

The Red Gown: Reflections on the In/Visibility of Menstruation in Scotland

Abstract

During 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, menstruation has become more present in public discourse in Scotland. Despite this, little attention has been paid to the complex interplay of visibility and invisibility that characterises menstruation's place in the nation's wider cultural landscape. In this article, we explore the context of menstruation in the town of St Andrews specifically, and Scotland more broadly, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and ask what this reveals about menstrual absence and presence in public debates. The University of St Andrews lies at the centre of this case study because it has been one of the first Scottish institutions to initiate a rollout of free menstrual products as a result of The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act of 2021. We do this in collaboration with artist Bee Hughes, whose practice focuses on the visible and invisible aspects of menstruation, and who was artist in residence at St Andrews in 2020. Although impacted by a university strike and the Covid-19 pandemic, our collaboration has explored collections of menstrual culture in Scotland and broader questions of its representation, reflecting on how established symbols with other connotations – notably the ceremonial red gown at the University of St Andrews – might provide a way of thinking about menstrual in/visibility. In this article we reflect on how these histories might be both present (institutionalised) and absent (when not on display). This paper presents the first stage of our findings, in which the artist reflects on their first visit to St Andrews prior to the strike and pandemic, in relation to historical and contextual materials we located together.

Introduction

In the late 2010s, menstruation became a topic of mainstream political and policy debate in Scotland.¹ Menstruation, the public was told, should not be taboo, talked about in euphemisms, or deemed shameful. Yet paradoxically, menstruation itself remained nowhere to be seen. Despite Scotland's long history of exploring menstruation in medicine, policy, and, more recently, politics, as in many countries menstrual blood has remained under wraps. As media coverage and public discussion built towards the passing of The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act into law on 12 January 2021 by the Scottish Government, the wider cultural landscape was characterised by this in/visibility of menstruation.²

In order to explore menstruation's often contradictory and complex status in the 2010s and early 2020s, the authors of this paper collaborated with the menstrual artist Bee Hughes to examine how the University of St Andrews, as one of the institutions in Scotland to implement the Act,

¹ Fiona McKay, 'Scotland and Period Poverty: A case study of media and political agenda setting', in James Morrison, Jen Birks, Mike Berry (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Political Journalism* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

² <https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/period-products-free-provision-scotland-bill> (Accessed 16 November 2021)

has responded to this imperative, and how this response links to longer histories in menstruation's in/visibility in both the town of St Andrews and Scotland as a country. Hughes's artist residency in St Andrews, which occurred before the 2020 strikes called by the University and College Union (UCU), and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in March that year, relates to their longstanding practice of producing menstrual art.³ This provides a through-line in what follows for analysing the paradox of menstrual in/visibility, from the logistics of implementing the Bill's requirements on the ground, to the wider engagements – or rather lack of – in visual art and cultural in Scotland which formed the context for the Act.

To underline the ways in which menstruation interlinks with other issues, the artist's pre-pandemic visit to St Andrews included meetings with groups that had been affected by menstrual stigma or policy both historically and recently. We met with the Estates team to talk about sanitary bins, cleaning, and the practical roll-out of the new Scottish law. We talked to members of the University Feminist Society and LGBTQ+ student groups to understand barriers for women, non-binary, and trans menstruators when trying to access products. We met with scholars who researched menstruation, and visited the University's museums. We observed what types of products were available in the local shops and in campus bathrooms. We talked with the busy organiser of the town's only foodbank, who knew how 'Period Poverty' (and poverty in general) was affecting the local community.⁴

Reflecting on these conversations and observations, the artist had hoped to make a work of menstrual art, while we collectively began investigating the longer histories – both traceable and occluded – of menstrual art and culture in St Andrews and Scotland. The project was initially conceived in a cyclical model, involving independent work punctuated with regular and collaborative interventions when the artist could be 'in residence'. However, the UCU strikes and Covid-19 pandemic of March 2020 put a stop to this plan, and our methodologies shifted in response.⁵ Against a background of absences of 'normal' public life instituted through public health measures, we realigned the project towards the many hidden aspects of menstrual experiences amongst people who menstruate and those who were tasked with implementing the rollout of the Act.

³ For an initial reflection see Bee Hughes, Camilla Mørk Røstvik and Catherine Spencer, 'Blood Lines: Researching Menstrual Histories During a Pandemic,' 17 February 2021, <https://centreforcontemporaryart.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/02/17/blood-lines-researching-menstrual-histories-during-a-pandemic/> (Accessed 16 November 2021).

⁴ All individuals interviewed for this project were briefed via email beforehand and during our meetings. They were asked if they had questions or concerns about the project throughout, and none requested anonymity.

⁵ In February 2020 the University and College Union (UCU) announced 14 days of strike action as part of a long-running dispute over pensions and a platform known as the Four Fights (casualisation, equality, pay, and workload): <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10621/UCU-announces-14-strike-days-at-74-UK-universities-in-February-and-March> (Accessed 16 November 2021). In mid-March 2021 the University of St Andrews reported its first case of Covid-19, and university buildings closed shortly after. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-51872202> (Accessed 16 November 2021).

