Discourses of Menstruation: Public and Private Formations of Female Identity

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DISCOURSES OF MENSTRUATION:
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FORMATIONS
OF FEMALE IDENTITY

by

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Introduction

In the course of one afternoon on the campus of Scripps College, I am presented with multiple, potentially contradictory, messages about the menstruating female body. As my friend and I walk across the center of campus on our way to class, she suddenly looks concerned as she begins to say, “I don’t know if I have a….” She pauses to look both ways over her shoulder, making sure that no one else is around her before she whispers the word “pad.” During class, I excuse myself to use the restroom in the Humanities building. Inside my stall I find small paper bags with the words “Sanitary Bag” embellished with pink flowers, a reminder of the hygienic, feminine way to dispose of items that have come into contact with my blood. After class I stop by the Motley Coffeehouse for a cup of tea. As I hand the cashier my ID card to make my purchase, I see tampons and diva cups for sale on the counter, right next to the case of baked goods. When I return to my residence hall, my neighbor is kind enough to ask me about my day. Based on my observations throughout the afternoon, do I feel comfortable telling her that I have bad menstrual cramps?

Menstruation is a biological process, but it is also laden with cultural meanings that produce society’s understandings of both the body and “womanhood.” Experiences with menstruation simultaneously reveal and inform the ways that culture mediates the relationships between biology, the body, sex, and gender. As scholars Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen phrase it, “the way we live with our bodies, and the ways we think about processes such as menstruation, are fundamental expressions of our cultural values and ideologies” (1996: 17). The
female body becomes a site of culture, a physical and symbolic representation of the rules and regulations of society. Feminist scholars have long been doing this work, analyzing and challenging assumptions surrounding women, the body, and identity.

Sociologist Sophie Laws uses the term menstrual etiquette to discuss the social rules surrounding menstruation (Kissling 1996). In North America, an overall sense of social discomfort with menstruation reinforces a menstrual etiquette that focuses on concealment, activity, and communication. Kissling expands on this, explaining that concealment means hiding the existence of one’s period, activity refers to restrictions placed on the behavior of menstruating women, and communication points to the understanding that menstruation is not something to be publicly discussed (Kissling 1996). Through these practices, women learn how society views menstruation and the female body as they navigate their individual thoughts and experiences with their bodies. Of course, there is no universal “woman” or “women’s experience” with regard to menstruation. Intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality shape the experiences of those who menstruate in very different ways.

Anthropological studies have emphasized the ambivalence associated with womanhood and with menstruation across a variety of cultural and historical contexts (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Lander 1988; Lee 1994). Women reflect both positively and negatively upon their experiences with menarche and subsequent menstrual periods, but even those who speak positively acknowledge aspects of shame and secrecy associated with the menstruating body (Jackson and Falmagne 2013; Lee and Sasser-Cohen 1996; Martin 1987). One aspect of this secrecy stems
from the ideology that menstruation is unclean or contaminating, and that it is not a
biological event shared by both men and women. In most cases women express that
they do not feel comfortable talking about menstruation with men, as it is not

This separation between men and women brings us back to Scripps College, a
private, liberal arts women’s college in Claremont, California. In an environment
like Scripps, where a person must legally be defined as female in order to attend and
where most students identify as women, what messages regarding the menstruating
female body are circulated within this space? Do students feel like an all-women’s
educational and living environment establishes the conditions for a more open space
for women’s bodies? What is the language that students use to talk about their
bleeding bodies, and what is the context within which these discussions take place?
Most students possess a female gender identity and most students menstruate, but do
they articulate these entities in relation to one another?

My approach to exploring these questions is to examine the discourses that
surround menstruation in the environment of Scripps College, discourses that are
shaped by students, the institution, and more broadly by U.S. society as a whole.
“Discourses” refers to the ways that menstruation and women’s bodies are talked
about and made visible, and more importantly “what these words and attributions
reveal about the cultural metaphors that shape dominant ‘realities’” (Lee and Sasser-
Cohen 1996: 7). Analyzing discourse means studying the ways in which the
workings of power are interwoven among the behaviors, assumptions, and practices
pertaining to a particular issue, such as menstruation and the politics of the female
body. As Gavey phrases it, discourse exists as “a way of constituting meaning which is specific to particular groups, cultures, and historical periods and is always changing” (1989:46). The dynamic nature of discourse is important to remember as students recount their experiences with menstruation because it calls attention to the ways that women internalize and sustain certain negative discourses but also engage in forms of resistance that make the discourse of the female body more positive.

Foucault states that “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (1978:101). Discourse, in this sense, operates as a process that both reveals and challenges the dominant ideas through which the subject—and subjectivity—is constituted.

By analyzing the discourses of menstruation among Scripps students, one can see that dominant constructions of Scripps as an “ideal women’s space” suggest that discussions about one’s bodily functions, especially menstruation, would be an open matter. However, the actual practices of students demonstrate that even within this cultural single-sex space of women, normative silences and taboos continue to operate. In that light, my four chapters explore the paradox and contradictions of menstrual discourse at Scripps as experienced by students in various contexts of their lives.

Chapter One considers the ways that women’s colleges, more generally, attempt to create a public space for women through the ways that the topic of menstruation is made visible in various locations on campus. Drawing upon
constructions of public and private space, I examine the history of women’s colleges and the current aim of these institutions to support women in the public sphere. Looking more closely at Scripps, students articulate that overall the female body is an openly accepted topic of conversation on campus, yet their reflections on individual campus spaces indicate that some locations are more appropriate than others for engaging in menstrual discourse. I conclude by utilizing both the Motley Coffeehouse and Residential Life’s educational week of programming entitled “It’s That Time of the Month” to illustrate the ways in which the private sphere is being made public on campus, through deliberate attempts to bring menstruation into the public consciousness. These efforts highlight the struggle to meet the expectations that women’s colleges will create “open spaces” for women in terms of the presence of menstrual discourse in the spaces where students are living their daily routines and experiences.

In Chapter Two, I unpack the language that students employ to discuss their menstrual periods and the process of discernment involved in choosing with whom they will share about the functions of their bodies. Students make distinctions for sharing based upon closeness with an individual or group as well as their perceived ability to understand the experience. Even when speaking with these select persons, who tend to be women, the conversation often sticks to a script that contains jokes and complaints. As students verbalize menstruation according to this format, they demonstrate modes of acceptable menstrual discourse. This chapter reveals the ways in which students navigate and define their relationships to other people based upon larger conversations of trust and intimacy that are embedded in menstrual discourse.
Chapter Three focuses on the existence of normative models of menstruation within student discourse, which heavily inform the ways that students gain and interpret knowledge about their own bodies. Students utilize the term “normal” in somewhat contradictory ways. Though students are hesitant and uncertain in their explanations of the inner biological functions of menstruation, they stress that the process within the body is “normal” and “natural.” Their conversations of birth control, however, depict the non-menstruating woman as normal because the processes of her body do not hinder her. The desire to maintain a normative image of themselves and their menstrual health leads students to make specific decisions about where to seek advice or consultation when they have pressing questions about their bodies.

In my final chapter, I look at how menstruation relates to students’ conceptions of themselves as “women”. Feminist discussions of women and identity have been careful to not essentialize women based upon their bodies and reproductive roles (Butler 1990; Ferguson 2007; Hekman 2000; McLaren 2002; Zerilli 1998). Second-wave feminists of color, and later third-wave feminists, insist upon the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that attention to the multiplicity of human experience is required to achieve inclusion in feminist projects (Bobel 2010). Scripps students approach this relationship from a similar direction. While students do tie menstruation to women, they are cautious about defining womanhood according to the body and its functions. Students are not denying a relationship between their body and their identity, but they are negating a traditionally negative culture associated with the body. In an attempt to create a more positive discourse of
menstruation, students emphasize a connection among women and a pride in the reproductive capabilities of the female body, but they do not see these capabilities as requirements for claiming a female gender identity.

With this final chapter in mind, I want to stress that both menstruation and women’s colleges interact with complex notions of sex and gender. Although people commonly use “sex” and “gender” interchangeably, they do not have the same definition. Sex, which is used to identify individuals as male or female at birth, is biological. It includes chromosomes, genitalia, internal reproductive structures, and physical characteristics. Gender is more complicated in that it encompasses one’s internal sense of self as male, female, both, or neither and how they present that sense of self.¹ Menstruation exists at “the complicated crossroad between sex and gender” (Bobel 2010:155), which complicates how students process its relationship to the body and constructions of “woman.” In the case of women’s colleges, not all students may identify as female regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth. Keeping these complexities in mind, when the word “woman” is used throughout this research it should be problematized for the ways it excludes the intersections of other identities. It is for these reasons that I use the word “students” rather than “women” when referring to my participants and the broader Scripps population, unless my participants specifically used the term “woman.” This project aims to contribute to feminist conversations that examine and challenge assumptions about gender, identity, and the menstruating body.

¹ My definitions, as well as a wider range of explanations of the gender spectrum, can be found at https://www.genderspectrum.org/understanding-gender.
Methodology

In the spring of 2012, I took an Anthropology course at Pitzer College that looked at sex, the body, and reproduction in a sociocultural context. Through this course I learned of the work of Emily Martin, whose own work on menstruation has largely impacted my thesis project. Her classic ethnography, *The Woman in the Body*, examines metaphors used in the medical field alongside interviews with women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to reveal that in the context of U.S. capitalist culture, menstruation is constructed according to a model of failed production (1987). Martin’s work stuck with me when I had the opportunity to do an independent study project while I studied abroad in Valparaíso, Chile during the fall of 2012. My research there examined the ways that middle class Chilean women in their 40s learned about menstruation from their mothers, and then in turn how these same women explained menstruation to the next generation, their current teenage daughters. The women I interviewed expressed that menstruation was a taboo topic in Chilean culture, but they actively worked to change this stigma by changing the nature of the sexual education discussions they had with their daughters and sons. Among these women, that meant speaking more openly on the personal and emotional elements of menarche and menstruation as well as explaining the biological process. As I interviewed these women about their experiences with menstruation in the Chilean context, I began to think about my home community at Scripps and what I felt was an absence of menstrual conversations despite the large presence of menstruating bodies on campus. This discrepancy provided me with a great starting point for my thesis research.
This study draws upon my own research that was conducted from early November of 2013 through late February of 2014 at Scripps College, a private women’s college in Claremont, CA. My research, which received approval from the Institutional Review Board, consisted of semi-structured first person interviews and participant observation. To support the discussion of my findings, I utilize scholarly texts and theories that position my work in a larger academic as well as sociocultural framework. All of my participants were Scripps students between the ages of 18 and 22 who identify as female. At first, my participants were mostly friends or acquaintances who learned of my research topic and were very curious about what I would be asking. These students seemed eager to help me out with my thesis but more importantly they were excited about an opportunity to talk about their menstrual periods. I gathered more students through snowballing, which stemmed from my initial participants, and I then posted in various Facebook groups for the different class years at Scripps in order to present my project to a wider range of the community. In the end I interviewed twenty-two students, six of whom were friends of mine, eleven of whom were acquaintances, and five of whom were strangers.

Interviews lasted between twenty minutes and an hour and took place in my room, various residence hall living rooms, or the student union, depending on the preference of the participant. Each student was asked a series of approximately eighteen questions in roughly the same order. The interviews were casual in nature and students were often asked to elaborate on their answers or were asked follow-up questions. This helped explain their thoughts and motivations in order to provide rich

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2 See the Appendix for a complete list of my interview questions. They are listed in the same order that I typically asked each question.
qualitative data. I began each conversation by asking participants to tell me about the first time they got their period. Using menarche as a starting point helped to establish a comfortable and casual tone, as students were able to narrate their menstrual history and speak to their individual experience before looking more closely at the Scripps community. Most students began this narrative by remembering how old they were at menarche, where they were, and how they responded to the situation in that moment. Starting the conversation at this point also served as a point of comparison, as participants often contrasted their feelings, physical and emotional, at menarche and the first few years of menstruation with how they feel now, as young adults.

Although a survey might have reached a larger percentage of the student body, I chose not to use surveys because I wanted to focus heavily on the discourse among students, which meant paying great attention to how they articulate themselves. In-person interviews allowed me to ask clarifying questions and to observe facial expressions, gestures, and tone as participants talked about their bodies and personal experiences. Only speaking with twenty-two students at a college with a population of over 900 students does limit the reach of my study. However, their responses offered both individual insight as well as a shared set of themes and experiences that were repeated continually as I spoke with more and more students. It is important to note that through informal conversations with students who did not formally participate in my study, I have encountered persons who do not agree with or relate to the ways that my interlocutors talked about Scripps. Not only do students possess a wide range of experiences, it is possible that
they may choose not to reveal everything to me or to answer in specific ways based on their expectations of me and the scope of my project.

In addition to my interviews, during late October and early November of 2013 I was a participant observer at three events on campus that related to menstruation and the female body. The first was an event hosted on October 29th by the Scripps Communities of Resources and Empowerment center (SCORE) during Ally Month that looked at sexism through the lens of menstruation in the media. This event was facilitated by writing Professor Kim Drake, who encouraged students to reflect upon and share their experiences at menarche before taking an in-depth look at the history of advertisements for feminine hygiene products. The second and third event were part of a week of programming led by Scripps Residential Life titled “It’s That Time of the Month,” which aimed to increase dialogue, education, and body positivity about menstrual periods during the week of November 4-8, 2013. These events will be discussed in detail during my first chapter, as they were specific efforts to make menstruation visible on campus.

**Participants**

Since my topic deals with what for many people is a private, personal topic weighted by cultural taboos and ideas of normativity, the names of the participants have been changed to pseudonyms and any identifying information has been removed from this study in order to protect their privacy. Of the twenty-two participants, there were five Asian students, three Black students, and fourteen white students. One of these students was also an international student. This breakdown, minus any dialogue with Latina students, is unintentionally a fairly close
representation of the percentages of racial diversity of the student body. The majority of these students come from middle-class backgrounds, therefore my research did not have the same socioeconomic findings as the scholarship of Martin. Thirteen students were seniors, six were juniors, one was a sophomore, and two were first-year students. The greater percentage of upperclass students who participated is largely due to their relationship to me, as a fellow senior, friend, or acquaintance. These students were more likely to know me personally, to be willing to help out with a thesis project, and to feel like they had something to contribute to an interview. Although I reached out to first-year students and sophomores about my research, I received less of a response to my inquiries over Facebook and through in-person conversations. One first-year student explained to me that she did not feel she had anything interesting to say. The lack of sophomore and first-year students as interview participants is particularly interesting to think about considering that at the on-campus events where I did my participant observation, first-year students were the largest population of the student body in attendance. Based on students’ conditions of closeness and comfort for menstrual discourse outlined in Chapters One and Two, it would seem that first-year students might have felt safer when sharing in a private interview, but that was not the case. My observations suggest that first-year attendance at these events stemmed from curiosity about the topic and an assumption that they would not have to talk openly about their personal experiences while there, unlike in the interview setting. It is also possible that

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3 According to the Scripps College website, diversity at Scripps is made up of 31% students of color: 4% African American, 18% Asian or Asian American, 9% Latina/Chicana, less than 1% Native American, 5% international. See this breakdown at: http://admission.scrippscollege.edu/facts.
upperclass students felt they had more to share on the topic, since they have had the opportunity to engage with more discourses over the course of four years at Scripps.

It is important to recognize that the participants in this study are a very self-selected group of individuals. They each chose to participate in the study knowing that they would have to share details about their menstrual periods with another person. As Scripps senior Grace states, “I probably wouldn’t have consented to an interview about it [menstruation] if I hadn’t felt comfortable about it.” By participating in this project, these students are already demonstrating an ease with the topic and a willingness to make menstruation more public. Comments made by my interlocutors during their interviews suggest that they know of students on campus who do not feel comfortable having a lengthy conversation about their period or do not believe that menstruation should be made visible on campus through educational events or open discussion. Consequentially, I fully acknowledge that the voices of these students are not present in my study in the same way as those students who actively decided to engage in a dialogue about their bodies and menstrual cycles.

The unique living and learning environment of my interlocutors impacts their menstrual experiences and how they are articulated. My focus is on Scripps specifically because of its nature as a women’s college, a space in which the majority of the population identifies as female and is menstruating on a regular basis. During the academic year, over 900 women occupy this space, where residence halls, dining halls, classroom facilities, and social centers are within a short walking distance. Although Scripps only admits female students, it is part of a larger consortium of

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4 At many women’s colleges, including Scripps, normativity surrounding sex and gender has been challenged through the struggles of transgender students and whether they should be
co-educational colleges with which Scripps students regularly interact and include as part of their community. In addition, through its Core curriculum and interdisciplinary approach as a liberal arts college, Scripps encourages its students to think critically and to question societal norms. While several students admitted that they had never seriously contemplated many of my research questions before, they acknowledged social stigma surrounding menstruation, challenged tying women’s bodies to reproduction, and problematized their own thoughts about the qualifiers for womanhood.

My Positionality

As a female-bodied, cisgender, menstruating Scripps student, I was granted insider status throughout most of my research process. Among my interlocutors, I was someone who could relate to their menstrual stories and to their college community. My identity as a cisgender woman allowed me to ask my participants more personal questions about their bodies and for them to feel comfortable talking to someone who, in theory, would be able to understand exactly what they were sharing without judgement or surprise. Being a relatable researcher provided me with richer data than I might otherwise have gathered due to the sensitive nature of my topic. At the same time, my insider status forced me to be conscious about

admitted to these colleges. Vice President of Enrollment for Scripps has been quoted in Scripps’ [In]Visible magazine as saying that “If a student self-identifies as a woman on the Common Application, then they may apply to Scripps. We admit women. We graduate students” (Borsuk, “The Women’s College Experience – Part I: Who Can Have the Women’s College Experience?” January 2012). Here are other articles chronicling this issue at Scripps:

http://community.scrippscollege.edu/invisible/2013/03/24/the-womens-college-experience-part-ii/
https://community.scrippscollege.edu/invisible/2010/05/07/changing-pronouns-jos-greene/
interpreting the responses of my participants through the lens of my own experiences. When responses seemed natural or normal to me, I tried to push back with follow-up questions so that students could explain their emotions or motivations in their own words.

