ABSTRACT

THE RHETORIC OF THE MODERN AMERICAN MENSTRUAL TABOO

by Erika Marie Thomas

The menstruation taboo remains a phenomenon in most cultures, including Western society. Despite progressive social relations and education in the United States, messages within our culture depict menstruation as an act threatening and socially harmful to women. This project employs Michael Calvin McGee’s method of analyzing discursive fragments in order to create a text which exposes the modern myths surrounding menstruation and the enforcement of the taboo. First, I examine the role of visual imagery in influencing cultural beliefs and contend that films visually connect the image of blood and menstruation to the logic of evil, danger, embarrassment, and dirt thus reproducing the menstrual taboo. Second, I examine various advertising campaigns for feminine hygiene products to determine how the menstrual taboo adopts a repressive discourse to successfully sell products to women while simultaneously silencing women’s issues to the private sphere. Finally, I examine artifacts that challenge the taboo and discuss implications for the future of the menstruation taboo. I conclude that rethinking the subject matter is necessary to further empower women on issues of embodiment. The rhetorical analysis critiques the discourses responsible for the taboo’s continuation and attempts to break down its repressive nature.
THE RHETORIC OF THE MODERN AMERICAN MENSTRUAL TABOO

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In Baghdad, July 2006, during the divorce court proceedings of Raad and Nidhal, Khalil Family Court Judge Salim al-Moussawi began his proceedings by asking Nidhal the traditional question, “Are you pure today?” Nidhal nodded her assent, thus indicating that the trial can proceed, because if Nidhal, a Shiite Muslim, was menstruating, she could not continue with court proceedings. For most men and women in Western society, the Iraqi courtroom proceedings may seem disturbing but not surprising. We often encounter and identify the menstruation taboo in foreign cultures, but fail to reflect on the ways in which the taboo operates in our own culture. Whether it is referred to as the “the curse,” “my red-headed friend,” or “that time of the month,” the prominent use of euphemisms in Western culture suggest that menstruation has been treated more as a disorder or a dirty secret than as a neutral element of the female reproductive cycle. In contrast, contemporary scientists and doctors describe menstruation as a straightforward process: from the onset of puberty, the uterine wall builds up and -- in the absence of fertilization -- sheds a nutrient and blood-filled lining. This scientific perspective of menstruation as an essential element of human reproduction represents a significant shift from the classical origins of our culture, but treating menstruation as a taboo topic has remained the popular approach since ancient times. Today, the menstruation taboo remains a phenomenon in most cultures, including Western society. Despite progressive social relations and education, messages within our culture depict menstruation as an act threatening and socially harmful to women. Understanding the discourse surrounding the menstruation taboo, what causes it and how it is reinforced, works to counter the oppressive tendencies of the Western menstruation taboo.

Existing literature in three areas grounds and develops a theoretical justification for examining the menstruation taboo. First, work on the role of taboo in culture demonstrates the ways which taboo continues to perform as a rhetorical tool in our Western society. Second, literature on the private/public spheres illustrates the ways in which these domains influence the taboo and promote its construction as a private threat. Finally scholarship explains why menstruation taboos exist and describes the taboos’
changing nature. I investigate each of these areas in the next sections to illustrate the ways in which the taboo has historically operated and leads to oppression.

The Role of Taboo

Mary Douglas defined taboo as “a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations. It threatens specific dangers if the code is not respected. Some of the dangers which follow on taboo-breaking spread harm indiscriminately on contact. Feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community.” Douglas explains that communities comply by recognizing a taboo and obeying its avoidance rules to maintain order. Thus, taboos are created by “leaders of the society” and “controllers of opinion” to structure social relations and stabilize power structures. In other words, rejection or acceptance of pollution produced by the body and/or pollution threatening the body grounds the organization of social structure and rational behavior. Douglas argues that societies code elements as taboo, dirty, or dangerous in order to protect distinctive categories of their universe and to distinguish the ambiguous and the sacred. Primitive cultures created taboos around such elements just as members of modern societies categorize the unclassifiable as “dirty” or “dangerous.” Thus, our categorization of dirt and the customs surrounding such elements continues a tradition of using “rituals of purity and impurity” to “create unity in experience.”

For Douglas, rituals create a shared experience both among and within communities, thus structuring and organizing reality. Members of a society are required to take seriously all rituals and taboos because they operate as the foundation of a culture’s way of knowing. It may be difficult for individuals to understand the particular concern or why the avoidance of a particular pollutant, food, or touch “eliminates” the danger or risk, but they accept the ritual as necessary because it is a part of their world. In this context dirt represents disorder. Through rituals, cultures tame dirt, reject it, or use it in creative ways so that order reemerges in the culture. Rituals of cleanliness and hygiene reflect the social relations in the culture, commonly subordinating a group of people on the basis of physical differences described as body pollution. For example, taboos have been used to reinforce gender hierarchies. Douglas states, “There are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids. According to
other beliefs, only one sex is endangered by contact with the other, usually males from females, but sometimes the reverse. Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy. Douglas explains that sexual pollution and bodily pollution are best explained as symbols which represent the relations between parts of society and mirror hierarchy. Such systematizing and interpretation of beliefs, such as separating and purifying, have the main function of imposing a system on experiences that are seen as inherently dirty or unclean. Pollution thereby upholds societal value in multiple ways, such as reinforcing moral codes. And, while pollution can represent danger, pollution rituals can also provide a check on authority thus empowering the powerless.

