



Menstrual Cups: R—Evolutionary Devices for Overcoming Wrong Views About Life

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This *Perspectives* article is informed by an ongoing practice-as-research that examines the empowering effects and creative potential of menstrual cups and discs in challenging menstruation taboos and promoting gender equity and equanimity. Beginning with a personal introduction that traces the roots of my fascination with menstrual products, the text explores the archaeology of menstrual devices to uncover reasons behind their delayed commercial success. In the second part, I describe how menstrual cups have inspired a growing number of artists to create transformative artworks that critique and dismantle historical discrimination against people who menstruate. Drawing on selected case studies of my own artworks employing blood, specifically menstrual blood, I argue that engaging with bodily fluids, porosity, and menstruation can rekindle a deep appreciation for what I call ‘the compassionate beauty of life’. I suggest that embracing life in all its facets supports a quiet yet resilient resistance to contemporary necropolitics—those power structures that, as Achille Mbembe writes, ‘express sovereignty as the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die’ (Mbembe 2003).



Introduction: From Shining Plastic Folds to Multicolor Menstrual Discs

My interest in and work with blood began five years ago and initiated a long-term practice-as-research process that has profoundly shaped my understanding of the importance of life-enhancing narratives and experiences for collective, trans-generational growth and healing.

As a child, I vividly recall a moment that first sparked my curiosity about menstruation. One day at a supermarket, I noticed a stack of transparent plastic bags resting on the top of a shelf, containing lots of little folded blocks of different colours. I must have been around five or six years old.

“Mummy, what’s in those plastic bags up there?” I asked, pointing to the packages.

“Those are menstrual pads,” my mum replied. “Women use them to protect their underwear when they bleed from their uterus. It’s called menstruation. It’s a natural process that happens every month for a few days throughout a woman’s reproductive life. There’s nothing to be afraid of; it’s part of what makes it possible to get pregnant and give birth.”

“Hm, I see. So, I can’t get one of those bags with soft thingies to play with?”

My mother smiled. “I’ll show you what they look like when we get home, but there’s nothing exciting about them. You’ll have to use them sooner than you’d probably like.”

This encounter marked my first introduction to menstrual products, and my mother was right—there is nothing inherently exciting about menstrual pads. They are messy and ecologically unsustainable. However, I feel differently about menstrual cups and discs, which is why I call them ‘r/evolutionary technologies’. Unlike traditional menstrual hygiene products (**Figure 1**), I see vaginal cups and disc as important allies and catalysts for self-empowerment of women and queer individuals, opening up new possibilities to challenge and reframe cultural narratives surrounding menstruation and gender.

Despite their potential to shift paradigms, menstrual cups remain largely unfamiliar to many. A significant number of adults have never heard of, seen, or used these devices, and many menstruating individuals have yet to try them. This unfamiliarity makes it essential to first explore the history of this surprisingly transformative, yet often overlooked device.

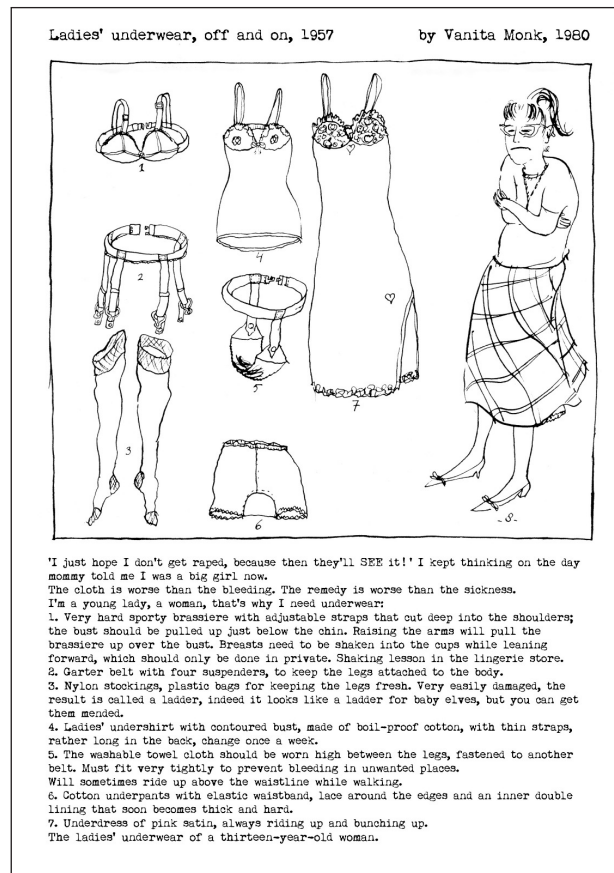


Figure 1: *Ladies Underwear, Off and On, 1957 (1980)* by Vanita Monk. Reproduced with permission of Johanna Monk.