For some of the students I knew more personally, my strong interests in menstruation and reproduction led them to view me as an amateur expert on the subject of menstruation, leading them to ask me questions about the female body or to suggest that they would do so in the future. Demonstrating serious interest and comfort in menstruation by basing my thesis on it seemed to make many students feel that I was a safe and informed person with whom to voice concerns and curiosities about the workings of the body. Yet at the same time, I felt as though I was always gaining more information from my participants about methods for dealing with cramps, or the advantages and disadvantages for using certain feminine hygiene products. Based on the suggestions of my interlocutors, I downloaded a menstrual tracking app for my phone to monitor and record my cycle, and I am seriously considering buying a DivaCup.

The moment the anthropologist inserts herself into a setting and begins to look at a specific situation or issue, she is causing that space to change. My original motivation for this research was a curiosity as to why there seemed to be so little visibility of menstruation in a space full of women who, in most cases, regularly experienced it. From the very moment I began to verbalize my topic, the campus climate surrounding this issue was altered. Shortly after I had declared my topic, I remember a friend introducing me to a Scripps senior that I had not previously met.
She shook my hand and said, “Wait, are you the one who is looking at menstruation on campus? That is so cool!” My topic was surprising and interesting enough to spark conversation around campus, even among people I did not know. Through this project I am enacting a kind of open discourse, in which people can begin to think about menstruation, their bodies, and their environment in new ways. The emergence of these conversations about menstruation in relation to my thesis reveals the ways in which the discourse is already changing. This became more apparent in the fall of 2013 when Scripps Residential Life hosted the “It’s That Time of the Month” departmental initiative, which brought menstruation into the public eye on campus unlike ever before. As a Resident Advisor at Scripps, these events were my original idea and were carried out largely under my guidance. The presence of these events on campus during the course of my research greatly influenced observations made by my participants and their perception of the Scripps community in relation to menstruation. Students were provided with very recent opportunities to see menstruation and college life interact publicly, but their responses often did not recognize the work and careful consideration that went into successfully executing these events on campus.

Bringing menstrual discourse into the academic sphere through this research makes menstruation public and creates a space for the female body, contributing to the work that has been done by feminist anthropologists, scholars, and activists. It has been difficult, at times, to navigate the taboo nature of this topic with the public sphere each time that I introduce my thesis topic to someone. When I am speaking to another Scripps student or more broadly to another woman, I have felt more
comfortable explaining my topic than the times I have had to share my research with mixed company at a formal dinner or upon meeting a complete stranger. How do you invite a topic like menstruation into a space where it has not typically been welcome without isolating yourself or minimizing your academic project? It has been insightful for me to notice myself negotiate the public and private in the same ways as my interlocutors, aware of the boundaries of the body even as my work is attempting to break them.

In the creation of this project, both the participants and myself have actively resisted traditional discourses in order to bring menstruation into public consciousness in a way that neither isolates nor essentializes women and the vast range of their experiences. While these actions and articulations may not reflect a complete break from negative constructions of menstruation, they do offer valuable insight into the ways that women negotiate issues of the body, identity, and culture.
Chapter 1:

Re-envisioning the Public Sphere: Women’s Colleges, Menstruating Bodies

“Because I mean, if you can’t be a woman at a women’s college, then fuck.”

- Grace, Scripps senior

As a women’s college, Scripps provides a unique environment in which to examine the discourses of students regarding their bodies and the subject of menstruation. It is a space founded with the specific aim of educating women and fostering opportunities for their personal growth. My original theory about Scripps reasoned that living in an environment where the majority of individuals were female-bodied would allow women to feel more comfortable engaging in public conversation about menstruation. However, aside from the visibility of menstrual products at the Motley Coffeehouse, this was not what I observed to be the case at Scripps, at least not until an increase in dialogue among students was spurred by news of my thesis topic and by a week of menstruation themed programs on campus during the fall 2013 semester. Shock, curiosity, and excitement at the public presence of menstruation in these two forms reveals two contrasting realities: that menstruation has not been an open topic on campus, and that students envision Scripps as open to menstrual discourse because it is a women’s college. What is clear from conversations with students about the campus environment is that in reality the presence of menstruation as a topic and bodily experience is made acceptable...
according to distinctions of private and public space, a distinction that is often gendered.

In this chapter, I examine the formation and history of women’s colleges in relation to the current goals of these institutions, which reveal changing formations of public space. Then, by studying the spaces where students find menstruation to be more acceptably visible on campus, I pose that women’s bodies are still relegated to the private sphere based upon where students articulate feeling comfortable speaking. Lastly, I focus on the popular Motley Coffeehouse and a week of programming put on by Residential Life entitled “It’s That Time of the Month” to recognize deliberate efforts by the student body to move menstruation into the public sphere. Student reflections on these events demonstrate how discourses of menstruation become naturalized in the public sphere as a topic that the school has and should pay attention to in order to meet the expectation that women’s colleges will generate and promote safe public spaces for women and their bodies. As women and gender scholar Chris Bobel articulates, menstruation occupies an “uneasy place in the private and public spheres” (2010: 27). In this chapter, we see how menstruation inhabits this uneasy place as students consider the spaces and opportunities available for menstrual discourse within their college environment.

**Shifting Ideas of Public Space: The Women’s College**

Women’s colleges in the United States emerged in the early to mid 19th century in response to new social trends that, despite conflicting philosophies, encouraged higher education for primarily elite and upper class white women. One push for education came from the popular assumption of separate social spheres for
men and women, in which women were associated with the home. Educated women would become educated mothers who could more effectively nurture their children, which in turn would create a more educated society. Conversely, the women’s rights movement argued against separate social spheres for men and women, claiming that women were just as capable as men. Education was viewed as the pathway to achieving equality. Other trends that contributed to the rise in women’s education include a heightened demand for women as teachers, an increase in leisure time for women due to the industrial revolution, a growth in employment opportunities, and more literature available for women to read (Harwarth et al 1997). Since most colleges at the time would only admit male students, separate institutions were founded for women where they could earn comparable degrees with the men’s institutions while also gaining skills that would serve them in the domestic sphere later, as wives and mothers.

Arguments against the establishment of women’s colleges largely stemmed from concerns about women’s bodies and the greater effect that higher education for women could have on society as a whole. Retired Harvard Medical School Professor Dr. Edward Clarke wrote in an 1873 article titled Sex in Education that “if women used their ‘limited energy’ on studying, they would endanger their ‘female apparatus’” (Harwarth et al 1997). Similar arguments to that of Dr. Clarke tie women closely to with the sphere of the home and to their reproductive capabilities, suggesting that higher education would endanger society by producing fewer marriages and therefore fewer families. Women and their bodies were viewed as too
weak to handle the rigor of higher-level learning, and this weakness would detract from their true responsibility to the family.

Over time, several of the women’s colleges that were established in the United States have become coeducational, leaving only around 48 women’s colleges remaining today. In the contemporary context, these institutions argue that women’s colleges are necessary because they provide an educational environment that specifically allows women to reach their full potential. One study by Pascarella and Terenzini supports the notion that women’s colleges provide a “uniquely supportive climate for women” (Harwarth et al 1997: 87). In this environment, women are more likely to speak up and participate in the classroom, to engage in under-represented fields like math, science, and technology, to become student leaders, and to develop strong relationships with their peers. In an article for the Huffington Post arguing that women’s colleges might pose one possible solution to the gender gap, current Scripps student Elisabeth Pfeiffer writes “I think Scripps has inspired students to recognize the abilities they have, and further develop them with more confidence, becoming passionate leaders in their fields.” She goes on to include that the statistic that graduates of women’s colleges make up 20% of women in Congress and 30% of Businessweek’s list of rising women in corporate America. The ideal behind women’s colleges suggests that such focused attention on women, their education, and their opportunities during the undergraduate period will lead to increased confidence and success as leaders in their future careers.

5 http://www.usnews.com/education/articles/2009/03/11/list-of-womens-colleges
6 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elisabeth-pfeiffer/womens-colleges_b_2277623.html
Looking more closely at Scripps, the institution’s website for prospective students has an entire page devoted to the question “Why a Women’s College?” The answer to this question is given as follows:

...students take their education seriously, women support each other, and the atmosphere is one of encouragement and high expectations, not cutthroat competition. A women’s college is an excellent place to develop your leadership skills. There are many opportunities for women to lead, and many excellent examples to look to: your student body president, peer mentor, resident advisor, and manager at the Motley Coffeehouse are all women. With so many women leaders, you can find your own style and voice among them.

The college recognizes that its status as a women’s college sets it apart from the majority of colleges and universities in the US, and that for many applicants this difference becomes a point of concern or curiosity during the application process. To quell those feelings of uncertainty, the institution must emphasize the advantages of living, learning, and socializing in an atypical college environment during an era where single-sex education is not the norm. Scripps emphasizes that students will be able to see role models that look like them on campus, a stark contrast from the minimal representation of women in U.S. politics, business, and technology, among other fields. As alluded to previously by Pfeiffer, there are more opportunities for women to be in leadership and to see other women as leaders. Scripps concludes this web page by declaring that they offer “a college experience that places women at the heart of our mission.” With dedication to women and their experiences at the heart of its mission statement, Scripps aims to provide an environment in which attention is paid to women and their needs so that they can thrive academically and socially.

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7 http://admission.scrippscollege.edu/womens-college
The projected shift moving from the exclusion of women from higher education, to the creation of separate and restricted colleges, to capitalizing on the positive opportunities for personal and professional growth in single-sex college spaces resonates with what scholars have conceptualized as private and public. As mentioned earlier, in the nineteenth century the concept of “separate spheres” emerged and Western social scientists used the spheres of public and private as a way of categorizing certain contrasting moral principles such as community vs. individual, rational vs. irrational, money vs. love, among others (Gal 2002). These principles were clearly understood as opposing one another, enough that crossing from one aspect of the private into the public would cause mutual contamination.

The dichotomy created by the public and private distinction was often gendered, aligning women with the private and men with the public. As Sherry Ortner explains, woman is viewed as closer to nature because of her body and its functions, the social roles available to her because of her body, and her differing psychic structure (1974). Similarly, Gillian Rose asserts that the domestic and the feminine have been associated with the particular, the relational, and also the bodily (1993). Through this constructed femininity, which was bourgeois and white, women and the hindrances of their reproductive bodies were aligned with the domestic sphere and the responsibilities of the home.

The dichotomy between public and private has historically been a hierarchical relationship, with the public being valued more by society over the realm of the private. Feminist scholarship, such as the work of Ortner, has heavily critiqued this hierarchy as well as the naturalization of the separation between these
two spheres. Instead it is argued that the distinction between public and private, and the association of these spheres with specific genders, is culturally constructed rather than biologically determined by one’s sex. As a cultural construction, there is flexibility between the spheres, allowing for them to influence one another and for their boundaries to change over time. As Joan Landes articulates in a collection of essays about the relationship of feminism to the public and the private, “the line between public and private is constantly being renegotiated” (1998).

Thinking back to the context of higher education, the university setting can be conceived of as public space, with a public sphere that includes clubs, student organizations, and classrooms to prepare students to move into society as adults. It is therefore a space that has been dominated by and designed to serve the needs of men. Even with the advent of coeducational institutions, which claim to offer equal access for men and women to the public sphere, women are still relegated to a secondary status in these spaces. The reality is that their voices are less likely to be heard in the classroom setting, they are less likely to uphold leadership positions in student government and campus organizations, and they are less likely to pursue male-dominated fields like math and science (Kinzie et al 2007). Women may have gained access to the public sphere, but it is more difficult for them to occupy positions of leadership and achieve visibility because this space was not designed with women in mind. These features of coeducational education provide the conditions for the necessity of women’s colleges today. Education consultant David Strauss explains that although women tend to outperform men academically, “there are all kinds of
societal pressures” against doing so. Women’s colleges actively work to combat these societal pressures so that women will feel empowered to perform at their very best, which may result in the attainment of equal status in the public sphere.

In their modern existence, women’s colleges are a site of renegotiation for the line between public and private. The contemporary purpose of women’s colleges is to create an environment in which women benefit from resources specifically designed to encourage their intellectual and personal development, which takes the form of leadership skills and increased classroom and campus participation. In that sense, women’s colleges work to empower women by constructing a public space for women. Women’s colleges utilize a gendered division of space through the establishment of a single-sex learning and living environment to foster a safe public space for women in which they can see examples of women’s leadership and experience active participation in these roles. In a setting where the majority of students self-identify as women, there is no gender division of social spaces, which eliminates the hierarchical relationship where men are viewed as the rightful or most-qualified occupants of social spaces on campus. Claiming a public sphere for women may also mean, as represented in the responses of several Scripps students that I interviewed, that topics that are generally considered to be private, such as women’s bodies and their functions, may be able to take on more of a public presence.

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8 http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2013/04/11/womens-colleges-wilson
Uncovering Menstruation at Scripps

Menstruation, as a natural bodily process, and perhaps more importantly as a bodily process associated with the female body, has traditionally been kept in the private realm. Despite the necessary and natural role that it carries out in the female body, societies have particular practices and rules for the menstruating body (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). In the U.S., it is common for these practices to take the form of menstrual taboos or restrictions that keep the body hidden and secret. At Scripps, the overall message I received from students regarding their experiences with menstruation on campus was that Scripps provided a more open environment to talk about women’s bodies and their experiences based on its identity as a women’s college. “Open” as utilized by students means an accepting, comfortable, and nonjudgmental attitude towards menstruation or other contentious issues. Despite the overall view of Scripps as open, interview participants were very clear that there are certain spaces on campus that are more acceptable for conversations about menstruation and that are more likely to publicly acknowledge menstruation. In this section I will look at the relationship between students’ expectations of how Scripps should treat menstruation and the ways that students differentiate public and private spaces on campus.

Students articulated the college environment at Scripps as a particular climate that allowed for women’s bodily experiences to be more visible and acceptable in social settings. Several students indicated that they had become more verbal about their periods since coming to college, noting that they felt more comfortable at Scripps where they could share with a student population who could understand their
experiences. Renata, a Scripps junior, remarked, “you don’t have to hide at all. Like you could just say something [about your period] and people are bonded over that.”

The majority of students I interviewed expressed that they were open to talking about their period in a variety of settings and with a variety of people when they were on Scripps campus. This openness is closely tied to being a women’s college, which students tend to understand as meaning that the school is required to be supportive of women and their lived experiences. This support includes acknowledging the functions of the female body and providing students with information and support in whatever way is desired. One Scripps senior, Grace, explained that Scripps has an obligation to its community to be open about topics like menstruation. She imagined a scenario in which the administration were to say that menstruation themed events or conversations weren’t allowed on campus: “it’s like what would that be saying to us?...Because I mean it’s like if you can’t be a woman at a women’s college, then fuck.” Grace chuckled at the end of her exclamation, as if amazed at the absurdity of such a situation. Her commentary about being able to embrace all aspects of womanhood in an environment claiming to be specifically dedicated to women reflects back to the concept of women’s colleges as creating a public space for women. If the topic were to be hidden on campus, that would be seen as negating the realities of the majority of the student body, silencing part of their identity and pushing women back into the realm of the private. Grace continued this conversation by expressing her view, which was shared by many students, that Scripps works to perpetuate a specific culture of acceptance as part of the confidence it aims to instill in its students:
“I feel like there’s just such a culture of be comfortable with yourself and all that entails here at Scripps, which is great because you know that can be anything from be comfortable with like your sexuality or your weight or if you have acne or if you have like a mental illness, it’s like whatever. Be comfortable with it. Especially the things, if you’re female identified, the things that make you a woman. Because it’s a women’s college. There’s enough of us here and there’s enough of that culture, that it’s like, well why wouldn’t we talk about it?”

Part of what Grace is alluding to here is a certain element of pride and a celebration of womanhood that is encouraged in this environment. Not all students identify as women or view this as the only or most important factor of their identity, but the college does aim to provide extra support for all things “woman.” Claiming a female identity is what identifies the majority of the student body on campus and what makes the college a women’s college, so it is logical that the institution would try to cultivate some sort of pride for its students. The culture of comfort is another way of urging students to embrace their bodies and recognize that being a woman does not place someone at a lower ranking in a gender hierarchy. Making the discourse of the female body positive actively combats what Grace refers to as “that culture,” the shameful, negative attitudes that dominate society. Instead the shared “sisterhood” atmosphere described by students has the ability to function as a site of empowerment for those who claim “woman” as a central aspect of their identity. The question Grace poses at the end of her quote suggests that the sole presence of women at Scripps allows for women to act as voices of authority for their own experiences and have a candid conversation about their bodies without feeling like these experiences are less valued or misunderstood.
Despite the overwhelming affirmation of Scripps as an open atmosphere for recognizing the menstruating female body, students divided campus into locations where menstrual discourse was actually open and acknowledged versus places that were more closed off to these conversations. For students, public spaces were characterized as “open,” “shared” spaces for discourse, while private spaces were considered to be “closed off” and “personal” in nature. Comfort with Scripps as a whole was shown as students commonly said that they felt comfortable sharing about their bodies in most spaces on campus, or that they had talked with at least one person about their period in almost all social spaces at one point or another. The distinction between appropriate and inappropriate for many students was determined by who was occupying the space, which will be examined in the following chapter, and the ability to create a private space even within a more public environment, such as a quiet, intimate conversation among friends in a crowded living room. Overall, the spaces where students were more likely to discuss their periods were locations that usually were accessible only to students, such as the student union, the field house, and the residence halls. These student-only spaces create what can be understood as the “home space” within the college environment. It is important to note that not all students would view these spaces as part of their home space because of other facets of their identity, such as their race or sexuality, which may make these spaces uncomfortable. A family, sisterhood atmosphere within the “home” space becomes more complex if the sisters possess other differences, or may not even identify as a “sister.” However, as many students deem these spaces as appropriate and accepting towards menstrual discourse because of the personal,
closed off nature of the home space, they reveal the ways in which menstruation still manifests itself in more concealed, domestic realms.