Our collaborative project utilises artistic practice as a way of exploring the specificity of menstruation's cultural in/visibility. The artist considered St Andrews as a central location for their developing research and practice, having presented and exhibited their work at the University before.⁶ Building on their existing relationship with the town, Hughes has described their practice as 'autobiographically entangled'⁷, often drawing on autoethnographic methods and 'performative bricolage'⁸ to produce works exploring their experiences of menstruation and gender.

The fragmentary nature of the project, and our account of it, reflects a number of the challenges that come with researching menstruation, and developing and enacting menstruation policy. We acknowledge the rough edges that accompany collaborative and interdisciplinary work, particularly when time and distance are factored in. We also accept the slippages that can become magnified when working with subjects that are at once deeply personal and societally important. This is reflected not only in the broader considerations of menstrual literacy that are needed to successfully enact menstruation policy, but also in the tensions that surface in the production of artwork(s), by one artist, exploring a phenomenon (menstruation) that is experienced in so many varied ways, and impacted by different social and cultural conditions. This in turn is informed by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology⁹ and her notion of 'sweaty concepts', which 'come[s] out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world [...] that might come out of a bodily experience that is trying'.¹⁰ Though we recognise it is not always possible to neatly reconcile visual art production, our cultural and socio-political present, and subjective experience(s), this article presents an account of our collaborative distance-working. Referencing Ahmed, this article represents our attempts to weave together our experiences and 'stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty', through and with the multiple challenges and changes encountered during the project when the initial goal – the making of a work of art – was no longer possible.¹¹

Reflecting on the changed and disrupted circumstances regarding project delivery, in the first section of this article, we situate Hughes's residency within the specific context of St Andrews as both the university and organisations in the town attempted to implement the Free Period

⁶ Bee Hughes, *Dys-men-o-rrho-ea*, 2019. Photographs of private performance at Liverpool School of Art & Design. St Andrews collection: <https://collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/item/dys-men-o-rrho-ea/1022104/viewer#?#viewer&c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-829%2C-103%2C3901%2C2059>; Bee Hughes, *Incomplete Cycles (December)*, 2016-2017. Digital collage containing daily body prints. St Andrews collection: <https://collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/item/incomplete-cycles-december-3rd-edition/1022103>

⁷ Bee Hughes, 'Challenging Menstrual Norms in Online Medical Advice: Deconstructing Stigma through Entangled Art Practice,' *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 2, no. 2 (2018): 15.

⁸ Dallas J. Baker, 'Queering Practice-Led Research: Subjectivity, Performative Research and the Creative Arts,' *Creative Industries Journal*, 4 no. 1 (2011): 33–51.

⁹ See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

(Product) (Scotland) Act. In the second section, we link this to histories of feminist activism in St Andrews, and the relationship between visual practice and menstruation in Scotland more widely, before we return in the conclusion to the symbolism of the St Andrews red gown, Period Poverty, and visual culture in the context of menstrual (in)visibility. Our article closes with a first person perspective by the artist discussing their work in St Andrews and the symbol of the red gown in their initial stages of creative exploration. Given that Scotland is one of the first countries to have made access to free menstrual products legally binding through the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act, we wanted to address whether there were specific visual cultures that had informed this. Working outward from the particular challenges presented by undertaking a residency when the artist cannot be present, we consider how this might parallel – and provide an important analytical perspective on – the wider problematic of menstrual presence and absence in Scotland.

Ending Period Poverty in St Andrews

The implementation of the Act in 2020 by the Scottish Government meant a sudden change for anyone tasked with stocking menstrual products in toilets and other facilities around town. The Act meant that institutions had a duty of care towards any menstruator who might need a product, and therefore included local schools, colleges, the food bank, and the university. Quickly, some institutions had to figure out how menstrual products would fit into their overall strategy for provision of free items, while others expanded their existing systems of provision. In speaking to those directly affected by these practical changes, we learnt about their roles in bringing about the change (and, as a result, the Act) in the first place, and witnessed them grappling with the ensuing practical roll-out.

At the University of St Andrews Student Union, we met with two members of the Feminist Society, who told us about the already existing activism regarding menstruation and related issues on campus. Students had been petitioning for free products for years, and had generally therefore been happy when the Act was passed. Working with trans and nonbinary students in particular, they had already been foregrounding an inclusive attitude to provision, insisting on the importance of products being made available in men's bathrooms, gender neutral toilets, and in toilets for disabled people. This work was typical of many parts of the early End Period Poverty movement in the 2010s, in that it was inspired by an intersectional feminist lens, fronted by young people, and often involved groups working on specific issues, who therefore had specific expertise.

