

# Bloody Beautiful

## Playbook



**affect  
lab**

A movement for normalising and  
celebrating conversations about  
menstruation and menopause



# Bloody Beautiful begins

When I tell someone that I'm working on a project about menstruation and menopause I like to watch what happens to their face. I see a few things. Often, a wash of relief with the acknowledgement that *finally* something might change the miserable narratives about menstruation and menopause. Other times though, I see people's lips curling in disgust, as if I've tried to poison them with the words "menstruation" and "menopause". They start furiously looking into the mid-distance for something else to focus on; the suggestion of blood (and possibly vaginas!) will be too much to bear. And yet, on any given day in the world approximately 800 million people are on their period.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rohatgi, Aishwarya, and Dash "Period Poverty and Mental Health of Menstruators During COVID-19 Pandemic."

Bloody Beautiful is a movement born out of a need to tell more stories about menstruation and menopause; to normalise these narratives and ultimately celebrate them. The team at affect lab noticed all too often that every-day conversations about menstruation are still shrouded in shame, taboo and disgust. In the course of our research we heard from menstruators who told us about pressure to "hide" or keep "secret" a process that happens to almost half the population. This book outlines our response to this deeply problematic dominant narrative about menstruation and menopause. It offers details of our approach to steering conversations in a different direction. Importantly, the book has "playbook" in the title because it suggests fun and lightness – elements we believe are key to creating an accessible social movement. It also suggests that it's for others to build on - to play with. We are not the first to start a movement addressing a complex social topic and we definitely won't be the last. We want to share and offer our methods and results up for others to build on and remix.

# Working in a feminist way means paying homage to those who came before and who will come after.

As part of this book we reflect on our gossip sessions held in various venues in Amsterdam and Rotterdam to open a space for sharing stories and insights. We outline our chosen research methods and tools for others to scrutinise. We look back at the workshops we facilitated. And we examine the possible future avenues for our work to move into next. Most importantly we look critically at what worked (and what didn't) in Bloody Beautiful so we can share these successes and opportunities for improvement.

Working in a feminist way, means paying homage to those who came before and who will come after. Of course, our work does not occur in a vacuum. Part of the Bloody Beautiful movement is about connecting with fellow activists, thinkers and pioneers in this space who have worked hard to pave the way for creative studios like affect lab to do this work. Here I am thinking about the efforts of people from all different parts of the menstruation health spectrum. Some of them deserve a special mention. Gynaecologist Dorenda van Dijken who is leading the charge for desperately needed research in the Dutch medical world regarding menopause. The inspiring work of Neighborhood Feminists who initiated the first period poverty survey in the Netherlands, laying

*The affect lab team with moderator Dymphie Braun, technologist Babusi Nyoni and artist SPUTNIKO!*



bare some of ugly truths - like 1 in 5 menstruators cannot afford period products in Amsterdam! Our good friends at Yoni Care who manufactured the first 100% organic cotton tampon when there were none in the Netherlands – and continue to propagate celebratory stories around periods. The fearless team at WOMEN Inc. who never stop lobbying for more to be done in the realm of women's health. Radhika Bansidhar who visits schools in Rotterdam to single-handedly educate children on period health and wellbeing. And Margriet Hijweege who breaks glass ceilings to train Dutch corporates on the importance of menopause wellbeing in the workplace. The list can go on, but the point is that Bloody Beautiful was able to take root because the seed had already been planted by others with a similar vision. We thank you!

**Natalie Dixon**  
affect lab

Our goal with Bloody Beautiful is to creatively propagate new public narratives about menstruation and menopause in a gender-forward way. Part of this work is to evolve our own thinking and vocabulary on bodies that do and don't bleed. Not every person who menstruates identifies as a woman and we feel it's critical to include queer and trans dialogue on the topic of periods, which is often relegated and marginalised in public forums. We want to explode the tired old myths and conditionings about bodies. Stories that are normally hidden are aired in all their glory in safe spaces.

affect lab's work exists at the base layer of a very big social impact pyramid. At the top of the pyramid is policy around menstruation and menopause at the highest level. Think menstruation leave, or menopause training policies in workplaces. We, at affect lab, are working at the vital base of the pyramid to change the cultural discourse - the conversations that we have everyday around menstruation and menopause. This shift involves sparking new conversations, holding space for stories to be told and offering spaces for this to all take place.



*The audience dancing with their bleeding avatars at Gossip Session #2: Bleeding into the Metaverse*



# Behind the Scenes

A brief introduction to our research

Menstruation is a subject that remains highly stigmatised and wildly under-researched. The same can be said for menopause – a process which everyone who menstruates will at some point experience, but which is generally obscured from public discourse. But where exactly does this stigma originate from? Cultural theorists and social scientists such as Mary Douglas, Camilla Mørk Røstvik and Marie Mulvey Roberts have chronicled the long lineage associated with period taboo. In ‘Purity and Danger’, published in 1966, Douglas uses cross-cultural examples to demonstrate the ways menstruation is viewed as a source of impurity, and menstrual blood as a pollutant, for example by Mae Enga men in Papua New Guinea, who fear that contact with menstrual blood will cause their slow death.<sup>1</sup> More recently, in 2005, Mulvey Roberts writes: “Within mythology, literature and history, period taboo has been projected onto images that invoke holy dread, horror and awe”, using the example of the Medusa – “The crawling, snakey, bloody, horror head of the Medusa can be seen to mark not only the danger of breaking menstrual taboo but also the demonising of menstruation itself.”<sup>2</sup> This work goes some way to show how menstrual stigma came to be embedded in our society and how it is entangled with women’s rights. The stigma around menstruation also extends into the medical profession, where, according to author and activist Leah Hazard, there exists an entrenched “yuck factor”, resulting in a lack of research. In a study of how many papers had been published on the topic of menstruation, Hazard found “only about 400 results for menstrual effluent, compared to over 15,000 for semen or sperm.”<sup>3</sup>



**1** Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 148.

**2** Mulvey Roberts, “Menstrual Misogyny and Taboo: The Medusa, Vampire and the Female Stigmatic,” 149.

**3** Hazard, *Womb*, 37.

**4** Aljumah, Phillips, and Harper, “An Online Survey of Postmenopausal Women,” 67.

In Western societies, people who menstruate continue to experience the adverse effects of a prevailing stigma and a lack of research. A similar stigma also remains around menopause. In a 2023 study by researchers at University College London (UCL), 49% of the post-menopausal participants claimed they “did not feel informed about the menopause”.<sup>4</sup> On top of this, the qualitative data from the study revealed

