

The Menstrual Closet: Analysis of the Representation of Menstruation in Japanese and Colombian Advertisements for Feminine Hygiene Products

BURITICA ALZATE, Juliana

This research offers an account of how menstruation is represented in a selection of Colombian and Japanese cultural manifestations—advertisements for feminine hygiene products. It presents an academic, philosophical reflection that intends to grasp the cultural meanings of menstruation and the female bodily experience, in both Colombia and Japan.

One of the more palpable and accessible sites for reviewing the treatment of menstrual blood and pinpointing the mechanisms of control for menstruation is that of television advertising for feminine “hygiene” products. Advertisements allow viewers to verify the dominant view of menstruation from a practical point of view—they are directed towards women as consumers of a product that conditions the way they relate to their own bodies. Also, the fact that advertisements are a circulating discourse highlights the importance of uncovering the portrayal of female bodies in the media. Advertisements not only give an account of the representation of menstruation but function as cultural models by reproducing a set of social codes related to women and in this case, to menstruation. However, it is important to recognize that many deep cultural meanings and codes regarding menstruation are impossible to grasp in the advertisements. The advertising strategies appeal to techniques that repeat and reproduce cultural meanings at a superficial level; they (re)produce encoded messages and audiences decode those messages, perpetuating a certain model of body control.

This paper argues that *the menstrual closet* is the main representation that operates in both cultural contexts. This is a term borrowed and developed from feminist scholar Iris Marion Young (2005), who affirms that “from our earliest awareness of menstruation until the day we stop, we are mindful of the imperative to *conceal* our menstrual processes” (p.106). Menstruators’ subjugation to the menstrual closet is essentially an oppressive process of concealment and abjection of menstruation that constitutes a normalizing experience. This analysis aims to uncover the social oppression of women as menstruators and as owners of a body that often does not belong to them or does not correspond to the archetype of a “clean” and “proper” body. In doing so, this paper aims to unravel the shame associated with menstruation and with the female body, which compels women to conceal their menstrual events and their bodily desires and needs.

To think about menstruation involves a consideration of a personal bodily process that often causes discomfort, annoyance or shame. These processes carry emotional meanings for many women. Bodily experiences, such as menstrual events, can certainly mark a woman’s self-narrative and influence a woman’s sense of worth. The following questions are at the basis of this analysis: How does the media build on the meanings of knowing one’s self as shameful, defiled and filthy? What does it mean to be outside of the norm? But most importantly, how to value menstruation as a positive experience and thus, how to evoke a discourse of body love and self-acceptance?

In the end, the reader of this article should be able to question his or her own way of valuing and controlling his or her body and to understand how different cultural mechanisms such as advertisements affect this process. This is a needed step of awareness and understanding, to be able to fully embrace menstruation with acceptance, gratefulness and pleasure.

The analysis of the representation of menstruation in these advertisements explores the conditions in which we see and the way we build meaning out of what we see. Here we can apply the words of John Berger (1982), “the way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe” (p.8). This paper includes the results of a comparison between a small selection of Colombian and Japanese advertisements of sanitary napkins and tampons. The methodology used is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in order to give an account of the ideological and symbolic elements within socio-cultural practices (Satō, 2010). There will first be an explanatory introduction of the theoretical grounds that sustain this analysis.

1.1 Menstrual Activism and The Closet

When looking at the history of feminist preoccupations, menstruation is almost an invisible chapter. The invisibility and silence that surrounds menstruation suppress the speech of the body and this is related to the practice of “speaking for others” and misrepresentation. As Rich (1977) puts it, the body has a bloody speech but “menstruators” participate in the silences around menstruation allowing others speak for them (p.254). This paper is a contribution to make visible the representation of menstruation and to propose a critical thinking regarding cultural values, advertisements and products.

The current research converges with arguments found in the Third-wave Feminism, a broad term for many contemporary feminist politics, which includes a movement often referred to as *menstrual activism*. Chris Bobel is an associate professor and chair of Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Bobel (2010) explains the politics of menstruation looking at feminism in flux; Bobel gives a historical background that goes thirty years back and shows how menstrual activists have questioned menstruation as a taboo. She also questions the safety and necessity of feminine care products. The Third-wave Feminism is closely

related to the field of cultural studies and especially involves the consideration of queer theory and visual culture theory (Bobel, 2010).

The topic of menstruation proves the intimate relationship between the biological and cultural spheres, and the constant oscillations between naturalizing and denaturalizing processes. From this particular theoretical standpoint, it is important when analyzing the representation of menstruation to insist on Derrida's (1995) words, "there is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization."⁽¹⁾ Biological discourse is built upon processes of naturalization. Menstruation, within this discourse, is thus seen as "natural" and "non-modifiable." In fact, any possible understanding of the biological is influenced and structured by politics, society and culture. Moreover, the notion of representation is a symbolic process that is part of the human signifying world and is irreducible to biological-physical instances because it is a world that, ultimately, is only available symbolically (Van Oort, 2009).

Thus, the current analysis is part of a denaturalizing effort as it provides evidence on how the representation of menstruation is built through the use of discourse that carries and reproduces ideological meanings of menstruation and the female body. Therefore, it follows that the way of conceiving and valuing menstruation is neither natural nor given. Rather, it is constructed, and in part, that construction is performatively made by advertisements for feminine care products.

Advertisements for feminine hygiene products frequently employ headlines that reinforce the belief of menstruation as a pre-given object of biology. They construct it as a natural physical feature of a woman's body that causes fear as well as a hygienic crisis, resulting in guilt, low self-esteem and a validation of the supposed inferiority of women. Understanding the menstrual cycle as a rite of all women essentializes female bodies. It cannot be assumed that menstruation

is a feature of all women's experiences and thus a political and practical concern for every woman, because the truth is not all women menstruate and not only women menstruate. According to Bobel (2010), "postmenopausal women, women post hysterectomy, and some athletes, for example, do not menstruate, and some preoperative transmen do menstruate (as do many inter-sexuals)" (p.11-12). Taking this into consideration, "menstruators" stands as a term that seeks the liberation of fixed binaries and is coherent with the denaturalizing effort previously mentioned. However, the advertisements are directed at women and the main characters are always women. In this sense, it is imperative to consider the category of women as the target demographic.