Douglas argues that the social relation between people provide the prototype for logical patterns and relations between things and beliefs. In other words, “bodily control tends to be relaxed where social control is weak.” In her case study of the Mbuti pygmy camps, Douglas argues that the society is free of social categories and boundary groups, which explains their disregard of bodily pollution, such as death and menstruation. For Douglas, a resemblance or association exists between the body’s physical boundaries and the danger present in community or social boundaries. Thus, rituals controlling bodily pollution enact a form of social relations and enable people to understand their society and its boundaries.

Douglas’ explanation of this function of taboo mirrors Kenneth Burke’s explanation of how humans use symbols, rituals and ceremonies to construct identity. As the “symbol using animal,” humans mark the behavior and orientation of others to develop their own sense of self. In other words, we use symbols rhetorically to organize and create understanding between others and ourselves, or to create opposing identities. Burke explains, “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.”

According to Burke, one does not need to sharply scrutinize “identification” to find its ironic counterpart, division. Thus, through his theory of identification, Burke provides an explanation for how taboo operates in rhetorical terms. Taboo is society’s
ritual for crafting identity through the process of demarcating differences. Taboo seeks to expose the beliefs and/or behaviors that construct an “us” and a “them.” According to this explanation, taboo, such as the menstruation taboo, is used to create divisions between or common identification among groups of people. In the case of the menstruation taboo, a division is constructed between men and women, and this division becomes one way we identify with sexual difference.

In The Philosophy of Literary Form, Burke examines the writing of poetry as “symbolic action,” because the poet participates in the “play-acting” that Burke describes as a “symbolization of his private problems.”¹³ This poetic organization often involves processes of proclaiming or forming an identity.¹⁴ Burke explains that one method for engaging in reidentification involves the process of scapegoating. He states: “Since the symbolic transformation involves a sloughing off, you may expect to find some variant of killing in the work . . . So we get to the ‘scapegoat,’ the ‘representative’ or ‘vessel’ of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial animal upon whose back the burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded.”¹⁵ As societies grew in social complexity, these animals could be replaced by other humans who were made “worthy” of sacrifice. Burke describes one strategy of scapegoating: the creature becomes worthy of sacrifice fatalistically due to a personal flaw or a punishable action.

The ritual of scapegoating becomes a form of symbolic redemption; a strategy necessary to keep order. Burke explains the motive and impulse to keep society’s “symmetry;” a strategy to keep order.

In their societies, they will seek to keep order. If order, then a need to repress the tendencies to disorder. If repression, then responsibility for imposing, accepting, or resisting the repression. If responsibility, then guilt. If guilt, then the need for redemption, which involves sacrifice, which in turn allows for substitution. At this point, the logic of perfection enters.¹⁶

According to Burke, most religious stories are illustrations of the guilt-redemption cycle that becomes a template for all other stories. Burke explains: “Though this may be a mystery theologically, its logological analogue is not mysterious. Logologically, there is a ‘fall’ from a prior state of unity, whenever some one term is broken into two or more
terms, so that we have the ‘divisiveness’ of ‘classification’ where we formerly had had a ‘vision of perfect oneness.’” An example commonly invoked by Burke is the story of Adam and Eve and their fall from the Garden of Eden. Burke’s cycle begins with a sense of uncertainty or disruption which becomes linked to contamination or pollution. As the story goes, once Adam and Eve ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, they were no longer “pure;” thus they were labeled polluted and called “sinners” and no longer permitted to remain in the Garden. According to Burke, when order cannot be kept, or when a group of people is labeled as outside “the order,” then the individual(s) experience guilt. Once people experience guilt, they seek redemption. Burke explains that redemption can be achieved through two courses, mortification (or self sacrifice) or the identification of a scapegoat (someone to blame). In the Book of Genesis, for example, Adam and Eve are the scapegoats in this story and the Garden of Eden must be purified by their banishment. In order to end their guilt and participate in redemption, Burke contends that we are motivated to participate in symbolic redemptive acts when we identify with a sin or with the status of guilt. For women, menses becomes the source of this feeling. The menstruation taboo not only demarcates women from men, but also makes women feel guilt. By participating in rituals of cleanliness and following normative paths to absolution, they acknowledge their complicity in the guilt redemption cycle.