The residence halls were one of the main locations where students felt menstruation was most visible and accepted on campus. This is not surprising if we think about these halls as the domestic, home sphere of Scripps. Over 90% of the student body lives on campus in these buildings, complete with dorm rooms, living rooms, TV rooms, kitchens, bathrooms, study spaces, and courtyards their home during the academic year. These spaces are more private for students, since faculty and administration are largely absent in the halls. When many students talked about having their menstrual periods at home, either prior to college or during vacations, they explained that it was usually a private conversation between themselves and their mothers or the women in the house. Similarly, the residence halls provide a home environment to share about one’s menstrual period with neighbors who are largely female-bodied. The comfort that students feel in these spaces reflects the position that menstruation has upheld in the private sphere, maintaining discourses of women’s bodies within the home.

Comfort within the residence halls may also stem from the fact that although Scripps provides a somewhat gendered division of space, this division does not isolate students from men in any way. Scripps is part of the co-educational Claremont Consortium of colleges, leaving it surrounded by institutions that interact with each other on a daily basis. Most women’s colleges today are actually part of consortiums or closely tied to co-educational colleges.\(^9\) The interaction that gets

\(^9\) [http://admission.scrippscollege.edu/facts](http://admission.scrippscollege.edu/facts)

played out between male and female students in spaces like the Motley, the dining halls, classrooms, and clubs at the various campuses depicts a reality in which Scripps is not really a completely isolated space for women. In many ways, Scripps depends on this relationship with the co-ed institutions, emphasizing this proximity on its website and in advertisements as an attempt to reassure prospective students who are concerned that they will be locked away from men as a result of attending a women’s college. It is important to consider, then, that not all spaces on campus are women-only.

The two spaces most commonly listed as inappropriate for conversations about menstruation were also the most public, and in the Scripps context, the most coeducational. One place was the dining halls, which was thought to be problematic because “there are a lot of guys there too and people don’t want to talk about their bodily functions when they’re eating food.” Similar to individuals’ discomfort in the Motley when women’s bodies and their functions were called to attention in a social eatery, discussing something thought to be unclean and dirty in a dining hall is unappealing. Among various cultures, bodily fluids, including menstrual blood, can be viewed as polluting because they have crossed the boundaries of the body and could then have a contaminating effect on certain sociocultural rituals and practices, such as the cooking and sharing of food (Douglas 1996). Jennifer, a Scripps first-year, shared that “it’s just been taught to me that it’s not appropriate to talk about certain bodily things at the dinner table…. I’ve just been raised with it and it’s automatic.” Ideas of contamination of this social sphere by the body and its natural processes create an unsettling atmosphere for students to be open about their bodies.
Students were also adamant that the classroom environment is not an acceptable forum for discussing one’s period, unless the class was discussing menstruation for some reason relating to the class material. This is not particularly surprising, since classroom etiquette encourages students to stick to the topic of class discussion. Students also spoke of maintaining a professional relationship between themselves and their professors, and that menstruation was not an appropriate part of this relationship unless it was the subject of study itself. And if it was the subject of study, it was included only as part of a classroom setting that functioned to examine issues relating to women and gender. My interlocutors did not bring up the presence of male students or professors as a reason for the topic not being appropriate. Instead the focus was on bringing a personal and private topic into a space that was meant to be professional. This focus demonstrates the ways in which understandings of public and private spheres and notions of appropriateness get played out. The discomfort with mixing the personal and the professional highlights the unnatural presence of menstruation, and consequently women and their bodies, in the public sphere.

Visible Bodies: The Motley

In every single interview I conducted, students named the Motley Coffeehouse as a place where menstruation was made to be visible on campus. This student-run coffee shop, commonly referred to as simply “The Motley,” is located in the heart of campus. It is open to students, faculty and staff of the Claremont Colleges, as well as outside visitors, but its most common customers are Scripps students. As a space operated by and oriented towards students, The Motley works to
create a supportive, public space for students and their bodies by openly engaging
with menstruation and other female-bodied issues as part of their business. The
Motley defines itself as an intersectional, political, and feminist business, and its
mission statement includes the aims of being a “socially responsible that explores
diverse feminist critiques” and fostering “thinking and purposeful change.” The
decor of the coffeeshop reflects this mission statement. On the wall behind the
counter there is a mural of a tree with words such as “feminism,” “sustainability,”
“community,” and “acceptance.” These words imply that this business is in touch
with the needs of its community and engages in consciousness raising about feminist
issues. In an attached room where there are tables, chairs, and couches for customers
to sit, there are painted molds of women’s breasts sitting in the windowsills, and a
bookshelf filled with feminist texts on topics including the female body. As observed
by all of my interlocutors, the Motley also engages its mission by selling feminine
hygiene products over the counter in addition to food and beverages. Right next to
the register is a bowl filled with tampons that can be purchased for 75 cents, as well
as a few DivaCups for sale for students looking for a more sustainable option to
feminine hygiene products. Stacked among their tea selections is a box labeled “PMS
Tea,” to help with mood and hormonal stress. These products are not hidden; they
are not items that must be specifically asked for as if part of a secret menu. They are
placed directly on the front counter in the plain eyesight of customers as they order
their food and drink.

A Motley manager explained to me that they began selling menstruation-related items because it was clear that there was a market for the products on

11 http://www.motleycoffeehouse.com/
campus. She elucidated, “we also consider ourself to be a feminist business, and by
selling these products I think that it demonstrates a way of supporting women-
through recognizing that menstruation is a natural thing that women go through. By
having the tampons out on the counter it hopefully will decrease the taboo around
menstruation and people can feel more comfortable about the topic.” She notes that
the overall response to these products has been positive, though it does surprise some
people to see menstrual products sold in a coffeehouse. The Motley understands its
decision to sell feminine-hygiene products as a form of resistance, of directly
challenging the separation of the body from the public sphere.

For a few of my interlocutors who work for the Motley, their discussions of
this space reinforced the idea of the Motley engaging in a feminist project as they make tampons and DivaCups available to students. Scripps senior and barista
Melissa mentioned the feminist mission of the Motley, stating, “I don’t think people
even recognize that this is a feminist action to provide that and to provide that so
openly. It just kind of proves that we’re not ashamed that this is a part of our bodies.
We’re not ashamed that this makes us female, and we’re going to provide you with
this resource so you don’t feel ashamed about it either.” Senior and barista Sunny
shares that it’s one of the ways the Motley is trying to support the community and to
“break stigma.” The fact that the Motley views this action as meeting the needs of
the community and as a deliberate feminist action to support women’s bodies
demonstrates that students feel like menstruation has not been entirely open to the
female body. Providing menstrual products for students functions as a way of saying
to the community, we acknowledge your body and we support it here.
In my interviews the majority of students expressed that selling menstrual products was something cool that set the coffee shop apart, making it uniquely Scripps. Renata talked about the sale of tampons as a way of reclaiming the women’s college space, even if that meant making other people uncomfortable for a little while. Jokingly she said, “it’s like hey, our periods are literally right out here at the cash register,” forcing people to be aware that this is a lived reality for women. Perhaps subconsciously, it may make customers think about the fact that periods are a regular thing that women have to pay for, monetarily and socially. Students also mentioned that this visibility of menstrual products was part of what made them feel like the Motley was a space where they could openly have a conversation with other students about their period.

While the sale of menstrual products was viewed as something positive, some students questioned whether the presence of these products in the Motley was more about appearing feminist than actually doing feminist work. Sophomore Chelsea doubted the intention: “I don’t think they really sell that many and I don’t think people are really interested in it. I think it’s more of a thing to be like yay, we’re a women’s coffeehouse and we sell feminine hygiene products. But I think there could be more done to make it truly a space where you can come in and that can be a thing.” Her comments suggest that the Motley’s debut of menstrual products is more for show, ignoring that students don’t actually feel comfortable purchasing these items in such a heavily populated setting. Indeed, of all the students who thought that the Motley was a more open space and approved of the fact that they sold menstrual products in the open, none of the students had ever purchased these products (though
I know students who have purchased them and the baristas stated that they had sold these products during their shifts). Junior Candace critiques Scripps for inviting only a “dash of feminism” to campus, using tampons on the counter as a way to make a statement about Scripps having just the right amount of “feminist and cool” for a women’s college. Her criticism suggests that the Motley’s actions stem from a desire to uphold a feminist image and make a bold statement rather than because they actually want to engage menstruation in the public sphere. While Candace admits that the Motley is taking a good first step, she wants the Motley to do more to challenge itself in terms of openly promoting menstrual discourse. Despite these critiques, it is important to recognize the work the Motley is doing to bring the reality of menstruation out in the open and to encourage positive, supportive discourse for students and the Claremont community.

Making the Private Public: “It’s That Time of the Month.”

As mentioned briefly earlier in the discussion of the residence halls, in early November of 2013 a group of six Resident Advisors planned a week of menstruation themed programs to be held on campus. The objectives for the week were to foster conversation and dialogue around the experience of menstruation, to provide education about menstrual health, and to empower students to feel comfortable with their bodies. During this week, which was entitled “It’s That Time of the Month,” there were two special events held on campus as well as passive educational programming that could be seen on the walls and entryways of the residence halls throughout the week. The topic of menstruation was plastered across campus, forcing
itself into the consciousness and the conversations of Scripps students and the broader Claremont community.

Through my observations and analysis of these events, what I aim to emphasize is that these events were deliberate efforts to bring menstruation into the public consciousness in a way that I had not experienced during my four years at Scripps, but they are remembered by students as examples of the continuous support that the institution provides to women. The taboo nature of menstruation has largely removed it from the consciousness of students as a topic that could be openly discussed, which creates a silence that leaves students desiring information as well as validation of their experiences. This silence is what establishes the need for conversations and programming on the issue. Once the subject is brought into the public eye, many students eagerly embrace the exploration of a reality that was once withheld. Yet at the same time that students are intrigued by a subject that has not been previously made available to them, they naturalize these events as a normal part of Scripps life. The expectation that women’s colleges, and therefore Scripps, have a responsibility to their communities to create a space for discourse on women’s issues leads students to view these activities as consistently occurring. They become examples of the ways that Scripps actively supports women and renegotiates the separation between public and private.

As part of my analysis, it is imperative that I locate myself and the influential role I played in instigating and planning the events that took place as part of “It’s That Time of the Month.” Once I became a Resident Advisor and learned about the educational and social programs I would have to plan as part of my job, I knew that I
wanted to provide opportunities for Scripps students to discuss their personal experiences with their bodies. When I would discuss my interest in menstruation with other women, I often felt like I had opened a doorway into another world, as they took hold of the opportunity to share as if they weren’t sure when they would get the chance again. I saw my new leadership position as a platform for bringing menstruation out into the open. The curiosity that so often accompanied my conversations with women at Scripps about their periods convinced me that the campus was ready and would be supportive of a menstruation program.

When I brought the idea of planning a menstruation event on campus to the rest of the Residential Life staff, there was such strong interest among other RAs that it was decided that a team of RAs would work together to plan a larger event around the subject. While the team was excited by the possibilities for programming, there was also an understanding that special care had to be taken in how the events were presented to the Scripps community. With the exception of a workshop focusing on menstruation in the media that took place on campus in late October after we had already announced our events, this was the first time during my four years at Scripps that I had seen menstruation themed events occur on campus. Consequently, there was no concrete sense of how the community would respond to the very public emergence of what for many is a very private topic. Keeping that in mind, our team tried to be very thoughtful in our advertising of the events. As we worked with the communications office to make flyers, we initially struggled with what imagery to put with our text, not wanting to make our posters too graphic to the point that students would feel disgusted or uncomfortable. Even in our desire to create a public
presence, we still had to negotiate appropriate representations of the female body and its processes. In the end we chose to be more subtle, contrasting bold type against a bright red background, using large circles around our event titles to allude to periods. These flyers were posted all over campus and in the residence halls, emails went out announcing the events through a student list-serve and a list-serve for Intercollegiate Women’s Studies, information was posted on the front page of the Scripps intranet page Inside Scripps, and perhaps most commonly accessed by students were the two Facebook events that were created.

“Know Your Flow with HEO”

On the evening of Tuesday November 5th, the first event of the week entitled “Know Your Flow with HEO” served as an opportunity for students to obtain information about their menstrual cycle. HEO stands for Health Education Outreach, a student services program that works to provide resources that empower students to make healthy lifestyle choices for themselves. The center provides information about safe sex, the effects of alcohol usage, mental health concerns, among other issues. For this event the director of HEO and a student who works as a peer health educator led a discussion that began by going over female reproductive anatomy, then explaining what happens during the menstrual cycle and how it can be charted, and answering any and all questions that were asked by students.

The event occurred in the living room of Clark residence hall, a large open study and meeting space that is decorated in the style of a time gone by, with antique armchairs, long striped curtains, and a high ceiling filled with simple chandeliers.

See Appendix for image of event advertisement.
Chairs and couches were arranged in an inviting circle to create a comfortable atmosphere for an informal conversation. There were three tables outside of this circle that held different items for the event. On one table there were all types of “red” snacks, playing with the theme of menstruation and blood. There was Hawaiian punch, strawberries, Swedish Fish, Twizzlers, Hot Tamales, and the stereotypical period food of choice, chocolate. The second table held items that were free for participants in the event, such as pads and tampons. The RA team had made buttons and magnets for students that were red and had the words “Know Your Flow” written on them in bold letters. There was also a box where students could submit questions anonymously. HEO provided their own materials to complete the space as well. Above this second table was a poster with a diagram of a uterus and female anatomy, while across the room was a poster with a calendar marking the different time periods of the menstrual cycle. Towards the end of the room was another small table, where HEO placed several products that they brought to be part of a raffle for students, which included a DivaCup, Vagisil, pads and tampons, and a few other feminine hygiene products. HEO also provided a plastic model of the cervix, a large supply of free condoms, and literature relating to the female body that students could browse.

Students slowly started to trickle into the event just before it started, mostly coming in groups of two or three rather than alone. They grabbed some red snacks from the table and found a place in the circle of chairs. By the time the event began, there were almost 40 students sitting around the circle or filling it in by sitting on the floor. For both “Know Your Flow” and the second menstruation event, the majority
of the attendees were first year students. The strong presence of first years is interesting since they are still becoming acquainted with the Scripps community and its activities, and many of them are away from home and making decisions for themselves for the first time. Throughout the event, HEO raffled off the feminine care products they provided. Special pink raffle tickets were given to students who asked questions and participated in the discussion, and the winner of that raffle received the DivaCup, a more expensive item.

Although HEO had a few topics to discuss informally with the group, the overall format of the discussion was students asking questions about their menstrual cycles or menstruation in general. Before the event, a Formstack link had been provided to the student body, allowing them to submit anonymous questions for the director to answer. The question box was also continuously passed around throughout the evening so that students could continue to submit personal questions if so desired. The majority of questions, however, were asked publicly by students as part of the conversation. About halfway through the discussion, I noticed that a student who had stayed in the living room to study had put her work down and turned around to listen and even make her own commentary. Overall, students were actively engaging in the dialogue, contributing parts of their own experience, asking questions, and listening to the responses.

The questions asked by students centered on concerns about normalcy as well as menstruation in relation to birth control and sex. Students appeared concerned about the regularity of their cycles in comparison to what might be considered “normal.” Some of the anonymous questions included: Why does my vagina look
gross and not like the vaginas I see in porn? What’s the point of discharge? Why am I really gassy when I have my period? Students had several questions about birth control and how it affected the menstrual cycle, and there was curiosity about the way that women who are living together often have their cycles sync up and why that happens. The event lasted for two hours, with nonstop questions and commentaries from students up until the end of the event. HEO answered all these questions with an underlying message of how important it is to know one’s body.

The evaluations of the event were very positive, stating that the evening was extremely informative and that they had learned at least one new thing. Many students articulated a desire for more events like this on campus on a regular basis for students to be able to ask questions and get information about their periods. Outside of the event, several other students shared with me that they would have been at the event if it weren’t for class conflicts and that they were curious about the information that was given out. The eager attitude of students at the event when asking questions suggests that there is a desire for information about menstruation to help students process what is normal for their bodies. Scripps, as a women’s college, sets up a safe environment in which women can relate to one another and ask questions of a more personal nature that apply to their experience, their bodies. While these events were most likely not the first time that students had access to this information, it may have been the first time they had access to this information on their own terms. When learning about menstruation from a parent or guardian or in a classroom setting, students may not have felt comfortable asking questions, particularly about the relationship between menstruation, sex, and birth control. This
event allowed students to ask questions and gain information about aspects of menstruation that they did not need or did not feel safe asking at a younger age.

While this event did openly engage with menstrual discourse and aimed to help students feel informed and supported about their bodies, it still operated within particular frameworks of what would be acceptable to the student body. Candace, a Scripps junior, brought attention to this during her interview, when she pointed out that this event took place within one of the residence halls. Speaking to these events, she shares,

I feel like events like that are useful because sharing experiences helps dispel myths and create understanding…. that being said though, the forum of those events being in the residence halls, it still kind of confines periods to like a women’s own space at the women’s campus in the residence halls, kind of like a Scripps only within your own dorm in your own sphere, so that doesn’t totally push—I guess I’m advocating for if we wanted like a feminist campus to address period issues, it wouldn’t be something that’s just relegated to….the personal sphere, and in the home and specifically like very female-centered spaces.

As Candace emphasizes, Scripps is doing important work that benefits its student body by creating events that allow for positive and informative menstrual discourse to occur. Yet even as these events push menstruation into an open, shared space for students, they are still bound by normative silences surrounding the bleeding body. Instead of bringing menstruation into the public consciousness more broadly by hosting the events in a space outside of the residence halls or encouraging students from the other Claremont Colleges to attend, they occurred within the “home” space, which is more closed-off and intimate for Scripps students specifically. Candace’s critique is not to meant to invalidate the ways that Scripps resists negative or silencing discourses about the female body through these events, but rather to point
out the ways in which we can still push ourselves to challenge notions of what is appropriate or acceptable.