The *menstrual closet* is a term elaborated by Iris Marion Young (2005) from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's thoughts about the homosexual experience of the closet. Young is an influential scholar who deals with political theory, social and feminist theory and normative analysis of public policies. Sedgwick is a scholar in gender studies, queer theory and critical theory; one of her main topics is what she calls "epistemology of the closet."

Sedgwick (1990) suggests that the experience of those deviating from heterosexual norms has come to stand for wider and diverse experiences of normalization. "The closet" and "the coming out," secrecy and disclosure, are figures that contribute to the understanding of the politically charged realm of representation. However, she insists that the image of the closet is indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions. Unlike many other oppressions, including racial oppression and oppressions felt by many people with disabilities, no physical markers signal to others the right to label others "homosexual." Particular ambiguities, uncertainties and dangers attend when coming out of the homosexual closet. However, it is worth pointing out that even if it is generally believed that menstruation is a physical event, there are

no physical markers that signal to others and allow them to label others as “menstruators,” although all women are assumed to menstruate by the middle of puberty.

Although this analytical perspective aligns with queer theory, it does not attempt to erase the difference between the stigmas attached to the deviation from normative heterosexuality, on one hand, and the experience of menstrual constraint and shame on the other. Judith Butler, philosopher and professor of rhetoric and comparative literature, has developed major contributions to political philosophy, feminism and queer theory. Butler’s theories state that the multitude of ways that people are made ashamed or positioned as odd should not be understood as a consequence of their being or actions, rather the trouble has its root in the idea of what is considered “normal.” In this sense, Butler (1993) details the dilemmas that entrap queer theory in a system that aspires to normalcy according to the standards of clean and proper culture framed within normative heterosexuality. These reflections about the homosexual closet, when applied to menstruation under the same metaphor, open a space figuratively to explore the tensions and personal shames of menstruators who aim to be “normal human beings” in a culture that finds menstrual processes sick, dirty and even frightening.

Regardless of the connection between the homosexual closet and the menstrual closet, it is important to note the distinct structural positions and experience of each. The homosexual closet is a space of *invisibilized* sexual identity, but also allows the possibility of developing a counterculture from within it. In contrast, even if the majority of women are presumably menstruating beings, other menstruators are unidentified; it is menstruation that remains invisible. It will always remain inside the closet. Young (2005) dwells on these differences:

“Menstruators can never be closeted in the way that those who challenge the heterosexual norms can. Most of us are visible and viscerally women

to those who encounter us. Consequently, the menstrual closet does not afford the same sort of safety as the homosexual closet, but neither does coming out of it carry the same threat of job loss or violence. Because the homosexual closet renders the identity it hides more invisible, moreover, it also opens greater space for development of a counterculture for those who know one another as in it than does keeping menstruation hidden. Despite these important differences, the menstrual closet shares with others a normative enforcement that produces shame" (Young, 2005, p.108).

1.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Specific Japanese and Colombian Advertisements

1.2.1 Analysis of the Discourses: The Menstrual Closet

Throughout the analysis of the following advertisements of feminine care products, the notion of the closet is applied to the menstrual experience.

For the advertisements in Japan four commercials of the company Unicharm were chosen. **The one with the cat in the bed** corresponds to the brand Sophy and the type of napkin advertised is "Wide Guard." It was released in 2007.⁽²⁾ **The one with the woman in white sitting** also belongs to the brand Sophy and the type of napkin advertised is, "Hada Omoi" (meaning skin care), featuring the model Satō Eriko. It was released in 2010.⁽³⁾ **The one with the woman in white posing** is very similar to the previous one, since it is also by the brand Sophy, also "Hada Omoi" and it features Satō Eriko. It is currently part of the official television campaign from the Unicharm Internet page. It was released in 2011.⁽⁴⁾ **The one with the dolls sleeping** offers a type of napkin called *Chōjukusui* Guard ("Sound Sleep Guard"), featuring Satō Eriko. It was released in 2010 and is currently uploaded on the official

television campaign from Unicharm's webpage.⁽⁵⁾ Finally, **the one with the book on top of the head** is the only online television advertisement found in Japanese for tampons. It was released in 1980 and it corresponds to the brand "Anne Tampon." The company was "Anne" (アンネ企業), but since 1993 this company merged with a larger corporation, Lion S.A. (ライオン).⁽⁶⁾

For the Colombian advertisements, the company *Nosotras*, a branch of a large corporation Familia Sancela, from Colombia S.A. was chosen. **The one with the woman sleeping** corresponds to the type *Buenas Noches Natural* ("Natural Good Night"). It was made in 2006.⁽⁷⁾ **The one with the pink T-shirt** offers the type *Ajuste seguro* ("Secure Adjust"). It was released in 2009.⁽⁸⁾ **The one with the inversion of roles** corresponds to the type of napkin *Nosotras Ultra-Invisible Rapigel* ("Ultra-Invisible, Rapid-Gel *Nosotras*"). It was also made in 2009.⁽⁹⁾ **The one with the couple sleeping** is of the type *Nosotras Buenas Noches Ultra-Invisible Suavesec* ("*Nosotras* Good Night Ultra-Invisible Soft-Secure"). It was made in 2012.⁽¹⁰⁾ Finally, **the one with the four women and a box of tampons** is an advertisement of tampons for the brand O.B. It was made in 2007.⁽¹¹⁾ Additionally, another advertisement about tampons and wet wipes, *Nosotras*, made in 2010 is added to the analysis.⁽¹²⁾