The design for menstrual cups was developed between the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Early menstrual cups have never achieved widespread use, even though they were available in developed countries for several decades. The first known patent for a menstrual cup was registered by American S. L. Hockert in 1867 under the name 'Catamenial Sack.' (Figure 2). His vision of having a rubber sack attached to a wire held by a belt, was more of a conceptual idea than a functional prototype and never made it to market for obvious reasons.

The first commercially viable cup was patented by American author, actress, and inventor Leona Chalmers in 1937. Her bell-shaped design has been used with little variation by nearly every brand of reusable menstrual cups available today. The Chalmers cup (Figure 3), made from rubber, relied on pelvic floor muscles to hold it in place, similar to modern cups. Nonetheless, it was only after the introduction of

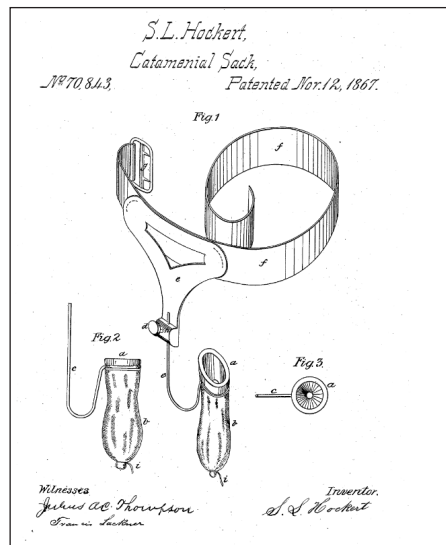


Figure 2: Drawing of the Hockert Catamenial Sack from patent 70,865 in 1867.

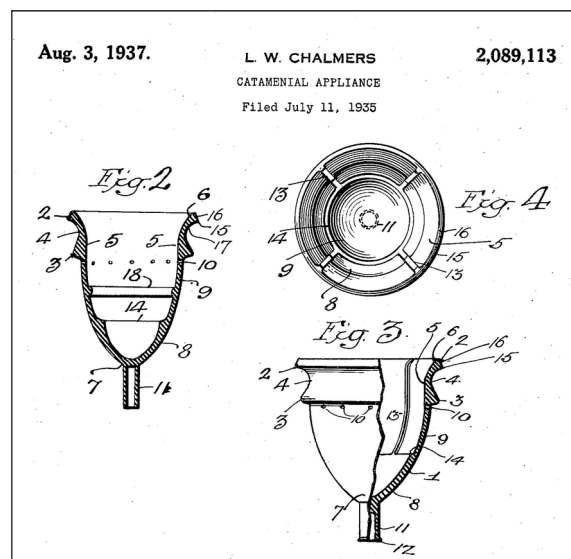


Figure 3: Drawing of Chalmers patent 2,089,113 in 1937.

medical-grade silicone by the English brand Mooncup in 2002 that vaginal cups gained significant media coverage and popularity, especially among younger users. The use of a medically safe, touch-friendly material, was a game-changing factor that propelled the use of this device among broader audiences. Thanks to its ergonomic design and harmless, foldable material, many users describe menstrual cups as a life-changing innovation that has helped them overcome fears, physical limitations, and other restrictions experienced during their menses.

Now, let us examine the primary competitor of menstrual cups: the menstrual disc (**Figure 4**). The first menstrual disc was patented by Audrey Contente in 1994. Although it functions similarly to a menstrual cup, it sits higher up in the vagina, in the fornix rather than the vaginal canal. Unlike cups, discs don't rely on a seal, making removal easier, and with practice, they even allow hands-free emptying. Another unique feature is that discs can be worn during penetrative intercourse due to their flat shape, which takes up less space than a cup. Both products provide a good solution for preventing unwanted leakage and encouraging menstrual self-care. Ultimately, the choice between the two devices depends on each user's personal preferences and unique anatomy.