“The Uterus Flag Project: Sit & Stitch”

The second event of the week took a more creative approach to menstruation, encouraging students to feel empowered by their bodies through an arts and crafts project. “The Uterus Flag Project: Sit & Stitch” brought southern California artist Terrilynn Quick to campus to lead a workshop in which students decorated flags painted with the image of a uterus using traditional “women’s materials” such as yarn, beading, and thread work. Decorating and presenting these flags functioned as an avenue for students to tell stories about their bodies and menstrual experiences. Inspired by Tibetan prayer flags and concerned about the medicalization of women’s bodies, Quick began the Uterus Flag Project as a way for women to creatively make a statement about their uterus and its history. Quick shares that her mission is “educating through the power of art, integrating the ideals of feminism to change the consciousness about women’s health.” When she meets with women in person to make the flags and foster a dialogue, she calls the event a “sit and stitch,” after the feminist craftivism concept of a “stitch and bitch,” allowing a space for women to openly share their experiences while doing social justice artwork.

I was the contact person for this project, since I had already participated in Quick’s project after finding out about her artwork via social media and had spoken with her about the possibility of coming to campus in the future. There were several other popular events happening on campus that night, leaving me nervous that the student body would not popularly receive a uterus art project. The event was held in
the student union, a space for students located above the dining hall. The space has a large open room when you enter, surrounded by small conference rooms where students can meet or study. I met Quick two hours before the event to decorate the space with 198 flags designed by past participants of the project. The flags, embroidered with various designs of a uterus, were strung together and then hung crossing one another across the open space in the student union where the event was held. Upon entering the student union, one would immediately confront almost 200 images of artistic uteri, completely filling the space. As students entered the space, you could hear comments like “woah!” as they viewed the flags for the first time and then began to look more closely at all the differing designs. Before the actual art project had even begun, the female body had completely taken over the space, forcing itself and its reproductive organs into the spotlight.

There was a table in the back of the room that had juice and cookies, as well as little pins with an image of a pink uterus printed on them for students to take with them. A large circle in the center of the student union was made out of chairs and couches for students to sit, surrounding a table where the painted flags lay. Another table possessed needles, thread, yarn, beads, markers, and all kinds of random craft supplies for students to use to decorate their flags. On a chalkboard in the space that could be seen from the entrance, Quick had written in large calligraphy “Your voice is justified and uniquely your own.” About 35 students came and participated in the project. Quick began by sharing about her work and the history of the project before encouraging students to dive into the process of decorating their painted flags. Once again, the majority of the students who participated were first-year students. During
the event, which lasted just over two hours, the process of creating a personal flag captivated students. Craft projects, so often absent from the daily life of college students, provided students with a creative outlet to show pride in their bodies.

Huddled together in small groups across the open space of the student union, students intently focused on the task of choosing which yarns, beads, photographs, or text they wanted to incorporate into their chosen flag. Quick and I moved from group to group during this time, observing the process and visiting with participants. At one point during the event, Quick attempted to get students to share with the group about their flags and their own personal experiences with menstruation, but there was some reluctance to speak in front of so many people. My sense was that part of this hesitation was due to the largely first year population, who may have been shyer to speak to their experiences with such a large, unknown crowd. As I walked around the room, conversations within the small groups of students ranged from talking about the flags and complaining about menstrual periods, to gossiping about campus drama and plans for the weekend. At the end of the night, Quick allowed students to either keep their flag or donate it to her project. Most students had become attached to their work and wanted to keep it.

One of the other RAs who worked to plan the event shared that she had spoken with a few people who decided to not come to the event because it sounded weird, or because they didn’t understand what it really was. Response to this event from those who attended, however, was extremely positive. Students responded well to the opportunity to participate in a craft project that celebrated their bodies. Megan, a Scripps first-year who attended the event with her roommates, said that she thought
the crafting experience was cute, and that it brought about interesting conversation amongst her roommates as to how they do or do not feel connected to their uteri. She added that initially her roommates thought the week of events was weird, and “funny that we had a lot of really substantial programming around menstruation.” She stressed that her roommates are fairly open and comfortable talking about their periods, but that “organized activity [in the form of events] seemed a little strange.” The attitude of her roommates demonstrates the unfamiliarity of putting menstruation into the public eye for a prolonged period of time, as well as an uncertainty about the benefit of giving so much attention to menstruation. And yet the impact of having a student space on campus covered with uterus flags continued even after the event, as I heard students discussing it in public spaces on campus such as the Motley and Seal Court. A few weeks later when I walked through the residence halls with a friend, I noticed that some of the first year students had hung their uterus flags on the door to their room, making them very visible if you were to enter their living space. In this way, the Uterus Flag Project gave the female body a very noticeable and impressionable place on Scripps campus. Once again, these flags were displayed in the student union and later on people’s individual doors within the residence halls, so they were still mostly only visible to Scripps students within the spaces that are more closed off and private.

Passive Programming

The final element of “It’s That Time of the Month” included passive programming in the residence halls, meaning posters that students could interact with on their own time rather than an actual planned event. While this programming is
described as “passive” because it conveys a message to the student body without being a formal event, students were actively engaged in interacting and responding to these posters. At the beginning of the week, a large piece of colored butcher paper was placed in the entryway to each of the residence halls with the unfinished sentence “My period makes me feel…” Students were encouraged to complete this sentence in whatever way they felt called to represent their own experience. Some of the comments written included, “Like I want to murder someone, but also I want soft pretzels,” “antisocial,” “relieved I’m not pregnant,” “like a broken faucet,” and “like I’m on top of the world!” among many, many others. During the time the posters were hanging in the residence halls, I saw students observe the posters in various ways. Sometimes groups of students would laugh together over what others had written, sometimes they would take pictures of the posters, and other times they would just quietly read the variety of responses.

Towards the middle of the week, red pieces of paper with facts relating to menstruation and feminine hygiene products were placed on the walls throughout the residence halls. One fact read, “An entire menstrual period releases less than half a cup of blood, including clots,” while another reported that “Periods tend to be heavier, more painful, and longer in colder months.” These facts served as something interesting for students to read as they walked through the hallways of the residence halls, and attempted to create increased visibility and conversation about menstruation among students. Weeks after “It’s That Time of the Month” had ended, several of these facts remained on the walls of the residence halls for students to read.

13 See Appendix for full list of student’s comments on the posters.
Students played with notions of public and private as they interacted with these posters within the more personal, student-oriented space of the residence halls. The posters were visible to anyone that entered the halls, but the reality that Scripps students mostly populate the residence halls does make them more oriented towards a specific community. Cassie, a Scripps senior, explained that one thing she liked about the posters was that they were placed

…. right when you walk in, and if you’re going to go down the hallway, it’s right there, so it’s not even in a place where only Scripps students will see it. It’s like anybody who enters a Scripps dorm is going to see that. And I think that’s cool because that’s like saying, everyone who lives here is dealing with this and half of the population is dealing with this, and it’s something that people should feel comfortable talking about.

Cassie’s comments demonstrate the ways in which the posters created an opportunity for students to openly share their thoughts and feelings about their bleeding bodies in a way that took over a community space, forcing itself into public consciousness. As students privately interact with the posters to read the comments and include their own experiences, they engage in a public expression of menstrual discourse. The anonymous nature of writing a comment on the poster without having to acknowledge personal identity allowed for many students to publicly engage the topic in more honest ways. Students may feel a sense of security and safety through the process of contributing to campus conversation surrounding menstruation from the comfort of their own private sphere. In this way, the passive programming becomes a tool for renegotiating the separation between the personal and the public.
As mentioned earlier, part of my interest in studying menstruation on campus for my thesis and in planning these events for students stemmed from what I observed to be a lack of public conversation about menstruation at Scripps. During my time as a student I had witnessed Scripps take on other taboo topics such as sex and pleasure for women, but menstruation did not have a place. I began interviewing students for my projects shortly after “It’s That Time of the Month” occurred. It seemed clear to me that the attention that this week brought to menstruation influenced the responses of my interlocutors, leading them to see menstruation as much more public on Scripps campus than I had anticipated. Their responses pointed to the dynamic nature of discourse, the ways in which it is constantly evolving. Several students reflected that “It’s That Time of the Month” was a good representation of the types of programming Scripps made available to its students on a regular basis. There was a sense that Scripps takes an active role in bringing sensitive topics that impact women’s lives to the forefront. While students spoke of the events as “expected” of Scripps, some students also mentioned hearing friends from other colleges make comments of a stereotypical nature such as “Only at Scripps!” or “Your school would do that,” when they saw the posters in the residence halls or heard about the events. The tone of these comments implies that of course a women’s college would draw attention to women’s issues that tend to make other people uncomfortable. Cassie, who did not attend the events but had participated in the posters in the halls, stated:

“Scripps doesn’t only like talk about being a place where women can feel comfortable being women but they, you, us, we provide actual
opportunities for that kind of bonding and stuff to happen. And like something that I thought was cool about the poster where people could write stuff about their period was... it’s like right when you walk in...It’s like anybody who enters a Scripps dorm is going to see that. And I think that’s cool because that’s like, everyone who lives here is dealing with this and half of the population is dealing with this and it’s something that people should feel comfortable talking about.”

Cassie’s fumbling over which pronoun to use to talk about the actions of Scripps serves as a reminder of the various groups of people and individuals who speak for Scripps and who decide whether menstruation is something that should be more visible and acceptable. What Cassie and other students expressed was an expectation that Scripps, whether that’s administration, faculty, clubs, or individual students, would create a safe and open space for these dialogues because commitment to women is at the heart of the mission of the college.

One word that kept popping up to talk about the public presence of menstruation at Scripps was “normal,” implying that an all-women’s environment creates a comfortable space for topics pertaining to women to become naturalized, as though their presence had always been public. While this naturalization shows that students feel comfortable with the ways that menstruation was made public, it also denies the reality that this was the first time in my experience that menstruation really entered the public sphere at Scripps. Part of why students had so many questions at “Know Your Flow” and were so curious about what would happen during this week of events stemmed from the actuality that menstruation, as a taboo issue belonging to women, was not brought forward at Scripps as a desirable topic of conversation prior to the fall of 2013. What is apparent from this desire for events and the subsequent naturalization of them is that the public and private can be
renegotiated at Scripps. Students have both an expectation and a desire for Scripps to be an open space for their bodies and their experiences made public. The “public” at Scripps, perhaps with the exception of the Motley, still takes on forms that closely resemble conceptions of the private. The Residential Life programming took place in a residence hall and in the student union, two spaces that are more closely tied to the idea of “home” for students, a safe space that is mostly dominated by women. How would these events have been received if they were held in the Motley, or if they had been made available to the rest of the Claremont College community? There is a desire, a push, for openness at Scripps, but students are still in the process of negotiating what exactly that openness can look like in this environment without compromising their own understandings of public and private.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how menstruation is talked about and made visible in an environment that is founded with the mission of supporting women and creating opportunities for their personal and professional growth. Scripps, as a women’s college, identifies itself as a space in which women are put first. The students who choose to live and learn there also express an obligation of Scripps to its community to establish a space where women and their bodies, traditionally relegated to a private and hidden realm, are unconcealed and celebrated just for the very nature of being women’s bodies.

Although students overall expressed comfort with discussing their period at Scripps, they did make clear distinctions in the kinds of places where menstruation had more of a visible presence. Spaces such as the Motley Coffeehouse, which make
a deliberate effort to put menstruation into public consciousness, stand out to many students as true examples of the private made public in the context of women’s colleges. When events occur on campus such as the “It’s That Time of the Month” programming, Scripps is understood to be undertaking its normal and expected duty to its students of providing opportunities for information and conscious marking of the fact that women occupy this space. It becomes a significant activity that functions as a reminder of the institution’s identity as a women’s only space. However, the need to create a public space for menstruation reveals the reality that even at Scripps, it is still not completely free and natural to talk about menstruation as a regular experience of those who are female bodied.
Chapter 2: 
Defining Relationships through Discourse

Just as the first chapter revealed that students made distinctions about which spaces on campus were more or less receptive to bringing menstruation into the public eye via dialogue, events, or products for sale, students also differentiate between the people they share with and the ways that they share. Despite the overall openness that students feel menstruation receives in the Scripps community, they must still navigate the physical spaces and individual interactions that in reality respond differently to the topic based upon how it is presented. This chapter explores with whom students feel comfortable talking about their periods and what these personal conversations actually look like in terms of language and context. First, I show how notions of comfort, closeness, and understanding impact who students talk to, focusing on the distinctions most commonly made between sharing with women and opening up, or not, to men. More critically, the chapter then demonstrates the ways in which appropriate forms of discourse are established for talking about menstruation. These standard and acceptable scripts for conversation tend to create a boundary that excludes sharing intimate details about bodily functions and does not allow for menstrual experiences that stray from the normative concept of what menstruation should be like for all women. Through these distinctions of language and context, students reveal that menstrual discourse serves a tool for understanding one’s relationship to another person.
Gauging Comfort Levels

When asked in which spaces on campus are they most likely to feel comfortable talking about their periods, several students replied that feeling comfortable is not dependent on the space as much as it is dependent upon who is occupying the space. One senior used the example that she would talk with a friend or close friends about her period in a classroom, but she probably would not talk about her period if she was meeting there with a professor or if the room was full of students she did not know. In this case and many similar reflections, the type of relationship possessed between persons played an important factor in how students determined if it was socially safe to discuss their periods in a particular setting. As discussed in the previous chapter, students feel that Scripps creates a very open environment for talking about the female body. This openness is what led many students to immediately answer yes when asked if they felt comfortable talking about their period with others. Once students began to expand upon their answer, however, it was clear that the phrase “being open” did not mean being open to everybody. It came with its own set of stipulations for who could be trusted with the conversation, sometimes involving the gender of the other person, sometimes not. Underneath students’ responses about being open and comfortable with another person were three main considerations: comfort, closeness, and understanding.

The comfort level of the person or persons they were talking to was one of the first things mentioned by students as something they consider before sharing about their periods. Emma, a senior, stated that it may seem like she is not the most comfortable talking about her period because she is afraid to make others feel
uncomfortable, and therefore doesn’t bring it up very much. She explained, “I know I think you should be comfortable talking about this, but I understand if you’re not, so that’s why I’m kind of hesitant.” Emma’s conversation showed that she found topics like menstruation and sex to be really important and necessary for women to discuss with one another, but that she generally did not want to make anyone else feel uneasy. Another senior, Savannah, said that when she was bringing up her period in a conversation with someone, she tried to gauge if the other person is uncomfortable before continuing. Although students turned away from talking about their own comfort levels to focus on that of the other person, the need to be concerned about how the other person is going to respond may reflect on the individual student. If Savannah, for example, were to disregard the cues of discomfort from the other person and continue talking about her period, it would reflect negatively on her, not the person she was talking to. Savannah would have opened up about her body and her experiences only to be viewed as inappropriate and crossing the boundary keeping the body in the private sphere. Not wanting to make someone else feel uncomfortable is also about not wanting to lose face in the relationship by being too open about one’s experiences. Gauging the comfort of the other person is as much about censoring oneself for one’s own personal protection as it is about accommodating someone else.

The last two factors, closeness and understanding, are reproduced in intertwining ways as interlocutors differentiated between women, with whom they generally felt comfortable discussing their periods, and men, about whom there was more debate. Most interlocutors voiced that they were most at ease talking with close
friends or other women. Comfort with close friends implied being free from judgment and knowing that the friend is a safe person to open up to about personal matters. Comfort with women stemmed from knowing that another woman has also menstruated and therefore understands the experience and can relate or empathize in some way. Living at a women’s college combined both of these areas of comfort together in a way that made students feel even more secure in talking about their experiences on campus. Talking about a topic that is not generally acceptable for discussion with a larger audience was one way that students created solidarity within their relationships. Close friends for most students were other Scripps students, meaning other women who not only understood menstruation and could relate, but who also had established trusting relationships with the interlocutors. Being part of a community of women in a setting engineered to support women leaves students feeling like Scripps is a safe space for making menstruation more visible than it had been in high school or back in students’ home communities. Lisa, a senior, illustrates this point when she claims that she would feel comfortable openly asking for a tampon in any one of her Scripps classes. She knows that the women in her classes will understand her needs and be able to meet them, so she is more likely to be upfront about her period even in a more public setting where she might not know all of the women present personally.

Closeness and understanding play out very differently in the ways that students articulated their comfort levels in speaking to men about their periods. Students had varying opinions and experiences about how appropriate, necessary, and comfortable it was to address their period with men based upon how they were
raised, what their friend groups looked like, the ways they had seen men publicly and privately respond to menstruation, and the types of relationships they were in. For some students, like Jennifer and Elsa, menstruation was treated as somewhat of a secret among women when they were growing up. It was not something comfortably talked about with fathers or brothers, so it was not something they talked about with other men either. Sunny and Chelsea, however, commented that they had men in their friend groups and periods were something that the men knew about it and that was discussed fairly openly. They had formed close enough relationships of trust with these guys so that they felt comfortable being honest about what they were experiencing and if they needed to stop at a store for tampons or if they were feeling moody.