So, how is the menstrual closet displayed in those Japanese and Colombian advertisements for feminine care products? The argument of the existence of the menstrual closet is developed in three sub-parts: concealment and the menstrual closet; abjection and the menstrual closet; and finally, the menstrual closet and its normalizing strategy.⁽¹³⁾

A) Concealment and Menstrual Closet

This section tackles the following codes that build concealment within the analyzed advertisements. The first element is that menstruation is addressed

without properly naming it. The lack of name and direct reference with regards to menstruation is part of the concealment strategy that appeals to metaphors and euphemisms (e.g. the moon). The viewer knows that they are talking about menstruation but they never actually say it (*menstruación*, 月経, *gekkei*). In this sense, menstruation remains hidden inside the closet, which means to remain unnamed, unidentified.

It is relevant to further discuss the issue of the expressions for menstruation in Spanish and in Japanese, in order to identify possible differences through the language used when it comes to the level of concealment. In Spanish, the word *menstruación*, comes from the Latin *menses*, which means month. In daily conversation people use the word in restricted contexts and there are plenty of euphemisms that are frequently used. Of course the expressions used in daily conversation vary from place to place and from generation to generation. Spanish is a widely spoken language with many different variations. Let me state the ones more often used in Colombia as expressions that indicate one is menstruating. *Tengo la regla* (“I have the ruler”), *el periodo* (“the period”), *me llegó* (“it came”), and *la luna* (“the moon”). In Japanese, the words 月経 *gekkei* and 経水 *keisui* are considered standard and direct Japanese expressions for menstruation or period. However, these words are almost never used in daily life. Certainly the most common word in Japanese is 生理 *seiri* to refer to menstruation. However this “direct” word remains a euphemism since it means ‘life logic,’ ‘organic faculty’ or ‘physiology.’ Also 女の子の日 *onna no ko no hi* (“girl’s day”), 生理が来た *seiri ga kita* (“the period came”), これ *kore* (“that”), 生理痛が辛い *seiritsu ga tsurai* (“menstrual cramps”) and 月の物 *tsuki no mono* (“moon’s thing”) are used. The latter is considered a very direct way of speaking of menstruation, as it means “thing of the month,” “monthly thing,” “moon thing.” Also, 今日はお風呂に入れない *Kyō wa ofuro ni hairenai* (“Today I won’t enter the bathtub”) is an indirect and common way

to refer to menstruation. In school scenarios, if the teacher is a man, girls will use the word 病気 *byōki* (“sick”) or *excusa personal* (“personal excuse”) to notify their absence from sports class. Whereas if the teacher is a woman, girls might say directly “I have my period” or “I have menstrual cramps.”

The second element that complements the lack of name is the fear of the display of menstruation, the lack of visible trace. All the Japanese advertisements feature women alone, with the exception of **the one with the dolls sleeping**, which simulated two more female characters in the shape of dolls—however it was evident that it was only one woman. They appear alone and in a private scenario. As for the Colombian advertisements, two of them appeared as alone in their beds or in a white artificial scenario like the Japanese ones. In addition, there are two advertisements, **the one with the couple sleeping** and **the one with the inversion of roles**, that involve two man-woman characters, but they are a heterosexual couple so they still appear in a private scenario addressing the question of sexual intercourse in relation to menstruation. With the only exception of **the one with the four women and a box of tampons**, most of them are in private and personal contexts. In a variety of contexts they are mindful of the imperative to conceal menstrual processes.

Most of the advertisements repeated the action of checking the buttocks when sitting or walking, and explicitly mentioned the fact of not staining the sheets or the clothes. The objective of the product offered and its particular feature is to avoid bloodstains on any place. Phrases such as: “in the morning your shorts will always be clean,” “Look, no leaks from the back!” and “You won’t leak and there won’t be any stains on your sheets or on your pajamas” reinforce the former point. Another example can be found in **the one with the inversion of roles** when the man asks the woman to check if he has stained his pants and since he did, she covers him with a sweater. All these elements build on the fear of displaying the menstrual

period.

If the imperative of concealment operates in this scenario of solitude and privacy, it follows that during the course of their daily activities, when they interact with others, they must follow a multitude of rigid practical rules. Concurring with Young (2005), the following are examples of these rules: do not discuss about menstruation with hardly anyone, keep the signs of menstruation hidden, leave no bloodstains on the floor, towels, chairs, etc, make sure that the bloody flow does not visibly leak through the clothes and that the outline of a sanitary pad does not show. All these practicalities create the menstruator's insecurity at evidence; including bloodstains, smell or marks.

A third element that is intimately related to the fear of display is the great emphasis on the absorbing capacity of the menstrual napkin, especially when it comes to the types of menstrual pads that are supposed to be used while sleeping. However, even in the tampon advertisement, the emphasis on absorption was also clear. The product offers a full guarantee of the absence of bloodshed, which obeys the imperative of concealment and thereby contributes to the creation of the fear of exposition. The following phrases are examples of how often the absorption element is reinforced: "softness and total absorption in one!" or "the anti-leaking zone and its powerful gel absorb in one go those big (menstrual) discharges." The capacity of absorption is the practical and tangible way of understanding how the menstrual "guard" (napkin), to use the Japanese brand name, promises to keep in prison the potential aggressor (menstruation). The recurrent absorbency tests also consolidate the emphasis on absorption and how it is the foremost characteristic that determines the efficacy of the product.