Through Burke we learn the rhetorical significance of society’s scapegoats. Since we have no identity without difference and since the existence of difference requires the presence of a scapegoat, all societies require the presence of a scapegoat in order to justify their unified identity. In his essay, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle,” Burke explains:

People so dislike the idea of internal division that, where there is a real internal division, their dislike can easily be turned against the man or group who would so much as name it, let alone proposing to act upon it. Their natural and justified resentment against internal division itself, is turned against the diagnostician who states it as a fact. This diagnostician, it is felt, is the cause of the disunity he named.
Burke maintains that society fears losing its unity and identity and as a result finds ways to rhetorically demarcate difference. By finding scapegoats or enforcing feelings of mortification onto others we reestablish order and identification in our society. Thus, menstruating women experience more than their biological menstrual cycle; every month they experience the guilt-redemption cycle, which society has come to recognize as the menstrual taboo.

Douglas and Burke demonstrate the conditions of possibility that allow the existence of the menstruation taboo. Douglas and Burke show that division is critical in constructing identity for others; thus, taboo is one discursive strategy used by societies in order to create division. By understanding the motives that craft a society’s discourse we can begin to alter the discourse for the betterment of society. Through a rhetorical lens we can see why society reinforces taboos and how taboo creates division and discrimination. Burke defines rhetoric as identification, thus articulating rhetoric’s power in constructing such concepts. In the same way Burke explains the association between rhetoric and identification, scholars have similarly identified rhetoric as a tool for dividing groups through its construction of the public and private spheres. Critical and theoretical questions concerning the public have plagued those interested in rhetorical studies since groundbreaking essays in the 1920’s defined the foundation and substance of public speaking. Today, scholars have developed theories to explain how the often arbitrary division between the public and the private are relevant to rhetoric, epistemology and ethics.

**Habermas’s Public/Private Dichotomy and Feminist Counter-Critiques**

Jürgen Habermas began the contemporary discussion over the public and private spheres by tracing the emergence, transformation, and then the disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere. Examining Habermas’s work, particularly how he understands the bourgeois public and private spheres operating, provides insight into the functions of patriarchy and its means of relegating women’s issues to the private sphere. Issues like poverty, welfare, and domestic violence have historically been silenced and hidden. The public is constructed as a forum reserved for “legitimized” discourse and issues, thus topics removed from the public sphere are isolated and privatized, making
them taboo or invisible to others by removing them altogether or creating a repressed discourse as the only means for discussion.

Habermas explains that the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere started with a changing market economy, as trade capitalism emerged in Europe in the 1500’s and shifted away from local markets. This change occurred because trade and an exchange of commodities required a transformation in communication in the sharing of information. During the middle of the seventeenth century, the term “public” first appeared in some European countries, influenced by a changing capitalist society, property ownership, and an educated middle class. A new public developed in salons, coffee houses and literary societies throughout Europe. Habermas describes this emerging enigma in his work:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized by publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.

In addition to public debates, rational-critical argumentation was also found in the early press and in the literature of the time. In some countries like Great Britain, the public sphere flourished as censorship dissipated and the first cabinet government was formed. Thus, Habermas argues that such forums allowed for political and human emancipation because the bourgeois public sphere became an idealized prototype for the foundation of pure democracy and governing through societal consensus. In order to maintain the establishment, the private sphere provided an intimate sphere or familial sphere, whereas the public sphere was reserved for the government and rational-critical discourse. A distinction is necessary so “private individuals” can use the sphere to discuss and deliberate matters of the common good and guarantee participation of common interest.

Habermas argues that during the nineteenth century that a social-structural transformation of the public sphere took place. As the state expanded its activity and
the mass media influenced the perceptions of the public/private dichotomy,\textsuperscript{26} an infiltration of the public and private interests occurred. Additionally, changes in capitalism shifted the interests of the private persons. Not only did the “world of work” become its own sphere,\textsuperscript{27} but the bourgeois property owners replaced rational-critical debate with consumption of goods.\textsuperscript{28} The public sphere no longer exists as a utopian discursive arena because its participants are not distinct from the state and its official economy and citizens prioritize consumption and commodification in the place of discussing matters of the common good.