A few students noted that they were comfortable talking to guys they were friends with but that it often depended upon the context because they had observed that men behave differently whether they were alone or with a group of other men. It was noticed that when the men would be together in a group, they would often joke more about women’s bodies and their cycles, making fun of the tampons and diva cups at the Motley or pretending to drink the PMS tea. This behavior may stem from feeling uncomfortable with the topic or from pressures from the other males to act a certain way. The discomfort or uncertainty about how to respond to visible evidence of menstruation may also be rooted in a genuine lack of knowledge about the topic. This is evidenced by students sharing that when they were alone with men and the topic was broached, the men had a lot of questions to ask and were more curious about what was happening to the women’s bodies during that time. The change in
public versus private behavior exhibited by many men around the subject of menstruation was noticed by Lisa, who found the contrast to be very interesting. Lisa remarked that the silence around menstruation negatively affects men as well as women because it doesn’t allow for them to really learn what it is beyond what is discussed in a 5th grade health class. She says, “I don’t think they understand past either exaggerations of what a period is or purely biological things. It’s either like PMSing crazy person or this is the female reproductive system. I don’t think that there’s a lot of conversation on it so it limits the wide range of experiences that women actually have. Which is probably pretty confusing for them [men].” Lisa’s observations here suggest a need for men to have better education about what is happening in the female body, and for a cultural shift in which men feel more comfortable talking to women, publicly and privately, to hear about more than the stereotypical representations of the menstruating woman. Some students felt like they did take on a more active role as an educator for their male friends, being “THE Scrippsie” who answered all questions about female bodies. Women still may not choose to share with men, however, since so much of women’s conversations with each other about menstruation takes the form of commiseration, as will be discussed later in this chapter. As Lisa and Melissa express, they are deterred from talking to men about their periods because men will never be able to experience it firsthand, and therefore will never fully understand.

Students also presented contrasting opinions about talking about menstruation with their romantic partners, who in almost all cases were male. While most felt that open communication was necessary in terms of telling your partner if
you had cramps, were emotional, or needed to get tampons, students had varying opinions relating to sex. Two students talked about having sex on their period, though they had experienced very different responses from their sexual partners. One student found that it was not a big deal for the men she was having sex with as long as she let them know beforehand. The situations often left her feeling empowered about her body and the relaxed, accepting nature of her sexual partners. Another student expressed that after sex she had talked to her sexual partner about the experience to hear his thoughts on the experience and he had been kind of grossed out by seeing her blood, which she understood and did not want to make a big deal about. The experience did not seem to sway her decision to have period sex again in the future. Three other students mentioned period sex, but to convey their discomfort with the thought of it. Some of them talked about feeling like menstruation was an inconvenience for their partners, since it meant that sex would not be happening during that week, though their partners had never explicitly said that. One student made the comment that she was not comfortable with period sex at this point in her life because college has such a hookup culture and she would really feel the need to have a trusting relationship with a partner before engaging in something so intimate for her. The hesitation from students to participate in sex while menstruating largely arises from feelings of embarrassment and disgust towards their bodies in a very intimate situation with another person, who in the cases of these interlocutors, has never menstruated. Once again, closeness of relationship plays a huge part in setting up a safe space for students to feel like they don’t need to apologize for their bodies.
What are students really saying when they speak of comfort, closeness, and understanding? How does qualifying the situations in which they use menstrual discourse impact their relationships with other people? Students are not gauging the comfort levels of others because they are curious about how other people feel about menstruation and the body. They are using menstrual discourse as a way of understanding and measuring their relationships with other people. Menstruation is a private topic because it has been socially stigmatized. Publicly addressing this subject with an individual or a group means inviting them into a personal, private aspect of one’s life. Comfort, closeness, and understanding become a test of trust, security, and connection that students utilize to make sense of their relationships. When they choose to speak of menstruation, the conversation is about more than the female body and individual experience; it is simultaneously a marker for the strength of the relationship and a tool that can be used to increase the closeness and trust within that relationship.

Even with students asserting that Scripps provides a supportive atmosphere for conversations about menstruation to take place among students, most interviews reflected that at Scripps, and in society more broadly, there is a need for menstruation to be made more visible and to be talked about more openly. Based on these interviews, it seems that Scripps appears to be a more open space for menstrual discourse because the majority female-bodied population allows for menstruation to have more of a presence and acknowledgement than it does outside of the college bubble. That does not mean, however, that there aren’t limitations to the ways in which it is discussed and with whom it is discussed. By examining the language that
students use in situations where they feel comfortable bringing up their periods, we can see some of the opportunities for growth in the ways that menstruation is rendered visible.

Acceptable Menstrual Discourse

I remember a conversation that I had with two friends in high school, in which they emphatically recounted the cramps, the crying during commercials, and the cravings for ice cream they experienced during their periods. I watched the conversation ping pong back and forth between them until suddenly they slammed their metal locker doors shut and turned to face me. What came next was an accusation: you don’t complain enough about your period. By not openly sharing when I was menstruating and by not complaining about the inconvenience of my own body, I was denying my friends access to an intimate part of my life and ignoring an opportunity for us to bond over a shared experience. If I wanted to fit in, I needed to be angry at my uterus or joking about my changing emotions.

My friends provided me with my first glimpse into what scholar Chris Bobel refers to as acceptable menstrual discourse (2010). Jokes about mood swings and complaints about cramps form the appropriate medium through which women can mention what is happening with their body during menstruation. Through this limited discourse a standard script is created for women around a basic understanding of what menstruating is assumed to be like for most individuals. This script may include stereotypical images of the menstruating woman, such as the woman who craves chocolate or who cannot control her emotions. Acceptable menstrual discourse reflects the ways in which society allows for menstruation to be
rendered visible, but it is neither inclusive of all experiences nor does it permit all aspects of one’s experience to be made public. Instead it contributes to a normative model of how menstruation should be discussed, and in turn this model perpetuates a normative understanding of how menstruation is lived. Acceptable menstrual discourse allows for women to acknowledge that menstruation is something they share without delving into detail or individual bodily tendencies. In that way, they create a “space” for menstrual discourse that is more complex, with specific guidelines for how menstruation is to be mentioned.

For the Scripps students I interviewed, acceptable menstrual discourse infiltrates the conversations they have with others about their periods. Students articulated that even within their interactions with the people they felt most comfortable talking to, there is a conversational boundary. Complaints and humor that can evoke an empathetic response are deemed admissible in public conversation, but statements that are too graphic, include other bodily functions, or that may not be shared by all those who menstruate are inappropriate. As Taylor, a Scripps junior pointed out, “the more you can create a picture out of what I’m saying, I’m probably not going to share that information.” While every student I talked to asserted that overall they felt comfortable talking about their period, especially in an environment like Scripps, they also made it clear that these conversations are played out in specific ways.

Acceptable discussions of menstruation within the Scripps community centered around recognizing that periods are a reality shared by most of the student body. Ariadne described menstruation as something that is viewed by the community
as a “surface level thing,” meaning that although it does come up in conversation, it is not going to reach an intimate or more personal level. She listed asking for a tampon, complaining about cramps or PMS, and talking about food cravings as among the pervading discourse for students. Elsa, a junior, positively referred to these topics as “traditions,” that provide fun opportunities for women to bond over their mutual period experiences. Being able to talk about one’s period in this way with friends becomes part of the expected and necessary aspects of menstruating. She explained to me that she talks about menstruation with her friends using “stupid slang terms for it like surfin’ the crimson wave or dumb things like that, like code words,” which she later describes as a “kind of fun vocabulary that goes with periods.” For Elsa, acceptable menstrual discourse is the only possible way for menstruation to be discussed because otherwise menstruation is what she refers to as a “shushing thing,” meaning to be kept quiet. If something so private is going to make an appearance in public conversation, it will be through a joke or criticism that is thought to be mutually shared. She does not feel comfortable, nor find it appropriate, to provide any more detail about her experience because it might not be relatable or of interest to those with whom she is sharing. Appropriate discourse sticks to a standard narrative about what menstruation is like for women by touching upon some of the more commonly noted experiences. If women stick to these phrases, they demonstrate insider status as someone who understands the trials of menstruation without revealing anything too personal. The surface-level nature of these comments led Scripps senior Sunny to argue that in reality menstruation is not discussed on campus. Sunny says that although it is acceptable to talk about, it is not
actually talked about in depth by students beyond simply informing friends about
when one is menstruating, unless a specific event is being held that creates a space
for deeper conversation. Does simply mentioning menstruation give it a visibility on
campus? Or is there something more that must be shared in order for it to become an
actual conversation? These questions are similar to the critique of the Motley
Coffeehouse considered in the previous chapter. At what point do deliberate actions
to increase the visibility of a stigmatized topic become feminist forms of resistance?
Is naming the problem enough?

Students outlined the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable
menstrual discourse fairly easily, making commentaries about blood as being too
graphic. Menstruation, which is necessarily tied to blood, does not actually have
blood included as part of its acceptable discourse for students. Blood, its color, smell,
texture, feel, becomes too graphic, too disgusting, too closely tied to the body and its
functions. Menstrual blood is what makes the female body unclean, polluting,
dangerous, and it is what leads to various taboos among societies (Britton 1996;
Jackson and Falmagne 2013; Kissling 1996; Martin 1987). Renata told me a story
about a friend of hers who once started talking explicitly about her blood and how it
was coming out of her body. As Renata reflected upon feeling so disgusted at her
friend’s inappropriate admission, she laughed and said to me, “that’s something that
happens, but you don’t say it!” Renata’s assertion here alludes to a sort of menstrual
etiquette that her friend chose not to adhere to. Even though Renata completely
understood what her friend was saying and had likely experienced it herself, her
friend had crossed a boundary by so candidly discussing her blood.
Concern for being too graphic also crossed into the very process of conducting interviews with students. During my interview with Melissa, she was telling me her menarche narrative but stopped herself as she mentioned seeing blood in her pants for the first time. “How explicit do you want?” she asked me. After I encouraged her to share whatever she felt comfortable sharing, she described the color of her stained underwear. Similarly, when one student began to open up about her experiences with having sex while on her period, she paused for a moment and looked to me as if to check in and see if it was appropriate or not for her to talk about the blood that stained her sheets as a result of the evening’s events. In these instances, students had to check in and almost remind themselves that this was a confidential and safe space in which they could speak more candidly about their periods. It was so unlike what they would normally contribute to a conversation that it felt unnatural and they had to literally pause themselves before continuing to share. In these moments, students use intimate details of their bodily histories to negotiate their relationship with me as a researcher.

Kelly and Chelsea explored the boundary between acceptable menstrual discourse and over sharing throughout their interviews. Their distinctions highlight which aspects of the body are allowed to be verbalized and at what point the conversation becomes censored. Kelly writes, “they [friends] don’t go into the gory details about how bloody they were or whatever but people talk about their cramps all the time, or oh my gosh it’s that time of the month. Like it’s casual talking but I’m not trying to give a scientific lesson of oh my wall is like shedding its inner whatever. It’s mostly just to be like oh my gosh my pain.” We can see the ways in
which her narrative reflects a stepping away from the physical details of one’s individual period and instead uses menstrual discourse as a way of commiserating and connecting with other women around a shared inconvenience. Although this is what Kelly observes among her friend group, she claims that she herself has no boundaries and will often get responses of “eww” from her friends of she gets too descriptive. Despite this, she responds with “whatever, you feel it too,” forcing others to think about the fact that she is being honest about her body in a way that they are not.

Chelsea shares that “there’s definitely a boundary of being like, oh I’m cramping right now versus oh I’m cramping right now and bloated and gassy and feel like dying. There’s still a line of like you don’t want to know too much.” Her version of what is appropriate allows for acknowledging that one is experiencing discomfort in the form of cramps, a most commonly expressed bodily response during menstruation, but eliminates the other parts of her body that are experiencing discomfort. Chelsea claims that society has declared bodily functions and fluids to be gross, and that is why people do not respond positively to hearing about menstruation. Some students articulated this distinction by saying that besides being graphic about the actual blood aspect of the body, it is also inappropriate to talk about bodily functions or responses that emerge as a result of menstruation. This might include feeling bloated, gassy, or having an increased libido. Interestingly enough, several students compared menstruation to other bodily functions in an attempt to explain why it generally should not be talked about in public. Among these comparisons were pooping, farting, being sick, having the flu, and having a
nosebleed or a cut. Students articulated that just like these are bodily functions that someone would not explain in detail out of courtesy towards the other person, menstruation should not be discussed graphically either. Talking about the body in this way brings it into the public eye in a way that was viewed as both unnecessary and at times inconsiderate.

However, menstruation is not the same as farting, pooping, or having a nosebleed. Each comparison that students made focused on bodily functions that both men and women experience, while menstruation affects female-bodied individuals specifically. Society’s rules and restrictions for menstruation are not solely dependent upon its relation to the body; it is because menstruation impacts the female body, and therefore there is a social stigma (Chrisler 2010; Luke 1977). In a world where the experiences of men determine the dominant modes of being, women’s bodies are marginalized, pushing them into the private sphere. Men cannot menstruate, they will never have firsthand experience with menstruation, and therefore it does not belong in the public sphere. It is important to remember that menstruation is a gendered experience because the realities of this distinction are lived by women daily, through menstrual etiquette, and through notions of shame and concealment. Gloria Steinem touches upon the ways that menstruation is treated differently because it is a bodily function pertaining to women in her thought-provoking essay “If Men Could Menstruate.” By imagining a world in which men menstruate instead of women, she envisions menstruation becoming a sign of manhood, a subject of research, and something overall respected in various public, powerful, and valued sectors of society such as government and medicine (1978).
When students dismiss the gendered aspect of menstruation, claiming instead that it is just like any other bodily function, they ignore the ways in which their own realities are shaped by gender norms.

This dismissal is also rooted in a desire to maintain an image of one’s body and experience that matches the rest of society. As Ariadne makes clear, if it is something that you aren’t sure is shared by everybody, you are less likely to talk about it publicly. If we think about the language of traditions and shared experience that makes up a large portion of acceptable discourse, it makes sense that thoughts, concerns, and experiences that don’t fit into the normative model of how a period is supposed to feel and occur would not be spoken about publicly. Savannah felt this way as well, stating that she was less comfortable when the conversation became more medically focused and looked at how one’s individual experience strayed from “how it should be.” In her own experience, there are aspects of her menstrual cycle that are irregular in comparison to how menstruation is talked about and assumed to be for most women, and that is something she keeps in mind when deciding with whom to share about her body. As we will see in the following chapter, Savannah’s desire to remain publicly true to a normative model of the body points damaging nature of norms, as they automatically place some individuals outside of the standard.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the ways in which discourse sometimes reveals negotiations of power, relationship, and intimacy. While my participants initially affirm that menstruation is something they feel very open to talking about with other
people, further conversation uncovers the decision making process that accompanies menstrual sharing. Being “open” to sharing with someone about one’s menstrual period is determined by feeling close to that person, gauging the comfort of the other person with the topic, and by how well that person will be able to empathize. In these interactions, students come to understand their relationships with other people. Menstrual discourse becomes the catalyst for measuring the strength and connection between two individuals. By verbally addressing a stigmatized topic with another person, students are testing the potential for a trusting relationship.

Even as students negotiate these relationships, the actual language they use to talk about their bodies falls into appropriate modes of discourse. It would seem that the expression “being open” would entail being willing to share about one’s period in its entirety, but that is not the case. As students work to make menstruation a more acceptably conversable topic on campus, they are simultaneously held back by constraints of normative language. Students stick to jokes, complaints, or simple acknowledgement of their menstrual periods, as these methods have become culturally accepted forms of public discourse. Within these models of conversation, women do not acknowledge the actual details of what is occurring within their bodies, nor do they stray from the standard public representation of the menstruating body. The next chapter will explore the ways in which popular, normalized understandings of menstruation pervade and promote certain knowledges of the female body.
Chapter 3:
Defining Menstruation, Defining Normal

In the previous chapter, we have seen how students’ comfort levels in disclosing their menstrual experiences with others depends not only upon who they are sharing with but also upon the nature of what they are choosing to share. Accounts of menstruation that provide intimate bodily details or that stray from standard conceptions of appropriate menstrual discourse are neither invited nor encouraged in the public realm. As students speak more directly to the biological processes at work during the menstrual cycle, their language demonstrates how constructions of a “normal period” and impact the knowledge that students possess about their bodies and their pathways to learning more. Norms are “cultural phenomena that prescribe and proscribe behavior in specific circumstances” (Hechter and Opp 2001: xi). These phenomena create a standard for society that may often go unquestioned, instead being perceived as the only acceptable behavior or practice for certain situations. Foucault emphasized the ways in which norms operate at the level of the body and can be marginalizing and excluding of those who do not conform to dominant discourse (McLaren 2002: 48). In the creation of a standardized perspective and behavior, someone is always excluded, and breaking from the norm may have social consequences. In this case, biology, as a standard discipline of thought that is highly valued in Western society, creates a normative conversation about how menstruation is meant to be experienced in the body. However, even cultural assumptions and ideals inform and shape biology and scientific imaginings.
of the body (Martin 1987). It is the dialogue between biology and culture that gives rise to the normative discourses of the menstruating body.

In this chapter, I show how college women propose a model for normative menstruation through their attempts to explain the process to another person. Then I discuss the ways in which this normative model impacts the resources that students feel comfortable accessing for information about their bodies. Finally, I consider the presence and absence of reproduction in explanations of menstruation, arguing that birth control becomes as much about maintaining normalcy as it is about preventing pregnancy. By examining these articulations of the workings of the female body, one can see that while menstruation is emphasized as a normal function of the body, students actually view themselves as “normal” when they are not menstruating.

**Articulating the Normal Body**

Verbalizing the process of menstruation as something occurring within their bodies proved to be a challenging exercise plagued with uncertainty for many students. After sharing about their experiences at menarche at the beginning of the interview, interlocutors were asked how they would explain what is happening during menstruation to another person. Several students further clarified the identity of this person, making a distinction between what they would tell a young girl and what they would explain to another adult. Upon hearing my reading of the question, students immediately showed a slight anxiety at the question, as though suddenly they were being quizzed on the workings of the body. Describing the working of the uterus was filled with “umms,” “likes” nervous laughter, and backtracking over what was previously said. Often times my interlocutors would look expectantly towards
me in search of affirmation as they were listing the steps of menstruation. Although I did not ask students to provide a scientific explanation, most responses focused on the biological aspects of menstruation rather than the way that it feels or is experienced. Martin found that this was the case among middle-class women as well, noting that they seemed uncomfortable with being unable to remember the exact biological process, but their explanation centered around a failed production model of menstruation, in which an egg is released because the body failed to produce a baby (1987: 106). A few of the explanations I received went as follows:

“Pretty much there’s a layer in your uterus. There’s also an egg that comes out (laugh). No wait that’s ovulation, wait! (laughing) I’m trying to figure out the cycle. So pretty much when you’re actually actively getting your period is when the inner linings of your uterus is shedding and that’s why you see sometimes blood clots, which is gross. And pretty much it’s just something that happens and it’s flushing out the toxins, flushing out whatever’s been collected. And it’s a healthy thing. And every single woman gets it.” (Kelly, Scripps senior)

Kelly’s repetition of the phrase “pretty much” speaks to her attempt to simplify the biological process and to show that she understands the basic workings of the body. It also functions as a way of naturalizing what is happening in the body, which is “a healthy thing,” as she states.