The fourth aspect is a symbolic category, the *menstrual etiquette*, which derives from the articulation of the previous elements. For example, in two of the advertisements, the two women (one Japanese and one Colombian) are irritated,

are sleeping uncomfortably because of the insecurity that involves menstruating at night. But the menstruator's security is regained through the use of the product. This point is clearer with the recurrent use of phrases such as: "more hours of protection" or "you will be safe and comfortable" or "for maximum security and protection." Why so much emphasis on safety and protection? What does it mean to feel insecure in this context?

Insecurity presupposes the presence of a danger, failure or threat: menstruation itself. However, when building fear and insecurity, by alluding to the necessity of using the product and keeping the danger locked in the closet, a particular idea of menstruation is engendered. Menstruation is dirty, disgusting, defiling, a threat and danger for menstruators, and thus, must be hidden. We, menstruators, must keep our private fluidity secret, consequently we must observe the practices of what Sophie Laws (1990) calls *menstrual etiquette*. Laws is an independent researcher and consultant whose areas of research include issues for children, youth, and parents; health; gender; lesbian and gay issues; among others. With the term menstrual etiquette, Laws denotes a set of rules governing social interactions, negotiating the material manifestations and cultural meanings of menstruation.

Menstrual etiquette concerns who can say what to whom about menstruation, what sort of language is appropriate, and what should not be spoken. This is shown in the way the advertisements make menstruation seem like something exclusive to women, using the words "we," "we, women," the implied message is "just between us women" as if it was some kind of secret club.

The rules of menstrual etiquette recommend the use of certain products, and instruct as to how they should be acquired, carried, stored, disposed of, and referred to in conversation. Above all, menstrual etiquette governs the behavior of menstruators to ensure that the facts of menstruation remain hidden; in other

words, to ensure subordination to the menstrual closet.

Young (2005) exposes the relationships between concealment, menstrual etiquette and abjection of menstruation in the following passage:

“As menstruators, women threaten psychic security systems because female processes challenge the distinctions between inside and outside, solid and fluid self-identical and changing. Both men and women experience menstruation as abject or monstrous, because both harbor anxieties about dissolution of self and merging with the ghost of a mother. One way of holding this anxiety at bay is to separate the feminine from the clean and proper masculine. Thus, either menstruating women must be separated from others, especially men, and isolated in a distinct space; or women may be allowed to roam free among men but must keep signs of their menstruation hidden. In either case, women every month carry the burden of abjection, the monstrous, the stigma of birth and death, as a practical and enforced shame... If a woman wishes to walk among men while she bleeds, if she wishes to lay claim to the rights and privileges of a solid self who stands forth and achieves, then she had better keep her private fluidity secret. Thus she must observe the practices of the menstrual etiquette” (Young, 2005, p.111).

B) Abjection and Menstrual Closet

This section tackles the relationship between abjection and the menstrual closet and questions in which ways abjection of menstruation materializes from advertisements for feminine “hygiene” products. Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection offers an interpretive framework for understanding the emotional issues that might be at stake in the menstrual closet when connected to abjection.

The first aspect to underscore is that most of the character's pajamas, pants or shorts and bed sheets are as white as snow. **The one with the woman in white sitting** and **the one with the woman in white posing**, both Japanese, are completely emphasizing the whiteness and transparency of the clothing and setting. In most of the cases, the walls and backgrounds are also white. One common association with the color white is that of purity or virginity. The use of the color white produces a symbolic removal of any trail that indicates that these women are actually menstruating. The range of reds and browns that evokes menstruation is omitted in most of the advertisements. In a few of the advertisements analyzed, the usage of light pink addresses femininity and functions as a euphemism or an indirect way of making the viewer "know" that they are talking about menstruation without showing it. However, the issue underscored in this point is how there are no signs of menstruation and how there must not be any stains and these aspects are exaggerated with the overuse of white elements. In this sense, to erase, eliminate and exclude is the mandate underlying the advertisements and it expresses the hidden and created desire of menstruation's non-existence.

The concealment strategy is convincing in these white environments (including clothes, sheets, walls, floors, ceilings), as neither the actual use of the menstrual product nor menstruation is ever seen. Whiteness and transparency produce menstrual invisibility, which indicates that menstruation has been abjected, symbolically eliminated. Menstruation enters the realm of abjection as it is rejected, thrown into the menstrual closet where it verges on non-existence in terms of its invisibility and with the desire of making it non-existent. In one of the Colombian ads, this phrase hits right to the core of this point: "Fortunately, for us (women) those days are invisible with *Nosotras* ultra-invisible."

The second aspect is the representation of menstrual blood within the advertisements. In some advertisements, it does not appear at all, the symbolic

representation is totally indirect in terms of the visual signs, again—viewers know they are talking about menstruation, for example, through the image of the panties, the pads and some dots of light that fall down. In the majority of the advertisements, menstruation is represented with a blue liquid contained in test tubes. This representation is often used to show the efficacy of the products' absorption capacity, but this type of representation is evidently a distortion of how menstruation is really experienced.

Additionally, this representation, or shall we say lack of or misrepresentation, indicates a cultural value concerning hygiene. Indirectly, menstruation is marked as a dirtiness that must be transformed into cleanliness. In the Japanese advertisement, this point is reinforced with the word *きれい* (*kirei*) ("clean," "pure," "pretty," "beautiful"). This cultural meaning results in a rejection and repulsion of menstruation, which is typical of abjection processes. Also, the abject denotes what does not fit. In this particular case, it is what does not fit with the hegemonic (masculine) norms of cleanliness and properness. Additionally, judgments of repulsion and disgust produced by menstruation within advertisements (irritation while sleeping before being reassured by the use of the menstrual product, for example) acknowledge the aversion and phobia involved in the abjection of menstruation.

Following Young (2005), it is important to note that this representation of menstrual blood extends to many other advertisements that are not analyzed here. These advertising campaigns, as many others, have replaced the conception of menstruation from an exhausting process to a healthy process, but it is still represented as dirty. Menstruation is still presented as a hygienic problem for society that requires the use of particular products in order to solve it. "Necessity" is created for maintaining the body as clean, fresh and perfumed as possible. This created need can be identified in phrases such as "responds to your needs," "sleep fresh," "neutralizes odor" or "always be clean."