Figure 4: Menstrual cup and disc in a hand.

Menstrual Cups and the Rise of Menstrual Blood as a Medium in Contemporary Art

Why care about (menstrual) blood at all? 'Indigenous elders often say that memory is in the blood and bone, that our stories are passed not just verbally but through a kind of genetic memory' (Bombay & Deerchild, 2015). The scent, colour, and taste of blood are some of the most primal experiences shared by all people. Archaeological findings indicate that blood, especially animal blood, has been used in ritual offerings and as a pigment for artistic expression since prehistoric times. Unlike blood shed through violence—such as from animal slaughter, war, or murder—menstrual blood represents a nonviolent red essence: a substance of vitality, transformation, fertility, and cleansing. Yet, in dominant patriarchal cultures, menstruation has long been regarded as impure and dirty. How come?

Some time during the Middle Ages, menstruation began to be used by religious and political institutions as a physical and administrative mechanism for legitimising and enforcing gender apartheid and sexual discrimination. Nowadays, menstrual cups and discs offer people with menstrual cycles the opportunity to reclaim the performance, grace, and creative force of their bleeding bodies within social, economic, political, intimate, and artistic contexts.

Recently, an increasing number of contemporary artists with periods, like Jen Lewis, Jasmine Alicia Carter, Zanele Muholi, Maria Bitka (**Figure 5**) and myself, has embraced vaginal cups and discs as their artistic partners and allies. I believe that highlighting the vulnerability, changeability and impermanence of human bodies, along with creating discursive spaces for menstrual blood in education, art and Academia, can serve as a powerful creative tactic to undermine contemporary necropolitics.

Necropolitics, as defined by Achille Mbembe, refers to the creation of ‘deathworlds’—‘new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead’ (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40)—where living beings can be exploited and exterminated without consequence. Using the language of biomimicry—a practice that learns from and mimics the survival techniques of organisms and ecosystems to address challenges faced by individuals and societies (Benyus, 2003)—necropolitics generates conditions that are death-dealing rather than conducive to life. The work of tapping into the transformational potentials of vital essences, like menstrual blood, operates as an antidote for the neoliberal death drive which is pulling the whole Earth towards self-destruction.



Figure 5: *Bloody Mary*, from the series *Sacrifiction* (2019), by Maria Bitka. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Why “Life Mattering” Matters

The next part of the article is closely connected to my personal artistic practice with blood, referencing a selection of performances and artworks I devised from 2019 on. *Laughing at Life Matters* was my first artwork involving blood, specifically vein blood.

When I devised this work, I was going through a seven-year period of secondary *amenorrhea*—absence of menstruation in adults—which ended in December 2019. I mention this work here to foster awareness of the diverse qualities of blood and to situate it within the long-term, evolving context of my practice-as-research journey.

Laughing at Life Matters is a one-on-one performative installation that explores the physical, olfactory, and chemical (corrosive) properties of six essential ‘life matters’ on Earth: air, water, carbon, soil, chlorophyll, and blood. It comprises six glass jars sealed with cork stoppers, each containing one of these substances conducive to life, alongside an empty steel canister. These found objects, collected from the streets of London, were previously filled with nitrous oxide (N₂O), commonly known as laughing gas. The immersive experience of the piece is enhanced by a soundtrack¹—an edited version of *Miserere mei, Deus*, the famous a cappella choral work by Gregorio Allegri—listened to while kneeling. Participants are encouraged to open the jars and familiarise with the containing scents at their own risk.

Laughing at Life Matters (**Figure 6**) facilitates a deep sensuous correspondence with a chosen life-sustaining matter, allowing participants to connect with the ‘underland’ of life through contemplation and introspection. The first and for now only presentation of the piece occurred in January 2020 at the art exhibition *Mirrored Anatomies* at University College London (UCL). The motto that accompanied the project was: ‘In an era of mass extinction, environmental degradation, and global warming... surfacing and befriending ‘life matter’ matters.’



Figure 6: *Laughing at Life Matters* (2019) by Jatun Risba.

