specific as situated, not only in place and time, but in youth, where e.g., irregular cycles and everyday life in school matters to the impossibilities and possibilities of young menstruants. In current times menstruation is commonly understood as a natural biological process of human reproduction (Winkler, 2020). The exclusive perspective on menstruation as a biological event stands in contrast to the point of departure of this empirical study. As Luisa and Karoline tell the story, their intense engagement shows us that this particular menstrual event mattered to them beyond (and as more than) biology, but as bodies and affects weaved together in the classroom. This is illustrative of how menstruation appeared in the classroom; as aggregations of bodies, blood, pads, pink shorts, peers, boys, time and place and as something, which had little to do with human reproduction. Menstruation thus moves beyond a separation of the bodily and the social but rather emerges through relational processes in the everyday lives of young menstruants. As several studies have shown, menstruation is never irrelevant to those who menstruate, and especially young people struggle with the practical and social issues, connected to menstruating. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to make sense of how menstruation matters to young menstruants in their formative years, where bodies are changing, and menstruating is yet not routinized. How does menstruation weave itself into the processes of young bodily subjectivity and how does this matter to what they can and cannot do?

---

<sup>1</sup> Actually, what Emilie here says in Danish is "*sygt grineren*" which is impossible to translate to English, but means something like "*sickly laughable*" or "*a sickly laugher*". This is a common phrase for Danish speaking youth. And means that something is hilarious/very funny.

## Menstruating young bodies

About half the population of the world have bodies which will have an active menstrual cycle for 35 – 40 years (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). Disregarding pauses caused by pregnancy, hormonal contraception or illness, the average menstruating person in 2022 spends approximately a total of 7 years of their life menstruating. During this time, bleeding, possible pains and fluctuating hormones affect menstruants, who must navigate and relate practically, socially and emotionally to the leakiness of their bodies and to how the world relates to a leaky body. Menstruating happens in the years of human life, from puberty to menopause, where menstruants are active and present in schools and at workplaces. In the early years of menstruating, irregular menstrual cycles, makes navigations of menstruation a “*labourious art form*”, as Julie, one of the participants framed it, referring to challenges of concealing menstruation in school. During the average coming of menarche, young people’s bodies are furthermore under radical transformation, and lack of knowledge about bodily functions and genital anatomy, along with the novelty of the changing body, add to emotional and practical complications of menstruating.

Larger qualitative studies, which exclusively explore the social and material relations of menstruation and youth in a Danish context, are non-existing. A 2015 questionnaire survey from a Danish news media, showed that every fifth young person between 19 – 28 years thinks that menstruation is “*disgusting*” (Abiltrup, 2015). Other studies has found that Danish youth, and especially girls, are not comfortable with their bodies (Dahl et al., 2018; Hybholt & Thing, 2017; Schmidt, 2017) and a related study from 2014 showed that four out of ten children did not feel that they had someone to talk to about their bodies (Børns Vilkår, 2020). None of these studies inquired about menstruation specifically. Due to the limited number of qualitative studies of menstruation and youth in a Danish context, I have had to look to International studies to explore how menstruation might matter to young people. Studies from countries located in the global south, show that a high percentage of young girls do not attend school while they menstruate and some pupils even quit school entirely post menarche (UNESCO, 2016). Even though many conditions for young menstruants located in the global south are fundamentally different from those of young people living in Denmark, quantitative studies from the UK (PLAN-UK, 2018) Sweden (Sifo, 2021) and Holland (Schoep, Adang, et al., 2019; Schoep, Nieboer, et al., 2019) point at

similar tendencies in Europe, where pupils miss school because of menstruation related issues. These quantitative studies can be read in connection to various qualitative studies about menstruation and youth in the USA, UK and Scandinavia. These conclude that menstruation is still connected to ideas of impurity, shame, stigma and low self-confidence (Aidara & Gassama Mbaye, 2020; Bobel, 2019a; Bobel & al., 2020; Fingerson, 2006; Gottlieb, 2020; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020; McHugh, 2020; Newton, 2016; Persdotter, 2022; Prendergast, 1994). British sociologist Shirley Prendergast's research on menstruation and youth has shown that the narratives through which young girls understand menstruation are crucial to whether they experience their bodies from a negative or positive perspective and whether they see themselves as healthy or unhealthy individuals (Prendergast, 1994). American psychologists Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Margaret Stubbs research has connected worrying about menstruation to *"...more depressive symptoms, lower body satisfaction, lower self-esteem, a more external locus of control and greater anxiety."* (Stubbs & Johnston-Robledo, 2013, p. 219). Most studies are concerned with how menstruation matters in a limiting way, as pollution, as disability or hysteria, like the UN rapport from 2019, which from a human rights perspective concluded that:

The stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation have severe impacts on all aspects of women's and girls' human rights, including their human rights to equality, health, housing, water, sanitation, education, freedom of religion or belief, safe and healthy working conditions, and to take part in cultural life and public life without discrimination (UN, 2019).

Popular code words for menstruation like *"my shit"*, *"the red"* or the most frequent, simply *"it"* which appear frequently in the data of this study, together with multiple accounts of menstrual concealment, isolation and discomfort, bear witness of how negative connotations of menstruation also matter to the lives of young menstruants in upper middle class Denmark. Considering the grim past of menstruating, where women have been othered and oppressed, with dire consequences (Buckly, 1988; Guidone, 2020; Rosenbeck, 1990) the research tendencies focus on stigma and taboo are understandable, but it can be criticized for overlooking how power moves through complex processes in young people-menstruation relations, like the subversive act of menstrual flashing which Luisa engaged in. In some cases research focused on stigma might also reproduce ideas of menstruation as *"management"* or *"concealment"*, which risks reinforcing the very stigma it claims to

challenge (Bobel, 2019a). Sociologist Laura Fingerson's research sticks out, as it explores how teenage girls use their menstruation to position themselves as powerful in peer groups and based on her conclusions she calls for research, which can contribute to a more nuanced field of menstruation studies (Fingerson, 2006). The field of critical menstruation studies is however beginning to spread out in multiple theoretical and empirical directions (Bobel & al., 2020), which include and acknowledge multiple perspectives on menstruation. Still, most resources on menstruation as a socially mattering event are situated in the global north and are predominantly from North America (ibid.).

### Global currents of menstruation

Menstruation is very much "having it's moment" (Bobel, 2020). This makes it a particularly interesting time to engage in research about menstruation. Scholarship, politics, activism, arts and popular culture, have seen an increased awareness and interest in menstruation and the last decade has seen a global boom in various menstruation related activities and changes. May 28<sup>th</sup> have been announced the annual global Menstrual Hygiene Day where organizations working with menstrual health and hygiene, focus on raising awareness to end menstruation stigma, provide better menstrual sanitation and push for political action to improve "menstrual health and hygiene for all women and girls" (Menstrual-Hygiene-Day, 2022). Initiatives focusing on "hygiene" have been criticized for enforcing menstrual stigma and menstruation as "dirty" with their one sided focus on menstruation products and menstruation "management" (Bobel, 2019a, 2019c). Focusing on change the status quo and explore the possibilities of menstruation, artists have worked to by engaging directly with menstruation materialities (Bobel, 2010; Gjerde, 2017) and activists have moved towards ending so called "period poverty" and implementing paid menstrual leave (Bobel, 2010; Persdotter, 2013; Vora, 2020). In the global south local and international NGOs and activists are working in various ways to fight stigma attached to menstruation and to provide better solutions for menstruants (Bobel, 2019c). In 2018, the Nepali government banned the traditional practice of *chhaupadi* menstruation huts following tragic incidents where isolated menstruating women died (Reuters, 2019). In the global north, spiritual facilitators of so called "womb wisdom" and "red tent" practice has (re)emerged. In the U.S, black feminists are raising awareness of how menstruation entangles with race and poverty and how for instance uterine fibroids have a disproportionate impact on black women with symptoms like excessive bleeding to follow (Marsh et al., 2018). More so-called "Fem-tech"

companies have launched a variety of apps that enable users to track their menstrual cycles. In the same field various companies have (re)launched menstrual cups and other sustainable alternatives to disposable menstruation products. The new menstrual movement can furthermore be tracked in commercial contexts, where in 2017, the first menstruation product company used red fluid (Røstvik, 2018), as opposed to the traditional “blue goo”, in an advertisement and a major Swedish clothes brand advertised with the slogan, “Periods are cool. Period” (Monki, 2017). At the time of writing, Scotland has recently been the first country to pass a law to end so-called “period poverty” to ensure free menstruation products to menstruants of all ages and more countries are debating similar laws. Most recently, Spain has suggested a law, which allows for menstruants to take paid sick days, in connection with menstrual discomforts.

### The menstrual state of Denmark

These examples illustrate how menstruation has become more visible in recent years on a global scale. However, in contrast to the subversive intent of all the above-mentioned initiatives, the central question of public debates in Denmark has not been *how* we should talk about menstruation, but rather *whether* or not menstruation should be publicly discussed at all. Public debates about menstruation in Denmark have been affectively intense, ridiculing of menstruants or skewed from relevant issues, and arguments relativizing menstruation has framed political or scholarly engagements with menstruation as unimportant in a Danish welfare state context. Prominent Danish politician Pia Kjærsgaard, has argued from her own embodied position as an experienced (post)menstruant, the importance of *not* speaking about menstruation in public (Kjærsgaard, 2016). Kjærsgaard’s main argument was that menstruation is natural, not tabooed, but that it ought to be kept “private” and that there are more pressing issues to attend to. She furthermore argued how the critical engagement in Denmark “with women’s shame of their menstruation is far-fetched, superficial and hysteric” by pointing towards the troubles of women and girls in the global south. Another Danish politician recently argued against free access to menstruation products in public toilets, by comparing menstruation to the passing of stool (Folketinget, 2021) and debate sections on social media and news sites, show how these opinions are shared by many. This included several participants in the study, who talked about appropriate silence, concealment and what menstruation scholar

Jill Wood refers to as “(in)visible bleeding” (M., 2020). Like when Anna states: “I don’t think it’s something to be ashamed of. It’s like...natural... I just think it should be kept private.” As others before her, she draws on ideas of “nature”, to legitimize the existence of menstruation alongside “privacy” to argue for menstrual concealment.

Some of the arguments about menstrual engagement draw on a popular belief of Denmark as an inclusive and modern welfare nation, which has already “arrived” at total equality. This makes the mere engagement with gendered topics like menstruation a radical and political act. Danish equality scholar Ea Utoft Høgh (Utoft, 2020) uses the term “*the post-feminist regime*” to describe how these beliefs impact diversity work within institutions, where bias and difference is unnoticed. Høgh argues how the idea of already existing equality and sameness close down opportunities of discussing gender related issues and thus creates a blindness of how power structures work. The idea of “natural but private” together with the “post-feminist regime” illustrates a significant paradox, where contrasting ideas entangle with die-hard cultural beliefs of Denmark as an equalitarian nation, which render discussions about power and difference in relation to menstruation superfluous. However, to qualify the public debate and enable possible actions towards menstrual equality, locally situated research is necessary to raise the level of knowledge. Furthermore, seen in the light of recent research, which shows how normative body ideals are narrowing, partly due to social media (Knauss et al., 2008), and how this connects to an increase in young girls’ bodily ill-being (Dahl et al., 2018; Hybholt & Thing, 2017; Olsen et al., 2021; Ottosen et al., 2010).

### The lacuna of qualitative critical menstruation research

Regardless of the character of research about menstruation, be it from a biological or a social perspective, no studies have ever reached the conclusion that menstruation is *not* of importance to the lives of those who menstruate. This raises questions of why menstruation has not been further researched as a social phenomenon in a Danish context.

The tone of public and political debates about menstruation and the general conviction of “sameness” and achieved equality in Denmark, can point towards the lack of scholarly, educational or pedagogical engagement with menstruation. Furthermore, the disinterest among feminist scholars to engage in research on menstruation, might be explained with

menstruations studies engagement with the body, which can lead to the very essentialism which feminist theory has been critiquing with discourse and queer theory. With this in mind, it is understandable, however regrettable that menstruation as an issue of sociality and subjectivity has been neglected, particularly in the light of its connection to young people's possibilities of general wellbeing and participation in communities (Bobel et al. 2020, Pendergast 1997, Rembeck 2008, UN 2019). The most significant qualitative study of menstruation in a Danish context is Amanda Karlsson's exploration of adult menstruants use of menstrual cycle tracking apps (Karlsson, 2019a), but larger qualitative or quantitative studies situated in Denmark, which inquire how menstruation as socio-material phenomena matters to youth and subjectivity are non-existing. The same applies to more general qualitative studies of menstruation, of which very little has been published in recent times (Fruergaard, 2000). In the last five years, the general concern with menstruation in activism, art and public debates, has also reflected in qualitative master studies, which explore menstruation as more than biology (Kirketerp Berthelsen, 2019; Laub & Nyvang Christensen, 2014; Søndergaard, 2019) as well as self-help menstruation books (Stigel & Tórshem, 2018) and more popular literature which discuss menstruation as a social phenomenon (Nyvang Christensen et al., 2016). Despite these ripples in the water, the socio-material matterings of menstruation, still seem largely overlooked in funded research situated in Denmark, as well as menstruation as a theme, which seems under-prioritized in sexual education and in the general infrastructures of young menstruants' lives. There is a qualified need for a critical study, situated in material, social and intersectional perspectives, to fill the vast lacuna of knowledge about menstruation and youth in Denmark. Furthermore, it is important that this is based on young menstruants own bodily experiences of how menstruation matters to them, in order to identify unknown problems and possible solutions.

### **An ethnographic and feminist materialist approach**

To explore how menstruation matters to young menstruants' bodily subjectivity, this study takes its point of departure from the ontological perspective that menstruation and (menstruating) bodies are relational, which means they have to be thought about beyond the dichotomy of nature and culture. To think about menstruation within the social, as the fields of educational anthropology and gender studies invite us to do, is thus not to discard of matter. The particular use of the word "matter" is difficult to overlook in this first part of

the text, and the choice of the term is not a coincidence. The double meaning of matter as, on the one side something which is important, but also as something which materializes, conjoins and thus moves thinking about menstruation and subjectivity, beyond the dualistic split of biology and sociality. This makes matter an important concept to think about menstruation and bodies with, in a way that in its multiplicity stimulates a generative analysis. There are multiple sides to menstruation, but matter as “...*the vast stuff of the world and of our selves...*” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1) is paramount when considering menstruation and menstruating bodies and empirical finds from this study and others along it (Bobel & al., 2020; Hasson, 2016; Persdotter, 2022) support claims that matter cannot be bracketed when referring to gender and menstruation (McGregor, 2020). Thus, menstruation as a messy, mattering and open-ended assemblage, organized through multiple and diverse relations is entirely central to this study. Menstruation, subjectivity, and puberty are all highly enfolded events, that call for theory which does not only include the materiality of the body, but just like menstruation with its uterine epicenter, begins with and within the body. Feminist materialist philosopher Rosi Braidotti refers to this as “...*radical immanence, urging to think (...) through the body, not in a flight away from it.*” (Braidotti 2002, p. 5). In this way menstruation reveals itself as a unique “*opportunity*” (Bobel, 2020) to think with about bodies, gender, and subjectivity differently.

This empirical study is situated in an entanglement of educational anthropology and post human feminist materiality studies, which means it is based on ethnography, which especially turns its attention towards pedagogical issues and relations, bodily subjectivity, gender, affects, materiality, and power. The strength of an ethnography like this is that it can capture naturalized and imperceptible practices, which we may not notice. These practices, which can have anything but subtle effects, are carried by small but powerful affective intensities that both move and fixate (Massumi, 2007) and which are hard to translate to verbal or textual forms and thus to conscious thought. Turning a sensitive attention to process and “*being mindful of movement*” (Blackman, 2008), it becomes possible to explore how menstruation comes to matter for young menstruant-subjectivities. Ethnography furthermore enables deep reflection on methodologies and power, which becomes especially important when working with youth and researching a subject, that is considered vulnerable for some.

## The research, “the girls” and their place in it all

To complete the circle, I want to end this introductory chapter by turning our attention back to Luisa and Karoline and the other participants who generously helped produce new knowledge about menstruation, bodies and youth, by sharing their embodied stories. Multiple empirical studies underline how gender is situated and how it cannot be understood isolated from intersecting categories like race, ethnicity, class, and bodily conditions (Gilliam, 2009; Renold & Allan, 2006; Skeggs, 1997; Staunæs, 2004). The same can be said for menstruation. Menstruation scholar Katie Ann Hasson’s analysis of medical journal articles and FDA advisory committee transcripts shows how menstruation is localized and how ideas about what the “normal” period is differ in time and space (Hasson 2016). In addition to this, menstruation scholar Josefin Persdotter has coined the term “*menstrunormativity*” to describe how menstruation is understood within a narrow frame of normativity (Persdotter, 2020). The intra-section of menstruation and class becomes evident in the recent focus on “period poverty” (Bobel et al. 2020) and when Danish politicians argue against free menstruation products referring to equal opportunities of the Danish welfare state (Folketinget, 2021). Examples from this research, furthermore show how menstruation is racialized through stories of different bodies and ideas of genetics, cultures and locations. Thus, menstruation is not a universal phenomenon, but something, which is (in)formed through relations of bodies, race, class, time, space and materialities. In this way, the participants of the study are not representative of all young menstruants or of a universal menstruation. Just within the small relatively homogenous community where I conducted fieldwork, I observed many differences in how menstruation played out and mattered. However, the study of these particular girls can say something about young menstruants and menstruation in the particular context of white upper middle class in Denmark and this particularity can relate to a bigger picture by acting as a prism for mapping and exploring overarching issues of gender and bodies.

Other than Denmark being a clean slate when it comes to research about menstruation and youth as a socio-material phenomenon and, that international critical menstruation research cannot be translated to Danish circumstances, I will argue that there is a valid point in doing research which questions the universality of whiteness and middle-class, by exploring exactly that. The particularity of this field becomes interesting in the sense that

the community references an image of “ideal living” in Denmark. The heteronormativity, whiteness, wealth, and stability of the area place the participants, and thus the study, as research, which explores menstruation within a framework of that which by many is considered “the most normal” or ideal. How menstruation matters within this context of “normality”, where educational, emotional, and financial resources and equal opportunities are believed to be plentiful can shed light on menstruation as a wider phenomenon. In connection to this, it is important to underline the importance and relevance of the minority of participants who are part of this study, but who do not live up to the homogeneity of whiteness and wealth, which is dominant in the location Nørre Søby. This study is just one possible place from which to begin critical menstruation research and it would benefit greatly by being joined by and compared to studies on menstruation and youth, situated in different empirical locations, methodologies and theoretical perspectives.

As the school is a central part of most young people’s lives it is relevant to explore how menstruation emerges and matters in the context of school. Even though the school as place and institution plays a central part, this study also focuses on how menstruation matters in a more general sense where young girls become-with menstruation in relation to the sociality, materiality, place and time they are situated in. With this, the study at hand aims to contribute with particular knowledge from this position of youth and Danish white middle class to the collected global body of critical menstruation knowledge. With the possibilities for generative analysis that the ethnographic foundation of the study and the particular perspective on materiality and becoming offers, the ambition is to explore, how a focus on menstruation can act as a prism for thinking about the relations of youth, gender and bodies differently. In this way, I hope the study will produce new knowledge that can contribute to how to make sense of menstruation and young bodily subjectivity and point towards ethical and responsible ways of living and becoming together as gendered and embodied beings.

### **Research aims**

The study at hand aims to explore what a body with a menstrual cycle can or cannot do, looking specifically at the (im)possibilities when navigating everyday youth life with a body with a menstrual cycle in a white middle class suburban Danish town. To help make sense of this, the analysis takes aim to explore the following questions:

1. Thinking with feminist materialism, where menstruation is seen as a socio-material event which “*emerges*” from open-ended assemblages of human and non-human relations, like bodies, blood, slime, pads and discourse, in which ways and forms does menstruation show itself in the everyday lives of young menstruants?
2. Secondly, how do specific, localized and material circumstances, like bodies, race, gender, class, time and place matter to these emergences of menstruation?
3. How do menstruation materialities relate with human bodies and matter in the processes which continuously (in)form young menstruants’ bodily subjectivity?
4. Ultimately, how do these emergences of menstruation and the embodied act of menstruating affect young menstruants’ (im)possibilities of “becoming”, understood as the capacitating of bodies.

### The structure of the thesis

The following part of the thesis is structured in eleven chapters followed by a postlude. In the following chapter 2, “*Theorizing menstruation and the body*”, I relate the material ontologies of menstruation and menstruating bodies to theory and argue why thinking with feminist materialist theory, can provide a generative and affirmative analysis of menstruating youth. Chapter 3 “*Noticing and inquiring menstruation*”, follows the theoretical discussion, as it discusses possible ways of inquiry and presents how the data and knowledge of the study at hand has been produced. The chapter concludes with reflections on analytical strategies informed by the theoretical and methodological choices. Thereafter follows the analytical part of the thesis, introduced by chapter 4, “*Place and People*”, which situates menstruation and the young menstruants, as it introduces the temporal, spatial, classed and racialized specificities of Nørre Søby where the fieldwork took place. The following chapters 5 “*Bodies*”, 6 “*Blood*”, 7 “*The Pad*”, 8 “*The Used Pad*” and 9 “*The Tampon*” follow body-menstrual-materiality-relations, as they emerged through the body of data. To discuss general findings through the analysis, and elevate the discussion to a general level, the final analytical chapter 10 “*Menstrual ecologies*” explores themes that cut across the previous chapters. The thesis ends with a final chapter eleven of “*Insights and Concluding Reflections*” which offers a run through of the central findings and insights of the study, where upon it suggest an affirmative menstruation pedagogy and sketches out the main contributions of the research. A *Postlude*, where the figuration of “*The Menstruator*” is

suggested as a possible menstrual becoming, leaves the thesis open-ended in hope of future possible reflections and discussions.

*Chapter 2:*

# THEORIZING MENSTRUATION AND BODIES

## Introduction: Bodily subjectivity

To be one is always to become-with many (Haraway, 2008:3)

I imagine the body as a closed unit, a closed circuit, pure, impenetrable. But it is not. It is porous, filled with entrances and exits, it absorbs and encapsulates and transforms and excretes. It is a strainer, a mesh, a fungus. It is unbearable to think about. (Top-Nørgaard, 2018, p. 75)<sup>2</sup>

All the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious (1994, Grosz vii)

As introduced, the study takes the point of departure that menstruation is more than biology and human reproduction, and that engaging with menstruation and bodies as socio-material can offer a generative and affirmative perspective on youth and menstruation. This chapter will explore how feminist materialist theoretical concepts of "*assemblage*", "*affect*", "*becoming*" and "*sexual difference*" can be put to work with empirical research on menstruation, youth, and bodily subjectivity. By knitting together theoretical and empirical literature this chapter will thus be a contextualizing of theoretical concepts to the particularities of the study at hand. Before embarking through theory, it makes sense to first briefly relate to how "*theory*" is understood and what function it has in the context of this study. As the ground premise of this study is menstruation as bodily immanence, so is research nor theory, considered neutral. Theories are tools to think with, which can do different things and can be operationalized to create routes to different outcomes. Claire Colebrook writes: "*Concepts are creations that testify to the positive power of thinking as an event of life*". (Colebrook et al., 2020, p. xxi). In this way, theory is utilized here to think with to make sense of the questions generated by the empirical body of data, which is the foundation of this ethnographical study. In this way theory and data together is considered

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeg forestiller mig kroppen som en lukket enhed, et sluttet kredsløb, ren, uigennemtrængelig. Men det er den jo ikke. Den er porøs, fuld af indgange og udgange, den optager og indkapsler og omsætter og udskiller. Den er en si, et net, en svamp. Det er ikke til at holde ud at tænke på.

a “worlding” process (Haraway, 2016) where research is a non-representational doing and a process with performative effects.

Inspired by earlier research on menstruation (Delaney et al., 1988; Douglas, 2002; Fingerson, 2006; Malmberg, 1991; Newton, 2016; Prendergast, 1994) and with a wish to expand and challenge the popular understanding of menstruation as pure biology and a bodily issue, my initial ambition was to explore menstruation as a purely social phenomenon. Menstruation can be considered relational in the pure sense of its emergences in social and cultural interactions, where the body is merely present “*as a blank page to be written on*” (Haraway, 1990) and relation equals social interactions like e.g. verbal conversation. However, as I spent time in Nørre Søby the body of my empirical data grew, and I realized that this approach would not fully include the bodily and material relations, which presented themselves strongly in the field and in the data. The idea of menstruation as pure sociality or biology was further challenged by my own embodied position, with years of experience of menstruating. These empirical events together argued for an analysis, which had to begin *from* and *with* the body and consequently think with theories of bodily immanence, where body and existence are not separate, that would enable an analysis of menstruation as socio-material. The presence and significance of menstruation as non-verbal and affective events, where human and non-human menstrual materialities like bodies, blood, slime, pads, tampons, toilets, clothes, painkillers and menstrual tracking apps entangled, furthermore made it relevant to think with theory, which would regard the relations through which menstruation and young menstruants emerged.

The relations of menstruation and youth frame the body and subjectivity in a specific way. As a body in transition from what we categorize as “child” to “adult”, which is open and leaky, young bodies with menstrual cycles invite us to direct our focus towards formations of what is by humanity proposed as “identity” as process and as open-ended. As leaky bodies are largely disregarded in the humanities of Enlightenment (Braidotti, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2022; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), the material and fluid foundation of a critical menstruation study calls for post-human theories of bodily subjectivity, which will expound the material ontologies of bodies with menstrual cycles. The human body, and especially the uterus-carrying versions, has long been a central theme in anthropology and feminist theory

in relation to subjectivity (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Blackman, 2008; Fox, 2012; Halberstam & Livingston, 1995; Hassard et al., 2000; Hoskins, 2002; Longhurst, 2001; Price & Shildrick, 1999). Parts of this research have engaged with epistemological discussions and explored how the body has been conceptualized and understood through time and how this matters to knowledge production (Haraway, 1990; Price & Shildrick, 1999; Shildrick, 1997). Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues that the mere presence of the body as a research theme, does not mean that it has not “*remained a conceptual blind spot*” (Grosz 1994:3), in philosophy’s at times rather uncritical adaption of a dualistic subjectivity where body and mind are separate and organized in stable hierarchies of opposition and value. argue that the mind/body duality opposition is still dominant in ways of thinking about bodies. This dualism, which prioritizes and isolates the mind as “being” (*cogito ergo sum*), is connoted to another series of binaries, where body or mind is linked to either:

(...) reason and passion, sense, and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance, mechanism and vitalism, transcendence and immanence, temporality and spatiality, psychology and physiology, form and matter, and so on (Groszch, 2008:3).

In anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner’s classic analysis of a universal gendered system, “*Is female to male as nature is to culture?*” she writes how these binary ideas organize gender, where femininity and masculinity are organized within ideas of nature/culture, and how this places women as closer to nature and thus on a lower ranking within a fixed hierarchy. Where Ortner’s analysis has aimed to describe universal systems of gender and power, post-structuralist, and Queer theoretical feminists, (Butler, 2006, 2014) have challenged the idea of mind/body duality together with the idea of a closed and essentialist body and subjectivity (Shildrick, 1997). Following what can be considered a linguistic peak in feminist research, where the body has been mainly considered as constituted through discourses (Butler, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987), critiques have been prompted by theory insisting on the ontologies of the material and the body, which has been referred to as the affective – or ontological turn (Hemmings, 2005). These critiques take aim at discourse theories’ exclusive engagement with semiotics, which leaves questions regarding the body as materiality unanswered. The critique has furthermore been directed at the tendency to not grant human or non-human bodies agency (Barad, 2007) and consider “ (...) *the possibility that the experiencing body may be able to resist such constructions through its materiality or*

*that its materiality could influence such redefinitions.* (Gannon & Helmer, 2004, p. 14) has (re)turned many feminist thinkers (Alaimo, 2010; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Braidotti, 2002, 2011; Coleman, 2009; Grosz, 1994; Ivinson & Renold, 2020; Staunæs, 2004, 2018) towards an engagement with materialism and affects, and, as a part of this, corporality, and the agency of bodies (Alaimo, 2008). Stacy Alaimo argues how

(...) the most unfortunate legacies of poststructuralist and postmodern feminism has been the accelerated 'flight from nature' fueled by rigid commitments to social constructivism and the determination to rout out all vestiges of essentialism" (Alaimo 2008: 237).

It is understandable how much feminist theory and scholarship on menstruation has turned away from essentializing discourse, which has been and still is being utilized to other and marginalize women and "other". Following Grosz' argument of how dualistic mind/body logics organize hierarchies of power (Grosz, 1994), menstruation has a long history of being used to place menstruators and "women" as "closer to nature" (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Rydström, 2020). This makes them emerge as unruly, emotional, weak, inferior, unclean, and even toxic (Shail & Howie, 2005) and ultimately as monstrous (Braidotti 1997, Ussher 2006). The leaky and affective body is thus placed as inferior to those who do not bleed cyclically. To acknowledge menstruation as a bodily event and as mattering for "girls", "women" and others who menstruate, therefore poses a risk of engaging with and maybe even reinforcing a discourse where the strong argument of nature as an ontological given may act as an irrefutable and oppressive power. Interestingly, this logic of fear might also be at play at an empirical level, when several of the research participants talk about the irrelevance of menstruation in their lives, while they simultaneously share stories of dramatic experiences with uncontrollable menorrhagia followed by hospitalization or about how they miss school every month because of intense pain.

Stacy Alaimo (Alaimo, 2010) argues the necessity of giving attention to the concept of "nature", which resonates with the strong presence of "nature", in its general connection to ideas of menstruation, gender and the body, and as it pops up in the data as an argument for legitimizing and normalizing menstruation. It is however crucial to question and rethink ideas of 'Nature' and 'The Body' outside of already established discourse based on normative and essentializing ideas of what a body *is*, to avoid falling into various traps of essentializing and misogynistic discourse. This rethinking and reworking is what feminist

materialist theorists are suggesting by insisting on thinking beyond the dichotomous division of body and mind, nature and culture, when exploring subjectivity. To think about menstruation as relational in a way where relationality goes beyond conversational (semiotic) interactions between human beings, but as intra-relational processes where through human and non-human bodies and things emerge, enables asking new questions about knowledge, menstruation, bodies, and subjectivity. “Entities”, “things” or “non-human objects”, as they emerge in through this thesis are thus not meant to be understood as separate entities, as sociologist Cornelia Shadler explains in reference to Haraway:

Donna Haraway (1992, 2008) describes the separated entities as posthumanist *figurations*. Made in material-discursive processes, the entities are not just material, discursive or cultural. Therefore, humans are material-discursive figurations, as are objects, structures, values and meanings. As iteration processes build, maintain and dissolve boundaries, a figuration can be perceived as fixed and real, but not as ahistorical and merely natural (Schadler, 2019, p. 217).

Bodies, blood, pads and tampons are thus in this study not seen as “things” in themselves, but situated in discourse, place and time and considered relational emergences, with the capacity to affect and to be affected. To think about how bodies and things become-with each other I use the concepts of “intra-acting” and “relations” interchangeable. Intra-action is a concept suggested by feminist philosopher and physician Karen Barad, which replaces interaction, in its presumption of already established entities. “Intra-” understands agency not as emerging not from within a body or entity, but as dynamic and moving forces, where human, non-human bodies and entities work together, diffract and emerge through each other (Barad, 2007, p. 141). In this way intra-action underlines inseparability, transversality and relationality. This perspective also concerns knowledge production, where classic understandings of objectivity are challenged, since body, ideas and “apparatus” together produce specific knowledge (Barad, 2007). “Intra-” thus underlines how bodies, things, affects are co-producing each other and how these systems “make worlds” - what Donna Haraway refers to as “*worlding processes*” (Haraway, 2016) . Like this, the leaky body is open, it intra-acts as menstrual-body-matter flows, and always becomes-*with* (Haraway, 2008), not only bodily matter, be it pus or menstrual body-matter, but also becomes-with non-human entities, structures, environments and discourse. The open body is affected by the world, that it simultaneously affects (Massumi, 2007, 2015). It is in relation “to” but

“with”, as it continuously emerges through particular and changing relations. These processual perspectives on the body challenge humanist anthropocentric perspectives on menstruation, where through menstruation continues to be explored as connected to individuals rather than a relational, transversal and affective flow, where through bodies and phenomena emerge from. It is not only in relation “with”, but also emerges through relations, that it is already always of. These perspectives on the open and leaky body challenge humanist and anthropocentric perspectives on menstruation, through which menstruation continues to be explored as connected to individuals rather than as relational, transversal and affective flows, from where bodies and phenomena emerge. By keeping the focus on “humans” as closed entities, we might overlook how matter and affectivities move and make. Thinking about the body as open is a strategy that moves thinking beyond binary divisions of matter/discourse, and nature/culture.

### Menstruation-body-assemblages

Perceiving the body as open, relational, and processual, shows us that menstruation is, though gendered and bodily, still a multiple, situated and localized event. The concepts of “*assemblage*” and “*becoming*” is a way to think about subjectivity as bodily and as processes of relations and intra-actions. The concept of assemblage is originally from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychiatrist Felix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2015). The pair’s philosophical project is aimed at creatively reconfiguring the idea of philosophy, structure and representation and it takes its outset in a world, which is constantly changing and sticking in multiple directions (Colebrook, 2020). Despite also being the target of feminist critiques, as we will return to later in this chapter (Braidotti, 2002, 2003; Grosz, 1994; Parisi, 2004), especially Deleuze’s philosophy has become an inspiration for feminist new materialism, because of its ability to creatively think about change, immanence, difference, subjectivity, affect and materialities. Deleuze scholar Ian Buchanan explains the growing interest in Deleuze “*as a critical response to the growing awareness at the turn of the last century of new type of social and cultural problem which John Law aptly named ‘messy’*” (Buchanan, 2020, p. 1). The concept of “*mess*” has, other than being literally connected to menstruation and leaky bodies, been a central theme of interest to both anthropology (Douglas, 2002) feminist philosophy (Price & Shildrick, 1999; Shildrick, 1997, 2001) and critical menstruation studies (Persdotter, 2022). Thus, studies of menstruating

bodies as situated and emerging through open-ended systems, matches theory, which considers the making and organization of bodies as multiple and “messy”. Because of the abstract style and radical reworking of language and concepts, Deleuze’s philosophy can be messy in itself and challenging to get a grasp on and connect to empirical research. Therefore, this chapter and the following analysis will focus on and think with selected theoretical concepts, which can be helpful in exploring empirical data, in a way which moves beyond a purely biological or social approach to inspire new questions in an ethnographic analysis of youth, menstruation and bodily subjectivity.

Firstly, “*assemblage*” is a central concept from Deleuze, which is helpful in its invitation to think analytically about menstruation and bodily subjectivity as radically relational - and as messy in multiple ways. “Assemblage” is, according to Jasbin Puar, an “*akward translation*” of the French “*agencement*”, which means “*design, layout, organization, arrangement and relation*” (Puar 2013, p. 380). Assemblages can be described as open-ended “gatherings” or “arrangements”, which work in ongoing and never ending processes of organization (Buchanon, 2021). Anthropologist Anna Tsing importantly underlines how:

Assemblages don’t just gather lifeways, they make them. Thinking through assemblages urges us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become “happenings”, that is, greater than the sum of their parts? (Tsing, 2015, p. 23)

In this way, menstruation can be an assemblage of bodies, blood, pads, and discourse, but still be greater than the sum of these single entities mentioned, which are assemblages too. As Claire Colebrook exemplifies: “ (...) *a human body [is] an assemblage of genetic materials, ideas, powers of acting and a relation to other bodies*” (Colebrook, 2020:16). The relations between ideas, things and bodies shape menstrual assemblages which are simultaneously constantly flowing and interrupted by desire:

Simultaneously, social apparatuses catch the body and make it signify, create lack and channel its desire, mark it, make it situated, embodied, white, black, male, female, fat, thin, cool, ripped, pumped, grotesque, working class and so on. Yet this work is always in process and the body is always a site of internal recombination and external contestation - It IS always a body *to come*, a body *in process*. It “endures through continually breaking down” (Doel, 19 95: 23 1) as becoming is itself a desire to escape particular body limitations.” (Linstead, 2000, pp. 44-45)

Like this, menstruation-body-assemblages are organized by affects that flow and/or stick in the assemblatic relations, which affect directions and intensities and decide what “[menstrual] bodies can do” (Deleuze, 2021, p. 155). Affects are not to be understood in a classical psychological way, as internal, but rather affects are relational and move between and through bodies. Menstrual affects are shaped through history, discourse and relations, which all become deciding for what menstruating bodies can do (Fox & Alldred, 2013).

The movements of affects are thus deciding of the potentialities of bodies, or in Deleuzian lingo: bodies with menstrual cycles capacities to desire (Buchanan, 2020). “Desire”, as a central concept in the understanding of how assemblages work, is importantly not to be mistaken for the Freudian form, where desire is connected to lack, sexuality, and lust. As Colebrook explains:

Desire is connection, not the overcoming of loss or separation; we desire, not because we lack or need, but because life is a process of striving and self-enhancement. Desire is a process of increasing expansion, connection and creation. (Colebrook et al., 2020)

Braidotti’s concern with desire is desire as productive, as the will to live, to persist, to generate, to become and as the affective intensity of “joy”, with no direction towards a defined object (Braidotti, 2019). In this way desire makes affects flow in some directions, cuts it off from others, and makes it “stick” to certain bodies (Ahmed, 2013a). Desire in this way becomes significant for what a body (with a menstrual cycle) can do. As Colebrook explains:

What something is, is its flow of desire, and such forces produce diverging and multiple relations. My body is ‘female’ for example, through its desire for other bodies; some produces one’s sexuality through desire. (Desire is not based on lack or what we do not have; desire is productive.) A female body is produced through certain desiring relations, but other relations would produce a different body. The same body can be ‘female’, ‘lesbian’, ‘mother’, ‘human’, ‘citizen’ and so on.” (Colebrook, 2020:xvi).

The job, then, becomes to explore how desire works to make affects “stick or travel” (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012) to bodies with menstrual cycles and how these affects organize menstruation-assemblages and matter to how bodies with menstrual cycles are capacitated. Exploring menstruation and subjectivity through the concept of assemblage and affect,

furthermore, underlines menstruation and menstruating bodies as relational and post human. Braidotti argues that:

By being materially grounded, posthuman feminism enables more precise analyses of power. Exploring both discursive and material practices, it exposes the normative power of a humanist and anthropocentric ideal of “Man”. (Braidotti, 2022, p. 111)

As this study is occupied with menstrual becoming, in a Deleuzian sense where becoming is relational and capacitated by desire, it decentralizes the fixed subject and thereby disturbs the idea of menstruation as an isolated, individual experience, but rather thinks of it as a relational happening or event. Thinking about menstruating young people as becoming-within a girl-menstruation-assemblage, creates a radical shift away from the idea of menstruants’ “identity” and the individual girl’s experience by directing attention to the affective flows and intense forces within assemblages of e.g., youth, bodies, blood, pads, whiteness, discourses, and social institutions. This means that menstruation is a *“a material and impersonal affective flow within assemblages of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions, which produces material (and other) capacities in bodies”* (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p. 769). Following the movements of affect directs attention towards process, movement and intensities or gatherings of bodies, blood, slime, menstrual products, affect, time, space, discourse, and technology that together affect each other and form menstrual assemblages. All positions, entities and processes are already inside the assemblage (Barad 2007, Shadler 2019). This notion further frames the body as a relational and affective assemblage, as *“unstable”* (Puar, 2012, p. 378) and interdependent, which means that bodily subjectivity can be thought of as materializing through relations or intra-actions. In this way, bodily subjectivities always materialize and become-with others. Thinking with the concept of assemblage in other words enables a perspective that looks at movements and processes through which embodied subjectivities become and are *“being composed”* (Blackman, 2008, p. 107) within menstruation-assemblages.

### **Open bodies and leaky becomings**

The concept of “becoming” is a way to theorize subjectivity as relational and as always in process from within (menstrual) assemblages (Holford et al., 2013, p. 714). It is important to underline that this study engages analytically with the concept of “becoming” from Deluze

and Braidotti, not to be mistaken for other analytical uses of becoming in the sense of individual development towards anywhere:

Of significance here is recognizing that becomings are not seen as residing inside the individual body. They are effects of bodily relations or linkages, composed from a range of material or non-material domains (ideas, things, humans, nature) – which Deleuze and Guattari define as ‘assemblages’. Assemblages are embedded within (not outside) the ‘strata’ and created from partial elements that pull in many directions at once, leaving heterogeneous residues that create possible becomings” (Holford et al., 2013, p. 714)

“Becoming” is widely used to theorize bodily subjectivity as process, but Rebecca Coleman stresses that there is a difference between “bodies in process” and “bodies as becomings” as always *enfolding* (Coleman, 2009, p.9). Enfolding refers to the relations between bodies and “other bodies”, be it human or non-human, which underlines the relationality of bodily becomings and, as Haraway stresses, how bodies are always becoming-with something/someone (Haraway, 2008) – always in a fold. The Deleuzian brand of Becoming is an affirmative concept. Since you cannot become something which “is”, becoming is always a movement away from “being”. With feminist critiques of binary thinking, Deleuze connects becoming-with “becoming-woman”, “becoming-animal” or “becoming-intense” and “Man as default “identity” “is”. Becoming is thus always a rupture of “*molarity*” (norm) and a movement towards the “*molecular*” (other). The multiple possibilities becoming enables, thus makes it an affirmative concept. Furthermore, becoming is difference. Davies et al. (Davies et al., 2013, p. 177) suggests that Deleuze and Guattari “ (...) *invite us to think about difference as differentiation or continuous becoming, where difference is an evolutionary multiplicity*”. In this sense, difference and becoming are affirmatively connected, because becoming happens through difference from being. The menstruating body as “*a body beyond the tradition of representation*” (Parisi, 2004, p. 199) in this way invites us to think about becoming and difference as an affirmative way to think about the body and gender, which is not bound by pre-existing categories.

For young people, menarche is a radical bodily marker for bodily difference, and literary scholar Maria Parsons writes how the menstruating girl, can be considered a threshold in

“becoming-woman”, in the meaning of becoming other than Man™ and how the very existence of menstruation challenges “molarity”, that is institutionalized and sedimented systems of power:

Menarche and menstruation are the initiators of the line of flight for ‘becoming’. Menstruation is a spilling forth of the body’s ‘within’, an encounter or clash with phallogocentric culture. However, according to cultural mores, this overflow, this breaching of borders, threatens the symbolic regime, and accordingly paternalistic culture recodes and reterritorializes the pubescent female body, constructing an anxious subject who is always ill at ease (or more precisely dis-eased) in her body. The menstrual girl-woman must conceal, hide and be embarrassed about her ‘unclean’ bleeding body (Parsons, 2009, p. 38).

Menstruation in this way is a gendered event, which in its marking of difference, can point out multiple directions of becoming, or as Catherine Driscoll argues: “(...) *becoming-woman is a deterritorialization of the organized body precisely because it uses gender against that organizing signification*” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 195). As Parsons also argues, becoming is not a one-way movement, but rather a zigzagging between the molar and molecular. This zigzagging, is decided by relations present in the assemblage, through which bodies and subjectivities become and it shows in the data, where young menstruants’ affective relations, practices and subversive acts are non-linear happenings. Thinking with becoming thus invites an analysis of both the “molar” and the “molecular” movements of menstrual events, that is the becoming and the beings, the ruptures, and the sedimentations and how these are not always separate and linear happenings.

### Posthuman and relational becomings

As mentioned, Donna Haraway elegantly adds “*with*” to becoming, to remind us how becoming is always relational and to invite us to think about the question: *How is “becoming-with” a practice of becoming worldly?*” (Haraway, 2008, p. 3). This means that becoming is always in and of the world and always together “with” others, be it discourse, bodies, dogs, tables, or menstrual fluid. Adding the “with” to becoming also reminds us “*to appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism*” (Ibid. p. 244), and, in other words, to remember the values of decentering the human subject for a more generative and full

analysis. Finally, it is important to underline how “becoming” is more than an analytical approach, but also works as an ontology, as Rebecca Coleman argues:

(...) it is clear that ‘becoming’ is both a concept in itself and a framework in which these concepts make sense and connect. That is, becoming (...) is both a concept and an ontology. Understanding bodies as becomings is not only conceptual but also ontological; bodies are becomings. In this sense, the ontology of being, upon which the subject(ivity)/object(ivity) distinction rests is replaced, or exploded, with the ontology of becoming; bodies and images, for instance, are not independent, bounded beings but are, and are constituted through, their transformative relationality (Coleman, 2009, pp. 48-49)

In this way, becoming is a concept of subjectivity which radically challenges the fixed and closed body and idea of core identity. Becoming, thus can be argued to match the ontological properties of bodies with menstrual cycles, their leakiness and porosity, their affectivity, and their sexed morphologies. This without turning to defined hierarchies of sexed bodies, where the menstruating body is valued as less. In this way, becoming can work as an affirmative critical concept.

### Sexual difference

As inextricably linked to “Womanhood” and what Braidotti refers to as “female morphology” the menstruating body has to be considered through theory, which attend specifically to the materiality and difference of bodies. Feminists have argued how Deleuze’s concern with multiplicity in becoming is problematic, as it disregards the real-life material experiences of women and others who are not “Men™”. By reading and discussing Luce Irigaray’s work about “sexual difference” together with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of subjectivity as “becoming” Rosi Braidotti proposes a “*materialist theory of becoming*”, which centers sexual difference as significant to this. Braidotti explains her intention: “*There are two tracks or dimensions in this project, one related to sexual difference theories and the other to Deleuze’s idea of becoming as resting on multiple sexed subject positions*” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 77). The two concerns of sexed morphology and multiple subjectivities combined hits the heart of the paradox concerning how to research menstruation as connected to biology and female morphology, while simultaneously having an eye for how

menstruation has been and is understood, but to still think about multiple and possible ways of becoming. One of the central critiques coming from feminists engaging with Deleuze and Guattari's brand of becoming, is however concerned with the notion of "*multiplicity*". Multiplicity, as "*an effect of its connections*" (Colebrook et al., 2020), does not consider bodily difference, which, as argued above, in the case of menstruation cannot be overlooked, and according to feminist critique, Deleuze ignores the role of bodily sexual difference when engaging with "*...concepts of identity, recognition, emancipation and the subject towards a new plane of becoming*" (Braidotti, 2002, p. 81). Said in a simplified way, the degree of fluidity in Deleuzian becoming, is ironically challenged by menstruation, in its insistent presence of bodily fluidity. To answer this critique, Braidotti builds an argument around the importance of considering what she (after Irigaray) refers to as "*female morphology*" and sexual difference, which she defines as "*...a founding, structural difference, which cannot easily be dissolved, without causing psychic and social damage*" (ibid.). Braidotti's suggests thinking with Luce Irigaray's notion of male and female 'morphology', meaning the gendered shapes or forms of bodies, Engaging with materialist theory does not exclude language and discourse as significant in the processes which (in)form bodies and gender. As Braidotti explains, language is always already interweaved with gender and bodily morphology:

In a poststructuralist framework, language is not to be understood as a tool of communication, following the humanistic tradition. It is rather defined as a key sociosymbolic institution: It is the site of location where subjectivity gets constructed. In order to obtain access to language, however, one has to take up a position on one or the other side of the great masculine/feminine divide. The subject is sexed, or she is not at all. Thus, sexual difference theories follow Lacan in problematizing the question of how morphological men and women connect to culturally coded roles of masculinity and femininity. Morphology replaces biological deterministic readings of the body with a psychosexual version of social constructivism and thus refers to enfolded, experiential understandings of the bodily self. Embodied subjects are expected to adhere to these representations by internalizing them. Therefore, although language is posited as a structure that is prior to and constitutive of subjectivity, the sexed positions that structure identity (M/F) are neither stable nor essentialist" (Braidotti, 2006:97-98)

In this way, Braidotti suggests how to consider the sexed materiality of bodies, by considering how different bodies have been constructed and privileged differently through

history. Like in the previous examples of connections between menstruation, nature, and inferiority. According to Irigaray, the ignorance of female morphology as mattering to subjectivity is embedded in “*phallogocentric*” belief systems which privilege “male morphology” in the organization of the world (Irigaray, 1992). Braidotti argues how we have to think through this difference to change how we think about gendered and embodied subjectivities. To visualize the systems that hierarchal difference operates in, Irigaray separates difference into three categories: “*The same*”, “*the other of the same*” and “*the other of the other*”. The same is the human template, the privileged and universal subject also known as Man. The other of the same is “Woman” and the other of the other is the multiple subjectivities within the category of “women” (Braidotti, 2002; Lykke, 2010). This last category thus refers to the multiple and embodied real-life experiences of women. In the case of this study, the empirical focus on young menstruants thus is concerned with an exploration of the latter as it emerges in relation with the former.

As Irigaray thinks within a binary system of gender, a transversal perspective on how menstruation is gendered and understood is needed to fully include different axis of power and how it moves. To consider menstruation as relational and localized, I find it helpful to think not just about sexed morphologies, but also extend or even disrupt the category of “Woman” or “Girl” by also thinking about how bodies have been shaped differently within hierarchies based on bodily features, like race, age, capability, or directions of sexual desire. To make sense of bodily becomings with menstruation, I find it generative to expand the idea of “*the other of the other*” with theory that enables thinking about multiple embodied differences as mattering. Postcolonial, Queer and Crip thinking (Butler, 2006; Crenshaw, 1990; Fritsch, 2015; Puar, 2012) have critically engaged with how thinking through embodied differences is necessary to fully understand how power moves and shapes bodily subjectivity. Braidotti discusses these multiple embodied differences by dividing them into three levels of sexual difference that take the multiplicity of embodied experience into account (Lykke, 2010). From Irigaray, Braidotti differentiates between “Woman” as the broad normative category of “women”, the latter representing women’s bodily and multiple different experiences.

Posthuman feminism and feminist materialism has been criticized for overlooking the subject in its eager to prioritize bodies and “things” in analysis (Ahmed, 2013b; Hemmings, 2005). In Braidotti’s brand of posthuman feminism, questions of subjectivity are central and inseparable from the body. Braidotti’s entire feminist project is however concerned with rethinking subjectivity as nomadic (Braidotti, 2002, 2003, 2011, 2013, 2019) to decentralize the idea of humanistic subjectivity, where the template is the white heterosexual able-bodied man, who exists outside body, time, and place. Hence, Elizabeth Grosz’s critique of the mind body dualism and connected organization (Grosz, 1994). Inspired by Irigaray, Braidotti relates the notion of becoming to issues of sexual difference by regarding subjectivity as embodied and embedded in a system of gendered history, power time and space, which, according to Irigaray and Braidotti, is embedded in phallogocentric systems of belief. Since “identity” and “Male” are identical, ideas of subjectivity must be rethought to include “othered” beings like women, girls and others with uteruses, for more experiences to matter, and, to allow difference to exist outside of hierarchy. Braidotti suggests we think about subjectivity as “nomadic” and as having the possibility to move. In reference to Irigaray and Deleuze Braidotti writes:

(...) the subject is not a substance, but rather a process of negotiation between material and semiotic conditions that affects one’s embodied situated self. In this perspective, ‘subjectivity’ names the process that consists in stringing together – under the functional unity of a grammatical ‘I’ – different forms of active and reactive interaction with and resistance to these conditions. (Braidotti, 2002, p. 75)

It is exactly this process between materiality and semiotics, or rather the process “intra-” different bodies, youth and menstruation which this analysis seeks to explore. Which affective intensities are at stake, and what makes processes flow or coagulate, what makes some routes (im)possible for bodies, when we explore menstruation, youth and bodily subjectivities?

### Young becomings

Thinking with feminist philosopher Donna Haraway’s addition of “with” in becoming-with, underlines how the concept of becoming is not meant to frame subjectivity as freely flowing

intensities. On the contrary, it is important to remember that there are always specific circumstances like bodily morphology and specific discourses at stake that affect what keeps moving and what sticks, as Haraway writes: *"it matters what knots make knots"* (Haraway, 2016). This especially counts when researching youth, where uncertainty about a transforming body and social positionality can increase the intensity of the *"knotting"*. As Braidotti points out:

For the real-life minorities, however, the pattern is different: women, blacks, youth, post-colonial subjects, migrants, exiles and homeless may first need to go through a phase of 'identity politics' – of claiming a fixed location. This is both inevitable and necessary because, as I have often argued, you cannot give up something you have never had." (Braidotti, 2002, p. 84)

Therefore, youth or other marginalized groups can strive to become-through identification and sameness and a further wish to belong and fixate one's location. This becomes visible in my research, where stories of menstrual resemblance comparing the likeness of bodies and intense identification with friends emerged frequently. Menstruation, puberty and youth are all events that can be recognized as disruptive of embodied subjectivities and already established positions in relation to the world. The question is, if this is a process with potential for bodily emancipatory becoming or if the disruptiveness becomes a catalyst for holding on to "fixed locations" or whether it can be both. Despite the possible eagerness to hold on and to "be", this *is* indeed a time of processual bodies and subjectivities in flow, which resonates with the concept of becoming and nomadic subjectivity. To think about processes of bodily subjectivity, in the case of puberty, youth, menstruation and bodies through notions of assemblage, sexual difference and becoming, raises questions about whether holding on and "being the same", whilst becoming something else, is part of the affective tension that I so often experienced in the presence of youth and how this matters to bodily subjectivity. As Braidotti further argues: *"...the fact that boundaries between self and other are porous does not mean that anything goes. Complexity and chaos and multiplicity, does not equate relativism."*(Braidotti, 2006, p. 100)

## Affirmative ethics

The concept of becoming holds potential for imaginative and affirmative analytical critique when exploring young menstruators everyday lives where embodied becoming might run full speed, but the daily struggle is holding on to fixation and sameness and to just be. Thinking with Braidotti's focus on sexual difference resonates with feminist ideals of causing minimal harm with research, by including the embodied experiences of the participants as existing within a binary gender system based on their bodily morphologies. The participants all identify as "girls", and when speaking about menstruation, conversation often revolved around questions of sexual difference or sameness. It often happened that the girls automatically related their experiences of menstruation to the boys, though I rarely asked in this direction. For the girls, difference is not something in itself, but it emerges in the meeting with ones not yet menstruating, like younger family members or with menopausal bodies or especially with the boys that do not and will not have a menstrual cycle. Assumedly, the presence of the highly bi-gendered topic of menstruation in our conversation underlined the participants' strong identification as "girls". Thus, thinking in terms of gendered multiplicity or even genderfluidity does not seem relevant as a first analytical move. The girls from my study would not recognize themselves in the queer positions that some poststructuralist theories offer and the emic dimension of experienced bodily difference would be unethical to ignore. This does not however mean that an ignorance of gender and sexuality as a continuum is productive. Some of the participants did talk about how gender can be read in other ways than binary, just not in relation to themselves, and the girl's practices refusing institutionalized femininity, could also be read as affirmatively queer critiques. Focusing on bodily and sexed difference is a way of taking a point of departure in the embodied experiences and material relations of the participants and in the emic circumstances that affect these experiences. It is also crucial to be able to focus on power structures which construct meaning through ideas of difference - it is to make sure that difference in power distribution is not overlooked.

Bodies with menstrual cycles are different from bodies without, they are different from the bodies they were before menarche marked them and they become visible as different when they do not fit into normative expectations and infrastructures of society, like not leaking and attending gym class. Furthermore, menstruation marks an embodied and gendered

difference filled with expectation, history and meaning. This bodily and sexual difference is a central point from where youth understand themselves, others, and their place in relation to the world (Renold, 2004). As discussed earlier in connection to “nature”, the emic focus of the girls on difference and dichotomies, which is central in my fieldwork, raises questions of how I can research menstruation without reproducing essentialist discourse about gender and women.

This therefore includes thinking about bodily differences without returning to essentialist and sexist ideas about gender, where some bodies are valued as less entitled to existence than others, which calls for theory that sees difference outside of hierarchy. Thinking about sexual difference with Braidotti’s theory of a materialist becoming can be a fruitful and responsible approach for two reasons. It can push for new readings and new knowledge about menstruation and bodily processes of subjectivity, materiality, and gender, because by insisting on en fleshed subjectivity and difference outside of hierarchy, it exactly tries to solve the dilemma mentioned above about taking embodied pre-facticities into account while still avoiding pre-determined, essentialist and universal accounts of embodied subjectivity. Secondly, as mentioned above, I find that Braidotti’s focus on sexual difference resonates strongly with the emic circumstances of this empirical study, where embodied subjectivity based on experiences of sexual difference and sameness is central.

In the context of teenagers’ everyday lives with menstruation, Braidotti’s brand of post-human materialist feminism might seem at times rather abstract and philosophical which calls for efforts to connect the philosophical and the empirical, for analysis to succeed. The processual perspective challenges ontologies exploring what bodies are and thus calls for methodologies that match the explorations of bodies as relations:

Recognition of the body as affective capacity, as always in relation to other bodies, requires feminist researchers to think in terms of connections, relations, and affective flows, and to develop methodologies that assist in the “opening up of a body to multiple and diverse connections.” (Coleman, 2008).

The following chapter suggests ways of noticing and inquiring about bodies and menstruation, which attempts map and disclose the multiple and diverse relations of youth-menstruation-body-assemblages.

*Chapter 3:*

# INQUIRING AND NOTICING MENSTRUATION

## Introduction: Fieldwork

This chapter introduces and discusses the practical measures and theoretical and methodological reflections in regard to the fieldwork, which lays the foundation for this study. The fieldwork was conducted over nine months spread over two years from September 2017 to November 2019. School summer holiday, my pregnancy, birth and parental leave disrupted the fieldwork, which made the total time I was physically present in the field from May to November 2017 and again from August to November 2019. During this time, I had contact with approximately 60 girls between 12 – 16 years old. 38 of these girls, participated in group interviews. The majority of the interview participants were 13 or 14, with one being 15 and one being 12 years old. I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with 13 friend groups of various sizes from 2 to 5 participants. The interviews lasted from one to two hours. I will go into detail about how the interviews took shape later in this chapter. Other than the young menstruants, who participated in the research, I had contact with an unknown number of boys, with whom I spoke casually at the youth club, six pedagogues in the Youth Club, two teachers and one school leader. I did not interview any of the boys or the adults and as such, they only appear as peripheral participants in the study.