The third aspect to be reflected on, in the effort to respond to that created necessity and to the desire of making menstruation less noticeable to the extent of making it disappear, it is appropriate to consider how menstruation is unconnected to the menstruators. In other words, how menstruation is alienated from the subject. The alienation is linked to the meaning of menstruation as something dangerous—we need a “guard,” “security” and “protection” and there is also a prohibition of all menstrual manifestations.

According to Kristeva (1982), the abject denotes a co-relationship with the subject that is in the other side of the limits of identity and threatens to dissolve that frontier. In this sense, substances expelled from the human body evoke aversion and displeasure. Vomit, pus, urine, defecation and the corpse threaten the subject’s disintegration. These substances, whose origins are located inside the body itself, shake the meaning of a body with limited, solid, impermeable, clear and impassable frontiers. The horror of abjection has two main paradigms: the excremental and the menstrual.

“While they always relate to corporeal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body’s territory, polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value. Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc) stand for the threat to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, the society threatened by the outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva, 1982, p.71).

Supporting this thought on menstrual abjection, Young (2005, p.110) says that “menstrual blood is a fluid and olfactory substance that itself defies boundaries and fixity.”

In this order of ideas, menstruation risks identity and stability, and this is why women require the promise of security and protection that offers the advertised products. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the alienation of menstruation is a fiction because menstruation comes from within, which means that when rejecting menstruation, women are rejecting themselves. The menstrual closet is an oppressive mechanism because it supposes “the experience of knowing oneself as shameful, as an abject existence that is messy and disgusting” (Young, 2005, p.109).

Finally, the typically Western radical difference between body and mind exemplifies a rejection of the body, and consequently represents abjection of menstruation. Menstruation is assumed as something excluded and thus, radically different from the subject. The abjection of menstruation allows us to interpret menstruation from the perspective of human substances ejected from our bodies, substances that escape from reasoning and control. These substances, whose origin is in the body, challenge our sense of impermeable and solid bodily boundaries. This pattern of thought can be identified in both, Colombian and Japanese cultural contexts.

The irrational and what is out of control, in this case, is related to menstruation and women, who are unable to domesticate their bodies. This point is evident in **the one with the dolls sleeping**, in which the actress appears next to two dolls and acts in a childish way. One possible interpretation is that this menstruating woman is associated with a kid who cannot control her body. This is also evident in **the one with the inversion of roles** with the man crying and claiming he is “sensible.” Crying, sensibility and childish behavior relates menstruators to what is out of control and thus, opposes the prevalent notion of subject, patriarchal and Cartesian. To be excluded from the category of subject is to be condemned to be

wretched. As Elizabeth Grosz illustrates: “For the girl, menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks uncontrollably, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out of control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood” (Grosz, 1995, p.205).

In relation to this topic, Martin (1992) reflects upon the construction of hegemonic subject and how social institutions and dominant discourses, including the biological and medical, have given the masculine body and behaviors a *normative* status. The menstruating body associated with the feminine deviates from these norms as it negotiates with the inconsistent and failed. The subject is also shown in the expectation of body control, hiding a process that is out of control. A sensation of impotence emerges—typical of the closet experience—as we cannot do anything to stop menstrual fluidity. Young supports this reasoning in the following passage:

“Women as menstruators live through a split subjectivity insofar as we claim the public face of normalcy and fear of exposure of the private fluidity of our flesh. Given the dominant disembodied norms of clean and proper, it is difficult for me not to experience my being as defiled and out of control” (Young, 2005, p.109).

Menstruation implies living aware of our corporal existence. However, this way of living faces tremendous challenges when given the incorporeal normative of the clean and masculine.

C) Menstrual Closet: Normalizing Strategies

This final section explores how the representation of the menstrual closet can be understood as a normalizing strategy. The notion of menstrual closet is an approach to the understanding of acceptance dynamics, as well as a type of power of cultural, political, and social control. The menstrual closet can be interpreted as a

normalizing strategy that regulates what is considered out of order.

Firstly, as menstruation is not properly named within advertisements, menstruation does not exist because it does not enter the discursive consciousness or symbolic world. Taking into consideration Butler's (1993) ideas, it is possible to have a better understanding of the relationship between the unsaid/unnamed and the abnormal. According to Butler, "the naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (1993, p.7-8). Consequently, what is named and repeated constitutes the inculcation of a norm and norms are often valued as *normal*. Naming is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion; it sets limits between what is intelligible and unintelligible, legitimate and illegitimate, rational and irrational, in the last term, normal and abnormal. In this order of ideas, the absence of the word 'menstruation' within the advertisements places menstruation in the other side of the boundary and norm: the unintelligible, illegitimate and irrational side.

Secondly, menstruating women in the advertisements act in a normal way. Sleeping and waking up are certainly normal actions in anyone's daily routine and menstruating and using pads appear to be usual events as well. Paradoxically, menstruation must be hidden at any cost and this act of concealment is considered a normal attitude towards menstruation. Moreover, the characters in the advertisements are not represented as strange for purchasing the products that guarantee normalcy; weird would be not purchasing and using them. Many advertisements emphasize the freedom of movement, and also some other advertisements emphasize how natural or common the pad is. These messages constitute the normalcy offered by the products.

Thirdly, there is a connection between acceptance and normalcy. When researching and analyzing feminine "hygiene" products, including both sanitary napkins and tampons, it is generally agreed that in Japan and Colombia alike, pads

are significantly more accepted than tampons. The history of tampons required from the advertising companies more emphasis on the approval of the medical community, as a legitimate voice saying it is okay to use them.