# In a review of papers published about menstruation, Hazard found “only about 400 results for menstrual effluent, compared to over 15,000 for semen or sperm.”

that “Some of the women shared how their experience felt very isolating which was related to the lack of support and the stigma surrounding menopause. Many of them did not feel comfortable enough to talk about what they were going through.” Some women highlighted the role that the media played in shaping their understanding of menopause.<sup>5</sup>

5 Aljumah, Phillips, and Harper, “An Online Survey of Postmenopausal Women,” 78.

We recognise that the way that menstruation and menopause are celebrated or stigmatised varies greatly across different cultures. However, research from the Netherlands has suggested people who experience menopause feel similarly as those mentioned in the research from UCL. A study from the National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM) revealed that more than 1 in 3 working women in menopause say that they experience limitations in their ability to work due to menopausal symptoms, but less than half discuss their complaints with their colleagues or employer, despite needing to take sick leave to cope with the symptoms.<sup>6</sup>

6 RIVM, “Overgangsklachten belemmeren volgens een derde van de vrouwen in de overgang hun werk.”

The ways that menstruation and menopause are represented in visual culture – artworks, films, advertisements, or cultural symbols within our everyday environments, such as the signage in public bathrooms – are of great significance, as they have a real impact on the way attitudes and beliefs around these subjects evolve. The Western cultural understanding of menstruation has been shaped by a patriarchal medical gaze, and has consistently framed it as something unclean that needs to be hidden from the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> As recently as 2022, the Dutch tampon manufacturer OB ran a campaign offering tips and tricks for how to discreetly hide your tampon. The assumption of course is that there is a need to hide your tampon, that the need to use tampons, and the function that they offer should be made invisible.

7 Hughes and Røstvik, “Menstruation in Art and Visual Culture.”

# Art and design have the power to shape the way menstruation is represented.

That being said, there is a global movement of artists, designers, filmmakers, and activists whose work challenges these stereotypical depictions of menstruation and menopause, from Judy Chicago's installation 'Menstruation Bathroom' (1972), to the depiction of a menstrual blood clot in Michaela Coel's TV series 'I May Destroy You' (2020), to the sex and menstruation scene in 'Saltburn' (2023). As Røstvik observes, in recent years the aesthetic representation of menstruation developed by artists and in popular culture has been appropriated by advertising campaigns run by menstrual product companies,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that art and design have the power to shape the way menstruation is represented to all consumers of menstrual products.

8 Røstvik, "Blood in the Shower: A Visual History of Menstruation and Clean Bodies."

While there is still a massive knowledge gap on the subject of menstruation and menopause, there is clear scope for creative interventions to influence the discourse around this subject. This is the aim of Bloody Beautiful – to engage audiences through creative interventions, produce new research and create new spaces for discussion on the topic, in a gender-forward way. In the first year of this new (ad)venture for us, here's how we did it:

## Desk research

For the foundational research of Bloody Beautiful we began with a thorough desk research phase, spending long hours researching menstruation and menopause by doing a literature review on the subject and reaching out to experts in the field. We documented and archived these articles (an ever-growing database of readings across three decades of writing) in a Miro Board that keeps growing with new additions.



## Phone line

We set up the Bloody Beautiful phone line in the spring of 2023. The phone line offers an intimate place where anyone can share a story about their experience of menstruation or menopause. It was developed using a voice bot, which enables an interactive audio experience. The bot guides the caller with the help of stories from other contributors, and inspires them to share their own story, via a voice note. The aim of the

phone line is to encourage conversation around these topics. In the process, we have also created a rich database of stories. We shared snippets of these (anonymous) audio stories at each of the gossip sessions, connecting them to the themes of the evening. We also shared some stories on the Bloody Beautiful platform.

## Interviews

While the phone line has provided us with interesting anecdotes from a large group of people, we also wanted to have the chance to have deeper conversations with individuals about their experience of menstruation. For this reason, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to understand how different people, including people who don't menstruate, experience menstruation and menopause. The interviews focussed on their attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, ranging from "Who or what resources have you turned to when you have questions about menopause?" to "Would you openly discuss menstrual products in a public space?" These interviews have allowed us to pick up on themes that often emerge when people discuss these subjects, such as shame (but also pride), mental health, representations of menstruation on social media, and familial dynamics, amongst other things.

## Gossip Sessions

At the heart of the Bloody Beautiful movement was a desire to create a space where people could bear witness to each other's stories about menstruation and menopause. We achieved this with a series of gossip sessions. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar



suggests that gossip originally emerged within the earliest human communities – who first used language to share information – to strengthen social bonds within expanding groups. As group sizes increased, forming alliances became crucial for survival.<sup>9</sup> However, the challenge arose when it became impractical to physically engage with everyone in these larger alliances. Conversation and language served as a solution to overcome this obstacle, allowing gossip to function as a social tool for acquiring information about individuals without the need for direct personal communication.

**9** Dunbar, “Gossip in Evolutionary Perspective,” 104.

Despite these practical, social origins, gossiping has long been demonised. During the witch hunt, gossiping was re-framed away from an integral part of female friendship, into the subject of ridicule.<sup>10</sup> In 1547, an English law was even introduced, proposing that “women should not meet together to babble and talk”.<sup>11</sup> With our gossip sessions, we are reclaiming the act of gossiping from its more negative connotations and using it as a method for making and sharing cultural meaning. Precisely because menstruation is a topic that has been shamed from public discourse, gossiping feels like a fitting way to discuss it, a way to share knowledge and personal stories, as if chatting with a friend. Exciting themes also arose in the exchange between our guest speakers and the audience.

