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Ellen Barth

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Article abstract

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Ellen BARTH

University of Münster

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the role of books about menstruation in twenty-first century menstrual activism. It argues that such books support and inspire transnational activist efforts by increasing public visibility of a taboo topic and by influencing perceptions about menstruation through their contents. Books on menstruation localize issues for specific linguistic, political, and cultural arenas, while still connecting to and bolstering the transnational movement. After providing an overview of current book trends, the article examines a single book, *The Tampon Book*, which protested the German tampon tax by hiding tampons in a book—a good with a lower tax rate than tampons. Materially embodying menstrual discrimination, the book contributed to activist efforts that led to the elimination of the tampon tax in Germany. Moreover, through engagement in the post-digital publishing field, the book helped bring greater visibility to this internationally relevant issue.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de la place qu'occupent les livres à propos des menstruations dans le contexte de l'activisme menstruel au XXI^e siècle. Ces livres soutiennent et inspirent les actions militantes transnationales en augmentant la visibilité d'un sujet tabou et en influençant, par leur contenu, les perceptions sur les menstruations. Ils situent les enjeux localement, dans des contextes linguistiques, politiques et culturels spécifiques, tout en venant dynamiser un mouvement transnational. L'article brosse les tendances actuelles en matière de livres sur les menstruations, puis examine plus particulièrement le cas de *The Tampon Book*. Celui-ci constituait un objet de résistance contre la taxe allemande sur les tampons hygiéniques, en ce qu'il dissimulait des tampons, produits davantage taxés que les livres. Puisqu'il a réussi à incarner de manière très concrète la discrimination menstruelle, *The Tampon Book* a concouru aux actions militantes qui ont conduit à l'élimination de la taxe sur les tampons en Allemagne. Enfin, en s'inscrivant dans le champ éditorial

post-numérique, le livre a permis d'accroître l'attention portée à la discrimination menstruelle en tant qu'enjeu à dimension internationale.

Keywords

Menstrual activism, transnational activism, period books, post-digital publishing field, book packaging as protest

Mots-clés

Activisme menstruel, activisme transnational, livres sur les menstruations, champ littéraire post-numérique, matérialité du livre comme résistance

In one of the most memorable scenes from the 2016 film *20th Century Women*, artist and feminist Abbie declares at a dinner party that she is menstruating. After being chastised for mentioning her period at the table, Abbie argues that it is not a big deal and is in fact a “deeply transformative time.” She goes on to ask all the men at the table to say “menstruation,” saying, “[n]ow everybody say it together: menstruation. Just like gentle, happy, and casual.”¹ In another scene in the film, which is set in the 1970s, the women’s health movement manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves* appears, with the book inspiring introspection and conversations about women’s lives and bodies among the characters.²

These scenes portrayed in the film, in combination with the title, imply that the stigma surrounding menstruation and the importance of books as materials that help normalize and destigmatize menstruation are things of the past. They are, the film suggests, twentieth-century issues. And there is some evidence to support this. On the global scale, the topic of menstruation has never been more visible, with the year 2015 having been declared by *Cosmopolitan* as “the year the period went public.”³ Around the same time, in 2011, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* issued its last printed book edition and moved online.⁴ The decision to discontinue printed editions of one of the most influential second-wave feminist women’s health manuals, which has sold over four million copies, been translated into 17 languages,⁵ and which has inspired numerous similar women’s health books around the world,⁶ seems to speak to larger cultural and media shifts, in which books are no longer the activist default they once were.

This article argues, however, that books continue to play a vital—if somewhat altered—role in twenty-first century women’s health and menstrual activism, which has been called a “period revolution.”⁷ Through their content, visibility, cultural/symbolic status, and material form, books have the power to influence perceptions about menstruation, encourage activism, and, in some cases, act as objects of protest. In addition to and often in tandem with activism on social media, period books about menstruation are a popular way to support menstrual activism, as they can localize issues for specific linguistic, political, and cultural arenas, while still connecting to and bolstering the transnational movement. In other words, period books strengthen and support global period activism while being able to target specific local readers through language, genre, and format.

Not all of these developments are new, and the current period revolution is a continuation of feminist activism of the 1970s, which itself was greatly influenced by grassroots strategies of the civil rights era and New Left student movement.⁸ The use of print as a vehicle for social and political change has been widely noted within the women’s liberation and women’s health movements of the twentieth-century.⁹ As Laurel Forster writes, “the significance of the printed word to the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1970s can hardly be overstated.”¹⁰ Books like *The Feminine Mystique*, *Sexual Politics*, *The Black Woman*, and *Lionheart Gal* defined an era of women’s activism that characterized itself by the slogan “the personal is political.” Books disseminated personal stories into the public sphere, often extending and growing out of face-to-face consciousness-raising meetings. Through efforts of traditional publishers and feminist presses, books could meet mainstream as well as more niche and localized needs.