Speaking to the students at the University, we also learnt that when the roll-out finally came, students like those involved in the Feminist Society also sometimes took on the role of educators. When other students made transphobic remarks about provision on the Society's Facebook page, for instance, it was often up to these student society members to explain. From what we understood, these students were incredibly patient, if frustrated, often assuming that information

would change someone's ideas. However, since limited guidance was available from the government (or the University itself) regarding the role of gender and menstruation, students were also therefore tasked with vast amounts of emotional labour. For trans and non-binary students – and non-students – this could be both frightening and exhausting. The lack of guidance and knowledge from institutions around gender inclusivity demonstrates a knowledge gap between grassroots activism and the stakeholders of policy implementation. It also suggests an underlying unfamiliarity with the complex intersectional considerations inherent in work around menstrual health and experience that is present in the realms of advocacy, activism and academic research.¹² Much of this labour was often not immediately legible to a wider public, and while student activism was a large part of the menstrual movement in Scotland leading up to the passing of the Act, the particulars of institutional protest and complex labour like the one undertaken by students at St Andrews, remains largely invisible.

While the students were part of the historic activist work to raise awareness for Period Poverty, another group has had an even more intimate and long-standing relationship to menstruation and public buildings. At the University, we talked to the Estates team who are in charge of cleaning and supply of materials across the sprawling campus, which is spread throughout the whole town. For this group, the Act was welcome, but also meant new practical challenges. While the Act offered some advice on how to acquire products, store them, and promote the scheme for such teams, each building and toilet on an old campus like St Andrews was necessarily slightly different, meaning that cleaners had to take a creative and space-specific approach to every single room.¹³ Furthermore, the Act gave room for Estates teams to purchase products from a list of providers, notably regarding decisions about reusable versus non-reusable products. But as reusables are more expensive than single-use options (at least in the short term), this was also an economic decision that had to look frugal and wise in the eyes of the overarching economic decision-making powers at the institution. In these ways, Estates had both power and limitations when implementing the Act, including the power to make reusable options visible in the university community within certain economic boundaries.

For the Estates team, similar questions to those encountered by the student activists quickly appeared. For instance, if they were only able to purchase a limited number of menstrual cups through their allocated budget, should they be distributed prominently and visibly through placement in women's restrooms, or situated across toilets for multiple genders to provide equitable access to trans and nonbinary people? Further challenges around ensuring people using these options had access to instructions for safe use and had a suitable understanding of new products also arose. In the beginning, some students did not understand that the reusables were theirs to take and keep, while some baskets full of products were placed so publicly that social

¹² Sarah E. Frank, 'Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics', *Sociological Inquiry* 90, no. 2 (2020): 371–404.

¹³ *Access to Sanitary Products Aberdeen Pilot: Evaluation Report* (Housing and Social Justice Directorate, 30 May 2018): <https://www.gov.scot/publications/access-sanitary-products-aberdeen-pilot-evaluation-report/>

embarrassment became a barrier, and no one ‘dared’ take them and thus mark themselves publicly as menstruating.¹⁴ Tracing notions of invisible and visible menstruation, we noted that the Estates team was one of the most knowledgeable about the everyday realities of menstruation in the workplace, and had expertise in discussing and managing menstrual practicalities. The Act made their existing work more visible to other colleagues, and necessitated more discussion about menstruation throughout campus. This discussion, however, often revolved around products, waste, disposal systems, and cleaning – underlying the existing visible tropes about menstruation as ‘unsanitary’ or as a ‘hygiene’ issue.¹⁵

Because the scheme was widely known to be connected with Period Poverty, some potential users could be put off by the association with poverty, especially in a seemingly affluent area like St Andrews. It took some tweaking by the team, and more work, but in the end, systems that took into account all the compromises (access, finances, the environment, disposal, gender etc) were put in place. However, this meant a varied approach was needed across campus, rather than a single streamlined system. For example, in the Student Union, students had to ask for products at the desk, where a box of disposable tampons and pads were provided. In staff-dominated buildings, community solutions prevailed (i.e. staff organise donations on a volunteer basis which seldom cover all bathrooms). In the University Library and public areas, the vending machines full of Tampax and Always (both Procter & Gamble) simply became free overnight. However, conversations about how best to manage the presentation and dissemination of menstrual cups and reusable pads on campus were not entirely resolved.

While students and the University as an institution have had the option of relying on the experienced Estates team to roll out the Act, a more limited infrastructure existed at the St Andrews food bank. Situated at the Kingdom Vineyard Church, the service is open to anyone who needs it and is run through the Fair Share food distribution centre in Scotland. As such, menstrual products were added to Fair Share’s existing regular delivery of products and food (nearby supermarkets supplemented on an ad hoc basis, and community members sometimes dropped off donations). Like we saw in other settings, the food bank had to rely on their own knowledge of consumers and the architecture of the building (an old church) to process the change. They solved this by setting menstrual products on a table in easy view. In a discreet system which operates as a mini-shop, users can simply take what they need. Take-up was slow but steady, revealing that there had been a need for items like these, but that barriers to take-up still might exist. Even in a setting like a foodbank where poverty is less hidden than in, for instance, a university, menstrual products still have a tendency to inspire shyness. Is this to do with menstruation taboos or economic precarity, or the entanglement of both over time? When

¹⁴ Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler, ‘The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma,’ *Sex Roles* 68, no. 1 (2011): 9–18

¹⁵ On the history of the sanitary bin and the development of sanitary waste disposal systems in Britain, see Camilla Mørk Røstvik, “‘Do Not Flush Feminine Products!’ The Environmental History, Biohazards and Norms Contained in the UK Sanitary Bin Industry Since 1960,” *Environment & History* 27, no. 4 (2021): 549–79.

the Covid-19 pandemic began, the service continued for as long as it could, then moved into motorised vehicles. As shops and other options became impossible to reach, the food bank's inclusion of menstrual products was likely more important than ever imagined. Here, we note that the invisible labour of food banks became more public during the pandemic, and that because of the Act, menstrual products were already part of this labour. Even so, we also understood that the concept of 'Period Poverty' could sometimes be an easier problem to discuss and solve than poverty itself.