“Well I don’t totally get the science behind it but I know I’d probably say that it’s totally normal and it happens to everybody and well, not everybody. Every woman, female. (laugh) And it’s something about your uterine lining that when you’re not pregnant it like cleanses itself or clears itself out, and that comes out like blood but it doesn’t hurt and it’s totally natural and totally normal.” (Cassie, Scripps senior)

Similarly to Kelly, Cassie also employs a discourse of regularity and normalization in her discussion of what is happening to the female body. Though she does not understand the exact biological process, her account emphasizes that
whatever is happening is supposed to be happening, demonstrating that her body is functioning correctly. As Kelly and Cassie make statements like “it’s a healthy thing” and “it’s totally natural and totally normal,” they employ a reassuring discourse, showing that what happens to the body during menstruation is a good thing. The need to be precise and accurate in the depiction of bodily functions stresses an understanding that there is a specific way that menstruation is set to occur. For Cassie and Kelly, there is an essentialized woman and female body that provides a model for how the biological process should occur for all women. This model is culturally constructed, giving authority to biology by designating the biological clock as regular and accurate. Through the language used to explain menstruation, students define “normal” in relation to the temporal cycle and its regularity within the female body. “Normal,” according to Kelly, Cassie, and several other students who gave more scientific explanations for menstruation, is envisioned according to a medical description of the body, privileging dominant information that describes the menstrual cycle as lasting 28 days, with a 3 to 5 day period. Hesitancy in explaining this biology and a fear of providing incorrect information derives from constructions of what it looks like to be a normal, menstruating woman and how that menstruating body behaves.

Although students noted that this process is part of their own experience and the experience of whomever they are speaking with by using language like “your,” their descriptions seemed to be describing a process taking place outside of themselves. Menstruation becomes a process happening to them, rather than an experience that is part of them. Martin explains that this separation is joined by other
corollaries such as: your self must adjust to or cope with your body, that menstruation is a state that happens to you rather than an active process you participate in, and that menstrual periods are separate from the self (1987:77). Martin finds that the language and the metaphors women use to talk about the process of menstruation is heavily fragmented, with the body outside the control of the self. For my interlocutors, this fragmentation was played out in the uncertainty that accompanied being asked to describe the inner workings of one’s own body. Despite the regularity of menstruation and the years of experience students possessed as menstruators, the biology manifested itself as something foreign and unfamiliar in the vernacular of students. While this unfamiliarity may simply represent a lack of knowledge of biological terminology and processes on behalf of students, the prevalence of normalizing discourse in the explanations suggests a culturally informed expectation for how menstruation occurs and is explained, even as students do know that persons who are female-bodied experience menstruation differently.

The Internet: A Girl’s Best Friend

Women experience menstruation in a multitude of ways, as it is impacted by a variety of genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors. There is no essentialized or universalized experience of menstruation shared by all women. As emphasized in pamphlets, books, and classes to teach girls and young women about menstruation, there is regularity for each individual woman’s body. Even at the “Know Your Flow” event hosted at Scripps, the overall message provided by the health educators leading the discussion was that each woman’s body has its own rhythm and that it is important to know one’s own body. That way any changes and irregularities are
discovered early on and can be checked out by a medical professional if necessary. As the title of the event suggests, know your own flow, not know a homogenized version of what your flow should be.

Despite knowing the individuality of each person’s menstrual experience, students still speak of biology according to a scientific, which is understood as factual and certain, model of the body. If college women are operating with a standard definition of what menstruation is supposed to look like and feel like, it can be anxiety inducing or embarrassing when one’s bodily experience does not fit into that mold. When asked where they go when they have questions about their period or something seems abnormal with their cycle, student responses were not always about where they could access the most accurate information, but rather about with whom they felt most comfortable broaching the topic of personal abnormality. Asking questions about bodily functions places women in a position of vulnerability, not only by admitting something very personal but by admitting that something with one’s body is not ascribing to the norm. Ari explains that she is less likely to talk to others about her menstrual period when she’s “maybe less sure if it’s shared by everybody.” This vulnerability resonates with Foucault’s warnings about the dangers of norms, in that they create a marginalized experience for those who do not follow the dominant model. Straying from the model becomes more complicated if analyzed according to Martin’s discussion of the fragmentation of the body and the self. If one’s body, which is outside the control of the self, is not ascribing to a normative model of menstruation, what can the self do? Where can the self find information about the body without incriminating itself as outside the norm?
The majority of students answered the question immediately by listing the Internet as their go-to resource. By “the Internet,” students mean conducting a Google search, visiting the website “WebMD,” or using another informed online website such as Planned Parenthood. The main reasons the Internet was used as a first source of information was due to its easy and quick accessibility at any time. Students found it appealing that through the Internet, they had 24-hour, free access to a plethora of consultants. Instead of having to find time in their busy schedules and make an appointment at a health center, students can run a quick search online by listing their symptoms or asking a pointed question and then receive information in a matter of seconds. Using the Internet as a resource was also advantageous because of the issue of confidentiality. Reading online articles did not require students to open up to familiars about potentially embarrassing subjects, nor did it require that they give a detailed medical or personal history to a medical professional. As Elsa explained, the Internet “is quick, anonymous, and I can type in the weirder questions and not have to blush.” Anonymity allowed for students to ask questions in complete detail without feeling the need to edit themselves as part of menstrual etiquette. The Internet also provided a wider variety of resources, and had an increased probability that women who were experiencing the same issues could be located and communicated with. In that respect, students perceive themselves as having more agency when they utilize online resources to make decisions about their menstrual health. They choose what they share, they are presented with a wide range of information, and then they evaluate sources on their own before making decisions about what to do next.
For some, admitting to using the Internet was a source of slight embarrassment or amusement, as though I might pass judgment that they would rather consult strangers than talk to someone in person about their bodies. In contrast, the prominence of Internet research in student’s evaluation of their own health and well being was not surprising to me considering the strong impact of technology on my generation. To Google something has become a verb in its own right, as a million sources of information can be accessed in seconds. A few students mentioned that the internet is not always the most reliable source of information, or that sometimes reading medical articles can turn them into somewhat of a hypochondriac, fearing that every menstrual disorder discussed could be what they are experiencing. The excess of information, in that case, can provide extreme cases of abnormality that further concern college women. It is interesting to note that the variety of abnormal cases that students read makes them further concerned about their own bodies, rather than diluting the assumed absolute normalcy that students articulate as part of the biological discourses of menstruation. Students interpret these cases as further examples of what the body should not be like instead of possibilities for what the body can be like. For this reason, the sources that students use for menstrual research take the form of medical columns and professional advisory sites, which they presume to be the most accurate and reliable for explaining the biological processes of the body. Other sites used included forums on sites for products such as the DivaCup or for organizations like Planned Parenthood, where students could read questions or comments written by strangers to see if anyone else had experienced something similar to what was occurring with their
bodies. Grace shares that “nine times out of ten, if something weird has been happening….what I usually do is go straight to the menstrual cup blog to see what other people are saying.” The appeal of these forums was the possibility of finding someone that shared your experience and taking their story as evidence for how to best handle your own situation. Some students articulated that the internet was their first resource but that if the problem they were experiencing seemed serious, they would run it by the second most listed resource, friends, mothers, and medical professionals. Friends can be asked if they have had similar experiences, mothers are seen as comforting sources of knowledge, and doctors can provide explanations for the biological aspects of menstruation. As Renata explains, “I talk to some of my good friends because they might have had the same experience or something. I mean I call my mom generally ‘cause...she had her period for like 30 something years!”

After consulting these resources, with whom she has a personal and trusted relationship, Renata gains a sense of whether or not her period is abnormal and whether or not she should see a doctor. Students like Renata do not seem opposed to seeking a professional opinion about their period, but seeing a doctor requires time, money, and having to face the reality that something more serious could be wrong with one’s body. In general doctors were only listed as an option for situations that seemed to be more serious, or if the student already possessed a friendly and well-established relationship with this professional.

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14 For an example of these forums, check out http://menstrual-cups.livejournal.com/ for information on menstrual cups, such as the DivaCup. Another example is a Planned Parenthood chat room, in which people can anonymously chat, call, or text a health educator questions about sex, birth control, missed periods, etc: http://www.plannedparenthoodchat.org/.
Since menstruation is not typically a topic present in the public sphere, a woman may be presented with few opportunities to learn about the female body and ask questions about the menstrual cycle during her lifetime. These moments might be at menarche, during a health or sex education course in school, or at a doctor’s appointment. For the students I spoke with, these first two instances may not always be the most comfortable times for asking questions or opening up about personal experiences due to embarrassment in adolescence and social discomfort in school settings. In regards to doctor’s appointments, not all students can afford medical attention for the sole purpose of asking about their menstrual cycle unless there appears to be a serious issue. Consequently, the Internet poses an intriguing possibility to increase one’s knowledge of the body by presenting individuals with instant information at any point in time and without having to interact with others. The Internet, as a public domain, creates a safe space for women to ask questions that they may internalize as private. The anonymity of this space may allow for students to be exposed to a variety of experiences that will help them to sort out the dynamic between factual conceptions of biology and the just as acceptable realities of their personal bodily histories.

Birth Control: What’s Reproduction Got to Do With It?

In an informal conversation with Health Education Outreach (HEO) at the beginning of the school year, I asked if students from Scripps or the rest of the Claremont Colleges ever came to HEO to ask questions about their periods. I was told that for the most part, the only times that menstruation is ever really brought to the educators at HEO is when female students have missed a period and are
concerned about being pregnant. Even though other aspects of the menstrual cycle can be important indicators of women’s health, students do not tend to utilize this college resource to ask questions about menstruation. This may stem from popular student impressions of HEO as a resource mostly oriented towards alcohol and sex education. When HEO came to speak at the “Know Your Flow” event on Scripps campus, the majority of the content and questions for the evening centered around having sex on your period, dispelling myths about menstruation and pregnancy, as well as a lengthy conversation around birth control and how the Pill impacts one’s menstrual cycle. The strong interest in the way that sex and reproductive health interact with menstruation implies that some students experience a close relationship between these bodily acts.

Yet as students narrate their understanding of the biological process of menstruation, reproduction is not always part of the language used to describe what is happening with the body. Some students sound like a high school biology textbook, speaking of eggs becoming fertilized, but they make no mention of how an egg gets fertilized or what a fertilized egg has the potential to become. Others describe menstruation as something that happens in the uterus only if you are not pregnant, while for some students there is no mention of pregnancy or reproduction besides the fact that there is an egg and a shed uterine lining. Sex and reproduction appeared in other aspects of the interview and participant observation process. In the interviews, only a few women mentioned feeling either relieved that they were not pregnant when they had their period, or using their period as a monthly sign that they were not pregnant. On the signs in the residence halls, however, that asked for
students to finish the question “My Period makes me feel…” I was caught by how many students mentioned relief and gratitude for not being pregnant, with repetition of phrases such as “not pregnant!” “happy I’m not prego,” “like I’m not with child,” and “like I’m not pregnant (which is great for all parties involved).” There were also comments about how birth control made the time of menstruating much more tolerable, for example, “I’m chill, it’s not that bad w/ birth control,” and “modern medicine took mine away, thank god.” Students’ inclusion of reproduction in their explanations and sentiments about menstruation seemed to be dependent upon whether a student was sexually active or if they planned to have children at a later point in time.

An article published in Inside Higher Ed from 2012 states that according to the American College Health Association, 40% of female college students are on the Pill, and of all female students using some form of contraceptives, 3 out of 5 choose to use the Pill over other options.\textsuperscript{15} This statistic is reflected in my interview sample, as just under half of my interlocutors shared that they use birth control, and the majority of those using birth control used the Pill. Of all the students who shared with me that they were on some form of birth control, being sexually active was not always the reason, or even the main reason, that they used birth control. Discussions about using birth control actually shied away from sex and instead focused on the ways in which the Pill helped to give them what they considered a more normal and bearable period. Students explained the ways that the hormonal impact of birth control changed the nature of their menstrual period, making it lighter, less painful,

\textsuperscript{15}http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/03/09/study-shows-students-turn-riskier-methods-when-insurance-doesnt-cover-contraception
or more regulated. Using the idea of normalcy as important to students’ lives, birth control “regulates” menstruation making it more manageable, therefore making life easier for students when they are on their period. In this context, “making life easier” means making life seem as though one is not menstruating. Living an “easy” life is tied to a second definition of “normal,” in which the non-menstruating body is the norm. Life becomes easy when it is not hindered by menstruation and the hassle of regulating one’s own body. Alex touches upon this new concept of normal when she explains that part of the reason she likes to use tampons is that they almost allow her to forget she is menstruating by hiding the physical evidence that she is bleeding.

Similarly, birth control functions as a mechanism for controlling the uncontrollable body, setting menstruation on a schedule that can work to students’ advantage. Grace, for example, knows that her period is the worst for her on the first day, so she adjusts her birth control that she starts her period on a Sunday. This way when she has really bad cramps or pain, she has the flexibility to relax and take care of herself more on that day rather than having to worry about getting to class, meetings, or doing homework. For some students, birth control functions more as life control. It is about making menstruation a reliable and predictable component of one’s bodily experience. In the context of birth control and managing one’s period, menstrual discourse situates menstruation against the busy lifestyles of students. In a college environment like Scripps, students are balancing classes, jobs, clubs, social events, family obligations, and planning for the future, among other responsibilities. Menstruation, which students first explain as a naturally occurring process, becomes
something that some students choose to plan out in accordance with their schedule so that it does not interfere with the regular routine of student life.

The issue of birth control and its prominent usage among college women raises interesting questions about what is considered normal for menstruation and what is normal for women in terms of reproductive health. For women who have very painful periods, birth control may provide a way in which they can experience a “normal,” “healthy” period based upon what society constructs a menstruating woman’s experience to be. Does altering the natural hormonal balance in her body work towards creating a more normal experience, and what does that mean in the context of that woman’s experience? If birth control is being used by women as a way of making one’s life easier when they are menstruating, almost as if they were not menstruating at all, how do they view their bodily processes in relation to a societal model for menstruation?

Conclusion

Students utilize the words “normal” and “natural” to help make sense of their bodies and biology and thus the knowledge they possess about menstruation is informed by various constructions of normalcy. The meanings of these words, however, take on different forms as students articulate their lives as menstruators versus their day-to-day lives. “Normal,” in relation to menstruation follows a medical definition of the body, generating an understanding of the menstrual cycle that follows a specific format, lasts a certain amount of time, looks a certain way, and by doing these things is considered to be healthy. When individual experience does not match this model, which may often be the case since in reality each female
body does operate differently, students turn to the Internet as a source of information that is quick, anonymous, and variable. While students do consciously associate menstruation with reproduction, their reasons for using birth control are often as much about controlling their lives as about preventing pregnancy. Menstruation is spoken of more positively when its existence does not alter the daily routine of students, allowing them to maintain what they consider to be “normal” lives, in this sense meaning a life without menstrual bleeding. Therefore, the knowledge and understanding students possess about their bodies attempts to balance these two conceptions of what is normal: a standardized menstrual cycle, or the non-menstruating body.

Underlying these debates about what is normal is a genuine difficulty that students encounter when they must speak of the body. They are uncomfortable, uncertain, and unwilling to make statements of a definitive nature. What follows in the next chapter is a continuation of these uncertainties, as students discover the tensions between the few positive discourses of menstruation and problematic constructions of identity and womanhood based upon the female body.
“It’s [menstruation] pretty much our defining factor.”
- Chelsea, Scripps sophomore

“I know this is a trick question.”
- Hilary, Scripps junior

As the previous chapters have emphasized, there is an expectation that as a women’s college, Scripps will provide a supportive environment for its students, the majority of whom identify as female. In this community, then, support takes the form of events, conversations, and an atmosphere that pays particular attention to the experiences of women, as a group whose needs may be different than those of men. Menstruation, as a regular and recurring experience for the majority of the student body, is one of those differences, but do students who identify as women view menstruation as closely related to that aspect of their identity? This chapter focuses on the ways in which students negotiate their sense of self, their gender, and their bodies. First, I utilize the work of scholar Chris Bobel to outline the two major philosophies within the movement of menstrual activism: feminist-spiritualists and radical menstruation activists. The opposing approaches of these two groups to creating positive menstrual discourse provides a useful framework for understanding the ways that students both embrace the idea of a sisterhood among women who menstruate while simultaneously problematizing the essentialist and exclusive nature of this idea. I examine the ways that students fragment the body from their identity,
using language that suggests menstruation is a bodily function that “happens” to them. I follow this discussion by showing how students do envision menstruation as relating to women and a broader shared identity among those who menstruate. Their responses suggest that they conceptualize a larger sense of connection with women as a method of reclaiming menstruation as more than an embarrassing inconvenience. Next, I show that as students process and express links between the female body and menstruation, they are problematizing the idea of being defined by one’s body. Associating women with menstruation creates an exclusive, essentialized category of womanhood with which students are uncomfortable. As Bobel asks in the introduction to her exploration of menstrual activism, “How can we talk about body-based discrimination, for example, without taking about women as women—even with all the differences within and among women? At the same time, how can we not afford to incorporate a questioning of fundamental categories like gender as we develop feminist agendas for the twenty-first century?” (2010:13). Ultimately, students are processing and challenging their own conceptions of what it means to be a menstruating cisgender woman as they search for a more inclusive understanding of both womanhood and menstruation.