An example of this is the health manual *Sharir ki Jaankaari*, which translates to “about the body,” published by Kali for Women Press. Created by rural women in the Indian state of Rajasthan after several in-person workshops, the creators carefully considered the book’s intended audience during its conception. This 1989 picture book is accessible to literate and non-literate readers alike, was published in Hindi, and includes flaps on illustrations of clothed women that can be lifted to reveal anatomical drawings of body parts. Still being used in some places in India today, the book has sold over 70,000 copies.¹¹ Books like *Sharir ki Jaankaari* took the international movement of second-wave feminism and localized it as a way of putting

power into the hands of the reader. In this way, women's health and sexuality advocates used print to disseminate knowledge, teach women about their bodies, and offer alternatives to medical establishments that so often ignored women's health concerns.¹²

While the importance of print culture to second-wave feminism and the women's liberation movement is a well-established fact, current fourth-wave feminism, on the other hand, has been dubbed "hashtag feminism" for its use of social media. Like many other recent social movements, such as the Arab Spring, #metoo, and #BLM, the period revolution has benefitted greatly from online social media connectivity and engagement, using online petitions, digital platforms, online fundraising, and hashtag campaigns to spread awareness and advocate for change. Individual social media posts that deal with the topic of menstruation have become flashpoints for discussion. Indian-Canadian Rupri Kaur's Instagram post in which she is seen lying in bed with menstrual blood on her pants went viral in 2014 for both its message of period positivity and for the fact that it was twice removed by Instagram.¹³

A benefit of online activism is that the photos, videos, and posts shared on social media are broadly accessible across national borders. The transnational aspect of the current period revolution can be traced in how hashtags and movements spread and are adapted to new national contexts. German university student Elona Kastrati, for example, shared her movement "PadsAgainstSexism" on Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook through images of her handing out menstrual pads with written messages like "my pussy, my choice."¹⁴ Kastrati's posts received messages from people in Slovenia, the United States, and France,¹⁵ and, alongside homegrown campaigns like #happytobleed, inspired similar activism as far away as India.¹⁶

Although social media has been an integral part of the twenty-first century period revolution that is taking place across the globe, as W. Lance Bennett has noted, transnational activism requires the possibility of engagement in different forms. Theorizing twenty-first century transnational activism, he writes that "it is not the technology alone that creates rapidly expanding action networks—it is the capacity to move easily between on- and offline relationships that makes the scale shift to transnational activism possible."¹⁷

This means that transnational activism cannot rely on social media alone, but needs to work in tandem with offline, localized activism. As tools for engaging and empowering local readers within specific national, political, and linguistic contexts, books and print media still have a role to play in this networked, online revolution.

By addressing recent trends in period books, this article contributes to knowledge about current fourth-wave feminist print culture and the role of the book in what Stevie Marsden and Rachel Noorda have come to call twenty-first century book studies.¹⁸ In mapping the field of twenty-first century book studies, Marsden and Noorda propose a long twenty-first century, because “this year 2000 line is a blurry one that bleeds into the late twentieth century.”¹⁹ Period activism of the late-twentieth century indeed “bleeds” into the present day, connecting previous waves of feminism with the current global period revolution.²⁰ The continued popularity of books as ways to reach people and change minds reflects a continuity with earlier activism while at the same time creating new book trends in the current post-digital moment.

This article will first provide a brief overview of the current period revolution and its aims before moving on to address the international landscape of contemporary period books—from Jamaican children’s literature to an Australian health manual—arguing that period books support and inspire activist efforts by increasing public visibility of a taboo topic and by influencing perceptions about menstruation through their content, as well as by connecting to online activism. Additionally, the book’s physical form can be used to protest discrimination, and the last section will closely examine *The Tampon Book*, which protested the German tax on menstrual products by hiding tampons in a book—a good with a lower tax rate than tampons. Connecting to online petitions and social media hashtags, and making use of modern trends such as book trailers, the book was a powerful tool of protest as well as an example of transnational action networks that move between and connect online and offline environments of activism.

The Twenty-First Century Period Revolution

In 2015, the kind of subversive period positivity heard in Ani DiFranco's 1993 "Blood in the Boardroom," which includes the lyrics "it ain't no hassle, no / it ain't no mess / right now it's the only power / that I possess," went mainstream.²¹ This current wave of menstrual activism has brought menstruation firmly into the public eye, with some memorable moments including M.I.A. musician Kiran Gandhi running the 2015 London Marathon while free-bleeding, a documentary on menstruation winning an Oscar in 2019, and Chinese swimmer Fu Yuanhui receiving widespread support for mentioning in a televised interview that she had her period at the Olympics in 2016.