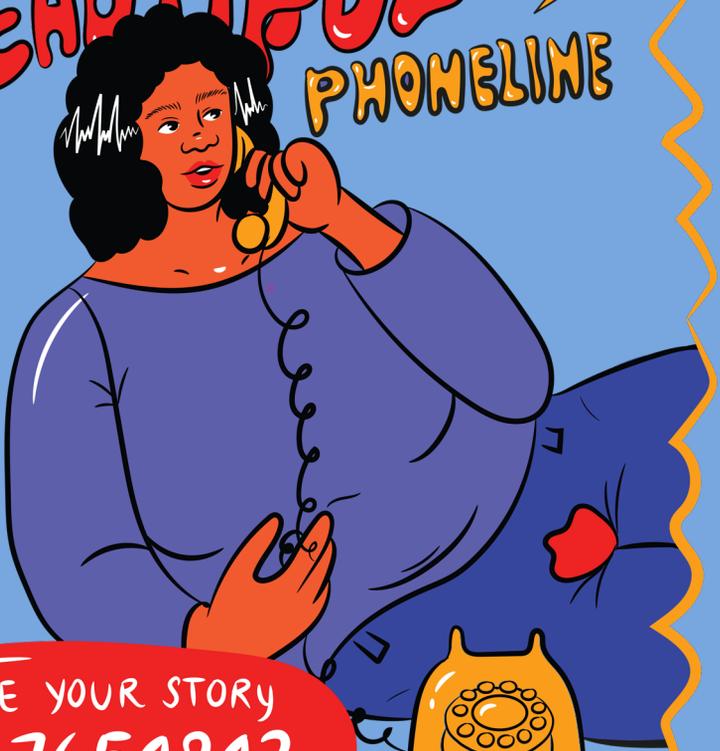
**10** Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*.

**11** Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, 467.

## Tearsheets

On top of the qualitative research methods we’ve already mentioned, we also wanted to get a basic understanding of the demographic of our gossip sessions audience. To do this, we used tearsheets at the gossip sessions – paper surveys where each member of the audience marks their response to survey questions by tearing their response into the paper. Via this method, we learned about the age-range of our audience, where they are based, how they heard about the gossip session, and how they relate to the theme of the session.

# BLOODY BEAUTIFUL PHONELINE



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# Gossip Sessions

The Bloody Beautiful gossip sessions were inspired by one of the most ancient feminist practices that exist: gossiping. In our view, gossip is an intimate way to share knowledge about menopause and menstruation. We wanted to harness these gossip sessions to open a free-flowing space for discussion and debate between the speakers and the audience. There was no subject off limits. No taboos existed in these gossip sessions. In this spirit, we paid a lot of attention to the design of the events to be especially playful and fun. We wanted a feeling of “welcome” - where all stories and spontaneity were encouraged. To this end, we spent a lot of time finding the most inspiring venues to foster an intimate atmosphere.

**There was no subject off limits.  
No taboos existed in these  
gossip sessions.**

Each session was guided by a different focus and took place in a different venue. First we highlighted the narratives around menopause, this session took place in a former temple in Amsterdam, giving the evening a sense of wonder and mysticism. The second session zoomed in on the representation of menstruation in the metaverse and took place at the wonderfully unruly club-night venue Paradiso, also a former church (!). The next session focused on the magic, myths and science of menstruation and for this we relied on our good friends at W139, a popular art space in the centre of Amsterdam to host us. Finally we explored the relationship between the built environment and menstruation. Here we found the perfect partner and venue in the Independent School for the City in Rotterdam.

These gossip sessions welcomed artists, thinkers, mothers, makers, dancers, daughters. The audience was encouraged to jump in at any point during the evening. To create an easy-going sense of sharing we relied on our moderator Dymphie Braun. As a facilitator she is highly empathetic and can literally “feel” the

room. Dymphie often shared a personal story with the audience at the start of the evening to set the tone. This was a key part of making this session interactive and intimate. We felt that even the most introverted person in the audience would feel comfortable enough to share their story in our gossip sessions.

**"I get itchy with these kind of women talking events but this one was really informative" - gossip session participant**

**"I believe as well that by doing these kind of events [...] it's important we actually learn from all these different stories, culturally, worldwide" - gossip session participant**

We saw these gatherings as a container, each event holding participants in a safe space for sharing, being heard and being seen. This was the ultimate goal - to offer a sense of community and shared experience that bonded participants together. Our expectations were exceeded in this respect. We received countless emails, stories and feedback. People told us how they felt less alone in their feelings on menopause and menstruation and through the Bloody Beautiful gossip sessions started to see these experiences as powerful collective moments.

*Gossip Session #2: Bleeding into the Metaverse*



June 14 2023  
Tempel, Amsterdam  
≈ 40 participants

# Gossip Session #1: De Overgang in Beeld

Gossip Session #1: De Overgang in Beeld [Menopause in the Picture] was an evening full of stories, knowledge sharing and exploding some of the stereotypes and taboos around menopause. This event was our first event in the Bloody Beautiful calendar. Menopause is a desperately under researched subject and in everyday conversations it's often characterised by shame. The aim of this gossip session was to open a space for people to freely share their stories and bear witness to each other's experiences.

For this session we invited three experts to lead the discussion. Photographer and artist Petra Kroon kicked off the evening with a reading from her wonderfully provocative memoir and cultural study *Silenced Womb*, setting the atmosphere for the event. Media personality and TV presenter Milouska Meulens shared insights from her own menopause journey, highlighting the experiences of people of colour, specifically through her interactions with the medical world. Menopause



*Participant at De Overgang in Beeld*



consultant Desirée van Cleef emphasised the huge knowledge gaps that exist amongst general practitioners in the Netherlands in dealing with menopause. She shared insights based on conversations she'd had with thousands of patients in her practice. Dymphie Braun moderated the discussion, fielding questions during a very lively Q&A. The talks were followed by an informal presentation of Petra's photo-research project about menopause, completed at the KABK (Royal Academy of Art) in 2022, accompanied by red velvet cake.

## Reflection

I felt that this first Gossip Session was a critical test for the affect lab team. It was our litmus test for setting the tone for future events and gave us a sense of the audience for our overall Bloody Beautiful movement. We were not disappointed. Participants were eager to share stories with barely enough time for all the questions during the second part of the session. I was so inspired to see an inter-generational audience; some women had been invited to the session by their daughters who saw our posts on Instagram. I saw this as a sign that menopause is not an individual challenge for a generation of 50+ people. Rather, it is a deeply networked topic that affects entire families across generations and impacts communities more widely.