Our conversations and visits with groups around St Andrews underline the ways in which some menstrual debates remain invisible. Most of the labour surrounding menstruation, including cleaning and providing products in bathrooms and foodbanks, continues to be discreetly done and is in many respects made invisible.¹⁶ The activism undertaken by students for equal access to bathrooms and products was highly visible for a time, but became merged with the larger and national Period Poverty movement once policy-makers and politicians stepped in. Encountering these stories, we began to understand the underlying tapestry of menstrual stigma in St Andrews which still existed despite some menstrual topics becoming more public. Since visual art can make some of these invisible strands of discourse visible, Hughes will include these conversations in their future studio work for this project.

Menstruation, feminist activism in St Andrews and art practice

Having discussed menstruation with contemporary experts in town, we turned to history to understand how the longer tradition of activism, feminism, and reproductive justice debates in St Andrews might have contributed to where we are today. Throughout the modern history of St Andrews (and in higher education more generally), menstruation tended to be present only as subtext. But it has still shaped the lives of people in the town. The first cohorts of female students were questioned as less suited for higher education than men on the basis of their bodily cycles, while both suffragettes and Second Wave feminists fought against essentialist views of the body and argued for more access to space and intellectual freedom.¹⁷ Today's students face many of the same challenges, questioning the role of gender identification and bathrooms for example. This gender work is similar to the work of challenging menstrual stigma: it is a process of unpicking and undoing decades and centuries worth of assumptions about the student body, the student's body, and the body of the town itself.

¹⁶ Scholars have explored the invisible nature of socially reproductive labour, see for instance Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: The History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972-1977* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ See Sarah Browne, "'A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism': Women's Liberation in St Andrews, Scotland, c.1968–c.1979,' *Twentieth Century British History* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): 100–123.

Equally, while St Andrews has a reputation as a conservative town, it also holds a long history of radical feminist activism. Historian Sara Browne's work on Second Wave feminism in Scotland positions St Andrews in a unique place in this history as 'a veritable hotbed of feminism', fuelled in part by the international student body.¹⁸ Part of this work was about reproductive justice, with critiques of lectures at the University that stated untruths about women, biology, or gender, as frequently discussed in the Women's Liberation Movement's newsletter *Spare Tyre* (referencing the more famous British magazine *Spare Rib*).¹⁹ Fighting against a strong current of moralistic and traditional views about women in the community, the university emboldened feminists to think of themselves as part of a historic trajectory stretching back to the suffragettes and first generation of women students and staff, while looking forward into an unknown future where new student bodies would look more balanced.²⁰

The Women's Liberation group in St Andrews utilised many tactics to make space for themselves, and to become visible in a larger battle for access. They vandalised the men-only golf course grass, harassed men on the street by staring at them and catcalling, and protested the mocking of female students that occurred during the annual Kate Kennedy parade in which a male student dresses as a woman.²¹ Their activism often also included aspects of art. For example, a day out in Aberdeen was organised around the group's wishes to visit and vandalise sexist artworks in a local gallery, and several members were also practicing artists or would go on to be so, such as textile artist Anne Jackson.²² Feminist documentary photographer Franki Raffles, whose archive Hughes consulted during their visit, was a prominent example of this. Raffles studied Philosophy at St Andrews and was active in the Women's Liberation group; after graduating she moved to Edinburgh and subsequently started a photographic practice during the 1980s and early 1990s which was particularly concerned with representations of working women.²³ One of the last projects that Raffles was working on before her untimely death in 1994

¹⁸ Browne, "A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism", 100–123.

¹⁹ Browne, "A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism", 107.

²⁰ On feminism in Scotland see Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay, eds. *Women and Contemporary Scottish Politics: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Polygon at Edinburgh, 2001) and Henderson, Shirley, and Alison Mackay, eds. *Grit and Diamonds: Women in Scotland Making History, 1980-1990* (Edinburgh: Stramullion, 1990).

²¹ The Kate Kennedy parade continues to be organised every year. It has been implicated in recent reporting on harassment at the University of St Andrews: Marc Horne, 'St Andrews Sex Scandal Spreads to Elite Society,' *The Times* (12 August 2020): <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/st-andrews-sex-scandal-spreads-to-elite-society-zztewkr3h>

²² Browne, "A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism", 119. Jackson's website: <https://www.annejackson.co.uk/> (accessed 10 January 2022).