Before every interview, I asked the girls to fill out an “About Me Form”, where they would write their parents’ occupations, their number of siblings, their way of living (house, apartment, how many rooms, garden and so on), their afterschool interests, their idols and their dreams for the future. The forms gave me an overview of the familial circumstances of the participants, the families’ level of wealth, and whether the parents’ occupations were somehow related to health or education work. I assumed this could influence the parent’s approach to menarche and menstruation in general. When I first visited the youth club, I wrote the following notes:

Today was the first day visiting the youth club. I arrived late in the afternoon and was greeted by Claus and Maria, who work at the club. Maria told me that she had informed the young people about my arrival and the reason for me being there. I quickly noticed how the attention I got was of a certain kind. Some of the girls approached me in a curious and polite way. Others cast hidden glances at me and walked away. The boys were different. One asked me if I was a lesbian or if I knew

any lesbians and they quickly named me M.L. for “menstruation Lise”. My presence at the club sparked an affective reaction amongst the boys, which became visible through running to me, asking me something about menstruation, laughing and running away. Other would shout, “there is M.L.” and run away, laughing. In this way, my presence in the club activated and brought the affective field of menstruation to life. (Field notes, September 2017)

The notes are written on my phone on the way home, from my first encounter with Nørre Søby youth club. It shows how I noticed from the first day that my presence affected bodies to whisper and run around, and how my connection to menstruation made some young people associate in specific ways and ask certain questions. This illustrates how an anthropological field is an assemblage of bodies, ideas, things, openings and closures, where particular knowledge is produced (Bøhling, 2015; Fox & Alldred, 2015). With the (re)turn of feminist materialism, researchers have grappled with how to do ethnographic research from a point of departure of materialism, which include both discourse, affects and materialities. Referring to the Anthropocene as an ever more complex, unjust and threatened world, anthropologist Anna Tsing writes “*new tools for noticing seem so important*” (Tsing, 2015, p. 25). In line with this, research (in)formed by Deleuzian ontologies, have worked with combinations of ethnographies, participant workshops and arts (Coleman, 2008, 2009, 2013; Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007; Renold, 2019; Renold & Ivinson, 2019; Renold & Ringrose, 2019) to explore ways to research a mobile, social, messy, creative, open-ended, sensory and affective world (Coleman, 2013, p. 1) outside of representation, and “*to account for the performativity of method*” as “*social science methodologies not only describe the worlds they observe but (at least in part) are involved in the invention or creation of the world*” (Ibid.). This means that the research process is an assemblage of theoretically influenced methodological tools, human and non-human bodies, time and space, and what Haraway calls an “*apparatus*” (Haraway, 2020), which works to organize specific and situated knowledge. As sociologist Cornelia Schadler who, in her research on families, has performed empirical research as non-representational by utilizing Karen Barad’s concepts of “*exteriority within*” (Barad, 2007) writes:

Research within a new materialist framework is not a construction of a research subject but a shared *enactment* of a research process that includes research subjects, all types of tools, scientific discourses, values, norms and research objects. (Schadler, 2019, p. 217)

Continuing in Haraway's terminology, research in this way can be considered a "worlding process", where methodologies intra-weave with knowledge and perform worlds. The classic three-way split of theory, methodology and analysis in this way do not apply, as the different phases in research overlap and fold into each other in an ongoing movement through the project (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Analysis begins before the fieldwork and the fieldwork continues in many ways after one has physically left the field. In these ways, fieldwork is an emergent way of inquiry, where methods and ways of being and acting, change according to the events particular relations organize. As Coleman and Collins argue: *The field as an event is constantly in progress of becoming, rather than being understood as fixed ('being') in space and time (...)* (Coleman & Collins, 2020, p. 12). This means that this study has changed and been formed through temporal and material relations with the field. As time passed, we shared different experiences and I followed the young menstruants through different moods, times and locations. I have evaluated and adjusted accordingly as I found out which approaches worked in generative and interesting ways, and which proved to be dead ends or impossible to accomplish.

Fieldwork is traditionally considered a cornerstone of anthropology and the strength of ethnography is that it offers possibilities for noticing the imperceptible and the naturalized (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998; Hastrup, 2003). In the case of exploring the discrete and unchallenged practices and affective flows of menstruation, fieldwork therefore seemed a suitable methodological approach. If fieldwork is the cornerstone of anthropology, then participant observation can be said to be the cornerstone of fieldwork, to such a degree that the two are sometimes used interchangeably. The seemingly tangible and material ontology of menstruation, together with the imperceptibility of concealment and silence surrounding menstrual practice (Fingerson, 2006; Wood, 2020), made participant observation seem like a suitable methodology and I expected to be able to notice events of relevance by participating in the young people's everyday activities. The great dilemma of doing fieldwork about menstruation in a public setting however quickly arose: there was no menstruation to notice. No blood, no words, no pads. Apart from what my presence catalyzed, I did not observe once that menstruation emerged as a conversational theme, neither did I notice pads falling out of pockets or any blood-soaked trousers. This was at first frustrating, but it however dawned on me that this was telling of menstrual practice - to not speak of

menstruation and to not show menstruation. Anthropologist Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb writes how silence *“lures our anthropological imagination beyond imputed origins of speech to a whooshing, plopping, slithering universe devoid of exegetical consciousness”* (Achino-Loeb, 2005, p. 1). The silence surrounding menstruation in the youth club and the schools was the first silence I noticed as telling. The other was the silence of the girls I approached, who ran away to avoid speaking with me, or the ones who stayed put, but did not utter a word. Their silence told me that menstruation is not something everyone enjoys discussing. With the lack of signs of menstruation, I instead began to notice infrastructures, which could be related to menstruating: toilets, sinks, waste bins and menstrual waste bins. I noticed their placement in relation to the classrooms and in the youth club. As both the school and the youth club had separate toilets for adults and children I insisted on using the children’s toilets. In this way, I attempted to focus on *“material participation”* related to menstruating, as Renold and Mellor suggest:

Thus, where there are no or a very few words in a situation, we can focus on the other practices, such as the material, affective and discursive practices of touch, that are embodied in body/place/object assemblages. In this way, movement and touch become important ways of being in the world. (Renold & Mellor, 2013, p. 27)

Other than the tangible, I noticed bodies, movements and touch, and noted when intensities rose and fell and what seemed to make them fluctuate. With anthropologist Raymond Madden words: *“good ethnographers will use their whole body as an organic recording device”* (Madden, 2017, p. 19) in mind, I tried to immerse myself in the Youth Club life, as I sunk down in the couch next to Rose and Molly and compared Instagram feeds, open to be affected by human and non-human bodies. Anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup notes:

The central aspect of field work is experience; It is equally connected to body and mind. You sense something and make experiences, which are embedded as silent bodily knowledge (My translation) (Hastrup, 2003, p. 25).

In this way, being with and following the young menstruants gave me significant inside information about their everyday lives in general - about their routines, their school life and the social patterns and groupings they engaged in. I participated in activities, dinners, games and conversations. I watched the same music videos as them; saw what clothes were *“in”*

and what was not and in all this I noticed and noted what mattered to them. Importantly, I also got a sense of the specificities of Nørre Søby, and how the participants moved through it, where they lingered and which locations they related to in different ways.

### Researcher-menstruation-relations

As part of the research, I related reflexively to menstrual materialities and noted what I noticed in my field diary. I changed my own menstrual practice and switched from a menstruation cup to a particular brand of pads, as they were the most popular choice for the young menstruants. As I had not used pads since my own teenage years, the sensation was as new. I had to figure out which brand and size to buy and reliving the experience of being a menstruation novice created a path into some degree of bodily participation. I also noticed what clothes I preferred while menstruating and which strategies for concealment I employed. I developed a hypervigilance to the consistency, smell and texture of my own menstrual body-matter. I noticed my body-pad relations and how they affected me as I participated in physical activities at the Youth Club. Later in the process, I began to challenge my own menstrual practice as I carried pads from my office to the toilet visibly in my hand, to find out how this affected me and threw used pads in private and public waste bins instead of the Madame bag to notice how this mattered. These approaches were meant as a way to observe and participate in the affective events of menstruating inspired by sensory auto ethnography (Pink, 2015). Consciously noticing menstruation was a way of participation which generated critical reflections of differences and similarities between my own situatedness as experienced menstruant and the young mensrtuants stories, as they were told to me. It enabled med to critically examine my own embodied situatedness in the research and how this mattered to the questions I asked and the perspectives I used to explore young menstruants-menstruation relations (Haraway, 1990). These reflections were important for analytical purposes, to be able to distinguish between how I was affected by menstruation and how menstruation affected the research participants. My position as menstruant-researcher has informed the underlying idea of this study; that menstruation is important, not only to health and to reproduction, but also to how menstruants live and who or what they can become. In this way, it matters to the research which kind of body I think and write with and from. The idea of knowledge as embodied (Braidotti 2019, Haraway, 2008), thus runs through this study on multiple levels.

Bodies, especially those who do not live up to criteria of being able, non-leaky and white are high intensity sites, and therefore, a critical research of bodies with menstrual cycles, is complicated by association as it places this study in politics. Being a menstruant-researcher, and thus embodied in the research, is a position I transparently embrace, and even insist on, as an ethical and generative point of departure for research.

### **Ethical considerations**

Research ethics applies to all levels of the research process, from the chosen theoretical and analytical framework to the micro moves of the researcher in the field. Participation emerged on a varied spectrum through the fieldwork and due to both ethical and practical reasons, I did not participate to a full degree in the lives of the young people. Even though many girls seemed eager to participate, I quickly sensed through their apparent shyness and distancing, if I wanted to talk to them, how I had to tread carefully, to not push them away. Some girls who agreed to participate later stopped answering texts and calls and others avoided me in the youth club. Because of this, I limited my participation to locations where the young people were together, excluding their homes, because when I shared the idea of visiting and in this way bringing “menstruation” into their homes, I felt how some girls distanced themselves from me, as if I had gone too far. I knew how some had difficulties showing the permission note to their parents because it was related to menstruation, and therefore I decided not to push for home visits.

Thorne argues that researching children is to “study down” due to the unequal power relations between the adult researcher and the children (Thorne, 1996, p. 12). With this attention to power and a wish to do a minimal amount of harm I was careful not to pressure any of the girls to participate. Even more so with the, for some, delicate nature of the subject of menstruation. I quickly sensed how the girls in Nørre Søby were well-mannered and used to obliging the demands of adults. Some of them would raise a finger to get permission to speak during interviews, even though I had stressed that the interview space was for casual conversation between friends (and me). This made me decide against pushing for permission to join the participants in toilets and changing rooms to observe their actual menstrual practice, since I was worried they would agree to do so for reasons of politeness and the infrangible authority given to me due to my adult morphology. At times, however, I experienced the power levels shifting, as the girls did not meet me for interviews

as agreed. I felt like I needed them more than they needed me and that they were in a position of power, since their willingness was crucial for my project to succeed.

The research-assemblage makes menstruation matter in specific ways, materializing through the relations of multiple present or absent agents. Even though menstrual emergencies in everyday life situations were limited to my presence as menstruation researcher, participating observations still granted me valuable insights into social groupings, locations, likes and dis-likes and general things that mattered to the girls. The silence and concealment of menstruation means that the largest part of the data used for direct analysis is sourced from interviews. I would however not have been able to have the same conversations or reach similar conclusions, had I not done the fieldwork in Nørre Søby.

### What counts as data

The elasticity of what counts as data is part of anthropological reflexivity. As anthropologist, Lotte Meinert, explains:

Anthropological method is adjusted as the field work progresses in contrast to a positivist methodological approach. (...) It is part of the anthropological approach – and challenge – that both research questions, method and researcher change during the process, dependent on context. (Meinert, 2003, p. 161, my translation)

I am exploring everyday menstrual events, which are the hotspots (MacLure, 2013) where young menstruants emerge through relations with menstruation in their everyday life. Everyday life is a classical point of attention for anthropological studies (Ehn et al., 2015) and, in the context of the study at hand, it is used to continuously point towards how menstruation is a cyclic event, which is present in the continuous routines of the participants' day-to-day lives. Everyday life is the ordinary, the repetitive, the "trivialized practices" (Winther, 2017.), which, when explored, can help us make sense of larger systems of meaning.

Events refer to the relations where menstrual materialities, affects and discourse come together and matter to the bodily becoming of young menstruators. Throughout the fieldwork I specifically paid attention to events related to menstruation in one way or another. I noticed events related to youth, sexuality, puberty, bodies, sociality, materialities. In my reading of the interviews (reading through and listening through), I have noticed

menstrual events which say something about menstruation. Events and scenes are happenings, which are part of what Kathleen Steward refers to as “*the ordinary*” (Stewart, 2007) - the zig-zagging flow of everyday life, with all its tensions, loosening, curbs or accelerations, which is shaped by affective assemblages, such as menstruation. The menstrual events are when menstruation emerges in this flow. Be it in the shape of a worry, a joy, a pad or the coming of menarche. In the interviews I asked specifically about these events, and the participants answered by referring to specific memories of events or to more general beliefs or ideas about menstruation. In this way, the menstrual events operated through multiple different layers. Events reach through from the past, when the event happened, which folds into the moment of the interview, where the menstrual event now becomes what happens in the interview. The story is now the menstrual event, which happens in the specific assemblage of the interview. It is not a representation of something which happens, which is a “true story”. The menstrual events, which matter in this dissertation, are the coming together of the interview, where a common story is crafted by the participants and the specific circumstances of the research apparatus (Barad, 2007; Fox & Alldred, 2015; Haraway, 1990). The menstrual events thus fold time and space and become something in the text, and in the intra-action with readers, which thus becomes yet another event which organizes the assemblage from where menstruation emerges. This kind of understanding results in a structure of the text in which the narrative is broken and messy, enabling an open and non-determined treasure hunt for mattering events through the assemblage of menstruation-youth-bodies. As anthropologist, Kathleen Steward puts it: *This means building an idiosyncratic map of connections between a series of singularities.* (2007:5). Staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), embracing the mess as productive, and going with the flow, is a writing and analysis strategy which will also be evident in the writing style and structure of the dissertation.

The menstrual events are enmeshed with analytical text, as they appear in the form of excerpts from field notes and interview transcripts. The excerpts have been chosen with great care from the larger body of data. Barad (Barad, 2007) characterizes the choices a researcher makes when data is selected, as agential cuts, as she refers to how research choices are performative and the way the menstrual events are cut-together-apart in this research and the way the writing allows them to emerge to the reader, has worlding

potential. The cuts, which have isolated menstrual events and allowed them access to the text, are made based on different criteria. The most prominent is a matter of frequency. If a story of a specific menstrual event e.g. the case of menarche, the concealing of pads or the importance of friendship between menstruators, appeared repeatedly in the data catalogue I would extract this and include it in the analysis. Another reason for cutting around an event, would be if menstruation emerged through high affective intensity. If there was an affective response which woke my attention, “glowed” (MacLure, 2013), or made me wonder, I would include it based on the reasoning that this must mean that whatever had happened was significant. Affective intensity in its many forms means that something is at stake and this intensity is a force in which bodily becomings might be traceable, making it relevant to include. Lastly, the project’s interest in what is constituted through “the ordinary” (Stewart, 2007) - routines, institutions, repetition and ritual - and what breaks and cracks and finds new ways, was relevant to deciding which menstrual events should be selected for analysis. Some of the events stand out in their uniqueness and contrast to the ordinary. Others resonate with a large body of similar stories. They however, all have in common, that they can be considered as mattering in regard to the menstruation-assemblage and that they all take place within the same specific group of young people in a specific place.

The research’s focus on affectivity and bodies as intra-connected and on affectivity as moving forces which push or pull bodies and things to form relations, organizing menstruation-body-assemblages, sharpened my research attention to the participants’ bodily expressions. Entering and being in the Youth Club could be an intense experience, where bodies would move fast, make noises and engage in intense intra-actions of chasing, fighting, playing or dancing with each other. This affective “wildness” of bodies was especially present in the club, but also during interviews where we were a group of bodies seated around a table, on chairs or submerged in soft couches. Despite the disciplining function of the furniture, the participants would move around, stand up, jump up, shout and play-hit or push each other. On one occasion, Rose climbed out the window and sat on the roof during an interview. Through this constant mobility of bodies, the spaces I moved through during the fieldwork were extremely lively. I however also noticed the silences of

bodies, the small quivers, looks and touches, both during interviews and while spending time in the youth club.

Though research-participant-menstruation relations might be the central focus of the research, it cannot be isolated and disentangled from other influences that have affected my approach of inquiry. Through the years of the project, I have read fiction about menstruation and seen contemporary dance, which made me think about bodies in new ways. I have read the online correspondences of girls who seek advice about menstruation and help each other out, and I have watched menstruation-themed horror films and read poetry and listened to music about menstruation and bodies. In this way, the data-assemblage is influenced by multiple sources, and does not begin or end with the young menstruants in Nørre Søby.

### **Organizing research and research participants: Children, Youth, Girls, Menstruants**

To explore and make sense of menstruation and youth, I initially organized the fieldwork to follow young menstruants. I was interested in following menstruating bodies, to whom menstruation and menstruating would still be a novelty. This decision was made from the assumption that menstrual practice and relations would not be routinized to such an extent, that they had become naturalized. I did not set out to focus on young middle class menstruants, but after contacting several youth clubs and schools, who rejected my wish to do fieldwork, I ended up being welcomed at Nørre Søby youth club. As I was interested in body-menstruation relations, and how this mattered to young people's impossibilities and possibilities, I chose to focus exclusively on how menstruation mattered to menstruants. Menstrual materialities in the shape of blood, fluid, slime, lumps, pads and tampons emerged as mattering to the menstruation-assemblage to such a degree that they entered the stage alongside human bodies, as the research progressed.

As with other categories, "children", "young people", "girls", "menstruants" are shaped from assemblages of multiple relations and attempting to categorize subjects who are in a process of transition, not only between categories but also bodily transition, is challenging. I refer to the participants as "young people" or "youth" rather than children. This does not only come from the subject of menstruation, which is considered by many to mark the end of childhood, but also from a wish to respect the participants by recognizing them in their

own identification as no longer being children. The age group 12 – 15 is however extremely heterogeneous - both in their appearance, where some have very developed bodies, already resembling an adult body, and some still had child-like bodies, with no signs of puberty. The participants' ways of dressing often followed the development of their bodies and they often built close relations with others who were at the same "stage" of development as themselves. The participants' own experience of whether they were children or "young people" was also diverse. In their own terms, they talked about being more or less "developed", and some insisted on still being children, when I referred to them as "youth". Furthermore, there is an analytical point in insisting that in some contexts they are "children" menstruating, like when adult size pads do not fit their smaller bodies or when their bodily autonomy is linked to them being perceived as children in the context of families and school. In this way, time, bodies, and clothes, meanings and ideas, have aggregated the different analytical categories, which are used according to their relevance. Despite situating the participants in a transformation between "child" and "young person", I will however place them and this study in youth studies, as there are significant affective, material and semiotic differences that distinguish a child from a young person. The onset of puberty and the very material changes this brings matter to subjectivity processes, where ideas of independency are central and represent a difference from "children". This difference can also be identified as they perform and constitute "youth" through boundary-work movements, interests, voice and language. These differences matter to research approaches, in terms of ethics and researcher-participant relations, and to how to think about the participants analytically.

Newer children and youth studies (Alldred & Fox, 2017; Best, 2007; Corsaro, 2005; Gilliam, 2009; Gulløv, 2003, 2013; James et al., 1998; Thorne, 1996) consider children as active agents in the processes which (in)form their experiences and their everyday lives. Feminist materialist theories situate the perspective of this study in a way which is less concerned with children's agency and childhood ontologies, but rather attends to the relations and movements through which children and young people emerge (Jones & Duncan, 2013; Spyrou, 2019). As Anthropologist Spyro Spyrou argues:

Insisting on the field being child-centred when examining complex phenomena in which children

participate is to simply resort back to the dominant view of the independent and autonomous child agent (Spyrou, 2017). A shift in research inquiry to studying children as part of assemblages and emerging phenomena which matter provides an alternative direction for the field which allows it to explore the dynamism and complexity of the social (Spyrou, 2019, p. 319).

Similarly, I consider the young people who has participated in the research process as becoming-with the research within a research-assemblage. This also implies that the study is not concerned with the authenticity of “children’s voices”, as representational of unique individuals, since one body never owns a voice, but both body and voice rather emerge from specific assemblages (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; Mayes, 2019; Spyrou, 2011, 2019). In line with Braidotti (Braidotti, 2019) and Haraway’s (Haraway, 2020) arguments of responsibility and situated knowledge, Spyrou argues how perspectives of relationality are also connected to a particular form of responsibility and ethics:

Recognizing our role in enacting particular ontologies of childhood is a responsible act and a necessary step towards recognizing the ethics of knowledge production in childhood studies (Spyrou, 2019, p. 320)

To underline that the young people are co-producers of knowledge, I refer to them as “research participants” or “participants”. This recognizes their capacity of participating in knowledge production and “cleans” the additional “noise” from more loaded or emic terms. The idea of “cleanliness” is however also problematic, since this so-called “noise” is all that matters, like bodily morphology and the affective, material and historic connections these carry. Therefore, I also refer to the participants as “girls”, as this was the emic term they used themselves as they all identified as “girls” and all used the pronouns “she/her”. I do not see the category of “girl” as referring to a biological limited body, but more as a figuration which underlines the participants’ processual but always and already situated and enfolded beings and becomings as young bodies of female morphology, which in the case of this study, means to menstruate. The interchangeable mentioning of the participants enacts the insolvable dilemma of how to name, and how all terms and naming enact a world with different consequences.

## Researching (with) young menstruants

As mentioned already, the majority of the participants in the study were between 13 and 14 year old, which makes most of them relatively inexperienced menstruants. In this way, there are different things at stake when compared to adult-menstruation relations. As Sofie says:

There are some girls in our class who also have it and one of them has had it for quite some time and she is just like that, she is pretty cool and people know about it. She just doesn't want everybody to talk about it. But I also think, that the longer time you have had it, the more natural it becomes for you. And then I don't think you will mind that people know about it. Even though, just in the beginning when I got it, then I was like: Nobody can know! At all! But know I'm ok with my closest friends knowing.

Sofie exemplifies perfectly why researching menstruation with very young menstruants requires careful reflection about the particular sensitivity surrounding the subject and ethical reflections of discretion and care. With the sensitive and personal topics in mind, I was careful to abide by official rules of research and data protection, which meant getting written informed permission from parents or guardians, keeping the data in safe in approved locations and aliasing the names of the town, youth club, schools and participants, to minimize possible risks of recognition. I was furthermore careful not to pressure or in any way force participants to participate in the research, or share personal information with which they did not feel comfortable. I negotiated participation all through the period of field work. This was, a judgement call since some girls only seemed mildly reluctant to participate and needed some convincing. As I asked them about their reluctance, I found out it was often a matter of convenience and I adapted to their wishes regarding time and place of the interview. Two girls were visibly uncomfortable and did not even overcome the hurdle of showing their parents the permission letter. I inquired into whether they wanted my help and I suggested calling their parents – an offer they both declined. An unknown number of girls ran away from me and very clearly stated that they did not under any circumstances want to participate, which I accepted without further questions, as a consequence of their visible dislike towards participating. This was regretful, as I ascribed their avoidance to the subject of menstruation, but due to the sensitivity of the subject, ethical principles of voluntary participation and doing minimal harm was prioritized above all (Davis & Craven, 2022; Smith et al., 2017).

## Researcher-participant relations

Fieldwork carries with it a tainted relation with colonialism (Huizer & Mannheim, 1979; Lewis, 1973), which despite researching “close to home” makes critical reflection and attention to power and how it operates through the researcher in the field, especially relevant. Recognizing research and knowledge as situated and embodied is an integral part of critical reflections on power. In relation to menstruating youth in upper-middle class Denmark, this means examining my own embodied position in relation to the young people centered in the field work. Perspectives from feminism and feminist materialism enable reflections on how the specificities of bodies and sexed morphologies matter to research and how positionalities are connected to power (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 2002; Nordberg, 1999). Furthermore, the theories of intersectionality and difference has pointed towards how ethnicity and race matter to power relations and access in research (Spanger, 2012). As a white, middle-class researcher, who dresses in a similar way to the young people I was researching, it was not difficult to understand the basic social and material codes among Nørre Søby youth. I spoke like them, held my phone in my hand, and discussed music and TV series without many problems. My own embodied point of departure as a menstruant placed us as “same” in a way which was central for the study. Anthropologist Carol A. B. Warren points out how the gendered body and lived experiences that come with it, matter to which questions a researcher asks (Warren 1988). This can raise speculation about how a different kind of knowledge would arise if the questions came from a position of not knowing about menstruation as a bodily experience. Being a leaky body and therefore having intimate knowledge and experience of affective relations to menstrual practice, mattered to what kind of questions I could ask. My own embodied, affective and sensory experiences with the specificities of menstrual body-matter, enabled me to ask about it. As one of the participants, Eva said during an interview: *“...that is also why it is easier to talk to you about it, than if there was like a grown man. That would be a little...like... creepy, if you were a guy.”* The fact that I was in a position of sameness in a heteronormative setting, removed possible sexual connotations in the conversation, which I speculate Eva is referring to when she speaks of possible *“creepiness”*. Swedish researcher Maria Nordberg describes the need to problematize and examine how gendered bodies matter to research and how gender is reproduced, negotiated and at times under-communicated in interview-events and fieldwork (Nordberg, 1999). When the research subject is highly embedded in gender

and body, it becomes clear how my gendered body matters as a ticket to a community of menstruators and to an already established bodily knowledge of menstruation. Being an experienced menstruator in this way also placed me in the position of being both the researcher and, in some way, the researched. I emerged through a configuration of being researcher, woman and a menstruating body (Karlsson, 2019a, p. 82), which posed certain ethical challenges.

My own memories from the time of my menarche and my early years as a menstruant kept surfacing and entangling with the stories of the participants. As menstruant-researcher-woman, the insistent presence of my history was troubling until I embraced it as an embodied and situated premise for the research. Even though this research is not about my body, my body became a tool to know more and embrace what I already knew through my own body. I therefore started a menstruation field journal, where I noted my own bodily sensations, thoughts and experiences related to menstruating. I also noted the early memories that popped up, and connected them to thoughts and ideas for approaches and questions in my research. In this way, it became possible to see the connections between my own position and how this mattered to the research. As Barrie Thorne writes:

(...) the subject of children continually veers toward the future, with an almost irresistible urge to divine distant outcomes, as do students of “socialization “ and “development”. The topic of children also tugs back into the past, evoking memories of one’s own travels through childhood (Thorne, 1996, p. 7).

Similarly, I also experienced how other people impulsively shared their own stories of early menstruation. The stories of colleagues and friends, together with my own, prompted ideas for how to ask and think about menstruation and in this way, the process of planning the interviews can in itself be seen as an assemblage of the experiences of multiple human bodies and as folds of time.

Despite my clear “advantage by uterus”, my age worked against me at times. Teenage years are a time of independence, which means distancing from adults, and it was a challenge to be persistent building relationships with the right balance of confidence and distance, without being intrusive or forceful. At times I was challenged by translating my academic and professional way of speaking about and around menstruation, which made some

participants think of me as a medical expert. In these cases, I made the limits of my knowledge clear to the girls and if I was unable to answer their questions, I referred them to more appropriate sources of knowledge.

During the fieldwork in the youth club, I was not welcome in the rooms where flirtation and/or intimate bodily encounters between youth were happening. During interviews, especially the ones that took place at the school, I had to remind the participants that I was not a teacher and that they were allowed to swear and talk about things that would normally be deemed “disgusting” or “inappropriate” in the classroom. In the club I was helped considerably by the already-established friend-like relationships between the adults and the youth.

## Interviews

As menstruation was absent in the youth club and the schools, I turned to interviews to make space for relating directly to menstruation. As Fingerson also recognizes:

Although observational methods can access teens’ “naturally occurring” talk, conducting an in-depth ethnography of adolescent everyday talk is not feasible given the relative sparseness of menstrual-related talk in everyday conversations that are readily witnessed by researchers. Published ethnographies note that menstruation issues come up in teens’ talk; However, the occurrence of such talk, albeit important, is relatively infrequent: Interview-based research can access issues that are highly salient to children and adolescents lives, yet are not frequently talked about informally in settings accessible to researchers. (Fingerson, 2006, p. 7)

Therefore, most of the data, which informs this study, is from interviews. I however chose to do friend-group interviews, to enact menstrual conversation between intimate friends. With encouragement from me, the girls formed the groups themselves based on their already established close relations. This made sense from an ethical perspective, where intimate conversations could remain within a circle in which intimacy was already circulating. The choice of doing group interviews, however, posed a dilemma about the exclusion of girls who already existed on the margins of the local community and of girls who were not comfortable talking about menstruation in a group.

I opened every interview with a reminder of confidentiality and that it was a space where menstruation would have potential to emerge more freely. To disrupt and de-center the idea of menstruation as an individual experience and in this way be able to bring out the

relational and socio-material intra-actions of menstruation, I organized the interviews as semi-structured friend group interviews. Through conversations, (re)enactments and intra-actions with menstruation materialities, menstruation would emerge in the intra-action of the girls, me and the objects that were present.

Group interviews in qualitative research with youth have been used to emphasize the strong relatedness between young peers and, in this way, the interview re-enacts everyday life scenarios (Frosh et al., 2001). I consider the interviews, which form the basis for this study, to be corpo-affective assemblages and as a site from where subjectivities have the potential of becoming-with menstruation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). Thinking about decentralization of subjectivity, and thus voice, in interviews further raises questions of voice as representational and individual:

Voice emerges from relations among objects, spaces, affects, bodies, discourses, text, and theory, in dynamically shifting arrangements and re-arrangements. Utterances become spoken from collective assemblages of enunciation; and voice becomes one element in assemblages. (Mayes, 2019, p. 3)

Observing how the stories of the girls entangled, and how menstruation emerged through collectively crafted events and enactments, makes it clear that menstruation, though framed as “private” by general discourse and in emic terms, is indeed something which in the data emerges from common history and situatedness where voices cannot be seen as representational of one body, but as enactments of a relational event. The voices did not become silent after they interviews had ended, as I listened to them again and again before I transcribed them. I consider transcription a significant part of the research assemblage, where the act of transcription became an embodied part of the research assemblage as sounds entered my body and the interviews rematerialized as digital text through my fingers and the keyboard. While transcribing, I became aware of affective intensity in tones, slang, pauses and laughter. I remembered the bodily movements, which I had noted in my field notes during the interviews, but which became more vivid as I listened, and in this way I tried to capture all nuances, shifts, tempi and intensities. I note “laughs”, “sighs” and “EXPRESSIVE TALKING”. When writing I made a point out of not “*sanitizing*” (Lather & Smithies, 2018) the girls’ language to leave it as unedited as possible. Nevertheless, the transformation from voices leaving the girls bodies to the final transcribed interview of immaterial stories mattered to what the data is and how we can think about it and with it.

As professor of education studies Liza Mazzei argues the interview is not only an assemblatic working of the human and non-human bodies present at the time of recording (Mazzei, 2013). Rather, it emerges again through the embodied and technological workings of me and the computer. In this way, the interviews are multiple in their temporality, location and shape, and cannot be considered something in themselves. They are not witness encounters of a lived experience with menstruation, but rather assemblatic stories in constant transformative relation to multiple dimensions and things. How we think about interviews and voice matter for how we think about the knowledge we produce. As I experiment with a non-hierarchical organization of materiality and voice in analysis, I also attempt to bring the same non-organization to work via my methodology (or refusal of the same), which makes thinking about interviews as embodied assemblages, and constructive, intra-active events, relevant.

The young menstruants from Nørre Søby who did not want to participate, who politely refused, who lied to me about not getting permission from their parents, or the ones who ran away by the sight of me - those we do not know about. We might speculate whether they dare to be affected, to speak of menstruation with friends and relate to others. I hope so. This created the risk of there being missing girls who were shy or who may have had a more strained relation with menstruation and/or talking about their bodies. In an attempt to solve this dilemma, I extended invitations to conduct individual interviews to all the girls I met with, but I received no positive replies. Not even from the girls I had built stronger connections with over time. I did, however, succeed in interviewing two groups of two girls, who had more timid characters and more complicated menstruation stories and whom I would consider harder to reach girls. The more serious tone in the two interviews with groups of only two, corresponds with earlier research (Frosh et al., 2002), where larger groups have been experienced as having a more “free” and “funny” way of being in the interview room. The void of silence from the missing young menstruants, who ran away, becomes a part of the research assemblage. However, further research would benefit from considering how to make more appealing invitations for the participation of girls, who are harder to reach, so that more various stories of menstruation can emerge. The arrangement in friendship groups did however, also enabled some of the shyer girls and girls, which did

not yet have their menstruation to participate in the research, by following their friend group into the interview space.

### Crafting an affirmative interview space

It is veeeeery important that the interviews will not be together with the 7<sup>th</sup> graders!

The quote is from Alice, who was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and illustrates how age and identification by school class, was important for who menstruation could be shared during interviews.

Considering the, for some, intimate dimension of menstruation, I started the conversation by explaining some ground rules of confidentiality. Then I took off lightly by asking questions that placed menstruation outside the girls' bodies like "*where did you first learn about menstruation*" and towards the end, we would talk about leakage, the sensory experiences of blood leaving the body or the consistency and smell of menstrual blood.

I had an interview guide, which I followed loosely to make sure, we got around the themes I had identified as important to know about. The questions were designed to explore how menstruation emerge in relation to bodies, things, places and times. I asked about peers, family, school-life and the sensory and corpo-affective experiences with menstruation in relation to the before mentioned. I ended the interviews with questions about how the participants imagined the perfect menstruation world or just a better world to be a menstruator in. I asked more specifically about how a perfect day would look like, in school or at home. In this way, the participants engaged in conversations with each other and me where we imagined a world, which was better accustomed to their (mostly) humble needs as menstruators. In this way, the interview can also be seen as a worlding process, where a more livable world for menstruators was constructed. Sociologist Ruth Levitas (Levitas, 2013) describes how the concept of utopia can be invoked as a method, rather than a goal of perfection. She refers to this method as social imaginaries and "the imaginary reconstitution of society". Considering the interview space as a "menstruation friendly space", where menstruation was the centered topic, it made it possible for the participants to imagine and talk about menstruation differently. The space was shaped by my proclamation that "this is about menstruation", but the menstruation friendly space, was also formed through the interview, as I did not engage in expressions of disgust or speak negatively about menstruation or any bodies of any kind. Neither did I praise the menstrual process,

but attempted to stay neutral, curious and open to my best ability. The questions aiming at menstrual imaginaries, prompted the girls to dream big and imagine menstruation differently. I will argue that this method is useful in the field of menstruation, which is a field of silence and concealment that leaves little room for change. When there is minimum visibility and words are lacking, it is crucial to spark the imagination and make up words and worlds to even have a conversation, which goes beyond the everyday conversation, which emerges from a tradition of sexism, where menstruation is isolated to “pads”, “pain” and “womanhood”. There is no doubt that I, as the researcher and adult in the group, had the power to direct the conversations in different directions, but the associations of the girls, their communal conversations, their actions (like climbing out on the roof) or the interference of telephones or a non-menstruation related stories, that the girls suddenly thought of, took the interview in directions I had little control over.

Keeping in mind how menstruation was considered private and intimate by the participating girls, I began every interview, with an agreement of what was shared during the interviews would not be shared outside the room. The intention was to create a space, where it would be possible to share menstrual stories, which might be sensitive, especially for the participants who had tagged along as part of the friend group. I made room for affectivity and loud outbursts, swearing and spontaneous responses, by telling the participants that this was allowed and even encouraged. I also engaged in the conversation on casual terms, and used the affective language I would use in my everyday intra-actions with the girls (like “fuck”), to create a space where affective responses were allowed. I often paused to let the girls engage in conversation with each other, where they questioned each other or told stories that they had experienced together, by supporting or challenging each other’s narratives. I also did not tell the girls to stay on their chairs or in the sofa, but let them move around the room, as they wanted to and use their bodies to support their stories. Like when they reenacted how to smuggle a pad out of the classroom or reenacted how they moved when they experienced a sudden cramping. In this way, the different movements of bodies became a part of the interview-assemblage and the interview held space for corpo-affective intensities. The body of data from the interviews is characterized by its heterogeneity. It contains high levels of intense being and becoming together, a lot of laughter, screaming and fastness but also more quiet, careful and serious conversations.

## Experiments and enactments

The concealed character of the girls' relations with blood and pads, in the privacy of the toilet or through swift handlings in the classroom posed challenges to observations of menstrual practice in the traditional meaning of the word. As mentioned, ethical considerations regarding age and the sensitivity of the topic made me restrain from asking permission to follow the girls into the toilets. To still reference (Schadler, 2019) corpo-material encounters of girl-menstruation relations, I invited the participants to enact menstrual-material events during interviews. For this purpose, I brought pads (disposable and reusable), tampons and menstruation cups, so that the girl could enact events where they engaged with these objects. I asked them to show me how they transferred a pad from the classroom to the toilet or how they would open a pad in a toilet cubicle; sometimes swift to muffle the sound of plastic, other times quickly for no one to notice. The girls sometimes offered to bring forth their own personal stash of pads, from the hiding of the smaller bag inside the larger school bag and this would prompt conversations about which brands they preferred and why, which sometimes directed the conversation towards the heaviness of their bleeding. During the many interviews, we talked about personal relations to blood and the body, but holding the cup made ideas of blood and the vaginal tract present in a way, which resulted in strong affective reactions from Mie, as we will know more about later. In this way, the intra-action with actual menstruation materialities resulted in knowledge about how menstruation matters, which did not emerge when I simply asked the girls about their relations with menstrual blood. It also meant that the girls began to play and experiment with tampons and water, and the playful intra-actions with the menstruation materialities, became in itself affirmative events of becoming-with menstruation.

By combining participants observations and interviews, with attention to bodies and affects, I have worked through a research assemblage, which enable an exploration of the ambiguous, contrasting and multiple dimensions of menstruation. With a combination of multisensory ethnographic approaches in the form of what E.J. Renold and Ivinson refer to as "corpo-affective engaged observations" (Renold and Ivinson 2014, p. 171), friend group interviews and enactments, I worked with methods that touched upon the multiple dimensions of menstruation and thus aimed to reach "*beyond discursive data* (Ibid)" and

pay “attention to material, embodied and affective elements of lived experiences” (Ibid). Other ways of inquiry, like creative workshops, where we would produce fake blood, to enact blood-pad relations where on the drawing table, but were unfortunately never realized. A future study would benefit from more creative and experimental ways of inquiry, to better explore the affective relations of menstruation (Coleman, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2019).

### **Analytical strategies**

Before endeavoring into analysis, I want to share some reflections on the analytical approach of the study at hand. Following the critique of the universal and unified subject (Braidotti, 2002, 2011, 2022; Deleuze & Guattari, 2015; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), how does one write about the participants without enhancing individual stories and centering the subject? How does one stay with the process of how the menstruation assemblage is organized, while still digging into the empirical body of data, which is based on fieldwork with young menstruators? The participants are all significant for this research. They all take the stage, but they are already always together with other human and non-human materialities and emerge from this assemblage of bodies in various degrees and with various intensity. They are mainly featured as the group young menstruators they are, who are all engaged in living a life at a specific place, which is recognized by a certain degree of financial wealth, a certain way of living and doing everyday life and dominated by white and abled bodies. Their stories always emerge in relation to other human or non-human bodies and thus their voices are never singular, but emerge in specific assemblages. What they have in common is that they are becoming-with youth and inexperienced bodies with menstrual cycles. This means that they all navigate and intra-act with menstrual materialities in their everyday lives. To decenter singular subjects and focus on process and relationality, the analysis follows menstrual materialities as they move between bodies, places and things (Coleman, 2020, 2013). This means that we follow bodies, blood, pads and tampons as they emerge and intra-weave as relational things in the data. The text is therefor structured after the menstrual materialities which seemed to matter. This is an organization with pros and cons, as following materialities might enable sense-making and identifications, which a subject focused analysis would overlook. The division into chapters, can however challenge to identify relations which cut across the menstrual assemblage, and

leave the impression of each menstrual materiality being in its own right, which is not the intention.

### **Noticing menstrual becomings**

An affirmative stance proposes an ethical coding that distinguishes power relations that are empowering – affirmative or active – from those that are entrapping –disempowering or reactive. The former enhance potential (the positive face of power), whereas the latter play into potestas (the restrictive face of power) (Braidotti, 2018, p. 221).

The dichotomy which this written description of how power works in different ways displays, is helpful as analytical steering tools to think and analyze with, and still in the data, these two “types” of power are not only separate events, but also emerge as mutually constitutive of each other. In the context of analysis the feminist affirmative ethics approach, means to actively notice where menstruants do things that are wayward of menstrual sediment practice, like e.g. concealment and silence. Previous research has established a grand narrative of menstruation as stigmatized and shaped by patriarchy, which no matter its legitimacy, risks leaving analysis blind to events, which acts “menstrual becomings”. Becomings are not one-way movements, they are rizomatic, crinkled, circular and complex and sometimes ruptures are provoked by stagnation or discomfort. Therefore the analysis explores menstruation as it emerges, but pays specific attention to glimmers of menstrual becomings, as they occur.

### **A few notes considering language**

As I am sure the reader has observed by now, this is an ethnography about Danish upper middleclass girls, who speak Danish with a Danish researcher. It is however written in English, which means the interview and field note outtakes have been translated. This matters to knowledge production and for analytical purposes, I did not translate interview and field note outtakes before the finalizing write through of the text. Translating young people’s Danish into English, is a challenge because important nuances are easily lost and meanings are obscured. I have however to my best ability, chosen the English words, which are closest to the Danish words, and where it proved difficult, I have kept the Danish word in a bracket or explained the meaning in a footnote. I have also insisted on keeping some Danish terms, like the very central “menstruation”, which is used more by Danish than by English speaking young menstruants, who would say “period”. In this way, the outtakes

should be considered as translations with the purpose of understanding, and not as references of a conversation in English. This might make the excerpts seem like “bad English”, but this is intentional, as a translation would warp the words of the participants, to a degree I would not be able to defend ethically. As a non-native speaker, writing in English also carries a risk for language confusion and mistakes. This is however a risk, I am willing to take to make sure more people have the access to read this work and so that it may take its place in the international body of critical menstruation research, where Danish research, with few exceptions (Homewood et al., 2020; Karlsson, 2019b, 2021) is underrepresented.

Inspired by Karen Barad's concept “intra-action” (Barad, 2007) I use “intra-” as replacement of “inter” to underline the transversally connection and immanent becoming of bodies, things and discourse. I furthermore use brackets strategically to underline a similar point of concepts and entities as intra-connected and as co-constitutive of each other.

Through the last decade the terms “menstruator” and “menstruant” have been used to enable talking and writing about menstruating bodies without exclude menstruating bodies who do not fit into institutionalized femininity or have bodies of female morphology, like transmen, girls, non-binaries and others who menstruate. In the study at hand I use the words “menstruant”, with particular inspiration from Swedish menstruation scholar Josefin Persdotter (Persdotter, 2022). North American menstruation scholarship has been prone to using the term “menstruator”, but by using a similar term of a fellow Scandinavian scholar, I hope to situate this study outside North American menstruation scholarship. It furthermore frees up the term “Menstruator” for alternative use, which I will return to.

*Chapter 4:*

## PLACE AND PEOPLE

## Introduction: Situating menstruation within people, place and time: “We are not from the block like...”

This first analytical chapter serves as a general introduction to the place and the people relevant to the study at hand and further situates the menstrual events, which emerge from the data, in the specific time the research participants inhabit. In the following chapters, I will invite you to follow menstrual human and non-human entities as they relate to the people and places introduced here, to make sense of how time, place and people as semiotic-material events, work and matter in the menstruation-assemblage. In this way, this chapter serves as a portrayal of the socio-material and temporal circumstances which matter to the participants’ everyday lives, where menstruation is a constant companion. Taking as the point of departure the view that research is always located (Braidotti, 2002, 2011, 2013; 2019, p. 13; Lykke, 2010) and embedded in time, geography, privilege, racialization and age - all factors that influence how menstruation-assemblages are organized - this study aims to engage analytically with time, place and people as specific circumstances that matter to young people’s everyday life with menstruation.

## Class and everyday youth life in Nørre Søby

Nørre Søby is a middle- to upper-middleclass suburb of Copenhagen, which is a popular residential area for families with children. Here, children can get everywhere on their bikes and roam the surrounding lakes and forests freely, providing opportunities for water sports and other outdoor activities. Other than the beautiful surroundings, the level of wealth in Nørre Søby struck me from the beginning and it became especially noticeable through the girls’ material possessions: their smart phones, clothes, bags and shoes, which were often high-quality and branded. Later I noticed how they referred to a lifestyle in which travelling many times a year, going to restaurants with their families and participating in sports at elite level, was normal. The average income in Nørre Søby is one of the highest in Denmark. Many of the research participants’ parents had completed higher education, hold high status jobs, e.g. CEOs at larger companies, engineers, doctors/surgeons at hospitals, specialist consultants or dentists, with the attendant high incomes. Some parents, typically the mothers, worked as teachers, pedagogues<sup>3</sup> or nurses and a few held jobs as secretaries

---

<sup>3</sup> In Denmark “pedagogues” holds a Bachelor education, which qualifies to work in a broad pedagogical field, like nurseries, kindergartens, schools, youth clubs, prisons and retirement homes. Therefor it cannot be translated to “nursery teachers”, “nursery assistants” or “kindergarten teachers”.

while one worked as a hairdresser. The majority of the participants' families were high-income, while a minority would be described as typical Danish middle-class. This distribution reflected Nørre Søby, where a minority of families lived in the town's few communal residential buildings, known among the locals as "The Blocks", which in their aesthetics and towering height offered a stark contrast to the otherwise largely homogenous landscape of the town. The town's level of wealth was reflected in the preponderance of large houses, which were enclosed by green, well-kept gardens. Trampolines, playhouses and children's toys took up space on the lawns, and during Halloween and Christmas, parents decorated the houses with lights, pumpkins and other ornaments, which gave the impression of Nørre Søby as a place where children were prioritized.

The brick villas of Nørre Søby are sturdy and may stand for many years, but the places and people are understood as human and non-human bodies and entities intra-acting with menstruation, and are thus not to be understood as static settings for the research and the researched. Families, houses, schools and friends emerge through particular relations and particular assemblages. Furthermore, temporal specificities relate to place and people and add another layer of movement and process to thinking about the specific circumstances, which the young people inhabit. At the time of this study, this place is in connection with the rest of the planet on a level never seen before. The participants emerge from fast-moving assemblages of internalization, cognitive capitalism, social media and Metaverse and through their smartphones, they are constantly challenging boundaries and ideas of time and place. As when during an interview, Freya shared with me and her school friends that she spent a lot of time in what she referred to as her "*secret online world*", where she had her "*real friends*", who were unknown to anyone but herself. In this way, the interview-assemblage was co-organized by bodies, which were not physically present, but which mattered to Freya's everyday life. Other than the Internet offering the possibility of building friendships across the Globe, Nørre Søby and the young people emerged through relations with South East Asian restaurants, American English phrases and accents, Swedish fashion, German cars, black American rap and Korean pop music. Despite this, there were mores and traditions specific to Nørre Søby and its young people.

## The schools and the youth club

I arrive and everyone is in the kitchen, where they are watching a popular male You Tuber.

Everyone's laughing and the atmosphere is good. I notice that the young people are mixed - boys and girls. That's a bit unusual, compared to what I have noticed earlier. Typically, they are organized in same-sex groups. Rune and Lars are making potato soup. I go over and say hi to Julie, Cecilie and Sofie. They agree to do an interview that evening, so I suggest we go to the supermarket and buy some snacks, for us to enjoy together later. We walk to the supermarket, and talk about grandparents, sweets and what Sofie is allowed to eat. The girls keep chatting about everything and nothing. (Fieldnote excerpt, November 2019)

In Denmark, youth clubs are offered by the municipality as an after-school activity for young people from 10 – 18 years old, with the intent of creating possibilities for *"activities and socializing, which enables young people versatile development, independence and understanding of democracy"* (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022). The Nørre Søby youth club is open every afternoon to all children and two evenings a week, where staff cook and eat dinner with children and youth from the *"outschooling"* (7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade). The majority of the youth attending the club evenings were students from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, who matched the age group of this study. Nørre Søby Youth Club is situated in a large, old, three-storeys house and offers a wide range of activities like creative workshops, music rooms for bands to practice in, DJ workshops or various physical outdoor activities. The Club is surrounded by a large outside area, with a workshop, a football field and rabbits for the children and young people to care for. Trips to e.g. the cinema or the bowling alley are offered on a monthly basis and, in addition, it is possible to attend one annual skiing trip and a summer camp. Parents pay a monthly fee of 600 Danish kroner for 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 300 Danish kroner for 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade children's attendance. These prices are affordable for most families in Nørre Søby, and the municipality covers Youth Club Fees for lower income families. Costs for meals, trips and special activities are additional.

The atmosphere of Nørre Søby youth club was typically relaxed, with young people hanging out, doing what they felt like and with a lot of chatting and laughing, sometimes loud music and noise. When I spent time in the youth club in the evenings, I typically observed young people "hanging out" in groups in the kitchen or in one of the common rooms. Some played pool or computer games and some used the band room. Many were buzzing around the rooms, chatting or whispering. Close by the Youth Club is a supermarket, to which there

would be frequent runs with the purpose of buying snacks and soft drinks, and I would often join the participants on these shopping trips.

The Youth Club is very much the *youth's* club. Aligned with the pedagogical intention of the club as enabling independence, the young people come and go as they please and are in charge of their own time. There are no demands for structured activity or attendance. It was clear that the participants and their peers enjoyed the club, where they seemed to feel at home and where they had close relationships with the staff who worked there. As is common practice in Denmark, youth clubs work closely with schools and Nørre Søby Youth Club was thus a part of Nørre Søby School, where the staff from the youth club assist teachers in some of the classes and were responsible for “movement”, which are scheduled classes of physical activity in Danish Schools. Egeskov school is connected to another youth club, but some of the students from Egeskov still attended Nørre Søby Youth Club.

Both schools, which figure in the study at hand, are public (i.e. state) schools. They have between 800 and 10000 students and have classes from 0. (Preschool class) to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, though many pupils leave school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The schools were organized in three parts called, *Inschooling*, *Middleschool* and *Outschooling*. The research participants were all in Outschooling and most of them attended 7<sup>th</sup> grade at the time of field work. The two schools both have high academic levels and score highly in national pupil welfare evaluations (Børne&Ungeministeriet, 2022). Despite the schools' geographical proximity and similar quality ratings, the schools did differ. Because of its geographical location, Nørre Søby School included children from the council-owned residential buildings, which were some of the few rental homes in the town. Nørre Søby School was furthermore famous amongst young people for its disgusting toilets and the school buildings gave an overall impression of being more dilapidated than Egeskov School.

### **Tiny dis/advantages**

Financial privilege informed the young people's everyday life in multiple ways, but it became exceptionally visible in connection to the girls' forthcoming confirmation. Even though Denmark is a highly secular country, many young people still go through the ritual of protestant confirmation when in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (sometimes 8<sup>th</sup> grade), which is celebrated with a party, where the young person traditionally receives expensive gifts.

Rose tells me about the shoes she want for her confirmation. Because she wants some which she can also use in future. She has been allowed to get some expensive shoes: Loboutain, Christian Dior, which cost around 4000 Danish Kroner. An older boy enters the room. She tells me, obviously impressed, that he is wearing the shoes she told me about! And, he owns four pairs of those and another pair and he has a jacket which is 14.000 Danish Kroner (Excerpt from fieldnotes, November 2017)

Rose, who lived with her two sisters and her single mother who was a nurse, told me about her wishes for her confirmation outfit, as we were hanging out on the couch in one of the many pleasant rooms of the youth club. Even though Rose shows awareness about the relatively high price of her dream shoes, they are still accessible to her. She is aware that the boy who enters the room has four pairs of the pricey shoes as well as the price of his very expensive jacket. This exemplifies how talk about expensive clothes was common and certain kinds of expensive brands were idealized and worn by many of the teenagers in the town. In general, it did not seem to be questioned that a teenager should wear a 14.000 Danish kroner jacket, it was simply admired. One evening in the club, I asked three friends Cecilie, Sofie and Julie, who all attended Nørre Søby School, went to football and scouts, and all had parents with middle-class jobs and average incomes, to write down their deepest wishes and life goals. They replied:

Cecilie: I want...what do I want?

Julie: I wrote a Balenciaga bag, that is what I really want!

Cecilie: But that's clothes.

Lise: That is expensive!

Sofie: Yes, it is really expensive...you know that city...

Cecilie: Gucci sneaks...ssssss

Sofie: Ey...has got that...and the Balenciaga bracelet, I actually got that from my parents.

Cecilie: I'm just going to write money.

Sofie: Ey, I also wish for money.

The actual intention of my question was for the girls to share their desires for the future. I wanted to know whether they dreamt of a specific type of job or of traveling, but as their

replies revealed, they understood my question differently. They might have been occupied with their forthcoming confirmation, but the youth of Nørre Søby were aware of current fashion trends and valued expensive fashion items. They all had specific brands of laptops, tablets, smartphones, cordless in-earphones, high-end bikes and expensive clothes and talked about these. Most of the young people were accustomed to restaurant visits and traveling to faraway places, and as mentioned, several of the menstrual events that the girls shared, like experiencing leakage on a beach in southern Europe or having menstrual cramps while visiting one's brother at a high-profile boarding school, referred to upper middle-class activities and to an active and privileged life.

Describing Nørre Søby as middle- to upper-middle class is, as with any categorization, not without complications. In general, the traditional separation into different classes is not straightforward due to de-industrialization, urbanization, education and women entering the labour market (Faber, 2008, p. 4). Denmark has one of the highest degrees of social mobility in the world (Ibid.) and the idea of all citizens' equality has, as earlier described in relation to sexism and gender, made the concept of class a *faux pas* in everyday conversation. In an English context, sociologist Beverly Skeggs (Skeggs, 1997), has criticized how class has been theorized and dismissed without any empirical foundation, and has responded by showing how gender and class is always intra-woven. Despite political and common voices challenging the existence of class in the welfare state of Denmark, Danish-based empirical research has engaged with class as a significant factor and analytical thinking tool (Bach, 2015; Gilliam, 2017; Hansen, 2014; Sandbjerg Hansen, 2014; Aamann, 2015). In the case of this study, the body of data - like the conspicuous level of wealth, privilege and specific ideals, requires an analysis that engages with the concept of class, to make sense of how the specificities of Nørre Søby are embedded in time, place and bodies, which ultimately matter to the opportunities of young people with menstrual cycles. Studies from high income countries similar to Denmark have shown how wealth, privileged and certain forms of living matter to menstruation (Barrington et al., 2021; Sifo, 2021), which furthermore stresses the need to include multiple categories in this study.

"Class" is a classic theme of anthropological analysis, which has traditionally drawn upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's conceptual expansion of class goes beyond descriptions

of financial wealth. His concept of habitus, where class transgress generations and materializes in bodies (Bourdieu, 2007) has been especially helpful for engaging with class analysis in a more nuanced and generative way. Sociologists Nick Fox and Pam Alldred have argued for the generative potential in re-engaging with the concept of class through new materialism and its engagement with situatedness and affective micropolitics. As they put it: *“Matters capacity is always context specific”* (Fox & Alldred, 2021, p. 7). Therefore, they argue for a better understanding of how class *works*, by rephrasing and talking about class as *“tiny dis/advantages”* and how these are produced and re-produced in everyday intra-actions between human and non-human matter (ibid.). Fox and Alldred argue that dis/advantages *“accumulate(s) to produce substantive inequalities and social divisions”* (Ibid. p.1). In this way a new materialist framework might assist in thinking about traditional categories like class, gender and race differently - as materiality, process and movement - to loosen up categories and thereby explore how sexed bodily morphologies in intra-section with non-human specificities, matter to the capacities of bodies. Like time, place and people are non-static, so *“class”*, or social positions, can be considered as moving processes and open-ended systems, which are formed through relations. As some of the girls in this study wisely observed, even in a small town like Nørre Søby, there are multiple ways of relating to menstruation. A menstrual multiplicity can be approached by exploring transgressions of class and location and how tiny differences in dis/advantages carry significance. As I have argued earlier, critical menstruation studies must pay attention to how circumstances, bodily or otherwise, such as level of income and education, religion, class, gender and race, work together and how these encounters matter in concrete and material ways to menstruating youth’s everyday lives. Many feminist thinkers have worked to make sense of how categories intersect and co-produce each other (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1990; Davis, 2014; Davis & Evans, 2012; Lorde, 1980; Lykke, 2010, 2020; Phoenix, 1997, 2006; Puar, 2012; Staunæs, 2003; Tiainen et al., 2020). Intersectionality stands central in this tradition as a theoretical concept, which in its original form was designed for political and juridical analysis of black women’s disadvantages in the USA (Crenshaw, 1990). There have been many discussions related to intersectional theory. Where one has touched upon the appropriation and de-politicization of intersectional theory by white feminists (Bilge, 2013), another discussion has been concerned with re-thinking ideas of intersectionality, to be better suited to empirical fields beyond law, while still insisting on its political potential.