**Women, Feminism, and the Politics of Menstruation**

In *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, women and gender scholar Chris Bobel chronicles the history of menstrual activism in the United States. Menstrual health activism emerged from the women’s health movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which encouraged women to be in charge of their own bodies and health rather than relying on the male-dominated field of medicine.
In its contemporary form, menstrual activism works to reveal the dangers of commercial feminine care products on the body and the environment, and to promote alternatives that are cheaper, healthier, and more sustainable (Bobel 2006). Bobel notes the ways in which the movement is largely populated by middle-class white women, with many activists identifying as LGBT and/or queer; she stresses that there are really menstrual activisms, plural, as women of color are doing menstrual activism, it just takes on different forms and is largely occurring within their own communities (Our Bodies, Our Blog 2009). As Bobel outlines the directions of menstrual activism throughout her research, she stresses how ideological tensions within the feminist movement have really been reflected in the different approaches that are taken to menstruation and feminist activism. These tensions point to larger debates about the category of “woman” and the future of identity-based movements such as feminism (Bobel 2010:167). Here I include Bobel’s discussion of two differing sectors of the menstrual activism movement, feminist-spiritualists and radical menstruation activists, to provide a useful framework for understanding how Scripps students process what it means to be a woman and how the body interacts with identity.

According to the ideology of the feminist-spiritualist wing of the movement, menstruation is not a hassle or a curse, rather it is a process that connects women to each other and to their essential feminine because it is unique to biological women. Their understanding of menstruation as a common denominator of womanhood stems from the theories of cultural feminism in the late 1970s, which argues that gender-based oppression is rooted in the cultural devaluation of women, and that
gender equality is possible if so-called women’s qualities like empathy, compassion, and nurturance are embraced by society (Bobel 71). Cultural feminism asserts that women share an essential sameness that situates them as fundamentally different from men. Female biology becomes a strength rather than a weakness. Feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich, whose instrumental text *Of Woman Born* is cited throughout many of the books and articles on menstruation that I encountered during my research, reflects theories of cultural feminism in her work, as she states that the feminist vision will “come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny” (1976:11). Critiques of women’s movements based on cultural feminism point to essentialist discourses that reinforce gender roles by working within the patriarchally constructed category of women (Alcoff 1988: 414; Bobel 2002: 164). Bobel is clear that in her research, the majority of feminist-spiritualists are white and middle or upper middle class, which makes sense considering the essentializing tendencies used in this movement to create a sisterly solidarity based solely on sexual difference. The fantasy of unifying all women through a shared menstruating identity ignores the realities of women who do not bleed, or women whose identities are not solely embodied in gender, such as women of color.

Radical menstruation activists, the dominant of the two groups, are greatly influenced by third-wave feminism, environmentalism, and the punk movement. They aim to challenge the “menstrual status quo” as well as the “dichotomous gender structure at the root of gender-based oppression” (Bobel 2010: 99). In practice, this means embracing third-wave values of contradiction, inclusion, multiplicity, and everyday feminism to separate the gendered body from menstruation and take issue
with assumptions about who menstruates. Persons who menstruate become “menstruators” rather than automatically assuming a female identity (Bobel 2010: 100). Like feminist-spiritualists, radical menstruation activists reject the menstrual taboo and ideas of menstruation as a shameful hassle, but they are different in that they reject a romanticization of menstruation and their projects take an intersectional, anti-essentialist approach. They vehemently oppose rigid definitions of identity that exclude gender-variant people and progressive men or deny the ways that racism and classism impact identity and experience in addition to gender. Viewing menstruation in this way reflects a collapse of the category of woman for many feminists, arguing against an essential feminine connection, and against gender as a cultural interpretation of sex as a biological constant (Zerilli 1998: 438). Radical menstruation activists also call attention to the fact that emphasizing menstruation as a uniquely female experience excludes young girls, postmenopausal, transgendered, transsexual, and intersex women, as well as women who cannot bleed for other medical reasons (Bobel 2010:103). In these ways, radical menstruation activists are challenging the relationships between identity, constructions of womanhood, and the menstruating body.

The Body versus the Self

Looking back to the context of Scripps, students processed menstruation and gender identity in equally complex ways. Students talk about identity as the characteristics and experiences that make them who they are, recognizing that identity is not a singular, essential thing, but is rather encompassed by a variety of intersectional experiences. When thinking about menstruation as a characteristic and
experience of the body, students did not tend to think about it as part of their identity or as a defining factor of their lives in any way. Their responses show a separation of the body from one’s identity, or sense of self. In most cases, students had never considered menstruation as linked to their sense of self before participating in the interview process. Menstruation was associated with biology, a scientific process acted upon the bodies of students, rather than a part of their self-conceived idea of who they are. The commonality and regularity of the experience led many students to dismiss it as something that could be a unifying marker of shared experiences or qualities. Yet at a broader level, students did associate menstruation with women and viewed themselves as connected to other women because of this shared bodily experience. Renata, expresses this dynamic best, as she processes the relationship between women, herself, menstruation, and identity: “if you said describe a woman, I would never bring up menstruation probably. But if I think about menstruation in our lifetime and in our cycles and stuff, I think it is a huge part of identity.” This section will address the separations and connections of menstruation with the self.

When students talked about their individual experiences with menstruation and reflected upon how these experiences impacted their sense of self, menstruation became an external process. The descriptions many students provided of their cycles included a “normal” state, in which they were not menstruating, and then their period, a time in which their body was visited by something that came and disrupted the regular routine of things, just like a cold might do. The clearest way to understand this view of menstruation as separate from one’s self is by examining the language that students used to talk about their periods. Menstruation might be
described as “it,” something that you receive such as “I got my period,” or as something that “happens to you.” Towards the end of her interview, a Scripps junior, Holly, caught herself using this language and reflected that she tends to speak of her period as something happening to her and something that her body tries to fight off. Her line of thought led her to think about the name “sanitary products,” used to talk about pads and tampons, and how language like sanitary implies the “need to clean you, cleanse you, of the shit that is happening to you.” Holly is trying to negotiate the idea that menstruation is both a bodily process but also something that her body does not want and needs to keep clean and contained.

For Holly, menstruation is closely tied to the body, but it is a bodily process that goes against what she considers to be the normal rhythm of her body and therefore it must be handled in specific ways. This mentality resonates with the second definition of normal explained in the previous chapter, in which the normal body is one that is not menstruating. We witness this idea even further in the dialogues of Emma and Cassie, who include menstruation as something they experience but not as part of how they view themselves as individuals. Emma’s discussion of her period used similar language to Holly’s observations, describing her period as something she “has to deal with.” She explains that her period is a reality of her body that she must take care of, but it does not impact who she is. As touched upon in the previous chapter, Emily Martin encountered this same separation of the body and the self as a central aspect of women’s accounts of menstruation, menopause, and birth. The women Martin interviewed used the same fragmented language to talk about menstruation as the Scripps students I spoke with.
One student who participated in the passive programming for “It’s That time of the Month” wrote on one poster that she feels like “my body and I are an old married couple and we’ve learned to compromise. Sometimes it’s my way, and sometimes it’s my body’s way. When I’m on my period, it’s definitely not my way.” Her metaphor of relationship implies her body as a separate entity from her self. The self, which encompasses students’ general understanding and image of who they are, is thought to be a site of control and influence over the body. The self is thus privileged as the locus of identity, even though in reality, the body does influence the construction of identity, whether that be through gender, race, or ability. Cassie exemplifies this fragmentation when she explains that although menstruation is part of her identity in that she will spend a quarter of her adult life menstruating, she does not think that her period has any bearing on who she is as a person. She recognizes that her body does impact her experiences and therefore her sense of self, but the regularity of this bodily function prevents it from being something that sets her apart or impacts her personality in any way.

Part of this separation of self and body also stems from viewing menstruation as a biological process. Both the body and menstruation are closely tied to biology, but the self is thought to be a separate entity. The body may influence one’s identity in important ways, but students did not want to be defined by their bodies. “I tend to think of myself as a woman and I tend to think of the world through that lens, and that doesn’t necessarily include my period. My period is a separate biological thing,” voiced Savannah. The underlying message here is that while her period is a biological thing, she is not a biological thing. Savannah maintains that her
personality, her behavior, her worldview, is not determined by the biological functions of her body. Her perspective further supports the idea of a distinction between the body and the self, placing menstruation outside of an individual’s identity. It also reflects the anti-essentialist discourses used by third-wave and radical menstruation activists, insisting that identity is met with several intersections of experience and cannot be limited to just sex or gender.

Throughout these conversations, students spoke of menstruation as something they experience, rather than as a key element in their understanding of themselves. Menstruation was an experience relating to the body, rather than a characteristic associated with the self. Part of the reason for this understanding was that menstruation was not a function of the body that students experienced continuously on a day-to-day basis. For the majority of the year, they did not menstruate and could temporarily separate themselves from their bleeding bodies. In general, students do not think about menstruation very often, unless they are currently dealing with it or are preparing to deal with it. Menstruation is an outside entity that appears perhaps once a month, adding a new element to what it means to have a female body. As discussed in the previous chapter regarding student usage of birth control and products like tampons, the self finds ways to regulate and conceal what the body is doing, so that the menstruator and all those around her, can continue life as though menstruation was not present at all. In this sense, students conceive of their identity in terms of the normative, non-menstruating body. Menstruation is something that regularly “happens” to the body, but it is not constantly present, which allows for students to separate it from the way that they conceive of themselves. The menstrual
period is exactly that—a period of time, which will pass and return students to their “normal” lives and routines. The passive nature of menstruation allows for the self to avoid consciousness of its existence until the body is forced to “deal” with it. Through this fragmentation of the body and its processes, students form and maintain identities that do not include menstruation as a crucial component.

**Connecting to the Essential Woman**

At the same time that students separate menstruation from identity, there is an overwhelming understanding that menstruation is associated with women, forming a broader network of self as students relate to a larger community. Students do not define themselves by their bodies nor by their biology, but they do view menstruation as pertaining to the female body. It is more though, than just an association; it becomes a connecting point for the individuals who menstruate and can therefore relate to one another based upon this bodily experience. Students may not think of menstruation as critical to their sense of self, but this connection, initially formed over a shared biological process, becomes an important aspect of the positive discourses surrounding women and menstruation. This sense of sisterhood caused by menstruation is reflective of the feminist-spiritualist position within menstrual activism, in which menstruation becomes romanticized as a meaningful connecting point for women to celebrate their bodies.

Students were asked whether menstruation was something they associated with women, and their responses pointed to menstruation as the one of the focal points for a commonality of experiences among women. Taylor declared that it was obviously a part of women’s identity because only women can do it. Chelsea stated
matter of fact that menstruation is “pretty much the defining factor” of being a woman. Their responses look at menstruation more biologically, noting that this physical process sets women apart because their bodies can menstruate while men cannot. First year Jennifer combined both biological and cultural factors into her understanding of womanhood. She explained, “the womb, the reproduction, the vagina, inserting a tampon…everything’s just very involved and immersed in you’re a woman.” In her opinion, it was through these various things that women are reminded of their womanhood and could then feel a sense of pride. Following the ideas of cultural feminism, these body experiences and the practices that accompany them, which have been coupled with what it means to be female, should be celebrated and championed throughout society as a positive thing that sets women apart from men. Sunny expressed that as women bond over these shared experiences, they create an identity for themselves that they can be proud of. Adding to this idea of menstruation as a positive, Mary laughed as she explained to me that menstruation is “definitely a main part of being a woman, which is why I don’t fully hate it!” Her exclamation is a reflection of deliberate efforts to create a positive discourse of menstruation. She wants to feel pride in her identification with womanhood, and if menstruation is something she experiences as part of that identity, she will claim it. All of these responses demonstrate how menstruation is understood as both a biological process and as a culturally shaped experience. More than just a function of the body, menstruation is experienced according to sociocultural ideas about gender, blood, and the body. The lack of presence of public discourse surrounding menstruation attests to its existence as something different, non-normative, taboo. As
people try to connect with one another over menstruation, they attempt to shape the discourse in new ways, as a special unifier, rather than a point of shame or disgust. The connection felt by some women around menstruation is informed both by the commonality of what is occurring within the body and by what can be shared with other menstruators through acceptable menstrual discourse. Similar to the critiques of cultural feminism and feminist-spiritualists, however, this connection often essentializes a specific body, leaving out other identities and experiences.

Looking back at Emily Martin’s research, she found that the “primary positive feeling many women have about menstruation is that it defines them as a woman” (1987:101). Being defined as a woman in this way brought with it access to a specific community of individuals who understand the process and share in an experience that sets women apart from men. Martin explains that there is an underlying understanding among women that this is something connecting all women, even if the connecting point of the experience takes the form of complaining with one another about the hassle and mess of the menstruating body (1987:102). Although the majority of my interlocutors would not say that menstruation defined them as women, they did see it as something that distinguished women from men and therefore allowed women to empathize with one another over an experience that only they can truly understand.

Creating a shared connection for women based upon menstruation then becomes a way of reclaiming menstruation as a positive aspect of womanhood, as argued by the feminist-spiritualist wing of menstrual activism. Rather than viewing women as secondary or abnormal because they menstruate, women gain access to a
specific community because of what their bodies are capable of. Melissa shared, “I think it is something that creates a kind of community within our sex, and something to kind of bond over and something that makes you appreciate all that you can do as a woman when a lot of society tells you that you can’t do a lot of things.” Melissa’s perspective challenges more traditional notions of women’s bodies as sites of shame and inferiority, and instead encourages women to feel pride and respect for the female body and its capabilities. Her comments are a reflection of cultural feminist theories, which demand a reassessment and valuation of so-called “women’s qualities” and experiences (Bobel 2010:71). Having this community also creates a space for support, as women can feel more comfortable discussing their bodies and what processes like menstruation, pregnancy, or menopause feel like.

Claiming the positive becomes amplified in a space like Scripps, where students speak about connecting with women over menstruation much in the same way that they speak of a larger connection with the Scripps community based on a shared identity as women. Scripps’ very existence is defined by setting women apart from men and claiming to actively support women at the heart of its mission. Overall, there is a strong sense of pride in women and their experiences on campus. Ari found that she viewed menstruation as more tied to women’s identity since coming to Scripps, where she finds that she feels more connected to other women. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, students envision Scripps according to an ideal of being a more open place to talk about menstruation because of its nature as a women’s college, a space filled with other female bodies who will understand and empathize. Bonding as menstruators in a female-dominated space can be seen in
jokes raised by interlocutors surrounding the syncing up of the menstrual cycles of students on campus. Comments on the passive programming in the residence halls reflected this bonding through statements such as “#ScrippsProblems.” Mary shared that when her friends see that the trashcans in the restrooms are full of the wrappers of feminine hygiene products, they joke that “Scripps has her period.” Personifying Scripps as a menstruating woman serves to emphasize a shared female identity of the student body through the very real shared experience of menstruating at the same time. Seeing these wrappers in the public restrooms places menstruation into the consciousness of students and reminds them that it is a process shared by a large portion of the student body, and yet the chosen acknowledgement is still through acceptable menstrual discourse, in the form of a joke. I say this here to note the constant struggle between consciousness and resistance as students reflect on their experiences with menstruation.

This discourse of connection exists prominently in student narratives despite an overall lack of positive feelings towards individual experiences with menstruation. Menstrual periods are described as uncomfortable, inconvenient, and painful, but when they are talked about as a uniting force among women they become natural, important, shared, less hated, as Mary and Melissa’s comments shared earlier address. Being able to connect with other women over shared experiences that take root in the biology of the female body, even if these experiences are limited to acceptable topics and expressions, is a positive thing for my participants. The sense of bonding and connection makes the negative and painful aspects of menstruation more bearable, at least in terms of discourse.
Navigating the “Trick Question”

As I asked students to explain if they viewed menstruation as something that was closely tied to women or a “woman’s identity,” I was surprised by the consideration and awareness expressed by the majority of students as they tackled the question. I was reminded of how students nervously chose their words when explaining the biological process of menstruation, though students were not struggling with this question because they did not want to be scientifically inaccurate. This time, it was clear that students were taking careful deliberation with their responses because they wanted to be politically correct in their answers. When students are forced to think about the biological aspects of menstruation in relation to a sense of self, they are uncomfortable creating an exclusive definition of what menstruation or womanhood is based upon the body. Students were so hyper aware of crafting an inclusive response that one student, Hilary, first responded by saying that she knew I was asking her a trick question. Through this attention to multiplicity and inclusion, students reflect the ideologies behind third-wave feminism and the ideals of radical menstruation activists. Even as students acknowledged that they did associate menstruation with a female gender identity, they were simultaneously challenging themselves to think critically about who it is that menstruates. Here I include several responses where students question the association of women with menstruation, even if they personally relate the two.

Ari expresses, “I know there are people who get their periods and hate it because they’re not a woman, but their body does this. Or women who feel they won’t be a woman until they get their period and that’s impossible, and so I feel sad
feeling that way a little bit because it sort of perpetuates toughness for other people
but for me personally... it’s tied to womanhood.” Chelsea and Melissa acknowledge
that not all women menstruate, and Kelly argues that there are so many facets to
being a woman beyond just menstruation. One of the comments written on the “My
Period Makes Me Feel…” poster stated, “I don’t get my period, and it makes me feel
sad, left out. But guiltily happy at the same time.” Alex reminds us that it’s important
“to remember that not everybody who has a female physiology identifies that way
[as a woman].” She was really excited about the creation of menstrual cycle tracking
apps that used gender neutral pronouns, which links back to radical menstruation
activists switching to use the term “menstruators” instead of “women.” Kelly, Hilary,
and Emma all mentioned transwomen as an example of menstruation not being a
necessary factor of womanhood, though Kelly admitted she didn’t know much about
the whole “trans thing.” As Sunny answered this question, she stumbled over her
words, showing how complicated the question was to answer. She started to answer,
yeah, because are we talking about like…. so it’s for like people who identify, like
gender roles as women, or females in general, or just like sexual…. yeah I think so
because…. sorry.” She then gave a longer explanation about being born female and
that being a connecting point, but only after she took a minute to organize her
thoughts. A few people apologized for not being clear in their responses and for not
being able to give the “best” answer.