Downward Moving Winds: Transitioning from Venom Blood to Menstrual Blood

My engagement with blood was paused during the COVID pandemic, only to return in 2023 with a new focus on menstrual blood, which I regard as the ‘blood of life’—an elixir that supports natural detoxification, fertility, and creativity. In my case, menstrual blood holds an additional, alchemical significance, as it is deeply connected to the successful conclusion of my self-healing journey from Multiple Sclerosis. As a result, it is employed as a ritual offering with transformational, healing properties.

Following this claim, I believe that menstrual blood can become a medium for re-imagining our shared existence in a life-centred way, rooted in care and multispecies compassion. By revealing the pulsating energy that underlies all human life, menstruation reclaims the meaning and value of blood in a world marked by war and turmoil. Over time, I have learned that embracing our vulnerabilities and shadows helps us grow stronger and healthier. Similarly, letting go of our fears deepens our sense of interconnectedness and wholeness.

I spent the first six months of 2023 in an art residency in the Zeeland region of the Netherlands, researching the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, in which Zeelanders and the Dutch trading company Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie (MCC) played a central role.

The culminating project of this period, *Possibility of a Relation* (Figure 7),² traced an alchemic matrix in the air and space, envisioning novel webs of conviviality for the generations to come. A transparent, one-square-meter film, symbolizing the weight of the rising cost of living (including real estate), was taped to the gallery floor with blue edging. This square served both as a sanctuary for future hopes and as a symbolic abyss, evoking the ocean’s rising sea levels and the memories of countless lives lost during transatlantic crossings.

In the performance, I used a white wooden board and a spirit bottle containing a large amount of menstrual blood. On the white board, which was representing for me the body of a ship crossing the Atlantic in a staged miniature world, I inscribed an esoteric spell with the refrain ‘possibility of a relation’. This incantation was underlined with my menstrual blood. The performance concluded with the chanting of the Tibetan Buddhist Bardo Mantra, which serves to clear accumulated karmic debts and to aid recently departed beings in their passage through the ‘bardo’—a state of existence between death and rebirth.

Through the offering of my menstrual blood, the performance created a portal where time is suspended, allowing past, present, and future to coexist in ritual time so that magic and trans-generational healing can occur. By enacting a life-affirming

ritual, I aimed to subvert and symbolically discharge both Zeeland's history of violence against humanity and the ritualistic use of blood in Voodoo practices, which often involve animal sacrifice.

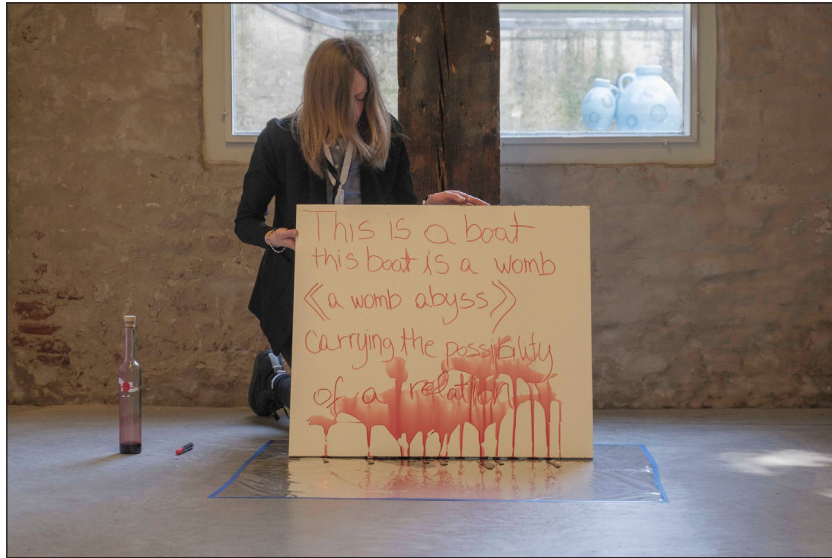


Figure 7: *Possibility of a Relation* (2023) by Jatun Risba. Photo: Yuki Jungesblut.