Several feminists (Davis, 2014; Davis & Evans, 2012; Puar, 2012; Staunæs, 2003; Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2006) have inquired into how intersectionality might be more analytically generative, and argued for the value of rethinking intersectionality in its original form. While being an important analytical tool, utilizing categories risks overlooking the process which produces these categories, and thus one might risk performing the very categories one is exploring in research. Furthermore, attention to processes of subjectivity is called upon (Staunæs, 2003). Therefore, this study aims to acknowledge the fluidity, multiplicity and differences that operate to organize assemblages of bodies, class and race. This means due attention is paid to difference and transversality, while at the same time leaving room for change and difference within difference (Braidotti, 2019). Jasbir Puar suggests we consider difference as events, rather than categories “(...) *categories – race, gender, sexuality – are considered events, actions, and encounters, between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects.*” (Puar, 2012, p. 12). Following Puar’s suggestion makes it possible to avoid taking certain previously categorized subjectivities for granted by focusing on the located and specific relational events through which menstruating bodies emerge. While it is common practice for studies about young people and menstruation to include demographic information about research participants (Fingerson, 2006; Newton, 2016; Prendergast, 1994), the attention paid to how socio-material circumstances like class or race relates to menstruation at times seems to be limited to enumerating different categories that are identified as important. In this way analysis neglects how classed and racialized circumstances intra-weave and matter to menstruation. This approach reduces class, race, and sexuality to mere analytical categories and leaves it up to the reader to draw possible connections between these and menstruation. This poses a risk of research placing “white”, “girls” and “menstruation” as universal figures and events (Frankenberg, 1993). To ignore or pay little attention to (bodily and sexed) difference is exactly what has historically rendered research on women’s bodies and menstruation superfluous and has left bias, blind spots and myths roaming and *worlding* (Haraway, 2008). In a study of white upper-middle class young menstruants, intersectionality and transversal thinking stresses the importance of exploring located specificities of bodily and menstrual encounters, to avoid leaving the impression of “menstruation” or “white-girl-menstruation” as “universal menstruation.”

## Menstruating in families

The participants had varying opinions of whether they were still children or had become young people, but in family relations, the participants were very much still “children”. The participants all share a home with parents and most had one or more sibling, and even though some had started to distance themselves more from their parents and family life, they all were expected to engage in the routines and events of family life. This also meant that menstrual events as they emerged in the data were often firmly anchored in the setting of the heterosexual nuclear family. By following menstruation into the participants’ families, it becomes clearer how, through relations with constructions of childhood and youth, menstruation emerges in the data.

Though Nørre Søby is a modern town and the majority of mothers work outside the home, families were still conservative in their way of organizing family life, which meant mothers were the primary parental relation for the children. Johanne laughingly shared how her father declared that raising children was a mother’s job and he did not want to be engaged in decisions about his daughter’s life. While this example illustrates a radical position, and many girls shared stories of more invested fathers, the overall impression of Nørre Søby was that when it came to family life, traditional gender norms were alive and well. Only a few of the participants had divorced parents, and none of the participants had same-sex parents. Neither did any of the participants themselves actively identify outside of heteronormative ways of living, though two out of the entire group of participants experimented with visual representations outside traditional femininity, like boldly colored hair, piercings and baggy clothes.

### Parents and menstruation: “You have to tell your mother!”

The closest thing to a menarche ritual in Denmark is that “*you have to tell your mother*”. It is a naturalized assumption that menstruation is of concern to mothers. Most mothers reacted by providing comfort if necessary and made sure that their child knew where the menstruation products were kept and how to properly use them. Celebration was not common as Clara - who was from a highbrow and in many ways traditional family where children were expected to be high-performing, explains:

Lise: Do you feel like telling me about the first time you got your menstruation?

Clara: I told my mother and she was like, well this is not something we celebrate in this family. And I was like, yes I know that! (Both girls laugh)

Lise: How did it make you feel, when she said that?

Clara: I was like, why should you? But some people do it...like she said, some people celebrate it, but like, I know that.

Lise: Did she show you where the pads were or did she tell you...?

Clara: No, I knew that already. In some way, then you already knew where the pads and stuff like that are.

It is not going too far to claim that Clara's mother greets her child's menstruation negatively. Clara and Elizabeth laugh together, maybe at the absurdity of it all. In addition to this example, Clara shared another menstrual story in which she took too long to change a pad at a traditional event at her brother's boarding school, to her mother and grandmother's irritation. Her stories serve as an illustration of how a leaky body in some upper-class families of Nørre Søby is an inconvenience to what is considered important, like attending prestigious bird shooting events at boarding schools.

However, Clara's mother's direct renouncing of celebration, when she got the news of her daughter's menarche, seemed harsh and atypical even for Nørre Søby. From a broader perspective, there seemed to be a relaxed attitude towards menstruation in most families, where the presence of an older menstruating sibling was a deciding factor in knowledge about menstruation. But the parents' professions also seemed to matter. Some of the girls' parents worked as professional health-workers, as either doctors or nurses, and they would share how their parents talked about menstruation during dinner or in front of siblings, which caused discomfort. One girl connected this openness to her mother's work as a hospital doctor, by sharing how she would also talk about "*other inappropriate topics*" like feces or operations, during family dinner, which hinted at menstruation as a topic she considered unsuitable for family dinnertime. Some mothers insisted on the girls reading leaflets about menstruation and they gave the girls menstrual pads to bring in their school bags before menarche, to ensure they were prepared. Many mothers were open about menstruating and would buy menstrual products and change their used pad or tampons with their children present. It is quite normal for relations between parents and children in Denmark to be informal when it comes to being present while using the toilet. One girl explained how she benefited from being synchronized with those in her family who

menstruate because then the smell of menstrual fluid could not be traced to her body. For some participants, menstruation seemed to be a relatively openly discussed topic within the family. Especially those with older menstruating siblings.

The dominance of heteronormative families in Nørre Søby was underlined by how menstrual practice and knowledge was passed on from the parent with bodily experience of menstruation. The girls continuously underlined that they would rather share their menstruation experience with their mothers, than their fathers:

Lise: Is it easier to talk to your girlfriends?

Cecilie: MUCH easier! For example, I haven't told my dad, I would NEEEEVER be able to do that. It is because, my parents are divorced right, and then we were at his house and I always have it exactly when I am at his right, ehm, so I am always like, then I'm always like, ok this is deep right, but if I have to open up a pad, I'm like really quiet (laughs)

Julie: Ey, I also used to do that in the beginning. We kept it secret to my dad, I was like: You cannot tell him! And then at one time, then we were like, Julie we have to say it, and then I was like: Ok, but YOU have to do it.

Sofie: Yes, that was like the first time I had to tell my dad, it was because I bled through my pad and then there was blood on my sheets (Everybody laughs)

Lise: Are your parents divorced as well?

Sofie: Yes, and then it was like a little, I had to wake him up in the middle of the night, because I woke up, so I was like: Daaad I had a little accident and I thought it was so awkward, but it was not because I had to tell him I was menstruating, it was because I bled on the sheets.

Julie: Ej, I did that too one time.

Lise: Are you more careful then, when you stay over at your dads?

Sofie: A lot, and then sometimes I actually wear two pads, because I'm like, I don't know why but I am really really shy and I can just like, if my mom says something, then I am like: Mom shut up! I mean, I really cannot talk to my parents about it, but I can talk to other about it no problem. I mean, it is a lot easier, but with my parents I just cannot.

Lise: Why do you think it is like that?

Sofie: I don't know. You have another relationship with your friends.

Cecilie: It's like awkward right, like you don't tell if you have a giant crush on someone, you don't go home like: Ey moooooom, don't you want to see this boy, he is so hot!

Some girls had still not told their fathers about their menstruation years after menarche, and as the quote shows, girls' fathers, but also other non-menstruating adults, like male teachers and pedagogues, were generally considered people with whom menstruation was preferably not discussed. As with Cecilie and Sofie, the issues of fathers most typically emerged in families where the parents were divorced. Here the girls would typically struggle with telling their father, if he was the adult present at the time of menarche, or they would have difficulty with where to place menstruation products in their fathers' houses. One girl shared that she was on holiday with her father when she suddenly got very ill and found out that it was her first menstruation, which caused her extreme discomfort. Instead of telling her father, who was in the room next to her, she called her mother on the phone, who then called the father back and shared the news. The reluctance to share menstruation with fathers is, however, not only connected to sexed morphology, but also to adulthood, as the participants place their mothers in the category of someone with whom not to share certain things. Though the story of hiding menstruation from fathers was common, some participants also shared how they had talked about menstruation around the campfire on a so-called "*father-trip*" with the class and it was common for most fathers to buy menstruation products when they went grocery shopping, as we shall see later.

### Being "good parents"

The principal of Egeskov School described the parents as very invested in their children's lives and education and as "*good parents*", but as she explained, "*some are very busy*". We might understand what this implies by considering anthropologist Dil Bach's research on wealthy Danish families and parenting in an area similar to Nørre Søby. Among other things, Bach's study shows how two stories about parenting dominate: Parents are highly invested in their children's lives, or they are absent and busy pursuing their careers (Bach 2015). Bach's research shows how mothers especially engage intensively in their children's everyday lives. Similarly, the mothers of Nørre Søby, were more likely to have lower income jobs than their male partners and were highly invested in their children's everyday lives. The mothers did not only function as family project leaders, checking up on homework and coordinating afterschool events. Some mothers' investment concerned the participants'

bodies, like what and how much they ate, how much they exercised or their menstrual cycle, as Katinka describes here:

My mother writes it down in her calendar and I don't understand why! I'm just like: mind your own business. Ok, so it is coming, ok I can sense it myself, I get all mood-like, not very happy, I get meeeega....

Katinka's mother's tracking makes her irritated, because her own sense of "mood" works as an indicator of menstruation, making her mother's notes in the calendar seem overly-involved and superfluous. Similarly, other girls expressed irritation with their parents', and especially mothers', involvement in their bodies and their everyday lives. A general irritation with parents was a theme through the participants' stories and can be read as typical for the process of coming-of-age. Despite protest, the participants attended school and their afterschool activities as expected, and most of them lived up to the academic ambitions of their parents, which as in other studies of Danish upper-middle class families were significant (Bach, 2014, 2015; Gilliam, 2017). The requirement of achieving meant that some participants would attend school despite suffering from menstrual pains, and there seemed to be an idea among Nørre Søby parents of physical activity as the best medicine against menstrual discomfort. Some participants seemed to adopt the values of their parents, where participation in school was prioritized, despite menstrual discomfort. When I asked Clara, and her friend Elizabeth, who were also from upper-middle class families, if they ever wanted to stay at home when they had menstrual pains, Elizabeth brushed me off with: *"The pain is no different here or there"*. Eva, who loved to read, described herself as a bit of a "nerd", and cared deeply about *"getting a good education"*, worried that her sudden outbursts caused by menstrual cramps, would disturb the other students' concentration and ruin their group work.

The parents' involvement in the children's everyday lives - with all this entails with regards to attendance, eating and being - reminds us how menstruating as someone's child means having a menstruating body with a child's limited possibilities of bodily autonomy. It furthermore shows how ambitions of academic achievement, bodily ideals and general ideals of how to live, intra-weave and affect the degree of bodily control young people with menstrual cycles are afforded. Moreover, the temporal structures of young people's everyday lives mattered to how menstruation emerged.

## Busy life in Nørre Søby

I tried to schedule an interview with Jessica again. I really want to talk to her and her group of friends. She tells me she is simply too busy with her sports. She informs me that her team is on a high level and that she is only in the club today because practice was cancelled. She tells me that she doesn't have time to participate, because of her busy schedule. (Excerpt from field notes, May 2017).

Being busy with school or afterschool activities was the norm for young people in Nørre Søby. Even though most young people were allowed a large degree of freedom, cycling around alone or with friends, a large part of their time was still structured and their parents expected them to participate in their scheduled activities. Some of the participants participated in sports at elite levels, which demanded attendance multiple times a week, while others participated in one or two afterschool activities once or twice a week. School and afterschool activities (either at the youth club or various sports) thus greatly structured the participants' everyday lives. A school day would typically begin at 8.00am and end around 2.00 or 3.00pm. During this period there would be 45-minute lessons separated by shorter breaks with a longer break for lunch. The temporal structure of the school is significant to menstruation, because young menstruating people are expected to be present in school during school hours by parents and teachers. They are expected to participate, in either sitting down concentrating or in physical activities, at school or in the surrounding environment. While trips to the toilet are allowed during class, they are expected to happen during breaks, which can be a challenge for menstruants with heavy flows. Some participants shared stories of leakage on chairs, while others talked about how they would sit on the hard wooden chairs, in awkward positions, to avoid leakage. Alice shared how she had to attend the annual sports day with the older classes while menstruating heavily, and how she had to jump up and down all day, to her great discomfort. Furthermore, there was a teacher guarding the door to the toilets, in order to prevent 'escapees' and even though students were allowed to use the toilets, Alice did not feel comfortable doing so as frequently as she needed to.

Menstruating youth have to navigate the planned activities of a school day and control their leaky menstruating body accordingly, which demands labour and skills. As Molly shares in

the extract below, her current menstrual bleeding was particularly hard due to an increased level of physical activity in school that week:

Molly tells me that she is menstruating and that it has been kind of a hard week to have it, because she had to be very physically active in school: She had gym class and then she was aware all the time of whether she would bleed through. So she checked the whole time. And then the other day they had to go out and mountainbike in the forest and be there for a really long time. And even though it was pleasant, it was difficult because there weren't any toilets. But she wore a huge pad, but she could still feel it and it was a little rough on top of the physical strain.

Molly's awareness of her menstruation changed because the planned activities in school demanded her body to perform in a way, that she was not comfortable with, and because another activity demanded her presence in a place where she could not use the toilet. She managed it by wearing "*a giant pad*", which she could "*feel*" and which was "*hard*" on top of the physical strain from mountain biking. Molly's story illustrates how spatial and temporal structures of school life can matter to how affects move through bodies and thus what a menstruating body can do and enjoy. In Molly's case, the relation of menstruating body and menstrual product of a certain size made it possible for her to attend, but not fully enjoy, the planned activities. Other participants shared how they dreaded going to scheduled swimming class or sail sports after school, when they were menstruating. Some girls shared how they did not change their menstruation pad, before returning to their home, since they did not feel comfortable using the school toilets. Some shared how their level of ambition, the expectation of attendance and investment in school and after school activities, made their menstruation more troublesome for them. The majority of the participants' waking hours were scheduled, whether in school or at numerous after-school activities, and in classrooms, halls, sports arenas and forest areas. The adults who were present in these settings also emerged in the data alongside family members and friends, as people of significance to menstrual youth life.

Children and young people's menstruating bodies did not appear to be considered in the planning of school and after-school activities. As mentioned, being not yet adults, the participants enjoyed a limited degree of bodily autonomy and the obligatory activities in school and after school, left little time for menstruating with all it entails i.e. managing bleeding, discomfort, pain, the need for safe and clean toilets, retreating and resting. In this

way, the spacious circumstances and the temporal rhythm of the everyday youth culture in Nørre Søby often clashed with menstruant's needs, and through this assemblage of menstruation-youth-school, the menstruating body emerged as troublesome to the participants.

### Sexual and Menstrual Education

Sexual education in Denmark is officially referred to as "*Sundheds – og seksualundervisning og familiekundskab*", which can be translated to "Health – and sexual education and family knowledge". Researcher of sexuality didactics Line Roien (et al.) states in their analysis of sexual education in Denmark that,

According to the latest national curriculum published in 2020, the aim of sexual education is to develop the competencies of pupils to promote the health and wellbeing, including the sexual health and wellbeing, of themselves and others. (Roien et al., 2022, p. 71).

Menstrual education is in this way, considered a part of a general wellbeing of youth. Despite several international studies showing how menstruation matters to young menstnants (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Liu et al., 2012; Rembeck & Gunnarsson, 2004; Rembeck & Hermansson, 2008; Rembeck et al., 2006; Ruble & Brooks-Gunn, 1982) , it does not figure as an independent theme in Danish sexual education, but is mostly considered part of education in human reproduction and puberty. As sexuality education is not scheduled per se in Danish schools, it is very much the responsibility of the primary class teacher, whether and in which form sexual education is conducted. Many teachers are not trained to teach sexual education and menstruation is often merely mentioned as a biological event, which marks puberty and enables reproductivity. The Egeskov School leader complained to me that they could no longer afford to bring in outside assistance from NGOs for sexual education and, because of this, the quality of information the students received had declined.

The participants shared how the topic of menstruation was normally not touched upon until the girls were in fifth, or in most cases, sixth grade, which meant they were 11 – 13 years old when first taught about menstruation in class. The Danish Family Planning Organization (Sex og Samfund), which works for sexual and reproductive health and rights, organizes "UGE SEKS" ("Week six": "six" in Danish is "seks", which sounds like "sex") once a year for schools to focus on sexual education, and direct their learning material on menstruation towards

fourth, fifth and sixth class. It seems that menstruation is not considered an appropriate subject for younger children, even though research has shown that if children learn about menstruation before menarche they have a more positive relationship to their bodies when they begin to menstruate (Rembeck & Gunnarsson, 2004)

Most girls were taught in class that menstruation was “natural” and “nothing to be ashamed of”. At the same time, teachers and school nurses provided tips on how best to conceal their menstrual products. At times other agents than the teacher, for example the school nurse, menstruation product companies or NGOs, are invited to the school to teach sexual and reproductive health.

In the two schools I visited in Nørre Søby, as in the rest of Danish schools, the common practice was to teach sexual education to all students across sexed morphologies, and then separate the group in different locations into “girls” and “boys”, when focusing on menstruation. Despite the advantages of a separatist space, where questions can be asked in the safety of menstruating peers, this practice has been widely criticized by menstruation activists as contributing to the stigmatizing and mystification of menstruation. It furthermore excludes young people and children who do not identify as the gender they have been assigned based on bodily morphology. Some of the participants shared how one male teacher had improved the boys in the class’ attitudes towards menstruation by educating them on the emotional effects of menstruation and how it was important to treat menstruants with respect.

As teenage pregnancy is at a historical low rate in Denmark and almost non-existent in white upper-middle class areas like Nørre Søby (DST, 2020) the connection between menarche and pregnancy, was only discussed in theoretical ways. This stands in stark contrast to research from less privileged countries (Chinyama, 2019; Sivakami et al., 2019; Tegegne & Sisay, 2014) where menarche is connected to life-altering consequences, like possible unwanted teen pregnancies and/or marriage, and underlines how menstruation carries localized meanings. Moreover, as abortion and contraception is available, in addition to free health insurance and visits to general practitioners, the health system supporting young menstruating people in Denmark is in place, theoretically.

Danish schools have school nurses, who conduct annual health check-ups. When the students reach puberty, the school nurse begins to inquire about whether or not they have reached menarche. Many of the girls found the knowledge they received lacking, as it focused mostly on the occurrence of menarche and whether this was within a normative age span. The participants were told that if they did not experience menarche before the age of sixteen, they would have to get a medical check-up by a doctor. The prospect of a vaginal examination was the main reason for worry in the girls who did not yet have their menstruation. With all the financial, educational and social resources the participants enjoyed in, many of them still complained about absurd and lacking menstrual education (the school nurse had brought a Barbie Doll to class, with a uterus painted on its plastic stomach, to demonstrate reproductive anatomy) and about how they did not feel comfortable reaching out to teachers or health professionals to ask for advice and information about menstruation. They preferred to search for answers on the internet or ask their friends, when in doubt.

### Situating menstruating in class and race

Together with material and financial wealth, specific aesthetic ideals organized how affects moved in the upper-middle class assemblage which is Nørre Søby. The young people dressed very similarly in expensive jeans and sporty clothes of high quality and there were multiple events in the data, where “doing youth differently” by dressing or acting off, affected peers negatively. For example, when Rose wished for acrylic nails in the following extract from my field journal:

We are talking about “Princesses from the Block”<sup>4</sup>. Rose says she wants acrylic red nails.

No! says William. You can’t!

Rose: Yes, why not?

William: You just can’t. William is upset and leaves. Rose continues to watch him.

I ask: Why do you think he got mad?

Rose replies: I don’t know!

---

<sup>4</sup> “Prinsesser fra blokken” is a Danish documentary series about working-class girls with a distinct aesthetic concerning make-up, clothes and long colorful acrylic nails.

I continue: Why don't you think anyone here looks like the princesses?

Rose replies: Because we are more privileged.

I turn to Molly: Why don't you think so?

Molly replies: I don't pay much attention to what kind of different people live here.

Rose: But we are privileged, we are not from the blocks right!

Rose's awareness of her own and her peers' privilege and how this is connected to geographical location and wealth is striking. Molly's expressed indifference to who lives in the area in itself resonates with the privilege of growing up in a homogenous middle class town, populated by "default" model citizens, who are rarely problematized in politics or in the media. In her research on middle class youth and civilizing practices in school, Laura Gilliam writes how it is a common practice to define "others" as morally inferior and less "civilized" in order to normalize middle-class being. Others have similarly argued that class comes into being through the identification of difference (Skeggs, 1997). When Rose says, "We are not from the block", she says it with conviction and certainty. Being from Nørre Søby means not being *other*, like those who live in social housing. For the girls this middle-classness is the source of normativity. It is from here the stream of ideas of what it means to be civilized, springs. This means that as a white, middle-class researcher, and for the young people living in an upper-middle class environment, things that matter to menstruation and possibilities of becoming might become invisible. Normativity is silent and hard to identify (Frankenberg, 2001) and thus it becomes visible in events like the above, where different ways of living and doing are problematized.

What is even more pertinent is a proportion of Nørre Søby families and some of the participants, like William, are *upper*-middle class, which makes the mere expression of a wish to move outside the boundaries of white middle class feminine aesthetics even more at risk of being sanctioned by affective responses, as the clash with working class "others" is even more radical and intense. Here affectivity takes on the shape of William's anger, which directs his body away from Rose, who risks possible social isolation, as her gaze follows him out the door. The intensity of how William is affected by the possibility of inappropriate nails points towards the importance of "doing youth right" in Nørre Søby. Elsewhere Rose, who lives with her single mother and her two sisters, shares how she has bought a specific

bag to feel included in her class, where she felt excluded. Josefine shared how, the seemingly innocent act of wearing two coats on a cold day would challenge accepted way of dressing, to such an extent that it prompted negative and highly affective responses from other students. These examples underline how the homogeneity of the town and the students matter to what young bodies can do and can become.

Being a child in a family in Nørre Søby also meant having access to basic menstrual care. Discussions about so called “period poverty”, in which menstruating people cannot afford menstruation products and therefore do not have the possibility to manage their menstruation as they wish, has recently led countries like Scotland and New Zealand to pass laws about accessibility and menstruation products. This was never an issue for the participants, who were privileged by their access to material goods like clothes, bikes and menstrual products of their own (or their mothers’) choice. All the girls I asked chose, and had access to, the most expensive and promoted brands of menstruation products, namely two major multinational brands. They furthermore talked about how they would buy not just generic biking shorts, but specifically “*Nike Pro Shorts*”, which are short, tight fitting gym shorts, that some girls would wear as additional protection against menstrual leakage. As mentioned earlier, Alice had the privilege of testing how swimming with a pad functioned, in her family’s private swimming pool, before going on a trip to the lake with her class. Just as it has become a popular choice for many adult menstruants (Karlsson, 2019b; Levy & Romo-Avilés, 2019), some of the participants used their smart phones to navigate their menstrual cycle on apps. At home, they all had access to clean water, soap and washing machines. These examples are marshalled to illustrate how access to high quality menstrual products, technology, clothes, clean water, pain medication, hot water bottles, heating pads, internet access to source information, access to medical consultations, trusted adults or swimming pools, matter to young people’s everyday lives with menstruation. Material advantages to assist in the management of menstruation, like the ability to buy expensive gym shorts, which feel nice against the skin and carry the power of a popular brand, instead of just *any* kind or any at all, matter because they enable young people to become-with menstruation *and* the joy of style, comfort and technology. A high brand menstruation pad, in a glitzy pink package, matters to how menstruants emerge by adding excitement and joy to menstruating. Premium technology and specific brands circulate

value that enters the menstruation- assemblage, and with the practical assistance of technology or simply the joy of fancy things, counterbalances the possible discomfort of menstruation. All this adds to Rose and her friends' awareness of "being privileged".

### Racializing menstruation

The demography of Nørre Søby is mainly white, which the principal pointed out to me as we walked around Forestside School: "*we have only had the occasional couple of Chinese diplomat kids*" as she put it. This aligns with my fieldwork experiences, where I only met two girls, who fell outside of the dominating norm of white bodies. One was Inez, who had been adopted from India as an infant and another girl Mie, who had a Japanese mother and passed as white. The bodily homogeneity of the town also made the group of participants highly homogenous and places them all, independently of the income of their parents, within the realm of Danish, white, upper-middle class and the bodily ideals and norms which come with this. Among other traits, the participants described themselves as "proper", "polite" and "ambitious". Similar to the students from Laura Gilliam's study of middle class and civilizing ideals (Gilliam, 2012), they seemed to have a clear image of themselves, as situated in the top strata of the Danish population. This became evident when they talked about young people living in the global south, or just in other parts of Copenhagen, as Rose mentioned before when she referred to the "princesses". This differentiation also happened when the participants talked about menstruation, where they would place themselves in opposition to children of similar age from other geographical locations, from working class teenagers or from youth with different racialized backgrounds, as Gry, Freya and Amalie did when they discussed menstruation and difference. Gry, Freya and Amalie, were three friends who stuck out a little from the majority of youth in Nørre Søby. Gry especially presented herself as a bit of an outsider and "alternative" by listening to alternative music, wearing "hippie clothes" and badges with political slogans. They all shared an interest in what one might call "alternative cultures", feminism and political issues:

Freya: Like, we were three developed girls, for many, yes, like for a really long time, it was me, Inez and Maham. Of the whole class, I actually think it was.

Gry: But somehow it also makes sense, that it was Inez and Maham. Or at least Inez.

Amalie: Why?

Gry: Because their...because when you are from India you get faster, well yes she, Inez is from India, then I think that, there you develop faster, one might say.

Amalie: Can you?

Freya: It might be something in their genes that does it.

Gry: But I am thinking...Inez is not at all, what can you say, does not have anything to do with India, but here is a lot, like there you start working when you are 14 years old. Then you like have to, then you have to be in some way developed.

Freya: Yes, and grow up really fast!

Gry: Yes, and that's why I'm thinking, then she must have developed.

Freya: That was at least a good theory...

Lise: But Inez lives in Denmark, where she doesn't have to go to work at an early age?

Freya: No, it could have something to do with her genes.

Amalie: I'm also thinking, that you get married I imagine. Inez has told me, that women do not have any rights over in India.

Freya: That is also because they are way, way more, like, evil.

Amalie: And then I am also thinking, that you get married off to someone.

Freya: To someone at 14 years old.

Gry: At 14 years old you have to be ready, you are like going out and having some children like, at 14 years old.

Freya: Some places they have, not necessarily India.

Gry: No no, but she comes from over there, where I could imagine that they do it.

Freya: It isn't certain that it happens in the big city, but in those small villages.

Gry explains the early development of her friends, Inez who is adopted from India and Maham, whose parents are from Pakistan, with their racialized difference from her. While Maham is left out of the rest of the discussion, the girls turn to theories of genetic variations to explain Inez's early menarche. They combine this with the idea of lack of women's rights in the global south and a cultural tradition for stepping into adulthood at an earlier age.

Freya, who was interested in feminist issues, suggests that the lack of women's rights, which she connects with the early onset of menarche, has to do with "them" being "more evil". It more than implies a difference from others - better people who do not marry their children away. Freya is however critical towards Gry's generalization about early marriage, as she question whether these are traditions reserved for rural life and in this way draws into the discussion nuances of how class intersects with race and matters to girls being dis/advantaged by menstruation. Even though Inez was adopted as an infant by a white Danish couple and, as one of the girls highlights, does not really have anything to do with India, the girls create an assemblage of "white-normal-bodies-menstruation" by drawing on discourses of genetics and "cultural othered bodies" that necessitates early menarche. Through this, the girls other those who reach menarche earlier than the average young menstruant, which posits their own bodies as "more normal", even though Freya, who is white, was one of the early-developing girls in the story to begin with. A similar event happened when Camilla suddenly remembered what her mother had told her:

Camilla: Like, there is also that thing, I have just heard my mom say, that when Muslims get menstruation, like the first time, then they have to start wearing a neckscarf...or that thing...

Lise: A scarf?

Camilla: Yes!

Isabella: Fuck, what an embarrassment! (Everybody is laughing).

Ester: Then everybody knows!!! (everybody is laughing).

Camilla: That is also, what I thought, but yes well...

Alice: That is so awkward, then in school one day you are not wearing it and then the next day, you do, and then you are just like nooooooooooooo (everybody is laughing.).

Isabella: But I also think, that their culture is a little different than ours (Sarcastic tone of voice)

Mie: Yeah

Camilla: You really think so? (Continuing Isabella's sarcasm, which makes everybody laugh).

Lise: So you are pleased that you don't have to wear a headscarf (The girls are laughing) to school, after having your first menstruation?

Isabella: It wouldn't really suit me I think.

Camilla: Just a little fringe there....

Camilla, Isabella, Alice and Ester all went to the same class at Egeskov School. They were an easy-going friend group, who spoke fast and laughed a lot. In this excerpt, they jokingly relate to the practice of beginning to wear a scarf at the coming of menarche. They imagine how this would not only cause them great discomfort, as it would reveal that they had started to menstruate, but they also joke about how the headscarf would make them look bad in relation to white middle class beauty ideals in Denmark in 2019. Through laughing and expressions of imagined embarrassment, they reduce the discomfort connected to their own menarche, by situating it as more "normal". In the participants' exchange, it becomes clear that bodily difference is not only linked to a specific sexed morphology, and it is not only about being a "girl" or a "boy", when relating to menstruation. As Braidotti reminds us in her insistence of always thinking transversally, bodies are always also racialized bodies (Braidotti, 2002, 2019), and despite sharing the bodily circumstance of menstruating, the participants bodies emerge as *more* normal when exchanging ideas about their friends' bodies as different to theirs and thereby normalizing white middle class menstruation. It is, however, not only in relation to their own sexed bodily morphology that they situate menstruation. When discussing the boys' lack of knowledge and their negative attitudes towards menstruation, Freya says that Danish boys were at least better, in regards to knowing and caring about menstruation, than boys from the USA. When I inquired about her personal experiences with North American boys, she said that she just heard about it somewhere. The general idea of Denmark as a land of equality (Faber, 2008; Faber et al., 2012; Utoft, 2020) shines through in Freya's story, and like this menstruation also emerges with ideas of nationality and of how having menstruation is "better" in Denmark than in some other places. These stories of menstruation in relation to racialized bodies and ideas of idealized nationality, stands unchallenged by the bodily homogeneity of the girls in the study, who are predominantly white, thin and able-bodied. Sameness is enacted in their daily lives where they are isolated from, and have almost no, first-hand experience of bodies, which are different from theirs in the sense of e.g. language, clothing, shape and skin-color. Therefore, the sameness is taken for granted and not questioned, as they draw clear lines between "them" and "us" in their discussion of early menarche. Through a

combination of distancing and simultaneously constructing a racialized and classed affective congealment of different menstruating bodies, the participants emerge not merely as girls-with-menstruation, but specifically as white-upper-middle class-girls-with-menstruation who menstruate together and in the same way. In relation to menstruating “others”, their constructions of sameness and neutrality overrules the more specific stories of menstrual diversity among the participants.

By introducing the place, and the people, which are part of (in)forming the participants, this chapter has aimed to give an overall look into the bodily homogeneity of Nørre Søby and of how certain ideals, norms and materialities together form a specific type of Danish white upper-middle class assemblage which organizes menstruation and youth. The empirical examples have illustrated how upper-middle class lives of young people with menstruation can be organized and done, and how this shapes ideas of bodies and menstruation e.g. as a signifier of neutrality, which renders white middle class menstruation more normal than that of “*the others*”.

*Chapter 5:*

# BODIES

## Introduction: Affective young bodies and sexed morphologies

Bodies are central not only to the process of menstruating, but also from the point of view that subjectivity is enfolded and that affects, as *“small wavelets of desire”* (Braidotti, 2022) run through bodies, and are significant to what bodies can and cannot do. In the context of Youth, there are specific bodily and affective circumstances at play, and this chapter explores how bodies of different sexed morphologies emerged in relation to menstruation and puberty through the data.

## Bodies, age and affect: “The girls have the feelings”

*“Being developed”*. This was the emic term through which puberty emerged in the field. The girls would talk about themselves and their peers and rate bodies and personalities as more or less *developed*. Similar to menstruation, puberty has most commonly been considered through a biological lens, and as a period in human life where hormones rage through young bodies, bodies transform, limbs awkwardly mismatch and skin is marked by acne. For young people with uteruses, menarche is considered a milestone marker for the onset of puberty. Challenging the one-sided perspective on puberty, where focus is on the development of reproductive capacities, researchers have argued how puberty is co-produced in discursive-material circumstances and how puberty in countries similar to Denmark is affected and shaped by the binary and heteronormative belief systems it emerges through (Driscoll, 2002; Mead et al., 1973; Paakkari & Rautio, 2019; Rice, 2018; Roberts, 2015). Rice and Roberts argue that: *“...puberty [should] be reconceived as a bio-psycho-social folding: a situated, material-semiotic temporal process in which sexed bodies change, flow and temporarily (if often stickily) congeal”* (Roberts 2015, cited in Rice, 2018, p. 548). In agreement, this study’s concern with puberty is how the corporal circumstances and the concepts and ideas of puberty enter the menstruation-assemblage. Puberty materializes through sexed relations, like the coming of menarche or voices breaking, and is defined through binary ideas of gender. In Catherine Driscoll’s research on what she refers to as *“feminine adolescence”*, she defines female puberty as: *“...the operation of the feminine in discourses on puberty (for which the puberty of girls is always relative to the puberty of boys)...”* Driscoll goes on to argue that feminine puberty is related to *“dominant Western discourses on adolescence”* (Driscoll 2002, p. 80), and cannot therefore be understood as an isolated corporal or biological event. Furthermore, through anthropology, puberty has been connected to cultural, classed and racialized norms (Driscoll, 2002; Mead et al., 1973) and,

as Driscoll argues, a dominant idea about puberty is “ (...) *that puberty is a process of physical disruption and then stabilization that extends into the social*” (Driscoll 2002, p. 82). In the case of the participants, an example would be the stabilization of “Womanhood” as an effect of menarche. Other than sexed morphologies as defining puberty, Paakkari and Rautio’s research on young people illustrates how puberty materializes through mobile phone use and how non-human materialities affect the transformation of young human bodies and how they are understood. (Paakkari & Rautio, 2019). For the participants, the hormonal changes of puberty and the radical bodily transformation that this brings - including menarche as a central material, semiotic and sexed signifier - specifically emerged through relations with “the boys”, but friends and other possible menstruants, school, smart phones and families also figured in their stories of puberty and menstruation.

The age span of the research participants was 12 – 16 years of age, with the majority being 13 – 14 years old. The average age of menarche in Denmark is 13.5 years (Aksklaede et al., 2009) and even though most of the girls had the experience of menarche in common, their bodies varied greatly in size and shape. Some still had childlike bodies, where others had visible breasts and more adult-like bodies. The girls’ appearance was shaped by their way of performing age, where for example some dressed more adult-like and were more outspoken about their sexual desires and others still wore typical children’s clothes and had not radically changed their interests from their last years of childhood. Despite the differences in bodily morphology and age performances, it was apparent that the socio-corporal presence of puberty did however matter to all of them, either as bodily events or as “something” to expect in the near future, where menarche represented for them as one of the most important milestones of puberty. In the following excerpt, puberty emerges through ideas of sexual difference and proper displays of affect and desire:

Johanne: I really think that the reason the boys in this class are so calm about it and like pretty indifferent, they do think it is exiting we all agree on that, boys are like that. They are pretty stupid at this age (Everybody laughs). They are very curious, let me put it like that!

Eva: We are just more developed than they are right. (Johanne and Ditte laughs)

Ditte: We are! They don’t know as much about it, and they don’t have it themselves, so they cannot feel pain or feel what it is like, so they are very curious, but in this class, we are very open about it. Like, in the other classes there is someone who has it too, and they are very guarded and if the boys

ask about it, then they are just like in a way like this: You don't need to know about that-like (Makes a high-pitch an intense voice). I mean, its fair enough to say that you don't need to know about it.

Lise: So you would say this class is more open?

Eva: Yes, we are very open, that's what we are like, we shout it in class: I got my periooooood! (Shouts with an exaggerated American nasal accent)

Lise: Why do you think it is like this in your class?

Eva: I think it is because the girls in here, we are very, I mean most of us developed early, like, we are in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and there might be a handful who have got...their menstruation. It's like in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, it was maybe half who got it already, so we developed early, so that's why, at least the girls in relation to our bodies and things like that, so we are just...we have talked about it for longer than I think they have in some of the other classes.

Lise: Have you also started to have boyfriends and girlfriends in this class?

Eva: Not that much.

Ditte: Ehm, there were some in the younger classes, but that wasn't really "boy or girlfriend"

Johanne: But like, we have feelings...we talk about crushes

Josefine: The girls have the feelings. I don't think the boys have them yet.

Eva: There are actually quite a few who says that boys talk about like girls, if they like a girl, but I just don't think they do it at this age.

Johanne: I think they talk about each other about it like, they are like: Ey check her out...

Josefine: Ey, but I dont think it's that serious

Johanne: Some do this, they go on Instagram and look at models who are like twenty-two: God she has a nice ass in that bikini! And then you are just like, seriously, you are in 7th...like seriously we wouldn't go up to a boy in tight trousers like that: Ooooooh...I mean...

Ditte: Also, the boys, you can sense on them that they are not that developed, not in that way I mean. In the younger classes, then some of the boys thought, and some of the girls, that it is really fun to say "willy" (tissemand) and then they all laughed like, it is like that (everybody is laughing) ok, you still think it's funny – and then when you are sitting, like I was sitting at that tall beautiful table there and then the boys they showed us their computer and then they were on this place called "Discord" which is like a chatting app.

Johanne: Ej, that was so disgusting!

Eva: And then they send each other porn-gifs!

Johanne: They send porn videos! They sent a video of a girl who...

Ditte: Some kind of blowjob and...

Johanne: No, they sent a video of a twenty-two second long girl, don't ask me how I remember, and then there was a girl who was standing in a bikini right, and she pulled it off and to the side and everything, ey it was gross! And man....

The girls mainly related *being developed* to bodily maturity, like menstruating and the development of breasts, but they also related being *developed* to levels and manner of sexual interest and experience and to emotional maturity. For instance, one's ability to talk about "*difficult things*" in a serious way was signifying one's level of development, according to the girls. Following this logic, they rated entire school classes as more or less developed and exemplified this by some classes having a relaxed tone when discussing menstruation, while others would giggle or tease when topics related to sexuality and bodies were mentioned. Other than this, the girls related "*developed*" to different sexual morphologies, where they would consider girls more mature and developed than boys in general, exemplified in the excerpt above, where boys are giggling sex maniacs, with no understanding of menstruation. In connection to this, the girls considered themselves *more emotional* and *more emotionally competent* than the boys and they considered themselves as generally more affective beings than the boys and the adults. If we consider emotional competency as the ability to control one's levels of affect, the idea of being emotionally literate and competent seems to contrast the idea of being an affective being. This was however not the meaning the girls intended. They argued that their deeper connection to affectivity meant that they knew feelings better than the boys and were more capable of addressing, sharing, analyzing and ultimately dealing with their feelings. In this way, emerging as "*feminine*" through affectivity related to maturity becomes something desirable, because adulthood is considered the end station for the transformational process the young people had embarked on. This became evident as being considered, and called, "*childish*" was definitively negative in the everyday life of the Nørre Søby school students. When disconnected from ideas of adulthood and affective knowledge and control, affective

bodies where problematized by both girls and boys. This happened in connection to puberty, but the discomfort connected to uncontrollable bodies of affect, specifically increased when related to menstruation.

### Different bodies

Within the general homogeneity of Nørre Søby, the youth club still encompass multiple bodies. Alice shared how she suffered from a chronic illness, which was invisible, and Rose shared how she suffered from extreme dysmenorrhea during menarche, but all the bodies in the club and the school appear as able bodies. In the Youth Club, bodies are hanging out on couches, smart phones-attached-to-hands-bodies, chatting bodies, dancing bodies, play-fighting bodies and bodies running around, bodies with long healthy hair, short hair, with polished nails, attentive bodies, alert bodies, whispering and organizing themselves in different groupings. All these bodies seem to move to the rhythm of a certain kind of intensity, which lingers as a constant vibration in the club. Things happen and turn the intensity up or down. Somebody steals something from someone, and suddenly bodies chase after each other through the house. It is a naïve drawing of a penis, traced by a finger in a thick layer of dust or sketched on a wall, with a pencil, which makes a group of bodies quiver with giggles. It is unexperienced flirting in the form of play-fighting and holding each other down. Sometimes the intensity excludes me from following the young people into certain rooms, because whatever happens there, I can easily sense that it is not meant for adults to witness. It is in outbursts of frustration from not feeling understood and it is in jokes, aimed to either please or harm. It is arms, legs, breasts, caps, jeans, skirts, t-shirts, cross-body purses and the right pair of sneakers. It is young bodies emerging and becoming together from all of this and I think people who have been in a youth club themselves or who are familiar with groups of teenagers, will recognize this affective and bodily imagery. Endless moving relations of human and non-human materialities cause specific and changing atmospheres, but the transformation from children into something else, together with the sexed difference of bodies, acts as an underlying current of intensity in the Youth Club.

“Friends”, “Youth”, “being developed” and “girls and boys”, were reoccurring emic themes. As it is still common practice in Danish schools, the two schools and the youth club often practiced organizing young people’s bodies after their morphology into two groups - “the

boys” and “the girls”. As mentioned, this separation happened during menstruation education, but also in other activities, like school group work, gym class, after school group activities and in the way many teachers and pedagogues addressed groups of children as either “boys” or “girls”. The young people themselves were aligned with the institutional binary gender organization of bodies, by mostly spending time with similarly sexed bodies and by more frequently referring to “the boys” as other than themselves, than as peers or friends. For some of the participants, like Rose, the relation with the boys had begun to be organized by a new kind of affective intensity, where sexual desire was significant. In the excerpt below, I am sitting with Rose on the couch in the club, before she engages in a competition with “the boys” and others. I write on my mobile phone and my writing is fast and disrupted, which mirrors an attempt to follow along and capture the highly energetic moving assemblage of bodies, movement and voices in the room:

Push-ups, The worm they are doing, bodies, strength status. Boys against girls and vice versa. Good atmosphere and clowning around. I have to ask the boys if they want to do “the worm”. They are talking about beer bongs, it weaves into the conversation. “Then we drank hot water from the tap. It was disgusting. They all go in the next room and do the plank. Rose leaves the strength competition and places herself up against me on the couch. Two of the boys pulls her out on the floor, hold her and pour water over her. She shrieks and shouts eeeeeyyy there’s water down my blouse! Ey! After she goes to her friends and repeats how there got water down her blouse, while she pulls out the neckline and looks down at her breasts. The boys return and walk over to Rose. They talk about “Snaps”. One of them just sent her one. Then they are standing close together, comparing shoe sizes. “Mine is very small”, Rose says.

Rose was one of what the girls themselves would refer to as “*developed*” girls. She was sexually active, had various “crushes” or love interests, which she would gladly share with me, and she was often the target of positive attention from the boys. In the example above the boys direct the water towards Rose’s body and she later directs her own and her girlfriends’ attention towards her breasts. In general, Rose seemed comfortable and pleased with her body. She enhanced typical feminine features by wearing dresses, bags and make-up. She was also physically active. She would do cartwheels on the lawn and participate in competitions of corporal strength on the floor between “the girls” and “the boys”. Here, it culminated in Rose and the boys emerging as differently sexed bodies, as she is held and soaked in water. Rose enhances her bodily morphology by referring to her breasts and

underlining her bodily diminutive ("*mine is very small*") to the larger boys. Play fighting, talking about beer, water on breasts and the exchanges of photos on mobile phones intra-weave and organize a specific youth-heterosexed-body-assemblage. Through how the young people organization of their bodies and how they enact binary gender through acting and talking, they continuously (re-)establish difference. In this way Rose and the other young people in the club emerge as two kinds organized by their bodily morphology.

Many researchers before me have pointed out how children and young people use sexed bodily differences to organize and make meaning of gender (Frosh et al., 2001; Kofoed, 2003; Renold, 2004; Staunæs, 2004; Thorne, 1996). Childhood scholar E.J. Renold's research has shown how ideas of imperative heterosexuality matter to how gender is done in the context of schools from an early age, where the expectance or desire to engage in heterosexual relations matters to what different bodies can do. All the way from nursery, kindergarten and throughout school, heteronormative and binary gender regimes are both challenged and cemented by children through play and socializing. Within this binary system of heteronormativity (Butler, 2006, 2014), bodily differences within the "two kinds" matter in specific ways to young people in the period of socio-corporal transformation, commonly referred to as puberty. Rose's body is different from some of the other girls', because of her body's developed sexed morphology. Her height, hair, slimness and developed breasts make her body live up to certain ideals of sexualized "femininity" (Ussher, 2006), while other girls still had child-like bodies, without any signs of transformation. As one might have gotten the impression from the above excerpt, Rose accepted and celebrated her sexed morphology, and the confidence stemming from this allowed her to speak freely about menstruation and maybe even use it to assert herself as "*developed*". This enabled Rose to speak about her menstruation in front of the boys she was playing table tennis with, during my first visit at the club. She knew why I was there, and initiated the conversation herself, but did so with a reserved attitude, as if she did not really care, even though her menarche was complicated and traumatic, as she hemorrhaged and had to go to the hospital. The "toughness" might be the general "coolness" which many young people idealize, but it could also have been Rose's shield of protection, in case the boys' reaction to her bringing up her menstruation could affect her with discomfort.

Rose's bodily confidence and openness about menstruating was, however, not shared by all the girls and although the boys mattered to Rose through joyful relations - like the water fight, flirting or friendships - for others "the boys" carried more negative connotations:

Inez: But like Gry, she had her hair cut like a page, and everybody found it nice. But like, I have been in really good shape and then I could just feel the difference when I wasn't. And it was, like, people kind of judged me because you are fat or something like that.

Lise: Did they comment? "

Inez: No, but I felt it.

Lise: Yes.

Inez: And I'm like this, while I have for a year and a half, no, since I got menstruation, I have never worn tight trousers and it was I third grade, so until seventh, eighth I haven't worn tight trousers.

Lise: You have never worn them?

Inez: No, because I have never liked it, I just felt fat: I didn't feel comfortable in them.

Lise: And it started as you got your menstruation?

Inez: Yes and then ehm, there was someone named Karl, who then, like at that time I felt very vulnerable and I was like not in good shape, when I was younger, I just began something and like something, and then my trousers where like a bit low and then he said, you look like shit and things like that and at that time I was wearing tight trousers. And I got very hurt. So then I stopped (wearing tight trousers). And then, since then I have never worn them. And now, when I, like, don't care about what people think about me, then I have begun again, but I still don't wear them all the time.

Lise: But that is nice, that you don't care as much.

Inez: Yes. Ehm, but it is a little weird, 'cause I still feel like people judge me. Like I still don't like wearing tight blouses and things like that. But I guess it will change as I grow older.

As shown in the previous chapter, Inez's body emerged in the group discussion of early menarche through racializing processes. She was brown-skinned and her body was shorter and had more fat than the majority of girls in Nørre Søby, which made her appear different. With her early menarche, the bodily difference was enhanced and as other girls who reached menarche, the first blood served as a material interpellation which placed her as

“woman”. Research has shown how menarche can catalyze the surrounding sexualizing of girls’ bodies, as they are suddenly placed in a bodily context of reproduction, “Womanhood” and adult heterosexuality (Rembeck et al., 2006; Stubbs & Johnston-Robledo, 2013). Inez shares how she finds that her body suddenly emerges after menarche as different through complicated relations with popular clothes. In this way, her body is made wrong in the clothes-body-relation. She is further affected by the comments from a boy, which ultimately incapacitates her in relation to choice and desire. Inez elsewhere during the interviews also shared how she had struggled with bullying and feelings of being wrong, and here she says that she was “*vulnerable*”. The concept of vulnerability has been reworked by feminists as a corporal openness of the body, and as a political insistence on relationality, as a possibility for change (Butler et al., 2016; Vaittinen, 2015). The latter I will return to later, but for now, vulnerability can be read as Inez in her corporal openness being able to be affected. In this case, she is affected by the words of Karl, who is placed in a history of white masculine dominance (Braidotti, 2019, 2022; Collins, 1998) and thus free from the same requirements of idealized beauty, holds the power to affect negatively, without any discomfort in return. Inez expects to be able to wear tight clothing when “she gets bigger” i.e. when she grows older. The future holds promise for her body being able to do more, perhaps because she will feel more comfortable with the sexualization that menarche and her surroundings have put on her and in this sense the limitations of her bodily capacity, is linked to a specific body of the present. Being of, and becoming-with, a sexed female morphology and menstruation is thus specific and relates not only to bodily and temporal circumstances, but also location. As anywhere, there are certain social codes in Nørre Søby School with regards to how to act, dress and be, and Inez is aware of this as she states in the above. One of the deciding factors establishing these rules, are the shapes and sexed differences of bodies. As Inez’s body, in contrast to Rose’s, did not align with ideals of beauty and sexed and bodily normativity in Nørre Søby, she was affected with discomfort, but meanwhile expressed a desire for it to be better, in claiming to be un-affected, while imagining a future which might hold more possibilities. Rose is already living Inez’s imagined future - recognized, accepted and fitting into heterosexed upper-middle class ideals of how bodies ought to be.

Comparing Rose and Inez highlights how the youth-body-menstruation-assemblage offers different possibilities for what bodies can do, depending on what bodies are already capable

of doing. Rose's body lives up to ideals of white middle class femininity, which enables her to talk about menstruation and relate to it openly, while Inez does not have the same option. In this way, despite their common point of bodily departure as menstruants and "girls", they appear as more or less a "right girl" in their relations with "the boys", which leads to different possibilities of becoming-with menstruation.

### Nuances of "the boys"

As with Inez' experience with Karl, other participants identified menstrual events, where non-menstruating peers - the boys - had used menstruation against them in a negative way. More of these examples will come up later, especially in relation to concealment of menstruation products. The issue of concealment was also the point of departure for the following excerpt:

Lise: Why is it that you have to hide it? Why do you think? Katrine: Well it's because it's a bit embarrassing.

Agnete: Yes, if it was a boy, I mean if the boys saw what it was we got. I mean a bag from the nurse, like a lot of stuff, pads or something that we had to bring to the class. It was so embarrassing!

Katrine: Yes.

Agnete: Because we didn't know how to get it to the class without the boys just...

Lise: Where was the meeting with the nurse, at?

Agnete: In the other building, but at that time our classroom was in the other building, so we had to walk across the schoolyard with those all of us.

Lise: What did they look like?

Agnete: They looked like, they were like a youth magazine, in a plastic thing and then inside the folder there was like a...

Katrine: Yes, and then there was the brands of the things printed on the outside.

Agnete: So what we did was that the girls went one by one inside and got our school bags. But the none of the boys saw it. We were just like "Oh my God, now they're going to find out!" But I was actually surprised what he said...

Lise: Yes, what did he say?

Agnete: He said that it was, like normal, like normally he would have said, I mean normally he is like a very loud type, who never keeps quiet, who is always noisy, so I thought "Oh no, now he's going to tell everyone, right. Then he said: "That's just brilliant! That's quite practical if it happens then you have a small stash". I was just like: "Ok, that was quite reasonable what you just said there

Lise: Ok, was that nice or?

Agnete: Yes, that was kind of nice, that he didn't begin to laugh or something like that.

Katrine: Yes, also because we have heard a lot of the boys, they are just like: "Eew how disgusting" and stuff like that, because you cannot help it if you get it, right, and stuff like that. So it was kind of nice if someone said: "That's practical you have it with you", instead of a negative comment, then you begin to think negatively yourself, but if you get a positive comment, then you are like, well ok that's really cool.

Lise: Yes.

Katrine: That's what I think anyway.

This was not the only account of how menstruation emerged through care from a non-menstruating peer. Rosalina told me how one of her non-menstruating friends, a boy, once went to the supermarket to buy her pads, when she was caught by surprise by her menstruation at the youth club. It is important to underline how menstruation emerged positively in relations with boys. What was interesting here, however, was that when the girls mentioned these positive emergences, they talked about them as something special and surprising. They expected to be met with negativity and mocking when their menstruation was exposed. The strong narrative about boys mocking menstruation also seemed to be part of the reason for the adults advising the girls to conceal their menstruation.

In the following, "the boys" becomes even more nuanced. The participants generally agreed that the boys found menstruation disgusting, which was reflected in their menstrual practice of concealment. Isabella however tempers the anticipation of disgust with her input in the following:

Lise: Why can't you say: 'I don't want to go swimming because I have my menstruation?'

Isabella: I think it would be difficult saying it in front of the boys, and also because it's not like everybody you trust in your class. So, if it's like, you should tell most people, then they would tell it to others and stuff like that, and that's a little...

Lise: That thing about not wanting the boys to know...or, what do you think might happen?

Isabella: They probably think that it is a bit too much *information* (originally pronounced in English).

Ester: Gross. I think they think it's gross.

Isabella: *Too much information* (originally pronounced in English).

Alice: YEAH the boys from our class they're also like very like...

Ester: Perverse

Lise: Are you also worried, that they think you're gross?

Everybody: Mmh no...

Ester: Like, it's more like...

Lise: Like if they...

Isabella: I don't think they think it's gross, I just think they are afraid to say that they don't think it's gross. Like. Because that's what they've always done.

Ester: Just like we are afraid to tell them that we have menstruation, then they are probably scared to tell us that they don't think it's gross.

Lise: OK because the boys have to think that it is gross or?

Everybody: No

Ester: In our class...

Isabella: They've just always done that

(...)

Lise: Can I just ask you a bit more about that then? So this thing about the boys maybe thinking that it is gross...or okay it's getting very complicated now, because maybe they think it's gross, but maybe they don't think it's gross, but they can't say that they think it is gross?

Isabella: They can't say it in front of the other boys.

Camilla: They think it's embarrassing.

Ester: You can't be a soft boy. It's also because for example, the girls they want to be more together with the boys.

Camilla: Yes.

Ester: And the boys want to be more together with the girls, but none of the boys or the girls dare to take the next step.

Isabella: It's like nobody really dares.

Alice: Taking the first step.

Ester: For a while I talked a lot with Emil from my class, and then he said...we had both asked like, if boys would be more together with the girls, and then he was like: "Yeah we would like that, but there's just no one who dares to take the first step", because then they start...then they are afraid that others will start laughing and then it gets embarrassing.

Lise: OK, so it's more safe to stick to your own group? I mean your own gender?

Camilla: Yes, but we can easily...it's ridiculous, I mean...

Isabella: I mean, in our class, we are like pretty good friends all everybody, nobody starts laughing at someone, if something happens, even...so we are really safe with each other, I think, so it's not like it's a problem that I...I would easily be able to do it, but in a way then you're just like, doing what everybody else is doing.

Alice: Yes, it's just following the flock.

Camilla: I mean, I think I would not, if the boys came over, or maybe if someone came over and asked "are you having it" then I would have no problem saying "yeah yeah I am", because it's normal at our age, but if like, I mean it's not like I would stand up in front of the whole class: "Helloooooo everybody, I just want you to know, how much fucking pain I'm in! Because I have my menstruation right now" you don't have to do that and I don't have anything against that.

Ester: Sigurd actually once asked me about it. I was with Luisa, because we had to work on something. I think actually you were sitting out there in ehm...the hallway. That time Henrik came over and said "Hi" (laughing).

Isabella: Oh yeah...no that was Phillip.

Ester: Yes but Sigurd was there too.

Isabella: No he wasn't.

Ester: Yes

Isabella: No

Ester: But they asked about if there were any of the girls who had it, then I was a little. If I had it, I would probably not say it in that situation right there. It would probably not be a situation like that to say it in. It's a bit awkward to tell it to a boy, because what do you do afterwards, then you're just standing there saying: "OK". And then you walk away. It's a bit awkward afterwards.

Lise: What does it mean that it is personal?

Camilla: That you don't want other people knowing about it?

Isabella: Yes and also when it comes from the personal genitals, then it is also like you don't talk about it and then it is also like, if it's something that comes from down there, then it is also like you don't really talk about it.

At first, they state that the boys find menstruation "disgusting", but then Isabella provides a more nuanced interpretation by saying that they might just find it a little "TMI" and that she thinks that they actually do not find it disgusting, they just pretend they do. This is a result of tradition, and tied to specific affective expectations concerning masculinity, where a positive attitude towards menstruation might threaten masculinity (you cannot be a "soft" boy). Furthermore, it seems to point towards an attempt to establish borders in a time of bodily and social transformation and a reconfiguration of the class. The transformation of the young people's relations is intra-woven with their bodily transformation, as the possibilities of being together through amorous and sexual relations emerges. Isabella bases her theory of the boys on conversations, where they expressed actual desire for spending more time with the girls, but no one dares to make the first move so they all "*follow the flock*". No matter Isabella's conviction of boys as having clandestine positive attitudes towards menstruation and girls in general, the participants still felt that sharing menstruation with boys was difficult, despite being "normal for our age" and considered intimate, as Isabella underlines by sharing how menstruation is not to be talked about, because of its place of origins (the "*personal genitals*"). "*There is no need*" to share menstrual pain and there is a risk of it being "*awkward*" if shared, which leaves menstruating bodies to say, "*well ok*", and walk away. The girls seem to assist the boys in

their border-drawing while simultaneously remaining on their own side, as if not to risk being affected by disgust or exclusion.

The excerpt shows how the assemblage of boys-bodies-menstruation is organized by discomfort, despite arguments of “nature”, normality and examples of actual good will from the boys. There are affective forces of discomfort at stake, caused by bodily difference in the shape of menstruation, which circulate and relate with bodies. Despite mutual desires to engage more closely, these bodies are pushed in opposite directions. “The boys”, as non-menstruating and as different-from, work as an ever-present figure of masculinity and bodily difference within a fixed hierarchy, and also as a reminder of heteronormativity as a dominant idea, significant to menstruating bodies.

The examples of Rose and Inez illustrates how bodies of specific shapes, sizes and ages are capacitated differently within menstruation-youth-body-assemblages. Institutionalized ideas of “femininity” and doing “girl” right and feeling right as “girl”, matter to the possibilities and impossibilities young menstruants are offered. It requires a certain kind of accepted femininity, through which value is already established, to be able to engage with menstruation openly in relation to non-menstruating peers. Furthermore, it shows how the participants are very much influenced by anticipation of how “the boys” relate to menstruating bodies, in some cases based on previous events. But other negative assumptions seem to be tied up with the ideas of negative intensities between “the boys” and menstruation.