²³ The University of St Andrews Photographic Special Collections now holds the Franki Raffles Photographic Archive, which contains over 40,000 negatives of photographs which explore women's health, among other topics, and which constitutes a significant resource for feminist research. For an overview of Raffles's career drawing on research in this archive, which articulates how Raffles's commitment to feminism throughout her practice grew from her experience of student activism at St Andrews, see Marine Benoit-Blain, 'Franki Raffles, photographe engagée: la photographie féministe en Écosse dans les années 1980 Et 1990,' *Les cahiers de l'Ecole du Louvre*, no. 10 (2017): <https://cel.revues.org/555> (Accessed 14 June 2017). See also Weitian Liu, 'Franki Raffles: Photography as a Social Practice,' *Photomonitor* (March 2021): <https://photomonitor.co.uk/essay/franki-raffles-photography-as-a-social-practice/> (Accessed 22 December 2021).

was a commission by NHS Lothian entitled *The NHS: A Healthy Place to Work and Live*.²⁴ As part of this project, Raffles photographed women workers, staff, families, patients and carers across hospitals, clinics and GP surgeries. In these images, the profound ways in which labour (waged and unwaged) and care are intertwined in the daily lives of many women are articulated from a feminist perspective, and demonstrates how histories of feminism and health are fundamentally combined. While not directly engaging with menstruation, Raffles early interest in the work of women can be seen as an effort to visualise hidden and undervalued aspects of ‘women’s work’, such as washing dirty linen and cleaning offices.

Through their art, performances, and stunts the St Andrews feminist group sought to bring attention to sexism, particularly sexism related to essentialist views of gender and women’s places in the physical and intellectual world. Their critique of Biology lectures demonstrates the group’s acute awareness of how discussions about hormones and the menstrual cycle could be weaponized against women, creating an essentialist view of the body that they continued to question and fight against throughout the 1970s, before members of the group dispersed across the world.

The creativity of the St Andrews Women’s Liberation Group, and Raffles’ body of work in particular, intersects with the wider relationships between visual art and feminist activism in Scotland, including artistic and theatrical engagements with menstruation. Examples from the late twentieth-century show how artists working in Scotland linked menstruation to themes of growing up, girlhood, and sex, and that the reception of their work varied greatly. These range in medium – a play, a performance art piece, and zines – as well as the reaction they incited, which shifts from outrage to critical acclaim to investigation and counter-cultural dissemination. For instance, on the opening night of Scottish playwright Sharman Macdonald’s first play about girlhood and sexuality, *When I Was A Girl I Used to Scream and Shout*, thirteen people walked out. Performed in September 1991 at Dundee Repertory Theatre, the show began with three teenage girls trying to make sense of the adult world, addressing topics including sex and menstruation. While this was too much for some audience members, most people stayed, and the play was praised for being ‘beautifully written and acted’ in *The Sunday Times*.²⁵ Despite some disgruntled audience members, the success of Macdonald’s play was one indication that attitudes to discussing sexuality and menstruation were changing in Scotland, and that writers and visual artists were seeking to foreground and investigate these themes in their work. Macdonald’s play nonetheless remains an arguably atypical instance of overt reference to menstruation in visual and literary cultural production in Scotland during the 1990s.

²⁴ Alistair Scott, ‘Rediscovering Feminist Photographer Franki Raffles’ *Studies in Photography*, (2017): <https://www.napier.ac.uk/~media/worktribe/output-969828/rediscovering-feminist-photographer-franki-raffles.pdf> (Accessed 28 June 2021).

²⁵ ‘Bold Dundee screams and shouts for more money’, *The Sunday Times* (22 September 1991).

The 1990s were a particularly important in this respect. LGBT and feminist magazines circulating in Scotland also poked fun at menstrual tropes, exemplified by the humour and creativity in Radclyffe's *Napkin Neurosis* where pads fly across the room like scary angels.

Fig 1. Megan Radclyffe, *Napkin Neurosis* in *Diva LGBT magazine*, 1 October 1994, issue 4, p 36.

The GWL's Zine Library holds multiple menstruation-themed zines, including unique items made by comic book artist and musician Zaskia. She published a series of menstruation-themed zines named *Heavy Flow* to chronicle her own interest in the topic during the 1990s, as well as a growing political and feminist awareness of menstrual issues in Scotland.²⁶ However, although we looked for examples in Scotland of the feminist menstrual art produced elsewhere in the UK, particularly during the 1970s, we could not find evidence of this.²⁷ It does not seem that there was an equivalent in Scotland for the work of practitioners like Catherine Elwes, notably her performances *Menstruation I* and *Menstruation II* the Slade School of Art in 1979, during which she enclosed herself in a white room and visibly menstruated over several days.²⁸ The wider retreat across the UK from these forms of expression might be mapped onto the resurgence of cultural conservatism in Britain during the 1980s, together with the fragmentation of the Women's Liberation Movement and associated feminist art activity. Only three years before the debut of Macdonald's *When I Was A Girl I Used to Scream and Shout*, in 1988 the US performance artist Karen Finley's work *Constant State of Desire*, which also included frank menstrual themes, had been banned in the UK and subject to an investigation by Scotland Yard, suggesting a tightening of possibility regarding what was deemed admissible when it came to periods.²⁹

²⁶ Helena Neimann Erikstrup and Camilla Mørk Røstvik, 'Menstruation in the 1990s: Feminist Resistance in Saskia's Heavy Flow Zine, Nursing Clio, 7 August 2018, <https://nursingclio.org/2018/08/07/menstruation-in-the-1990s-feminist-resistance-in-saskias-heavy-flow-zine/> (Accessed 28 June 2021).