As previously noted, the current period revolution is, to quote Yasmin Watling, "part of a longer picture of activism dating back to the 1970s."²² But whereas the women's health movement of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s aimed to address a wide range of women's health and sexuality issues, the twenty-first century period revolution sets its sights on narrower goals. The current wave of menstrual activism aims to effect change in two main ways: to reduce social stigma related to menstruation, and to combat insufficient access to menstrual supplies, also known as period poverty.²³ The following will take a closer look at these two often interlocking issues.

Secrecy, shame, and stigma around menstruation remain common across the globe. Menstrual stigma can have damaging physical and psychological effects for people who menstruate, creating situations in which menstruators are excluded from daily activities, put in dangerous situations, and regarded as lesser than their peers. The tradition of *chhaupadi*, for example, still practiced in some places in Nepal and India, requires that people who are menstruating isolate, in some cases in unsanitary conditions.²⁴ There are numerous studies on the ill effects of menstrual stigma, with research showing that children who menstruate miss more school,²⁵ that pain related to menstruation is not adequately addressed by health professionals,²⁶ and that menstruating people in many countries are considered unclean and unable to participate in daily life while menstruating.²⁷ Taboos surrounding menstruation mean that speaking up about periods is incredibly difficult, leaving many menstruators to feel isolated in their experiences and unaware of how to advocate for change.

Menstrual activism aims to break these silences and normalize menstruation, so as to end menstrual stigma.

Another key issue of menstrual activism is to fight period poverty and advocate for accessible and affordable menstrual products. According to Shailini Vora, period poverty “refers to the state in which people who menstruate find themselves without the financial resources to access suitable menstrual products.”²⁸ Period poverty generally describes a financial situation, but also impacts physical and mental well-being.²⁹ One policy advocated against by menstrual activists is what has been labelled the tampon tax: a high or luxury tax rate for menstrual products. Campaigns across the globe have fought—and in many cases, won—battles for accessible and low-cost menstrual products. Kenya was the first country to eliminate such a tax on tampons and other menstrual products in 2004, issuing a complete repeal of taxes on menstrual products. Canada, Malaysia, India, Colombia, and Australia have also dropped their tampon taxes, either fully or to a lowered rate.³⁰

Watling’s 2021 report notes that activism has put greater emphasis on fighting period poverty than on fighting taboos, stigma, and gender norms surrounding menstruation. Laws that put a higher tax on tampons institutionalize discrimination, which may seem to be a more solvable kind of problem than the complex issue of changing beliefs, customs, religions, and biases. As Watling emphasizes, however, these two issues are entwined. She notes that although “the campaigns that dominate the menstrual activism space are explicitly product-focused, they should not be seen as isolated from progressive shifts in menstruation norms.”³¹ A fight for broader and more affordable access to menstrual products is also a fight for greater awareness of the issues surrounding menstruation.

On the use of social media in menstrual activism, which includes such hashtag campaigns as #bloodydisgrace, #endtampon tax, #periodpoverty, and #LahuKaLagan, Watling states that these platforms “are vital, highly influential tools” that “make it possible for individual voices, messages, and development campaigns to be shared, amplified and connected into a larger (sometimes global) movement.”³² This being the case, it is also important to address the potential problems with such a high reliance on online and social media. Jessica Megarry has questioned social media’s usefulness as a

feminist tool, noting that, in contrast to the high value second-wave feminists placed on women-only spaces, today's feminists "appear to be relying on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter—globally dominant, capitalist, male-owned companies—to start a revolution."³³ These considerations underscore the importance of engaging in different streams of media activism, made even more salient as in recent years social media users have had to think ever more deeply about issues of free speech, fake news, echo chambers, and political incitement on online platforms.

Indeed, the reality of the internet rarely lives up to its oft-lauded democratizing potential. As of 2021, for example, men are "14% more likely than women to have access to the Internet."³⁴ Added to that is the fact that many people who identify as women are assumed to be men online.³⁵ This, along with rampant online misogyny, reveal an online gender bias that goes beyond internet usage statistics. Race is another topic of consideration; although the use of hashtags such as #BlackTwitter help "validat[e] the existence of a Black community and subculture on the social media platform,"³⁶ the problem of colour blind racism continues to affect users of social media.³⁷

Moreover, while social media may be a useful vehicle of activism for adults and teens, the internet is not always a safe place for younger children. This is a critical point, as children absorb cultural ideas about menstruation at a very young age, when they are unable to find other information online without the risk of being exposed to harmful content. Naama Bloom, author of the children's book *The Guide, Period*, gained popularity through viral online videos and generally makes good use of online connectivity; she notes that "[i]t's even the sort of innocent search that may lead you to, you know, a not so innocent place, and that's why I think books at this age are still so super important."³⁸

The next section will provide an overview of recent trends in period books from across the globe, paying special attention to books for children and young adult readers, and thinking specifically about how the public visibility, cultural status, and communicative function of books can help fight the stigma and silence around menstruation as well as inspire activism.