In the following we will explore how menarche and the well-worn saying of “becoming a woman”, which often accompanies it, can serve as a sudden (mis)interpellation, which affects young menstruants differently.

### **“Becoming a Woman” – part one**

“Becoming a Woman” is the title of a brochure I and my fellow young menstruants were handed by a nurse who came to my school in rural Denmark in the early 90’s. She represented a large multinational menstruation product company and was knowledgeable, talking about menstruation with an ease that differed from any other adult. The title of the pamphlet is a popular phrase, both in Danish and in English and the body of data shows that it is still used in discussion of young people’s menarche and menstruation. Acting almost as

a prophecy, "Becoming a Woman" travels across generations and folds the past of menstruation into the present, thereby adhering to the connection between menstruation and "Womanhood". From the general view on menstruating women as beings of affect and unruliness (Rosenbeck, 1992), to the men of medicine, who like famous Danish obstetrician Leopold Meyers' research of menstruation as a source of mental instability (Delaney et al., 1988; Meyer, 1890), up to the generation of the teachers and mothers as the primary sources of knowledge about menstruation. The concept of "Becoming a Woman" with menarche encases and activates all of these past and present relations in a sexed-menstruation-assemblage, where existence for young menstruants seems to be predetermined. The participants related different experiences of how beginning to menstruate placed them on a route to "Womanhood":

Lise: Can you be proud about getting your menstruation? Is it cool?

Elizabeth: I don't know.

Lise: No, but what do you think? Have you experienced it?

Clara: Before I got it, then I was a bit like, everyone who had got menstruation felt kind of cool in a way. Not you, because you were just like, just like, but some of the other girls could be a bit like...

Elizabeth: I have got it! I'm a woman! (Shouts with a sarcastic tone of voice)

Clara: Yes, yes.

Elizabeth: You are not! You are a child!

Clara: No but like, yes. And then I felt like, it was kind of weird. It was more the way they acted. They acted differently. Like more proud. With they...

Lise: You said that thing about "becoming a woman". Has anyone said that?

Elizabeth: No.

Clara: I have heard it before, but that was just for a joke. It wasn't like.

Elizabeth: But you DO become a woman.

Clara: Yes.

Lise: What does that mean? To become a woman.

Elizabeth: That you can have children. I think.

Lise: Ok, is it also related to being adult?

Elizabeth: No, because when you are in your teens, when everything is happening, then you can just do what goes in front of how you feel, and when you are a grown up, like a grown up woman, then you don't think that much about it. You just do what is best. I cannot quite remember the word.

Clara: Practical?

Elizabeth: Hmmmmmm, no, mmmmm. In your teens you are not sensible.

Clara: You don't care.

Elizabeth: Sometimes. I can really change a lot.

Lise: Ok, so adulthood is about being more mature or having more sense?

Elizabeth: I don't know. I cannot remember the word.

Lise: (Sensing that Elizabeth feels pressure to perform well). You cannot say anything wrong. When I ask about things, I am just trying to dig deeper. Actually, one of my questions was whether you have experienced being celebrated when you had your menstruation, but I guess you haven't Clara (We all laugh a little, as we remember how Clara shared her mother's response to her menarche as no reason to celebrate).

Elizabeth: Me neither.

Clara: Like one of my friends was like: Wuuuhuuuu Clara! Like, no.

Lise: So she did celebrate you a little?

Clara: Yes, she was like yay!

Elizabeth: Yes, if you find out about one of your friends having it, you also say congratulations. '

Lise: Ok.

Elizabeth: Or, I have done that.

Clara: Yes you have.

Elizabeth: It IS a big deal to get it. In a way.

Clara: Yes!

Elizabeth: And in some way, it's not.

Lise: Can you say a little about why it's a big deal?

Elizabeth: You..you mature. I don't know.

Lise: Can you say that it's something you have been waiting for?

Elizabeth: I don't know.

Lise: Do you remember feeling different in any way, after you got your menstruation?

Elizabeth: Nope.

Clara: No.

Elizabeth: I remember, but I didn't feel any different.

Lise: You didn't feel cool like the girls you mentioned before?

Elizabeth: No! (Everybody laughs)

The interview excerpt demonstrates a great ambivalence connected to "Becoming a woman" with menarche. Elizabeth sarcastically mocks the other girls who claim womanhood and insists on childhood as the proper category of identification. Her insistence on childhood might be more about putting the girls, who show off about their menstruation, back in place. Still, there lies a central point in Elizabeth's statement. Despite her insisting on childhood as co-existing with menstruating, she still recognizes menarche as a significant event where one does become a woman, which in her understanding equals the ability to bear children and becoming more "mature". While simultaneously denying the significance of menarche, Elizabeth, with Clara following her shifting opinions, still acknowledges that menstruation is "a big deal", but in some ways, it is not. The ambivalence might refer to how menarche can feel like a big event, which affects girls differently, but also to how menstruating is an everyday life event, which in its cyclical return, quickly becomes routinized and something where the focus is on management of leakage or discomforts, like pain or exhaustion. Eva's relates to "Becoming a woman" with menarche by making a point of how her body does not fit the template:

Eva: (...) but I would say it like this, that I don't think about it like that: It's because I can have children now, because my body is still not ready, to give birth. It might be that my uterus is ready to make a baby, but it cannot get a child out of there. I mean, it isn't like my body... I haven't grown enough to carry a child in my stomach and to properly get a child out and like...

Lise: Mmmm.

Eva: ...myself. So I am thinking about it like, I mean sometimes I think like: Why does it have to begin this early? Because it would be nice if you could give girls like some kind of hormone pill, which did so that it did not begin, before you turned 15 years old. Because you don't need...

Katinka: Older!

Eva: Yes or older right, because you don't have, there isn't any, if you could do it, so that you could make sure, that there weren't just as many teen pregnancies, because you do not need to have a child when you are 12 years old. There's no one...like...

Eva draws on a logic of her body's size and capability to oppose the idea of menstruation as reproduction. The idea of being able to reproduce can be specifically alienating to young people and Eva reasons how her uterus might signal being ready for fertilization by shedding its lining, but her body is not big enough for the child to leave the womb. She then, together with Katinka, imagines and wishes for hormonal suppression for young people, so that menarche can occur at a later age. While Eva's resentment is quite practical, for others the sexed imperative of "Becoming-Woman" organized their bodies through discomfort, which in Johanne's case is in the form of an eurgh!":

Lise: Have you ever heard anyone say: Then you turn into a woman, when you get your menstruation?

Johanne: Like for me, it hasn't been said. I'm quite happy about that!

Lise: You are happy about it?

Johanne: It is something I didn't find out about until after, and if it was mentioned I was like eurgh!!

Johanne reacts with a sound which can be read as some kind of discomfort, more specifically an "eurgh!" ". A sound of revulsion, where Johanne sticks her tongue out of her mouth to mimic ridding herself of whatever has made her uncomfortable. This can be read as a way of distancing herself from the imperative of womanhood forced upon her.

Johanne's "eurgh" raises the question of how disgust might adhere to "Becoming a Woman". Like other young people, sex and the thought of reproduction in itself affected the youth I encountered in Nørre Søby with ambiguous feelings of disgust and joy (Fox & Alldred, 2013). Adult female morphologies' connection to sexuality emerged as especially troublesome, as we will explore soon. Maria Parsons explains how horror movies frame girls as going through a menstrual morphosis - a "*simultaneous 'becoming-woman' and 'becoming*

*monster*” (Parsons, 2009, p. 185). The example points towards how coming to know ones sexed and bodily self, through a bodily event such as menstruation, brings with it more than the affective connections of menstrual-body-matter (which will be explored in depth in a later chapter). The persistent past of “Women” as a fixed position, seems to matter as it leaves limited space available for young menstruants to inhabit.

Furthermore, “Woman” embodies an adult femininity, which might carry dysmorphic affects for young menstruants who do not recognize themselves within traditional ideas of femininity, or for others who do not even identify as “girls” or as “women-to-be”. As Braidotti argues *“the feminine bears no immediate or even direct relationship with real-life women”* (Braidotti, 2011, p. 92) and maybe Johanne’s “eurgh” is a distancing from sexualization, adulthood and a fixed position as woman. Maybe this rests on an internalized misogynist idea of “women” as an undesirable position. However, no matter the origin of the “eurgh!”, what it might do is to trouble fixed ideas of menstruation and female morphology as leading to institutionalized “Womanhood”.

The idea of menarche as “Becoming a Woman” and contributing to human reproduction has a goal-oriented focus towards a finalized representation of one right way to function and be, as a menstruating subject. In relation to reproduction, but also institutionalized femininity, the idea of menarche as marking the end of childhood and the beginning of “Womanhood” can seem almost brutal in its sudden bodily insistence on a fixed destination. As Braidotti states: *“What counts in the project of sexual difference is the in-between spaces, the itinerary, rather than the final destination.”* (Braidotti, 2011, p. 93). With this in mind, how does menarche as “Becoming a woman” matter to young menstruants? For some, menarche as is bound together with something expected, exciting and valued. Some feel comfortable to be cast as “Woman” and enjoy the emergence as feminine and the sexualization that menstruation’s connection to adulthood brings with it. Menarche furthermore places them in a togetherness with other young menstruating people and if it occurs within the average time of what is considered “normal”, they themselves can feel “normal” and “natural”. For others like Inez, who reached menarche at nine and did not attend school for week and who, as we saw earlier, suffered from bodily self-contempt, the sexed imperative of menarche might bring more challenges than enjoyment. Some, furthermore, experienced the sudden transition to “Woman” as problematic, in relation to

relations with friends and family. They feared that others would perceive them differently if they learned about their new status as menstruants and that menarche was a sudden catapult into a new category, which would act as a watershed and a premature farewell to childhood and all that this entails. We might make sense of the participants' ambivalence of "Becoming a Woman" as a way of searching out more possibilities with menstruation, with Braidotti's suggestion of feminist subjectivity:

(...) the subject of feminism is not Woman as the complementary and specular other of man, but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity. 'She' no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a dominant subject who casts his masculinity in a universalistic posture. She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process; a mutant; the other of the Other; a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis. The quest for a point of exit from phallogocentric definitions (Braidotti, 2003, p. 45).

The resolute connection of menstruation to female adulthood and human reproduction, frames young people's menstruating bodies through hetero-sexualizing discourse, where affectivity works to organize assemblages of menstruation-youth-bodies that set up limits for what they can do and become. Menarche as "Becoming a Woman", can in this way be considered a highway, territorialized by ideas that connect menstruation and hetero-sexed bodies that make it difficult for young menstruants to identify the multiple zig zagging scenic routes through life. By thinking about Johanne's "eurgh", and the other girls' opposition towards "Becoming a Woman", as acts of distancing from "*the institution of femininity*", it can point towards another kind of bodily and sexed subjectivity, where becoming a woman based on sexed morphology and bodily conditions like menstruating is possible, outside of pre-cast hierarchies of bodily difference.

### **Menstrual anger: I can feel...I'm PMSing at the moment**

Even though the word "PMS" (Short for pre-menstrual syndrome) was known by most of the girls, and especially among the more experienced girls who had had a menstrual cycle for more than one year, it still seemed to be one of the more mythological aspects of the menstruating body. PMS emerged through stories of discomfort of the body, irritation or

anger and the desire to be *“left alone”*, eat chocolate and relax, as Molly calmly shares on the youth club coach. Here Nanna and Kamma are exchanging thoughts about *“PMSing”*:

Nanna: I can feel it...that I'm PMS'ing at the moment.

Kamma: Annoyed with everything and everyone.

Lise: OK so you can feel it on your mood?

Kamma: Yeah then it's like, OK it's coming soon-ish.

Nanna: I mean you and I have been sitting next to each other this last week and you could feel that I've been a little annoyed...annoying. It's because I'm PMS'ing! I'm like: “God people are so annoying and my stomach hurts” and stuff like that and that's just...yeah.

Nanna is one of the more experienced menstruants in the group of girls. As Nanna does here, the girls mostly talked about menstrual affective discomfort as *“irritation”* or they used the Danish word *“sur”*, which is similar to the English word *“grumpy”*. These words indicate a less intense version of anger, than *“angry”* or *“furious”*. Mostly this discomfort took the shape of irritation or anger directed towards other bodies. Nanna mentions how it is partly her menstrual pain that is causing her mood to shift, but mostly the girls would explain their discomfort in terms of hormonal changes. Typically they would direct this discomfort towards family members with whom the girls had a specific intimate relation where affective leakage was more accepted. In another setting, Elizabeth shared how her discomfort was being triggered by strangers passing on the street, while walking her dog during her bleeding phase: *“I don't know why, I can just pass a person and get soooo mad”*. Nanna explains how she *“has been a little irritated...irritating”*, and flips her discomfort directed towards others, to the discomfort of other bodies directed towards her. Nanna presumes that her irritation has affected her friend, who has been sitting next to her all week, and her body of pain, which is affected by her menstrual cycle, is now affecting other bodies close to her. In this way, menstrual anger works not only in one body, but is circulating affects where Nanna's irritation emerge. The girls all share their menstrual discomfort in calm voices and unlike other menstrual events, these were shared in an almost melancholic way. It happened in intimate spaces, like during interviews or on the couch in the youth club, as in the example with Molly. This, however, differed slightly from when Elizabeth shared the example of walking her dog and feeling annoyed at strangers and

she did so with a touch of humor, while the girls who were experiencing either menstrual pain or menstrual discomfort at the time of sharing, were inclined to be more earnest and quiet. They would lower their voices and talk with less intensity. Some had experienced how being in affect had been used against them and some of them feared repetition, based on the intimate knowledge they had with their school peers. These “attacks” might be one of the reasons why being present amongst other bodies, while in a body of discomfort and talking about this discomfort, made the girls feel vulnerable to attacks from peers. It may also reflect a general desire to appear and feel in control of one’s body in order to be considered accountable and civilized.

The overall vulnerability that menstruating exposed the girls to, seemed to matter in some way, and as the girls frequently brought it up, it runs through the chapters like a red thread in relation to bodies of anger and irritation. Without me asking any questions, Thilde in this excerpt, felt the urge to talk about how she experienced her friend’s menstrual anger and how this affected their classmate Laust:

Thilde: Can I say something?

Lise: Yes I was just about to say if there’s anything you would want the world to know...

Thilde: Also about, now I’m just going to use Laust as an example, because sometimes then...Laust to Marie I’ve heard a couple of times, if she was annoyed or angry, then Laust says: “Oh so you’re probably, you are probably having your menstruation” or something like that right. That’s just like...

Rosalina: You are!

Jenny: You don’t know what it iiiiiis...(pronounced in US English with nasal accent).

Rosalina: You can’t mis-use the word menstruation!

Jenny: No you could...I could...

Rosalina: Because they don’t understaaand it! And no matter how much you tell them about it and how much you elabourate and stuff, then it’s just like: ‘Ew!’ and then they still haven’t understood...it’s this where.

Thilde: Maybe it’s also because...

Rosalina: It’s like this test you can do to boys: If the still say ew, then they don’t get it!

Thilde: Noo. But it could also just be puberty hormones, like I could be really mad about some argument or I had a bad day at home or something like that right and then I could just see it on the boys that if I'm like sitting there being angry, I can almost imagine that Laust would come in and say: Ah but you are just having your menstruation. Like: No I am not!

Lise: What is that like, hearing that?

Thilde: It's just like a little annoying because they think...somehow, because I can be what I told Rosalina, and he heard it last week that I had my menstruation last week right, and why does he think that I have it like two or three weeks in a row? (Laughs a little).

Jenny: It is so belittling.

Rosalina: Yeah because it's also like, we do have emotions at other times than that one week a month and maybe we are just angry because we are going through puberty and maybe they haven't gotten to that same place...

Lise: Or because there actually is something to be angry about?

Rosalina: Yes, it doesn't just have to be because we are bleeding. Sometimes we are also just really mad because we are bleeding and we can't really do anything about that right, but it's not always because of that.

It is interesting to notice the reactions of the other girls when Thilde shares how she experienced her classmate Laust connecting a fellow menstruants' anger to menstruation. Rosalina and Jenny takes over the conversation as they, with intense indignation and a caricatured nasal American accent, talk rapidly about how the boys do not have any bodily experiences with menstruation and therefore cannot possible "*understand*" it. Laust's misdiagnosis of anger and what the girls identify as a general lack of understanding of menstruation, raises affective intensity in the group, which circulates between bodies and makes conversation ping-pong loud and energetically. The girls indignation is not only concerned with the lack of knowledge about menstruation, but also the lack of respect *for* menstruation, which is almost elevated to a holy event as Rosalina says: "*You cannot misuse the word menstruation*". "*MISuse*" indicates that the word "*menstruation*" has a *right* use and should be talked about only when relevant and with respect for those menstruating. It is furthermore reserved for consecrated menstruants to define and know right or wrong ways to address menstruation. Jenny imagines how it is Laust's faulty

assumption about menstruation and anger, which would irritate her. She lists other possible reasons for why she could be in a bad mood, like her body being in a hormonal state which might cause specific affectivities, at which the boys have yet not arrived. It is “*belittling*” as Thilde says, for the girls’ anger to be related to menstruation by Laust. With the former excerpts in mind - in which the girls shared how they experience PMS as discomfort, irritation and anger - this raises a question: since some of the girls *do* experience irritation and anger in connection to their menstrual cycle, why is it then “*belittling*” when Laust attributes anger to menstruation? In addition, why does talking about Laust’s “*misuse*” of menstruation, cause voices to rise and speed up and bodies to move rapidly around the table?

The girls enhanced Laust’s bodily morphology when they spoke of him. They shared how he underlines this by performing strength and masculine power in the classroom and on social media. The girls tell me how Laust shares half-naked selfies of himself on Snap Chat, watches heterosexual pornography openly and tells misogynist jokes in the classroom. In this way he emerges through radical difference from the young menstruants and the general feminine morphologies connected to menstruating. For the girls, Laust seemed to be relevant as he appeared many times in conversations about menstruation. He mostly emerged through the participants’ stories of conflict and the participants often portray him as an embodiment of hyper-masculinity. The girls shared how Laust would often engage in misogynist outbursts of different kinds, some of which drawing on menstruation.

In their research, Ivinson and Renold “...interpreted the term ‘boy’ as a condensation symbol for a wider range of feelings of patriarchal regulation” (Renold & Ivinson, 2019, p. 4). The participants’ frequent referencing of “The Boys” as a conglomeration of specifically sexed bodies, connected to negative anticipations relating to menstruation, and to Laust as dominant body in this group, makes it possible to read Laust as a figuration of a type of condensed masculinity, which seemed to clash with menstruation. Similarly, social psychologist Dorthe Staunæs, in her research on ethnicity, class and gender in Danish schools, has introduced the figure of “*Dreng Danmark*” (which translates to “Boy Denmark”) as a figuration of normative “Danish masculinity”, which works as a hegemonic template, against which other ways of doing masculinity are measured (Staunæs, 2004). Similar to this, Laust as an embodiment of white hyper-masculinity seemed to affect several

participants, across classes in Egeskov School, with discomfort in relation to menstruation, and this made him an entrance point for the participants to talk about menstrual events in generalized terms in relation to young masculinities.

### **Menstrual pain: “But this is just what it’s like being a girl”**

Other than anger and irritation, the most common menstrual discomforts mentioned by the participants were sore and swollen breasts, indigestion discomforts like bloating and diarrhea, or cramping and pain in the uterus, which at times spread to other parts of the body, radiating down the legs or the lower back. Menstrual pain has lacked a place in medical research as well as in critical menstruation studies (Przybylo & Fahs, 2018) though recent research has shown how menstruation pain in its worst forms are described by patients as almost as painful as a heart attack (Goldhill, 2018).

The participants spoke about menstrual pain as something they had feared in relation to menarche, as something they still feared experiencing in the future, or as something they already dealt with. As with menstrual anger, menstrual pain was problematized by the girls, mostly in relation to either time schedules, obligatory activities or to other human-bodies:

Lise: Have you ever experienced that any of the boys make like jokes about menstruation?

Elizabeth: Yeah they did that a lot with Karoline.

Clara: Yeah.

Lise: What kind of jokes?

Elizabeth: I don’t know. I haven’t been there.

Clara: I mean not like jokes exactly. Yeah it’s more teasing like, ehm where they are like: “Does this hurt?” And then they would press on her stomach.

Lise: Okay! Because they knew she was having menstruation pains?

Clara: Yeah.

Elizabeth: We don’t sugar coat things in this class.

Lise: No, okay what does that mean?

Elizabeth: That one of our friends can easily just lay down there and tell the boys “oh this really like hurts”.

Lise: OK, and what was that like for you seeing them? Or, Elizabeth you didn't see it right, but what was it like for you to see that?

Clara: It was a little, it's a little weird this. Like. Yeah.

Lise: But was it like, fun, or it was a little?

Clara: A little weird, kind of. Because I wouldn't like it I think.

Lise: So you just did a grimace, but you can't see that on the recording. So what does a little, kind of, mean?

Clara: Like a little...yeah I don't know...It felt uncomfortable. I wouldn't like it.

Elizabeth: I wouldn't care.

Lise: OK, so this is a class where you all feel good around each other or?

Elizabeth: Yeah we're good.

Clara: Yes.

Elizabeth: "I wouldn't care" matches her reserved way of answering questions. As I speculated before, this could be an attempt to seem "cool" and to keep herself together. Being "sej" is a Danish expression best translated to "cool" or "tough". It is an affective concept, very much in play among teenagers. The opposite is being "pinlig", which translates to an affectivity between "shame" and "awkwardness", or "akavet" which simply translates to awkward. In earlier work (Andreasen, 2014), I explored how young people navigated gender through affective performances of "sej", which they connected to masculinity and toughness. When Clara thinks that it would be transgressive if the boys push your uterus while in menstrual pain and Elizabeth replies that "*she wouldn't care*", she appears to emerge through "*sejhed*" - toughness and coolness. She appeared cool and standoffish, to a degree that at times left me insecure and reminded me that how the school leader had described how the two friends were "*hard to reach*". I can detect a slight tremble in my voice when I listen to our interview. The "*toughness*" might serve as a shield against bullying and as a way for Elizabeth to make herself untouchable. In opposition to vulnerability, it attempts to leave the body shut-off and thereby does not allow the transgressions of others, as Clara's acknowledgement of feeling transgressed might do. Elizabeth furthermore mentions with a sharp, approving tone that, "*We do not sugar coat*

*things in this class*”, which means that they have a direct manner in their class, saying things as they are. Her statement is a reply to me asking whether the boys knew about Karoline having menstrual cramps as they pushed her. It is said in a hard and no-need-to-make-a-fuss tone, which was very different from the more caring tone many of the other girls used when they wished that menstruation could be less concealed. Elizabeth’s statement nevertheless also leaves the impression of openness about menstruation as an ideal. An ideal, which Eva worked on by talking very directly about menstrual pain:

Eva: I mean, we are not like, me and my, we are not like that we have a code word for menstruation, but we do like have it, if we are having menstrual pains, so instead of saying my stomach hurts, because that can also be a lot of other things, then just like: “My uterus hurts”. Then it’s just like more specific right. Because you can say: “Oh I have a pain in my stomach” and then it can be like diarrhea or something, so I have pains in my uterus. Also because then people knows not to ask: “Oh do you need the toilet” or something, but even if I tell my mom that my stomach hurts, then she just says: “But that’s just what it’s like to be a girl!”

Ditte: Thanks mom!

Lise: But do you just say it like that in class to?

Johanne: Yes, she was sitting right there staring into nothing and the boys were all around, everybody was all around. Then she was just like: “I’ve got pains in my uterus” and everybody just didn’t care, which I thought was pretty cool.

By talking about menstrual pain as a specific pain, and recognizing it as such through their naming, the girls actively recognize and underline the specificity of menstrual pain. It is not just normal stomach pain, it is something special. It’s also much more practical for good communication to give it a specific name. The girls’ experience is that the people around them, more correctly the boys, do not care about her statement, which they find “pretty cool”. The girls seem surprised by the non-reaction, which could mean that Eva runs a risk by naming her menstrual pain loudly and specifically in class, surrounded by non-menstruants. As a wide range of research has shown (Fingerson, 2006; Prendergast, 1994; Wood, 2020) and as we shall see later in this study, the girls from Nørre Søby worked hard to conceal menstruation, so it’s therefore interesting how some of them where explicit about menstrual pain (Good et al., 1994, p. 2; Guidone, 2020).

It reflects a pattern of difference and dissonance between talking about menstruation in a group of peers, and me during an interview, and what the girl's menstrual praxis, which related more to menstrual materialities like blood and products, seemed to be.

### In defense of affective bodies

In Renold and Ivinson's research with young girls in an ex-mining community in Wales, they describe how experiences of abuse by men fostered a general anger amongst the girls and fantasies of revenge (Renold & Ivinson, 2019). Similarly, the girls' experiences with non-menstruating co-students' negative remarks towards menstruation e.g. comments with the intention of undermining experiences of menstruation and menstrual pain - made the girls fantasize about revenge:

Lise: Do you have any last comments about what it is like to have menstruation?

Luna: It really sucks, ehm, and you shouldn't make fun of it and be like: oh it's nothing special. Then you try it! Then you bleed out of your willy, I mean! And have the pains!

Lise: Does anybody make fun of it in your class?

Katinka: Eeehm I mean yes, there is one of the boys, if I say 'L' I think everybody knows who it is...?

Stine: Yes!

Katinka: He is just so, he is full of himself, he's like: 'I'm better than everyone else! (L+F: Ehhh hmmm). I'm better than everyone else and nobody can feel worse than me even though I feel really good...

Lise: And he makes fun of menstruation?

Katinka: Yeah but he's like: "It's nothing special!"

Stine: He's like eeeeehhhh...

Katinka: "Why does it bother you that much and stuff like that?" And then it's just like, okay do YOU want to have mood changes all the time? Do YOU want to argue with your family all the time? Do YOU want to bleed 24/7 and that you cannot make it stop? Do YOU want you get wet pants and you cannot make it stop? 'Cause I thiiiiink not! And I also don't think it would be nice bleeding out your willy, to be honest!

Stine: I could also wish that you could do something like, that did so that the boys could experience it (Katinka: they can!). Like do something like with electrodes (Stine: giggles). You know what, an

interesting experiment right, if you gave boys, a lot of boys, electrodes on their stomach and then put them together with a girl who had her menstruation. Every single time the girl felt a pain, they could give the boy a pain. Just think how much more the boys would complain than the girls did right! Because I'm sure that if for example Laust or when Christoffer and Villads also is with him, then they are really bad, that if you did that with them, he would complain MUCH more than we do. I mean I think. Really, because it, I mean because if there is some kind of, like because it feels a little like if you are stabbed with a knife in the stomach, like a little from the inside somehow. Like does just like that or says ouch. But I think if it happened to him, he would be like:

“oooooooouuuuuhhhhhh!”

Katinka: I think people use that expression “like a knife to the stomach”, because that is how they imagine that it feels, but at the same time it is a cramp and not pain like that...

Stine: No but if you had to explain it to the boys...

Katinka: No, yeah, but still you're just like, what if I stuck a knife in your stomach Julie, then I don't think you would be able to compare it!

Stine: A butter knife!

Katinka: But still, you can still in your head, and still it's like, if the boys they were to wear that thing right, you can trick your body right. So one just thinks: “okay I really have a lot of pain in my stomach”, if you think it for a long enough time then you do have it.

Flora: Hmmm (laughs a bit) yeah.

Katinka: Then you are just like (strains her voice, only little air coming out): “It feels really bad right now” then you're just like aaarrrrggggggg (laughs).

Stine: Yeah but eeeeh, now I totally forgot what I was supposed to say...

Through their conversation, where the girls share their creative fantasies of wanting the boys to feel their pain, they support each other. In sharing, they transform fantasies of directing pain to the boys' bodies into care for one another. As the girls share from places of pain and anger, they unleash affective flows into the communal space shared by bodies in the interview room. Through a practice of relating to each other - in discussing their fantasies of revenge - pain, anger and vulnerability transform into community and strength. The affective relation offers reparation, as it enables the girls to stay with their pain, without risking to get affected by harm from the boys. The way they talk about their pain, as they

paint explicit images of knives cutting into bodies, leaves an impression of half the pain, being this exact lack of recognition.

When the interview participants engage in this defense of menstruation as something to be respectful of, and of their anger as legitimate, what organizes this specific affective menstruation-assemblage through which they emerge as fierce defenders? If we curiously follow how history folds into the interview- girl-menstruation-bodies assemblage, the girls' bodies are affected from within a menstrual assemblage, which has been aggregated by ideas of women, anger and bodies through centuries. The medicalization of menstruation rests on ideas of the female morphology as hysterical, and PMS plays a part in this as a form of hysteria. Danish historian Bente Rosenbeck writes about how a medical company in the 1970s tried to market antidepressants on a monthly basis to women suffering from PMS, which they argued,

caused mischiefs, criminal acts, child abuse, shoplifting and arson. PMS related issues caused absence from work, hospitalization, suicide and so on. The ad claimed that 50% of criminal acts committed by women, was during the last week before their bleeding phase. (Rosenbeck 1987, p. 75).

The company's claim of certain affectivities as connected to the menstrual phase, can be traced far back. As mentioned earlier, medical history from the global north is filled with theory that connects female morphology and specifically menstruation to hysteria, psychic illness and generally frames women as creatures closer to nature (Braidotti, 2002; Buckley, 1988; Gottlieb, 2020; Meyer, 1890; Rosenbeck, 1990, 1992).

Paradoxically, anger organizes ideas of traditional masculinity, and therefore if women are openly angry, they do not only emerge outside of normative femininity, but also outside assemblages of white middle class, where both racialization and identification with class calls upon bodily control and rationality (Frykman & Löfgren, 2005; Gilliam, 2009)

Anthropologist Dil Bach (Bach, 2015), in her research on upper- middle class families in Denmark and ideals of parenting, explains how children's anger exists in a paradox of being valued as a way of "*being one's own person*" on the one hand, while shouting or acting wild is perceived as not being civilized on the other (Bach 2015, p. 84). Anthropologist Laura Gilliam describes how her research in a school in a Danish middle-class area (Gilliam 2012)

showed how children learn from an early age to restrain their body in relation to possible aggressions. This can be seen as part of a general mechanism of disciplining the body and its expressions (Gilliam 2012, p. 123) and how these ideals of bodily control are institutionalized through all children's voyage from kindergarten and beyond. The ideal of bodily control is connected both to ideas of how to be part of a community and a school structure where space and teacher capacity is stretched, and how to achieve well academically. Gilliam goes on to describe how uncivilized bodily behavior among children is "*(...) that which offends others, like (...) aggression, farts, burbs and foul language (...)*" (Gilliam 2012, p. 124). These are all bodily functions which are expected to be under control by the time children reach their teens. Menarche thus poses a new risk of not only leakage of fluid, but also of what I would call either purposely or un-purposely "*affective leakage*" such as aggression, which is normally connected to younger children or masculinity. Therefore PMS and other affective leakages connected to menstruation, make the girls emerge outside of idealized ideas of proper femininity and young adulthood. This is combined with the hormonal changes of puberty and the bodily transformation, where the body does not only leak menstrual fluid and vaginal discharge, but possibly puss from acne and in the case of some, semen from involuntary ejaculation. These ideals of being civilized are discourses roaming the menstruation-assemblage, which leaves little space for bodies with menstrual cycles to interrupt schoolwork or to act upon menstruation-related affective discomforts like anger or pain. The ideal is to "contain" the affective body in such a way that the affective intensities stay "inside" and thus do not trouble relations, teaching or "*den gode stemming*" – the good atmosphere.

Returning to the girls, I ask the group whether they could just be angry about something, and Thilde suggests it could "*just*" be puberty hormones causing the anger. Thus she ascribes anger to hormonal circumstances and returns the affects to the body. The "*just*" suggests the hormonal flows of puberty as a more legitimate reason for anger than the hormonal flows of the menstrual cycle. Because the affective body, here in the form of discomfort and anger, troubles white middle class ideals of composition and control, it has to be assigned to the abnormal, like puberty or menstruation. This shifts the focus of affect from relational to inside the individual body, which is expected to contain it.

The girls talk about puberty as a commonality transgressing bodily morphology, and in this way puberty is happening to all, unlike menstruation, which in its connection to difference, disgust and disturbance, poses a greater threat. As the girls' classmate Laust demonstrates, female morphologies' anger can be ridiculed by ascribing it to hysteria or menstruation, and thereby anger can lose its legitimacy. Historical anecdotes from the medical field illustrates how ideas of menstrual anger have been used against menstruants through time and this folds into current menstruation-assemblages that decide what contemporary young menstruants can do. The trope or figuration of "the angry menstruant" has never been challenged much, neither in research, lived lives or popular culture (Fahs, 2016; Przybylo & Fahs, 2018), and it is still to this day a trope utilized in misogynist memes, by world leaders who find their power to be challenged (Haymond, 2020) and young boys - like Laust - alike. When Laust connects the girls' anger to menstruation, he therefore draws on portrayals of menstruants and Women as bodily creatures closer to nature, which draws on the power of extant ideas of anger and sexed bodies. These ideas (in)form menstruants as affectively instable, which can be used to undermine the legitimacy of anger. When Laust suggests menstruation as a reason for anger, it does not come across as an act of care, but rather as a way to disarm complicated and intense affective flows.

It is important to ask which bodies can *afford* to be angry, and, in which way anger can be expressed for some bodies. In the case of the girls' anger, it is placed in hormonal explanations, as either puberty or menstruation. When anger moves through a body-menstruation-assemblage it organizes "Womanhood" in a way where subjectivities are constructed through ideas of wildness and abnormality. Just like women's and menstruants' bodies, so children's and pubescent bodies are believed to be more "wild" in affect and thus more lacking in control than the "finished" adult body (Alldred & Fox, 2017; Driscoll, 2002; Fox & Bale, 2017). In this way, the girls' bodies are informed by multiple overlapping affective assemblages. Anger works in these assemblages as bodily affects and as discourse when it is excused by, e.g. puberty, and is thus abnormal. Because menstrual anger poses a risk to the girls' attempt to hold themselves together as white, middle class girls, their defense has to switch the reason of anger away from menstruation, which emerges through difference, to puberty which emerges through communality, or to other more concrete reasons. The example with Laust shows how menstrual affective bodies are organized in

specific ways when a sexually morphological different body and discourses of radical masculinity enter the menstruation-body-assemblage. In this case, the girls work to distance themselves from menstruation as the cause of their discomfort, while they still insist on the legitimacy of their anger and respect for their leaky bodies.

North American-based research has shown that identifying and sharing PMS symptoms and menstrual discomfort is a common way to talk about menstruation (McHugh, 2020). This is reflected in the data, wherein the girls would typically share memes of menstrual distress and snaps of menstrual discomfort. In connection to the event of sharing menstrual discomfort, McHugh has coined the concept of *“menstrual moaning”* to explore the exchange of *“negative communication about menstruation between women”* (McHugh, 2020). She argues that the exchange of menstruants’ experiences of menstruating often has a negative focus on pain, mood swings and discomfort and this serves to further cement the *“stigma of menstruation”* (ibid). If we think about the girls’ exchanges of affects connected to menstruation, and how affective relations of pain and anger but also laughter, move and organize the youth-bodies-menstruation-assemblage, the data questions McHugh’s conclusion. McHugh states that: *“Typically, women’s negative talk about menstruation views women’s experiences as both biological and personal”* (McHugh 2020:416, quoting Lee and Sasser-Coen, 1996b). However, when Molly shares how she informs her family about her menstrual anger, which she ascribes to PMS, and Nanna similarly shares how her PMS emerges in relation to a school friend, they perform a shift in which menstruation matters in a caring and communal way. Furthermore, when the girls talk about their menstrual anger in relation to Laust, they become angry and insist on their right to be affective bodies. Menstrual *“moaning”* might be a common practice among some menstruants, but exchanges of menstrual affectivities did not read as *“moaning”* among the participants in this study. Rather, affective exchanges capacitated bodies by shifting menstruation as an individual experience to a collective event. Talking openly about pain and anger is a first step towards an acknowledgement of the body as significant and mattering to everyday life. In this way, menstrual discomfort might work as a jumping-off point for emancipation and change and thus, even though anger and pain is not considered ideal or positive, it can be read as the menstrual body *“kicking back”* (Barad, 2007) against a

world where affective bodies are considered lesser. In this way, the girls' exchange of affects can be seen as subtle world-building, where menstrual discomfort exists and is related to.

Menstrual affectivities, like pain and anger, make menstruation visible. The affective body affects others and thus leaves the menstruating body vulnerable to be affected in multiple ways.

Other revelations of bodies in pain - and not just pain, but gender-specific, shame-laced pain - however, leaves the pained body not just open to possible care, but also to attacks. This might be by boys who press on one's stomach to enhance the pain, or by caring friends who fetch hot water bottles or painkillers. The paradox is, however, that menstrual pain and discomfort must be shared for menstruants to receive aid and understanding from other bodies, as Patsavas argues here:

Once we recognize the network and the fluidity of experiences between bodies, the fixed distinction between pained and non-pained bodies begins to dissolve just enough to undermine discourses that individualize pain and reframe it as shareable and as shared. (Patsavas, 2014, p. 215)

To act on pain, to make oneself comfortable, or to receive care from others, demands that bodies of pain or anger are revealed as menstruating, like when Eva shouts out loud that she has pain in her uterus. Owning the menstrual pain in this way can act as protection against attacks, because it is a subversive move of strength and power.

As I intuitively and habitually center the young menstruants in my analysis, it is them who bring menstrual discomfort up as emerging in relation to other bodies, the boys or parents, which underline how the menstruating body affects and is affected through human and non-human relations. It is through these relations that menstrual discomfort and the affective body causes trouble. When the girl's desire to isolate, eat chocolate and rest are not met, menstrual discomfort becomes an issue to talk about. It is in relation to other bodies, especially non-menstruant bodies or "the boys", as well as time schedules and expectations of performing, that menstrual discomfort emerges. Not as isolated individual bodily events.

*Chapter 6:*

# BLOOD

## Introduction: Flows and stagnations of blood and menstrual-body-matter

As Laura Fingerson bluntly states, “*blood is gross to most teens*” (Fingerson, 2006) and in contrast to many adult menstruants, who are not affected as negatively by menstrual blood (Persdotter, 2022, Karlsson, 2019) several studies of young people and menstruation have shown how disgust of blood circulates with particular intensity amongst this age group (Fingerson, 2006; Newton, 2016; Prendergast, 1994). This affective pattern matches the thick density of discomfort when the participants related to menstrual blood. With the specificities of youth in mind, this chapter follows the flow of what I, in an attempt to be inclusive and take materialities seriously, refer to as both menstrual blood, menstrual fluid and menstrual body-matter. It does so to explore how menstruation, in the form of blood, slime, blobs and lumps, emerges as specific, through its affective relations with human and non-human materialities. In doing this, the chapter aims to make sense of how material specificities of menstruation and their affective relations matter to young menstruants.

### Menstrual body-matter

Menstrual blood, fluid, or - since it is not always in fluid forms - menstrual body-matter, inhabits a central place in the general understanding of menstruation, and in the participants’ stories about menstruation. Menstrual body-matter is the result of a bodily process in which the unfertilized egg is shed from the uterus, together with the uterine lining. The discharge travels from the uterus, down the vagina and leaves the body through the vaginal orifice in an average cycle of once per month. However, menstrual cycles can vary from person to person. It is often the bleeding phase which is considered menstruation but, throughout the cycle, hormones fluctuate and can cause difference in bodies. Medical sources describe menstrual body-matter as half arterial and venous blood. It contains sodium, calcium, phosphate, iron, and chloride, the extent of which depends on the person menstruating (Carlson et al., 2004). The rest of the flow consists of mucus, uterine tissue, proteolytic and fibrinolytic enzymes and discarded cells from the vagina (Bondevik et al. 2012:12). Other accounts mention that menstrual blood includes bacteria, which is something rarely included and discussed in feminist accounts of menstrual body-matter. The vaginal fluids in menstrual body-matter “*mainly contribute water, common electrolytes, organ moieties, and at least 14 proteins, including glycoproteins (...)* The average amount of menstrual fluid during a menstrual bleeding is 35 milliliters (2.4 tablespoons of menstrual fluid) with 10–80 milliliters (1–6 tablespoons of menstrual fluid) considered typical” (Carlson

et al., 2004, p. 179). This, however, varies and amounts are experienced differently in a measuring cup than in intra-actions with bodies, underwear or on sheets. Menstrual body-matter takes on various colors from almost transparent to bright red to reddish-brown or black. These different consistencies and colors makes for a heterogenic experience of menstrual fluid, which means that menstruation is experienced in different ways. These are often dissonant with common references to menstruation: Either as blue liquid, as it has been portrayed through decades by the commercial industry (Røstvik, 2022), or blood that materializes menstrual fluid as generic, bright red and liquid. In the following outtake, 13-year-old Gry demonstrates how her menstrual body-matter varies and takes on multiple forms, colors and textures, by taking us through the different stages of her menstrual bleeding:

Lise: Do you find menstrual blood special in any way?

Gry: I think so. Or I think, the last days of my menstruation, it is very, or it is like...If I get it in the evening. Then it isn't until the morning after, that I really feel like it begins, because in the evening it's more like spotting. And the it's very light the two first days, then it can become a little darker and then it becomes like less dark and then towards the end, it's like really gross and like...(mumbles)...But I was also told, by my mum, that it is because that there might be some old blood, that didn't come out the last time or like that, so that is the dark, like, also the brown, that is like the old stuff-ish. But I feel that when you have a nosebleed or if you have a wound, then it is almost always the same color and like, almost like paperlike red (Freya: yes yes). Like a normal crayon red, dark crayon red.

Gry explains how time changes the color and consistency of her menstrual flow and how the amount of fluid and matter gives meaning to what can be considered a real menstruation. The color of her flow goes from light to dark and Gry describes how her affective response to her menstrual fluid changes as it changes its color. Towards the end it is "*kind of disgusting*". Where blood from a wound or a nosebleed is the red you would use for creating arts and crafts - what Gry refers to as a "normal" red - the "old" blood is brown and this variation affects her with discomfort. The idea of a "normal" kind of red and a "normal" kind of color of blood, makes other colors on the spectrum of menstrual body-matter, like brown or black, "not normal". The idea of normality in colors of blood and the idea of menstrual fluid *as* blood has significance for how menstrual body-matter affects differently.

Normal blood as “crayon red blood” creates a navigational fixed point from which menstrual fluid in its varying color scheme and multiple consistencies is read as other than blood, perhaps making it emerge as “wrong” or “other”. Considering the multiple colors and consistencies of menstrual body-matters, it runs the risk of emerging as such. Gry’s consideration of the blood as “old-ish” and as something which has lingered in her uterus since her previous bleeding phase, furthermore adds to how she is affected by it. Gry does not in any way seem ashamed to talk about her menstrual blood, but she underlines how she finds it more disgusting because it is brown, and therefore old. In this temporal relation, menstrual blood is not just bodily waste, it is old bodily waste, and emerges through associations of biological processes of decomposition, which attach associations of bacteria and uncleanliness to Gry’s body.

### **Different kinds of blood**

Menstrual blood can differ in color, consistency and age, but it also differs from other kinds of blood from the human body. Several of the participants compared menstrual blood with blood from cuts and scrapes and other injuries, which prompted me to inquire about it during interviews:

Lise: Something I also discussed with the other girls just before was, we have to end this soon, but is menstrual blood different from other blood?

Rosalina: I don’t know...like...

Thilde: Well, I don’t know, but maybe because it comes from some genitals, like say if I have cut my finger, then it bleeds up here, it would be kind of different with genitals.

Rosalina: Well a little I think.

Lise: So, when you get a nosebleed it bleeds from the nose....

Rosalina: Yes, but I also think that would be a little embarrassing to get a nosebleed, compared to if you have cut your finger, that is something you can’t, like I know that you could leave the sharp knife alone or something like that, but you can’t really help it, but menstruation you can...you cannot help it, but it would just be kind of weird somehow.

Lise: But what about a nosebleed, you said that could also be embarrassing?

Rosalina: Yes I think it is kind of.

Jenny: I just always feel a little sick

Lise: Are you ok to talk about it?

Jenny: Yes yes.

Lise: Ok, sometimes if you get sick from blood, it can be difficult to talk about it.

Jenny: Yes, but it's also because I think it is hard, when you get a nosebleed, you have to like lean backwards and let the blood stay inside, with out letting it run out. I don't really like that.

(...)

Thilde: I'm just thinking that when you have it, then it must have been unpleasant and then I think that it must be unpleasant with your genitals. In comparison to if you cut your finger, it might hurt, but just not the same way.

Lise: Does it have something to do with what the people around you think? If you get a nosebleed or something?

Thilde: No because, like, a nosebleed you can get from when you are a small child, like in kindergarten or something, like almost everybody has had a nosebleed.

Lise: Yes.

Thilde: So that's also why I think it is a little different right. Like, someone gets it super often. So a lot of people get it in school time, and then you are just like talking a little about it, but if you cut your finger, then you are just like: Jeez, you were so stupid-ish, because you cut your finger, you could just have done that or that or something.

Lise: So it is because nosebleeds and menstrual bleeds are just something that happens, while cutting you finger is something you do yourself?

Thilde: Yes.

According to the participants, nosebleeds are similar to menstruation in the way that the blood "comes" on its own. Unlike a cut, it is not (always) inflicted by an outside event, and this makes Rosalina describe it as "*a little embarrassing*". Similar to menstrual blood, a nosebleed flows from inside of the body and leaves through an orifice and it cannot be controlled by a bandage. The uncontrollability might cause Rosalina's discomfort, but there is also an issue of responsibility connected to the difference in blood, which complicates Rosalina's story. A knife cut is cause for embarrassment, if it is self-inflicted, where

menstruants and nose-bleeders cannot be held accountable for their bleeding. *"You cannot help it"* Rosalina states. This was a common "excuse" for menstruating that the participants repeated multiple times, as an expression of comfort for a fellow menstruant, which casts young menstrants almost as victims of a force of nature, with agency of its own. Together with claims of menstruation as *"natural"*, the participants used it to argue that no one was at fault for their menstrual bleeding. This indicated that there was a fault to be placed and therefore it was somehow not right to leak menstrual body-matter. Even though cutting yourself leaves you "stupid-ish", it is somehow imagined to be within the control of your body, and the reason for the cut can easily be connected to the clumsiness of a hand. There is nothing mysterious about it - the hand is a very concrete reason for the blood and nothing places agency outside of the human body.

The young people's common urge to excuse menstruants for menstruating also hints towards how something is "off" with menstrual bleeding. Maybe what is "off", other than the lack of control of blood flows, is the transitional dimension of menstrual body-matter. Where the two kinds of bleeds differ is in their connection to age. Nosebleeds are no novelty, as you can get them from when you are a small child, in contrast to menstruation, which in this specific context of young people, is a rather new event. New events, like bodily transformations, can in themselves stir up affective discomfort, as it challenges the status quo. When the transformation is connected to sexuality and reproduction, moreover, it sticks certain affectivities to menstrual blood. Menstruation is connected to female morphology as it *"comes from some genitals"* of a specific kind, where nosebleeds affect anyone: *"almost everyone has a nosebleed"*. Furthermore, blood in general carries multiple connotations of life, death, violence and broken bodies, which makes it powerful and mostly unwelcome outside of the constraints of veins and skin.

Another example of the differences in types of blood is illustrated in the following where, in the beginning of an interview with a friend group at Egeskov School, Nanna told me that she has cut her finger in school today and that she has blood on her white trousers. This started a conversation about different kinds of blood and the significance of how blood enters extra-bodily existence matters:

Nanna: Yes, but I also spilled something there, but it wasn't because of menstruation, it was because I cut my finger and I hadn't noticed it and then it just was like that, and then they were just like: Nanna, what happened this morning and I was like: Nothing!

Lise: So you actually have blood on your white trousers right now, just another kind of blood?

Nanna: Yes

Lise: Is that blood different from menstrual blood?

Nanna: Yeeeeees, isn't it a little bit? Isn't menstruation kind of mixed with discharge at the same time?

Kamma: Yes it has lumps in it.

Nanna: I just think menstrual blood is like thicker than normal blood because...well yesterday it just dripped (Kamma breaks out in a loud giggle). Well, yes, on the finger right! (Nanna responds to Kammas giggle. Kamma giggles even more.) Then I thought...it was like blood there was like, it wasn't as fluid as water, but more like, like milk or something like that.

Lise: But I am also wondering if there is any difference of how you feel about blood from a finger and menstrual blood?

Nanna: Like, if I'm bleeding from my finger I'm just like, I put a Band-Aid on and then I don't really care, except I often find that a bandage is annoying. But otherwise, if I have my menstruation, then it is just like a little....uyyyyyrrrrddddd (sighs) and then I just spend time in bed, because I cannot stand it. I cannot stand it. Because of the cramps.

As in Nanna and Kamma's account of blood, it was a reoccurring theme that when I ask about menstrual body-matter, the participants answered in quite literal ways in which they related specific material aspects of menstruation. Nanna shares how menstrual blood is thicker, and does not drip like blood from her finger. The intimate engagement with specificities of the consistency of blood makes Kamma giggle, which infects Nanna, who joins her in laughing. As happened many times, the engagement with menstrual body-matter raised the intensity in the room, where one body's affective outburst would affect another and so on. The idea of menstrual fluid dripping might be kind of naughty, rule-breaking or just grotesque. Bodily matter that is separate from the body generally affects human bodies with disgust or with laughter at the grotesque, but the motive for the two girls laughing might be to disarm the risk of shame which can be ascribed a typical affectivity

that circulates among younger bodies. It might also be caused by relief that this is only happening in the virtual space of the conversation.

### Through the system: Body-blood relations

During the previously described event, I brought different menstrual products to the interview. Some of the participants frowned upon the idea of inserting a menstrual cup through which they would have to relate directly with their vulva and menstrual fluid, which made me ask about the reason for their reactions of discomfort:

So, is it because you think menstrual blood is more disgusting than other blood, or is it even disgusting?

Stine: Like, it is not because it is really disgusting, but I wouldn't want to get it on my finger or like on my hand, if I could avoid it. It is just like the thought of it, that it like comes out of the body and like down through like....the system...you know...

Lise: Hmmmmmm?

Stine and Flora are both laughing

Lise: You know? (I laugh)

Stine and Flora are laughing and giggling.

The menstrual blood, which has left Stine's body after passing through the uterus, her vaginal tract and the vaginal orifice, which she collectively refers to as "the system", intra-acts with another part of her body. Or rather, she *imagines* it touching her hand, which makes the intra-action virtual. It nevertheless affects her body, which challenges the split of virtual and actual, as the thought of the blood-hand relation actually affects Stine's body. The menstrual material becomes something specific with the thought. Stine explains how the menstrual blood is not disgusting in itself. However, when the menstrual blood intra-acts with her body, it becomes-with different locations of the body and it thus becomes something else, than other kinds of blood, in the relations it engages with on its trajectory from uterus to hand and skin. Tracing the blood on its virtual way as described by Stine, through and on her body, the blood becomes in different ways, as it materializes through the traces of previous intra-actions, which it carries with it. Where blood comes from matters, what it has touched matters and what is has been touched by matters, and in this way, it is (in)formed by the affective relations of former locations.

If we begin by following the menstrual flow leaving the body, its place of exit adds layers of meaning to the substance. The relation to the uterus, vaginal tract and vulva is a process of the fluid becoming-with sediments of time, where the female reproductive system has been given meaning through certain beliefs of sexuality and impurity as connected to female morphology. These entangle with Stine's age, where she is still in many ways considered and considers herself a child, which according to norms of sexuality and age are not supposed to carry any sexual connotations. Her reference to her vagina and vulva as "the system", place her genitals in a mechanic discourse, which points towards technology, reproduction and practical disposal of human waste. The naming of "system" matters to how the menstrual blood is entangled with discourses of gender, sexuality and impurity. Naming is in itself a worlding practice, a gerundive and generative process, where worlds are continuously figured and refigured in intra-weaving encounters (Haraway, 2016; Stewart, 2010). Stine's naming connects menstruation to how "female morphology" (Braidotti, 2002) is othered, objectified and instrumentalized, but it also illustrates how Stine does not have access to everyday language for her genitals and reproductive system, which might align with a lack of knowledge about her body's anatomy. The trouble with naming the vagina and vulva (naming which also disturbed me during interviews and in my writing i.e. what to name someone else's "system") does not solely cause trouble on a discursive level. We all laugh when Stine refers to her uterus, vagina and vulva as "the system". Her choice of words affect us collectively and laughter rises up between us. The laughter makes me wonder why it is funny to imagine the vagina/vulva through a mechanic discourse. Which affectivities move and which assemblages do they organize, that we all seem so at home that we can laugh together, without explanation, because the laughter we share is based in some kind of common knowledge. "System" is funny because we all recognize the difficulty of saying "vagina" or "vulva". Vulva is a word which is still relatively uncommon to use in Denmark. Even among many health professionals in Denmark, the common terms are "*skamlæber*" for labia and "*skamben*" for pubic bone. "*Skam*" in Danish is "*shame*" which translates "*skamlæber*" to "*Shame lips*" and "*skamben*" to "*Shame bone*" in English. This provides some situated background for why we all laugh at "*the system*". It is a fun thing to call your genitals, partly because it addresses the difficulty we all share with naming and it offers humorous relief and a way out of the struggle of naming. Another way to think about it is in terms of organization. We do not have an established location for the intra-sections of

menstrual-body-matter, youth, sexuality, vaginas and vulvas. This “mess” does not fit anywhere, so we laugh to release the uncomfortable intensity, which moves between us, and to place it somewhere.

By naming the troublesome parts of her body, “the system” Stine can distance herself from the intimacy entailed by naming every single part in a more detailed way, and it creates a way out for her and all of us participating, where order is re-established despite the transgressional subject of the conversation. The lack of casual everyday language to talk about important parts of the body is the history of othering female morphologies folding into the present. There has been no evolution in naming genitals, especially those of female morphology, which points towards an inertia in how we know menstruation. Stine’s choice of words carries and affectivity from the past, which reaches across the present and into the future. How she names parts of her body as “the system”, matters to how menstrual body-matter can become-with the bodily locations it has touched and related with, and thus ultimately the possibilities for young menstruants becoming.

The analysis will engage more with the matter of laughter and menstruation in due course, but returning attention to the materiality of Stine’s story, menstrual-body-matter is in itself a thing of transgression, which in its disorderly movements challenges ideas of order (Braidotti, 2011; Douglas, 2002; Kristeva, 1982; Shildrick, 1997) - both the order of “the human” and the order of society. To make sense of how the intra-action of menstrual-body-matter with the vagina and the vulva matters to menstrual-body-matter - and how it transforms while passing through the body, “picking up” affectivity on the way out - we have to consider how the vagina/vulva can be considered a thing/place of trouble:

The vulva, along with the mouth, anus, ears and nose, problematizes inside and outside and confounds two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional depth...Some of its surfaces are clearly outside (the labia majora) and some are inside (the vagina, the uterua) but most – the labia minora, the clitoris, the opening of the vagina – are both inside and outside, or somewhere in between. (Jones, 2017, p. 34)

It is not only in its connection to female sexed morphology and adult sexuality, but also from its material specificities and how they relate to ideas of organization, that the vulva becomes troublesome to place. It is soft and disorderly, it folds, and is both inside and

outside, with no clear border between the two. This adds more disorderliness to the menstrual-body-matter, which has always already touched the vulva before entering the extra-bodily world. The participants were aware of this, as they often mentioned the location of where menstrual body-matters exit from the body as a reason for either disgust or embarrassment about menstruation. In this way, the blood-vagina-vulva mutually affect each other with the intensity that arises from border-crossing, disorderliness and sexed sexuality and thus they become something specific in their affective relation.

With the intense revulsion, which I here refer to as disgust, of menstrual blood in mind, it is interesting how the participants were able to talk about it quite openly in a group. Many of the girls were a little hesitant but still gladly discussed consistency, odor and color, with me and their friends. One would expect that they would be reluctant or feel ashamed of relating to such a substance of disgust. I never heard stories of girls actually throwing up while in the process of changing a pad, leaking or through direct intra-action with menstrual blood, but during interviews some of the girls made a point of performing vomiting. Menstrual blood became something specific in the interview-assemblage, where menstruation was already established as an acceptable topic. As in the example of boys and girls following the flock, and the boys not really finding menstruation disgusting, I got the sense that engaging with disgust was, for some, considered cool. The vulnerability of bleeding was kept at a distance as the affective intensity shifted with intense displays of coolness. Which cool teen would ever admit to fascination? Or to being scared? Eva, who explained how she had read medical books at a young age, and therefore knew a lot about menstruation and was fascinated by it, in the same breath excused herself as a geek, which her friends seconded. By using different affective strategies, the girls enable themselves to relate to menstruation. Like when they use memes where blood is central in one way or the other, to share menstrual events. The interview makes it possible to move an intimate intra-action between body and blood into a collective space. The shift of location, and the relation to more human bodies, results in a different affective movement, from when intra-actions with blood are intimate and private.

### **Wild Flows**

As mentioned, in order to introduce a material dimension of menstruation to the interviews (Knudsen, 2015; Renold, 2019), I brought menstrual objects to our meetings and put them

on the table. The participants held them, played with them and explored them, which facilitated enactments of intra-actions with menstrual fluid, followed by various affective responses. In the following excerpt, the participants asked about how to use them and as I demonstrated how to fold a menstruation cup, the intensity in the room raised, in the form of laughter, giggling and bodies shifting on chairs. Katinka started the following exchange:

Katinka: I could never use something like that! Do you have to pour it out?

Lise: Yes.

Stine: And then you have to wash it.

Katinka: I could never make myself do that! I would be like (Katinka makes expressive gagging- and vomit sounds) and then just (more expressive gagging and vomit sounds).

Stine: But isn't it kind of disgusting, that you have to pour it out in a sink or something?

Lise: I mean, you just rinse with a bit of water. But, ok you would find it disgusting to pour the blood out?

Katinka: Yes, but also just when you stick it in and it is just like eeeeeeeew

(...)