*Petra Kroon (L)  
and Milouska  
Meulens (R) at De  
Overgang in Beeld*

I was struck by the stories that people shared so freely - some very intimate. One person, Francine Becker, shared about her struggle to get a diagnosis related to her menopause condition. Francine told how she suffered for 4 long years with fatigue and persistent urinary tract infections - both common symptoms of menopausal women, easily solved with the correct diagnosis. This story deeply affected me because it points to how menopausal women are overlooked and marginalised. And I really felt my own story of perimenopause through this story of Francine. Desirée van Cleef made the comment that general practitioners in

the Netherlands are radically under-trained to recognise common symptoms of menopause in their medical training curriculum. I noticed through emails and feedback I received after the event that the stories shared during the event had been aired for the first time at our gossip session. I took this as confirmation that a sharing space was urgently needed. It offered participants a much-needed sense of "being seen". I also believe that the venue had a big role to play in creating a sharing space. As a former temple for anthroposophical work, the high ceilings and beautiful light reflections set the right tone of awe and gravitas.

- Natalie Dixon

## Research themes

One prominent theme that came through from the dialogue of this event was how the stigma around menopause impacts our understanding of its implications on other parts of our lives. The pain and suffering which menopause causes has been normalised, as if it is just a part of life that people have to accept. Paradoxically, it's still stigmatised, as something which shouldn't be discussed openly. Multiple members of the audience told stories about how menopause had impacted their ability to work, and how this had then caused concerns for them about career progression. And this is not anecdotal – in the Netherlands, approximately 1 in 3 menopausal people feel that their symptoms have affected their ability to work.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from the discussion at this gossip session that menopause is wildly downplayed – the result of a lack of research into the subject, and an entrenched stigma that prevents people from talking about their experiences. The severity of menopause symptoms and the impact they have on life are not adequately recognised by health professionals, sometimes bordering on medical gaslighting.

It seems that because of the stigma, people going through menopause are faced with a double burden - feeling the need to hide their menopause as if it is something to be ashamed of, while at the same time really needing to adjust their lifestyles to help them cope with menopause.

“There is a taboo that we put upon ourselves, because we feel less good about ourselves, but also because we are worried about our career opportunities, and if we talk about it, it may jeopardise the ambitions we still have.” - gossip session participant

<sup>1</sup> RIVM, “Overgangs-klachten belemmeren volgens een derde van de vrouwen in de overgang hun werk.”

“It is not even that my doctor did not take me seriously. She is a woman and has been my doctor for a long time. And she listened to me. But it simply did not occur to her that it might be menopause” - gossip session participant

“Sometimes it is easy to make some changes to our work and working environment to better deal with menopause, but then we need to talk about it” - gossip session participant

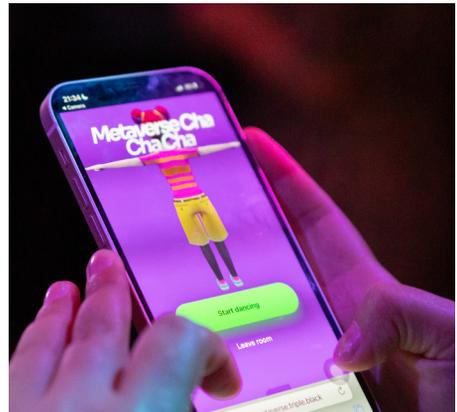


July 18 2023  
Paradiso, Amsterdam  
≈ 70 participants

# Gossip Session #2: Bleeding into the Metaverse

Gossip Session #2: Bleeding into the Metaverse was a gossip session like no other. Part dance party and part protest, the evening highlighted menstruation rights in the metaverse. This session took its inspiration from an event in 2022 when pioneering Japanese artist SPUTNIKO! (Hiro Ozaki) launched her Menstruation Machine, a wearable in the 3D virtual world Decentraland. If allowed, it would have been the first instance where menstruation was visible in the metaverse. However, the developers at Decentraland rejected SPUTNIKO!'s avatar because menstrual blood failed their safety and age standards for users. This sparked a clash between feminist politics and internet culture. We saw double standards at play here - why are bleeding heads and bloody corpses allowed in Decentraland, yet no menstruation blood? We took this as a call to action for digital inclusivity.

Bleeding into the Metaverse was held in the iconic Amsterdam night-life venue Paradiso lending the evening a lively rebellious edge. The programme kicked off with a conversation between SPUTNIKO! and moderator Dymphie Braun. Then the dance floor opened, giving participants a chance to connect with a menstruating avatar. The crowd danced (and bled) into the metaverse to the beats of dj mayo. The movement of every person's phone dictated the movement of their paired avatar on the screen. This was truly unique – watching a physical dance floor come alive with the possibilities of the virtual in a rhythmic and fun way.



*A bleeding avatar  
ready to dance in  
the metaverse*

## Reflection



This event stood out as one of my personal highlights of 2023. The inspiring work of SPUTNIKO! aligns perfectly with our intentions of the Bloody Beautiful programme.

Paradiso, the venue, is truly magical and full of warm memories. I love it when a serious and critical conversation combines with an embodied experience, in this case an active space full of dancing bodies and avatars.

In the event, SPUTNIKO! highlighted her move from art to entrepreneurship through her start-up Cradle, which aims to inform and support female employees in major Japanese corporations on menstruation and menopause issues. Her way of referring to this as ‘hacking’ the capitalist system was an interesting take, as the income of this startup will be used for researchers in women’s health, who are structurally underfunded. SPUTNIKO! underscored the problematic limitations imposed on female and queer bodies in online spaces. What stood out for me was her experience in Decentraland where her menstruating avatars were censored and how this censorship is even present in brand new AI tools like Dall-E or Midjourney that censor images featuring menstrual blood.



*Mayo Djing while the audience danced with their avatars*

I distinctly recall the excitement in SPUTNIKO!’s response when we proposed to her to create a dance party in our alternative Metaverse, enabling her censored menstruating avatars to become visible once more. It was really amazing how, within the blink of an eye, the presentation space transformed into a magical dance floor with disco lights, a smoke machine, and dj mayo’s uplifting beats. Witnessing the censored avatars come alive on the dance floor, moving, glitching and bleeding, felt empowering — like a collective statement. The audience fully engaged in this protest dance party. Each step a protest, each movement a statement — for our right to express, bleed, and dance freely in the metaverse and beyond!