²⁷ The question of whether there was a feminist art movement as such in Scotland during the 1970s is an intriguing one which it is not possible to address in this article. It is notable that examples of collective and concerted feminist artistic activity seem to occur later, such as the founding of Women in Profile in 1990 (which ultimately led to the founding of the Glasgow Women's Library), and which developed the Castlemilk Womanhouse project in 1991, which was based on Womanhouse in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. Whereas the LA Womanhouse featured a 'menstrual bathroom,' however, the Castlemilk Womanhouse did not. On Castlemilk Womanhouse, see Hannah Hamblin, 'Los Angeles, 1972/Glasgow, 1990: A Report on Castlemilk Womanhouse,' In *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, edited by Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 164–82. For an analysis of Judy Chicago's menstrual artwork which includes the menstrual bathroom, see Camilla Mørk Røstvik, 'Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art since 1970,' *Oxford Art Journal* 42, no. 3 (2019): 335–53.

²⁸ See https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/catherine_elwes/menstruation_1.html and https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/catherine_elwes/menstruation_2.html (Accessed 21 June 2021). For a history of feminist art in Britain which situates Elwes' work in its wider context, see Kathy Battista, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

²⁹ 'Art at the Outer Limits; Karen Finley, Taking Performance to a New Level', *The Washington Post* (4 May 1988). For a longer history of censorship in Britain with regard to art that included references to menstruation, see Siona Wilson's discussion of COUM Transmissions in Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 93–137.

These ebbing and flowing histories of art and menstruation in Scotland and the UK more broadly demonstrate the wider context of our project, and our desire to look in particular at how art practice might provide a way of bringing to light the histories of menstrual activism and engagement in St Andrews specifically which were not well known. As creative and activist explorations of menstruation in Scotland, these are reminders of a long-interlinked history of the arts, menstrual themes, and the public. Hughes's work at St Andrews thus constitutes only one of the most recent contributions to this artist-activist discourse, and we hope illuminates how visual production and its reception can help us understand changing attitudes to menstruation in Scotland today.

The Artist is Not Present (a first person account)

In this section, Hughes reflects on their experiences of working with the subject of menstruation, St Andrews, of walking the line between being an academic and an artist, and of the role of (their) art in the conversations around the Scottish Period Products Act. This section will be written in the first person, reflecting the tension that surfaces within this article (mirroring menstrual activism and advocacy) between the personal and the collective.

St Andrews is significant to my practice as a menstruation researcher and artist working with menstrual subject matter, as it is the first place where I presented this body of work to my peers. Through various visits in support of Menstruation Research Network activities, the exhibition of my work in the Cloisters of St Salvator's Chapel, and the collection of that work by the Museum of University of St Andrews, the town and university have been instrumental in shaping my understanding of the field. Since visiting in 2018 I have felt an affinity to the town. It reminds me of home in elements of its geography, historic architecture, and the sense of division that bubbled underneath the surface. I grew up in rural North Wales, near the coast, the mountains of Snowdonia, and the university city of Bangor.

St Andrews is a small town on the east coast of the region Fife, with a population of about 17,000. It is home to one university, established in 1413 and considered a high-ranked academic institution. There is a palpable split between the wider town and the university in St Andrews, which also encompasses golf courses, a small fishing community, agriculture, a hospital, shops, a botanical garden, and museums. Its reputation, alongside that of the university, is one of prosperity, privilege, and conservatism, and it is steeped in long-standing traditions, student societies, and systems.

During my first visit as artist in residence in 2020, we began considering what symbols of St Andrews might be available to act as an anchor for the creative work, a material grounding to situate a practice in and with the town and university. My curiosity was piqued by recalling glimpses of figures dressed in red gowns around the campus; the University of St Andrews'

ceremonial attire. Since 1800, students at the University have dressed in bright red gowns and walked back and forth over a fishing pier to commemorate the rescue of crew members of the ship *Janet Macduff* by a former student. The red garment is one of the most well-known markers of the institution and has a long history of public wear. Since its introduction during the post-Reformation era as a compulsory ‘school uniform’ for youngsters to prevent them from drinking in pubs, the gown has since become an icon of the town.³⁰

As an artist who explores the social and cultural aspects of menstruation in their art and academic works, I noted that the gown could be re-appropriated as part of this project as a symbol for menstrual invisibility and visibility. While the bright red gown is on public display every week as students walk the pier and circulate in the small town (as well as during graduation and formal events), menstrual signs remain taboo and occluded. The identification and re-appropriation of this symbol was important creatively and conceptually. As an artist, I do not see my role as (re)interpreting the findings of my collaborators (or even my own research data) into an artwork. My aim is not to represent the conversations Camilla, Catherine and myself had literally or figuratively in St Andrews, nor is it to quantify the impact of the Bill. Rather, I see my role as an artist in residence (or elsewhere) as trying to navigate the various discourses of menstruation circulating in a particular cultural milieu, forming impressions, and bringing together fragments from these layered observations. My aim is not to hold up a mirror and produce a straightforward reflection, but to highlight contradictions, stitch together fragments, and produce objects or performances in dialogue with the space(s), experiences, and ideas encountered.