Underneath the careful consideration made by students as they answered the
question is a desire to be inclusive when it comes to defining what it means to be a
woman or to have a female body. Students raised up the trans community as well as
women who cannot menstruate or can no longer menstruate as the main people who become excluded from the category of “woman” if menstruation becomes a qualifier. Tying women specifically to menstruation means viewing the female body as a necessary condition for womanhood, which puts biology in a defining role with which students are uncomfortable. This connection privileges the body in ways that students do not feel is justified, even if they do not have all of the information or arguments to explain why it is problematic.

It is my estimation that the extent of the sensitivity demonstrated when answering this question is specific to this environment. Through Core, the humanities based curriculum that first and second year students must take, and the liberal arts nature of the college, Scripps students have been taught to think critically about concepts that we may take for granted or that have not traditionally been questioned. Certainly not all students are familiar with or understand concepts of intersectionality, biological essentialism, or even that there are multiple feminisms, but since Scripps is a small community and I have established relationships with some of my interlocutors, I know that many of these individuals challenge themselves and others to think about issues of inclusivity and multiplicity. These students, I would argue, might have more of an awareness of the tensions between constructions of “woman” and identity than the average young adult in the United States, even if they are not the most articulate in their explanations of these problems.

What stands out to me in these negotiations of the body and experience and selfhood, is hesitancy from students to establish a model or definition of what it
means to be a woman, and of what it means to possess a menstruating female body. The discourses examined in the previous chapters show that students do have set ideas about how menstruation is to be approached as a topic and what is considered acceptable in certain contexts, but they do not want to admit that these ideas do in fact construct ideas about what it means to be a woman. Students do not want to be defined by a biological process that feels fragmented from their sense of self, even if they do associate menstruation with women, because they do not want to exclude anyone from also claiming that identity. Regardless of their individual experiences, students articulate a move towards a broader understanding of what being a woman and having a menstrual period might look like.

**Conclusion**

When students speak about menstruation as part of their identity, it is viewed as something separate from the body that forms a regular part of their bodily routine, but is not always present. When they speak positively about menstruation, they express a connection with women as a larger group with a shared experience. Scripps, in that sense, provides an environment in which students are surrounded by women who can relate to their bodily experiences and who understand what many students refer to as the inconvenience of the menstruating body. Scripps has also created a learning space in which students have become more aware of issues like trans identity, gender identity and body politics, and this consciousness infiltrates the way they think about articulating broad categories like “woman” in non-essentialist ways.
The students I interviewed are all within the same age range, all at a particular moment in their lives as young adults in college, preparing to enter society independent from their parents or guardians. Will their conceptions of what it means to be a woman or what it means to be female-bodied be the same ten years from now? How will their relationship with their bodies change, and will those changes impact their sense of self? What will it be like to emerge into the “real world” as a menstruating woman after leaving an all-women’s college environment?

I do not have the answers to these questions, but I do have some insight on how students envision their future and their bodies based on their responses to one of the final questions I asked during the interview process. Students were asked if they would eliminate their period in its entirety if they were given the ability to do so. In most cases, students said that yes, they would eliminate their period, but only if they were allowed to include conditions. The majority of the time these conditions involved reproduction and the possibility of having children at some point in the future. Menstruation was very consciously tied to reproduction in these negotiations, with over two-thirds of interlocutors mentioning children as part of their discussion of not having a period anymore. It was in these negotiations of what not having a menstrual period might look like that students really acknowledged their reproductive potential and did not want to part with it. While not all participants mentioned wanting children in the future, this connection of menstruation to reproduction is interesting to think about in relation to menstrual activism. It is the cultural feminist-inspired discourses that link menstruation and reproduction, which is not applicable for women who do not identify with their ability (or inability) to
procreate (Bobel 2010: 103). Similar to student opposition around menstruation as a requirement for a female identity, students did not place the desire to reproduce or the ability to reproduce as a necessary marker of womanhood.

As much as students seemed to want to distance themselves from traditional depictions of women as reproductive vessels, closely tied to nature and the home, they did think very carefully about their reproductive capabilities and how menstruation impacts the ways that family life will play out in the future. Renata discussed this tension in her interview, problematizing her association of womanhood with reproduction, but also feeling that there was value attached to this connection. Menstruation is tied to reproduction and the possibility of pregnancy, and for many students menstruation serves as a reminder of what is possible in the future just as surely as it is a reminder of not being pregnant right now. Other students spoke of being fairly certain they did not want children, and thus feeling like there was no reason for them to deal with such a hassle once a month.

In the end, students do not negate that the body plays an important role in how they conceive of their individual identities. For many students, the reproductive potential of their bodies was a crucial and exciting component to how they envisioned their futures. These students are not negating their bodies; pride in their bodies actually plays an important role in efforts to create positive menstrual discourse for women. Instead, they are negating the negative culture that has traditionally been associated with the body. The tensions expressed by students in the articulation of a shared woman identity, as well as the mirrored tensions between cultural feminist-inspired spiritualists and third-wave radical menstruation activists,
highlight the ways in which constructions of “woman” continue to be problematized in order to create menstrual discourse that is inclusive of all those who menstruate.
Conclusion

I began this project by describing a few of the messages about the menstruating body that I regularly encounter throughout the course of one afternoon on the campus of Scripps College. As I concluded these descriptions, I posed the question “based on my observations throughout the afternoon, do I feel comfortable telling her that I have bad menstrual cramps?” Well, we are students at a women’s college, an institution that insists that our education and experiences as women are at the heart of its mission. It is just the two of us standing in the hallway of Kimberly residence hall, a space that represents our home base on campus. She has asked to borrow my heating pad before, so I know that she trusts me enough as an acquaintance to address menstruation. Complaining about cramps falls within acceptable menstrual discourse, and I do not plan to share any other details about my body. My neighbor identifies as a woman, and I know for a fact that she menstruates, so she will probably be empathetic to my pain. In the end, is it okay for me to tell her about my period? The importance of this question is not dependent upon the answer, but rather lies in the many considerations that inform the decision to engage in menstrual discourse.

The identity of Scripps as a women’s college is what sets this research apart, creating a unique environment in which to study a biological and cultural process that affects female-bodied individuals. The large presence of young adult women living together in a concentrated area, combined with the uniting desire of these individuals to live and learn in a space dedicated to supporting the advancement of women, might lead one to believe that menstruation is made more visible at Scripps
than in environments with less of a gendered division. On the one hand, this assumption is true. Students do envision Scripps as an “open” space, where topics like menstruation are made public because they have been inscribed upon the female body. Combating the stigma associated with menstruation is recognized as one way that Scripps supports its community, by encouraging women to accept and even love their bodies, just by the very nature of being female. However, the discourses outlined in the chapters of this study demonstrate that “openness” at Scripps is constructed in very specific ways. Students consider location, company, and the nature of the information to be shared before publicly discussing menstruation.

The contrast between openness and distinction reveals the ways in which women’s colleges function as an ideal of an open space for women. There is an expectation that the community will be more open, a lived understanding of the community as more open, but also a desire to continue pushing the community to open itself further. For students to work towards an ideal of openness, they must not recognize that they are not fully experiencing acceptance within their community. Once this fact is acknowledged, students attempt to move forward in making a public space for menstruation. As students utilize menstrual discourse to articulate the necessary conditions for women to fully engage the public sphere at Scripps, they simultaneously acknowledge that these conditions often operate within rigid constraints of normative behavior for women. It is when students work to make a public space for menstruation, when they navigate their relationships with other people, when they examine their knowledge of their bodies, and when they grapple
with issues of female identity that students are pulled back by the traditional boundaries and constraints that have permeated menstrual discourse.

Despite the ways through which student behavior and conversation regularly maintain and comply with society’s expectations of what it means to be female, they are also actively engaged in forms of resistance. As Lee and Sasser-Cohen phrase it, “Women’s bodies are products of and situated in a sociocultural context that devalues and trivializes women; and yet, while adult women have internalized the stigma and shame associated with having bodies that bleed, and all this entails in terms of restrictions on body, mind and soul, they have responded as active agents, and have resisted these discursive regimes through a variety of ingenious means” (1996: 180). My interlocutors have taken these ingenious means upon themselves in order to resist the dominant discourses of the menstruating female body. By participating in this study and telling their stories, they give voice to their experiences and push menstruation into the public realms of academia. On a daily basis, they find ways to manage their bleeding bodies while fully participating in society, and they create positive discourses that emphasize bonding with women over the amazing capabilities of the female body. Perhaps more importantly, they challenge the exclusionary principles of biological essentialism in order to create support for all those who menstruate and all those who identify as women, recognizing that these categories are not dependent on one another. Their actions and dialogues suggest the hope of obtaining the ideal of openness in the Scripps community, as a starting place for more positive discourses of menstruation in society as a whole.
Appendix

Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews:

- Could you tell me about the first time you got your period?
  - Did you tell anyone about it? How was it explained to you/did someone explain it to you? How did you feel?
- How do you feel generally when you have your period?
  - Are there specific things that you do during this time to take care of yourself? Do you eat different foods or change your routine?
  - Are there particular types of hygiene products that you use? Or particular medicines/practices that you use to help with cramps or discomfort?
- Thinking about Scripps, or college more generally, as a unique environment in which students are living, working, going to class, and socializing, have there been times when you’ve had your period and it has impacted your life in any of these areas?
- Is menstruation something you feel comfortable talking about with other people?
  - How do you talk about menstruation with these people? What kinds of things do you say? Are there any boundaries?
  - With friends? Women and men? With family? With your partner?
  - Are there particular spaces on campus where this is not an appropriate topic?
- On campus, are there spaces where you talk about your period or where, as a topic, it is more visible/invisible?
- Do your experiences with your period at Scripps vary in some way from your experiences in high school or when you’re in your home community? If so, how?
- How do you think menstruation is viewed by the Scripps community/how do you view your period?
- If you have a question about your period, where do you go for information?
- Would you eliminate it if you could?
- Is menstruation something you associate with women or a women’s identity?
  - Do you view your period as a key aspect of your identity as a woman (if you identify that way)?
- Are there other stories or opinions you have to share about your period or things you’ve seen on campus related to menstruation?
Advertisement for Residential Life’s week of programming: “It’s That Time of the Month”

It’s that time of the month.

A WEEK OF MENSTRUATION PROGRAMS

presented by

SCRIPPS RESIDENTIAL LIFE

in collaboration with:

INTERCOLLEGiate WOMEN’S STUDIES,
HEALTH EDUCATION OUTREACH (HEO),
SAS, AND THE DEAN OF STUDENTS OFFICE

NOV. 5
KNOW YOUR FLOW WITH HEO
7-8:30 P.M.
CLARK LIVING ROOM

NOV. 7
THE UTERUS FLAG PROJECT
SIT & STITCH
7-9 P.M.
STUDENT UNION

PMG: Jill Juang @ scrippscollege.edu
Passive Programming, poster responses to “My period makes me feel….”

(The comments written within parentheses are descriptions of drawings made by students on the posters. The arrows written next to comments signal responses made by other students to those specific comments. I have included every written comment, even when there are multiples, to show commonality in experience.)

Like a Woman <3
Like a star
Wet
Like I should de-friend my uterus. ← agree :)
Severe pain
Gross
Horny
I just finished an expletive statement
Sick
HUNGRY - COOKIES (drawing of a cookie) ← follow up on those cookies w/ bloated :
Like my body is trying to kill me….slowly!
I need le sleeps and le sex. Not at the same time.
Like I need a shower
Modern Medicine took mine away.
Thank God.
Sleepy.
Gross
Awkward….
Happy that I’m not pregnant!! ….yep ← haha, seconded :) :)
Like I’m birthing a tiny fetus
Really really exhausted (those stomach cramps)
Mean
#ScrippsProblems
Relieved for about 30 sec that I am a)
not pregnant and b) a functioning female and then everything sucks for the next week

Like a broken faucet :
“I hope the week goes fast…..”
Antisocial
Whiny
Like there’s a crime scene in my pants!
Not pregnant!
Chocolate (is a must)
Like the mother of dragons
Like curling up in a ball and never leaving my room
Like I’m on top of the world!! ← [I call BS]
Irritated b/c my sexual partner cannot get me pregnant anyway so it’s not even relieving, it just sucks
Like I want to punch everyone in the face
MURDER
Bloody awful
Relieved and angry at the same time
Bloated
Not pregnant
Like I’m shedding the lining of my uterus because I failed to fertilize that egg
I don’t get my period, and it makes me feel sad, left out. But guiltily happy at the same time
Gross
Cats
Happy I’m not prego
Like I want to punch something/someone
Extremely relieved…(tampons cost less than a pregnancy test) ← yes!
I’m a dude.
like dancing → wut? srly?! wow…. :) 
Bloated as hell like I’m a whale that swallowed a whale and is also pregnant at the same time → (face showing horror) ← que horror!
UGH
Like a complete sentence.
Like I would rather have a penis → yes x10,000
HORNY (drew an excited face) ← for reals?
“Like there is a crime scene in my pants.” But really. Confused. Grossed out.
Like a terror to everyone…look out
Sad :( 
TERRIBLE
Annoyed ← yes Happy I’m not pregnant! :) ← agreed Like it’s the end of a sentence. Burdened Nauseated :( Bloody Sucky
Like I want to eat EVERYTHING in sight or that I think about HUNGRY ← eat all of the ice cream!! 
UGH 
Needy Like I’m not w/ child Resigned Like (drawing of a squiggly circle like a cloud) Warrior Sexy Hawt

Like a sociopath (drawing of a face with wide eyes and open mouth)
(drawing of a face getting stabbed by a dagger)
Like shark week…and I’m the bait ← I like this, I like this too, One person likes this Like I’m insane! Pain Hormones
Like a natural woman?
Like my body and I are an old married couple and we’ve learned to compromise. Sometimes it’s my way, and sometimes it’s my body’s way. When I’m on my period, it’s definitely not my way, but….can’t live without it I guess :) ← get out of this relationship.
Like a virgin (drawing of musical notes around the text)
So many snacks Sneeze and a chunk of my uterus slides out ANGRY! LADY TIMEZ
Like shit. Period poop. (draws a pile of poop) Horny and sexually frustrated → but let’s face it, that’s all the time. ← preach, amen sista! Bloated DEATH
Sexy as fuck <3 Like I’m not pregnant (and that’s good for all parties involved)
Constantly munching ← me too! Try sucking on cough drops (Halls Vitamin C taste good) Short tempered
Like I’m bleeding out my vagina
…like my body is cleaning out all of
the shit I dealt with for the past month
“Like there’s a crime scene in my
pants!” - No Strings Attached
Niagra falls in my pants
Ill (drawing of a puking face)
Like I truly know the meaning of hell
← THIS
A closer connection to Midol
Nothing changes, except maybe the
downstairs activities
Physically and mentally achy
Like a (natural) WO-MAN! womyn
Like everyone is out to get me!!!
Diarrhea <3
Horny <3
Misunderstood.
Like a cow! Moo! (drawing of a cow)
All I want is a bath and a glass of
champagne with a button of advil
Hot and bothered
Resentful of mirrors
Slightly bloated
Blah
Like I cannot see or be seen by people
Swaggerific
Bloat<br>
Ugly
Horny
Ashamed
HOT
poopy ← preach
Hungry! Om nom nom
Like I’m not the Alpha-female :( —I
wear Old Space wagger to compensate
← ME TOO
Afraid to use white towels
Like a goddess (the vengeful kind)
*grateful for the tampon inventor*
Healthy
Like a woman ← hmm gender
essentializing :( hmm idk cuz I respect
your experience though, I DO! but
trans-phobia also
Not pregnant
So gross!
BUT HOW?! ← true that
HORNY
Hungry horny stinky
(drawing of an elephant)
Like a glorious angel <3
Self-conscious
Like I want chocolate!
Like I’m losing a part of myself
Disgusting ← Don’t; it’s natural
Chubs
Bloat<br>
Lonely cuz I don’t have a gf to go
down on me during my period :( ← so
ture!! hit me up
Like I ruin my panties with
unavoidable stains! ugh
Like a monster is growing inside
me…. :( (drawing of a scribble) ?! ← yes
Like I’m not pregnant ← which is
great for all parties involved! relieved!
every month! so perfect!
Monsoon erupting from vag
I’m living the worst day of my life for
5 days
Like I have a good excuse not to do
anything
I’m chill, it’s not that bad w/ birth
control ← If only my insurance would
cover that… #birthcontrol privilege,
#humblebra
Like I’m wasting $ on tampons
Like I have to poop
Like a t-rex
I want to die
Like a sociopath
Like I’m giving off super sexy vibes
to everyone
Like a womyn!
Awks…
My uterus will explode and fall out
my butt ← THIS
Grumpy :
Like killing my suite
Feels like I’m dying from the inside
out!!! I hate period! :
Like I’m full of pumpkins
Happy because I’m not pregnant
Bored. Pissed Off. Sexually
Frustrated. ← the same
Emotional roller coaster :(( ← true that
Someone is slicing me in the gut
I’m leaking
Poopy
Like the elevator from the shining
BLEGH (drawing of an angry face)
Like elves with knives are happily
frolicking in the uterus ← <3
Like shit!
Vomitroicious!! :) 
Reassured that 1) I am a healthy
woman 2) I am not pregnant
Not prego, yay!
Like a snapping turtle!
Terrified that I will bleed through my
pants!
Alright…tampons contribute to the
illusion that I’m not on my period
A little bipolar :
Hungry and sometimes lighteheaded.
I’m borderline anemic, but neglect to
take my iron supplements ← :(
Tragically horny :*(
I can’t help it if I’ve got a heavy flow
and a wide set vagina… ← <3
(drawing of a monster)
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