Books in the Period Revolution

Whereas much of current menstrual activism is focused on ending period poverty, twenty-first century period books, on the whole, have an emphasis on reducing the stigma that continues to be attached to menstruation. Books bring the topic of menstruation into public light, both by influencing perceptions through their content and for the way they increase public visibility of a taboo topic. The books given as examples in this section were selected for their linguistic and national diversity, but also for the diversity of their formats, genres, and intended audiences. They represent a first step into thinking about period books in global/transnational menstrual activism. Many of the books that follow have been published according to traditional models and can therefore be understood as mainstream productions. Continued research in this topic might expand this view to incorporate underground and unauthorized productions, and consider intersections between period books, celebrity, and marketplace feminism.³⁹

Most importantly, period books break silences surrounding menstruation. Books such as Jennifer Weiss-Wolf's *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (2017) make it clear that public visibility is part of the menstrual activists' fight. Menstruation continues, in many ways, to be shrouded in secrecy. As objects imbued with symbolic and cultural worth, books are not only a way to bring these topics to the public but also afford status to the activist causes they support. During a time when so many of our textual transmissions are digital and therefore ephemeral, the presence of books in bookshops, classrooms, libraries, and homes adds metaphorical and physical heft to the topic of menstruation in a way digital media cannot.

Another way period books make the topic of menstruation visible is by providing readers with accurate facts and data. This is something of a reversal from "the personal is political" ideology of second-wave feminism that included personal stories in books and used the form of compiled editions as ways to bring together individual women's voices in print, even when it came to fact-based topics such as medicine and health. Books like *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) and *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) extended and mimicked the conversations happening in consciousness-raising groups that prioritized individual experience. Today, these trends might best be reflected on social media sites: as blogs, Tweets, and Facebook posts.

Microblogging, such as that of a Tweet, allows for—and perhaps expects—increased intimacy between writer and reader, with Claire Sedgwick arguing that even online journalism has shifted to “a discourse of intimacy,” evident in the increased use of the pronouns I/my in online journalistic pieces.⁴⁰ Period books in the non-fiction genre, on the other hand, are being used to present factual information rather than personal accounts.

Non-fiction books about inequalities surrounding menstruation inform readers about topics and figures that may otherwise be difficult to find, or, crucially, that they did not realize needed to be examined. For example, in *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019), Caroline Criado-Perez has highlighted that menstruation is not typically accounted for in medical studies, leading to data bias that can cause incorrect diagnoses and a feeling of helplessness in female patients. Data, she argues, is the solution. “We are not usually believed when we share our individual stories, so data that validates our lived experiences can be effective.”⁴¹ This opinion has been echoed by Australian activist and author Karen Pickering. Co-authored with Jane Bennett, Pickering’s book *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have to Have* (2019) surveyed 3,500 women and girls and found that negative feelings about menstruation are prevalent, as is a lack of knowledge on the subject. “Where there’s a vacuum of good and reliable information, misinformation can flourish. This,” she says, “is the precondition for the menstrual taboo but it also perpetuates it.”⁴² Books like Pickering and Bennett’s break this cycle by offering facts, free of judgement, and fill in data gaps which can have dangerous and damaging consequences for menstruators.

Looking at fiction, historically, menstruation has not often been mentioned in literature, and, when it is mentioned, may receive negative reactions from literary institutions, parents, educators, or editors. Among reasons for banning books in the United States are plots that include depictions of violence, sexual content, discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity, and also books that openly discuss puberty and menstruation. Most famous among these in American history is perhaps Judy Blume’s 1970 coming-of-age novel *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*. Although challenges of books that mention periods were decreasing in 2015, in an article from that same year, Carissa Pokorny-Golden noted that this may be, in part, because there were fewer YA books that mentioned menstruation

on the market, with one explanation for this being that editors, anticipating backlash, suggested the removal of such content before books were published.⁴³

Readers, however, want this kind of content. As Yash Kesanakurthy wrote for *BookRiot*, “I want to know how characters manage menstruation. When Hermione went camping with Harry and Ron, did she just take a potion to skip periods altogether? Was the potion as conspicuous as going to the bathroom with your bag?”⁴⁴ To help other readers find literature that mentions periods, several booklists on the website Goodreads gather together books that include menstruation as topic, with examples being “Heroine with Punctuation,” “*Menstruation und Periode*,”⁴⁵ and “Menstruation in Romance Novels.”