Fig. 2. Red ceremonial gown of the University of St Andrews.

The hyper-visibility of the red gown in St Andrews linked to our shared central concern with the ways in which menstrual visual cultural production, and specifically menstrual art that utilises real blood, have informed and shaped menstrual culture and discourse in Scotland and beyond.³¹ In these ways, my plan was to re-appropriate the gown as a menstrual symbol.

Re-appropriation and fragmentation have been a central theme in my art practice in recent years, particularly using cut-up text and autobiographical elements to foreground the limited space for

³⁰ ‘Academic Dress’, University of St Andrews website (2021): <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/orientation/once-you-arrive/academic-dress/>

³¹ Art historical investigations of menstruation include Ruth Green-Cole, ‘Painting Blood: Visualizing Menstrual Blood in Art’ in Bobel et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstrual Studies* (Palgrave, 2020), pp. 787-801; Jen Lewis, *Widening the Cycle: A Menstrual Cycle & Reproductive Justice Art Show* (blurb, 2015); Røstvik and Bee Hughes, ‘Menstruation in Art and Visual Culture’ in *The International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media, and Communication* (Wiley, 2020); Carli Coetzee, *Written Under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa* (Boydell & Brewer, 2019).

gender-diverse experience in medical and everyday framings of menstruation.³² These works also aim to explicitly counter the historic absence of menstruation in everyday life in the UK, characterised by Victoria Newton as ‘a historical shift from the invisible menstruating woman to invisible menstruation’.³³ While political and public discourses have shifted towards vocalising (and making visible) menstrual products as a key component of gender and economic social justice, the turn towards menstrual management as a panacea has continued to maintain the invisibility of menstruation itself. Though period products are now part of mainstream discourse, menstruation itself remains absent (with its visceral, inconvenient, affirming, and contradictory materiality), as does the labour of those who make the provision of menstrual products possible.

With only one official visit under my belt for this project, and the second in March 2020 cancelled due to a strike (which we supported) *and* the worsening international news about Covid-19 (and eventual ‘lockdown’), my preliminary notions about a co-produced, participatory, performance-led work were thrown into disarray. Instead, we turned to the historic documentation we explored during my first visit, especially the photographic archive of the feminist documentary photographer and St Andrews alumni Franki Raffles held in University Special Collections. This rooted me somewhat with the rhythms of the town, and the history of feminist health activism in Scotland documented by Raffles in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Fig. 3. Franki Raffles, *Western General Hospital Laundry*, August 1993. Lothian Health Campaign, Franki Raffles Photography Collection, University of St Andrews Library and Edinburgh Napier University Special Collection.

I was particularly struck by Raffles’ photographs documenting the everyday work and workers of hospitals in the Lothian region. *Western General Hospital Laundry* (1993) in particular, with the billowing piles of cloth and neat folded stacks of crisp white linens, brought to mind the contrast between the clinical and hygienic practices of medicine - and menstrual self-care - in contrast with the sometimes messy realities of medical treatment and the leaky menstruating body. Washing and keeping the body clean has so often been considered ‘women’s work’, and in Raffles documentation we see a respectful portrait of hidden labour and gendered pressure.

The first visit offered unique insights into the contemporary and historic contexts of St Andrews, leaving me excited to unravel the story of menstruation in the town further. This enthusiasm was challenged during the strike and pandemic, leaving the project uncertain, and the threads I had gathered in January slipping through my fingers. As I adjusted to thinking about the project and St Andrews from afar, the need for a physical connection to anchor my creative practice became

³² B. Hughes, *Performing Periods: Challenging Menstrual Normativity Through Art Practice*, Doctoral Thesis, Liverpool John Moores University (2020).

³³ V. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 183.

evident; enter the red gown. I purchased a red gown of my own, had it shipped to my home, and started exploring its components.

As I got to know the gown's material and details, I began reflecting on the prevalence of the gown in the university's marketing materials - for example a photograph of the pier procession on campus maps, and splashed across the website. The consistent presence of the gown in the University of St Andrews' collective identity became solidified as a significant symbol, which could be re-formed around the role of Scottish Universities in this historic moment for menstrual equity. At the same time, the 'lockdown' meant that no-one was walking the piers in St Andrews anymore, that the gown was back in the closet, and that the ambitious Scottish 'Period Poverty' plan would be tested in ways unforeseen by policy makers.