Katinka: Might it happen, that it like went all the way up and then you couldn't get it out and then you had to go to the doctor, then it's just meeeega disgusting when you take it out, then there is just blood!

The menstruation cup, is constructed with the intention of being inserted in the vagina, with the purpose of collecting menstrual body-matter. When the cup is full, hands and vaginal muscles collabourate to remove it. One has to release the vacuum, which holds the cup in place, and carefully pull and push it out, before emptying it. It can then be rinsed with water, if desired, and reinserted. The menstrual cup differs from other menstruation products, which work by principles of absorption. The cup holds the menstrual body-matter between its silicone walls, which means that the menstrual blood and body-matter is still liquid and still very much "blood". It can leave the construction that caught it, and flow freely in the extra-bodily world, in sinks, in toilets or spilled on floors. The material specificities and function of the menstrual cup means that it enters the interview- assemblage and enables a conversation of menstrual blood as liquid and free-flowing. The

thought of menstrual blood relating with sinks or “all over” affected the girls in such a way that they worried about consequences of others witnessing their blood, which made them make intense sounds of disgust. The menstrual cup has been reintroduced as an option for managing menstrual blood in recent years and was still novel to some of the girls, who seemed to find it in some ways grotesque. The look of the cup and the element of insertion, which we will explore later in relation to tampons, seemed to trouble the girls. Here, however, it is the thought of the menstrual blood in the cup where it is in no way absorbed, rather than captured in cellulose and wrapped in pink plastic, with a glue strip for easy concealment, which affects the girls with disgust. From the silicone surface of the cup, the blood easily let go of their unity and the uncontrollability of the fluid form menstrual blood takes on in the relation causes worry of how the blood might run wild, and end up in inappropriate places, like sinks or “all over”, which can mean anywhere and is impossible to predict.

### Menstrual Leakage: “What if...”

Menstrual blood’s fluidity and therefore the ability to avoid capture that this specific consistency carries, meant that the participants worried about spillage and leakage, even if they had access to menstrual products of their choice. The relation of fluidity and early menstruation, where the menstrual cycle was not yet established, meant that the fear of “leaking” - or in Danish “*bløde igennem*” (bleed through) - resulted in intense habitual menstrual body-monitoring. Some would regularly check their menstruation-tracking app, to predict the possible coming of blood. Others would go to the toilet and check their underwear on a regular basis. The girls would assist each other in this, with some developing codes for co-checking for signs of leakage. Amalie performed pretend stretches in class so that her friend could assure her that there was no leakage, while others would give each other “a look” and then turn discreetly around to enable their friends to check the back of their body for possible stains. Noticing menstrual blood and its whereabouts occupied the participants during school days. Eva explained how she noticed her blood leaving her body:

**Lise:** Do you , for example, while at school and sitting in class, if you have to sit down for a long time, do you give it a lot of thought?

Eva: Yes, or it's always like if I have been sitting down, then when you stand up, then it is like wruuuuum (Eva makes the sound as she does a downward movement with both hands, from her vulva towards the floor, illustrating blood gushing out. Everybody laughs).

Lise: So you can feel it?

Eva: Yes, but lately, I don't really like to use pads anymore, because it is a bit like...I only use pads at night now, but...

Lise: Try to explain how it is. You don't have to hold back, you can say things that you find disgusting and stuff like that (Everybody laughs)

Eva: Well if I have been sitting for a long time, and then when you stand up then you can just feel like wruuuuuu-like, it is like I don't know...

Lise: Does it run out?

Eva: Yes, kind of, but it is because you have like a canal and you are like completely open and then it is (Eva makes a sound, like flatulence leaving the body), like it slides down, because it is kind of closed, but you can still feel it. It's a bit hard to explain.

Lise: Yes, but I recognize it, but it is also because we are not so used to talking about these things, so it can be hard to find the words.

Eva: If you sneeze or laugh, on that day number two, or like laugh, like a lot, then you can also...

Lise: Yes, what happens then?

Eva: Then you can feel it.

Lise: That it's coming out?

Eva: Ehmm hmmm

Lise: Yes (Everybody laughs)

Eva: But it is also that thing about leakage, I only wear black trousers when I have it.

Lise: Ok.

Johanne: That's just like a little tip.

Eva's use of sound effects and gestures underline the dramatic sensation of blood leaving one's body. She observes how it seems like the vaginal tract is "open" and a "canal" even though she knows it is not. She *feels* that it is, as the blood which has been collected over

time runs out with the help of gravity. To illustrate how this might matter, we can think about how this happens in class. In the middle of a room filled with other bodies, some non-menstruating, Eva has an intimate relation with the inside of her body, which she can feel as blood gushes out. We can imagine how she makes an effort to seem unaffected by the sensation and we can imagine how this feeling of fluid running out might prompt her to make her way to the toilet. Eva struggles to find words for her relation to menstrual blood. She, however, uses illustrative sound effects and furthermore, she evokes the meme of “*day two*”, which is cited in popular culture as the day when most menstrual body-matter leaves the body (Åkjær, 2019). This points to how Eva is part of a new generation of younger menstruants who are beginning to create a way of relating with menstruation, where issues of menstrual materialities are brought up as mattering.

Like Eva, several participants mentioned how menstruation occupied their thoughts, especially during the schoolday and how their worries were often connected to the possibility of leaking menstrual blood:

**Lise:** Do you sometimes worry about menstruation while you are in class?

Luisa: Yes, I always feel like I bleed much more than I actually do...because I feel like that there is blood running all over the place and then when I go to the toilet, there isn't that much blood at all, it is like, it is strange (Laughs)

Lise: Why do you think you feel like that?

Luisa: I think that you would rather be prepared in case you ARE about to leak through. Like I would rather be thinking I am almost leaking and then not be close at all, than be like, “Oh I'm not even close, so I'll just stay”.

Lise: To make sure?

Luisa: Yes

Lise: Ok, mmm...so does it matter to the way you are present during classes?

Karoline: Hem, it isn't as easy to concentrate I would say.

Luisa: I don't think so either

Karoline: Because I am like thinking about something else

Luisa: Also because you are tired and you have, like I don't feel good about myself. I mean it's just harder to have one of those days where you are like: I feel good, I am really pretty and things like that, right. When I am menstruating I am just like a little, I just feel a little...

Karoline: I think I feel a little dirty.

Luisa: Yes you feel...I feel really dirty too! I just feel like showering all the time!

Karoline: But I just don't have the energy to shower in the same way. I just want to go and lie down, but then it is also because, then you get out of the shower right, and then it is difficult to dry yourself off, because you have to put on underpants right away, so you don't bleed all over the place.

Luisa: I bleed in the shower sometimes....

Karoline: I LUCKILY don't do that! Because that is not particularly yummy (laughs). You can just. You can just keep standing out there like....

Luisa shares how she experiences a dissonance between the amount of blood which she feels is "running all over the place" and the amount that is actually there when she gets the opportunity to check. She rationalizes it as a practical activity, which will prevent her from leaking in school. No matter the practicality of intense attention to bleeding, both girls agree that this detracts from the ability to concentrate in class, which resonates with many other participants who were distracted by their worries of leakage in class. One girl would check her menstrual tracking app regularly in class, even though she knew it did not change and was dependent of the data she fed it. Another girl would sit askew on her chair, in an uncomfortable position, to prevent bleeding directly on the chair. Luisa continues with a broader perspective on menstruating in school, as she shares how she is occupied with feelings of low self-esteem and of being dirty, which both girls share. General tiredness and discomfort make it harder to shower<sup>5</sup> and it is furthermore complicated, the girls share, to shower without experiencing leakage, during or after the shower, which is considered "not that yummy" in Karoline's opinion.

Through the chapter, menstrual blood-body relations has been established as troubling, as they (in)form the body as "disgusting" and diviant. As discarded object body-matter, as symbols of life or death, as affected by orifice-intra-actions and the affective relations they

---

<sup>5</sup> In Denmark it is most common to shower. Taking a bath is not that common and many households do not have bathtubs.

bring, together with the different consistencies of blood make body-blood relations troublesome. As the consistency of the substance can make it difficult to contain or separate from human and non-human entities like clothes, chairs and floors, the irregularity and unpredictability of menstrual blood make young menstruants worry about the “what if” of menstruation. What if I leaked? What could happen? It is a feeling of insecurity, which steals thought and time capacity, spent instead on worry and trips to the toilet, which might have been invested to generate more enjoyment in young lives.

### Leaking odor

Menstrual odor is a little-mentioned topic in critical menstruation studies (Laws 1990, Malmberg 1991, Persdotter, 2022). One can speculate if the reason for the lack of interest in the olfactory dimension of menstruation might be the focus of menstrual scholarship and activism on de-stigmatizing menstruation and working towards more positive attitudes towards menstrual blood. However, like most other things degradable and stemming from human bodies, menstrual body-matter has the capacity to smell. Maybe because of the affect from former research I did not think of asking about smell, but it figured, however, in the participants accounts of menstruation, like this example from Mie of Egeskov school, who did not hold back when sharing her menstrual stories:

Mie: But I think it’s really gross, if it has been a while since you changed your pad and then it smells like hell.

Camilla: Not if you have a pad with perfume!!! (Everybody laughs)

Mie: No, it is just a really bad and strange mix, really bad, it becomes a really bad...

Camilla: No I don’t like the smell either, I think it reeks! Really disgusting!

Alice: Yes it is.

Lise. So you all think it smells. Do you worry, if others can smell it on you?

Mie: Yes! I think about that!

Camilla: No, because I have only been with my family. I almost always have it together with my family, or my sister and my mum so...

Mie: Hey, what about Peter? (Camilla’s father)

Camilla: No (everybody is laughing), he has not got it after all (everybody is laughing again).

The participant connects the smell of menstrual body-matter with the length of time they wear a menstruation pad. As time passes, bacteria grows and menstrual body-matter might begin to “reek” as Camilla puts it. As the odor particles of menstrual body-matter reaches the participants’ noses, they wonder if the smell is also noticeable to others. The menstrual body-matter which has left the body now returns in its re-materialized state caused by its intra-action with time, as odor particles, which are small enough to re-enter the body. Smell emerges as a transgressional feature of menstrual body-matter, as it does not only travel back into the body it has left, but also travels between and even enters other human bodies. Similar to this Springray offers a take on how smell is relational, and how it might change character through different relations:

“(…) when we are familiar with the object of the smell, the smell is stronger, demonstrating that “cultivated odors operate across a membrane from the material to the symbolic, the asocial to the communal” (Marks, 2008, p. 126). The smells of daily life—sewage, rot, corruption, body odor—in short the smells associated with the body—have been censored over time and replaced with sweet, clean, and sanitized smells.” (Springgay, 2011, p. 649)

In line with Springray’s description of how humans have handled body odor over time, Camilla jokingly suggests a perfumed pad to camouflage the smell of menstrual body-matter. The laughter stems from how perfumed pads are uncommon and would even be frowned upon in Denmark, where ideals of vaginal health involve preserving a “natural” environment by avoiding unnecessary supplements in menstruation products. The idea of a perfumed pad furthermore affects the participants in this specific way because come from Nørre Søby, where both vegetables and menstruation products are often organic. Therefore, the idea of a perfumed pad comes across as a joke. Yet, when menstrual body-matter smells the participants find it problematic, as it challenges ideals of cleanliness and bodily (odor) control. This makes the menstruating body emerge as non-civilized, and ideals of the “natural” body and the absence of perfume do not extend to an acceptance of bodily smells. Still the smell of menstrual body-matter does something to the participants, as it makes them aware of their surroundings and related to menstruation:

“When we smell something, our bodies merge and intermingle with the sensation and thus we become aware of our body in relation to space, place, and memory. Smells are perceived and coded as good or bad dependent on prior experiences we have had with smells, the ways we have been

taught to understand smells and the environment or context in which we sense a smell. For example, our memories and our prior educational experiences might suggest that the smell of freshly baked cookies is pleasing. At the other end of the spectrum, many people categorize smells that are unfamiliar and strange as offensive not because they naturally smell bad, but because we associate the alterity of the smell with disgust". (Springgay, 2011, p. 649)

As Mie senses her menstruation smell with her family present, it makes her become aware of her menstruating body in relation to "*space, place and memory*", as Springgay suggests. In Mie's case, as she claims only to be around her family while menstruating and as they are all synchronized and those bleed simultaneously, this does not worry her. This might be because the simultaneous menstruating makes the odor undetectable to one body in the family. In this way she hints towards the possibility of their being reason to worry, if it was otherwise. How the risk of menstrual smell worries Camilla backs up the idea of menstrual odor as unideal.

Menstruation becomes relational with its smell, as it connects menstruation with the extra-bodily and other human bodies. This challenges the idea of menstruation as "private" and "intimate". As Springray observes, bodily odor is associated with decomposition and the temporal aspect of menstrual odor suggests the development of bacteria as the reason for the smell. This places menstrual body-matter in the category of dirt and waste, which is what menstrual activism has fought against. Menstrual odor is, however, real and matters to how the young participants related to menstruation and their menstruating bodies. Maybe new ways of thinking about bacteria and human bodies as always already co-existing (Braidotti, 2019, 2022; Haraway, 2008; Haraway, 2016; Wilson, 2015) can challenge the idea of odor signaling something bad and rather as part of the post-human body, which is not singular but relational and always becoming-with (Haraway, 2008).

The "what if" of menstrual leakage, be it related to fluid substance or airborne particles, did not align with many participants' actual experience of leakage of either menstrual body-matter or odor. Only a few had first-hand experience of leakage in public space and those implicated did not seem traumatized, but rather shared stories of care from others (fellow menstruants or non-menstruating peers) who would assist with coverage and caring words. One participant shared how she bleed on her chair during physics class and then returned during the break to wipe a stripe of blood off the chair. No one noticed, but her worry and

creativity in cleaning the chair unnoticed turned into an entertaining story at which we all laughed during the interview. The trouble she went through and the worries of leakage, however, point towards how possible menstrual leakage matters to young menstruants.

### Wayward Slime

Different from the fluidity of menstrual-body-matter are the congealed and slimy menstrual substances which young menstruants also encounter as they begin to menstruate. These pose quite different but equally troubling issues to the participants:

Lise: Can you tell me a bit about your menstrual blood then?

The question does not immediately evoke any answers. The sound of bodies shifting, a chair scraping, giggles and inaudible whispers. The intensity in the room raises and then Anna exclaims: Mega gross!

Ditte: Ay, I think it is SO nasty!

Anna: It's like all sticky. It is like sticking together and like! Ew! It is just mega gross!

Lise: Anna, can you explain why you just did that thing with your fingers? What does it mean?

Anna: It is because, sometimes when I change my pad, then like, when you pull your underpants down (the participants are all laughing) then there is...then there is a string up (the participants are all laughing even harder) and then you are just like! WHAT THE FUCK EEEEEW!!! (Anna shouts out the last part loudly).

Lise: So is it like...like slime?

Anna: Yes, it is really disgusting!

Frida: I've never seen it.

Anna: Then there is just this long rubber band coming out.

There is an intense sensation in the room. All the girls are talking fast and laughing. Everybody is active in the conversation, words travel back and forth across the table we are gathered around and it is difficult to make out what is being said.

Anna continues: Ey ok, then it is just like blerh blerh blerh (she makes the sound of slime)

Alice explains how it is the *consistency* of menstrual body-matter that affects her. Anna makes a movement where she holds her thumb and index finger together and pulls an

invisible string upwards. By this, Alice enacts the consistency of a certain kind of menstrual body-matter and goes on to explain how there is “*a string up*” between the pad and her vulva. The slimy consistency of the menstrual body-matter, makes it cling to her body and as a slimy bridge it creates an insistent relation between her body and the pad. As Donna Haraway observes about slime: “*I am a creature of the mud, not the sky. I am a biologist who has always found edification in the amazing abilities of slime to hold things in touch and to lubricate passages for living beings and their parts.*” (Haraway, 2008, p. 3). In her positive take on slime, it sticks things together. As Anna is in the process of getting rid of her pad, and the menstrual body-matter which was supposed to be contained by the pad, she faces slimy trouble, as the consistency complicates the task of separation. The thing, the “*menstru-slime*” (Persdotter, 2020) is doing something. It is acting on her and affecting her by its clinginess, and emerges in Anna’s story as an agentic materiality. It is actively sticking and going against the purpose of Anna’s actions, as the slimy string connects Anna’s inside to the outside world and due to the clinginess of slime, it is difficult to separate the two.

As anthropologist, Kristin Hanssen, puts it: *It is troublesome to organize fluids and thus they are experienced as impure* (Hanssen, 2012). When menstrual fluid takes on a slimy form, it becomes even more troublesome to organize, because solutions for capturing menstrual fluid have not accounted for slime. Menstrual slime does not have the same behavioral patterns as liquid blood. It struggles to leave the body and it is not easily absorbed by the technology designed to capture blood. It makes “*rubber bands*”, it is stringy, and it sits outside of tampons and has erratic ways of ending up on bathroom floors or toilet seats. The stickiness makes it insist on its presence. Its egg-white consistency intra-acts with Anna in a way, which connects her body to the pad, which she was in the process of getting rid of. It is the special organization of matter, where it is neither solid nor a liquid, which makes slime stick together and act like a “*rubber band*” as Alice defines it. Slime is neither a solid nor a liquid. It is a so called non-Newtonian fluid, which means it does not follow Newton’s law of viscosity. It becomes more or less liquid or solid when influenced by temperature or force. The key to slime’s consistency is its polymers, which are the long chains of molecules which contain many repeated parts. In slime, the glue is a polymer. The glue is made of long chains which slide past each other easily. It is this material organization of slime that troubles Anna in her endeavors. It forces Anna to stay with the menstrual body-matter for

longer than she wanted to. It is bothersome to her and forces her to relate to her menstruation on a material level, raising some kind of discomfort in her, here expressed by a forceful and intense outburst of “EEEEEW” or “FUCK<sup>6</sup>”. The final “*what the fuck*” expresses a wonder about what is happening. Trouble like this causes delay and increases the amount of labour one has to do, but there is an added dimension to Anna’s discomfort with the slimy consistency of her menstrual blood. She is disgusted by it in such a way that she raises her voice, moves her body and uses expressions of force to express her revulsion.

Mary Douglas (Douglas, 2002) and many others (Bondevik et al., 2012) (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988; Hoskins, 2002) have theorized how bodily fluids can be considered matter out of place/body and slime in its liminal position is thus hard to place in a system of cleanliness and dirt. In its stickiness, the menstrual blood forces an intimacy on Alice, which she does not seem to want (who wants to be intimate with a transgressional substance?). Social anthropologist Fanny Armbjörnsson discuss how intimacy matters to what is considered dirty or clean, by referring to Olli Lagerspetz example of saliva:

In the book “Smuts” Olli Lagerspetz (2006) discuss the role of intimacy for human experiences of dirt and cleanliness. He exemplifies this with how one’s own saliva rarely is experienced as uncomfortable and maybe the saliva of a loved one too, is uncomplicated. In contrast to other people’s saliva, which is unpleasant, if not to say disgusting. The borders of what can be perceived as dirt is in this way connected to the degree of intimacy and closeness. Furthermore, it is dependent on whether the intimacy is chosen or forced upon you.” (Armbjörnsson, 2018, p. 185, my translation)

Menstrual blood is the menstruant’s own and still it emerges through affective expressions of discomfort and disgust. The relation of blood changes through the assemblages it emerges from. In the interview assemblage, all the human and non-human entities matter to how menstruation and blood affects bodies. Young bodies might ride a wave of intense affectivity, like disgust, to distance themselves from what is expected to be disgusting and add value in a group of bodies. Menstrual body-matter might not affect a body in the same way, in the intimacy of a closed bathroom, where the menstrual-matter-body intra-action is not witnessed by anyone. However, when blood leaves the body, it becomes something

---

<sup>6</sup> As the word “fuck” is considered harsh in Anglo speaking parts of the globe, in Denmark the distance from its original tongue makes it a much less powerful swear word, and is commonly used, including by youth in school, and as you can observe through this text, the participants where not shy to say “fuck” in conversation with me either.

outside of the body - it becomes strange and no longer part of the body (Kristeva, 1982). Strange in the sense of no-longer-intimate matter to be exposed of. But even more strange, as it materializes as slimy matter. Slimy menstrual body-matter differs in consistency from the idea of menstrual fluid as blood (crayon red and liquid), which makes it seem even stranger than the “normal” non-gendered blood the participants are used to encountering from wounds and scrapes, from cultural products or from advertisements where blood was blue, now red, but always in a predictable liquid form.

Slime lingers in the liminal zone, between body and outside world. It insists on the body's relationality with the world. It is a post-human substance in this way. In the case of menstruation and blood it should be in or out, not lingering in-between. This liminality resonates with a general discomfort of blood not leaving the body, The way the idea of nosebleeds having to run back into the body affected Jenny with discomfort. Similarly, some participants were affected by discomfort of tampons because they kept the menstrual blood, already released by the uterus, inside the body.

Through bodies relating with menstrual slime, Anna becomes with the specific affective movements which the material specificities of menstru-slime offer. Despite the possible positive identifications with the normality of puberty, e.g. similarity to menstruating peers and female morphology that menarche and menstruating might bring, Anna's becoming-with slime is a becoming-with disgust and repulsion. Still, as she is affected by the discomfort and trouble of slime, she turns it into disgust-with-humor in the interview- assemblage. If we consider how children laugh at flatulence, poo or other bodily transgressional things, and how older children, like the participants laugh and giggle at porn, in a joy-disgust relation, this might be another case of bodily transgressions affecting young people. However, it might also be the age-specific ability to find joy in the grotesque, which enables young menstruants to even speak of menstru-slime. Mentioning radical things can be powerfull for young people and this enables the conversation of slime to be filled with playfulness, laughter, curiosity, joy, communality, shared experience and menstrual solidarity. In this way, bodies' intra-actions with menstru-slime might offer new trajectories, where becoming monstrous menstruants through gluey intra-actions with menstru-slime means moving together towards menstrual elsewhere.

Becoming-with menstrual blood, also means becoming-with slime. Slime, when bought in toy stores in plastic containers in bright colors, is fun. Its non-Newtonian consistency invites us to play. To explore and experiment. It is a border object and in its unpredictable nature it brings joy and thrills equally to the player. When slime is mixed with menstrual blood and sticks to vulvas, thighs, toilet paper and the insides of toilet bowls, it is anything but delightful. It is troublesome and messy.

Slime is often seen as the matter of monsters, and if we think about it within the frameworks of monster theory (Weinstock, 2020), where the monstrous, in its ability to transgress and linger in “the middle”, carries possibilities of disturbing fixed and constituted events and positions, then there might also be potential for change in menstru-slime. If we engage with the menstrual-body-matter like blood and menstru-slime it might be a way of “staying with the trouble”, as Haraway urges us to do (Haraway, 2016). Was the raised intensity in the room, the unease of their bodies, their laughter and giddiness an expression of the ambiguity of feeling repulsed and drawn to the wonder of something at the same time? Is there a thrill of horror and a feeling of curiosity behind the laughter and forceful expressions of revulsion, that some of the girls display? When slime is produced by different chemical compositions with added glitter and color, it is a popular toy, which has stuck to textile, hair and walls for generations. It is delightful and soothing to play with slime. To feel this cool, sticky and moist matter on your hands and fingers. To throw it on the wall and watch as it slides down and hits the floor with a sound I cannot translate into written text. It is the feeling of delightful disgust, of curiosity and mild hysteria, which makes colorful slime a popular toy. For the young participants, menstrual-body-matter emerges from within an assemblage, which is organized by affective intensities of discomfort, but also accelerations of joy. Multiple voices entangle and become a choir of joy-horror, which illustrates how it can matter to bring menstrual-body-matter like blood and menstru-slime into the common space of the interview-assemblage and thus the everyday lives of young menstruants. Something different happens in which the materiality of menstruation becomes a common experience formed by laughter, rather than discomfort in the form of irritation, disgust or shame. In this case, it is through the shared affectivity of bodies that menstrual-body-matter is enabled to affect and capacitate bodies differently, as it travels through multiple bodies.

In this way, the joint experience does in itself what Miller here explains is the cause of stickiness and slime:

*“Stickiness and sliminess horrify because they erase the distinction between subject and object”* (Miller, 2009, p. 25)

Menstru-slime does not only prompt body-world relations. It further erases the distinction between “one body” and menstrual-body-matter as outside matter, as it challenges the distinction between the participants’ menstruating bodies. The erasure of a subject/object distinction might affect with horror, but the presence of menstru-slime, as it glues the girls together, might also point towards a menstrual relationality, which offers possibilities for co-becoming and co-emergence.

*Chapter 7:*

## THE PAD

## Introduction: "You have to wear a pad"

Flora : Ehm and then she said, ehm yes, it is because I just got my menstruation, what am I going to do? Then I said: you have to begin with telling your mother! Because you have to wear a pad!

The menstruation pad is a central materiality in the youth-menstruation-assemblage to such a degree that despite only virtually relating to blood, in practice it almost equals menstruation. Other than serving as the only publicly visible materiality of menstruation, as portrayed in advertisement and as it stands on the supermarket shelves, it is a crucial materiality for young menstruants to have, and to know how to use, when menarche arrives. Mothers are often the gatekeepers of pads, as they are the ones who often buy them and know where they are kept in the home. The importance of the mother and the pad is reflected in Flora's advice to her friend, who calls her more experienced friend to share that she has gotten her first menstruation. The pad is almost always a central matter of the first conversation about menstruation between the young menstruant and, in the case of this study, her mother or a fellow menstruant peer. The pad continues to take center stage in practical exchanges of menstruation throughout menstruants' everyday lives. In conversations or in sneaky exchanges between hands. The pad is also a thing connected to risk, as it might expose the existence of menstruating bodies, if not carefully concealed. The menstruation pad, which in Danish is known as "bind" or "hygiejne bind" (hygiene pad), is an article made with the purpose of absorbing menstrual fluid or other vaginal discharge, and uterine bleeding like post-partum flow or from abortions. It is made of absorbent fiber, mainly cotton or cellulose, and normally has a strip of glue on the back, to enable it to stick to underwear. It varies in shape and size. Some pads are named "Night", "Super", "Ultra" or "Normal", some have "wings", which fold over the sides of underwear, and some have heart-shaped perforations or other decorative patterns on the surface. The budget versions are simple and white, while the more expensive kinds have plastic-like surfaces with technological features and aesthetics, which gives a sense of science being involved in its creation. Pads are bought in plastic packages in colorful designs. The girls' preferred pad is wrapped in shocking pink, though a newer trend is for pads to be packaged in brown cardboard boxes to look more environmentally friendly, reflecting current climate concerns. In the new wave of menstrual activism, climate conscious reusable menstruation cups and cloth pads have had a renaissance, but in the case of the participants of this study,

the most common product was disposable, single-use pads. The participants preferred the highest-profile brands, which are the ones with the technological feel to them, wrapped in colorful plastic. They are also the ones who engage with the age group through the most aggressive marketing strategies, like collaborations with young You Tubers or Tik Tok stars.

The pad roams many spaces. It can be found in the supermarket, in the small bag inside the schoolbag, in the hand of the young menstruant on the way to the toilet, in exchange between mother and daughter, in a box in the school office, rolled up in plastic and hidden under a stack of paper tissues in the toilet bin. Menstruation pads have one specific purpose: To absorb menstrual fluids. They are easily recognizable and in their undeniable connection to menstruation, they always become-with menstrual fluid. Even when white, sterile and fresh from the shiny package, pads relate to menstrual fluid, which is virtually always already together-with the pad. This unbreakable relation to menstruation sensitizes the pad and loads it with affects, which makes it capable of affecting human and non-human materialities. However, at this point it is important to make a distinction between the menstruation pad's virtual and affective connection to menstrual fluid and *the used pad*, which materially intra-acts with vulvas and menstrual body-matter. Pad-blood relations reach towards the previous and the following chapters, as menstrual body-matter becomes something specific *with the pad: the used pad*. The used pad here specifically refers to a pad which has been used to absorb menstrual body-matter and it is of such significance that we will engage with the relation of menstrual body-matter and pad in the following chapter. To explore the significance of the unused pad, as it is encountered in the data, this chapter is exclusively concerned with the menstruation pad, as it relates with multiple human and non-human materialities pre-menstrual fluid intra-action.

### **Bodies-with-pads**

In the company of menstrual blood, fluids and body-matter, the menstruation pad is one of the primary menstrual materialities and a close non-human companion to young menstruants. After the introduction at menarche, the pad becomes a stable relation in the youth-menstruation-assemblage. Together with clothes, technology and things, the pad is together with young menstruants and kept close to their bodies at all times. Either it is on standby in a bag or in action, directly touching the body during the bleeding phase. For better or worse, the pad sits between legs, and united by glue, blood and slime, it moves

with bodies to the best of its ability. As other menstruation products pose challenges to young people - which we will explore in depth later - pads are the participants' first choice of menstrual product. Being a young menstruant practically means being a body, which is, moves, senses and becomes with a pad - a relation which affects bodies in different ways:

Lise: Well, what about pads? Are they comfortable to wear?

Kamma: Eh I think it is fine, I mean what I use.

Lise: I mean, because sometimes when I wear a pad, then I can feel it when I walk, do you recognize that?

Kamma: Sometimes, if it is sitting like, if you have been lying down, then sometimes it is sitting wrong, but like otherwise I can't feel it.

Lise: No.

Kamma: When you play basketball though, it's a real pain in the ass! It like, ooooh, it is just sitting wrong all the time and then you are standing there trying to correct it, during a match and that is like, then you run to the other end of the court and then it is like again and aaaall the time, but if you are wearing these tight...what are they called?

Lise: Shorts? Underwear?

Kamma: Yes, if you are wearing really tight underwear, then I cannot feel it at all.

Lise: Ok, but sometimes it can like...I mean, are you a better basketball player when you are not wearing a pad?

Kamma: No, I just have to correct it all the time.

The participants had many complaints about pads, despite them being the main choice of product to absorb menstrual fluids. In contrast to tampons or menstruation cups, pads are considered the least invasive menstruation products and it is the default option for young menstruants. Pads did not, however, always act as expected. They did not always stay in place and they did not always provide efficient absorption. Sometimes, they were too big for the participants' bodies. The ill-fitting pads touched bodies in ways that caused discomfort and forced a more intensive relation upon the girls. This heightened the girl's bodily awareness of menstruation which at times distracted them from their everyday endeavors, like participation in sports or being in, and paying attention in, school classes. A

body becoming-with a pad which is ill-fitting is a body constantly aware of its leakiness. It is a body formed by the irritation of glue sticking to thighs and pubic hair and sharp edges of the pad, gnawing into where the leg meets the torso. A menstruating body with a noticeable pad becomes a more awkward body. Furthermore, it is a constant reminder of the bodily secret, which the pad protects, and the secret that the pad is in itself. The discomfort of the body-with-pad thus becomes a reminder of the menstruating body as secretive and mysterious. Because of this, some of the participants wished for smaller and better fitting pads:

Josefine: My perfect period-day, it would be (the other girls are laughing), yes but, that you didn't bleed that much for the first part, I mean that you could just wear a panty liner, because then you cannot feel it, when you have it on, it's like, it's just...

Ditte: Yes, it's flapping....

Johanne: And then those big pads, it's like they stick to the skin and then they move around even though they have glue on them and then they get stuck and then it is more than half the pad, which just gets stuck on your thigh and then the rest.

Josefine: Sometime it gets stuck in my hair!

Ditte: That is just...WHAT? Josefine!

Lise: So it would be perfect for you if?

Ditte: If you could make pads, which would stay in place!

Josefine dreams of bleeding less, so that she could wear a "*panty liner*" (a smaller pad intended to absorb vaginal discharge) instead of a pad. Ideally, the pad does its job of absorbing menstrual fluids discreetly and without fuss. When, however, the glue from the pad is displaced from its intended position in the underwear and sticks to inner thighs or, as Josefine mentions to Ditte's distress, pubic hair, the pad, which is supposed to control a messy situation, makes more mess. In this way, the pad and the body become more messy together. Josefine's cheeky reference to her pubic hair, glued together with the pad, is said with a laugh because she knows, and she knows that her friends know, how the pubic hair in itself holds affective potential, through its sexualized connection. Therefore, together with another affective thing, the mere mention causes an affective stir, which makes Ditte shout out in a humorously strict and offended voice "Josefine!". The pad here becomes a

menstrual trickster, which by sticking to a body part that causes laughter in itself, disturbs the complaint of pads out of place, and introduces humor, which re-organizes the menstruation-body-assemblage. The unruliness of the pad can at times be a laughing matter and pads sticking to hair can be comical, but it also forced the participants to check and sometimes correct the pad's position manually, which challenged their labour of menstrual concealment further. This was a practice of secrecy, which was very much related to the materiality of the pad and which at times required great creative skills.

### The labourious art of concealment

Young menstruants' schoolbags are like Russian dolls. Inside the school bags are pockets, with smaller bags inside, which hide even smaller bags. Inside these bags, we can find the pad, but not easily, because of the effort put into camouflaging the pad:

Lise: Yes. Do you think all the girls have like, one of those small purses?

Frida: Yes, we were told by some of the other teachers, that we, and the nurse that it was a good idea, because all of a sudden you can experience it, and then if you are at a friends or somewhere else, then you like have it in your purse. That's quite handy.

Ingrid: Yes.

Lise: But it is inside a small bag in the bag?

Frida: Yes, I like a small toiletry bag. And the reason why I have it in like a toiletry bag and not just a bag is clearly because, if my bag falls over, then it falls out, and then the boys will think: That's just a toiletry bag with hairbands and something, then it isn't just a plastic bag where you can see what's inside.

Ingrid: Then it is kind of more private-ish, you can say.

Frida: Yes, I also have a lipbalm and hairbands in there.

Ingrid: Yes, in case...

Lise: Ok

Ingrid: Yes, when I had it, then I put a kind of lady-stuff on top, you know like mascara, not that I use a mascara, because I am not allowed, but I put it on top, because if someone looked inside my bag, then they would think: Oh, you have a toiletry bag with make-up in.

Lise: A ha, if someone opened it like....

Ingrid: Yes, if they accidentally did it or if it opened by itself...

As mentioned earlier, it was common that parents, teachers and nurses taught the girls to carry pads around to be ready for when they reached menarche, but the girls were also advised by adults to hide their pads in small bags inside their school bags. Neither adults nor children questioned this imperative of discretion. Ingrid explained how she hid her pad under “*lady things*” like make-up which, despite not being allowed to use by her parents, she still carried with her. It is thus not the sexed affiliation of the pad which makes it crucial to conceal, since other things connected to femininity are used as camouflage and therefore seem legitimate. It is furthermore not the transformation to adult which makes the girls uncomfortable with anyone noticing their pads, since the make-up they use for camouflage is also associated with adulthood and, in some ways, sexuality. Pads are more “*private*” as Ingrid states. Privacy has long been a concern of feminist theory and anthropology, where privacy has been discussed in relation to the public as political, and the idea of privacy has been framed as a measure of normativity and control. Some feminists have commented on the separation of public and private as being too simplistic and Karen Barad (Barad, 1997) argues how they are mutually constitutive of each other. In terms of menstruation, privacy is something close to the body, something not to be noticed by many, and something the girls considered an intimate matter.

The concept of “privacy” is situated in times and places. As the participants of this study are embedded in the upper-middle class ideals of Nørre Søby, it is relevant to remember how the concept of privacy in a Danish context is connected to gendered ideals of the bourgeois, as industrialization drew a line between “out” and home, and assigned the latter to “Women”, whereby the idea of domestication arose (Rosenbeck, 1990; Shorter et al., 1979). For the girls, the idea of privacy and menstruation as private simultaneously caused and disclosed the amount of labour put into menstruating. It hides how the girls deal with discomfort, pain and inability, because it is considered “private”. The imperative of “privacy” furthermore challenges the possibility of developing an everyday language of menstruation, of naming and therefore knowing menstruation. The participants were creative about this, as they made up codenames for their menstruation like “mint” or “pony”. But rather than enabling them to have a generative conversation about menstruation, these codes amputated the conversation and resulted in a giggle.

In the participants' emic, use of "*privacy*" as a concept was an argument for keeping menstruation hidden. A standard response to inquiries about the reasons for the effort put into concealing menstruation pads was, "*Menstruation is not shameful; it is just something to be kept private*". The claim of privacy was often stated with a firm tone of voice, which excluded the acknowledgement of affective discomforts, as the reason for concealment. Bodies of discomfort, be they in the form of pain or shame, are not desirable and not something the participants wished to admit to. The idealized affective state of youth is the idea of "*coolness*"<sup>7</sup> (Andreasen 2014), which relates to one of the most important tasks of life, especially for young people (Braidotti, 2002), of keeping oneself together (Blackman, 2008). In this way the claim of privacy can be seen as a way of shutting down the affectivity that risks the participants' vulnerability. Laurent Berlant (Berlant, 1998) argues how intimacy as closeness and protectedness coexists with the opposite - the risk of exposure, publicity and vulnerability. In this way, the concealment of menstruation holds an affective vibration in its silence, secrecy and its eternal risk of being exposed. Deleuze argues how difference is intensity (Colebrook et al. 2020, p. 44), and with this the idea of difference between intimate and public fuels the affective intensity of menstruation, as it lingers in secrecy and specifically here, the always-hidden and concealed pad becomes a thing of affect.

Because the pad mostly moved in the clandestine sphere of pockets, closed fists and inside small bags inside bags, I asked several groups of interview participants to reenact how they would smuggle a pad to the toilet, while in the classroom. With the help of a pad I brought, this resulted in vivid performances of skillfully choreographed movements, where swift transfers of pads, from hands to pockets or trouser linings, concealed the menstruation pad perfectly. Agnete and Katrine explained how you had to do in a way which "made you look the most normal". It was important to find a middle way and not overdo the secrecy in a way that someone would notice: "you cannot sneak or something like that", Katrine explained and went on: "You cannot wave it around like, but you cannot be like *nooo you cannot see it-like*". Stine developed her own strategy of concealment that she proudly shared with the group:

---

<sup>7</sup> "Coolness" is translated from the Danish term "*sejhed*", which refers to being tough and untouchable. The adjective "*sej*" is frequently used by Danish Youth and refers to anything positive.

Lise: How did you do it?

Stine: Then I just like, looked down and pretended that I would take my snack or something and then I zipped open a pocket in my bag and then it was like....eeeerrgg and then I rolled it together like that and then I was like, rolled it mega much and then inside the hand and then YES, I just need to go to the toilet (Said with a panicked and laughing voice) and then you just went out and then...yes. But now I invented, I have a small bag-like, like a small grey cotton bag, with a zipper, or you can like, close it, oh no, it's from a speaker (...) then you can draw a string and then it closes and then I keep it down there and then I place it in my bike helmet, so in case I need to...

Lise: Out here in the wardrobe?

Stine: Yes and then I mostly do it during class, because then I can just run out there and then it isn't really, like just at the beginning of class, because then people are always getting an explanation of something, so there isn't anyone out in the hall, so I can just run freely, just grab it and then go to the toilet and then it's pretty easy.

Lise : What about during break?

Stine: Sometimes I did it, because if the whole class, some of the boys always go to the gym hall and if the girls are in the school yard, then I'm like: I'll be right there! And then I managed to sort it out, while there wasn't anyone. But now I do it during class.

The conversation continues with Katinka explaining in a similar way, how she hides her pads in a small bag in her bag, underlining the importance of the boys not noticing, and I ask:

Lise: Why is it important to do all these things so that the boys won't notice you bringing pads to the toilet?

Stine: It's actually a real downer (Sygt nedern), because it's really normal and all women like have it.

Luna: Yes

Stine: But still you feel like it's kind of wierd if you like wuuuu huuuu (laughs) take a pad and just run...

Luna: yes; I think it's because you fear their reaction, namely that they think it is gross and then it feels like that you do something then it is like, yes that they keep bringing it up, like.

Lise: So you become the one with menstruation?

Luna: Yes exactly! The disgusting girl!

Even though I have shortened the interview excerpt considerably, it still shows the amount of labour the participants put into concealing the pad. This is one excerpt, but the body of data contains similar accounts of pads being hidden and smuggled to the toilet from almost every participant. When Stine and the other girls shared their skillful endeavors, smuggling and hiding pads, I was struck by how they took the practice for granted and how they shared, in relaxed conversation, something which was otherwise a clandestine practice. The amount of creativity and labour put in the concealment of pads, and especially to hide them from the boys, shows how the pads hold the power to affect both menstruants and non-menstruants. The girls fear that the boys will be affected by disgust, which will then stick to them as they continue to bring it up, or as it becomes an identity, positioning one as “the disgusting girl”. In light of these worries, it makes sense that the girls put work into the concealment of pads. However skilled the young menstruants were at concealing their pads, there were times where the pad was forced into the light of day and exposed for multiple eyes to behold.

### **Pads out in the open**

As described earlier, so-called period poverty i.e. lack of money to buy pads, is not an issue in Nørre Søby. Despite most young menstruants in Nørre Søby having sufficient funds themselves to be able to afford menstruation pads, there were other barriers which posed challenges to getting hold of pads. Going into a shop and buying pads for oneself was not common among the participants. If they were surprised by menarche or menstrual bleeding outside the home, they would call upon an adult in order to get pads. Some girls from EgeskovSchool shared that if they started bleeding in school and needed a pad, they could go to the school office and get a free pad there. The girls explained that they were uncomfortable doing this because they had to ask for it, meaning they had to say the word “*pad*” to the staff in the school office, whom they did not consider very welcoming. The girls furthermore felt that the school office was a place where they would not normally be, except if they were in trouble for one reason or another. Some girls said they would have preferred the pads to be in a box for them to grab without having to communicate or having to say the word “*pad*”. Other girls suggested that having menstruation products in the toilet would be preferred. In families, children rarely shop for their own toilet paper or detergent, and likewise the participants would not buy their own pads. “*Your mom has to buy them for*

*you...*” as Marie says. This means that if the girls needed pads and there were none at home, or if they needed another kind of pad, to the ones their mothers or siblings preferred, they had to involve their family. In most of the participants’ families, pads were an item bought at the supermarket like any other. In the following excerpt, Kamma shares how she shops for pads with her father in the supermarket, and how this affects her:

Kamma: My older sister is like (makes a voice): Buy these pads with extra large and then he is like, well okaaaay (Makes a crazy dad-voice), but like if I am shopping with my dad or something like that and we have a lot of pads I’m like: Go to the lady, not the man! So that like...they should NOT go to a man...that is just...

Lise: Oh you mean, go to, when you are going to the cashier?

Kamma: YES!

Lise: So you want the lady to beep the pads?

Kamma: Yes, because it is always me who ends up with like taking all the stuff because my dad is like: Ooooh I forgot bananas and then he has to run and get it.

Lise: And then you are left alone with pads and a male cashier?

Kamma: Yes, because he is so slow and then he doesn’t make it before I have taken all the stuff up and then I’m standing there like: He will be here right away and then some time passes..and then he arrives like (makes noises like someone out of breath) and then he is all out of breath and then he is like, well we need this as well and then I’m standing there like nooooo not again!

Lise: OK, I’m just going to ask a question, what would happen if a male cashier and you were standing there alone

Begge: mmm mmm

Lise: and he had to beep you pads...

Kamma: Then I would be like: He’ll be right here!

Lise: How would you feel?

Kamma: Really like, nervous like please don’t stir on those pads and just be like: What is that?

Lise: So what, would you be embarrassed?

Kamma: Well yes, but its not that bad, it is more like, im scared that someone will like look at me and notice what I am buying

Nanna: Im not.

Lise: Ok, so you feel different there?

Kamma: Yes.

Nanna: Or else I would just say: They are for my mom!

Everybody laugh.

Both of the girls are part of families where talking about pads is part of everyday life. They can ask for them to be purchased and especially Kamma's older sibling, who is a more experienced menstruant feels comfortable shouting through the house, that she needs a certain kind of pads. When the family however, moves outside their home and into the space of the supermarket something shifts for Kamma and suddenly the body behind the counter matters to how the many pads affect Kamma. The packages of pads, or as Kamma puts it "*a lot of pads*" makes her urge her father to go to the cashier of female morphology. Kamma's discomfort is connected to the pads touching the hands of the male cashier, while she also worries of the possibilities of visual intra-actions of co-shoppers. The discomfort can be relieved, if the pads are handled by an employed at the supermarket, with a body similar to Kamma, who also possibly menstruates. In this way, the packaged pads circulate affects differently depending of which bodies they intra-act with. Kamma explains the male-morphology-pad-relation as making her feel "*nervous*" and she reacts by pleading inside her head: "*please do not stare*" and pretends to disacknowledge her bodily affiliation with the pads (*What is that?*). Nanna, even though not affected in the same way, suggests the same strategy, as she imagines saying that the pads are for her mother. As Kamma talks to me and Nanna, she performs a light panic, where she acts frantic, looks away and whispers. When I ask if the feeling she is performing can be described as embarrassment (Danish: pinlighed), she confirms it, but it is not too bad, she just would not like "*someone*" noticing what she is buying, and in this way she imagines this someone to be a potential other customer, witnessing her body as possibly menstruating. Later on in the conversation, she imagined this someone to be Laust, who we have earlier established as someone many girls see as the materialization of masculinity. The presence of the many pads in the public space and as the

things, which are central to this particular shopping exchange (the many pads are right there, on the conveyer belt, shifting hands, making the machine say a loud beep, before sliding to the end of the conveyer belt, where it can be concealed in a bag), affect Kamma's body with discomfort. Nanna joins the conversation to mark her position as *not* affected by the situation. As mentioned, she however, still prefers to pretend the pads are for her mother, because even though she is not scared the connection of her own body and pads in a public space, still troubles her. Other than the differently sexed body of the cashier, the amount of several packages of pads matters to Kamma's story. As Kamma underlines the amount of pads (more packages), the affective flows intensify and thus many pads, means a larger degree of discomfort for Kamma in the supermarket, and a more thrilling menstrual event to share in the interview room. More pads points towards more bleeding and larger amounts of blood and several pads can, in some cases, carry more affective power, than one, in the meaning that they can affect more intensively. The amount of pads thus matter to how Kamma emerges as a en fleshed and leaky subject, there in the supermarket. Because she stands alone, and her body is in the sexed morphology that it is, her body emerges as possibly leaking the large amounts of menstrual fluid, which the multiple packages of pads imply could be present in the world. As discussed before in this study and others with it (Hasson, 2016; Persdotter, 2020) the amount of bleeding matters to ideas of body normality and ultimately, to the possibility of emerging as a human subject. This means that Kamma's public relation with a large amount of pads and a presumably non-menstruating body, leaves her more vulnerable and thus more easily affected, as she risks emerging as not-quite-human, in the exposed public space of the supermarket. A public space, enhanced by the precense of a strangers non-menstruating body in intimate intra-action with the menstrual materiality, which will later touch Kamma's body and absorb her blood. In this way Kamma's body is capacitated in the menstruation-pad-assemblage of pads and the non-menstuating body behind the counter. The pads relation to a non-leaky body, emphasizes Kamma's body as different. If we follow Shildrick and others with her (Braidotti, 1997, 2003; Grosz, 1994; Shildrick, 1997) and think about the leaky body as monstrous and a non-subject, the risk of resolute subjectivity in the middle of the supermarket is ultimately, what causes discomfort. These examples points to how the affective attachments of menstruation pads, even when they are unused and packaged in colorful plastic, matters to the simple everyday act of acquiring pads. Even if the girls are financially, bodily and

emotionally capable of purchasing pads in the supermarket or if they dare go into the school office and ask for pads, the public affiliation of their bodies with pads still affects them with discomfort in the form of nervousness or shame. In the process of acquiring pads, there is a timeslot where pads are publicly visible and cannot be concealed, which as we have seen, the girls otherwise invested a great amount of labour in doing. Acquiring menstrual pads is therefore not a straightforward endeavor, because relating to menstruation products in supermarkets or in school publicly exposes the young menstruants as leaky bodies. In addition to this, it might expose them as menstruants to adult menstruants, which in their experienced bodies are also different from the novice menstruants.

### The contagious pad

As with young menstruants with menstrual pain or discomfort in the shape of irritation, are bullied by non-menstruating co-students, so affective discomfort in the shape of pain or shame can leave the menstruating body vulnerable and open to be affected by others. Furthermore, a body affected by shame can affect other bodies, and make them emerge through discomfort, as happened to Cecilie in the swimming pool changing room, when her friend caught a glimpse of a pad stuck to her underwear.

Lise: Cecilie, is there something you cannot do, when you are menstruating?

Cecilie: Hmm, I think that is like a little, so I have a bit of trouble, being with my friends or being at the pool because, I have like a little, there was one time I was at the pool with one of our friends from class and it was at the exact time, where I had it, I mean of course nothing happened in the pool, but as I was getting dressed after, then she just looked at me funny, just because I was wearing a pad and that was like a little... Then she didn't really talk to me and then I was like, but it's normal...

Lise: Did she not talk to you, because you had your menstruation?

Cecilie: No, but she got like embarrassed about...yes.

Lise: Did she tell you or were you able to guess?

Cecilie: I could guess, because she looked and then she got all red in the face and then she looked away and it was like a little...

Lise: Ok, so it was right there she didn't speak to you, it wasn't like the rest of the day?

Cecilie: No.

Lise: Ok, but this is why you find it difficult to be with some friends?

Cecilie: yes.

Lise: Ok so, it was that thing about keeping a bit back from participating, can it be like that?

Cecilie: I don't know, I don't feel like that.

Lise: Ok, so you still go to the pool, even though it can be awkward with your friend?

Cecilie: Yes.

Several of the participants' menstruation stories took place in changing rooms, before or after sports activities. In these places, participation is often mandatory for children, which means menstruating is under risk of exposure, as in this case. Cecilie's friend notices her pad as she puts on her clothes. Cecilie notices her friend seeing the pad and being affected by the pad, in a way which makes her uncomfortable. She "*stares funny and turns red*", which Cecilie reads as shame. The pads affects the friend's body, so it ultimately turns away and keeps silent for a while, when she does not talk to Cecilie. Shame particularly, has been theorized as a primary emotion (Fischer, 2018; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007; Massumi, 2007; McHugh, 2020; Sedgwick, 2003; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995) and in feminist affect theory, shame has been connected to bodily control and self-management of women's bodies and sexuality. Sarah Ahmed argues that, "*Shame can be described as an intense and painful feeling that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self feeling that is felt by and on the body*" (Ahmed, 2013a, p. 103). In this way, discomfort organizes the assemblage through which the body materializes, like when blood runs to Cecilie's friend's face and her body turns away from the pad. Ahmed refers to this kind of turning away as, "*(...) the turn of pain*": "*We turn away the whole body, more especially the shame, which we endeavor in some manner to hide. An ashamed person can hardly endure to meet the gaze of those present.*" (ibid.). The affect invested in the pad contaminates Cecilie's friend in such a way that even though the pad and therefore the affective relation is not hers, the virtual relation of her possibly co-menstruating body makes the discomfort stick to and materialize her body. If we think about shame as an affect, which organizes the pad-menstruation-body-assemblage, it affects Cecilie's friend's body in a way whereby she cannot relate to

Cecilie. The virtual blood relating to the pad affects the actual blood in Cecilie's friend's body, so that it rushes to her face. The friend then turns her body away, to avoid relating to Cecilie and her menstruation pad and afterwards she avoids talking to Cecilie for a while. We can speculate if Kamma's fear is that the cashier will be contaminated by menstrual shame, as he touches the pads. Even though the pad is the thing which sets off this chain event of discomfort, it is not because Cecilie chose a pad as her menstrual product - pads being the participants' default solution for managing menstruation and are considered "normal" compared to tampons or menstruation cups. It is because the pad is already with menstruation and with Cecilie's body, that it carries the capacity to affect Cecilie's friend, so that she cannot relate to her for a while. As we do not know the friend, and only know that she had not herself reached menarche, we can only speculate about her own relation to menstruation. What is interesting, however, is that despite feeling uncomfortable from her friend being negatively affected by her menstruation pad, Cecilie still participates in swimming and other after-school activities. She, however, does it with the awareness that someone might be affected by her body-with-a-pad. In this way, what a body-with-pad can do is to go to the pool changing room with friends, but what it cannot do is to go there with an uncomplicated joy for swimming. Despite Cecilie highlighting this particular menstrual event as mattering, when I inquiry about obstacles, she says she still goes swimming. Several participants mentioned swimming and other activities where they had to change clothes with others, as something they actively avoided while menstruating; an avoidance strategy, which matched the stories of discomfort and the amount of labour the participants put into concealing their menstruation, and particularly their pads.

*Chapter 8:*

## THE USED PAD

## Introduction: Pad-blood-relations

Clara : I'm a babysitter and I hate that when I am menstruating. There was at one time, where I...I was like: I cannot find any waste bin oh God oh God, but then I found one in the end.

The opening quote is one among many, which illustrates how *used* menstrual pads become troublesome as a specific blood-pad-assemblage. Pads are designed as a technology of ease and assistance, but used pads have a tendency to not comply as they stick to skin and non-human surfaces, tear or expose young menstruants. This chapter explores how the used pad's material specificities affect young menstruants in multiple ways. The previous two chapters centered menstrual body-matter and the pad on explorations of affective movements between human and non-human materialities, specifically the menstruation pad, and illustrated how both menstrual blood - fluid or slimy - and the menstrual pad are central materialities in the youth-menstruation-assemblage. Through the relations with actual menstrual body matter the pad emerged as something else, in emic terms, "*the used pad*". This relation deserves its own privileged position in inquiry as a specific thing of significance to the girls' bodily becomings.

As we have learned, unused pads mostly exist in concealment: Wrapped in plastic, in smaller bags inside larger bags, hidden in bicycle helmets or squashed inside clenched fists. But also at times bleached white pads are visible in advertisements or on the supermarket shelf. The used pad, however, emerges through different stories of concealment or visibility and circulate affects differently from the unused pad, which raises several new questions. The used pad therefore requires its own mapping, to make sense of how affects organize the girl-body-*used* pad-assemblage and what this makes or does not make possible. The following chapter is thus a sibling to the two previous ones, but here the used menstrual pad is our guide through menstrual events. As with blood and menstrual pads, to follow the used pad means being attentive to its becoming and its worlding (Coleman 2020). This means to explore and look attentively at "*something*", which is normally not gazed upon but usually wrapped in plastic, and which instinctively makes us turn away. A "*something that I do not recognize as a thing*" as Julia Kristeva writes (Kristeva 1982, p. 2). The central question here is, which relations (in)form the used pad-girl-body-assemblage of Nørre Søby.

### “There wasn’t Madame...”

As Clara stresses in the introductory quote, her main trouble with menstruating while at work as a babysitter in a private home is where to dispose of the used pad. It is disturbing to such a degree that she calls upon “God” twice to re-establish order. As in Clara’s example, the used pad especially emerged through stories of trouble with placement, which made the issue of waste bins come up regularly. The following extract is from an interview with Josefine, Eva, Ditte and Julie. They are all 13 years old and close friends. The interview takes place in their shared classroom. The girls are confident and outgoing and a positive and relaxed atmosphere forms the conversation. Halfway through the interview, I ask the three friends if they have ever bled through while menstruating in school and Josefine shares the story which leads us to the used pad. After finding out that she has bled through her trousers and onto a chair in the classroom, she makes it to the safety of the school toilet, only to find that she is now facing another challenge - how to dispose of the used pad, without anyone noticing it:

Josefine: Ehm, then I ehm, then I was sitting...I changed the pad and like that. And then, the first thing I thought about, it was: What the fuck do I do with this pad, so that no one will notice it? So I took one of those, out in the toilet.

Lise: I’m just going to ask, because I used the toilet by the office and that is one of those toilets, where you can lock the door and then there is a sink and one of those “Madame” bags...

Johanne: Yes, but there was one of those out there as well.

Lise: But couldn’t you leave it in there?

Josefine: No not these. There wasn’t Madame.

Ditte: We just got those.

Johanne: Yes they just arrived.

Josefine: There wasn’t at that time.

Lise: But you hadn’t, there wasn’t any bag?

Josefine: No, no bag.

Lise: And no bin either?

Josefine: Yes, there was a bin, but that wasn't, I didn't just like want to leave it there, just like, just like, like...so that it was just lying there. So I thought: OK, I'm going to take this piece of paper that you use for drying your hands and then I'm going to take a lot of it and gather it around the pad, as if it was a ball or something, and also make it a bit wet, so it looked like someone just dried their hands in it. And then, I threw it in the bin.

Lise: So you camouflaged your used pad?

Josefine: Yes! Mmmm mmmm. I actually never think anyone found out! Ehm, and I was very happy about that. Ehm, but then when I threw it down there, I was just standing for a while, and then I threw it down, then I was standing like, can you see it? Caaan you? Ehm, no it is going to be all right!

After leaking through her clothes, Josefine has made it to the safety of the school toilet and the first thing she thinks about is where to dispose of the used pad: *"What the fuck do I do with this, so people won't see it?"*. Her animated way of telling the story, and her cursing, captures the attention of all of us present in the room. As I struggle to understand Josefine's conundrum, I inquire further about it. She then explains that the problem was the missing Madame bag. Most public toilets in Denmark have a special bag for used menstrual products. It is a plastic bag which attaches to two sturdy metal rods held together by a spring, thus creating a clip which automatically keeps the bag closed when not in use. In this way, used menstrual products are not visible to other users of the toilet and the pad itself, or possible odor, cannot re-enter the space of the toilet easily. The plastic bags are typically covered by an image depicting a blue ocean or stones in clear running water. Others have a 1980s-style silhouette of an active body connoting female morphology. Both bring forth associations of freshness and active living that draw on menstrual discourse traditionally used by the commercial menstruation product industry. The most common brand names of the bags, which are written on them, are e.g. *"Madame bag"*, *"Lady bag"* or *"Ladies hygiene bag"*. The brand of bags at the toilets at Aarhus University are simply called *"Miss"*. The gendered names, together with their placement in the *"Women's toilets"* leaves no question of which kind of bodies the bags are for. The word *"Madame"* even connotes a certain kind of woman. A sexed term of adulthood and respectability, while the Danish use of the word could also carry negative and misogynist connotations of fatness, stamina and heightened levels of affectivity.