Fundamental to Habermas’s conception of the public sphere and its emancipatory power is the distinction between the private and the public.\textsuperscript{29} For Habermas, a citizen gains access to the public sphere by owning property and being a sovereign leader of the household. The implication becomes that a participant must be a “private man” for during this time, the “owner of commodities” and “head of the family” were male.\textsuperscript{30} One could only remain a citizen if autonomy was achieved through human intimacy and family. Thus, the disintegration of the public sphere coincided with and changed as the family became “deprivatized;” the illusion of privacy rose, while the family actually lost power.\textsuperscript{31} Ultimately, Habermas views the disintegration of the spheres as a regression from rational-critical debate and public deliberation. Although his work seeks to point out the multiple intersections between the spheres, he continues to idealize the emancipatory possibility that exists in the public sphere. He states, “unlike the idea of the bourgeois public sphere during the period of its liberal development, it cannot be denounced as an ideology. If anything, it brings the dialectic of that idea, which had been degraded into an ideology, it its conclusion.”\textsuperscript{32}

Habermas illustrates how distinctions between the public and private sphere were discursively and politically established and the ways in which they continue to exist today. But, Habermas’s characteristics of the public and private spheres are often contested by feminist scholars for multiple reasons. Typically, critics argue that Habermas fails to acknowledge the gendered nature of the public sphere and ignores its masculine tendencies and assumptions. Several of these feminist scholars show how these assumptions had negative effects on women.
Craig Calhoun charges Habermas with overlooking issues of gender in the public sphere. Although Habermas attempts to make divisions gender neutral, he conflates the terms of “man” and “citizen” throughout his work.\textsuperscript{33} Michael Warner agrees, and argues that gender neutrality is not only impossible but also counterproductive. He states, “Neither in gender nor in race nor in class nor in sexualities is it possible to treat different particulars as having merely paratactic or serial difference.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus an asymmetrical privilege develops in Habermas’s work that makes the bourgeois public sphere privileged for white, male, property owners. The neutralizing effect that the public sphere has on gender and difference prompted Nancy Fraser, Geoff Eley, Joan Landes, Seyla Benhabib and other feminist scholars to demonstrate how women’s oppression is reaffirmed through the legitimization of the public sphere and the continuous dichotomy established between the public and the private. This oppression is better understood after examining the masculine and exclusionary tendencies of the public sphere. From this perspective, Habermas’ idealization of the public sphere requires ignoring the numerous exclusions of gender, race, and class which occurred as a result of its construction.\textsuperscript{35}

Fraser argues that history contradicts Habermas’ assumptions that the public sphere is open to all; women were excluded from such a concept, for gender, class, and race were all elements that limited one’s access to the public.\textsuperscript{36} Habermas brackets discussion of such groups as the working class and women because he views them as excluded members of the public sphere, but Fraser contends that the protocols in the bourgeoisie public sphere actually marginalized the lower classes and women. Geoff Eley concurs with Fraser that multiple masculinist constructs were built into the liberal public sphere. Eley notes that modern political structures have been historically used to exclude women and have reified gender distinctions as natural and essential qualities.\textsuperscript{37} The public sphere applies modernist ideologies which sought to remove women and other minorities from participating in society. Joan B. Landes examines the masculinist nature of the European bourgeois public sphere through her study of the French Revolution, which she contends is an example of a modernist paradigm that limited “liberatory potential” for women. She uses the works of Rousseau and his influence on the “ideology of the republican motherhood,” to show the foundation of the norms which
excluded women from the public sphere and the prevalence of the ideology.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, Cynthia Enloe explains that the legitimizing the rhetoric of “private” and “public” in legal discourse continues today and is an act used to further silence women and remove their legal rights.

One of the most potent mechanisms for political silencing is dichotomizing "public" and "private" . . . One of the longest and fiercest struggles that advocates for women's rights have had to wage has been a against those -women as well as men-who have presumed that not only women's concerns but women themselves were most "naturally" kept within the allegedly private sphere.\textsuperscript{39}

Feminist scholars further label the public sphere as masculine because it has limited the acceptable topics and concerns typically addresses in public politics. Habermas assumes that within the discursive arena “private” persons must only deliberate about “public” concerns. Fraser argues that this assumption is problematic because topics can only be discussed if they are “1) state-related, 2) accessible to everyone, 3) of concern to everyone, 4) and pertaining to common good or shared interest.”\textsuperscript{40} This clearly eliminates many issues that specifically affect women, including child rearing, domestic violence, reproductive freedoms, and care for the sick, young, and elderly; Seyla Benhabib notes that such limits make the public sphere a space that excludes women.\textsuperscript{41} Catharine MacKinnon exposes the negative treatment of women’s issues within the legal system by examining modern political debates over legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and court cases such as United States \textit{v. Morrison}. She contends that the court’s decisions devalue material activity as belonging to the private sphere which re-inscribes the public/private dichotomy by upholding patriarchal power within civil society. MacKinnon explains the gendered phenomenon:

The closer to home women's injuries are addressed, the less power and fewer rights they seem to have; the further away from home the forum, the more power and rights women have gained - and with them freedom of action, resources, and access to a larger world. In experiential terms, women are least equal at home, in private; they have had the most equality
in public, far from home. It is in the private, man's sovereign castle, where most women remain for a lifetime, where women are most likely to be battered and sexually assaulted, and where they have no recourse because the private, by definition, is inviolable and recourse means intervention. For physically and sexually violated women, going public with their injuries has meant seeking accountability and relief from higher sovereigns, men who have power over the men who abused them because they are above, removed from, hence less likely to be controlled by those abusers. 42