The Scottish Act was necessitated by the need to grapple with economic inequalities in Scotland. The pandemic only underscored this. Likewise, our symbolic gown also documented a history of privilege and financial exclusion in St Andrews through its price and manufacturer. For months, we tried to find out where the gowns were made, by whom, and how. After numerous emails and phone calls, the makers of the gowns – leading UK academic gown providers Ede & Ravenscroft - replied after we were vetted through a St Andrews retail connection. The gowns were simply made in Littleport in England, and constructed of dyed wool and velveteen. The reason for the secrecy was financial and legal. A few years prior, a new academic dress company tried to make the red gowns cheaper and more accessible. This led to a lawsuit with Ede & Ravenscroft who argued that no-one else had the right or ability to make the red gowns as well as them.³⁴ Ede & Ravenscroft gowns are today sold for £159, whereas competitor Churchill Gowns slashed this down to £89. The lawsuit continues, while the gowns are still being sold and worn by new generations of St Andrews students. This financial background was interesting to us as part of unpicking the privilege, economic realities, and creation of the gown itself. Furthermore, it seemed to echo the conversation around menstrual products: are they a necessity that should be free (like toilet paper) or a luxury one can chose to opt out of? Should institutions provide or subsidise these items, or is it up to the individual to acquire the necessary funds? At a moment when menstrual products became free in Scotland, the gowns remained inaccessible to many. Arguably, both items are needed to appear as a St Andrews student – the menstrual product to avoid leaking and embarrassment, and the gown to be part of the elite intellectual academic community.

Herein were the beginnings of my project to re-make the red gown, to un-pick and cut-up its association with academic prestige, and create a new link with menstrual work. The gown itself, a heavy wool garment covering the body from the shoulders to calf, simultaneously marks the

³⁴ Margaret Taylor, 'Fight over St Andrews gowns Hots up as Replica Firm Makes New Legal Case', *The Herald Scotland* (20 November 2019): https://www.heraldscotland.com/business_hq/18046894.fight-st-andrews-gowns-hots-replica-firm-makes-new-legal-claim/

wearer as part of this academic community whilst shrouding the body beneath its voluminous folds. This dichotomy - hyper-visible, yet hidden - called to mind the strands of presence and absence inherent in menstruation research, experience, visual cultures, and policy-making. The gown itself became the site of my artistic exploration as I set about devising a process of making that mirrored the processes and themes uncovered by my first research visit.

Fig. 4. Bee Hughes, *Blood Lines: Sampler*, 2021. Hand stitched tampons and hand embroidery, cotton on synthetic gown.

I resolved to unpick and undo the gown, document its various threads, the panels of wool and velveteen, and the hidden supporting structures within the garment, in order to re-make them as symbols of menstruation. The gown was never intended to symbolise menstruation - indeed the very fabric of centuries of academic life has been built around the Cartesian notion of an immaterial intellectual self - the body is obscured, even denied, in favour of intellectual authority. Herein I find the humour *and* significance in dragging it into conversations about menstruation, of entwining it with the public, private, political, and academic discourses around fleshy, leaky bodies of people who menstruate, and how to support them.

While my residency was halted, studio work became difficult due to the pandemic, and progress has slowed, there is still value in reflecting on how this project came about and how my practice developed in response to the specific social, cultural, and political conditions of St Andrews, and Scotland. In a future article, we will reflect more on the artistic process and any outcome made in response. While we entered lockdown, our collaborative work by necessity shifted from the live residency to the aspects foregrounded above: menstrual art history, and to explore how menstruation had been made both absent and present in previous creative projects in St Andrews and Scotland.

Conclusion: Making menstruation visible?

As Scotland combats Period Poverty, the gown is a reminder of underlying economic inequalities. While the gown manufacturers lawsuit continues in the courts, the episode clarifies how the gowns also tie St Andrews to a history of economics and privilege of access to the paraphernalia of studenthood. Not all students can afford the gown, and, as we know, some utilise the foodbank too. Some students thus welcomed the alternative, cheaper gown, excited to finally access the proper academic 'look', wrapped in red and visible to the world. In what is often assumed to be a privileged space – like St Andrews, Scotland, or the Global North – it is easy to focus on status symbols such as the red gown or a generous menstrual product policy. The underlying issues, whether poverty or stigma, will likely not dissipate only through such a lens. Like menstrual products, the economic fight around the red gowns benefit companies first and foremost. Whether gowns are sold by Ede & Ravenscroft or Churchill Gowns, or menstrual

products are supplied through the Scottish government or vending machines, a red-hot economic market serves no one better than the supplier.

Today's students, cleaners, foodbanks, academics, and citizens are making the menstrual subtext text in St Andrews. Menstruation is no longer so invisible in the town nor Scotland. The country has housed menstrual research and policy development, provided free products to all, and fronted a national campaign calling for an end to all menstrual euphemism: 'Call periods, periods!' We hope that our project, once the artwork is completed in the future, will contribute to and amplify the various moments where menstruation has 'bled through' into the foreground of public life in the town, and beyond. As the subtext disappears, a new future beckons for those who menstruate in St Andrews. One in which products are more readily available, and discussions about menstrual pain, health, and pleasure perhaps not far behind.