The lack of a specific waste bag causes Josefina's difficulty discarding her used pad, as she does not "*just*" want to leave it "*lying there*". Leaving her used pad with her menstrual body-matter behind, and exposed in an open waste bin, might risk leaving her vulnerable to others. She also might run the risk that the matter-with-pad, which was until recently a part of her body, could affect other bodies in ways which might cause her discomfort. The school toilets have waste bins, but in Josefina's view, which she shares with many of the girls, regular waste bins are not suitable for used pads. As described above, waste bins are different in design and purpose, but seen from a pragmatic perspective a regular waste bin could easily contain a used pad. This raises the question of the reason for a special waste bin to contain used menstruation products.

Josefina goes through a labourious process of wrapping and moistening paper towels, before she wraps them around the used pad so that it looks like the pad is *only* used paper towels. After throwing the wet bundle of paper towels and used pad into the waste bin, she pauses to check if it is noticeable, then concludes it is not. Josefina is proud and happy that her plan of concealments succeeds. The used pad is always wrapped in paper tissue or plastic before it leaves the young menstruants' hands and in this way is concealed before it is discarded. The practice is so established that none of Josefina's friends question her actions and they all seem to take for granted that a used pad does not belong in the regular waste bin.

Josefina explained her labour with not wanting to leave her used pad behind to be found. Katinka similarly performed the labour of concealment. She shared how she felt equally uncomfortable disposing used pads in the regular waste bin, which made her ask the school leadership to install "*Lady bags*" in the school toilets. I asked her why she did not find the regular waste bin sufficient:

Lise: Why do you think there are two different kinds of wastebins? Or why did you miss it, because you asked for it to get installed.

Katinka: Because I didn't feel like leaving it in the bin.

Lise: Ok. Why not?

Katinka: I don't know, I just think sometimes it is a little gross in the paper-waste bin, then there is some blood lying there.

Lise: Ok. Yes, is it...back when there was only the regular bin, what would you do?

Katinka: I used to wrap it and then cover it up, because you can't really flush it in the toilet.

Lise: No you cannot do that. So it was important to you that no one could see it?

Katinka: Yes, it is kind of strange, if there is a pad in one of the bins. It's also kind of gross.

Flora: You really ought to invent a pad that you could just flush!

Katinka: Without it being bad.

Flora: Made from something which would dissolve itself or something.

Katinka: Yes, like the plastic things which are on the dishwasher tabs, which di...dissolves.

Katinka found it "gross" and "weird" to leave her used pad-with-blood in a regular waste bin in the toilet. She adds how it is necessary to cover the used pad because you cannot flush it down the toilet. The need for concealment is not questioned, it is a matter of *how* to conceal the trace of menstruation left behind. Katinka and Flora dream of easier concealment and fantasize about flushable pads, which they then begin to invent in that moment. Similarly, Katinka says she does not "*feel like*" disposing of her used pad in a regular waste bin. Katinka's dislike can be connected to her feeling of disgust ("gross"), by the thought of a used pad displaying blood in a regular waste bin. As Katinka does not like the idea of leaving her blood behind to be witnessed, so Josefine does not want to leave her blood in the bin and risk leaving herself vulnerable. Because the girls have already touched, seen and smelled their used pads, the concealment is (also) for those following into the toilet. Imagining others' disgust from seeing the used pad, affects how the placement of the used pad in the wrong place affects Katinka (and the other girls) with discomfort. If, however, the used pad is placed in its designated place - the "Madame bag" - it cannot be seen or smelt which means less discomfort, less intensity and thus the pad-blood-relation possesses less power.

In conversations with the participants, we often struggled together to name the bags, since they did not seem to have an obvious name or a general term in our shared everyday language. We would say things like "*that bag you know, that you used for pads*". The contrast between the waste bag for used menstrual products as a frequently-used, everyday object used by all menstruating beings, who have to deal with their menstruation in public

toilets, and the lack of words for it, speaks to the paradox of silence surrounding menstruation and the menstruating body. As with the general lack of menstrual terminology, the lack of an everyday term for the place for used menstrual products reflects how the content of the bag is unmentionable. The gendered and “fresh” looking camouflage is a strong indication that what is inside is the opposite of “fresh”. As Hansen observes: *“The disgusting is bubbling in everyday culture, when it is about avoidance of the disgusting”* (Hansen 2018:24) The bag’s insistence on femininity and freshness is this avoidance which forms used menstruation products as disgusting and as an unmentionable “lady thing”, requiring a specific location, behind a metal-closure. In this way the “Madame bag” becomes a paradoxical assemblage of female morphology, where the outside is institutionalized femininity with its shiny, fresh, clean surface and the inside contains decomposing pads-with-menstrual body-matter, possible smell and bacteria. In this way the “Madame bag” does not just point towards a cultural history of menstruation as pollution and dirt (Buckly, 1988; Gottlieb, 2020; Persdotter, 2022), it produces discarded menstrual body-matter as a specific kind of dirt, which needs special containment to keep it from interacting with other human and non-human things. Because of the purpose of the “Madame bag” and its close relations with used pads, liners or tampons, the bag itself becomes a thing which only figures outside everyday discourse, highlighted by the shared difficulty with naming the “Madame bag”. Similarly, the lack of a general term challenges the writing of this text, as I choose to refer to the waste bag designated for used menstrual products with the brand name “Madame bag”, where I would prefer a more general term. Enfolded by paper tissue and dwelling in different waste bins, the used pad becomes something particular, which relates to and affect bodies in different ways. A way to think about these particular affective relations is by engaging with classical theorizations of waste, dirt and cleanliness.

### **Place matters to menstrual body-matter**

By following the used pad to different locations, we see how the possibilities for placement become important. This resonates with Mary Douglas’ theory of how matter out of place can disorganize the order of civilization (Buckly, 1988; Douglas, 2002). As discussed earlier, bodily abject is matter out of place in its very core, and menstrual fluid ranks high in the hierarchy of displacement and affective investment. Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1982) and

several others (Douglas, 2002; Persdotter, 2022) have argued that menstrual body-matter is distinct waste in its connection to blood, gender and reproduction.

All waste is not per se dirty, and all waste is not matter out of place. A banana peel is not similarly affectively loaded, because it is easy to identify where it belongs - in the waste bin and even in any waste bin. Josefine would not finish eating a banana and exclaim, "*Fuck! Where am I going to dispose of this*", as she knows where it goes and she does not risk anything by being with the banana peel. In this way, Mary Douglas' theorization of matter out of place does not consider matter out of place as equal to "waste". She rather connects matter out of place to power, which also renders it neither negative nor positive, but as something that matters and affects. Douglas and several others (Buckly, 1988; Delaney et al., 1988; Douglas, 2002; Kristeva, 1982; Persdotter, 2022) have written about menstruation as pollution and abject matter. The lack of desire to associate with menstrual body-matter, stems from what Douglas explains as "*pollution is a particular class of danger*" and how this is connected to power. When matter is out of place and thus considered pollution, it both poses a risk to the boundaries which uphold order and which it has transgressed, but this is also what holds potentiality. It is the transgressional and ambiguous character of matter when out of place, which makes intense affect and power circulate:

"In these cases the articulate, conscious points in the social structure are armed with articulate, conscious powers to protect the system; the inarticulate, unstructured areas emanate unconscious powers which provoke others to demand that ambiguity be reduced." (Douglas, 1966).

Josefine's discomfort and her "fuck" in this way demands that ambiguity and its power is reduced, which she solves by concealing her used pad. The collective practice of concealed disposal, hence the wrapping and the Madame bag, aligns with Douglas' understanding, and this might explain why Josefine invests time, energy and creativity into her practice of concealing the used pad, as she moistens the paper towels and pauses to check if the camouflage works. Similarly, thinking about the used pad as disturbance can assist us in making sense of Katinka's displays of disgust by the thought of a used pad in a regular bin, or of why Clara smuggles used pads out of her employer's house, instead of using their waste bin, while babysitting.

Used pads are clearly matter out of place. So clearly, that they have their own special waste bin, which can be closed off, for the pad to never escape the designated place. The used pad's inability to belong as normal waste affects the girls with discomfort, so they must labour to conceal their used pads and retain order. As mentioned before, the girls describe themselves as "polite". They wear clean and, at times, expensive clothes and maturity is a feminine virtue that they speak to when they complaint about others' (the boys) immaturity. Cleanliness is relative as it intersects with location, age, gender and class. History has (in)formed the ideal bourgeois body as a clean body (Schmidt, 2004) and in the same way, cleaning and being clean is connected to bodies of female morphology (Ambjörnsson, 2018; Gullestad, 1984/2001; Schmidt, 2004; Skeggs, 1997; Skeggs, 2001). The used pad, thus might pose a risk to the girls "middle class femininity" as it emerges through assemblages of cleanliness and order. The affective flows are thus fueled by how the used pad poses both danger and power, which is the potential Douglas identifies as mattering to pollution (Douglas 2003). If we think about this through the concept of the menstruation-assemblage, danger and power can be seen as the intense flows of affect, which organize the assemblage and capacitates menstruating bodies (Buchanan, 2020). In this way, when the used pad emerges with "Madame bags", as something to be concealed, something "unfresh" and as pollution, if placed in an inappropriate place, it affects the girls' bodies with discomfort, like worries of possible vulnerability, if the connection between pollution and body is exposed. The used pad as matter out of place, furthermore affects the girls' bodies with disgust and alienation towards menstrual body-matter-with-pad, which was in intimate relation with their bodies not long before. In this way, the affective discomfort might stick to the girl's bodies, which in their relation with pollution, emerge as polluted themselves. As the menstrual materialities which are out of place are highly gendered, and the appropriate space for them to be discarded is feminized as well, body-Madame bag relations offer limited possibilities for how young menstruants might emerge.

**"Please remember to wrap your bloody waste!"**

In the Women's toilet at the department of Educational Anthropology, a homemade sign written on a university computer, printed out and taped to the wall, reminds menstruants "*Please remember to wrap your bloody waste!*" Assuming the sign speaks of menstrual waste, it enhances how used menstruation products are not regular waste, but "bloody

waste". The used pad however, is not just "bloody waste" and cannot be understood as equal to menstrual body-matter as object or waste. The used pad becomes *used* through relations with leaky bodies of female morphology. The absorption and containment of menstrual fluid makes the used pad itself a mobile waste bin. The pads become-with bodily object matter, which is loaded with gendered, sexualized and age-related affectivities, and the ability to move this affective load away from the body makes it a powerful thing of abjection through this very separation. In addition, used menstruation products are associated with bad smells and bacteria, which adds to their object status (Persdotter, 2022).

Josefine's "fuck" is connected to the trouble of not knowing where the used pad belongs, and demands that she reduces the ambiguity of the bloody object in her hand. The "fuck" points towards how the used pad is multi-layered, which complicates its categorization: it is menstrual fluid out of the body (but in place absorbed in the pad), it is the used pad out of place (it has left the underwear) and out of shape (warped, moist, discolored, fringed) and it's between places, creating chaos, affecting Josefine to express a "fuck!". The absence of the Madame bag makes it complicated: the used pad has left the private and intimate and is not lingering in a semi-public room (Blumenthal, 2014), with nowhere to go. The school toilet might be considered private, but in the moment of relating intimately with menstrual body-matter, the participants were alert to who might enter, sounds from the pad's plastic wrapper being audible, who might notice how long they were gone for, and thus the public reached inside the toilet, no matter if the door was locked. This adds yet another layer to the multiple layers of how being out of place circulates affects, which sticks the used pad to Josefine, just as she needs to break its gluey bond. Josefine, Flora and the other girls' discomfort is expressed in various forms -with verbal expressions like "fuck" or "gross" when Josefine recognizes the affect between herself and her used pad as disgust, and "weird" and "I did not feel like" placing the pad in the regular toilet waste bin.

Katinka says she finds it "weird" to place a used pad in the regular toilet. Weird can be thought of as a feeling of alienation towards the intra-action of the used pad and the "regular world", where it does not belong. If we consider Julia Kristeva's theoretical ideas of monstrosity, "weird" can also be an expression of alienation towards a "something" that moves between the very categories which sustain humanity, but is still connected to her

(human) body. This indefinable character of the used pad is enhanced by the absence of a designated place for it after it leaves the menstruants' body.

Such an encounter of used-pad-human, the gaze that meets the monstrous "*something, which is not a thing*" (Kristeva 1982:4?), circulate intense affects, which are recognized by the girls as dislike (*does not feel like it*) disgust (*gross*) or alienation (*its weird*). Josefine's "*fuck*" and her light state of panic and discomfort is caused by the fear of someone noticing, someone seeing this thing of displacement. As Douglas states:

"Danger lies in the transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable" (Douglas 2002:119)

Just as it is worse when white and clean things become dirty, it is certainly more visible that this is a thing which has been polluted and that this is now a thing of liminality. In this way the used pad can be considered "more dirty" and as circulating more intensity than menstrual fluid alone. It is the intra-action and merging of bodily materiality and technology/non-human materiality, together with the dirtiness, which makes the used pad monstrous. It is not human, not non-human. Furthermore, it is obvious that it cannot be made clean again. It is doomed to exist together with pollution and is now in itself a thing of pollution. The used pad thus, if placed in the wrong waste bin, becomes matter out of place, because it carries matter out of place to an out of place location (Douglas, 2002). And not any matter out of place, but matter which already in its very existence paradoxically threatens human subjectivity in its challenge to the sealed of body (Shildreck, 2019).

Because the used pad captures menstrual fluid and thus provides it with a fixed form in their co-becoming, it enables the separation and independency of menstrual fluid from the body, and enables it to be in the world as something other than fluid. This complicates and adds extra layers of affectivity to the used pad. As Kristeva writes in line with Douglas (1966):

"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. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 1982:4).

With Kristeva and Douglas, we are reminded that when the girls say that menstruation is "private", the private means "something" to be kept "inside" or at least close to the body, so that rules about privacy are not broken. When menstrual fluid intra-acts with a pad and

in this intra-action gains a new form of mobility, by which it can move away and be separated from the inside of the body, rules of intimacy are troubled. The used pad intra-acts with menstrual fluid, and this becomes an abjected part of the body, which is left behind in a public space. It is a most intimate thing, from inside the body, left vulnerable in a waste bin, which leaves the body that left it there vulnerable and open to be affected.

Teeth are left for the fairies to take care of, and locks of cut of hair are kept in red bows deep inside drawers. As we have seen, menstrual fluid is considered a “private” and intimate materiality by the participants. Pads that intra-act with bodies and menstrual fluid, which are removed from said bodies, are *private waste*, *gendered waste* (as the names of the “madame”, “Ladies” or “miss” bags stress) *sexualized waste* and furthermore *adult waste*. All these assemblatic relations capacitates used pads to affect bodies. The girls routinized practice of wrapping used pads and burying them deep in a pile of paper, might speak to the connection to intimacy and the affective streams mentioned above and the need to ritualize and protect an abjected part of one’s body, as with teeth and hair. A part which does not really belong anywhere, except maybe in a specially designed bag for its purpose. The relations between the wrong matter in the wrong place forms assemblage, where menstruation gains intensity through the disturbance of order. It is the troubling nature of matter out of place, the affective attachments, and their threat to upholding “subjectivity” that call upon the girls to conceal used pads and to be affected with discomfort when relating to used menstrual pads. If the used pad is not concealed it enables a transgression of the private-public, which does not come without risk, as we shall explore in the following section. But to fully make sense of how the used pad can be weaponized, I want to go beyond Douglas’ theorization of dirt and discuss yet another layer of relations that form the used pad-girl-school-boy assemblage, by exploring the intra-action of human and non-human materialities of the used pad.

### The “somethingness” of the used pad

In the merging of bodily materiality and non-human technology, the used pad becomes undefinable. The pad has been used for its purpose and now becomes something other than pad *through* its intra-action of menstrual fluid, pad and body. After serving its purpose, the pad has taken shape after the body. There is an impression of the cracks and folds of the vulva, which leaves the pad stretched, folded and wavy. It is heavy from the fluid absorbed

in the core combination of paper pulp and unknown super-absorbents or the porous paper-based material, which is used in some products. Before reaching the core, the menstrual fluid has passed through the “acquisition layer” of wood fiber or polyester fiber, which transports the menstrual fluid to the core of the pad. Menstrual fluid and sweat has mixed with the (possible) ink and perfume, that beautifies the pad, and now the pad seems more porous than when it was new. The outer layer of polypropene/polyethylene polyester/viscose might have broken a little, leaving the surface seeming rough and ripped. It can be frayed at the edges. Sometimes there is a sound, when the glue made of various polymers and synthetic resins and the cotton fabric of the underwear are pulled apart. The used pad is briefly exposed to light and oxygen and the gaze of the menstruant before it is rolled together and enfolded by a piece of polyethylene film (which is silicone coated in some products) or toilet paper. Through oxygenation, the menstrual fluid in the pad changes color and smell. It might become brownish and menstrual fluid in used pads has thus moved even further away from the idea of “*crayon red blood*”, that the girls consider “*normal*” blood. The pad was bleached by chlorine. It was white and clean, now it is reddish-brown. It is un-fresh and thus defies the ideal of menstrual product marketing. An irreversible process of decay is slowly beginning.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the chlorine-bleached and clinical looking *unused* menstrual pad can be a sensitive object in itself, through its connotations with menstruation, gender and sexuality. But in the intra-action with menstrual fluid, the pad is further sensitized, as it becomes-with color, consistency and smell. It is a merging of human bodily fluid and tissue and non-human tissue, which in their intra-action become-with each other “something” else. Another object. A “something” (Kristeva, 1982), a (post)human thing, where bodily materialities, fibre, technology and plastic go beyond the border separating human from non-human. This is a disturbance of the human – non-human divide and in the sense that it is neither human nor completely non-human it can be thought of as a monstrous object. To consider the figure of the monster helps us expand on Douglas’ ideas of matter out of place, by moving beyond the idea of abjection, and in this way make sense of the transgressional materiality of the used pad and how intensity circulates *from* this. Haraway has argued how the monster can work as a promising feminist figure, because transformation happens through difference (Haraway, 1992). The menstruous monster

(Parsons, 2009) is not, however, meant as a negative figure, but as potential for change and becoming. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests the monster as a guide for imaginative thinking to perform alternative worlds:

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (Cohen 1996, p. 7)

Despite popular culture's representation of monsters as male-like, the monstrous and the abject as incomplete, moist, broken bodies, with lack of subjectivity and as the abject, has traditionally been connected to women, othered and racialized, who have existed in the liminal (Braidotti, 2011). Even the ultimate monster, Frankenstein's poor assemblage of a body, is feminized in its sensitivity and lack of strong subjectivity (Rauch, 1995; Shelley, 2001). The used pad as a thing of female monstrosity is connected to what Braidotti and others (Braidotti, 1997; Kristeva, 1982; Parsons, 2009; Ussher, 2006) refer to as "*the horror of the female body*". This is all that is considered monstrous in its inability to remain within the boundaries of individuality and heterosexuality, like menstruation, childbirth, discharge and all that does not fit within the idea of "Women" as sexualized objects within capitalist post-modernity. The used pad in its moist form, can thus be considered a transgressional and post-human "something" of female horror.

It is important to underline, that the figure of the monster and menstrual monstrosity is not deployed as a negative reference to the research participants, but as a way to think about how bodies emerge and are shaped through ideas of difference, and how this difference can be re-thought with affirmative ethics. The transformational bodily state, which the teenagers are becoming-through is a liminal space and as I have argued elsewhere, the monstrous:

"as difference is a suitable inhabitant roaming the liminal locus of adolescence, where for womb-bearing subjects, menstruation and the coming of menarche in itself de-centralizes and places the subject in a position of otherness, by shaking it with affects such as pain, shame, alienation, not-knowingness, and discomfort" (Andreasen, 2020, p. 904)

This in-between nature of the used pad makes it “*neither a total stranger, nor total familiar*” as it “*exist in an in-between zone*” (Braidotti 2011, p. 216). This makes it difficult for the girls to dispose of it, when the special location in the form of a Madame bag or even a toilet bin, as Clara searches for, is not there. The Madame bag in this way becomes a missing location for the liminal, the in-between and the monstrous, the used pad, which is for the girls at the same time both “*same and other*” (Ibid.). The intra-action of human and non-human waste that the used pad becomes through, complicates its displacement further than what is possible to make sense of with classic theories of dirt and purity. Thinking with the figure of the monstrous peels back yet another layer of how the used pad plugs into the youth-menstruation-assemblage.

### The power of the used pad

As we have seen in the above, the relations between bodies, used pads and waste form assemblages where affectivities gain intensity in their connection to gender, sexuality, age and location. When the used pad is handled, rolled up, pressed and put into the Madame bag where it is expected to stay in all its material, audible and olfactory forms, it poses less of a threat to the existing order of subjectivity and the organized world. The used pad, however, did not always stay put in its designated location, but emerged as even more radically out of place than in waste bins:

Lise: What do you think would happen, if they saw it? Or have you experienced, have any of you experienced something in the class or here in the club?

Linnea: It just isn't that cool.

Rose: No.

Linnea: Well yes, Johan from my class right, he and Vincent and some of the boys, they went to the toilet and then they opened the bag we have for pads and stuff like that (Molly: They are really annoying) and then they came into the class room.

Rose: It was at the school.

Lise: What is the bag, can you just tell me about it?

Linnea: It's one of those bags, where you put your pad into after using them.

Vera: You cannot put them in the toilet.

Molly: They are those kind where you clips.

Linnea: Then they came running into the class with the pad in their hand: Who has got menstruatooooooon!

Lise: With a used pad?

Linnea: Yes, with menstruation on.

Linnea starts out by stating that visible menstruation is just not that cool. Her choice of phrasing and her voice, which speaks with little animation, gave an impression of detached coolness, which was typical for some of the girls, when answering my questions. I read it as a way of distancing themselves from being affected by the discomfort of menstruation, but also as a general attitude of young people, even though we had a positive relation. Typically, the participants voices gained intensity as the stories developed, as here where they shared how some of the boys, that is non-menstruating peers, went into the toilet and found a used pad, which they brought into the classroom, running as they shouted: *Who has got their menstruatooooooon!* To find the used pad they opened the clips to the “Madame Bag” and looked inside and thereby crossed a border, which was not intended to be crossed. When waste is discarded, it is not supposed to circulate among human bodies anymore. The metal construction which closes the Madame bag is meant to ensure this and when the boys re-open it and enable the used pad to return not only to the toilet, but to the classroom, they disturb the organization of matter. Furthermore, the act was intentional, as they did not accidentally drop a used pad. Neither did they stumble upon a used pad on their way to the classroom, but forced the metal clips open and brought the used pad out and into the classroom.

The classroom changes when the bell rings and the teachers leave to have their coffee in the teachers’ room. It becomes a place more similar to the youth club, where high energy, pushing and shouting, and intense communal staring at the screen of a mobile phone alternates. In this space different things are allowed, to what’s allowed during class time, but even in this in-between state of the classroom cum youth-zone, it is an unusual location for a used pad. Nevertheless, here it is now, flying freely in the air, waved back and forth by a hand, which in addition is of a non-menstruating body. The pad is not just a pad, which would also affect the bodies in the room, it is a used pad, which adds to the layers of

affective complexity for what it can do in this uncommon setting. The pad-menstrual-body-matter-non-menstruant-body relation now encounters the air of the classroom and the gaze of the young people, who are present in the room. The relations of pad-with-blood-classroom-teenagers forms an assemblage, which is fueled by a whirlwind of intensity. Jane Bennet discusses how things which appear suddenly command, *“attention in their own right, as existence in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects”* and further writes how these things strike her and provoke affects in her (Bennett, 2010, p. 4). In the same way, the sudden emergence of a used pad in a classroom and the loud sound from the body holding it coerces the young people in the room to look at the “something”, which normally would not be on public view. To bring a used pad into the classroom, *“with menstrual blood on it”* as Rose adds, transgresses not only a border between unclean and clean, but also transgresses the intimacy of menstruation, which has significance for the young menstruants who stressed how menstruation was a “private” matter for them. This also arose when Rose was nervous about anyone listening in the next-door room. If “someone” gazes upon a used pad and connect it to a body, they will encounter not only the transitional and abject state of the pad-with-menstrual fluid, but their gaze will also reveal the transitional state of the body who left the pad behind. The transformation from a child’s body to a body capable of reproduction is an intimate matter, about which many of the girls talked with insecurity and shyness. The used pad can thus be weaponized through its shift of location from intimate concealment to public space and from connected to menstruating body to a body without a uterus, which is safe from bodily association with the abject “something”. The monstrous “something” in the location of the classroom, becomes even more monstrous in its misplaced-ness and thus poses the risk of polluting bodies with uteruses. Ahmed (Ahmed, 2013a) argues that certain affects “stick” to certain bodies. In this way, the discomfort that the used pad out of place awakens sticks to all potential menstruants in the classroom, as they are interpellated as possibly together with the used pad. Because the used pad is detached from the body which menstruated and placed it in the bag, it is now no-one’s pad, which opens the possibility of being any menstruant’s pad. Their capacity to become-with menstruation in ways of concealment and of their own choice, is deprived of them, and they are left with a detached feeling of irritation. In this shift, drawing on all of the above-mentioned affective attachments that the used pad embodies, the used pad in the classroom performs an act of violence towards the young

menstruants, who repeatedly insist in words and practice on keeping menstruation private and concealed.

It is difficult to imagine an adult actively searching out a used pad in a waste bin, to bring it into the office and demand to know who bled on it. The participants' former claim of "the boys" as less emotionally mature, is reflected in the girls' detached response, as they take the mature stance. The "something", which the participants argue is connected to privacy and intimacy, has been brought into the public sphere of the classroom and this transgressional act is talked about by the girls with disbelief and indignation which, when we think about the labour they put into concealment of used pads, makes sense.

Despite the young menstruants' extensive work to conceal used pads, several stories like the above circulated. In connection to one, some boys expressed that used pads ought not to be in school at all:

Linnea: Like, the boys from my class they have also been in and check if one of the other girls had been in there before and then they could like see if she had her menstruation (Rose: Who is next door?) and they thought that we should go home and have it, but you cannot just like do that.

Lise: Did they say....

Molly: That, what did they mean?

Linnea: Right, I overheard them and then they talked to me and said: Couldn't they just do it at home? AND you can't like!

Lise: Like change your pad at home?

Linnea: Yes at home! Then you have to go all the way home from school, just to change your pad. Because they find it disgusting.

Molly: Ej tsss (laughs)

Linnea's story shows how the boys do not only search for used pads in the toilet, but some also follow girls into the school toilet to investigate whether they are menstruating. As Linnea tells us about her experience with boys revealing menstruants, Rose gets anxious that someone is next door and can hear out conversation. This is not a conversation without risk, as the topic is sensitive. In Laura Fingerson's research on youth and menstruation she writes about how the boys make jokes about menstruation and argues that:

“boys joke about their [the girls’] menstruation because of their lack of knowledge and experience, not only because they are being sexist or trying to exert power over girls” (Fingerson, 2006).

Without questioning Fingerson’s conclusion, the data from this study is not so much concerned with the boys’ intentions as what their relations with menstruation, and in this case with the pad-menstrual-body-matter, does to young menstruants. When the boys bring used pads into the classroom or suggest the girls go home to change their pads, it can be seen as an exertion of power over girls’ bodies, and a way of enhancing the masculine dominance of one’s own.

If we consider Turner’s idea of becoming adult through liminality (Turner, 1969), the boys bodily relations with an object of abjection and pollution, as a transgressive act, catapults them in words in their journey towards adulthood. As Dimitis et al. writes: “*disgust becomes the glue in the liminality of the ritual*” (Dimitis, 2018 p. 109). The used pad is a suitable tool for liminality, as the intense affectivity it holds and which is upgraded in the classroom, makes it a powerful weapon for masculinity, not just as a form of distancing from female morphology, but also as a display of courage - of the body who dares to hold hands with the menstros-mounstros and thereby risk contamination. Liminal rituals of young masculinity do not, however, exist in a bubble, but affect young menstruants. As discussed before, the school toilet is a semi-public space, where young menstruants face possible exposure when managing their menstruation. This meant that some young menstruants felt unsafe to a degree where they chose to go home or wait until after school to change their menstruation pads.

### **Becoming-with used pads**

Used pads did not, however, only emerge through stories of concealment, disgust or trouble, but also through joy and potentiality. These ambivalences can be thought about with the figure of the monstrous. The “something” is difficult to place, but at the same time it attracts our gaze by curiosity and fascination (Miller, 2009). In such an ambiguous way, the used pad also circulated joy for some:

Julie: It’s also just sometimes it is lying there. I remember once my younger brother came and told me, my brother is 13 years old, that it was last year one of his classmates, a girl, or it was a group of girls, they found a used pad in that waste bag there and they found it really funny, and I just felt like,

Emil do you know how many, there are quite a few in your class who have it, so I don't understand why it is so funny actually. I mean that you stand there and laugh. Like they have it themselves.

Cecilie: It would be like laughing at their voices, when they go...

Julie: No but it wasn't even my brother, it was the girls who laughed about the used pad in a bag..

Cecilie: was it?

Julie: yes, it was the girls who found it and thought it was funny. My brother also found it funny.

Julie questions why a used pad is a laughing matter. Her arguments draw on normality from majority, as there is a fair number of menstruants in the class. There are multiple examples in the data where fellow young menstruants are framed as "menstrual traitors", and when girls laugh at a used pad it can be considered treason, reflected in Cecilie's surprise at the fact that it was the girls who found the used pad. The girls talk about the event with indignance and wonder, as they take the mature stance in relation to used pads. The conversation capacitates bodies with desire, which means that in the conversation itself, through irritation and discomfort, emerges wondering, questions, exploration and maybe even fascination about the event. As Wendy Rogers and others stress, the abject affects in multiple ways:

"The abject is essentially corporal and hence aligned with the feminine, the procreative, the maternal. Much power of abjection stems from a fear of the unknown, and a fascination with the possibilities inherent in ambiguity" (Komesaroff et al., 1997, p. 230)

The presence of both horror and fascination, of maintenance and disruption, is central to remember, when thinking about the used pad, because it offers possibilities for becoming.

We have seen how the girls work to conceal their pads and how some take the concealment to such a degree that they remove the exposure of used pads from the school and go home. We have also seen how they approach the school management to make their everyday school lives with menstruation easier and how they support each other in conversations about menstruation. All of the above examples operate within the rules of menstrual concealment. In the following, however, Freya and her friends oppose what menstrual scholar Jill Wood has coined as "*the menstrual concealment imperative*" (Wood, 2020),

Freya: I have like those which have something on the sides, so when you open them, you can roll it together and then press it down like and then there is no problem in, then I just throw down there to the side.

Lise: What is it called again, it is like some Julia Sofia<sup>8</sup>...

Amalie: Press n' roll and go!

Gry: Roll, press, go!

Freya: Roll press go! (All chant it rhythmic together and laugh). You roll it, then you press it and then you throw it out!

Gry: Yes, because I cannot understand what it embarrassing about a pad lying in a waste bin, it is like meant for it.

While discussing ways of disposing of the used pads, Freya describes the system she uses. A feature of the most popular brand among the girls is a system that is supposed to ease the disposal of used pads. It works in such a way that the plastic which is wrapped around the individual pad has re-sealable glue on the sides. This enables the user to roll the used pad into the plastic wrapping and then to re-seal it, before disposing of it. The feature is marketed with the slogan: "Roll! Press! Go!" which connotes easy and quick concealment for menstruants on the go. Drawing on Douglas, menstrual scholar Josefin Persdotter argues in her exploration of how menstruation becomes dirt in Sweden, how the act of "rolling" has not been invented by the menstruation company, but is an institutionalized purification practice and that the act of rolling can be seen as,

(...) a ritual of purification that serves to lessen the professed danger of the symbolically polluted waste. Though Libresse argued that the disposal function was "new," the practice of *rolling* the product was positioned by the participants as a taken-for-granted routine of menstrual hygiene that had been around for ages, though using toilet paper was more common than using the pad wrappers (Persdotter, 2022, pp. 120, 121).

Similarly, the participants in this study all took for granted the practice of rolling their used pad in either the piece of plastic from their next pad or in toilet paper, before disposing of it.

---

<sup>8</sup> Julia Sofia is a well known Danish You Tube star, who have collaborated extensively with a large menstruation product company.

Lee and Sasser-Coen and others with them (Kissling, 2006; Røstvik, 2022) have argued how menstrual products are entangled in capitalist and misogynist logics, as they assist menstruants with concealment and “decontamination” and thereby benefit from menstrual discomfort. Thereby, the specific materiality of menstrual products, like technology for easy “rolling” and aesthetics which promote “freshness”, position menstruation as dirty and aim at the protection of exposing others - non-menstruants - from the potential pollution from menstrual body-matter (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996, p. 68). What is noticeable is how the girls are critical as they make fun of the slogan by saying it in silly voices and chanting it repeatedly, despite their appreciation of the technology and their participation in the ritual of purification through “rolling”(Persdotter, 2022). In addition to mockingly chanting, Gry furthermore opposes total concealment, as she shares her puzzlement about why it is embarrassing that a pad should be in a waste bin, which is made for waste.

While the girls go through a great deal of work to conceal their menstrual waste, they still display a great deal of critique towards a concealment practice. The ambiguity of the young menstruants reflects an interesting paradox of saying one thing and doing something else, which can be seen throughout the body of data. I will unpack this as an overarching tendency, in a later chapter. In relation to the used pad, the ambiguity can be teased out further by exploring the used pad beyond a dualistic economy, where difference is not a negative but rather intensity. The used pad in its monstrous and abject form offers possibilities, rather than closing them down as a sign of stigma, like the clips of a Madame bag. What does following the affective flows that carry the used pad through all the aforementioned assemblages, enable us to conclude about menstruation and bodily becoming? “Irritation”, either as a literal statement or as sighs and moans, was a frequent response to menstrual bleeding, or to transgressive menstrual events, like when adults did not acknowledge menstrual discomfort or when boys brought used pads into the classroom. The girls’ statement of irritation in the case above, was accompanied by sighs and a low intensity, almost resigned, tone of voice. Still, the girls’ shared irritation made waves through the menstruation-assemblage. When a mosquito irritates your ear, you hit it, and in the same way, Josefine’s discomfort, her irritation, disgust and alienation, capacitated her to ask the school to install Madame Bags. By asking the school to cater to her and fellow menstruants’ needs, Josefine can share her menstrual story with pride during the interview and thus she becomes-with the used pad courageous, an entrepreneur, an acting subject,

rather than emerging through sexed connections of discomfort, disgust and waste. In this way, the monstrous used pad, imperatively concealed, becomes a site that enables menstrual visibility when Josefine engages the school management in a menstrual conversation. Becoming-with the used pad means Josefine's resistance and potentiality is made possible. In the same way, Linnea becomes-with the used pad, as she takes a critical stance against normative relations to used pads. She comments critically on how used pads are considered polluting matter in regular waste bins. With her friends, she mockingly chants "Roll! Press! Go!" Elsewhere, participants also criticized tampon ads as being unreliable in their portrayal of menstrual happiness and the girls had a general critical relation to menstruation advertisements. Seen in this light, the chanting can be read as a critical mocking of the commercialization of the concealment imperative. Instead of menstruation as dirty and the menstrual discomfort the brand draws on, the girls become together with the used pad through affective responses of irritation-joy-excitement.

Like this, the participants do not solely emerge through affective responses of shame and silence, but very much through displays of discomfort in the form of intense irritation and disgust. The latter holds intense affectivity, which pushes them to ask for things to be different. The used pad in the waste bin or in the classroom leaves those with menstrual cycles vulnerable. The opening this vulnerability creates enables the ability to affect and to be affected and the capacity to desire change, resulting in the girls' action towards more livable lives with menstruation. Through their critiques and wishes, they emerge as desiring subjects with capacities to act for things to be better (Braidotti, 2011). In this way, the intensity, which the used pad circulates and the assemblage of difference that it becomes through, holds potential for the girls to become-with the used pad beyond difference as negative

As this chapter has explored, the used pad emerges as specific materiality through stories of disposal and trouble with placement and how this trouble stems from the undefinable character of the used pad as a particular kind of sexed waste and as a human-non-human thing, which can be thought about through the monstrous. Bodily becomings with this "something" of monstrosity, through a specific circulation of affects, capacitates bodies by creating sites for impossibilities or possibilities for bodily becoming-more – for some. The extracts from interviews and field notes, which are brought forward in this chapter, are of

those who speak about the used pad and how it has emerged through events of acting and – even though irritated or disgusted – some kind of self-confidence. This becomes possible within the menstruation-friendly space, which was established during the interview, while another space might not offer the possibility to actualize the critiques put forward. Bodily becoming-with the used pad can be becoming-with disgust, alienation and irritation. These are however all affectivities which in their circulation can affect bodies to do more and to have more potential for a liveable life – to some degree and for some.

The following chapter explores how young menstruants-body-tampon relations matter to everyday life with menstruation, as well as ideas about bodies and sexuality.

*Chapter 6:*

## THE TAMPON

## Introduction: Tampons are scary

“Nothing about menstruation makes adolescent girls more nervous than tampons.” (Fingerson, 2006, p. 24)

Do you think I’m nasty, when I pull my red thread? I do not change every other hour, because I cannot afford it that often. As long as they are exploiting me, when my uterus releases eggs, then I’ll protest and demand money, in terms of tampon allowances (Kvindeballadegruppen, 1977)<sup>9</sup>

Vaginal tampons, what Sharra L. Vostral calls: *(...) a uniquely gendered technology to absorb menstrual fluid (...)* (Vostral, 2020, p. 673) are cotton or rayon rocket-shaped rolls that have a string sewn through them for easier removal. They are designed for internal use, where they absorb menstrual fluid, before it exits the body. Unused tampons are compressed and almost hard, but become softer, dilate and increase in size during absorption of menstrual and vaginal fluid. To ease insertion, the most frequently used tampons in Denmark have a plastic or cardboard applicator, while others are inserted by fingers only. The applicator has been used in marketing tampons to young girls, by underlining how it does not destroy the “hymen” and how insertion is made possible without fingers touching the vulva (Samvirke, 1980). In Denmark, various brands of tampons are widely available. Those who can afford can buy tampons in supermarkets, pharmacies and corner shops, where they normally come in three different sizes: “Mini”, “Regular” and “Super”, which match their absorption ability. Automatic tampon dispensers are not common in Denmark, as seen in other countries.

Among experienced menstruants in Denmark, tampons are a popular option, while insertion of tampons challenges younger menstruants. Tampons and menstrual cups are far from the research participant’s menstrual product of choice. As mentioned, most of the participants consider pads the default option when relating to their menstrual flow. Still, tampons emerged as significant to the organization of the girl-body-menstruation-assemblage. A few of the girls used tampons, some girls wanted to use them, but were affected by discomfort

---

<sup>9</sup> Synes du at jeg er ækel, når jeg trækker i min røde tråd? Jeg skifter ikke hver anden time, for så ofte har jeg ikke råd. Så længe de udnytter mig, når min livmoder løsner æg, så protesterer jeg og kræver penge, i form af O.B.-tillæg (Kvindeballadegruppen, 1977)

from the mere thought of it, while others clearly detested the idea with a strong rigor. No matter if tampons were in actual intra-action with bodies or merely virtual, they mattered to the young menstruants' bodily subjectivities. As mentioned earlier, I always brought an assortment of menstruation products to the table when meeting with the participants for interviews, and through this I brought tampons and menstrual cups into the conversation, even though it was not an everyday materiality in the participants' lives. However, I did not put the tampons on the table until the girls brought them up in conversation themselves. To make sense of what happens when tampons enter the girl-menstruation-assemblage, this chapter traces the various relations of tampons as they emerged in conversations with the girls.

Through time, tampons have been marketed as a thing of freedom. As mentioned above, freedom from finger-vulva intra-action, freedom to be physically active, freedom from odor and leakage. Tampon advertisement discourse hints towards the freedom from being a menstruant at all. As Vostral puts it: *"Tampons have come to belong to a liberation toolbox, providing a means for physical mobility and bodily freedom in a society where menstruation has neither been privileged nor celebrated."* (Vostral, 2020, p. 673). Vostral further argues how menstruation products are designed with the intention of making menstruating bodies "pass" as non-menstruating bodies (Vostral, 2008), confirming the leaky body as undesirable.

The young menstruants of this study were however skeptical of the discourse of tampons as happiness and bodily ease that tampon companies push, and the emergence of the tampon in the girl-menstruation assemblage circulates entirely different affectivities. Julie here shares her views on an advertisement for tampons:

Yes, and then she is like 'With Tampax, my menstruation does not stand in the way. Now, I can go to the beach every day and be sure about something...something'. And there is also a girl trying on clothes in completely white pants.

Julie talks in a sarcastic and critical tone, while her friends nod their heads in agreement. Some of them roll their eyes. They do not recognize the uncomplicated and joyful portrayal of menstruating and tampon use. Their skepticism of the promising discourse of freedom from the trouble of menstruation aligns with how only a handful of the participating girls

used tampons on a regular basis, and thus their experience did not resonate with the bodily capacities portrayed in an affective field of comfort and joy in the advertisements. Rather than sensing the sweet smell of freedom, the majority of the girls expressed discomfort about merely considering using a tampon. One of the general worries prompted by tampon use was the link to possible health risks. As Josefine explains:

I have been told that tampons are not especially good for you and you can get cancer and all kinds of things. When I was a baby I had a diaper rash.

Clara and Elizabeth agree. They too are uncomfortable with tampon use:

Clara: Im scared...I don't like the thought of tampons.

Elizabeth: No, me neither.

Clara: I don't know why, I just really don't.

As I asked the girls about possible reasons for their discomfort, Josefine, Clara, Elizabeth and others were all vague and unable to identify any direct reasons, e.g. previous (bad) experiences, for their dislike of thinking about tampons. None of the participants above had actual bodily experiences with tampons, other than holding a tampon in their hands. Josefine has heard "*something*" about it being bad, and connects tampons to cancer, and then connects it to the diaper rash she had as a baby. In this way, she connects tampons to possible health risks, which have been discussed in recent years, where activists have brought attention to the lack of regulation of harmful chemicals in tampons and other menstruation products (Bobel, 2010; Delaney et al., 1988). Clara just does not like the thought of tampons. They scare her, and she finds it difficult to say why, which might point towards the general challenge of talking about genitals and menstruation. One way to make sense of the participants' general fear of tampons is to consider the history of "Toxic Shock Syndrome" (TSS) (Delaney et al., 1988; Fingerson, 2006; Prendergast, 1994). As tampon technology advanced up through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some fabricants started to use a super-absorbent material, which resulted in several menstruants getting sick and dying from TSS in the early 80s (Delaney et al., 1988; Vostral, 2008). Fingerson's (2006) study of young people and menstruation, showed how the fear of TSS was one of the reasons for young menstruants' aversion to tampons, and argues how the medical authority of the diagnosis

serves as a valid argument for the girls in her study to avoid tampon use. The research participants of this study knew of TSS, without referring to it by name or to the actual medical implications. Some of them mentioned a more recent incident, where an American model had her leg amputated due to TSS-related complications. They did not, however, link fear of TSS directly to their discomfort with tampons, but rather referred to tampons simply being “*bad for you*” or a health risk in general. Some mentioned the issue of chemical content in tampons and the importance of buying only organic ones. The vagueness in the participants’ answers about tampon use prompted me to ask questions more directly, which resulted in them being more specific about their discomfort with tampon use:

Lise: But can I ask one last question? Can we return to, what you said before about not using tampons?

Kamma: Well I don’t feel like it, and then I am just like, like the thought of standing there and rummaging around up there and then it bleeds and then there is blood all over the place...

Nanna: hmmm hnmhm

Kamma: And then when you stand then you are like then you stand and rummage around and then it gets on your thigh and then you have to rinse off anyway, just the thought of that string might also go (*ryge der op*) up there and then you cannot get it out and then you are like, then it is just like stuck, so you are just like no thanks! I do NOT want to chance it! Or, you just make a really long string, so it goes all the way down your thigh...I’m going to bind a long piece of yarn!

One of Kamma’s worries has to do with mess. She is worried that she will get menstrual fluid on her hands and thighs while handling a tampon. She says she feels uncomfortable just thinking about “messaging” or “rummaging” around up there<sup>10</sup> and “*blood being all over*”. Kamma relates tampons to a lack of control of menstrual body-matter, which stands in contrast to the intention of the marketing of the product. She also mentions how the mere thought of the tampon string going “*up there*” and “*being stuck*” worries her to such a degree that she will not risk it. It is thus not just the specific consistency of menstrual body-matter that emerges as (more) uncontrollable with a tampon, it is also the tampon-body relation which Kamma imagines can get out of control. She does not want to risk this loss of control and fantasizes jokingly about a long piece of yarn to secure a possible tampon’s

---

<sup>10</sup> In Danish she says “*at rage der oppe*”.

return. From listening to Kamma and several other participants' similar worries of disappearing tampons, it creates an image of a vast space of "up there", where hands get lost and tampons disappear in a messy chaos of blood. The girl's insecurity about their genital anatomy shines through when they relate virtually to tampons. Their worries and wording gives the impression that a vagina and vulva, which in their emic terms are called "down there" or simply "the hole", leads inside the body and then there seems to be little knowledge of what happens and where a tampon might go. The participants displayed sparse or no knowledge of the cervix, and how there is no passage for tampons to enter the uterus. They did also not have knowledge of the depth of their vagina or of vaginas in general.

There is no research to support whether some of the girls' lack of knowledge of female genital anatomy reflects a larger tendency within Danish youth. There is, however, Danish research which shows how a large proportion of Danish youth and especially girls are dissatisfied with their body and that this affects their everyday lives negatively (Dahl et al., 2018) - how experiences of and with the body matters to possibilities of "thriving" in Danish schools (Justenborg, 2021). Several international studies (Fingerson, 2006; Rembeck & Hermansson, 2008; Rembeck et al., 2006) have concluded how the level of girls' knowledge about their body and especially their reproductive system and genitalia is lacking. In addition, Johnston-Robledo and others with them (Fingerson, 2006; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Prendergast, 1994) have argued how some girls lacking body literacy is connected to discomfort with tampon use, as this causes blind spots and worries of what might happen, similar to the participants in this study.

Anatomical blind spots and the impossibility of naming one's body, might feed the participants' ideas about tampons getting lost "up there". This reflects Newton's study of youth and menstrual discourse, where she similarly notices how, "*The fear of tampons getting lost, or stuck in the body, is linked to ideas about the size and capacity of the vagina.*" (Newton, 2016, p. 84). In other terms, one could say that the lack of body literacy creates a space for affective flows of discomfort in the form of worry, insecurity and fear that together organize a specific girl-body-menstruation-assemblage. Young menstruating bodies' capacities are shaped through this discomfort, as it decides what they can and

cannot do. As we will explore next, this discomfort extends to worries of pain that, among other things, are fueled by tampon horror stories.

### The pain and horror of tampons

For many participants the tampon seemed like a mythical thing. Some had never handled or even touched a tampon before I brought them into the interview space, where they explored them with curiosity. For some young menstruants, like Alice, who we will meet again later, tampon discomfort emerged from actual painful bodily relations with tampons. Insertion, withdrawal and usage of tampons (or menstrual cups) can indeed be a painful experience if not done correctly, for example if the vagina is dry or if used during menstrual cramps. But for many of the young menstruants, worries of pain travelled through hearsay that sometimes took on the form of menstrual horror stories:

Lise: How about you Mie, what are your thoughts?

Mie: Eeehhmm...

Lise: I mean, it's not because there is something wrong about not wanting to use tampons, it's just out of curiosity...

Mie: I think it would hurt, if you didn't do it right. And I do not want to put myself in that situation.

Isabella: Apropos not doing it right, one of my friends from when I was three years old did.... She had to try it, because she was on vacation and then she stuck it...she tried to stick a tampon up where you pee!

Mie: Nooo!

Isabella: And she was standing and she came crying to her mother and was like: I don't understand why it hurts this much and I don't know what I've done wrong! And then the mother said...

Lise: How old is she?

Isabella: She is one year older than us, she is 14 and she had to try it for the first time and then the mother she said: Do you want me to help you? And she was just like: No I do not want help from you! And then the mother she was just like, where are you sticking it up? And then: In the first hole! And then she was like, it's in number two, try number two! (Everyone laughs)

Mie (13 years old) fears how "not doing it right" might cause pain, and Isabella (13 years old) supports Mie's worry by sharing a painful tampon event she knows of. The story causes

the stirring of girl's bodies around the table accompanied by loud exclamations of disbelief, laughter and raised intensity in the room. The thought of how a lack of tampon-insertion skills might result in pain and humiliation affects the girls with horror, which is enhanced by the humiliating thought of the mother as deeply involved in the daughter's body.

Furthermore, the thought of insertion in the urinal orifice, which in contrast to the vaginal orifice is not designed for entrance of any kind, makes this a situation where body-tampon-relations emerge as extreme and grotesque (Bakhtin et al., 1968; Russo, 1986).

Pain related to tampon use was for some caused by the confusion of orifices and unknown and abstract ideas of (the girl's own) genitalia, but even for experienced tampon users, tampons might circulate expectations of menstruation-related pain.

Ester: Doesn't it hurt like crazy to get a tampon up in...

Alice: Yes, it hurts like crazy! (Everybody laughs)

Isabella: My sister screamed!

Mie: I do not think it hurts. I mean I don't have any problem with it, but as I said, me and the girls from the swim team have also talked quite openly about it.

Lise: Have they shown you how to do it?

Mie: No, but we have like talked and then they have said: And then it is a good idea to place one leg on the toilet seat (Everybody laughs, because Mie is now standing up and showing how while making a funny face)

Lise: You are making a face, what does it mean?

Mie: Nothing just (Makes a strenuous sound). No but we just give each other tips and stuff like that.

Lise: Like the placing your leg on the toilet seat?

Mie: Yes it is like, I just don't really have a problem with it.

In the two excerpts, the tampon-related discomfort has moved from more abstract undefined health risk, to the fear of lost control over menstrual body-matter and the body-tampon relation, to actual or virtual direct bodily intra-actions with tampons and possible resulting pain. Ester asks if it hurts to *"get a tampon up"* and Alice confirms with intensity, *"Yes it really hurts"* to which everybody laughs. The way Alice says it and how this affects the other participants might resemble the specific way young people talk about being affected by disgust (Allred & Fox, 2017) - as a way to efficiently distance oneself from what

might be contagious and might make one vulnerable, and to raise intensity in a group and assert oneself through this. Vera continues in the same intense style of storytelling as Alice by sharing how her sister screamed, presumably of pain, when inserting a tampon. Then Mie breaks the horror-session as she explains that her own bodily relations with tampons are not painful. She explains the absence of pain as resulting from the knowledge she has gained from her swim teammates. The more experienced menstruating swimmers have shared with her how to raise one leg on the toilet seat, to ease the insertion. Mie's experience as a swimmer correlates with another participant who also shared how her comfort with tampons stems from the teachings of her swimming teammates. Both of them are at home in a space where tampons are, and have been for decades, common practice and thus part of menstrual knowledge, which is shared among swimmers, even younger ones. In this way the swimming pool changing room can be seen as a space of possibilities, where Isabella and other young menstruants can be offered not only practical knowledge about tampon use, but also a space where there is no intense affective relations connected to tampon use. For the rest of the girls, this knowledge and naturalization of tampon use was harder to access, and despite Isabella's relaxed attitude, she seems to adapt to the different menstruation-tampon-assemblage during the interview, where affectivity circulates with more intensity, as she makes a strained face. Other participants who were more experienced tampon users still participated in the sharing of horror stories of pain even though they, as with Isabella, were not affected with discomfort themselves. The tampon holds the potential to offer a good story, which might affect bodies with delightful shock, horror and laughter that can be used for self-assertion and social glue, whether or not it matches the experiences of the narrator.

To conclude her story, Mie shrugs her shoulders and directs her gaze away from the group, as she repeats the disarming statement that she "*does not really have a problem with it*". Other tampon using participants like Mie, seemed to find it equally necessary to address their choice to diverge from default pad use. The practice of some explaining or disarming their tampon use is interesting to follow up on, and the following section sheds light on how it mattered for the girls to engage with affective disarmament in regards to their tampon use. In the excerpt above, Mie perhaps tries to turn down the excitement of horror and affective intensity and close down the conversation, as she looks away and claims that it is

not a matter to be concerned with. In this way, she distances herself from the drama of the tampon, so that it does not implicate her and her body.

Some participants who were used to tampons, replaced their initial fear of insertion with fear of containing and removal. Forgetting a tampon inside one's body can be a health hazard as the girls illustrate with the anecdote of the amputee. Disgust is however also prompted by the risk of the body remaining in intra-action with a tampon and thus remaining open and more-than-human. Body-tampon relations do not only stop menstrual fluid by closing a gateway of the body, looked at differently, it also keeps the body open by being present as a non-human thing. The body-tampon relation enacts bodily porosity and the nomadic, bodily and more-than-human subjectivity that comes from it, disturbing the idea of "being". Furthermore, as Jenny mentioned in a previous chapter when speaking of nosebleeds, the thought of blood re-entering the body causes discomfort, and similarly the idea of menstrual body-matter being kept inside the body, speaks against how some participants stated that they considered menstruation as a purification process. This aligns with past and present beliefs of menstrual blood as dirty and the ridding of it as a purification of the body (Buckly, 1988). Intentionally keeping something which is considered dirty by some, inside the body, might also explain the circulation of intense feelings of disgust connected to tampons and why some of the girls felt the urge to extend justifications for their tampon use.

### The used tampon

The horror stories of tampons extended from pain and humiliation, to the thought of someone encountering one's used tampon, as Isabella, Ester, Mie and Alice discuss in the following:

Isabella: Right, I use a tampon so that's very easy, it takes up no space, you can just shove it up your sleeve so...

Ester: What did you do then, with the used?

Mie: (Inaudible sound)

Alice: In the bag? What if there is someone after you, that comes in and checks?

Isabella: I mean, there is paper around that and then you can put the old one into it, because then you cannot see just as clearly, because it is gross. I hate it.

Lise: what is gross, the applicator or?

Isabella: No the old, the old.

Lise: The old tampon?

Mie: (Expressive gagging and vomit sounds) EEEW SO GROSS!

The relatively small size of the tampon makes it easier to conceal, but discomfort emerges in the group with talk of being exposed as a menstruant, if someone notices the used tampon in the toilet bin. While pads are marketed with solutions for discrete disposal and most young menstruants quickly become routinized in disposal of used pads, tampons however are not in the same way part of well-known menstrual routines. Some girls would flush it, while other were disturbed to hear that they did not know this was harmful to the drainage system and the environment. The Madame Bag emerge exclusively in talk of used pads. There was no taken-for-granted place for tampon disposal, which made it even harder to place and therefore dispose of, than the used pad. As discussed in the previous chapter, disposable menstrual products become something else through body and menstrual body-matter relations. As tampons fulfill their purpose, they shapeshift, change texture, color, smell, and become other than a bleached white clean thing, as they morph into a hard-to-place post-human monstrous something. Used tampons therefore seem to hold the same potential for affective intensity as used pads but, as I will argue, even more intense affects circulate and stick to tampons through their material specificities and relations with the inside of human bodies. This might explain why it prompts Mie's violently performative gagging, and why thinking about a used tampon affects with more intensity than the general displays of disgust relating to the used pad.

### Tampons inside or exiting the body

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how tampon discomfort is connected to lack of bodily knowledge and fear of failing tampon insertion. However, if successful with the insertion of a tampon, the girls' worries did not end. Another worry that travelled with and between the girls was similarly connected to lack of bodily knowledge, but in contrast to insertion, these worries were concerned with how to remove the tampon, as I touched upon before, to the fear of forgetting it "inside".

Lise: Have you ever heard any stories about menstruation?

Karoline: Like I have two and I don't know whether they are like myths, but the thing about that you couldn't walk for the first two days and then the thing about, I haven't gotten tampon yet and I am not really afraid of it, but still a bit, yes because it isn't really quite. It isn't like using a pad. Eh, I am a little scared like, if you can say it like that.

Lise: Yes., but why, what have you heard about using tampons?

Luisa: Just that if they stay put for too long, it hurts badly!

Karoline: Someone else I went to swimming with, she also said that one time she had been in the showers and then it was when she just had her menstruation and then she sat down like and then she had like given birth (laughs) to a tampon, because she forgot to remove it and I just thought that was mega disgusting and I was like (vomit sounds and laughing). I was like (vomit sounds).

Luisa: Yes, but it is also just like, you forget to remove it and then it is just like sitting there.

Karoline: Yes, but it was also the first time I used a tampon, I found it a bit scary, but now personally I think it is much nicer.

Lise: What was scary about it?

Karoline: Like sticking it up! (Everybody laughs). But like, now my body has like gotten used to it and I cannot really feel it, when I have one of those in or what it is you say, but I am always extremely scared that I will forget it, if I'm doing one thing or another and forget about time and then it is just like, if it is the last days and there isn't that much (blood), then it is just..ehhm...and then I am scared that I forget about it. And then I have to get my leg amputated!

(Everyone laughs)

Lise: It sounds like there are some scary things about using tampons

Karoline: Yes, that is how I always feel, most people when they have just gotten their menstruation, then it is just pads and then one time there was something about Sundhedstyrelsen, I played momio all the time one, it was this game where you had a small figure and then it was like a social media for children like, and then some girl who had posted like really lame like "I have menstruation ha ha (Said with a stupid sounding voice) and then someone wrote, you can just use a tampon, and then she wrote like, no because the Sundhedsstyrelsen recommend that you do not use a tampon before the age of 15 and that is just, I have been thinking about it for crazy long time, because like what, as if your hole (laughs) wasn't ready or something strange (laughs), but then I found out it wasn't true. Fake news.