The absence of menstruation as a topic in literature can have long-lasting effects on readers. When menstruation is missing from literature, no matter the genre or readership group targeted, it perpetuates the idea that menstruation is somehow wrong, secretive, and shameful. Looking at young readers in particular, research has shown that children benefit from seeing their diverse experiences reflected in the literature they read. In 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop argued that being able to see oneself reflected in literature was part of “self-affirmation” that many non-white children lived without.⁴⁶ “For black children,” she wrote, “the absence of positive images in children’s books was a clear signal that they themselves had little worth in the society that these books reflected.”⁴⁷ Many children who menstruate do not see this biological reality reflected back to them in the literature they consume, and that silence supports menstrual stigma.

Many recent period books are aimed at a younger audience, with the purpose of introducing the topic of menstruation early on and to open this topic up for conversation with parents, teachers, and friends. While second-wave activism “specifically targeted children’s books,” the aim was primarily to address gender imbalance and the depiction of gender roles.⁴⁸ Some examples of books from this era are the *Free to Be . . . You and Me* book and record, and a series of books published by the consciousness-raising group turned feminist book publisher Lollipop Power. As recalled by historian Sara Evans, who was part of the group, the picture books written and published by Lollipop Power “scrambled sex roles” and

later began to “challenge the stereotypes of race and class.”⁴⁹ However, books that specifically looked at menstruation were not as common. That the current feminist movement can afford to have somewhat narrower goals seems to speak to the accomplishments of earlier feminists who pushed publishers to be more equal in their representation of society and gender or simply produced their own books.

Period books for children do more than normalize menstruation; they also embed menstruation in specific cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, menstrual activist Shelly-Ann Weeks’ illustrated children’s book *It’s My Body. Period.* (2018) addresses what it is like for Caribbean girls to start menstruation. “For many young Caribbean girls,” the book description reads, “the basic orientation they get when their period starts is a trip to the store to purchase pads or tampons, some over the counter pain killers for the cramps and a stern warning not to get pregnant.”⁵⁰ Offering an alternative to this “basic” introduction, the book takes readers along one Jamaican girl’s journey of first menstruation. Another example comes in the form of the Indian comic book called *Menstrupedia* (first published 2014). The book was written by Aditi Gupta and Tuhin Paul, and is part of a broadly-encompassing strategy for combatting menstrual stigma which includes a resource-full website as well as a YouTube channel. The book provides clear and cogent information about these subjects while engaging young readers through its comic-book format. Inspired by Gloria Steinem’s essay “If Men Could Menstruate” in a 1978 issue of *Ms.*, *Menstrupedia* is available in 11 languages and is used in school curricula in some places in India.⁵¹ Although the book’s topic is accessible to readers anywhere, the illustrations place *Menstrupedia* in an Indian context.

This regional focus needs to be emphasized, as there is evidence that many readers are interested in reading from and about their own local/national perspective.⁵² Rather than competing with literary texts, digital media may be entrenching the differences between books and conversations happening online. “The fluidity of the present collides with the specificity of social diagnosis that the novel has traditionally offered,” Wendy Griswold writes, going on to note that readers “are those seeking such specificity.”⁵³ Put another way, readers not only benefit from stories that reflect their worlds and themselves, as Sims Bishops suggests, but are often interested in them as well. Books like *It’s My Body. Period.* and *Menstrupedia* are self-affirming for

both the experience of menstruation and the national/cultural identity of the characters depicted.

Another trend in period books is the use of humour and artistry to engage readers in what may be an uncomfortable topic. One such book advocating for period positivity is noteworthy for its unusual genre: a colouring book. *The Adventures of Toni the Tampon: A Period Coloring Book* by Cass Clemmer (2016) shows the adventures of Toni the Tampon, a tampon with googly eyes, who first appeared and gained popularity on Clemmer's Instagram page. Toni is just one character in the book, alongside other anthropomorphized menstrual products, such as Sebastian the sea sponge. In the book, the characters go on adventures—into space, for example—taking the often-embarrassing topic of menstruation and making it magical, funny, exciting.