The use of scientific lingo about the construction of both types of products provides evidence on the generalized ignorance when it comes to menstruation and its products and the need to “call in the experts.” In the tampon advertisement we can identify phrases like, “learn how to use it and call this number” and that the design of O.B. was made by a gynecologist. Additionally, in the Colombian advertisements it is important to be recognized by the National Federation of Gynecology. In the Japanese advertisements, there is also a medical language when referring to itching and to practical, medical solutions.

Finally, all these characteristics aim to build on the meaning of the importance of using products that allow us to have a healthy and “normal” body. The development of this argument demands a reflection about what is considered normal.

“The normal body, the default body, the body that everybody is assumed to be, is a body not bleeding from the vagina. Thus to be normal and to be taken as normal, the menstruating woman must not speak about her bleeding and must conceal evidence of it” (Young, 2005, p.107).

Therefore, the concealment and abjection processes are central to the strategy of normalizing the use of this product, which is a major interest of the menstrual product business. If menstruators wish to be recognized as “normal,” they must respond to the demands of menstrual etiquette and participate in the silences around menstruation.

What we recognize as “normal” women in the advertisements is also related to the looks of the female models that appear in the advertisements. They are all thin, wear tight clothes and have beautiful faces. This tendency of representing a particular “perfect” model of women in TV and its persistence over time also operates as a

mechanism of control by creating a prototype of a desired body. To be fair with the Colombian advertisement of tampons, **the one with four women and a box of tampons**, it is relevant to acknowledge that even if the four female models are indeed beautiful and thin, they are purposely different from each other and act as different characters, with different clothes and styles, suggesting a degree of multiplicity and diversity between women. However, this advertisement still evens up with the other advertisements by sending the message that in order to be a “normal” woman you must conceal your menstruation and use these accepted products.

“It seems apt, then, in this normatively masculine, supposedly gender egalitarian society, to say that the menstruating woman is queer. As with other queers, the price of a woman’s acceptance as normal is that she stays in the closet as menstruator” (Young, 2005, p.107).

1.4 Media, Menstruation, Conclusive Remarks

In general, a central theme for sanitary napkins is the test of absorbency. In most of the advertisements this is spoken of in terms of keeping the female menstruating body fresh, clean, dry, secure and protected. These products offer security and protection against visibility, addressing the fear of staining menstruation. But they are also offered against the possibility of one’s own body becoming soiled, wet or dirty. In many cases, leakages spoil our viability as a subject. The state of being stained is a site of embarrassment, a sight and site not to be seen or occupied at any cost. The menstruating woman is not merely “in possession” of a body that produces “waste” and “dirt,” but if she cannot exercise her agency, if she cannot manage and *contain* this aspect of her body, she is not acceptable.

Sanitary napkins portray a passivity attached to the female body, a body in need of protection and being saved by the products. Tampon advertisements offer

the choice of occupying a more active position, a more masculine subject position, but of course this is again through the guarantee of no stain, no sign of mess. The reality of being always potentially at risk is recalled. The emphasis on the sanitary napkins' value is the threat of leakage (abjection) countered by absorbency, and the emphasis for tampons has been on the issue of discretion (concealment). Considerable attention is given to the size and design of the products rather than addressing important problems these products often cause: itching, pain and harboring bacteria. Furthermore, the very absence of blood—visually and textually—in both types of advertising indicates invisibility leading to a desire of menstruation's non-existence.

The message that is conveyed from the whole collection of advertisements is not a body that menstruates, but a body that should not. The body is portrayed as discrete, self-contained, and controlled, and this state is achieved through the denial and repulsion of menstrual blood, as that which surpasses the constitutive boundaries of the self. All which exceeds the intelligibility of the body must be made absent or at least *kept in the closet*, and this is the premise and promise for female subjects' viability. Menstrual blood—successfully absorbed by a sanitary napkin or tampon—or prevented or suppressed is a risky substance. The menstrual closet appears to be the only way to deal with the disorderly behavior of the female body.

The comparison of advertisements from different times and radically different cultural contexts allow us to acknowledge that the dominant use of textual themes and visual images in advertisements remain fairly static over the years and over the geographical gaps. Even if the portrayal of female bodies includes both passive and active characters, the underlying message of menstruation as something to be concealed and ashamed of persists. The case of tampons is slightly different because its introduction in use took longer to be accepted.

Houppert (1999) writes, “blood is kind of like snot. How come it’s not treated that way? People with runny noses do not hide their tissues from colleagues and family members. Young girls do not cringe if a boy spies them buying a box of Kleenex” (p.29). Even if trivial, this analogy hits the point this paper has been stressing throughout these pages. For being an experience that directly affects a vast part of the human population, menstruation’s concealment and abjection results in a treatment of menstruation characterized by shame and secrecy. This research claims that media, in particular advertising, is not a means of women’s expression. It is impossible to blame this shame and secrecy surrounding menstruation entirely on the feminine care products industry and its advertising campaigns. However, advertisements do not contribute to counteracting this representation of menstruation. In fact, they sell products because of this belief. The issue of menstruation being treated as a secret and as a shameful thing addresses how these companies have informed women of their products when the products themselves were, and in some cases are still, commonly viewed as embarrassing and unmentionable. This is particularly strong in the case of tampons, and is even more palpable in Japan, where people buy these products and they are wrapped in several layers of bags.

It turns out that menstrual product advertisements play upon the menstruators’ insecurities about their periods to convince them about the products. Worried about leaking? Use this. Worried about not sleeping? Use this. Worried about odors? Use this. Worried about not being able to move? And so on, and so forth. This creation of needs reinforces shame, confusion and fear. These characteristics are typical of the menstrual closet experience.