Landes agrees that such limiting structures and discourse exist in the current public sphere, which both affects women’s legal rights and restricts the emancipatory potential of today’s feminist movements because it is “predicated on removing women, and women’s speech, from the public sphere.”43

Furthermore, feminists critique Habermas because his conclusions failed to predict the ways in which the spheres would change due to society’s shifting gender relations. Benhabib argues that the intimate sphere was radically transformed when the women’s movements massively led women into the public sphere and into the labor force. The contemporary acceptance of the distinction between the public and private spheres refuses to acknowledge the changing traditions.44 “What the women’s movement and feminist theorists in the last two decades have shown, however, is that traditional modes of drawing this distinction have been part of a discourse of domination that legitimizes women’s oppression and exploitation in the private realm.”45 Likewise, Lisa McLaughlin criticizes Habermas’s work for his dismissal of the mass media and his failure to provide a follow-up theory, particularly because it does not account for the significant role the mass media plays in contemporary society. Today, the mass media allows for regulated plurality, simulating the slogan, “the personal is political” and further obscuring the distinction between the public and private spheres.46

The masculine characteristics of the public sphere have lead to many negative effects that continue to affect women today. Benhabib argues that Habermas’s conflation of citizen with man results in two consequences that inhibit social transformation: 1)
contemporary moral and political theory continues to ignore gender and differences experienced by men and women, silencing discourse on how these changes create inequality, and 2) the power relations are treated as if they do not exist. Such actions as menstruation, reproduction, housework, child care etc. become unchangeable in human relations. Thus, we gain a concept of the “autonomous individual” only through one’s access to the public sphere. Challenging such inherent distinctions is at the heart of the women’s movements, according to Benhabib: “to the extent that they privatize these issues, is central to women’s struggles, which intend to make these issues public.”

Like Benhabib, Fraser shows that many assumptions which are essential to understanding Habermas’s public sphere cause negative consequences for women. Fraser argues that discriminatory boundaries surrounding the discursive arena should not be established because it depoliticizes those social discourses about traditional women’s topics. Although the domestic and private spheres are traditionally areas delegated to women, Habermas overprivatizes women’s issues by excluding these from discussions about the common good. One example of this is domestic violence. Only recently were feminists successful in making the issue a common concern in society. The early privatization of the issue further subjugated women and legitimized the patriarchal public sphere that dismissed it as one of several “women’s issues.” Thus it remains a flawed assumption that domestic issues are outside the realm of public issues, which typically concern policy-making, justice, and capitalism. Thus, identification of counternarratives and public exposure of silenced issues places women’s interests in the dialogue on the common good. Mary Ryan shows that by listening to the voices of those minority groups who have been banished from the public sphere, society can offer a new opportunity to those individuals to achieve representation.

Finally, Habermas’s theory fails to consider the body politic and its relevance to the public and private spheres. Hannah Arendt traces the emergence of the public and private spheres as far back as Ancient Greece. Unlike Habermas, Arendt acknowledges the exclusionary nature of the public sphere -- freedom and equality were necessary components in order to participate in the polis. Women remained in the private sphere because “necessity” dictated such labors as caring for the household and giving
birth. “Natural community in the household therefore was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all activities performed in it. The realm of the polis . . . was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition of freedom.” Arendt points out that the division of private and public realms reflects society’s distinction of “things that should be shown and things that should be hidden.” Arendt argues that this distinction correlates with bodies, such as the bodies of women and slaves, who were not permitted in the public sphere. She states:

it is striking that from the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the bodily pat of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy . . . Hidden away were the laborers ‘who with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,’ and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was ‘laborious,’ devoted to bodily functions.

Arendt concludes that the modern age’s emancipation of the working class and women indicate that bodily functions are no longer hidden or confined to the private sphere. However, feminists continue to show the ways in which women’s bodies are relegated to the private sphere, thus hindering equality for women. My project extends this argument by examining the ways in which American society uses the menstruation taboo to keep women’s bodies outside the public sphere.

Theories of the public and private sphere frame an innovative approach to examining the American menstruation taboo. Scholars have often identified distinctions between the messages of the modern taboo and those found in early history, but they often fail to explain how the discourse of a progressive society allows any such taboo to persist. I contend that the discursive theories of the public and private sphere explain the ongoing social utility of the menstruation taboo and the conditions which make its persistence possible. Specifically, while its divisive character remains constant over time, the internal logics of the taboo have evolved and maintained currency. In the past perceived threats to the public formed rhetoric surrounding the menstruation taboo, but
that dynamic has evolved. For Western women in particular, the “danger” associated with the menstrual blood has shifted from a threat to the public to a threat to private individuals. Understanding this distinction illustrates the ways in which the taboo operates today and helps explain why some men and women fail to view discriminatory and oppressive practices toward menstruating women as employing “taboo.” In other words, people falsely believe that the taboo has been eliminated since menstruating women are no longer viewed as dangerous to others and are no longer relegated to menstrual huts during their monthly period. Examining these changes through a public/private lens, however, reveals that treating an object or action as dangerous - even if only in private context - remains the discourse of taboo. Thus, the individual woman’s constant fear that any sign of menstruation will lead to embarrassment, social exclusion, rejection and affiliation with dirt and disgust verifies the existence and continuing impact of a modern, Western menstruation taboo.