Few months after the Zeeland experience, I devised *The Intimacy of Otherness* (Figure 8):³ a durational transmedia multisensory performance lecture about my radical self-healing from Multiple Sclerosis (2012–19). The performance begins with



Figure 8: *The Intimacy of Otherness* (2024) by Jatun Risba. Photo: Darja Lukjanenko.

my slow, performative entry into the performance space, while being dressed only in a minimal monokini, soaked in old menstrual blood. The scent of blood becomes the sensory element that sets the tone for the entire performance lecture, drawing the audience into a visceral experience that stirs primal emotions and often brings repressed, unconscious memories to the surface.

Blood and Chlorophyll as Lifelines to Equanimity

In May 2024, I authored a book chapter on my art research exploring parallels between human (menstrual) blood and chlorophyll. This research was commissioned by Schmiede Akademie (Hallein, 2024) and will be published in *YnselBook #6: Blood* in 2025.

Following an art research methodology that positions the art-making process as a primary space of inquiry, I created two new artworks while writing the chapter. The first, a live-streamed performance titled *One Taste of Blood and Chlorophyll*⁴ (Figure 9), involved eating two portions of rice: one covered in menstrual blood and another soaked in liquid chlorophyll. This performance explored the Buddhist concept of the ‘equal taste’ of all phenomena, which suggests that all extremes—good and bad, sweet and sour, etc.—share the same fundamental nature of emptiness and mind itself.

The second artwork, a solo vocal album titled *The Songs of Realization of Blood and Chlorophyll*,⁵ features vocal improvisations inspired by this theme. Both works emerged from deeply embodied, personal, and intuitive processes, positioning my practice within feminist and queer critiques of Western dualism and the rational, individualist approach to knowledge production. By reclaiming emotional and sensory forms of embodiment and emphasizing the practice of ‘presencing’ to spontaneous bodymind impulses, I advocate for the value of alternative, embodied ways of knowing. This approach counteracts the limitations imposed by prioritizing rationalism and analytic methods in research.



Figure 9: *One Taste of Blood and Chlorophyll* (2024) by Jatun Risba.

Due to my inclination toward vegetal forms of life, I have started to employ liquid chlorophyll to complement my 'menstrual art' practice. Both substances are politically charged (Figure 10), eco-friendly, and biodegradable mediums with versatile applications. By introducing these vital liquids into contemporary art milieus, artists can raise important questions about the visibility and invisibility of blood, as well as the legal rights of nonhuman and more-than-human beings. In an age that calls for holistic renewal, embracing life-enriching devices and practices may be crucial for nurturing a more interconnected, equanimous, and compassionate world. So that life on Earth will (continue to) be...



Figure 10: *Female* (2019) by Vanita Monk. Reproduced with permission of Johanna Monk.

Notes

- ¹ To listen to the soundscape of *Laughing at Life Matters* (2019), click here: <https://vimeo.com/418581786>.
- ² To watch *Possibility of a Relation* (2023), click here: <https://vimeo.com/842913240>.
- ³ To watch *The Intimacy of Otherness* (2023-) trailers, click on the following links: <https://vimeo.com/1001634040>; <https://vimeo.com/904756953>.
- ⁴ To watch *One Taste of Blood and Chlorophyll* (2024), click on the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J70A3M4SS5U>; https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6qn0O-IQuw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBi-NWFIZA==.
- ⁵ To listen to *The Songs of Realization of Blood and Chlorophyll* (2024), click here: <https://jatunrisba.bandcamp.com/album/songs-of-realisation-of-blood-and-chlorophyll>.

Acknowledgements

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Jatun Risba (they/them) is a migrant transmedia artist from Slovenia. Their work engages with ecofeminist and posthumanist discourses through performance art, conceptual art, relational art and practices of abjection, détournement and art intervention. They have exhibited and performed widely, at Live Art Ireland, at the Opens platform in Singapore, at the Prague Biennale (2023, 2024), at the Trondheim Biennale 2022 in Norway, at the Cloud 9 pavilion at the Bangkok Biennial in 2020, at Fabbrica del Vapore in Milan, at Kersnikova Institute and Cirkulacija2 in Ljubljana, at Pixelpoint festival (2008, 2019) ... and gave lectures and workshops internationally. Risba is the founder and co-facilitator of the global live art project *Be-coming Tree* (<https://becomingtree.live/>). They hold a BA from NABA, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano and a PGC in Art & Science from University of the Arts London. More at <https://jatunrisba.com/>.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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