In conclusion, the menstrual closet is an oppressive set of rules governing women’s behavior and thought, and it is etched on women’s conscience through different types of mechanisms. The repetition of associating menstruation to a

hassle, dirtiness, pathology, and the imperative to conceal it at all costs, are not only social and cultural aspects but also political. If the context and target change dramatically, like between Japan and Colombia, why does the representation of menstruation in advertisements remain practically the same?

This analysis ends as an opening towards a set of crucial ponderings about the construction of a solid political and ethical instance mindful of cultural models that reproduce representations of gender difference and sexuality in Japanese and Colombian contexts. In the last term, a comparative and gender perspective led us to recognize the exchange between the East and the West and in this particular case, the *Japanization* and *Colombianization* of a broader, hegemonic representation of menstruation through the advertising of feminine care products.

Japanese and Colombian cultures are both highly patriarchal, despite their different traditions and historical conditions that led them into becoming two different male-oriented societies. After the analysis of their respective advertisements, it turned out to be that both are similar cultural contexts when it comes to the treatment of menstruation. Thus, the focus of this current analysis emphasizes the act of comparing, finding similarities, rather than contrasting, finding differences.

1.5 Re-thinking Menstrual Products and Embracing Menstruation

As a departure point after the critical analysis of advertisements of feminine care products, this paper proposes a critical view against the products themselves. Sanitary napkins and tampons constitute not only a concern in terms of the relationship between menstruating women and their menstruation, but also an environmental concern. Menstruation is not toxic nor is it dirty—on the contrary, it is an organic and biodegradable substance. However, when encapsulated in a

sanitary pad or a tampon a piece of garbage is created, and the environmental cost of their production and use (especially concerning sanitary pads) is still subject to reflection. As menstruation is a topic tackled with caution and discretion, there is not enough questioning of the pollution caused by sanitary pads or of the compromise of feminine hygiene product industry.

It is logical to think that if we create garbage out of menstruation we value menstruation as garbage, and this suggests that until we find more sustainable alternatives we will have difficulties in re-signifying menstruation in a positive way. This environmental inquiry must be a cause of political reflection and must lead to a set of questions with regards to the use of sanitary pads and tampons and the use of possible different alternatives. For example, environmentally friendly options include a more direct contact with one's own menstruation in the form of menstrual cups,⁽¹⁴⁾ reusable pads and so on. For example, with the use of sanitary napkins and tampons, many menstruators have no idea about how much they actually bleed, and knowing our menstruation is important in order to appreciate and understand it.

Finally, embracing menstruation is of utmost importance: shifting the significance of menstruation from dirty, disgusting, pathological or dangerous into a bodily experience particular to each menstruator that reinforces life. Menstruation has been the object of social, cultural and corporate domination and colonization and it belongs to the narrative of each body. The breakdown of stereotypes and binaries that justify menstruation as dirty, pathological, defiling, messy and disgusting is essential. It is not about assimilating menstruation to male normalcy by remaining inside the menstrual closet. It is about signifying menstruation in a positive way, considering it a revealing corporal experience that allows women to assume life from a point of view that affirms menstruation and women's existence by integrating mind and body.

In this sense, this paper encourages menstruators to come out of the menstrual closet by talking about it, by sharing experiences and thoughts with people from ones' own culture and from other cultures; this is a possible way to re-signify it into a more positive experience. It is important for people to feel better about their menstruation as this would improve their whole feeling of self-worth. This affirmative valuation of menstruation is part of feminist struggles that seek liberation from stereotypes and stigmas and gets rid of etiquettes and rules that restrict women's lives within any culture.

When menstruators start talking to each other about their cycles and the products they use, the number of reasons to love menstruation will gradually increase. To understand that it is more than just "days of bleeding and pain" but rather a whole cycle—ovulation, discharges, the role of hormones, shedding of an unfertilized egg and the uterine wall—that affects our fertility, sexual arousal, intuition, creativity, feelings and sensations. Just by being informed on what our bodies do can help us to feel more empowered and in charge of our own health. Even keeping a diary of our cycle might help us to better understand it.

Menstruation should not be the "price paid" to be able to have children, especially when many menstruators cannot or do not want to have children. Menstruation is related to the possibility of creating life and thus, it can be understood as a creative process. During the cycle, the uterus builds a nourishing nest and when fertilization does not happen, the body intelligently releases everything it no longer needs, representing a cleansing process renewing itself every time. This natural cycle affects our lives in many different aspects but there is always the possibility to connect with our inner strength and body power. This connection brings insightful thoughts, awareness of the body and the present, sensibility, honesty, reviewing our dreams and goals, redefining priorities among many other benefits that vary from person to person.

Through the experience of menstruation, as well as through the experience of bodily functions, we have an opportunity to develop our own narratives of our bodies, self-awareness and to deepen our knowledge about our bodies and our corporal connection to the world. Everyone must build a healthy and empowering relationship with their own bodies. It is thus a topic that matters to everybody; it is not only limited to women, or menstruators.

Notes

- (1) Cited by Butler (1993) in the "Introduction" (p.1) of *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York and London: Routledge.
- (2) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPOLUpTboa8&NR=1>
- (3) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp8biDHSXQY>
- (4) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SusWP2gL1NY&feature=related>
- (5) Retrieved May12, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=V82t89BkRs8>
- (6) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUPeROZRD_c
- (7) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKT9RWjTOtw>
- (8) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0pjPLDX7Lk>
- (9) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9wwTNZRXUc>
- (10) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5d6jOeLOW4&feature=relmfu>
- (11) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=smQC18LUcSg&feature=endscreen>
- (12) Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvVHHoeCCzI>
- (13) For a detailed description of the visual and verbal instances of the advertisements selected cf. Buritica Alzate, Juliana. (2012). *The Menstrual Closet: An Analysis of the Portrayal of the Female Body in Japanese and Colombian Contexts*. An unpublished Master