- Klasien van de Zandschulp

## Research themes

Bleeding into the Metaverse offered an insight into the complex relationship between new technologies and representation. AI and the metaverse are framed as new frontiers in digital technology, offering space for exploration and self-expression. However, what has emerged through SPUTNIKO's artistic work – and through our own research – is that these new frontiers maintain existing gendered biases against representations of menstruating bodies and menstrual blood.

Why is menstruation censored in the metaverse? For the same reason it is censored in other forms of public discourse and visual culture. It remains something shameful, unclean, that must be hidden. When we consider the “yuck factor” – what Leah Hazard has concluded puts medical professionals off studying menstrual blood – it is peculiar to see that this yuck factor extends beyond real menstrual blood to a pixelated representation of a spot of blood on someone's trousers. It's clear that it is not the physical properties of menstrual blood which make it “yucky”, it is the idea of it.

SPUTNIKO's experience with challenging decentraland's policies also call into question who has the power to decide what is made visible in our visual culture. It is telling that a digital representation of a decapitated body is ok, but the menstrual blood is not – in other words that brutality and venous blood are fine, but menstruation and menstrual blood are too explicit and need to be censored.

**“Because of censorship in AI there is a lack of visualisation of menstruation” - SPUTNIKO!**

**“What are they afraid of? Why are they afraid of menstruation?” - gossip session participant**

**“I really sensed the hostility [from the Decentraland team] towards what I was questioning about menstruation and boundaries. I think it is really important that we point this out in events like this.” - SPUTNIKO!**

*SPUTNIK101 at Gossip Session #2: Bleeding into the Metaverse*



October 12 2023  
W139, Amsterdam  
≈ 45 Participants

# Gossip Session #3: Menstrual Goddesses

In Gossip Session #3: Menstrual Goddesses, we wanted to honour the wisdom and power of menstruating bodies. We drew inspiration from ancient stories. For example in prehistoric times menstrual blood was considered the most potent weapon in war. In early Indian matriarchal communities, it was honoured as the source of divine power and during Victorian times doctors thought it had the potential to conjure madness. We set out to explore some of the mythological and magical dimensions of menstruation as well as the science of menstruating bodies. The night was made especially intriguing through some small additions to the venue - strategic lighting, a ritual upon entering, and some decorative elements - all courtesy of our collaborator Vincent Truter. We invited multi-disciplinary artist Annika Kappner to be at the centre of this session. Annika has an inspiring art practice that is especially witchy and sensory. She led us through her recently completed Moonblood drawings, made with her own menstrual blood. During the evening, she guided everyone through a powerful moon cycle ritual that paid homage to the ancestors and the Earth. Our second speaker, Isabelle Guenou, is CEO of the Berlin-based startup theblood, an exciting femtech company launched in 2022. We noticed that theblood is doing unprecedented testing on menstrual blood to better understand the uniqueness of menstruating bodies, offering people personalised data and health insights.



*Participants  
in meditation  
at Menstrual  
Goddesses*





*Vincent Truter  
guiding the  
entrance ritual  
at Menstrual  
Goddesses*

## Reflection

I joined the affect lab team not long before the Menstrual Goddesses event took place. I wanted to understand the power that lies within these gossip sessions and the possibility of connection and belonging around these less-talked-about topics. W139, with its long history of presenting experimental, contemporary art, offered the perfect, nurturing setting. The entrance was transformed for participants to glide into a magical atmosphere, offering a small ritual, immersed in palo santo scent, a trail of bright red ribbons to follow and soft nets put around our shoes. As you followed the trail to the back of the

space, covered in soft, warm, orange-red light, it felt like entering into a womb-like, safe place. All of us shuffling slowly past the 16 Moonblood drawings by Annika and sitting down in the half circle, close to each other and the speakers. With this entrance I felt the stage was set for openness as the participants responded to questions posed by Dymphie. I was happy to see the genuine curiosity and sharing, before we moved on to the speakers. This was one of those events where I felt the world of magic and science were intertwined, showing the potential of an interdisciplinary and multi-layered approach to menstruation (and menopause). This was a gossip session where we were offered a holistic vision of how we can see our menstruation by Annika, and embedded our menstruating bodies in traditions of storytelling and ancestral rites. But equally magical to me was Isabelle's vision of using menstrual blood as a source of power and knowledge. In her story I felt the opportunity and urgency to develop new scientific methods to understand our health. This was an intimate evening, with curious and vulnerable questions from the audience. Exchanging knowledge, wonder, uncertainties, trying to grasp the potential of menstruating bodies. I felt the power of the collective to question, to share, to recognise, to be open and to move in the liminal space between magic, myth and science to understand the power we hold as menstrual goddesses.



- Juliette Brederode

## Research themes

Menstrual Goddesses demonstrated the importance of harnessing knowledge about menstruation, particularly within and across arts and sciences. What Annika's practice and Isabelle's work have in common is a shared recognition of menstruation as a source of insights. Annika engages with the menstrual cycle as an alternative and natural cyclical rhythm that we should turn to in the face of capitalism's cycles of productivity.

Isabelle highlighted the impact of gender inequities in medical research specifically, that there are fewer female scientists in lead research positions. This results in a skew towards male-pathologies and this is why conditions like erectile dysfunction are often prioritised above menstrual research. The consequence of this is a lack of medical knowledge about menstruation. However, through their research and product development, theblood are demonstrating how menstrual blood is in itself a great source of knowledge – with unique proteins not found in venous blood. To harness the scientific power of menstrual blood could be beneficial to women's health more widely.

Another form of knowledge sharing arose in discussion with the audience – inter-generational knowledge. Mothers in the audience reflected on the knowledge (or lack thereof) that their own mothers had passed on about menstruation and what they wanted to do differently for their own children.

It became clear through these conversations that the way that menstruation is being approached as a subject is shifting. Key to reducing the stigma around menstruation is to raise awareness and to normalise conversations about it. Parents are taking it upon themselves to contribute to this normalisation through the discussions they have with their children. In the scientific arena, the work of theblood is legitimising the subject of menstruation and recognising its medical importance. Annika's artistic approach encourages the creative community to bring menstrual blood and menstruation rituals into public arts spaces also to contributing to this normalisation.