Clemmer, who is a self-described “nonbinary trans menstruator,”⁵⁴ went viral for posting a photo with menstrual blood and the hashtag #BleedingWhileTrans, drawing attention to the fact that it is not only women and girls who menstruate. The colouring book brings these aspects together, keeping the topic of menstruation playful through the illustrated adventures of Toni the Tampon as well as inclusive to all menstruators. “By the simple act of naming my tampon Toni, my sea sponge Sebastian,” Clemmer told *Teen Vogue*, “and by being open about my own gender identity in a very public sphere, the period coloring book helps, at the very least, introduce the idea that not everyone who menstruates identifies as a woman.”⁵⁵

Clemmer is not the only author using art and humour as a strategy. The illustrated French book *Les règles . . . quelle aventure !* (2017) puts a positive spin on menstruation by framing it as an adventure.⁵⁶ Similarly, the German-language *Rot ist doch schön* (2019), which roughly translates to “red is indeed beautiful,” presents periods as something beautiful and to be celebrated. With an aesthetic that looks more like an illustrated diary than a published book, *Rot ist doch schön* is as much a visual experience as a textual one. While such books fight menstrual stigma by framing menstruation as something positive and beautiful, other books, however, speak as openly but less positively about the experience of menstruation. A final example comes from Japan in the manga *Seiri-chan*, published in English as *Little Miss P*

(2019), whose title character is an anthropomorphized period that delivers punches to the gut. Originally released as a webcomic, the manga series shows Little Miss P punching women who begin their period but also “support[ing] them through their personal problems and met[ing] out similarly debilitating punches to unsympathetic husbands.”⁵⁷

In this way, *Little Miss P* is a lighthearted book that supports “menstrual crankiness,” a concept which Przybylo and Fahs argue “asks that we take stock of the uncomfortable and dissident feelings that are part and parcel of the menstrual experience.”⁵⁸ The use of humor and art to support menstrual activism is specifically mentioned by Bobel and Fahs, two of the editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. In looking forward to the future of menstrual activism, they say:

The notion of what menstrual activism is, and the work these activists do, must move away from a primary focus on menstrual products and instead emphasize a much wider array of menstrual activist priorities including mental health, global feminisms, cultural critiques, humor and mockery and educational changes as a means to promote menstrual literacy and fight stigma.⁵⁹

Period books have the potential to help move menstrual activism in new and engaging directions, keeping the topic lively and reactive to cultural shifts, as well as offering a counterweight to the activism that is focused on the reduction of period poverty.

Thinking once again about the dual foci of the current period revolution and the role of books therein, it becomes clear that in the same way increased visibility of menstrual products can reduce period stigma, so too can normalization of menstruation through period books have an effect on period activism. Many period books are produced by activists who maintain active social media pages and create digital content, but who also use books as way to bring greater public visibility to their specific cause—be that better education for children or greater awareness that is not only women and girls who menstruate. Both fiction and non-fiction can inspire action, for example with readers creating reading lists, such as those seen on Goodreads, that make it easier to find books that normalize having periods. More than this, books that mention menstruation may create activists out of readers. Entrepreneur Valentina Milanova was inspired after reading

Anne Frank's diary, in which the diarist writes of her happiness at having her period, to create a new brand of tampons. "When I was 13 and first read her diary," Milanova recalls, "I remember being deeply impressed that someone could hold a positive view on menstruation—it changed my perspective on it."⁶⁰ Taking inspiration from Frank's words, Milanova and her partners started Daye, a company that is putting out pain-reducing CBD-infused tampons.⁶¹ As well as changing attitudes and validating experiences, period books can provide a roadmap for future activism. As Bobel notes:

After all, the dearth of attention to a fundamental reality and indeed a vital sign is not only a profound knowledge gap, it is an exposure of the power of misogyny and stigma to suppress knowledge production. And when we lack knowledge, we cannot effectively act to effect change.⁶²

Through their visibility and content, books on the topic of menstruation have the potential to act on the lives of readers, both to change views and to inspire action.

A final trend is that many of these books interact in some way with the digital sphere. Hashtag activism connected to colouring books, Kickstarter campaigns, Goodreads reader lists, and YouTube videos that accompany classroom literature all inform a twenty-first century understanding of publishing in which the physical cannot be clearly separated from the digital, which Alexandra Dane and Millicent Weber define as "the post-digital publishing field."⁶³ The many inroads for reading and participation as well as the flow across media channels exemplify what Simone Murray has recently dubbed "the contemporary digital literary sphere,"⁶⁴ identifying a similar intersection as Bennett's conception of on- and offline transnational activism.

The next and final section examines one book that makes strategic use of the post-digital publishing field, and which, in addition to imparting knowledge and inspiring online action networks, creates protest through the material form of the book.

The Tampon Book: Packaging as Protest

The Tampon Book: A Book Against Tax Discrimination (fig. 1) was released in 2019 by The Female Company, a Stuttgart-based online start-up company founded in 2018. The company primarily sells menstrual products—tampons, pads, sponges, menstrual cups, and period underwear—but also sex toys, shaving kits, and at-home tests for sexually transmitted infections.⁶⁵ *The Tampon Book* was released in both German and English, and sold on The Female Company’s online shop.