In short, the menstruation taboo is tied to the theories of the public and private since the discourse of the taboo relegates menstruation to the private sphere. The historical archives indicate that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, menstruation, viewed as a “woman’s issue,” was banished to the private and domestic spheres due to the perspective that such discussions are not pertinent to the “common good.” Such silencing created an environment that hurt women by denying them proper education on the topic, relation to other women, and equal rights in the public sphere. By extension, ritualistic practices, exclusion, and commodification associated with the hiding of menstruation led to additional oppression of women.

**The Menstruation Taboo**

Our culture has long treated menstruation as threatening or dirty, and many have taken a closer look at the process by which a naturally-occurring bodily function in women which is as necessary and natural as sneezing became taboo. Like other rituals, and beliefs, the menstruation taboo has a cultural foundation that can be traced genealogically, and historians and anthropologists have explored the progression that created the present taboo. As with any accepted social structure, the belief arose in the context and support of prevailing values. In this case, the taboo reflected cultural beliefs justifying the power differential between men and women.
Historians traced the practice of constructing differences that subordinate women to men to ancient Greece. Often these differences labeled women as debilitating and inferior, although males and females were believed to be structurally the same. Thomas Laqueur traces the history of sex by examining the ways in which medical conceptions and figurations of the human body shape society’s present notion of gender difference. For a thousand years, it was believed that women had the same genital components as men, which were merely “inverted” so that they appeared inside the woman’s body. In other words, only one sex existed, and the female was merely a malformed male. Laqueur attributes this “one-sex” model to that Alexandrian anatomist, Herophilus, who claimed that women had testes and seminal ducts that corresponded to men’s reproductive systems. Laqueur explains, “Instead of being divided by their reproductive anatomies, the sexes are linked by a common one. Women, in other words, are inverted, and hence less perfect, men.”

Therefore, despite the similarities and parallel characteristics of their bodies, men and women were seen as unequal and ordered hierarchically.

Using Herophilus’s notes as support, Galen of Pergamum, developed a model in the second century B.C.E. of the structural identity of the reproductive systems of men and women. He argued that women’s organs remained inside and invisible because they were a lesser form of male organs. Thus, even Ancient wisdom maintained negative assumptions and claims about menstrual blood and linked its presence to the inferiority of women. For example, it was believed that sperm was a product refined out of blood, thus, members of the female sex lacked the capacity to convert their nutrients and food to the highest quality fluid, sperm. Thus, according to the Ancient Greeks, the imagery establishing the dominant sex existed as a hierarchy of blood. Laqueur states: “For Aristotle, therefore, and for the long tradition founded in his thought, the generative substances are interconvertible elements in the economy of a single-sex body whose higher form is male. As physiological fluids they are not distinctive and different in kind, but the lighter shades of biological chiaroscuro drawn in blood.”

According to Emily Martin, although Galen saw menstruation as a form of purification and inherently healthy, “menstrual blood was often seen as foul and unclean.” In other words, Galen and many early physicians believed that the process
of letting blood was necessary and analogous in men; however, men could remove the impurities through such other ways as perspiration, illustrating their more cleanly tendencies. Furthermore, the writings of Galen and even earlier writings of Hippocrates show that the substances released or ejaculated by men and women were ordered hierarchically according to their supposed power. Thus, even the earliest medical scholars explained and grounded physical and biological differences using the rationales and beliefs socially constructed in gender relations.

Laqueur maintains that the shifting interpretations of men and women’s bodies are not simply due to scientific progress; rather, the purpose for identifying and articulating gender in the one-sex and two-sex model was political. He shows that medical scholars became interested in differentiating the sexes when it became politically important. The remaking of the body is intrinsic to each social change and development between men and women throughout history. Additionally, Laqueur maintains that language separated and marked early notions of sexual difference from today’s two-sexed model.

The same justifications remained as the system began to accept the two-sex model, our present model which allows women’s reproductive organs and processes to be seen as uniquely different from men’s genitalia. Power struggles between men and women, particularly over the public sphere, used sexual anatomy to develop social, economic, political, and cultural differences through the human body. As the struggles between the sexes heightened during the nineteenth century, medical writers needed to continue to emphasize and reinforce the supposed differences between men and women in order for men to maintain domination over women. Thus, medical writers began to change their interpretation of menstruation to emphasize the pathological nature of the process. Expelling tissue was now seen as a disorder and writers tended “to stress the debilitating nature of menstruation and its adverse impact on the lives and activities of women.”