Thesis submitted to the Division of Comparative Culture, International Christian University in June 2012, stocked in the ICU Library, Mitaka, Tokyo, p. 20-32

- (14) *Moon Cup, Smarter Sanitary Protection*. Retrieved November 19, 2012 from <http://www.mooncup.co.uk/>

Bibliography

- Berger, John. (1982). *Ways of seeing*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Bobel, Chris. (2010). *New Blood. Third-wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Bordo, Susan. (1993). *The Unbearable Weigh. Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Butler, Judith. (1990a). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- (1990b). "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In S.E. Case (Ed.) *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 270-282.
- (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- Castaño, Ramon Abel. (2004). *La publicidad: un freno al desarrollo. Elementos para un juicio critico sobre la llamada industria publicitaria*. Medellin: Sello Editorial, Universidad de Medellin.
- Douglas, Mary. (1966). *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers.
- Endo, Orie. (2006). *A Cultural History of Japanese Women's Language*. Michigan: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. (1993). "Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason." In Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (Ed.) *Feminist Epistemologies*. London: Routledge, p. 187-215.
- (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- (1995). *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: The Sage Open University Publications.
- Houppert, Karen. (1999). *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kristeva, Julia. (1980, 1982). *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez

- (1982). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Laws, Sophie. (1990). *Issues of Blood. The Politics of Menstruation*. London: Macmillan.
- Martin, Emily. (1992). *The Woman in the Body. A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Miyata, Noboru. (1996). *Kegare no minzokushi: sabetsu no bunkateki yōin*. Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin (宮田登『ケガレの民族誌——差別の文化的要因』京都:人文書院) (Repr. 2000. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo (東京:筑摩書房)).
- Rich, Adrienne. (1977). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Said, Edward. (1978). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Repr. 1995).
- Satō, Toyoko. (2010). *Performativity and Discourse: Japanese Advertisements on the Aesthetic Education of Desire*. A dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Copenhagen Business School. Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies. Ph.D. Series 24. 2010.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Thwaites, Tony; Davis, Lloyd; Mules, Warwick. (2002). *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach*. New York: Palgrave.
- Van Oort, Richard. (2009). *The End of Literature. Essays in Anthropological Aesthetics*. Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers.
- Young, Iris Marion. (2005). *On Female Body Experience. Throwing like a Girl and other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press.

生理のクローゼット ——日本とコロンビアの 女性用衛生用品の広告における月経の表象分析——

フリアナ・ブリティカ・アルサテ

女性用衛生用品の広告における月経の表現には、月経のクローゼットに対する女性の征服が含まれている。それは本質的に、月経の忌避や隠べい、およびそのことによって経験を正常化するという抑圧的な過程である。これらの広告は女性、とりわけ月経に関する社会的なルールを再生産する文化モデルとして機能している。この意味で、広告は日本とコロンビアの社会文化的文脈の一部を理解するための役割も果たしている。

本論文の基本的な目的は、広告の裏に隠れた月経のクローゼットの表象を明らかにし、それによって、女性の行動様式や考えを支配している一連の抑圧的なルールを特定することである。

本論文は、月経の表現を視覚化することおよび文化的価値観、広告、製品にフェミニストの視点から批判的思考を提示することに資する。単に生物学的な言説として月経が語られるときには、これは「自然な」ものであり、したがって「修正不可能なもの」としてとらえられている。しかし実際には、生物学的な視点は政治的、社会的、文化的な構造で語られ、それらの影響を受けているのである。

したがって本分析は、月経や女性の身体のイデオロギー的な意味を伝え再生産する言説を使用して月経の表象がいかに構築されているのかを実例から探り、自然と思われているものがいかに不自然かを明らかにするものである。つまり、月経をどうとらえ、月経に対してどのような価値観を持つかは、自然なものでも天性のものでもない。むしろ人工的に構築されたものであり、その構築は女性用ケア製品の広告によって遂行的に実現されているのである。

生理のクローゼットという言葉は、イヴ・コゾフスキー・セジウィックのホモセクシャルのクローゼットの経験からアイリス・マリオン・ヤングが構想したものである。この分析の視点はクィア理論の流れに沿ったものであるが、性的な生物についてまわるスティグマと規範的なヘテロセクシャリティから逸脱する行動の違いを拭い去ろうとするものではない。ホモセクシャルのクローゼットについての考察は、規範的なヘテロセクシャリティの中に位置づけられる清潔で適切な文化基準による正常を熱望するシステムに、ホモセクシャリティが陥った罍のジレンマを述べている。このようなホモセクシャルのクローゼットについての考察を、月経に対しても同じ「クローゼット」というメタファーのもとに応用するとき、月経を病的で、不潔、さらには恐ろしい存在とみる文化の中で正常な人間になろうという月経のある女性をとらえる葛藤や個人的な恥の意識を探る余地が与えられるのだ。

月経を不潔、病的、汚れのある、面倒な、うんざりするものとして正当化するステレオタイプや二項対立を解体することが必要不可欠であると考え。それは、月経をクローゼットの中に閉じ込めて、男性の正常に含めることではない。忌避的、不合理、不潔、病的だととらえられている月経を、月経や心と身体を統合する女性の存在を確認する観点から我々の生命をとらえることを可能にする身体体験として露わにするということである。このような月経の肯定的な評価は、ステレオタイプやスティグマからの解放を求め、ある文化の中で女性の生活を制限するエチケットやルールを取り除くというフェミニストの葛藤の一部である。

月経は我々の身体表現であり、芸術的、魅惑的、ミステリアス、パワフルなものでもあり得るのだ。それぞれの文化や宗教において、月経はそれぞれ異なる意味を持つであろう。しかしいずれにせよ、月経の経験を通して我々は自己認識を向上させ、我々の身体や世界への身体的つながりについての知識を深める機会を手に行っているのである。