**“With menstrual blood, we also have unique proteins, which are only in the menstrual blood”  
- Isabelle Guenou**

**“[Medical testing] really legitimises something that we all keep super hidden.” - gossip session participant**



Q&A at Gossip Session #5: Menstrual Goddesses

# Gossip Session #4: Bloody Architecture

Gossip Session #4: Bloody Architecture focussed on the relationship between menstruating bodies and the design of the built environment. We explored the ways in which the imposed invisibility of menstruation influences the way our bodies interact with every-day architecture. By questioning how this imposed invisibility has been designed into our public spaces, we also challenged it, engaging with the appropriation and use of space as a political act.



For this gossip session we gathered at the Independent School for the City – a vibrant space for research, education and events with a focus on cities. Our three guest speakers offered different perspectives on how to accommodate the needs of bodies in public spaces. Architect Molly Hughes presented her project ‘Taboo in the Loo’. Molly’s work looks at how redesigning the public bathroom can raise awareness of menstrual illiteracy. Our second speaker was Mayim Frieden, a researcher-writer who discussed how the design of the built environment for one standard body excludes not just menstruating bodies, but other groups too, such as trans people. Our third speaker was Tammy Sheldon, co-founder of Neighborhood Feminists, an organisation working to alleviate period poverty in Amsterdam. She discussed the practical measures they are taking to provide free period products in Amsterdam, through the implementation of menstruation stations – cupboards placed in public spaces around the city, stocked with free period products.

*Participants  
sample the scent  
of menstruation  
by Molly Hughes*





*Mayim Frieden  
in conversation  
with moderator  
Dymphie Braun*

## Reflection

For Bloody Architecture, we brought together two seemingly unrelated topics - menstruation and public space. However, by doing so, we opened up a conversation about how inclusive the design of our public spaces is. I was happy to see that the majority of people at the event had not attended a Bloody Beautiful event before and more than half had not been to the venue before. This suggested to me that it was the content of the event that attracted the crowd - 40+ people gathered together to discuss public bathrooms and menstruation infrastructure!

The Independent School for the City, with its packed bookshelves and remnants of past workshops, feels like a breeding ground for research and practice. It was a great space in which to offer the stage to three speakers whose projects are all in relatively early development, giving them the opportunity to also discuss what the next steps for their work could be.

Our speakers each brought a different perspective to the event. Molly offered a conceptual design approach, Mayim brought a critical research perspective and Tammy rounded it off by presenting a practical and solution-oriented intervention. Together, I felt the three speakers offered the audience a call-to-action, showing how menstrual stigma and gender exclusion in public space can be addressed through varying means.



One of the highlights that came out of the event happened before the public programme had even started. Mayim pointed out that the bathroom in the building uses gender-binary signage to indicate that one cubicle is for men and one is for women, with no less than three traditional signs to demarcate the cubicles, plus a sanitary bin in only the women's cubicle. We followed this discovery up with the team at the Independent School for the City and agreed that it exemplified how important it is to have events like Bloody Architecture, to encourage people to think about the gender inequity they may not even notice in their daily lives.

- Minnie Bates

## Research themes

This Gossip Session revealed the inequity which different bodies experience in public space, particularly in relation to visibility. Generally, visibility has been conceptualised in public space design as beneficial – if everyone can see each other, this will improve social cohesion. Molly discussed how creating a more convivial and shared experience in public bathrooms can increase the visibility of menstruation, facilitate knowledge sharing, and reduce stigma. However, as Mayim exemplified, this does not account for specific groups, like trans people, whose visibility can put their safety at risk. There is a tension between the notion that visibility helps raise awareness around menstruation, and a preference for invisibility which Mayim recognises in his research.

Tammy used the case of Neighborhood Feminist’s menstruation stations to show the complex nature of visibility. It is important to display the content of the menstruation stations because it confronts the widely perceived notion that menstrual products need to be hidden. The menstruation stations also need to be visible enough that people know they are there. However, they cannot be so visible that people who for personal/cultural reasons don’t want to be seen taking products from them, avoid using them.

There is a need for more accurate representation and visibility of menstruation in visual culture, including in the semiotics of public space. However, we must be mindful of the complexity of this topic. Visibility is not necessarily regarded as liberating or inclusive by everyone. There is no universal standard human body, and there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to meet the needs of everyone. Instead, inclusive public spaces, like public bathrooms, need to be approached with nuance, and offer choice, to accommodate the needs of different bodies.

“The main aim is really to get people talking about menstrual illiteracy [...] That really affects the way that certain bodies, menstruating bodies inhabit space”  
- Molly Hughes

“There’s a lot of reasons why visibility has been designed into these spaces. It’s also very intentional”  
- Mayim Frieden

“It’s important to make the [menstruation station] transparent so that you could see that there were products inside, because it starts to generate a certain kind of discussion, because this is not something you normally see in public spaces” -  
Tammy Sheldon

Tammy Sheldon in conversation with moderator Dymphie Braun



*Molly Hughes presenting at Gossip Session #4: Bloody Architecture*





November 21 and 28 2023  
affect lab studio, Amsterdam  
≈ 12 participants

# Queering the Quantified Self Workshop

Queering the Quantified Self Workshop was a two-part workshop created by Radical Data - a collective co-founded by Rayén Jara Mitrovich and Jo Jara Kroese. Over two sessions, we explored how mainstream body-tracking apps, particularly those related to menstruation-tracking, reinforce normative ideas about the quantified self that emphasise productivity. Towards the end of the first session, we all paused for a somatic exercise to consider what we wanted to track over the coming week – a habit, an emotion, a physical reaction or simply something we noticed in our day-to-day lives. We were invited to track these things by any means we felt comfortable with. Rayén also offered everyone the option of tracking their data using Radical Data's Self app, designed to offer an alternative to mainstream self-tracking apps.

One week later, during the second part of the workshop, all the participants shared the various data tracked and reflected upon this process together. The group discussed how mainstream tracking apps ignore the complexities and messiness of the human body. Through a more personalised approach to tracking, we explored how this messiness can be accommodated, shared and embraced. The workshop took place in the more relaxed setting of the affect lab studio in Amsterdam. Gathering in this setting conjured up a space for more discussion and conversation, creating an important flat hierarchy in the group dynamics. affect lab invited researcher-writer Mayim Frieden to document both workshops. Mayim's subsequent essay is published in this Playbook and serves as an independent reflection on the workshops.