Once a two-sex model was biologically accepted, Laqueur maintains that it needed to be reproduced through sex-determinant characteristics and also through “micro-confrontations over power in the public and private spheres.” The menstrual
cycle and ovulation became linked with political theory showing incommensurability of the opposite sexes. Although researchers often lacked the medical theories to determine factual details and descriptions about women’s menstrual cycles, they continued to develop false conclusions and ‘medical “truths.” According to Laqueur, “the social characteristics of women seemed writ in blood and gore and cyclic rages scarcely containable by culture.” Based on this theory, menstruation no longer was viewed as a fluid continuum found in both men and women. Instead, menstruation became a strictly female process and a woman’s social stature was understood according to her body. Thus the menstrual cycle became a way to understand sexual difference by radically differentiating women from men. Laqueur concludes that during the nineteenth century women became “enslaved to a uniquely female cycle” illustrating the cultural weight of a woman’s physical body and characteristics.

Martin provides additional support in her work The Woman in the Body, that medical writings and dominant metaphors about menstruation have historically negative connotations. The effects of such imagery and description allow the maintenance of dominant organizations in society and reinforce the patriarchy. E.F.W. Pflüger argued that nervous stimulation triggered menstruation, and many physicians who adopted his theories argued against the emancipation of women. Edward H. Clarke and Henry Maudsley argued that women should not be educated due to menstruation. Clarke claimed that due to women menstrating, women could not be educated in the same manner as a man, since women needed extensive rest during puberty and during the development of their reproductive system. Clarke specifically recommended women spend all of their energy on the development of their reproductive abilities lest they “lose their ‘maternal instincts.’” Maudsley flatly argued that women could not be educated since menstruation made women unable to understand intellectual matter. Examining the medical writings during this time and the parallel societal context of women fighting for equality reveals that, it is obvious that most scientists and physicians illustrated a clear bias in their discoveries since both acknowledged and “unacknowledged cultural attitudes can seep into scientific writing.”
Numerous other scholars argue that the need to protect patriarchy encouraged the continuation of menstruation taboos. Judy Grahn writes at length about the myths, stories and power that surround menstrual blood in most cultures. Typically blood is treated paradoxically; although blood seen is seen as life force, menstrual blood is seen as dirty and polluting. Grahn argues that this illustrates society’s fear of women gaining too much power.72 “Hers was the power of raveling and of unraveling . . . the power of creation and destruction, as at one time evidently all humanity believed, was in the woman’s blood.”73 Thus, many taboos existed to control the power associated with the menstruating woman.

For Ashley Montagu, taboos surrounding women are constructed for a few different reasons, but these all reflected tensions between the sexes. Although it is often denied, Montagu argues that men are jealous of women’s ability to bear children and, by extension, men are jealous of women’s ability to menstruate. Because they lack these abilities, men have turned the capacity to menstruate into a disability. He states, “By turning such capacities into handicaps, one can cause those thus afflicted to feel inferior, while anyone not so “handicapped can feel superior.”74 The creation of taboos around women’s bodies is an effective way to protect status. Stories, myths, and taboo about the danger of women, including taboos about menstrual blood testify to the fear of men losing their power and “to the deep anxiety underlying male attitude toward women.”75 He states “By making women objects of fear and something to be avoided as unclean, one can reduce the cultural status of women by simple inversion. Their biological advantages are demoted to the status of cultural disadvantages, and as cultural disadvantages, they are then converted into biological disadvantages.”76 At an early age, females are conditioned to believe that menstruation is a “curse” and a “handicap.”77 Through our social heredity we have unquestioningly accepted the belief that biological disadvantage is associated with being female and our society still falls victim to these beliefs today. Montagu states:

“We know today that menstruation is neither mysterious nor malignant but a perfectly healthy, normal function of women . . . Women have been led to believe that these functions are handicapping, and that they must, at
best, play a secondary role to men. Today, both women and men perhaps better understand how this belief came into being and perhaps endeavor to make the necessary concession to the facts.”

The social constructionist perspective shows how the menstruation taboo builds feelings of inferiority and weakness in women. This approach has been strengthened by psychoanalytic scholars, such as Julia Kristeva, who have informed the constructionist perspective by recognizing that the development and acceptance of identity and difference originates with the recognition of forms of abjection, like urine and feces. Thus, the rejection of bodily fluids, such as menstruation, and the association of those fluids with the self are illustrated through psychoanalytic theories of abjection.