When I inquire these participants about possible stories of menstruation, the conversation becomes about how the used tampon leaves the body and how it re-enters the outside world. The thought of someone “giving birth” to a bloody tampon causes intense disgust, which Karoline, similarly to Mie in the previous paragraph, expresses by making vomiting sounds repeatedly. If we follow Kristeva (1982), Karoline and Mie’s performative vomiting can be seen as an enacted expulsion of abject matter from their bodies, in the same way as the girl who births a tampon expels a human-non-human and “*unheimlich*”; that which was close and intimate is now an uncanny thing revealed to the public (Freud et al., 2003). Even though Karoline is a swimmer and intimately knows about tampon use, the thought of a bloody tampon leaving a body in the semi-public space of the pool showers, serves as a menstrual horror story to her, which she feels like sharing. Earlier in this chapter, the removal of a bloody tampon was connected to fear of loss of control over menstrual body-matter, so that it might touch “*all over*” or the body. As the vagina is the active force of expulsion, there is no blood on fingers or thighs and it is the relation of abjection and what is abjected which circulate disgust. The “thing” first: The used tampon is similar to the used pad - warped in shape and color. Menstrual body-matter-cotton relations makes it a thing both human and non-human and as it travels between the outside and the inside of bodies, it is challenging to both category and organization, which places it within many layers of menstrual dirt which is expelled from the body. A bloody tampon, which moves and intra-acts with the vagina, down through the vulva and then is “born” in a semi-public space is a monstrous baby indeed, which can only cause affective responses among a group of young people. Without having the empirical support, I imagine the event would affect older people as well, but there is still the specificity of young menstruants being novices to menstruation, the vaginal orifice, the thought of reproduction and adult sexuality. Furthermore, to avoid possible contamination and ultimately in a worst-case scenario, being considered abject themselves and socially isolated, it makes sense to distance themselves from abjectivity, by expressive displays of how the public birthing of an abject matter affects them with discomfort.

In addition to the monstrosity of the “thing” - the used tampon - which is expelled, it is worth noting how there are no active fingers assisting the birth of the tampon. As the body births the tampon, the vagina-vulva is transformed from a passive, unknown and mythical

orifice into an active agent, which changes the tampon from active penetrator into a thing, which is passive and possessed. German feminist Bini Adamczak suggests the term “*circlusion*” as an antonym for penetration, which means the active encircling, engulfing, encompassing or pushing of something, (Adamczak, 2016). Thinking with the concept of circlusion invites us to speculate about the vagina beyond being a passive orifice (or a “*hole*” as the participant’s emic term goes). To the contrary, the circluding vagina is active - it holds, it pushes and it is forceful and in this way intensity and (sexual) power is (re)established in bodies of female morphology. Like this, circlusion can also be the desire of the body to expel what is no longer of use, like a used tampon. Similarly, to Adamczak, American feminist Andrea Dworkin, wonders about how the concept of “*possession*” is missing as an imperative of heterosexual sex:

Remarkably, it is not the man who is considered possessed in intercourse, even though he (his penis) is buried inside another human being; and his penis is surrounded by strong muscles that contract like a fist shutting tight and release with a force that pushes hard on the tender thing, always so vulnerable no matter how hard. He is not possessed even though his penis is gone—disappeared inside someone else, enveloped, smothered, in the muscled lining of flesh that he never sees, only feels, gripping, releasing, gripping, tighter, harder, firmer, then pushing out: and can he get out alive? (Dworkin, 1997, pp. 80-81)

In Dworkin’s thinking there is a shift from the vagina as passive to active, which also speaks to how American science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin (Le Guin, 1986) considers how the “*container*” and the “*recipient*” has not been rendered more valuable in the grand narratives of (hu)man, which results from phallogocentric thinking centering penetration as the significant gesture of all times. In the light of these speculations, which radically change how we can think about bodies and belief systems, the question arises of why it is not the tampon, but the body, that is considered as having something done to it. For example, the tampon could be seen as being received, contained, circluded and pushed out. The tampon, in its phallic resemblance, is rather connected to “*sticking*” and “*nastiness*”. Choosing to describe the vaginal expulsion of a used tampon as a “*birth*” matters to how the body and the tampon emerge together in an affective assemblage organized by disgust of the “*monstrous feminine*” (Ussher, 2006). In medieval days menstrual sex was connected to so called “*monstrous births*”, which refer to children being born with deformed bodies:

The early church fathers forbid coitus during a woman's menstrual period, and, although abstinence is also required during pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, it is intercourse during menstruation that seems to have the most severe consequences. Early medieval penitentials claim, for example, that conception during menstruation would result in a hideously deformed child. (McCracken & Karras, 2003, p. 63).

Professor in English Josie Campell, furthermore cites an early biblical text stating that: "*women in their uncleanness will bear monsters.*" (Campbell, 1986). This is not to argue that the participants have been exposed to religious scriptures, but birthing is still a knowledge field, which is reserved for professional and the actual people giving birth. This means that for young people, giving birth speaks into the uncanniness of reproduction and the parts of the female body morphology, which are not made visible by institutionalized femininity.

### Tampon-youth-(hetero)sexuality assemblages

As discussed above, the used tampon and the relations of human-non-human materialities, and their disturbing of the organization of things, affected the girls with discomfort. Another material specificity of the tampon, which still needs to be addressed is its phallic shape and its purpose of insertion/penetration and thus its relations to ideas of heterosexuality. In the following outtake Ester puts it simply:

Ester: I just think it sounds a bit nasty to stick something up.

Camilla: That one is proper thick! (holding a tampon)

Ester: Also with tampons, I just think and I believe, it really sounds like it hurts, I feel.

Alice: Yes, me too.

Ester: But you say it doesn't hurt, but...

Isabella: I do not think it hurts.

Mie: I think it fucking hurts!

Camilla: But it is also nasty in some way!

Ester: If you just stick something up!

Isabella: But it came naturally to me, because all...

Alice: You had to do it!

Ester: Yes!

Alice: You like had no choice.

Mie: No.

The mere idea of inserting “something” into the body filled many of the girls with discomfort. As Mie concluded her story with a disarming comment about her tampon use, so this excerpt ends with a smoothing out of the conflictual beginning, where Ester shares how she finds it “nasty” to “*just stick something up there*”. In Danish “something” translates into “*something random*”. This might point towards penetration of the body simply being “nasty” or that the tampon emerges as a thing not suitable for insertion. As a potentially harmful and alien body. The act of inserting a “*random thing*” into one’s body is considered “*nasty in some way*”. The nastiness is not defined or explained, but can however be associated with sexual discourse, where it is used as an ambiguous term like “dirty”, which is not solely negative, but meant to be arousing. Just think about the countless pop culture products, like porn movies and music, which play on this (Commane, 2020). Ester says “nasty” with a wrinkled nose, connoting some kind of unpleasantness. It might be the transgression of bodily boundaries, and not just any boundary, but one that is organized in an assemblage of sexuality and age, which the reference to the size of the tampon might hint to. It might also address the possibility of pain.

As explored earlier, youth-sexuality-assemblages are often organized affective intra-weavements of disgust, shame, desire and joy. Young people who are reaching puberty are in many ways in-between, including with respect to sexuality as they are discovering a new way of relating to sex and to their bodily subjectivities as sexual (Fox & Alldred, 2013; Rembeck & Hermansson, 2008; Rice, 2018; Roberts, 2015). When the tampon enters the youth-menstruation-assemblage, its phallic shape and its purpose of vaginal insertion associates with hetero sex and thereby the affectivities which stick to this. As discussed in a previous chapter, both the school and the youth club were spaces marked by (hetero)sexuality, like displays of heterosexual porn movies and gifs in the classroom or on Snapchat, and juvenile graffiti depicting male genitals. The young people furthermore enacted sexual encounters, as part of dancing or playing.

Other research (Bobier, 2020) has shown how young people use heterosexualized language when talking about tampon use. Like the participants in this study, Bobier's participants talked about how one has to feel "ready" before using a tampon -a term which is usually deployed when talking about the first sexual encounter with another human. Bobier concludes from this that the girls "*associate the penetration of a penis into the vagina, with the insertion of a tampon*" (Ibid.; p. 309). The relation between heterosexuality and tampons shaped some of the participants' mothers' advice against using tampons before "*having had sex*". A couple of mothers directly forbade their daughters from using tampons before "*having had sex*". When I inquired more about this "having sex", the girls hinted towards it being penetrative sex with a body with a penis. The logic behind this prohibition is that the penis is the "natural" breaker of the imagined physical hymen (Lange Thomsen & Senderovitz, 2017). As Kamma says, when we discuss using tampons,

Kamma: I think it is easier when you have like...

Nanna: Experience?

Kamma: No, when you have like lost your virginity, because then it doesn't hurt as much (giggles)

Kamma speculates that it makes sense to wait to use tampons until after having "*lost one's virginity*", because then "*it doesn't hurt as much*". More girls had this idea about the existence of the hymen as a seal to be "taken" or "broken" and that the "right" way for this to happen was to have penetrative sex with a person with a penis. Other than being supported by the mothers' prohibition, this logic was partly made possible because of the girls' body illiteracy, which led to some of them imagining an incorrect anatomy of the hymen as solid and rigid (Lange Thomsen & Senderovitz, 2017).

Sharra L. Vostral mentions how the question of tampons and hymens came up in the early tampon tests in the USA, where it was feared that tampons "*(...) were threatening the virginity of pubescent girls by breaking the hymen (a task purportedly for a husband on a wedding night)*". (Vostral, 2020, p. 678). This fear of improper hymen-breakage thus folds back in time and transgresses space. In regard to ideas of pain and virginity it is also interesting how the imagined or virtual pain connected to "*losing ones virginity*" as a result of a heterosexual sex act seemed to be more accepted by the girls, than the imagined pain connected to using a tampon. This seems illogical, since many tampons are smaller-sized

than the average penis and can be inserted in the safety and comfort of one's own company and possibly under the guidance of a trusted friend, family member or an experienced menstruant.

Another affective discomfort that travels in the youth-menstruation-tampon assemblage is related to ideas of proper heterosexual behavior and youth sexuality. Prominent gynecologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wrote about the dangers of how, "(...) [t]ampons may be left inside even by the intelligent women (Oats & Abraham, 2015, p. 72), or as gynecologist Thomas Jeffcoate worried:

(...) in young girls they [tampons] may arouse unfavorable reactions such as a morbid interest in the genital organs, masturbation and revulsion. They are, however, harmless in the normal woman (Jeffcoate 1957, p. 88 cited in Laws, 1990, p. 141).

The general idea of tampons being "bad" for young girls, and the distinction from them as "*normal women*" does not only relate to illogical ideas of anatomy, but are also connected to a general idea of youth, especially those with female morphology, and sexuality.

Fingerson found in her research that:

"To use tampons, girls must touch their genitalia and be intimately familiar with their own vaginal anatomy. It requires girls to touch and manipulate "down there", which is something the girls were neither taught nor encouraged to do. Many of the girls expressed discomfort with tampon use, and thus they rely on pads. The girls' lack of cognitive and subjective knowledge about their bodies not only affects their sexual power and safety, but has direct and often painful and frustrating effects on their management of menstruation" (Fingerson, 2006, p. 25).

Fingerson's research is situated in a different time and place, and among older teenagers, whose everyday lives are different from those of the participants in this research. Still it resonates with the participants' lack of intimate knowledge of their own bodies and the lack of encouragement to get to know one's body intimately and/or use tampons. As Denmark is a moderately secular country with a cultural narrative of being sexually liberated it is interesting how the mothers' ownership over their daughters' bodies increased when tampons entered the menstrual assemblage. By advising against or forbidding tampons, the mothers somehow protected the daughters' hymens, which does not match the general idea of bodily autonomy of white Danish upper-middle class girls. As mentioned, research within a Danish context has however shown that young girls are shamed for being sexually

active and that sexualizing is used to shame young girls (Dahl et al., 2018). The connection that the girls and some of the mothers made between the tampon and the penis meant that the tampon was sexualized in a way that, because of mythical ideas of the hymen and ideals of sexual morality, made it improper for young menstruants to use.

The myth of the hymen as an unbroken seal, which must be “broken” in a certain way, is so strong that it becomes an argument for missing swimming, watersports or other physical activities. For these young menstruants, being or becoming-with a tampon, means emerging through discomfort from a menstrual assemblage where relations between ideas of (hetero)sexuality and tampons or cups, circulate affects of disgust, sexual shame or fear that sticks with the bodies that use tampons. In this way, the menstrual assemblage works to organize a tampon-using body as a body of discomfort. Disgust sticks to the tampon user, who is now a being who inserts random things into her body, while possibly enduring pain and at the risk of “birthing” a post-human monster.

If the leaky body is enacted as “wrong” and undesirable, so it is also “wrong” to insert non-human objects into orifices. As Ester says it is “nasty” to stick something up there. Especially for young people, who do not have much, if any, sexual experience with either themselves or others, inserting a tampon can be an act of transgression, which might circulate discomfort. As with leakiness, tampons challenge the “whole body” and enable the body in its porosity. By making disarming comments and harnessing the intensity, the tampon-using participants might try avoiding being related to affects, like disgust or shame, and thereby try to keep themselves together as “whole subjects”. Doing menstruation the right way by using a pad, which does not require justification, can thus be read as menstruating in such a way that keeps the illusion of bodies as intact, and in the case of youth with no relation to adult (hetero)sexuality or sexual pleasure. Young tampon users are somehow acting on the borders of what is acceptable bodily behavior for young people in feminine morphology. Isabella’s friends disarm the situation, by stating how “*you had to do it*”, “*you didn’t have a choice*”, to which she agrees as she had to go to the swimming pool. The material specificities, sexual morals of proper (hetero)sexuality and young bodies of female morphology who lack knowledge of themselves, organize a menstruation assemblage, where discomfort fuses bodies together with the dissonance of sexuality. Menstruants as young as 13-14 years old can stick to and (de)capacitate tampon- using bodies.

Tampon-body relations create space for self-discovery and increased body literacy. When young menstruants practice how to insert a tampon, intra-action of fingers and vulva is legitimized by practical reasons, in a way which invites exploration and getting to know one's body in a new way. Exploring the genital anatomy in this way can enable non-sexual intra-actions, but becoming-menstruant-with tampons, can also mean becoming sexual. As Fingerson argues:

" (...) talking about menstruation and tampons can be one of the few spaces where women, particularly adolescent girls who are not sexually experienced yet, feel free to talk about their reproductive anatomy in very intimate ways. The girls talk about tampon use with each other, albeit in single-gender groups, and this can foster a discussion about body and sexuality that might not occur, otherwise." (Fingerson, 2006, p. 28).

In this way we can flip the general worry of (young) female sexual pleasure to excitement for the opportunities for sexual development tampons might bring to young girls. The before-mentioned relations between ideas of heterosexuality and the phallic, penetrating tampon, can thus be disturbed by tampons entering the menstrual assemblage. If becoming-sexual with tampons, means self-exploration and self-joy, the tampon's entrance in the menstrual assemblage can offer a way for bodies to become sexual beyond the limited ideas of a heterosexual regime.

### **Becoming-with tampons**

So far, this chapter has focused on how tampon-menstrual body-matter-body relations organize menstruation assemblages through discomfort and worries of sickness, pain, porosity and ultimately fears of chaotic subjectivity. Discomfort, in the shape of worry or literal disgust emerged as the top layer in the body of data. Laughter, giggles, menstrual solidarity and social bonding were however more subtle, but still constant through the participants' sharing. This last section aims to excavate how body-tampon-relations were also organized through incongruent affective relations of joy and discomfort. In contrast to the mothers who guarded their children's "hymen", other mothers encouraged tampon use and helped their children to use them and, as shown, specific spaces like the swim team enable tampon use. Similarly, the material specificities of the tampon might cause discomfort, but they also incited playfulness and laughter as the two next excerpts exemplify:

Kamma: I just want to add, that instead of a tampon you can call it a mouse!

Lise: Yes?

Nanna: A MOUSE?!

Kamma: Yes.

(Nanna laughs hard.)

Nanna: A mouse, why not a snake or something? Why a mouse?

Kamma: It just has like, a tail right!

Nanna: (Laughs a lot) That was just so random that thing!

Kamma: A mouse!

///

Karoline: Yes, I remember when we were younger, we used to play with tampons that they were popsicles, because they were yellow and green (Everybody laughs)

Luisa: Popsicles!

Karoline: Yes, that it was københavnerstang or champagnebrus<sup>11</sup>. So that's that.

Lise: I remember that we used my mother's pad as mattresses for our Barbie dolls.

Karoline: Oh! (Everybody laughs)

The material circumstances of tampons, their shape and ability to shape-shift, are in this way not exclusively the fabric of affective discomfort, but also invite humorous and joyful encounters. The string resembles the tail of mice, and tampon wrappings are often colorful and shiny. As the participants share their fun stories of playing with tampons they laugh together, and the laughter affects bodies which emerge from a different kind of tampon-body-assemblage than previously in this chapter. Laughter runs through the entire exploration. Bodies are often affected by laughter when the conversation concerned orifices or other "holes" in the body, like the amputated leg. The leaky body is a laughing matter. X explains how she laughs about hard things to make them easier, which aligns with Jeannie Thomas' research on why intergenerational women in her family laugh as they share

---

<sup>11</sup> Well known yellow and green popsicles that have existed in Denmark for decades.

traumatic life experiences (Thomas, 1997). In Thomas' interviews, the women also laugh about menstruation as they reminisce about humiliation and shame connected to their early experiences of menstruation. Laughing can be a disarmament of shame or it can be a reaction to the grotesque (Bakhtin et al., 1968), but for the sake of this research it is interesting to inquire into what the participants' laughter does in relation to their possibilities as young menstruants. As Thomas writes: "*The revolutionary potential of laughter is enhanced by its enticing nature; it invites others to join in.*" (Thomas, 1997, p. 126). When tampons affect bodies with laughing the girls become menstruants together through affective relations of joy. In this way, the interview-assemblage can be seen as a worlding event, where tampons and menstruation are disarmed and even funny, and becoming-with menstruation means (be)coming together. Deleuze says about laughter, that "*since it can notionally be evoked anywhere, anytime, it serves as a positive embodiment of nomadic existential orientation towards difference, newness, and endless transformation*" (Weeks, 2020, p. 11). Thus, laughter *is* becoming in itself and tampons with their material and affective circumstances, offering a line of flight in their ability to make the girls laugh.

As mentioned, there is, however, not a distinct line between joyful play and discomfort. Sofie shares how she playfully dipped one of her mother's tampons in red fruit juice and how it made her gag, which she reenacts. This makes her and her friends laugh, while at the same time being affected with the enactment of vomiting Sofie engages in. She is funny and the disgusting is often connected to humor. In an earlier analysis of menstrual enactments on You Tube, I introduced the "*the menstruous- monstrous clown*" (Andreasen, 2020), which is a figuration that embodies the affective relations of joy and disgust, which we tend to consider opposites:

"When the disgusting and scary monster meets humor it resembles a clown, and the menstruating clown can touch upon the untouchable and become the matter of intense fun. In this way, the monster might be awakened through disgust and fear, but it is legitimized through fun and this affective entanglement of fun, fear and disgust then becomes the chisel that cracks and carves out spaces for menstruation to emerge differently." (Andreasen, 2020, p. 911).

The affectivities of discomfort, sexuality and fear clash with the grotesque materiality of tampons and thereby intensifies their comical potential. Here, the object meant for

insertion into a vagina, an object of transgression, is now a mouse, an ice cream or a dilated blob in a glass of red fruit juice. In the intimate space of the interview room, laughter appears to dismantle the tampon, at least for a while. The tampon's material specificities make it possible to affect bodies with joy and through this it can emerge in the public as a display of the grotesque (Bakhtin et al., 1968).

As with the liberating potential of laughter, the tampon also emerges as social glue and as an enabler of conversations about menstruation. One example of many was when the youth club went on an overnight trip to a waterpark and Malou (who was not part of any interviews, but whom I still knew from the youth club) planned to use a tampon for the first time. She told me how she was worried and therefore decided to include the girls she shared a room with. Agnete, who was part of the group shares her story about the event here:

But it was also there, Malou she made like a rap, with some of the girls made a tampon song, where we were all standing and cheering. So it was the first time, she was going to try to use a tampon, but she got her menstruation as we were there, that was a real shame, I felt sorry for her.

As a supportive measure, Malou's friends composed a "tampon-rap" together, to cheer her on. To my great regret, they did not want to rap it for me, but they shared the story with great excitement and Malou was happy about the support from her friends. Malou's decision to share her worries and discomfort of having to insert a tampon left her vulnerable to her friends. As vulnerability can be read as being open to being affected (Butler et al., 2016), Malou is lucky to have good friends who meet this openness with music and cheering. In this way the (for young menstruants) radical event of first-time tampon use was shared with other bodies and through this became an event where joy and community also happened. Through the exciting re-telling of this, it shows how this capacitated not only Malou, but also the rest of the group of pre – or post menarchal girls. Turning a difficult tampon-event into an experience where bodies are relating through music, laughter and joy, can subvert the discomfort connected to menstruation and tampon use and enable the young menstruants to become-together. The example also shows how menstrual becoming happened outside of the menstruation-friendly interview-assemblage, and therefore it points towards how young menstruants "world" together, also in their everyday lives.

As I have shown through this chapter, tampon use is no uncomplicated matter. Tampons do, however, matter to young menstruants, even if they do not use them. Tampons emerge from the menstruation-youth-assemblage through affective relations of gender, age, heterosexed normativity and ideas about huMan bodily subjectivity. The tampon is a menstrual materiality, which leads thoughts to parts of the body, for which there hardly exists a shared everyday language. Even though the tampon is unused, its phallic shape together with the knowledge of its utilization, soaks it in affective intensity. It emerges through different variations of intense discomfort connected to “uncontrollability”, “penetration”, “disgust”, “horror” and “pain”. Still, it also affects bodies with laughter and joy, which are in many events intra-woven with the beforementioned discomfort. With this I will argue that tampons hold potential for girls’ becomings. Other than the obvious way, in which tampons make the joy of swimming, jumping and moving through the world without breaking social rules of menstrual dirt and mess, their materiality in itself, their shape and their ability to shape-shift together with the humorous - and maybe pleasure-related - connection to penetration, holds the possibility to offer joyful body-tampon relations.

*Chapter 10:*

## MENSTRUAL ECOLOGIES

## Introduction: Menstruation as lens

You don't need to be fixed, my queens – it's the world that needs the fixing.

Johanna Hedva, *Sick Woman Theory*, 2016

At this point, the analysis has worked itself into the intimate spaces of young bodies, menstrual body-matter and non-human menstruation materialities. As the end of the thesis nears, this chapter will pick up the threads that have been teased out of the youth-menstruation-assemblage and cut across chapters to identify general themes. As several scholars have argued before me, explorations of menstruation can serve as a lens to make sense of how bodies, gender and power is organized (Bobel, 2020). Fingerson argues that, By learning about how adolescents experience their bodies and menstruation socially, we can learn about broader aspects of their everyday lives. We can learn about the shifting power in their gendered interactions, the resources from which girls and boys draw power, the ways in which they define each other as gendered beings. Also, how do menstrual interpretations and menstrual talk affect other aspects of teens' lives, such as body politics, the gender order, and health? (Fingerson, 2006, p. 4)

To elevate the perspective of the study at hand, and make sense of how relations of place, time, bodies, blood, slime, pads and tampons matter to the impossibilities and possibilities of young people, this final analytical chapter will engage with the following overarching themes which flow through the chapters: *becoming a woman, leaky bodies and fighting fluidity*.

### “Becoming a Woman” – part two

Through the chapters, the participants' stories of menstruation have bristled and spread out in multiple and ambiguous directions. While the participants would talk about menstruation as “natural”, “normal” and “nothing to be ashamed of”, there seemed to be a dissonance between what the girls *said* about menstruation during interviews and what they *did* with menstruation; the ideal of menstruation positivity, which emerged through their stories was not enacted in menstrual practices. Thinking about this empirical divergence with the concept of bodily becoming as multiple capacities, there seems to be a tendency of affirmative menstruating mostly through conversations and imaginaries, where through

desires for change, defiance and more livable and enjoyable menstrual lives emerged. Despite some menstrual events of waywardness, most participants' everyday menstrual practice was affected by an (re)enacted imperative of concealment, which left an impression of stagnation and accepting the menstrual status quo rather than greater possibilities for becoming-with-menstruation. However, when the participants continuously expressed desires for change and at times *did* practice menstruation differently, why didn't menstrual events seem to emerge radically differently across generations and from girl to girl? Why do young menstruants still conceal menstrual materialities, why do they not have better language and knowledge about menstruation, and why do they speak in code and suffer from menstrual and bodily discomforts?

Through the chapters, we have seen how worries of bullying, being contaminated by the menstrual abject and perceived as "gross", and ultimately risking one's value as a human being, has mattered to young girls' possibilities for menstrual and bodily becoming. These possibilities have all been dis- or en-abled in a menstruation-assemblage where menstruation emerges through affective relations embedded in female morphologies.

As discussed earlier, the emic imperative of "Becoming a woman" with menarche matters to what and how young menstruants can become, as it is quite the opposite use of "becoming" than the Deleuzian affirmative, open-ended concept. What I will argue here is that menstruation, in intra-section with institutionalized femininity, is partly what causes inertia in the young participants' menstrual practices.

The imperative of the mother as the first responder to menarche, and the teacher of menstrual practices, makes the young menstruants' body an extension of not only her mother's body, but of her mother's body before her, and her mother's mother's body before that. In this way, generations of menstruating bodies are reborn and thus young menstruating bodies are capacitated by menstruation-assemblages where menstrual pasts folds into the now. This means that "Becoming a woman" with the coming of menarche, prioritizes the option of becoming like the women who came before you. Menstrual knowledge, which is passed on in most of the participants' families, often included pointing towards the cupboard in the family bathroom with the menstrual pads, a hug and an offer to answer any questions. The intergenerational-menstruation-assemblage is organized by the

affective flow of times when science talked of “wandering wombs” and “hysteria” and the traditions of menstrual silence that this carried with it. Through the last five years, in which the study took place, new norms of “body positivity” have emerged, especially in youth culture, and the participants were affected by this as they talked about embracing your body and criticized advertisements for menstrual products for not representing them in their diverse experiences of menstruating. The clash between new and affirmative ways of thinking about female body morphology, and the body in general, and how intergenerational menstrual practices are kept alive, can be ascribed to what Gilliam and Gulløv argues is “cultural inertia” (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012, p. 283), where ideals of the past do not keep up with how norms are changing. An inertia, which can be further made sense of by thinking about how shame as connected to female morphology transcends generations of menstruants, as they live a menstruating life of silence and concealment, which are indeed tools of sedimentation. The way menstruation is talked about, taught and mediated by family members, schools, and commercial companies, together with the feminized discourse and aesthetics of menstruation products, cements the menstruation-femininity-relation so that everything menstrual is female and feminized. This points towards how female morphology-menstruation-relations are of significance to the stratification of menstrual practices, as the idea of menarche as a direct route to “Becoming a woman” is fixed.

The lack of norm-critical, progressive and professional menstruation education for young people, makes the passing on of menstrual knowledge by other menstruants - like friends and mothers - necessary. Sharing menstrual knowledge across generations can offer community and a sense of belonging, but the knowledge is randomized, and based on each mother’s relation and own experiences with menstruation - a relation which formed in history, in which leaky bodies materialized through other circumstances. This becomes clear when some participants are advised to use tampons while others are prohibited to do so. And it emerges when young menstruants are continuously told that menstruation is natural, but pads are best kept in a small bag inside the school bag, which is widespread advice and exactly how the participants practice menstruation.

How would it matter if menstruation was disconnected from the end station of “womanhood”? How can we talk about menstruation, so that we fully acknowledge bodily

morphologies and aspects of reproduction, without planning out a certain affective route for young menstruants? Can young bodies menstruating “just” be leaky, without certain expectations of being sexual or being “Woman”? Would this enact menstrual body-matter as less “dirty”? Moreover, what range of possibilities would all this open up for young menstruants?

As discussed in the introductory part of this study, critical menstruation scholars and activists have adopted terms such as “menstruator” (Bobel & al., 2020), “menstruant” (Persdotter, 2022) and menstruating people. The purpose of this is not just to “*degender menstruation*” (Rydström, 2020) to include a varied spectrum of menstruating people, but also to be able to think about and talk about menstruation, without relating it to already established ideas of what it can be. This shift thus provides alternative routes for young menstruants than exclusively “becoming a woman” with menarche.

The fact that the relation of “womanhood” to menstruation makes it troublesome points towards how “women” still emerges through misogynies and sexism. To “degender” menstruation might open up possibilities, but it also poses a risk of overlooking differences in bodies and reproducing misogynist discourse, by overlooking the historical significance of menstruating “women”. Ignoring difference can be a trap, as it simply reinstates “man” as the universal and in this way distancing from “womanhood” places women and femininity as problematic per se. Braidotti seeks to answer this paradox in her insistence on “women” as multiple and in the same way, we might aim to understand young menstruants as bodily immanent, but still multiple. In this way, menstruating bodies who do not embody institutionalized femininity, bodies with disabilities, fat-bodies, queer-bodies, trans-bodies and girl-child-bodies, can be included in how we think about and understand the different needs of different menstruating bodies.

### **No room for leaky bodies**

Leaky bodies, be it with menstrual body-matter or affects, emerge as particularly troublesome in relation to the expectations of participation, achievement and bodily control, which form the participant’s everyday lives in families, schools and at after school activities. Anger, crying, cramping, tiredness or general discomfort, disturb schedules and leaky bodies are in general considered troublesome, no matter their morphology. However,

they emerge as more or less troublesome depending on the specific bodily relations with whom they emerge, as when Muslim boys in Danish schools are considered “troublemakers”, while white boys’ affective leakage can be ascribed to proper masculinity and being cheeky (Ferguson, 1995; Gilliam, 2009). Previous chapters have shown how the menstruating young body is more troublesome to the participants when it emerges in relation to temporal, spatial or material circumstances that do not take menstruating bodies’ needs into account. The participants might handle this by trying to adjust their bodies with painkillers, clothes, extra-large pads or tampons. They can also try to adjust by suppressing pain or discomfort, while still attending the activities that have been scheduled for them. Even though the participants of this study are privileged compared to young menstruants who do not benefit from whiteness, financial wealth, access to technology and relative bodily freedom, they are still disadvantaged as their leaky bodies are misfits in the infrastructure of their everyday lives, where expectations of high achievement and physical capacity dominate. This concerns both academic ambitions, but for many also with regard to participation in an active life, where the active, thin, strong and healthy body is centered and idealized. The idealization of the strong menstruating body is present in menstrual activism, with slogans like “*anything you can do I can do bleeding*”, or advertisements showing physically strong and able menstruants persevering in their sports, despite bleeding from cuts and scrapes (*not* from the vulva) (Bodyform, 2016).

Similar ideals of bodily ability and strength affected the participants, as they seldom “*allowed*” themselves acts of care like resting or eating chocolate, to ease their menstrual discomfort. When they did, they framed it as an almost naughty endeavor. Calling in sick or taking time off from school, had to be negotiated with parents (mothers) and many shared how their parents (mothers) insisted on them participating in activities, in or out of school, no matter their menstrual discomfort of various kinds.

In recent debates about the implementation of paid menstrual work leave, arguments against have played on possible financial losses for employers or the state (Thomsen, 2014). Furthermore, some have worried that menstrual leave would have negative consequences to gender equality, as menstruants would be undermined in their professionalism and authority by belonging to a group of bodies which might need to rest more than non-menstruating bodies (Leahy, 2016). Others have suggested that women simply take

hormonal contraception to stop their menstrual cycle (Elsesser, 2022). As mentioned in the introduction, in Denmark, several politicians and public speakers have ridiculed the mere suggestion. Similarly, recent suggestions about freely available menstruation products in public toilets were ridiculed and turned down (Folketinget, 2021). The overarching logic arguing against infrastructures that implicate menstruating bodies, seems to be that menstrual wellbeing cannot be a priority and that bodies have to adjust to workplaces, schools and public spaces to live up to ideals of efficiency and ability. The ridiculing form the arguments took, where one politician jokingly compared menstruation to fecal matter (Folketinget, 2021), shows how the debate about paid menstrual leave and free menstruation products is shaped by misogyny, and further illustrates how the body in its multiplicity and leakiness is disregarded as important and furthermore formed as “wrong”. Lindstead argues how:

(..) the body image which is deployed beneath the surface of corporate thinking is, where it is acknowledged (Morgan, 1986), the body of no one in particular, and is genderless. Despite the fact that the embodied organization can be strong, weak, lean, in need of trimming the fat, sick or healthy, it is never said to have prostate trouble or PMS. But organizational body images - those embodied in structures, systems, power relations, decision-making, reasoning processes, artefacts and architecture - are not gender-neutral. They are inescapably male. (Linstead, 2000, p. 31)

This does not mean that bodies of male morphology cannot leak fluids or affect, and clash with neoliberal infrastructures. Menstruation however is a cyclic bodily event, which effect most young bodies in female morphology. Therefore, it is puzzling that the material and temporal infrastructures of everyday life have not yet incorporated the specificities of menstruating bodies. This is especially the case for children and young people, where many are in a bodily and emotional transition and who spend the majority of their wakeful hours in school.

School is by tradition a place of bodily discipline and order (Bánovčanová & Masarykova, 2014; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012). The body is considered in holistic perspectives of learning and health (Bengtsson, 2014; Justenborg, 2021), but if we disregard the minimal amount of menstruation education, the menstruating body is absent in how the overall structures of school have been designed. The negative menstrual ecologies furthermore show in toilet facilities. One of Nørre Søby's schools was famous for its' worn down and dirty toilets and

other toilets were cubicles or did not provide any sound insulation. Some toilets had Madame Bags, *after* Josefine asked for them, but not all. In some toilets, the waste bin was placed outside the cubicles, which meant used pads or tampons had to be carried out in a shared room to be disposed of. This made the tactic of camouflaging used pads impossible and made the waste bin publicly accessible, which enhanced the risk of exposure.

EgeskovSchool had toilets in which the bin and sink were in the privacy of the cubicle, but as they were placed next to the classrooms, some participants felt like they were too public to use for dealing with their menstrual flow. As shown, the participants worried about exposure and worked to develop strategies for how to menstruate discreetly and the state of the toilets meant that some young menstruants did not use the toilets during an entire school day, not even to urinate, and many did not feel comfortable changing their menstruation products while at school.

Sociologists Natalie Moffat and Lucy Pickering suggest how menstruating bodies and menstrual concealment are challenged by poor toilet facilities that do not cater to the needs of menstruating bodies. They refer to this as *“the double burden of menstrual etiquette”* and from this they argue that there is an *“infrastructural neglect of menstruating bodies”* (Moffat & Pickering, 2019, p. 781). Similarly, Persdotter shows in her research of menstruation as dirt, how menstruants use large (and unnecessary) amounts of resources to deal with their menstruation and how this is partly due to *“technological and built misrecognitions of the needs of menstruants”*, which also extend to private toilets (Persdotter, 2022, p. 141). Other than toilets, the *“infrastructural neglect”* of young menstruants can be expanded to other material, spatial, temporal and social neglects, which offer little or no space for assisting, caring for, or comforting menstruating bodies. Beyond the lack of practicalities and care, the material infrastructures of menstruation-body-school relations also matter to how menstruating bodies are (in)formed. As architect and researcher, Katarina Bonnevier argues:

Norms and systems of power are reproduced in how cities are built, how houses are drawn and how they are used and judged. An important entrance point for my understanding of built environments is the idea of us not only constructing architecture, but architecture constructing us, constructing subject positions, directions of desire and power relations. I ask myself, how does *“the other”* matter

in architecture? How are they made through architecture? How does architecture construct gender, “lower” standing groups or “deviants” from the norm? (Bonnevier, 2008, p. 60 my translation)

When school toilets do not cater to menstruating children and young people, when there are few or no considerations of menstruating bodies in the planning of activities and when there is no or little room for menstrual affectivities, the menstruation-school-assemblages shape the menstruating body as deviating and undesirable. Together with affective discomforts of more-than-human materialities, objectivity and monstrous femininity, which the previous chapters have unpacked, young menstruants are left with limited options of becoming in everyday school life.

### Fighting fluidity

Menstruating bodies do not only clash with spatial and temporal structures, but also becomes troublesome in young people’s endeavors to keep “*themselves together*” (Blackman, 2008). The formative years, which the participants are in the middle of, is a time of bodily and emotional transition, where tears, menstrual fluid, semen, pus, sweat, smell and affects flow in new and increased ways. The word “formative” reveals that these are also years where young people struggle to find a (new) shape, and the transformational circumstances make them strive even more for this to become solid and predictable. As mentioned, Braidotti (Braidotti, 2002) underlines how the idea of nomadic subjectivity is challenged by those who fight to be recognized as subjects: Women, colonized and racialized peoples and of particular relevance, youth. Therefore, in the time of puberty, transition and fluidity, where popular youth culture and neoliberal capitalism preaches “...*enlightenments vision of discrete, atomized and self-sufficient Man (...)*” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 88), the participants work hard to keep themselves together. As feminist Astrida Neimanis states in her essay on embodiment as watery and fluid relations: (...)*any body still requires membranes to keep from being swept out to sea all together.*” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 91), as she goes beyond a distinction between fluid subjectivity and fluidity as rationality. The dance of back and forth, between solid and fluid, flows through the data, both in the practice of capturing fluid menstrual body-matter, but also as the balancing act between affective leakage and rationality and nomadic subjectivity and “human identity”. Young menstruants balance the act of trying to keep themselves together and on the other hand, dare to be openly leaky, fluid and vulnerable.

In this way, the young menstruants' fight against fluidity was not restricted to controlling of menstrual body-matter, but showed in their reserved and disarming attitudes, as they aimed at emancipation through the phrase of menstruation as "natural" and a refusal to be affected by others (human or non-human). The ideals of individualism are hard-lived in everyday understandings of bodily subjectivity, and menstruation is in many ways shaped as an individual issue. This forms it as something private and intimate, which is best kept to oneself, and if absolutely necessary, to a whisper, a meme or a code word between close friends. As shown through the study, the affective relations shaping menstruation-girl-assemblages were often intense and disabling to the capacities of young menstruants. The loneliness of carrying this, which the silencing of menstruation enables, mattered to the participants, as they highlighted friendship and confidentiality as being central to menstrual wellbeing. Ideals of independence, individuality and "core identity" in Danish upper-middle class youth, align with neo-liberalist ideals of independence and achievement, and matter to bodies, as writer and artist Johanna Hedva writes in her essay "Sick Woman Theory":

(...) the body and mind are sensitive and reactive to regimes of oppression – particularly our current regime of neoliberal, white-supremacist, imperial-capitalist, cis-hetero-patriarchy. It is that all of our bodies and minds carry the historical trauma of this, that it is the world itself that is making and keeping us sick. (Hedva, 2016, p. 9)

Hedva's quote refers to how mental illness and affectivity have been defined by oppressive regimes, which mark and shape bodies. The essay engages with a North American assemblage of bodies and politics, which cannot be directly transferred to a Danish white middle-class context. Some tendencies stretch across the Atlantic, however, as being an advantaged young menstruant in upper-middle class Nørre Søby might be a privileged position with respect to access to material goods and financial security but carries traces of the regimes Hedva mentions in the high degree of bodily control and (hetero) normativity expected of young people,. This makes the clash of idealized individuality versus fluid and relational bodily subjectivity particularly noisy and points towards why it appears as intense affective ambiguity in the young menstruants' stories. Throughout the study, the participants have underlined how friendship and confidentiality is crucial to menstrual wellbeing and how sharing their menstruation with non-menstruants, the boys, has surprised them positively. The intensity and joy that filled the interview rooms and which

“glow” (MacLure, 2013) in the recordings and transcripts, show how the flow of menstruation between young menstruants and the enactment of menstruation as relational challenges regimes of individuality and also underlines how menstruation is best when shared. The interviews were particular menstruation-assemblages organized to enable menstrual sharing in a comfortable setting. Together with the participants’ stories of joyful menstrual sharing (with menstruants and non-menstruants), which run through the data, it can be read as a signpost pointing towards how making space for shared menstruation can be possible, with less affective ambiguity and discomfort.

*Chapter 11:*

# INSIGHTS AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

## Introduction: Summing up

Since Luisa and Karoline's introductory story about menstruation in the classroom, this exploration has taken many turns in its endeavor to make sense of the beings and becomings of young menstruating people. Some encounters have been expected, like reproductions of menstrual practices of concealment and how shame sticks to menstruating bodies, while turning other corners has disclosed unexpected ruptures in youth-menstruation-assemblages.

To make sense of how menstruation and menstruating bodies emerge and how this matters to bodily subjectivity, the analysis has followed young leaky bodies in female morphologies and zoomed in on the relations of human and non-human materialities, which touch, leave and enter bodies and in this way situate them in specific assemblages. The study has considered relations with place and people, blood, pads, used pads and tampons to map out the affective relations through which young menstruants and menstruation emerge. Through this analytical practice, the various chapters have shown how menstruation is more complex and significant than common knowledge, reflected in public debates and the general lack of consideration of menstruants, considers it to be. The findings of the study show how menstruation matters both to the beings and becomings of young bodily subjectivity. This final chapter will run through the analysis' insights into young menstruants' bodily becomings, and based on the empirical findings, offer reflections on possible ways to move forward with menstruation affirming pedagogies and critical research on menstruation.

## Menstruation is situated

One of the concerns of this study has been menstruating bodies as relational and processual, which has called for an analysis of how location and time matters to body-menstruation-relations. By noticing specific circumstances of place, time, bodies and things, the ambition has been to weave a nuanced and, at times, messy rag rug of how different relations matter to young menstruants' becomings. Focusing on the specificities of Nørre Søby and how day-to-day youth life intra-actions play out there, the study has shown how menstruation and menstruating bodies are situated in place and time and thus cannot be considered universal phenomena. Beginning with discussion of some of the general circumstances of Nørre Søby, the study has shown how material advantages and wealth are

significant to menstruating. Young menstruants' access to technologies, clothes and menstruation products makes keeping to conventional practices of menstruating easier for them. In this way, leaky bodies can "pass" as non-menstruants in their day-to-day life in school and at afterschool activities. Some participants were aware of their own advantages, as they referred to other circumstances under which young menstruants live and menstruate, as worse than their own. They were furthermore aware of their own position in the top layer of society, which reflected in a general self-confidence that affected their ability to relate to and speak about their menstruating bodies. There were exceptions. Some participants did not seem comfortable talking about menstruation, and some young menstruants in Nørre Søby never agreed to an interview. In relation to this, the data has shown how wealth and a general self-confidence might matter to practical ease and menstrual positivity, but affectivities still circulate through and between bodies, which capacitates only some young menstruants to talk about menstruation, to buy or ask for menstruation products, while others are left incapacitated by discomfort.

Focusing on classed material circumstances and ideals furthermore provided insight into how busy schedules, which together with the limited degree of bodily autonomy that children and young people enjoy, made menstruation emerge as troublesome and in the way. Both troublesome for the young menstruants, who were affected with discomfort by the clashes between their leaky bodies and social, material and temporal infrastructure, but also disturbing to the larger scheme of living up to said ideals. The way bodily ideals and homogeneity in Nørre Søby related with ideals of activity, ability and achievement matter to young menstruants in terms of rest and activity, but also in terms of bodily well-being. The homogeneity of white, able and thin bodies shaped menstruating bodies in these particular versions as ideal and "more normal", thus placed menstruating within already existing hierarchies of sexed normality and power dynamics.

### **Ambiguous emergences of menstruation and bodies**

From the first step of exploring the situatedness of menstruation and menstruating bodies, analysis calls attention to how the data simultaneously spreads out in multiple directions and takes on ambiguous forms. By structuring the analysis after concrete menstrual materialities as they emerge in the young menstruants' stories, the study has provided insights into how menstruation emerges through multiple complex and messy human body-

non-human entities relations. Beginning with the body as open, leaky and affective, the analysis has paid particular attention to issues concerning the sexed differences of bodies, which has shown how menstruation genders bodies as menarche catapults young menstruants into a, for many, ambivalent route towards adulthood and “Womanhood”. For some, menarche is a sign of a functioning body, and for some it brings comfort of belonging within a community of menstruating peers. These sensations are however intra-woven with discomfort of the sexual connotations brought by the idea of sudden reproductive ability.

Noticing bodies from a perspective of sexual difference, the study has furthermore shown how the difference of leaky bodies is weaponized, as bullying and undermining of subjectivity, especially by non-menstruating peers. From the intensive affectivities of menstruating bodies and menstrual-body-matter, non-menstruants draw power to assert themselves and affect menstruants with discomfort. The empirical findings in this study point towards how hyper-masculinization and menstrual bullying is connected. Despite occurrences of positive menstrual relations between menstruants and non-menstruants (the boys), the research shows how the negative experiences with non-menstruants mattered, together with the underlining of binary sexed differences, resulted in worries of exposure and added to a narrative of non-menstruants being undependable as menstrual allies. The binary division of bodies after sexed morphology, which is enhanced in the schools and youth clubs infrastructure, as well as in the dominance of heterosexual family formations in Nørre Søby, thus matter to young menstruants becomings. Framing menstruation as “natural, but private” together with the claim of already existing equality, together makes it difficult to address the inequalities of menstruants. Still the participants explained how they experienced bullying related to menstruation and the limitations they experienced as menstruants as highly unjust.

Bodily difference within the category of “girls” also proved to have significance. Even in the highly homogenous group of participants, there was heterogeneity of practice and affectivity, which was, among other things, also connected to the difference of bodies. Some bodies bled more; some less and some were invalidated by menstrual pain, while others did not feel a thing. In this way, leaky and affective bodies showed themselves as significant agents in how menstruation mattered differently to young menstruants. Bodies which were already idealized by discourse and peers, held more possibility for becoming-with

menstruation, while already “othered” bodies struggled more for a livable day-to-day life as menstruants. An overarching insight from this - if bodies did not fit into dominating ideals, be it of beauty or levels of achievement and activity, menstruating emerged as more troublesome. As inseparably connected with bodily subjectivity, young menstruants thus emerged as troublesome subjects and in the way of fulfilling the dominating ideals.

Using a feminist material lens to zoom in on the material specificities of bodies and menstrual-body-matter has provided insights into how generalizations of menstrual materialities, and general references of menstrual body-matter as “blood” in their inaccuracy can frame menstruation as more or less normal. This, together with lack of knowledge about genital anatomy can cause insecurity and discomfort in the body-menstruation relations of young menstruants. The material circumstances of menstrual-body-matter furthermore trouble systems of organization, as they cling to and connect material domains across established borders. The analysis showed how this caused affective discomfort, which clung to the bodies, which produced the menstrual substances in question. The body is however leaky, as this is a condition of bodily morphology, and despite historical and contemporary enhancement of female morphology as leaking fluids and affect, both menstruants’ and non-menstruants’ bodies are affective and leaky. By showing how fluidity and leakiness, in terms of menstrual body-matter, affects or subjectivity, is continuously under attempted control, the study concludes how leaky bodies, no matter their inevitability, are considered undesirable.

### **The labour of menstruating**

Following various human and non-human menstrual materialities provided insights into the overarching theme of menstrual concealment and in addition, the extensive amount of labour which young menstruants put their efforts into through their day-to-day lives. In interviews, some participants shared how they would use standardized practices of concealing menstruation products, while others shared creative ways of smuggling pads to the toilet. The girls would furthermore consider what clothes would best conceal pads and possible leakage, take extraordinary action to conceal used menstruation products and worry about how to conceal possible leakage. Some would conceal menstrual pain and discomfort, as they worried about exposure or worried about interrupting the concentration of their peers. As various studies before this have argued (Buckly, 1988; Johnston-Robledo &

Chrisler, 2011; McHugh, 2020; Wood, 2020), this high degree of concealment points towards a misogynist culture, where the female bodily morphology has to be fully concealed or altered by partial concealment. Body hair must be concealed, skin irregularities must be concealed (with a “concealer”), body fat must be concealed and so the list continues and extends to how displays of certain “negative” affectivities must also be concealed. The study has shown how the young menstruants do not only invest large amounts of attention to concealment, but also to worries about the risk of failure to conceal. Worrying about the “what if” of leakage and exposure, especially to “the boys”, occupied the participants’ thoughts to such a degree that some found it difficult to concentrate in school, while others would worry for months in advance about the convergence of menstruating and a school trip. As mentioned, one girl worried about having surgery, not because of the anesthetics or possible complications, but because she was worried she would leak menstrual blood while being sedated. The analysis has shown how worrying for many young menstruants is also connected to the irregularity of their menstrual cycle, together with their inexperience with the amounts of bleeding and how to use menstruation products. Worrying is part of the menstrual labour, which comes from experience, but is also shaped from the silence and concealment, which is default menstrual practice. Worrying steals energy from young menstruants, it restrains and exhausts, and the reasons for their worries might not ever be actualized.

### Menstrual inequality for young people

When Laust says “*It’s nothing special*” about the menstrual pains, which leave some young menstruants temporarily incapacitated, it can be explained as a singular event of “*boy’s talk*”, where a non-menstruant uses the affective intensity of menstruation to assert himself as masculine. However, when mothers’ say “*That’s what it’s like being a girl*”, when learning about their child’s menstrual pain, and Danish politicians state that engaging with better menstrual health and knowledge is “*hysterical*”, “*superficial*” and thus frame discussions of menstrual health and education as spoiled and overly affective, and therefore not legitimate, a pattern emerges. It becomes clear how many do not consider menstruation as a matter of concern. This research has shown that not considering menstruation has negative consequences for the lives of young menstruating people. Even those who live in the middle class layers of the welfare state of Denmark.

In recent years, the term menstrual equity has surfaced as a response to how menstruants are disadvantaged by the before mentioned lack of material, social and infrastructural support of menstruation. Menstrual equity is generally concerned with the rights to affordable and safe menstruation products, but is also concerned with high quality menstruation education and reproductive care. As mentioned, this study has shown how the accessibility of pads is not solely dependent on financial means, but is also related to how affectivities circulate between bodies and things. Similarly, young menstruants' access to toilets depends on planned activities and time schedules. The lack of bodily autonomy and knowledge adds to the worries and discomfort affecting young menstruants, to such an extent that they struggle with participation and feeling safe in school and at afterschool activities. Some participants shared how their concentration and presence, in school and elsewhere, was challenged not only by menstrual affects during their bleeding phase, but also by worries of when they would bleed the next time. The labour of checking, scanning, thinking, being aware, squirming on chairs, controlling affects and discomfort, worrying, preemptive leakage control, and, *if* leakage happens, handling it discretely, all added to young menstruants' ability to be present, physically or mentally, in school. The study's attention to menstrual labour, emotionally or practical, has shown how affective discomforts of menstruation caused by lack of knowledge, and the schools' missing attention to the specific needs of menstruating bodies, move young menstruants' attention and energy away from things which might bring joy or meaning in other ways. By closely exploring the menstrual labour of young menstruants, the study shows how affects stick to menstruation and menstruating bodies and how they are deciding for what young people who are menstruating can do. By exploring the amount of work the girls put into concealing menstruation, the creativity and skill they use, it becomes visible in the day-to-day practices how menstruation is still stigmatized, also in upper-middleclass Denmark and how this affects young menstruants.

Supported by several studies which have shown how negative attitudes to menstruation impact young menstruants and matters to their self-image in their formative years (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007; Rembeck & Gunnarsson, 2004; Rembeck & Hermansson, 2008; Rembeck et al., 2006; Stubbs & Johnston-Robledo, 2013), the empirical excerpts from this study have shed light on how body-menstruation-relations matter to the general well-

being of young menstruants. It has furthermore shown how menstruation can be deciding of whether or not young girls can participate or not. Considering the narrow bodily ideals in Nørre Søby together with the crisis in mental health among, particularly, young girls in Denmark, the lack of sexual and menstruation education is concerning. Therefore, it makes sense to include the menstruating body when discussing children and young people's general well-being:

Menstrual health is defined as complete physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to the menstrual cycle. This definition reflects the multifaceted nature of menstruation and the many ways the lives of those who menstruate can be affected by their ability to properly know and deal affirmatively with their menstrual health. Achieving good menstrual health is not just a matter of ensuring access to menstrual products but also relies on individuals having the resources they need to participate fully in all spheres of life during their menstrual cycle. These resources might illustratively include information, supplies, sanitation facilities, supportive environments (including sensitized teachers and work supervisors), and accessible health-care workers trained in menstrual health disorders. (Babbar et al., 2022, p. e10)

Through the chapters, bodily difference has been a key term, as it has emerged within hierarchies of possibilities, and when menstruating bodies are overlooked and not considered as mattering in regards to young people's well-being, it illustrates how these hierarchies work in young menstruants' everyday lives.

The participants continuously underlined the importance of having trusted friends in relation to how menstruation mattered, and some mentioned how their social life and being with friends was challenged by menstruating. Menstruation can become a challenge general participation at a time in life, where belonging and community is crucial for wellbeing. Ultimately, the lack of positive and supportive menstrual ecologies in the form of sociality, knowledge and materialities might result in menstruation challenging girls' participation in community and learning, which is ultimately a democratic and human rights issue.

### **What can a menstruating young body do?**

The study commenced by asking the Spinozist inspired question of *what a menstruating body can do*. The analysis of empirical data has since disclosed how menstruation as it is shaped in relation to bodies, discourse and things, matters to young menstruants' bodily becoming. Affective flows of menstrual relations zig-zag in non-linear movements, through

menstruation-youth-body assemblages, where they both capacitate and deny young bodies to express and act on their desires. For some, menstruating emerges through affective relations of shame to such a degree that it partially denies them participation in the communities and activities, which are significant for young people. For others, the discomfort of menstruation does not deny them participation, but worries of possible exposure and shame to follow, deprive them of the wellbeing, presence and joy, which non-menstruating young people might enjoy on e.g. school trips to the pool or mountain biking in the forests. Discomforts connected to leaky bodies, post and non-human menstrual monstrosities and otherness, however also capacitate, as they call upon young menstruants to risk being affected by others. As mentioned earlier, the participants underlined how having close friends with whom they could share experiences of menstruating and menstruation products, was significant to how menstruation affected them. The interview-assemblage furthermore showed, how community was built through menstrual sharing and openness and how becoming-with menstruation, was possible in a menstruation friendly space.

When the young menstruants stayed with their leakiness, be it fluids or affects, and they allowed for vulnerability, it unleashed flows of intensity, which enabled becoming. This however was not exclusive to the menstruation friendly interview-assemblage, as Luisa and Karoline's story of intentional bloody exposure illustrates. By embracing the leakage, Luisa flipped the power dynamics and her menstruating body emerged through an assemblage of possibilities. Both as the event happened in the classroom, but she and Karoline continued their menstruation friendly world-building, as they shared their story with me.

Through the lens of feminist sexual difference theory, the analysis has shown how sexed differences of bodily morphology matter to how bodies are valued and thus how menstruation, in its unbreakable connection to female morphology and the institution of "Womanhood", is used to (re)produce past and present ideas of "women" as affective and irrational. This ultimately leads to ridiculing of menstruants' needs, as they true to misogynist tradition are framed as hysterical (Kjærsgaard, 2016) and laughed at, which closes any conversation about menstruation. This undermines young menstruants' basic human rights of access to knowledge about their own bodies, the right of not being

discriminated against and the right to participate in communities (Hennegan et al., 2021; UN, 2019; WHO, 2022).

Furthermore, thinking with feminist materialist theory has shown how menstruation as a transgressive and post-human material relation, makes menstruating bodies, and thus girls, emerge through affective relations of disgust and shame. The lack of critical reflection about this, along with the reproduced practices of concealment and ideas of “proper menstrual hygiene”, not only kept alive by sediment practices which have been transferred through generations of menstruants, but also by well-meaning NGOs and activist’s at times one-sided focus on “management” and “hygiene” (Bobel, 2019b, 2019c; Hennegan et al., 2021)

The fear of exposure as menstrual, affective and ultimately a non-subject (Braidotti, 2002; Shildrick, 1997, 2001) silence conversations, and thus leaves relations of menstruation and disgust untouched. Still, offering “*alternative formations of subjectivity*” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 236), the analysis shows how it is the very leakiness of bodies and the intensity of difference that hold positive potential to direct young menstruants towards alternative paths, diverging from the highway of institutionalized femininity. The leaky body is what causes discomfort, but it is also what opens up possibilities for multiple and affirmative ways of living. The leaky body is what makes it possible to become more-than woman, to become-intense, to become-nomadic, to become-with. In conclusion, the study shows that *what a menstruation body can do* depends on the relations through which it emerges. Therefore, it is in these relations, and not in the illusion of bodies as individual, that menstruation has the possibility to capacitate.

### **Affirmative menstruation pedagogies**

Taking an inspired departure from a broad definition of menstrual health as the above and recognizing menstruation as mattering to the general well-being of (some) children and young people in schools, can accommodate better and more enjoyable lives for young menstruants and enable their possibilities for inclusion in community. Simply talking about menstruation is a radical event, which if it can be completed (remember how some young people ran away from me and how politicians closed the conversation down) holds potential for menstruation affirmative “worlding” and a promise to make menstruation matter in affirmative ways.

The study has shown how interview-assemblages worked as menstruation friendly spaces, where friend groups could talk freely about menstruation, in an assemblage organized by multiple affects, but where joy was very much present. The interview-assemblage furthermore made it possible to map menstrual imaginaries by inquiring into what else could be possible to build more livable and enjoyable lives with menstruation. By inquiring into the participants' wishes and desires for their lives with menstruation, either by direct questioning or by noticing signs and practices which could be read as defiance of expected and routinized menstrual praxis, the analysis has given valuable insights into how menstrual life can be improved for young people. The participants in the study pointed towards how more openness would demystify menstruation and make it easier to talk about. Other than qualifying menstrual education to be about more than biological processes and reproduction, it should also include non-menstruating youth, to not further stigmatize menstruating bodies. Several examples from the study show how menstrual intra-actions of menstruants and non-menstruants were experienced as positive. Furthermore, the participants shared stories of how the non-menstruating pupils improved their attitudes towards menstruation after having discussed it, and in the light of this, mixed sex inclusion in menstruation education could be an important first step to open up conversations about menstruation and establish a common language to talk about menstruation in an affirmative way.