Queering the Quantified Self workshop at the affect lab studio



# For which self do we self-track?

## Queering the Quantified Self with affect lab and Radical Data

*Written by Mayim Frieden*

Like a mathematical equation of static variables, menstruation and menopause are often discussed as quantifiable, predictable, occurrences pertaining to one demographic—namely, able-bodied cis women. Those that do not fit into this equation are made to feel like errors, glitches in the data. Further to this, the Western narrative around menstruation and menopause frequently relies upon binaries. Woman/man, irregular/regular, healthy/unhealthy. Bodily data has become organised around these binaries, and then we're marketed tools, such as self-tracking apps, that encourage us to identify ourselves within these binaries. We're forced to fit into neatly drawn lines that reject our innate complexities.

Self-tracking apps, particularly those for menstrual-tracking, exemplify how data can enforce certain perceptions of our bodies, others' bodies, and the world we inhabit. Along with their formulaic interpretations of bodily processes, the majority of these apps greet you with an interface mimicking stereotypical interpretations of womanhood: saturated in pink, decorated with flowers, and centralising the tracking process around ovulation, assuming all users are interested in their fertility.<sup>1</sup> Even the most minor design choices can assume the gender expression of one's bodily data.

Que Radical Data, co-founded by Rayén Jara Mitrovich and Jo Jara Kroese. They see the potential in using data to understand what our bodies experience, yet through a queer approach. In queering the self-tracking process, Rayén and Jo illuminate data's messiness, moving beyond its standardised and individualised equations.

"Be like sponges", Rayén expressed in the first session of their two-part workshop with affect lab, *Queering the Quantified Self*. They characterised this opportunity as one for collaboratively soaking in and squeezing out information regarding our bodies and the possibilities for their data. The quantification and standardisation

**1 Skop, "Clue': Are Period Tracking Apps Reinforcing Gender Norms?"**



of bodies has been motivated by various ethics and intentions, yet, Radical Data offered us an environment that centralised unlearning and relearning from and with others. An environment where the realities of queerness are integrated, rather than dismissed.

The normative messages we've been sent about menstruation and menopause are often accompanied by shame or aversion, suggesting that these are processes to hide or experience in isolation. As we're sent these messages, we may become more and more distant from ourselves. We may find it harder and harder to care for ourselves and those close to us. Being transmasculine, I feel so far from the bodies that are shown to get their periods that I catch myself pretending like I don't. In trying to deny this, I deprive myself of attunement with my body and of the comfort of proximity with a collective experience.

Radical Data challenges us to reimagine not only how we've been taught to understand our bodily processes, like menstruation and menopause, but also how we understand methods of collecting and sharing our bodily data. They demonstrate that, as opposed to being a tool of marginalisation, data can be a tool for those marginalised, societally and by the medical care system, to more collaboratively understand and care for ourselves.

In addition to how menstrual-tracking apps tend to visualise bodily data through stereotypes, their internal mechanisms are often questionable and limiting. The safety of users'

highly intimate data is frequently met with concern, and the standards that regulate how such data is analysed – as either ‘regular’ or ‘irregular’ — draw from reductive physiological interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the workshop, many of us expressed discomfort with self-tracking apps for these very reasons, forcing us to create our own alternatives for staying in touch with ourselves. From journals, cameras, to our phones’ Notes apps, we all experimented with modes of self-tracking that felt safer and more intuitive.

2 Radical Data, “Queering the Quantified Self: Bringing Queerness to Self-Tracking.”

Everyone joined this workshop with their own intention, relationship to their body, and perception of self-tracking, yet none were prioritised or deemed more relevant. Rather, Rayén and Jo materialised the values of their collective into the workshop, valuing each of our respective interpretations and weaving them together. Our differences were not seen as personal measurements but as materialities for constructing shared insight.

Contradicting the ‘black and white’ understandings often circulated through self-tracking apps, Rayén and Jo continuously reminded us that there was no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ within the workshop. This message accompanied their request that we self-track an experience of our choice between the first and second sessions, through whichever method felt most natural.

Some of us chose to track emotional experiences, such as how one’s mood fluctuates throughout the day. I focused on something more physical, tracking the relationship between binding my chest and my back pain. Others chose to track a mix of both, for example tracking the impetus for one’s urges in response to forms of addiction.

Throughout the workshop, the messiness of our data spilled onto each other, spreading throughout the room. Our messes continue to keep me company. They remind me of how intertangled we all are, how our glitches are communal.

We reconvened the following week and basked in the shared messiness of our approaches. Whether we tracked digitally or by hand, by the hour or at random moments, we all had inconsistencies, hiccups, and glitches. One participant noted that our data is nothing on its own, we're the reason it takes shape. This comment illuminated the value of Radical Data's practice — in viewing our data as shapeable, we release it from pre-determined, reductive, binaries.

Radical Data offered us hope for more promising options to come. Yet, they situated their work in honesty. Contributing to the breath of fresh air that Rayén and Jo brought with them, they began their workshop by acknowledging the difficulty in gathering amidst the ongoing genocide throughout Palestine. Their honesty and reflectiveness stretched throughout both sessions of the workshop and throughout their practice: in the honesty that one individual or collective cannot know 'best', that imperfection is inevitable, that there is no one 'truth' in data.

Such honesty is radical in and of itself, contradicting the claims of most self-tracking apps, and the Quantified Self movement in general. These alternative approaches present their analyses as objective facts and suggest that our experiences are secluded from one another. By centralising and embodying humility, curiosity, and care, Radical Data demonstrated how data can bring us closer together, instead of isolating us from each other.

*Rayén from Radical Data leading the workshop*



Throughout the Queering the Quantified Self workshop, the messiness of our data spilled onto each other, spreading throughout the room and out the door, accompanying us as we left. Our messes continue to keep me company. They remind me of how intertwined we all are, how our glitches are communal. As we navigate a world saturated by simplified understandings of ourselves and our experiences, I hope we can continue to locate our shared chaos that slips through the cracks.