Figure 1: *The Tampon Book.*

As the title of the book states, *The Tampon Book* was published as a way to fight the German 19% VAT tax, also known as the luxury tax, on menstrual products. Whereas necessary goods, such as food, are taxed at a reduced 7% rate, before 2019 menstrual products were not categorized as necessary goods by German law. This created a situation in which (to use an example from the book) caviar was taxed at a lower rate than tampons. At the time of the book’s release, several other countries had successfully campaigned to end their tampon tax, and several prominent public officials, such as Barack Obama, supported its reduction. Despite this, there was not widespread support in the German government to reduce the tax, with then-Minister of Finance Olaf Scholz commenting in 2018 that a lowered

tax rate for tampons would be “*kein geeignetes Mittel, eine dauerhafte Entlastung der Betroffenen zu erreichen*” and that there was no guarantee companies would pass savings on to consumers.⁶⁶

To protest the German tampon tax, The Female Company decided to hide tampons in a book, thereby circumventing the luxury tax for tampons. As the company founders say of the book, it is the “first packaging that fights patriarchy.”⁶⁷ Noteworthy for its unique engagement with the subject of period poverty and the tampon tax, the book is itself a subversive act of protest, as the material book conceals—in a way smuggles—15 tampons between its covers. In doing so, the book makes plain the issue of tampon taxation, but also the secrecy and shame often associated with menstruation. In this way, the book materializes menstrual stigma.

The Tampon Book is in some ways similar to an artist’s book in that it should be read primarily as an object rather than a text and for how it comments on the cultural status of the book. In Germany, books are a protected commodity, endowed with status as a necessary cultural good. For centuries, books have benefitted from lower postal rates, as it was understood that the easy and affordable exchange of books was needed in a flourishing society.⁶⁸ Moreover, the book not only contains tampons but mimics them. Enclosed in hard, white cardboard reminiscent of a tampon applicator or the boxes tampons are sold in, the book blurs the distinction between the two consumer goods. Another playful feature is a double knotted string in place of a bookmark ribbon, which hints at what is concealed inside. In blurring the distinction between books (unquestionably good and valuable) and tampons (secretive and shameful), the book protests the German tax but also asks meaningful questions, such as: Aren’t menstrual products a necessary good? Why must these goods continually be hidden away?

The Tampon Book is, however, a book. Or, to put it another way, it contains pages that are filled with text and joined on a vertical spine. Those pages, like the period books discussed in the previous section, impart inclusive information about period poverty, the tampon tax, menstruation, and anatomy. In an approachable style that makes use of humour and an abundance of illustrations, the pages in the book inform readers about menstruation and point them to a [change.org](https://www.change.org) petition by

Nanna-Josephine Roloff and Yasemin Kotra which they can sign to show their support for a reduced tax for menstrual products.

Although the book presents itself as a way to save menstruators money by hiding tampons in a book, in actuality, it is in fact a clever campaign, conceived of by the Berlin-based agency Scholz & Friends, that, as well as reflecting positively on The Female Company as a brand, demanded that Germany drop the tampon tax. The campaign used the book to connect a material object to global online activism, and the book itself highlighted ways to engage in the digital sphere, such as with #tamponbook appearing on the title page.⁶⁹ Many purchasers used the hashtag as a way to join into online conversations about the German tax law and the tampon tax worldwide. The Female Company also released a promotional video for the book, linking to recent trends of book trailers shared on social media platforms, which provided the book with even greater online exposure. A liveticker on the company's website detailed important news in the fight towards period equality, and the founders Anni and Sinja also regularly updated the company's Instagram page with videos and images.

The book received significant media attention. It was featured on numerous media channels such as the *Augsburger Allgemeine* and German broadcaster RTL, and many politicians mentioned or shared pictures of the book to show their support. This was prompted by The Female Company sending copies of the book to members of the German Parliament, who, in some cases, issued a response on social media. As a result of their efforts, the two founders of The Female Company were invited to speak in Parliament on the topic of the tampon tax.⁷⁰

By June 2019, the book had sold over 10,000 copies;⁷¹ in September the book started to be sold by German retailer dm, where many Germans normally buy tampons, in their online store;⁷² and in November 2019, the luxury tax on tampons was repealed in Germany.⁷³ Although *The Tampon Book* was one of many efforts to bring down the tampon tax, what the book provided was a useful symbol of activists' grievances and goals. For comparison, Stephanie Coontz has recently shown that many people who self-reported as having been affected by *The Feminine Mystique* never actually read it;⁷⁴ in a similar way, *The Tampon Book* was useful beyond its text. It provided menstrual activism with a valuable symbol and talking point, and

reports on the book appeared in various news outlets worldwide. A *Washington Post* article that mentions the book's role in the reduction of the German tax is titled "Germany has slashed its tax on tampons. Many other countries still tax them as 'luxury' items."⁷⁵ The creators of *The Tampon Book* seemed to understand that they were not only advocating for changes to the tax in Germany, but also within a worldwide movement. In releasing the book in English as well as German, The Female Company made it easier for the book to reach international audiences.