An overarching theme of this study is the push and pulls between open and closed bodies. The before mentioned ideals of rationality over affect and "kept together" bodies over bodies which leak affect and fluids, need to be disrupted to normalize menstrual community and care between all young people. Therefore, menstrual affirmative pedagogies should consider how bodies are always already related and emphasize care as an ideal in these relations. These ideals of care should also reflect in the material, spatial and temporal infrastructures of schools and other places where young menstruants spend time. The participants asked for accessible pads, hot water bottles, flexible breaks and a soft place to rest. School gym classes could consider how menstruating young people could exercise in a way that suits leaky and cramping bodies. Maybe soft yoga or stretches would be better than headstands and high intensity running, when menstrual discomfort occurs. It ultimately comes down to educational systems and schools to consider the difference of

bodies and raise the awareness that many children and young people menstruate in school and that both material, temporal and social infrastructure matters to their general well-being. One could imagine how schools would incorporate menstrual politics and supportive systems for young menstruants to create an openly menstrual friendly school, in order to ease or in some cases, make possible, the presence of childrens and young people's leaky bodies in schools.

### Research contributions

The study at hand has contributed to fill the lacuna of qualitative and critical menstruation research situated in Denmark and has provided important knowledge of how menstruation matters in the everyday lives of young menstruants. By engaging empirically with menstruation in the context of the youngest menstruants, the exploration has contributed significant knowledge about an underexplored field of research in a Danish context. The engagement with the youngest menstruants and how menstruation plays out as a novelty, where routinize and bodily knowledge is not yet established, has further contributed to the broader research field, which explores menstrual practices.

By thinking with concepts of feminist materialism, sexual difference theory and affirmative ethics, the study has offered a complex reading of how menstruation emerges in multilayered affective assemblages, which can both supplement and challenge theory and already existing research on the matter. The study's attention to affects and materialities has challenged how research can inquire into and notice menstruation, by suggesting a perspective on a methodology which captures more than linguistics and which considers the research an assemblage with worlding potential. In this way, the study offers a tentative beginning of enacting menstruation research with attention to the materialities, as post-human and relational, which are central to menstruation and menstruants.

Furthermore, the empirical foundation of the analysis and the insistence on situating menstruation and menstruating bodies, have kept the research grounded and specific and shown how menstruation is always situated in bodies, time and space. This has provided insights into the importance of grounding critical menstruation research, to provide the most nuanced and accurate analysis on how future research would benefit from including a focus on how local ideals, norms and material dis/advantages matter to menstruation and possibilities for menstruating youth. In conclusion, the study, in its empirical feminist

materialist and transversal insistence, offers an empirical contribution, not just to critical menstruation studies but to educational anthropology and feminist materialist philosophy in a wider sense.

## Postlude: INTRODUCING THE MENSTRUATOR

As Braidotti states: “*What counts in the project of sexual difference is the in-between spaces, the itinerary, rather than the final destination*”. (Braidotti 2006:93). Similarly, before closing down I want to invite you to enter the in-between spaces and multi directional itineraries of the study at hand. As the affective and leaky body of this researcher-author is now affected by years of leaking thoughts and words, leaking blood and milk, leaking care and frustration, leaking creativity and new ideas, the current affective state of exhaustion-exhilaration of nearing the end of the labour of this thesis, spills over and transforms into the joy of writing. I now leave this project as an ongoing and open-ended process, by introducing the feminist affirmative figuration of “The Menstruator”. This postlude serves as a final assemblage which mobilizes “*poetic truths*” (Lykke, 2010, p. 174), as unexpected realizations that aggregate how menstruation emerges in the in-between spaces of affirmative menstruating, by deploying the feminist figuration of “The Menstruator”.

THE MENSTRUATOR is a feminist figuration, shaped by social reality-fiction relations (Haraway, 1990) which moves transversally across and through all the bodies of young menstruants, as they all (together) have offered bits and parts and limbs and fluids to organize the Menstruator. In this way, The Menstruator is not to be understood as a utopic ideal or a categorization that excludes some menstruants or some ways of menstruating, but as an assemblage of ruptures and movements, which hold possibilities for leaky subjectivities. The figuration of the menstruator works by addition, not separation, and opens up ways of thinking differently about en fleshed becoming. It is an affirmative feminist figuration, which offers not only a way of imagining things differently in a futuristic sense, but is a kaleidoscope to notice the already existing ruptures and the tiniest cracks, which might lead elsewhere beyond the fixed end-stations. The figuration of the Menstruator thus serves to gather and enhance the cracks, through where alternative menstrual practice and critique of the sediment glows. It is a way to think about menstruation as a relational event, as it gathers the subversive actions of all young menstruants to envision a better future for young people who menstruate.

THE MENSTRUATOR bleeds small amounts or large amounts. They are plural or singular and are not en route to fixed gendered positions. They are already always together with human

and non-human bodies and things. The Menstruator is affirmatively monstrous. It is a post-human body, which embraces and embodies difference outside of hierarchy and thereby subverts difference as negative. Their body is leaking fluids and affects and it insists on being open, affective and difference enfleshed. They share their menstruation with friends and strangers, when practical or otherwise called for. They are literate in an affirmative menstrual tongue, *écriture menstruelle* (Cixous, 2009), that exists outside of medical patriarchal discourse and enables them to name and understand their genital anatomy and menstrual related sensations. They wear white pants, short skirts, underwear or no underwear. They are body and menstrual literate and know which menstrual technology suits their desires and needs, if any. They choose to free bleed or they use the menstruation materiality of their choice. They collapse time and bleed on the soil, like their menstruating ancestors. They find community and strength through the recognition and difference that menarche brings.

THE MENSTRUATOR stays with the menstrual trouble. They listen to and recognize their pains and affective discomforts. They take their time to be with the mess of menstrual human-body-matter as they see fit. They are a menstrual killjoy, who moans in public, and cancels scheduled events they are not suited to while menstruating. They make room to care for their own and their kin's menstruating and affective bodies.

THE MENSTRUATOR finds delight in the shiny, glittery, sticky surface of menstru-slime. They embrace the thrill of horror, and play with the slimy red strings as they emerge from their vulva. They experiment with the limits of its stretchability. Because their desire is catalyzed by curiosity, joy and openness, it is not limited by normative entangled conventions of cleanliness and femininity and their becoming is not towards "Womanhood" as a predefined destination for menstruants. Their embodied relations with the vicarious, with bloody slime, becomes a reason in itself for worlding through play, which creates openings towards more possibility, towards "elsewhere" (Haraway, 1992). In this way the menstruator in Braidotti's words "materially embody stages of metamorphosis of a subject position towards all that the phallogocentric system does not want it to become" (Braidotti, 2003, p. 13). By phallogocentric Braidotti refers to Irigaray's theory of masculine dominance, as that which incapacitates pleasure related to female morphology. The Menstruator engages in menstrual intra-actions with intensity, laughter and playfulness fueled by the intensity of

delightful horror/disgust, and thus refuses the idea of menstruating as stigmatized or shameful. Isabella enacts *The Menstruator* as she appreciates how menstruation affects and affect,

Isabella: But actually, I kind of really like the way I have my menstruation. I actually like having it at practice, I like having had it first before others. I like the idea of when it comes. I don't have anything that would be more perfect, I think my world with menstruation it is actually very perfect.

THE MENSTRUATOR thus, does not problematize its leaky body by default, if it somehow clashes in relations of temporal structures or material infrastructure. It changes the world, it asks for and builds menstruation friendly infrastructure and it shares its discomfort, and through its vulnerability it organizes collectives of menstrual resistance to make space for leakiness. The Menstruator's leaky body insists on being open to being affected and to affect, with its transgression of bodily boundaries. It is a critique of Enlightenment's masculinist idealized "identity", because it does not fit into this template, and thus still insists on being noticed with all the trouble it makes. The Menstruator is a possibility of nomadic leaky bodily subjectivity, which leaves us with the question of "**what else is possible?**"

THE MENSTRUATOR leaves the spotlight for Eva, who concludes this last paragraph of the thesis with a modest wish for menstrual respect and openness:

Eva: And then it is a little bit like I do not want people to say: Oh I feel so bad for this person and have to like...as if you were a little baby, because actually it is pretty cool that you can go through it and stuff like that. I would actually rather prefer that people didn't care, so that you could go up to the person and say, are you like ok or? No I'm not, I am menstruating, but I will be all right, but I don't feel ok and there is nothing you can do about it and that was just a normal thing and people wouldn't be like: Eww yrks, that person has menstruation like, because you could like figure out...It's like when we came back to the class and had those papers<sup>12</sup> on us and the boys were very curious, I told the boys: It is something only girls have, use your brain!

Lise: Oh, were they very curious after?

---

<sup>12</sup> Eva is referring to the permits for research interviews, which had to be signed by parents or guardians.

Eva: Yes! And like then he could figure out, I think most of them had figured it out already, so it is something like, I mean it is just, it's a normal thing, so I don't understand why people think it is disgusting if you suddenly talk about it. Because it is better that we talk about it than we just...

## Summary

Based on fieldwork among young menstruants in a youth club and in two local schools situated in an upper middle class suburb of Copenhagen, Denmark, the thesis **The Possibilities of leaky bodies** investigates impossibilities and possibilities of young menstruants' bodily becomings. With the theories of feminist philosopher Rosi Bradotti as a point of departure, the thesis' analysis is thought with the feminist materialistic concepts "assemblage", "becoming" and "sexual difference" and thereby takes perspectives on subjectivity as embodied and on bodies and menstruation as affective relations. The affirmative theoretical concept of "becoming" is understood as an open ended and enabling process catalyzed by affirmative affects, without a predetermined destination but rather moving away from limitation and restriction. Thus, the study illustrates how menstruation and menstruants' bodies become in open and flexible systems known as "assemblages" that are organized through affective relations, which then become a determining factor in "what bodies can do". From a post-humanist approach, the analytical focus is directed at relations of bodies and menstruation materialities, like blood, pads and tampons as mattering to perform a productive and nuanced analysis of menstruation and of young menstruants' bodily subjectivity and possibilities of becoming. Situated in feminist materialistic philosophy, critical menstruation studies, and educational anthropology, the study is concerned with menstruation as embodied and significant in the context of young people's everyday lives. Therefore, the thesis is based on the stories of the young menstruants as they move in their everyday lives in school and extracurricular activities, and how these stories are expressed through interview-assemblages. By tracking and mapping bodies, blood, pads, used pads and tampons as situated in the context of an upper middle class town, the study finds that menstruation is a relational and embodied factor in deciding the possibilities of young menstruants, both as limitations and as enabling affects, in their processes of subjectification. The chapter **Place and people** explores how menstruation and young menstruants are embodied in place and time, where class dependent ideals and expectations of a high performance level and frequent physical activity along with family relations, matter to the relations through which menstruation becomes. The chapter **Bodies** focuses its analysis on how bodies as affective and leaky are understood through institutionalized femininity, where affectivity is connoted as feminine, but also as a sign of maturity and something which comes easier to girls. Furthermore, the chapter investigates

how menstrual affectivities influence the subjectification processes of young menstruants and how "female body-morphology" is understood as otherness and 'less than' through relations with non-menstruating pupils, the boys. The chapter **Blood** looks into the ways in which menstrual blood is more than a red liquid. By examining textures, colours and smells, the analysis offers insight into the process by which embodied menstruation materialities are disruptive through their relations to female morphology and sexuality, and in their transgressiveness and uncontrollability. In addition, the chapter explores how menstrual body-materialities emerge as abject and therefore are connected with affective discomfort, which entangles with bodily processes of becoming. The following chapters **The pad**, **The used pad** and **The tampon** follow non-human menstruation materialities as they emerge through interviews with young menstruants. By tracking the relations between menstruation materialities, bodies, things and places, the analysis decenters the subject, and explores how young menstruants always become, enmeshed with other bodies and things. The chapters show how the specific materialities of menstruation products matter. As post-human things, dirt or assisting technology, the menstruation products act as relations, which either enable the young menstruants to act on their desires or catalyze fear or worry. The concluding chapter of the analysis **Menstrual ecologies** examines the general themes as they emerge in the previous analytical chapters: sexed relations, leaky bodies and control over fluidity and their significance in relation to bodily subjectivity. The final chapter **Insights and concluding reflections** picks up the insights, which emerge from the analysis. It is concluded how menstruation is more than biological reproductive processes inside individual bodies and how, rather, menstruation as socio-material affective relations matters to young menstruants' everyday life and to their possibilities of affirmative becoming – as subjects of value. With outset in the empirical findings, menstrual equality is discussed, as the thesis suggests an affirmative menstruation pedagogy, where diverse and norm critical knowledge about bodies is thought as a fundamental human right, together with a menstrual ethics of intra-dependability and care to improve the circumstances for young menstruants' becoming. The chapter ends by going through the research contributions of the thesis to existing research about youth and menstruation and to the intersecting areas of research, feminist materialist philosophy and educational anthropology, in which the research is situated. A **postlude** leaves the thesis open by introducing the affirmative feminist figuration of "**The Menstruator**" as a suggestion to

think with, to identify "*poetic truths*", which might open up possibilities for leaky bodies to become nomadic subjectivities.

## Resume

Baseret på feltarbejde blandt unge menstruerende i en ungdomsklub og i to nærliggende skoler placeret i en over-middelklasse forstad til København, Danmark, undersøger afhandlingen umuligheder og muligheder for unge menstruerendes kropslige tilblivelser. Analysen tænkes med de feministisk materialistiske koncepter "*assemblage*", "*becoming*" og "*sexual difference*", og tager dermed sit teoretiske udgangspunkt i perspektiver på subjektivitet som kropsligt indlejret og på kroppe og menstruation som affektive relationer. Med udgangspunkt i den feministiske filosof Rosi Braidotti, tænker afhandlingen med det affirmative teoretiske begreb "*becoming*", og *tilblivelse* forstås derfor som en åben og mulighedsskabende proces katalyseret af affirmative affekter uden forudbestemt destination, men med retning væk fra begrænsning og fastholdelse. Undersøgelsen belyser hvordan menstruation og menstruerende kroppe bliver til i åbne og bevægelige systemer, såkaldte "*assemblages*", som organiseres gennem affektive relationer, der således bliver bestemmende for "*hvad kroppe kan*". Afhandlingen anlægger således en post-humanistisk tilgang, hvorigennem den analytiske opmærksomhed rettes mod relationer af kroppe og menstruationsmaterialiteter, som blod bind og tamponer, som afgørende for en frugtbar og nuanceret analyse af unge menstruerendes kropslige subjektivitet og muligheder for tilblivelse. Situeret i feministisk materialistisk filosofi, kritiske menstruationsstudier og pædagogisk antropologi, er studiet optaget af menstruation som kropsligt indlejret, og som betydningsgivende i konteksten af unges hverdagsliv. Dette betyder at afhandlingen er baseret på de unge menstruerendes historier, som de bevæger sig i deres hverdagsliv i skolen og til fritidsaktiviteter, og som de er kommet til udtryk gennem interview-assemblages. Ved at følge og kortlægge kroppe, blod, bind, brugte bind og tamponer, som situerede i konteksten af en øvre middelklasse by, viser studiet at menstruation er en relationel og kropslig faktor, med afgørende betydning for unge menstruerendes muligheder, både som begrænsninger og som muliggørende affekter, i deres subjektiveringsprocesser. Kapitellet **Sted og mennesker**, udforsker hvordan menstruation og unge menstruerende er indlejrede i sted og tid, hvor idealer forbundet til klasse, forventninger til et højt præstationsniveau og hyppig kropslig aktivitet, sammen med familierelationer, betyder noget for de relationer som menstruation bliver til igennem.

Kapitlet **Kroppe** koncentrerer sin analyse omkring hvordan kroppe som affektive og lækkende, bliver forstået gennem institutionaliseret femininitet, hvor affektivitet er forstået som feminint, men også som modenhed, og som noget der bedre mestres af piger. Kapitlet undersøger derudover, hvordan menstruelle affektiviteter betyder noget i unges menstruerendes subjektiveringsprocesser, og hvordan "kvindelig kropsmorfologi" forstås som forskellighed og mindre værd gennem relationer til ikke-menstruerende elever, drengene. Kapitlet **Blod** undersøger, hvorledes menstruationsblod er mere end en rød væske. Ved at undersøge konsistenser, farve og lugt, giver analysen indblik i hvorledes kropslige menstruationsmaterialiteter er forstyrrende gennem sine relationer til kvindelig morfologi og seksualitet og i sin transgressivitet og ukontrollerbarhed. Kapitlet udforsker derudover hvordan menstruelle kropsmaterialiteter bliver til som abjekte, og derfor er forbundet med affektivt ubehag, som vikler sig ind i kropslige subjektivitetsprocesser. De følgende kapitler **Bindet**, **Det brugte bind** og **Tamponen**, følger menstruationsmaterialiteter, som de fremkommer gennem interviews med unge menstruerende. Ved at følge relationerne mellem disse menstruationsmaterialiteter, kroppe, ting og steder decentrerer analysen det menstruerende subjekt, og viser hvordan menstruerende unge altid bliver til indflettet med andre kroppe og ting. Kapitlet giver indsigt i hvordan materialiteternes specificiteter får betydning, som post-humane ting, smuds eller som assisterede teknologi. På den måde får menstruationsprodukter i relation med kroppe, betydning for unges tilblivelser. Det afsluttende analysekapitel **Menstruelle økologier** hæver perspektivet og undersøger de gennemgående temaer, kønnede relationer, lækkende kroppe og kontrol af lækkende kroppe og hvad dette betyder i relation til kropslig subjektivitet, som de er fremkommet i de forgående analytiske kapitler. I det afsluttende kapitel **Indsigter og Konkluderende Refleksioner** samles der op på de indsigter, som analysen har givet. Konklusionen lyder at menstruation er mere end biologiske reproduktionsprocesser inde i individuelle kroppe, men at menstruation som sociomaterielle affektive relationer har betydning i unge menstruerendes hverdagsliv og for deres muligheder for affirmativ tilblivelse - at blive til som et subjekt med værdi. Ved at diskutere ligestilling for menstruerende med udgangspunkt i empirien, foreslås der en affirmativ menstruationspædagogik, hvor alsidig viden om menstruation og kendskab til egen krop tænkes som en grundlæggende menneskeret, sammen med en menstruationsetik funderet i en præmis om gensidig afhængighed og omsorg, for at forbedre vilkårene for

unge menstruerendes muligheder for tilblivelse. Kapitlet runder af med at gennemgå afhandlingens bidrag til den eksisterende forskning om menstruation og unge, og til de krydsende forskningsfelter, feministisk materialitets filosofi og pædagogisk antropologi, som forskningen er situeret i. Et **Postludium** efterlader afhandlingen åben ved at introducere den affirmative feministiske figuration "*Menstruatoren*", som et forslag til at tænke med, for at identificere "*poetiske sandheder*" der kan åbne op for muligheder for lækken kroppe, som menstruerende nomadisk subjektiviteter.

## References

- Abltrup, U. (2015). *Unge: Menstruation er ulækkert*. Danmarks Radio.
- Achino-Loeb, M.-L. (2005). *Silence: The currency of power*. Berghahn Books.
- Adamczak, B. (2016, 10.06.2022). *Come on! Diskussion Über ein neues Wort, das sich aufdrängt - und unser Sprechen über Sex revolutionieren wird*. Retrieved 15.3.2016 from
- Ahmed, S. (2013a). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2013b). Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism'. In *Women, Science, and Technology* (pp. 530-542). Routledge.
- Aidara, R., & Gassama Mbaye, M. (2020). Practice Note: Menstrual Hygiene Management—Breaking Taboos and Supporting Policy Change in West and Central Africa. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 529-537). Springer.
- Aksglaede, L., Sørensen, K., Petersen, J. H., Skakkebaek, N. E., & Juul, A. (2009). Recent decline in age at breast development: the Copenhagen Puberty Study. *Pediatrics*, 123(5), e932-e939.
- Aktinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (1998). Ethnography and participant observation. *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 248-261.
- Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press.
- Alaimo, S., & Hekman, S. J. (2008). *Material feminisms*. Indiana University Press.
- Allred, P., & Fox, N. J. (2017). Young bodies, power and resistance: a new materialist perspective. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(9), 1161-1175.
- Ambjörnsson, F. (2018). *Tid att städa*. Kriterium.
- Andreasen, L. U. (2014). *Piger, skoleliv og affektive forbindelser. En pædagogisk antropologisk undersøgelse af piger i en dansk skoleklasse og deres forhandlinger af køn gennem forståelser af flovhed og sejhed* Unpublished Master thesis.
- Andreasen, L. U. (2020). Menstruation Mediated: Monstrous Emergences of Menstruation and Menstruators on YouTube. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 901-914). Springer Singapore.
- Babbar, K., Martin, J., Ruiz, J., Parray, A. A., & Sommer, M. (2022). Menstrual health is a public health and human rights issue. *The Lancet Public Health*, 7(1), e10-e11.
- Bach, D. (2014). Parenting among wealthy Danish families: a concerted civilising process. *Ethnography and Education*, 9(2), 224-237.
- Bach, D. (2015). *Overskudsfamilier: Om Opdragelse, Identitet Og Klasse Blandt Velstående Familier I Nordsjælland*. Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Bakhtin, M., Iswolsky, H., & Bakhtin, M. M. (1968). *Rabelais and his world*. The M. I. T. Press.
- Bánovčanová, Z., & Masarykova, D. (2014). The docile body – Reflecting the school. *Journal of Pedagogy*, 5.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway : quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Barrington, D. J., Robinson, H. J., Wilson, E., & Hennegan, J. (2021). Experiences of menstruation in high income countries: A systematic review, qualitative evidence synthesis and comparison to low-and middle-income countries. *Plos one*, 16(7), e0255001.
- Bengtsson, J. (2014). Krop og viden i skolen. *Studier i Pædagogisk Filosofi*, 2(2), 46.
- Bennett, J. (2010). Vibrant matter. In *Vibrant Matter*. Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical inquiry*, 24(2), 281-288.
- Best, A. L. (2007). *Representing youth: methodological issues in critical youth studies /*. University Press.
- Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies1. *Du Bois review: Social science research on race*, 10(2), 405-424.
- Blackman, L. (2008). *The Body*. Berg 3PL.

- Blumenthal, D. (2014). *Little vast rooms of undoing: Exploring identity and embodiment through public toilet spaces*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bobel, C. (2010). *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. Rutgers University Press.
- Bobel, C. (2019a). Beyond the Managed Body: Putting Menstrual Literacy at the Center. In C. Bobel (Ed.), *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (pp. 281-321). Springer International Publishing.
- Bobel, C. (2019b). "Dignity Can't Wait": Building a Bridge to Human Rights. In C. Bobel (Ed.), *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (pp. 211-242). Springer International Publishing.
- Bobel, C. (2019c). Making Menstruation Matter in the Global South: Mapping a Critical History. In C. Bobel (Ed.), *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (pp. 69-109). Springer International Publishing.
- Bobel, C. (2020). Introduction: Menstruation as Lens—Menstruation as Opportunity. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 1-6). Springer.
- Bobel, C., & al., e. (2020). *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bobier, L. (2020). The Sexualization of Menstruation: On Rape, Tampons, and 'Prostitutes'. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 303-317). Springer.
- Bodyform. (2016). *No Blood should hold us back*
- Bonnevier, K. (2008). Klassrummet är ingen neutral container. *Pedagogiska magasinet*, 1 (08) 58 - 61.
- Bourdieu, P. (2007). *Outline of a theory of practice* (Repr. (21. printing). ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't IA woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of international women's studies*, 5(3), 75-86.
- Braidotti, R. (1997). Mothers, monsters, and machines.
- Braidotti, R. (2002). *Metamorphoses: towards a materialist theory of becoming*. Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2003). Becoming woman: Or sexual difference revisited. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(3), 43-64.
- Braidotti, R. (2006). Posthuman, all too human: Towards a new process ontology. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(7-8), 197-208.
- Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. (1. ed. ed.). Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2018). Ethics of joy. In R. a. H. Braidotti, Maria (Ed.), *Posthuman glossary* Bloomsbury Academic.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge*. Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2022). *Posthuman feminism*. Polity.
- Buchanan, I. (2020). *Assemblage Theory and Method: An Introduction and Guide*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Buckly, T. G., Alma (ed.). (1988). *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (T. Buckley & A. Gottlieb, Eds.). University of California Press.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2014). *Bodies that matter : on the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge.
- Butler, J., Gambetti, Z., & Sabsay, L. (2016). *Vulnerability in resistance*. Duke University Press.
- Bøhling, F. (2015). The Field Note Assemblage: Researching the Bodily-Affective Dimensions of Drinking and Dancing Ethnographically. In (pp. 161-180).

- Børne&Ungeministeriet. (2022). *Uddannelsesstatistik*. Retrieved 06.30.2022 from <https://uddannelsesstatistik.dk/Pages/main.aspx>
- Børns Vilkår. (2020). *Børnefakta. Børns forhold til krop, sundhed og motion*. [https://www.boerneraadet.dk/media/249276/Tilgaengelig BRD Boernefakta Okt 2020 Unges-forhold-til-krop-motion-og-sundhed-FINAL-a.pdf](https://www.boerneraadet.dk/media/249276/Tilgaengelig_BRD_Boernefakta_Okt_2020_Unges-forhold-til-krop-motion-og-sundhed-FINAL-a.pdf)
- Campbell, J. P. (1986). *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages* (Vol. 14). Popular Press.
- Carlson, K., Eisenstat, S., & Ziporyn, T. (2004). *The New Harvard Guide to Women's Health*.
- Chinyama, J. e. a. (2019). Menstrual hygiene management in rural schools of Zambia: a descriptive study of knowledge, experiences and challenges faced by schoolgirls. *BMC public health, 19*
- Cixous, H. (2009). The laugh of the Medusa. *Feminisms Redux*, 416-431.
- Colebrook, C., Fensham, R., & Threadgold, T. (2020). *Understanding deleuze*. Routledge.
- Coleman, R. (2008). The Becoming of Bodies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(2), 163-179.
- Coleman, R. (2009). *The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, Images, Experience*. Manchester University Press.
- Coleman, R. (2020). *Glitterworlds: The future politics of a ubiquitous thing*. MIT Press.
- Coleman, R., Ringrose; Jessica (2013). *Deleuze and research methodologies*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Coleman, S., & Collins, P. (2020). *Locating the field: space, place and context in anthropology*. Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). Intersections of race, class, gender, and nation: Some implications for Black family studies. *Journal of comparative family studies*, 29(1), 27-36.
- Commane, G. (2020). *Bad girls, dirty bodies : sex, performance and safe femininity*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2005). Collective action and agency in young children's peer cultures. In *Studies in modern childhood* (pp. 231-247). Springer.
- Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stan. L. Rev.*, 43, 1241.
- Dahl, K., Henze-Pedersen, S., Østergaard, S., & Østergaard, J. (2018). *Unge opfattelser af køn, krop og seksualitet*.
- Davies, B., Gonick, M., Gottschall, K., & Lampert, J. (2013). Ruptures in the heterosexual matrix through teenage flows and multiplicities. *Girlhood Studies*, 6(1), 46-62.
- Davis, D.-A., & Craven, C. (2022). *Feminist ethnography: Thinking through methodologies, challenges, and possibilities*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Davis, K. (2014). Intersectionality as critical methodology. *Writing academic texts differently: Intersectional feminist methodologies and the playful art of writing*, 17-29.
- Davis, K., & Evans, M. (2012). *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Delaney, J., Lupton, M. J., & Toth, E. (1988). *The Curse : A Cultural History of Menstruation* (2nd Revised ed. edition ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Deleuze, G. (2021). *Expressionism in philosophy : Spinoza*. Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2015). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia /*. Bloomsbury.
- Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Psychology Press.
- Driscoll, C. (2002). *Girls : feminine adolescence in popular culture and cultural theory*. Columbia University Press.
- DST. (2020). *Rekordfå teenagefødsler i Danmark*. Retrieved 06.28.22 from <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/bagtal/2020/2020-01-31-rekordfaa-teenagemoedre>
- Dworkin, A. (1997). *Intercourse*. Simon & Schuster.
- Ehn, B., Löfgren, O., & Wilk, R. (2015). *Exploring everyday life: Strategies for ethnography and cultural analysis*. Rowman & Littlefield.

- Elsesser, K. (2022). Spain May Legislate Menstruation Leave—Do Women Still Need Their Periods? *Forbes*. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2022/05/18/spain-may-legislate-menstruation-leave-do-women-still-need-their-periods/?sh=21d71b5c4f8d>)
- Faber, S. T. (2008). På jagt efter klasse.
- Faber, S. T., Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., & Skjott-Larsen, J. (2012). *Det skjulte klasesamfund*. Aarhus universitetsforlag.
- Fahs, B. (2016). *Out for blood: Essays on menstruation and resistance*. Suny Press.
- Ferguson, A. A. (1995). *Bad boys: school and the social construction of black masculinity*. University of California, Berkeley.
- Fingerson, L. (2006). *Girls in Power: Gender, Body, And Menstruation in Adolescence*. State University of New York Press.
- Fischer, C. (2018). Gender and the politics of shame: A twenty-first-century feminist shame theory. *Hypatia*, 33(3), 371-383.
- Folketinget. (2021). *B 173 Forslag til folketingsbeslutning om gratis adgang til menstruationsprodukter*. Retrieved 06.25.2022 from
- Fox, N. J. (2012). *The body*. Polity Press.
- Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2013). The Sexuality-Assemblage: Desire, Affect, Anti-Humanism *The Sociological review (Keele)*, 2013-11, Vol.61 (4), p.769-789.
- Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2015). New materialist social inquiry: designs, methods and the research-assemblage. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(4), 399-414.
- Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2021). Bodies, non-human matter and the micropolitical production of sociomaterial dis/advantage. *Journal of Sociology*, 14407833211002641.
- Fox, N. J., & Bale, C. (2017). Bodies, pornography and the circumscription of sexuality: A new materialist study of young people's sexual practices. *Sexualities*, 21(3), 393-409.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993). Growing up white: feminism, racism and the social geography of childhood. *Feminist Review*, 45(1), 51-84.
- Frankenberg, R. (2001). The mirage of an unmarked whiteness. *The making and unmaking of whiteness*, 72.
- Freud, S., McLintock, D., & Haughton, H. (2003). *The Uncanny*. Penguin Adult.
- Fritsch, K. (2015). Desiring Disability Differently: Neoliberalism, Heterotopic Imagination and Intra-corporeal Reconfigurations. *Foucault studies*, 43-66.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A., & Pattman, R. (2001). *Young masculinities: Understanding boys in contemporary society*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A., & Pattman, R. (2002). *Young masculinities: understanding boys in contemporary society /*. Palgrave.
- Fruergaard, M. (2000). *Cyklus : studier i rødt* (1. udgave. 1. oplag. ed.). Aschehoug.
- Frykman, J., & Löfgren, O. (2005). Kultur och känsla. *Sociologi i dag*, 1, 7-.
- Gannon, S., & Helmer. (2004). *Corporealities. In(ter)ventions in an Omnipresent Subject*. .
- Gilliam, L. (2009). *De umulige børn og det ordentlige menneske Identitet, ballade og muslimske fællesskaber blandt etniske minoritetsbørn*. Aarhus University Press.
- Gilliam, L. (2017). *Children of the welfare state: civilising practices in schools, childcare and families*. Pluto Press.
- Gilliam, L., & Gulløv, E. (2012). *Civiliserende institutioner: Om idealer og distinktioner i opdragelse*. Aarhus universitetsforlag.
- Gjerde, U. (2017). *Blodig alvor*
- Goldhill, O. (2018). Period pain can be “almost as bad as a heart attack.” Why aren't we researching how to treat it? *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/611774/period-pain-can-be-as-bad-as-a-heart-attack-so-why-arent-we-researching-how-to-treat-it/> .
- Good, M.-J. D., Brodwin, P., Good, B., & Kleinman, A. (1994). *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. University of California Press.

- Gottlieb, A. (2020). Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 143-162). Springer.
- Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Routledge.
- Guidone, H. C. (2020). The Womb Wanders Not: Enhancing Endometriosis Education in a Culture of Menstrual Misinformation. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 269-286). Springer.
- Gullestad, M. (1984/2001). *Kitchen-table Society. A case study of the family life and friendships of young working-class mothers in urban Norway*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Gulløv, E. (2003). *Feltarbejde blandt børn: metodologi og etik i etnografisk børneforskning*. Gyldendal Uddannelse.
- Gulløv, E. (2013). Creating a natural place for children: An ethnographic study of Danish kindergartens. In *Children's Places* (pp. 28-43). Routledge.
- Halberstam, J., & Livingston, I. (1995). *Posthuman bodies /.* Indiana University Press.
- Hansen, S. J. (2014). At komme fra 'udkanten' : Om sted, stedsans og unges uddannelsesstrategier i et socialt rum under forandring - belyst gennem et casestudie af Hirtshals, en havneby på den nordjyske vestkyst. In: Det Humanistiske Fakultet, Københavns Universitet.
- Hanssen, K. (2012). "Blod: rent eller fruktbart?". In *Rødt og hvitt: Om blod og melk i fortid og samtid*. eds. Bondevik, Hilde & Anne Kveim Lie (Vol. 2012, pp. Pp. 75-102). Oslo: Unipub.
- Haraway, D. (1990). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873106>
- Haraway, D. (1992). The promises of monsters: a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. *Cultural studies*, 295-337.
- Haraway, D. (2008). *When species meet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, D. (2020). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. In *Feminist theory reader* (pp. 303-310). Routledge.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene* Duke University Press.
- Hassard, J., Holliday, R., & Willmott, H. (2000). *Body and organization*. SAGE.
- Hasson, K. A. (2016). Not a "real" period? Social and material constructions of menstruation. *Gender & Society*, 30(6), 958-983.
- Hastrup, K. (2003). *Ind i verden: En grundbog i antropologisk metode*. Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Haymond, R. (2020). # PeriodsAreNotAnInsult: Hashtag activism meets menstruation. *Women's Reproductive Health*, 7(2), 73-86.
- Hedva, J. (2016). Sick woman theory. *Mask Magazine*, 24.
- Hemmings, C. (2005). Invoking affect: Cultural theory and the ontological turn. *Cultural studies*, 19(5), 548-567.
- Hennegan, J., Winkler, I. T., Bobel, C., Keiser, D., Hampton, J., Larsson, G., Chandra-Mouli, V., Plesons, M., & Mahon, T. (2021). Menstrual health: a definition for policy, practice, and research. *Sex Reprod Health Matters*, 29(1), 1911618.
- Hickey-Moody, A., & Malins, P. (2007). Deleuzian encounters: Studies in contemporary social issues.
- Holford, N., Renold, E., & Huuki, T. (2013). What (else) can a kiss do? Theorizing the power plays in young children's sexual cultures. *Sexualities*, 16(5-6), 710-729.
- Holland, J., & Ramazanoglu, C. (2002). Feminist methodology. *Feminist Methodology*, 1-196.
- Homewood, S., Karlsson, A., & Vallgård, A. (2020). Removal as a method: A fourth wave HCI approach to understanding the experience of self-tracking. Proceedings of the 2020 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference,
- Hoskins, J. (2002). Introduction: Blood Mysteries: Beyond Menstruation as Pollution. *Ethnology*, 41(4), 299-301.
- Huizer, G., & Mannheim, B. (1979). *The Politics of anthropology from colonialism and sexism toward a view from below* (Reprint 2011 ed.). Mouton.

- Hybholt, M. G., & Thing, L. F. (2017). Krop og civilisering: Om unge danske pigers forhold til den nøgne krop i forbindelse med omklædning. *Tidsskrift for professionsstudier*, 13(24), 46-55.
- Irigaray, L. (1992). *Speculum of the other woman*. Cornell University Press.
- Ivinson, G., & Renold, E. (2020). What More Do Bodies Know? Moving with the Gendered Affects of Place. *Body & Society*, 1357034X20923017.
- Jackson, A. Y., & Mazzei, L. A. (2009). *Voice in qualitative inquiry: challenging conventional, interpretive, and critical conceptions in qualitative research* /. Routledge.
- Jackson, T. E., & Falmagne, R. J. (2013). Women wearing white: Discourses of menstruation and the experience of menarche. *Feminism & Psychology*, 23(3), 379-398.
- James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). Theorizing childhood. *New York*, 81-104.
- Johnston-Robledo, I., & Chrisler, J. C. (2011). The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma. *Sex Roles*, 68(1-2), 9-18.
- Johnston-Robledo, I., & Chrisler, J. C. (2020). The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 181-199). Springer.
- Johnston-Robledo, I., Sheffield, K., Voigt, J., & Wilcox-Constantine, J. (2007). Reproductive shame: Self-objectification and young women's attitudes toward their reproductive functioning. *Women & Health*, 46(1), 25-39.
- Jones, L., & Duncan, J. (2013). Deleuze and Early Years Education: explorations in theory and lived experiences. In (Vol. 3, pp. 203-207): SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England.
- Jones, M. (2017). Expressive Surfaces: The Case of the Designer Vagina. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34(7-8), 29-50.
- Justenborg, K. V., Sager, N., Larsen, K., & Frederiksen, J. T. (2021). Folkeskolens sociale rum af trivsel: Hvordan er oplevelser af og med kroppen med til at skabe forskelle i adgang til trivsel blandt elever i 5., 7. og 9. klasse i den danske folkeskole. . *Praktiske Grunde: Nordisk tidsskrift for kultur- og samfundsvidenskab*, 15(2), 15-40.
- Karlsson, A. (2019a). *Den kønnede datakrop: en socioteknisk undersøgelse af menstruation, self-tracking og apps: ph. d. afhandling Aarhus Universitet*].
- Karlsson, A. (2019b). A room of one's own?: Using period trackers to escape menstrual stigma. *Nordicom Review*, 40(s1), 111-123.
- Karlsson, A. (2021). Whose Bodies? Approaching the Quantified Menstruating Body Through a Feminist Ethnography. In *The Quantification of Bodies in Health: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Kirketerp Berthelsen, S. (2019). *Med hjertet & kussen i laser : et magtmenstruelt hævnskrift, der giver MeToo-kritikere og andre med deres på det tørre svar på tiltale gennem Vita Andersens poesi* (1. udgave. ed.). Nemo.
- Kissling, E. A. (2006). *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Kjærsgaard, P. (2016). Der er altså større problemer i Danmark end kvinders menstruation *Politiken*. <https://politiken.dk/debat/art5623746/Der-er-alts%C3%A5-st%C3%B8rre-problemer-i-Danmark-end-kvindens-menstruation>
- Knauss, C., Paxton, S. J., & Alsaker, F. D. (2008). Body Dissatisfaction in Adolescent Boys and Girls: Objectified Body Consciousness, Internalization of the Media Body Ideal and Perceived Pressure from Media. *Sex Roles*, 59(9-10), 633-643.
- Knudsen, B. T. (2015). *Affective Methodologies* (B. T. Knudsen & C. Stage, Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Kofoed, J. (2003). *Elevpli: inklusion-eksklusionsprocesser blandt børn i skolen: ph. d.-afhandling Institut for pædagogisk psykologi, Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet*].
- Kofoed, J., & Ringrose, J. (2012). Travelling and sticky affects: Exploring teens and sexualized cyberbullying through a Butlerian-Deleuzian-Guattarian lens. *Discourse (Abingdon, England)*, 33(1), 5-20.

- Komesaroff, P. A., Rothfield, P., & Daly, J. (1997). *Reinterpreting menopause: Cultural and philosophical issues*. Psychology Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror* (Vol. 98). University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton.
- Lange Thomsen, J., & Senderovitz, G. S. (2017). *Mødommen*. Gyldendal.
- Lather, P., & Smithies, C. (2018). *Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS*. Routledge.
- Laub, C., & Nyvang Christensen, M. (2014). *Med bind for øjnene : en retorisk kritik af amerikanske reklamer for menstruationsartikler*. [Sine Cecilie Laub og Maja Nyvang Christensen].
- Laws, S. (1990). *Issues of blood : the politics of menstruation*. Macmillan.
- Le Guin, U. K. (1986). *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Ignota Books.
- Leahy, C. P. (2016). Does gender equality suffer when women get menstrual leave? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/does-gender-equality-suffer-when-women-get-menstrual-leave-55710>
- Lee, J., & Sasser-Coen, J. (1996). *Blood Stories: Menarche and the Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary U.S. Society*. Psychology Press.
- Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as Method The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (1st 2013. ed.). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Levy, J., & Romo-Avilés, N. (2019). "A good little tool to get to know yourself a bit better": a qualitative study on users' experiences of app-supported menstrual tracking in Europe. *BMC public health*, 19(1), 1-11.
- Lewis, D. (1973). Anthropology and Colonialism. *Current Anthropology*, 14(5), 581-602.
- Libresse. (1992). *Becoming Woman*. In. Denmark: Libresse / O. B. Fleur.
- Linstead, S. (2000). Dangerous fluids and the organization-without-organs. *Body and organization*, 31-51.
- Liu, H.-L., Chen, K.-H., & Peng, N.-H. (2012). Cultural Practices Relating to Menarche and Menstruation among Adolescent Girls in Taiwan—Qualitative Investigation. *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, 25(1), 43-47.
- Longhurst, R. (2001). *Bodies: exploring fluid boundaries /*. Routledge.
- Orde, A. (1980). Age, race, class, and sex: Women redefining difference. *Women in Culture: An intersectional anthology for gender and women's studies*, 16-22.
- Lykke, N. (2010). *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (Vol. 1). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Lykke, N. (2020). Transversal Dialogues on Intersectionality, Socialist Feminism and Epistemologies of Ignorance. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 28(3), 197-210.
- M., W. J. (2020). (In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 319-336). Springer.
- MacLure, M. (2013). The wonder of data. *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, 13(4), 228-232.
- Madden, R. (2017). *Being ethnographic: A guide to the theory and practice of ethnography*. Sage.
- Malmberg, D. (1991). *Skammens röda blomma? : menstruationen och den menstruerande kvinnan i svensk tradition = The red flower of shame? : menstruation and the menstruating woman in Swedish tradition*.
- Marsh, E. E., Al-Hendy, A., Kappus, D., Galitsky, A., Stewart, E. A., & Kerolous, M. (2018). Burden, Prevalence, and Treatment of Uterine Fibroids: A Survey of U.S. Women. *J Womens Health (Larchmt)*, 27(11), 1359-1367.
- Massumi, B. (2007). *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation /* (4. print. ed.). Duke University Press.
- Massumi, B. (2015). *Politics of affect /*. Polity.
- Mayes, E. (2019). The mis/uses of 'voice' in (post)qualitative research with children and young people: Histories, politics and ethics. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(10), 1191-1209.

- Mazzei, L. A. (2013). A voice without organs: Interviewing in posthumanist research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(6), 732-740.
- McCracken, P., & Karras, R. M. (2003). *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McGregor, K. (2020). Material flows: patriarchal structures and the menstruating teacher. *Gender and Education*, 32(3), 382-394.
- McHugh, M. C. (2020). Menstrual Shame: Exploring the Role of 'Menstrual Moaning'. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 409-422). Springer.
- Mead, M., Sieben, A., & Straub, J. (1973). *Coming of age in Samoa*. Penguin New York.
- Meinert, L. (2003). Grænser for deltagelse. In E. a. H. Gulløv, Susanne (Ed.), *Feltarbejde blandt børn : Metodologi og etik i etnografisk børneforskning*. Gyldendal.
- Menstrual-Hygiene-Day. (2022). *MH DAY* (<https://menstrualhygieneday.org>),
- Meyer, L. (1890). *Menstruationsprocessen og dens sygelige Afvigelser. Forelæsninger holdte ved Københavns Universitet i Efteraarshalvaaret 1889*.
- Miller, W. I. (2009). *The anatomy of disgust*. Harvard University Press.
- Moffat, N., & Pickering, L. (2019). 'Out of order': The double burden of menstrual etiquette and the subtle exclusion of women from public space in Scotland. *The sociological review*, 67(4), 766-787.
- Monki. (2017). *When did your periods become cool? Today*. <https://monki.lunette.com/>
- Neimanis, A. (2012). Hydrofeminism: Or, on becoming a body of water. *Undutiful daughters: Mobilizing future concepts, bodies and subjectivities in feminist thought and practice*, 96-115.
- Newton, V. L. (2016). *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Nordberg, M. (1999). Synd att du inte kan hänga med in i duschen... om könstillhörighetens betydelse vid intervjuer och fältstudier. *Nord Nytt nr 75/76*.
- Nyvang Christensen, M., Laub, S. C., Nyvang Christensen, M., & Laub, S. C. (2016). *Gennemblødt : en bog om menstruation* (1. udgave. ed.). People'sPress.
- Oats, J. J., & Abraham, S. (2015). *Llewellyn-Jones fundamentals of obstetrics and gynaecology*. Elsevier Health Sciences.
- Olsen, S. S., Madsen, K. D., Stolpe, M. N., Damgaard, T. I., Nielsen, P. N., & Sederberg, M. (2021). Krop og trivsel i udskolingen—fra et elevperspektiv. *Forskning og forandring*, 4(1), 80-97.
- Ottosen, M. H., Andersen, D., Nielsen, L., Lausten, M., & Stage, S. (2010). Børn og unge i Danmark. *Velfærd og trivsel*, 3, 59.
- Parisi, L. (2004). *Abstract sex : philosophy, biotechnology and the mutations of desire*. Continuum.
- Parsons, M. (2009). *The Menstruous-Monstrous : female blood in horror* [Dublin Trinity College]. Dublin.
- Patsavas, A. (2014). Recovering a criptistemology of pain. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 8(2), 203-219.
- Persdotter, J. (2013). Countering the menstrual mainstream: A study of the European menstrual countermovement. *Masters in European Studies*.
- Persdotter, J. (2020). Introducing Menstrunormativity: Toward a Complex Understanding of 'Menstrual Monsterings'. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 357-373). Springer.
- Persdotter, J. (2022). *Menstrual dirt: An exploration of contemporary menstrual hygiene practices in Sweden*. Arkiv.
- Phoenix, A. (1997). Theories of gender and black families. *Black British feminism: A reader*, 63-66.
- Phoenix, A. (2006). Interrogating intersectionality: Productive ways of theorising multiple positioning. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*(2-3).
- Pink, S. (2015). *Doing sensory ethnography*. Sage.

- PLAN-UK. (2018). *Break the barriers: Girl's experiences of menstruation in the UK*. <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-break-the-barriers-report-032018pdf/download?token=Fs-HYP3v>
- Prendergast, S. (1994). *This Is the Time to Grow Up: Girls' Experience of Menstruation in School*. Family Planning Association.
- Price, J., & Shildrick, M. (1999). *Feminist theory and the body: a reader* /. University Press.
- Przybylo, E., & Fahs, B. (2018). Feels and flows: on the realness of menstrual pain and crippling menstrual chronicity. *Feminist Formations*, 30(1), 206-229.
- Puar, J. K. (2012). "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess": Becoming-intersectional in assemblage theory. *PhiloSOPHIA*, 2(1), 49-66.
- Paakkari, A., & Rautio, P. (2019). 'What is puberty, then?' Smartphones and Tumblr images as de/re-territorialisations in an upper secondary school classroom. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 40(6), 873-888.
- Rauch, A. (1995). The Monstrous Body of Knowledge in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein". *Studies in Romanticism*, 227-253.
- Rembeck, G., & Gunnarsson, R. (2004). Improving pre-and postmenarchal 12-year-old girl's attitude toward menstruation *Health care for women international*, 25(7), 680-698.
- Rembeck, G. I., & Hermansson, E. (2008). Transition to puberty as experienced by 12-year-old Swedish girls. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 24(5), 326-334.
- Rembeck, G. I., Möller, M., & Gunnarsson, R. K. (2006). Attitudes and feelings towards menstruation and womanhood in girls at menarche. *Acta paediatrica*, 95(6), 707-714.
- Renold, E. (2004). *Girls, boys and junior sexualities: Exploring childrens' gender and sexual relations in the primary school*. Routledge.
- Renold, E. (2019). Ruler-skirt risings: Being crafty with how gender and sexuality education research-activisms can come to matter. In *Uplifting gender and sexuality education research* (pp. 115-140). Springer.
- Renold, E., & Allan, A. (2006). Bright and beautiful: High achieving girls, ambivalent femininities, and the feminization of success in the primary school. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 27(4), 457-473.
- Renold, E., & Ivinson, G. (2019). Anticipating the more-than: Working with prehension in artful interventions with young people in a post-industrial community. *Futures*, 112, 102428.
- Renold, E., & Mellor, D. (2013). Deleuze and Guattari in the nursery: Towards an ethnographic multi-sensory mapping of gendered bodies and becomings. *Deleuze and research methodologies*, 23-41.
- Renold, E., & Ringrose, J. (2019). JARing: Making phematerialist research practices matter. *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, 4.
- Reuters. (2019). *Nepal urged to crack down on 'menstruation huts' after fourth death in a month*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nepal-women-religion-idUSKCN1PT18T>
- Rice, C. (2018). The Spectacle of the Child Woman: Troubling Girls and the Science of Early Puberty. *Feminist studies*, 44(3), 535-566.
- Roberts, C. (2015). *Puberty in Crisis: The Sociology of Early Sexual Development*. Cambridge University Press.
- Roien, L. A., Graugaard, C., & Simovska, V. (2022). From Deviance to Diversity: Discourses and Problematisations in Fifty Years of Sexuality Education in Denmark. *Sex education*, 22(1), 68-83.
- Rosenbeck, B. (1990). *Kvindekøn : den moderne kvindeligheds historie 1880-1980*. Gyldendals Bogklubber.
- Rosenbeck, B. (1992). *Kroppens politik. Om køn, kultur og videnskab*. Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Ruble, D. N., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1982). The Experience of Menarche. *Child Development*, 53(6), 1557-1566.
- Russo, M. (1986). Female grotesques: Carnival and theory. In *Feminist studies/critical studies* (pp. 213-229). Springer.

- Rydström, K. (2020). Degendering Menstruation: Making Trans Menstruators Matter. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 945-959). Springer Singapore.
- Røstvik, C. M. (2018). Blood in the Shower: A Visual History of Menstruation and Clean Bodies. *Visual culture & gender*, 13, 54.
- Røstvik, C. M. (2022). *Cash Flow: The businesses of menstruation*. UCL Press.
- Samvirke. (1980). Tampax mini fra den første menstruation. *Samvirke Oktober 1980 - 10*. <https://classic.samvirke.dk/magasin-artikel/tampax-supermini-fra-den-forste-menstruation>
- Sandbjerg Hansen, C. (2014). *Socialt rum, symbolsk magt : bourdieuske perspektiver på klasse* (1. oplag. ed.). Hexis.
- Schadler, C. (2019). Enactments of a new materialist ethnography: methodological framework and research processes. *Qualitative Research*, 19(2), 215-230.
- Schmidt, L.-H. a. K., Jens Erik. (2004). *Lys, luft og renlighed. Den moderne socialhygiejnes fødsel*. Akademisk Forlag.
- Schmidt, L. S. N. (2017). *Unge syn på krop og kropsidealer. En undersøgelse fra Sex og Samfund*.
- Schoep, M. E., Adang, E. M., Maas, J. W., De Bie, B., Aarts, J. W., & Nieboer, T. E. (2019). Productivity loss due to menstruation-related symptoms: a nationwide cross-sectional survey among 32 748 women. *BMJ open*, 9(6), e026186.
- Schoep, M. E., Nieboer, T. E., van der Zanden, M., Braat, D. D., & Nap, A. W. (2019). The impact of menstrual symptoms on everyday life: a survey among 42,879 women. *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 220(6), 569. e561-569. e567.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). Touching feeling. In *Touching Feeling*. Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K., & Frank, A. (1995). Shame in the cybernetic fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins. *Critical inquiry*, 21(2), 496-522.
- Shail, A., & Howie, G. (2005). *Menstruation: a cultural history* /. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shelley, M. (2001). *Frankenstein*.
- Shildrick, M. (1997). *Leaky bodies and boundaries: feminism, postmodernism and (bio)ethisc*. Routledge.
- Shildrick, M. (2001). Embodying the monster. *Embodying the Monster*, 1-154.
- Shorter, E., Teglbjærg, L. S., Shorter, E., & Shorter, E. (1979). *Kernefamiliens historie*. Nyt Nordisk Forlag.
- Sifo, K. (2021). *Undersökning om mens, mensskydd och mensfattigdom 2021*.
- Sivakami, M., Maria van Eijk, A., Thakur, H., Kakade, N., Patil, C., Shinde, S., Surani, N., Bauman, A., Zulaika, G., Kabir, Y., Dobhal, A., Singh, P., Tahiliani, B., Mason, L., Alexander, K. T., Thakkar, M. B., Laserson, K. F., & Phillips-Howard, P. A. (2019). Effect of menstruation on girls and their schooling, and facilitators of menstrual hygiene management in schools: surveys in government schools in three states in India, 2015. *Journal of global health*, 9(1), 010408-010408.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). Formations of class & gender: Becoming respectable. *Formations of Class & Gender*, 1-200.
- Skeggs, B. (2001). The toilet paper: Femininity, class and mis-recognition. *Women's Studies International Forum*,
- Smith, K., Alexander, K., & Campbell, S. (2017). *Feminism (s) in early childhood: Using feminist theories in research and practice* (Vol. 4). Springer.
- Spanger, M. (2012). "You see how good-looking Lee Ann is!" Establishing field relations through gendered and racialised bodily practices. *Qualitative Studies*, 3(2), 150-162.
- Springgay, S. (2011). "The Chinatown Foray" as sensational pedagogy. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 41(5), 636-656.
- Spyrou, S. (2011). The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood*, 18(2), 151-165.
- Spyrou, S. (2019). An ontological turn for childhood studies? *Children & Society*, 33(4), 316-323.

- Staunæs, D. (2003). Where have all the subjects gone? Bringing together the concepts of intersectionality and subjectification. *NORA: Nordic journal of women's studies*, 11(2), 101-110.
- Staunæs, D. (2004). *Køn, etnicitet og skoleliv* / (1. udgave. ed.). Samfundslitteratur.
- Staunæs, D. (2018). 'Green with envy:' affects and gut feelings as an affirmative, immanent, and trans-corporeal critique of new motivational data visualizations. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 31(5), 409–421.
- Staunæs, D., & Søndergaard, D. M. (2006). Intersektionalitet–udsat for teoretisk justering. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*(2-3).
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press.
- Stewart, K. (2010). Worlding refrains. *The affect theory reader*, 339-353.
- Stigel, N. E., & Tórsheim, L. (2018). *Dit hemmelige våben : guide til din kvindelige cyklus*. Womens Power Press.
- Stubbs, M. L., & Johnston-Robledo, I. (2013). Kiddy thongs and menstrual pads: The sexualization of girls and early menstrual life.
- Søndergaard, M. K. (2019). Difficulties in Distinguishing 'Fine' from 'Sick' : Sensorially oriented anthropological perspectives on diagnostic delay and healthcare seeking for endometriosis in Denmark. In Aarhus: Aarhus Universitet, Institut for Kultur og Samfund.
- Tegegne, T. K., & Sisay, M. M. (2014). Menstrual hygiene management and school absenteeism among female adolescent students in Northeast Ethiopia. *BMC public health*, 14(1), 1118.
- Thomas, J. B. (1997). *Featherless Chickens, Laughing Women, and Serious Stories*. University of Virginia Press.
- Thomsen, P. (2014). Professor: Kvinder skal have betalt menstruationsorlov. *Ekstra Bladet*.
- Thorne, B. (1996). *Gender Play*.
- Tiainen, M., Leppänen, T., Kontturi, K., & Mehrabi, T. (2020). Making Middles Matter: Intersecting Intersectionality with New Materialisms. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 28(3), 211-223.
- Top-Nørgaard, J. (2018). *Kroppen er en si* (1. udgave. 1. oplag. ed.). Fredag.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). The Mushroom at the End of the World. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). Liminality and communitas. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*, 94(113), 125-130.
- UN. (2019). *Women's menstrual health should no longer be a taboo*  
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2019/03/international-womens-day-8-march-2019>
- Undervisningsministeriet. <https://www.uvm.dk/sfo-klub-og-fritidshjem/klubtilbud>  
<https://www.uvm.dk/sfo-klub-og-fritidshjem/klubtilbud>
- Undervisningsministeriet. (2022). <https://www.uvm.dk/>
- UNESCO. (2016). *Leaving no one behind: How far on the way to universal primary and secondary education?* (Global education monitoring report: policy paper, 27 UIS fact sheet, 37, Issue.  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245238>
- Ussher, J. M. (2006). *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (New Edition ed.). Routledge.
- Utoft, E. H. (2020). Motivation, organisational gender equality work and the postfeminist gender regime: A feminist approach. *Dansk Sociologi*, 31(2), 93-98.
- Vaittinen, T. (2015). The Power of the Vulnerable Body. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17(1), 100-118.
- Vora, S. (2020). The Realities of Period Poverty: How Homelessness Shapes Women's Lived Experiences of Menstruation. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 31-47). Springer.
- Vostral, S. L. (2008). *Under wraps: A history of menstrual hygiene technology*. Lexington Books.

- Vostral, S. L. (2020). Of Mice and (Wo)Men: Tampons, Menstruation, and Testing. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 673-686). Springer Singapore.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7\\_50](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7_50)
- Weeks, M. (2020). Affect philosophy meets incongruity. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 8(1), 1-13.
- Weinstock, J. A. (2020). *The Monster Theory Reader*. University of Minnesota Press.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125-151.
- WHO. (2022). *WHO statement on menstrual health and rights*. Retrieved 06.30.22 from  
<https://www.who.int/news/item/22-06-2022-who-statement-on-menstrual-health-and-rights>
- Wilson, E. A. (2015). *Gut feminism*. Duke University Press.
- Winkler, I. T. (2020). Introduction: Menstruation as Fundamental. In C. Bobel, I. T. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. A. Hasson, E. A. Kissling, & T.-A. Roberts (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (pp. 9-13). Springer.
- Winther, I. W. (2017). Hverdagsliv: trivaliserede praksisser. In *I Pædagogisk antropologi : tilgange og begreber* (pp. 27-39). Hans Reitzels Forlag. Pædagogik og Samfund Nr. 1.
- Wood, J. M. (2020). (In) Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative. *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, 319-336.
- Wynter, S., & McKittrick, K. (2015). Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: Conversations. In *Sylvia Wynter* (pp. 9-89). Duke University Press.
- Åkjær, A. (2019). *Dag nr. 2*. <https://youtu.be/vtvIzr4gg8o>
- Aamann, I. C. (2015). Class, mothering and the values of food. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*(3-4).