

## C.L. Arbelaez Orjuela (SPD 2016-17)

### “Body Politics and Menstrual Cultures in Contemporary Spain”

In recent years, there has been an increase and diversification of actions in the western world to challenge the menstrual taboo and to raise menstrual awareness; this phenomenon was coined by Chris Bobel (2010) as “*Menstrual Activism*”. Some of the actions comprised under this term have focused on raising awareness about health conditions related to menstruation (i.e. endometriosis and menstrual suppression); environmental issues such as innovation of sustainable or reusable menstrual products (i.e. menstrual cup, period underwear, reusable pads and sponges); and discussions on the social policy arena related to menstrual management, such as why these products are taxed as luxury items and how this affects girls and women, particularly those in vulnerable situations like inmates, refugees and homeless women, among others.

As I have come to realize how more than a merely physiological process, menstruation has important social, cultural and even political implications worth exploring in academia, beyond the psychological or biomedical approach, I decided to research it further in my RP. I noticed that many of these actions that challenged the menstrual taboo in arts, politics, education, health, and in the crafting and distribution of alternatives for menstrual management, were gaining strength in **Spain, specifically around Barcelona**. This, plus its story of activism, social movements and community organization, and a strong feminist movement (which comprises many and varied feminisms), made it a very interesting scenario to look at in the attempt to discover how this “activism” was taking place.

My RP looks at how women in contemporary Spain are challenging the western biomedical and social ideas of the menstruating body, using their bodies and new ways to experience their periods, as scenarios of resistance. Using ethnography, netnography and semi-structured interviews, my main objective is to identify the different actions taking place within this phenomenon and their nature, and identify **how** in turn, they are **generating a new menstrual culture and body politics of menstruation**. This research is based on the theories of Body Politics (Harcourt, 2009), Embodiment (Martin, 1997) and Corporeal Feminism (Grosz, 1994), which explain the importance of having the body (in this case the female<sup>1</sup> body) as a subject of research, in order to challenge and transform the patriarchal ways in which it has been conceived, and as such treated in the social and political arena.

With the support of the SPD fund I was able to go to Spain, where I spent 40 days based in Barcelona, traveling to different cities, where I met and interviewed women from different fields who were working on ending the menstrual taboo. I also attended various workshops and encounters, where we discussed the menstrual body, the menstrual experience, feminism(s) and how the lack of information on the whole menstrual cycle in its chemical, psychical, emotional and cultural manifestations, as well as the taboo around it, lead either to “secrecy and silence (or) supra-performance” (Gatrell, 2011); both, perceived by them as highly violent and oppressive.

The SPD Fund also helped me to finance a 6 months subscription to the only online community for menstrual pedagogy called **Soy1Soy4** (focus of the netnography) I did for the RP), which is also a key part of this research and its findings.

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge diverse, non-binary sexual and gender identities and the fact that not all women menstruate and that not everyone who menstruates, is a woman; however, for the purpose of this RP I will focus on the (cis) female menstruating body.

From my fieldwork, I found this to be a very heterogeneous phenomenon, were intergenerational change, feminism(s), building communities, self-care, privilege, emotions, anti-consumerism and ecologist movements, education and access to information were key axes for its analysis. I noticed that, unlike what's happening in the US and Canada, *Menstrual Activism* is not the term that is owned by most of the women taking part in this phenomenon in contemporary Spain, nor they call it a movement or recognize themselves as activists. Rather, I came to identify that it is a matter of individual actions and personal processes that begin on a private level, and then (mostly unintentionally) create bigger and wider political implications regarding the relation women have with their bodies and a re-signification of menstruation in the Spanish society. What I found, then, is the emergence of a *Menstrual Culture*, in which new attitudes, knowledges and practices toward the menstrual body, its cycles and the overall menstrual experience, are being shaped, shared and disseminated.

**Figure 1: art by Lola Vendetta (left) and Zinteta (right), who I interviewed in Barcelona.**



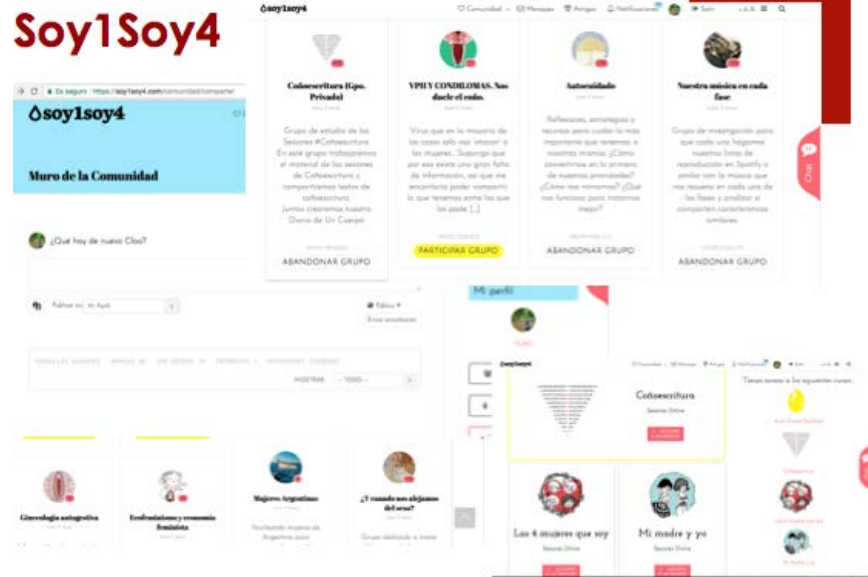
Source : @LolaVendetta Instagram/ @Zinteta Instagram

**Figure 2: Drawing workshop to talk about menstruation and natural gynecology, held by *Divina Menstruación*. Barcelona, Spain, July 2017.**



Source: The author/Divina Menstruación's Facebook page.

**Figure 3: Screenshots of the *Soy1Soy4* online menstrual pedagogy community.**



Source: <https://soy1soy4.com/comunidad/> 2017.

**Figure 4: First Soy1Soy4 community encounter. Benasque, Spain, 2017.**



Source: Participants of the encounter/The Author