Mayim Frieden

*Mayim Frieden (they/he) is a researcher and writer with a BA in Art & Architectural History and an MA in Design Cultures. Focusing on the interplay between design and sociology, they study how our environments influence how we understand and treat ourselves and one another. From public bathrooms to self-tracking apps, he questions the consequences of the design discipline's embodiment of various binaries, and in turn, he imagines alternative, co-created, futures.*

*Queering the Quantified Self is a project by Radical Data, founded by Jo Jara Kroese and Rayén Jara Mitrovich. They are a collective of mathematicians, technologists, dancers and designers who believe that data, used with care, can move us towards a world that is autonomous, just and joyful. They create data analyses and digital tools that are infused with queerness and decoloniality, through community-based art, activism and research.*

*Queering the Quantified Self workshop at the affect lab studio*



# Bloody Coding

(in development)

Joana Chicau (coder and choreographer) connects code with the <body> by linking algorithms to the menstrual and lunar cycles. We worked in parallel with her on building and designing the platform. Joana was inspired by the connection between the lunar cycle and menstrual cycle, integrating real-time data about the moon's phases into the website and her live coding concept. Over the next year, this will be further developed into a performance. This collaboration is thus seen as a starting point for something larger that we are developing from within the Bloody Beautiful movement. The audio stories shared via the phone line form an integral part of her performance, for which she has published a documentation video on the platform.

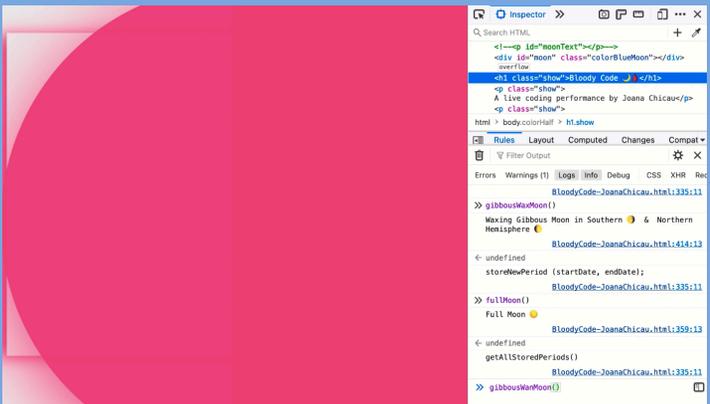
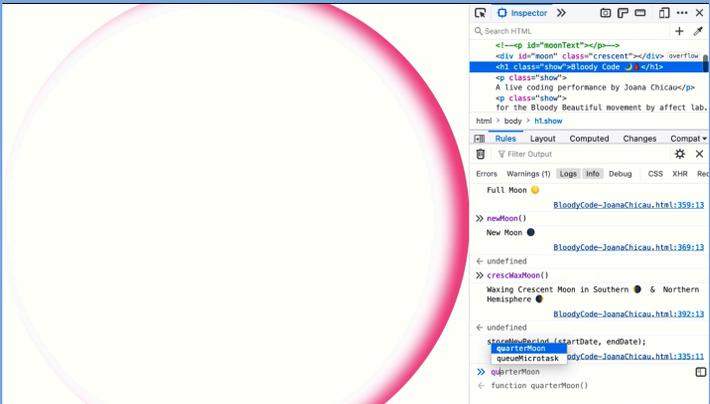
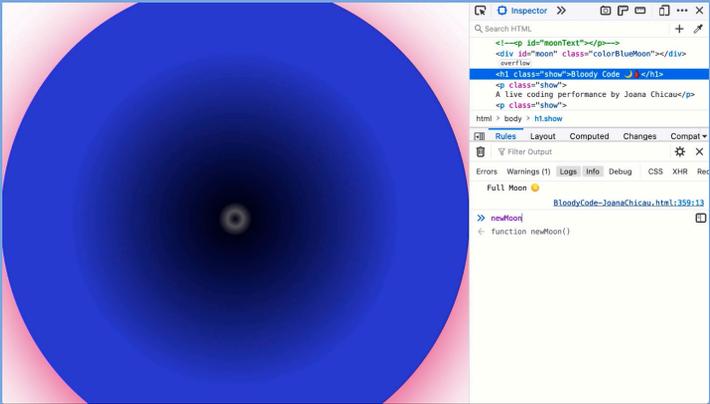
# Bloody Platform

(in development)

In 2023, we initiated the Bloody Beautiful Platform with the aim of sharing knowledge and information widely within our communities and networks. The platform brings together all activities, including an experimental page featuring excerpts from some audio stories shared through the phone line. In the top left corner, we see the real-time phase of the moon, accompanied by a video of Joana Chicau's work.

We consider both the Platform and the Playbook as starting points for a source of knowledge sharing and information exchange that we will continue to build upon in the coming period. This may include publishing research results, expert columns, visual research and a portion of the code from Joana's performance. We view the platform as a modular form, allowing us to continually add new chapters as the movement grows and evolves.

Stills from the Bloody Coding performance by Joana Chicau (in development)



Gossip session #3: Menstrual Goddesses





# One year in...

The first year of the Bloody Beautiful has allowed us to dive into a variety of research themes connected to our public programme of gossip sessions, workshops and other creative experiments. While the main aim of the events in our programme has been to create spaces where we can share expertise and lived experience and propagate new narratives about menstruation and menopause, these events have also led us in inspiring new directions in our research.

Over the past year, we have noticed the need for more cross-cultural conversations about menstruation and menopause and see important value in promoting this project internationally. What's more, we want to experiment with new ways to bring together creative innovators and thinkers who are also trying to tackle the stigma around menstruation and menopause. We are excited to drive these ambitions forward and to share what happens next for the Bloody Beautiful Movement with you.

Bloody Beautiful movement

Visual culture of menopause

Gossip Session: De Overgang in Beeld

Gossip Session: Bleeding into the Metaverse

(Digital) representation

Prototyping

Interviews

Queering the Quantified Self Workshop

Research and development

Quantifying and algorithms

Phone line

Desk research

Bloody Coding (In development)

Myths and beliefs

Moon Cycles

Space and Architecture

Science

Gossip Session: Menstrual Goddesses

2024 - 2025

Fostering creative partnerships

Gossip Session: Bloody Architecture

Cross cultural exchange

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Joana Chicau (Bloody Coding)

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Our goal with Bloody Beautiful is to creatively propagate new public narratives about menstruation and menopause in a gender-forward way. We want to explode the tired old myths and conditionings about bodies. Stories that are normally hidden are aired in all their glory in safe spaces. Part of this work is to evolve our own thinking and vocabulary on bodies that do and don't bleed. Not every person who menstruates identifies as a woman and we feel it's critical to include queer and trans dialogue on the topic of periods, which is often relegated and marginalised in public forums. Everyone is welcome.



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lab



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