Although Louis Menand has argued that books like *The Feminine Mystique* and *Silent Spring* acted like "bombs" on the reading public in part because television had not yet become an established and influential part of the everyday media landscape,⁷⁶ scholars such as Jessica Pressman have argued the opposite in our own era: that the emergence and ubiquity of digital media has created a renewed interest in the material book.⁷⁷ *The Tampon Book* is a clever project for how it uses the book object as protest and puts the problem of the tampon tax in readers' hands, and also for its engaged use of social media. Through their book trailer, Instagram page, and website liveticker, the company further engaged activists online, in this way offering a valuable case study for transnational activism through period books and post-digital feminist print culture.

The Tampon Book is also interesting for what it implies about books. While readers are meant to be incensed that truffles and oil paintings are taxed at a lower rate than tampons, in no case is the anger of the creators directed at books. Rather than questioning the low tax rate for books, *The Tampon Book* makes use of the situation to put books and tampons on equal footing—both are necessary, and both should be easily and cheaply available.

Conclusion

Period books as part of fourth-wave feminist print culture connect to a longer history of feminist activism through print, but also speak to their unique temporal and technological moment, where transnational action networks are created through on- and offline engagement. In a moment that some have described as post-digital, books continue to be valuable for the intimacy and specificity they offer readers. Current twenty-first century period books primarily support activism in the period revolution by

breaking down the silence surrounding menstruation, and both fiction and non-fiction books invite readers to learn more about menstruation, understanding it as a natural part of daily life. At the same time, social media platforms allow for connected discourse across regions and nations, and add visibility to menstrual activism. It is in many cases impossible to separate digital and print influences, with Kickstarter campaigns, YouTube videos, book trailers, and online campaigns becoming integrated parts of the post-digital publishing field.

Robin Morgan opens the 1970 book *Sisterhood is Powerful* with the assertion “[t]his book is an action.”⁷⁸ Across the twentieth- to twenty-first century divide, what remains the same is that books continue to be powerful sites of action. Books are actions and inspire action. They do so not only through their visible status and educational, entertaining, and self-affirming contents, but also for what they offer in offline engagement with transnational activist movements. Finally, as *The Tampon Book* illustrates, books in the twenty-first century period revolution remain useful for their material form.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Ellen Barth is a research associate and doctoral candidate in Book Studies at the University of Münster, Germany, and is the executive assistant for the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP). She received her B.A. in Asian Languages and Literatures, and her M.A. in National and Transnational Studies. Her dissertation examines American community cookbooks to consider women’s participation in alternative and amateur self-publishing in the second half of the twentieth century.

Notes

¹ *20th Century Women*, directed by Mike Mills (New York: A24, 2016), 1:29:36. <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80134080>.

² *Ibid.*, 1:04:30.

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⁷ Yasmin Watling, “Gender Norms and the ‘Period Revolution’: Report,” *Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALiGN)*, August, 2021, 4.

⁸ Jennifer Nelson, *More Than Medicine: A History of the Feminist Women’s Health Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 21.

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¹⁸ Stevie Marsden and Rachel Noorda, “Twenty-First Century Book Studies: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 22 (2019): 371.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

²⁰ While the “wave” metaphor is useful in describing the differing goals and tactics of specific activist moments, it is important to note that the concept of “waves” in regard to feminism is nonetheless limited. Scholars have recently put pressure on the metaphor and questioned its usefulness, pointing to how the term may homogenize diverse goals and movements; prioritize a timeline of white, Western feminism; suggest a progressive linearity, with each wave improving upon the last; and be used to create a sense of generational divide between feminists. See Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); and Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²¹ Ani DiFranco, “Blood in the Boardroom,” track 7 on *Puddle Dive*, Righteous Babe, 1993, CD.

²² Watling, “Gender Norms,” 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ Elo Przybylo and Breanne Fahs, “Feels and Flows: On the Realness of Menstrual Pain and Crippling Menstrual Chronicity,” *Feminist Formations* 30, no. 1 (2018): 217, [doi:10.1353/ff.2018.0010](https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2018.0010).

²⁷ Watling, “Gender Norms,” 10.

²⁸ Shailini Vora, “The Realities of Period Poverty: How Homelessness Shapes Women’s Lived Experiences of Menstruation,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, eds. Chris Bobel et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 32.

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³⁰ Bobel, “Introduction,” 2.

³¹ Watling, “Gender Norms,” 9.

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³³ Jessica Megarry, *The Limitations of Social Media Feminism: No Space of Our Own* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2.

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