According to Alan Hyde, the phenomenon which makes menstruation “disgusting” is the same phenomenon which occurs with all other forms of abjection. Borrowing Kristeva’s analysis, Hyde explains that presymbolic infants take pleasure in relieving abjection (vomit, defecation, urination) until they enter the symbolic universe which teaches them that such activities are inappropriate in public or for public discussion. “The body every day defines itself and its boundaries by what it jettisons; it throws out the abject again and again; yet what it jettisons disgusts and threatens it”

Elizabeth Grosz expands upon Kristeva’s theories of abjection and contends that certain bodily zones and bodily development have come to mark the way in which men and women in Western societies “signify, live, and practice their sexualities and desires.” In other words, these characteristics serve to emphasize the difference between men and women, yet such cultural marks are often biologically arbitrary. For women, the measurement of womanhood is identified with the development of breasts, hips, and the onset of menstruation. She states: “While clearly the development of these characteristics leads to many different attitudes and responses . . . there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions.” Grosz’s work examines the differing cultural views of the fluids produced by men and women. Grosz shows that, in comparison to men’s bodies, women’s bodies are structured and lived so that they differ from men’s and therefore find themselves positioned as passive and secondary. Specifically, Grosz shows how the West constructs the female body so that it is viewed as
“leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid . . . ”82 Grosz illustrates how our views of bodily fluids, like menstruation, are not constituted with ontological meaning, rather they are attributed meaning based on the hierarchical structuring of heterosexual male desire. Grosz states:

for the girl, menstruation, associated as it is with blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable, not in sleep, in dreams, but whenever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood. The idea of soiling oneself, of dirt, of the very dirt produced by the body itself, staining the subject, is a “normal” condition of infancy, but in the case of the maturing woman it is a mark or stain of her future status, the impulsion into a future of a past that she thought she left behind. This necessarily marks womanhood, whatever else it may mean for particular women, as outside herself, outside its time . . . and place . . . and thus a paradoxical entity, on the very border between infancy and adulthood, nature and culture, subject and object, rational being and irrational animal.83

Grosz concludes that societal structures, cultural beliefs, and popular ideas label women’s fluids as abject and code men’s fluids, such as semen, as non-threatening and purifying. Grosz contends that even Kristeva’s analysis remains unclear failing to explain why menstruation is dangerous to both sexes, whereas semen is not. Describing Kristeva’s analysis as “obscure” and “not entirely convincing,” Grosz implies that even Kristeva was guilty of incorporating cultural and social taboo and myths about fluid into her analysis. Grosz’s analysis illustrates that women’s bodies are marked differently than men’s at particular body regions. Codes and the relationship between sexual identity and difference must disappear so as to not determine the relations between sexes.

I have shown the historical foundation of the menstruation taboo and the various theories explaining how the taboo works to maintain sexual difference, hierarchy and power relations. Now that I have explained the ways in which societal order was preserved through the taboo, I will show how the taboo once affected and today continues to affect women’s behaviors and everyday lives. I will also show through historical and
modern examples of the ways women were forced to adapt to the taboo the ways in which the taboo changed and its connection to the public and private spheres.

As I have argued, the rhetoric of the menstruation taboo shifted from one which threatened society to one that now threatens the individual. In most cultures and societies, up until and including the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, menstruating women were viewed as a threat to society. In particular, a menstruating woman’s offspring, husband, family, and even other men in her community were at risk of curses, diseases, and even death. Thus, in most societies, women were confined to menstrual huts during their menses because of the various dangers they posed to men and society. It was commonly believed that intercourse with a menstruating woman was thought to cause great harm to men. A sixteenth century English text from 1506 claimed that intercourse during menstruation is fatal to a husband, because women’s menstrual blood was poisonous. Such beliefs often originated from the Bible, in particular the Book of Leviticus. According to Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, the Bible reinforced the belief, explaining that women who menstruated were unclean for seven days and that any men who had intercourse with a woman during that time would then be considered unclean for seven days as well. It was also believed that a monstrous or deformed child would be born to any woman who conceived during menstruation. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, numerous Italian medical advisers, like L. Lemnes, argued that “copulation during menstruation generated monsters.” According to Ottavia Niccoli, the belief that conception of monsters occurred during a woman’s menstrual cycle could still be found in medical and anthropological literature as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, intercourse with a menstruating woman was strongly discouraged by physicians, medical texts, and Judeo-Christian religions. Patricia Crawford explains the political implications of this restriction:

The pattern of taboo draws attention to the ambiguous position of women in society. Women were dangerous, but they were dangerous because they were powerful. They may have been inferior to men, but they posed a threat. It is significant that the most widely discussed prohibition on contact with menstruating women is on sexual contact. Since copulation was, ideally, confined to husband and wife, the taboo was meaningful in a
domestic context. There, in the area where ideas of superiority and inferiority were hardest to maintain, where patriarchal theory needed all the support it could gain, the taboo on copulation may have functioned as a reminder of women’s inferiority.87

Believed to be equally as dangerous as intercourse was food prepared by and the touch of a menstruating woman. According to Pliny the Elder in *Natural History*, contact with menstruating women would “turn new wine sour, dry seeds, make fruit fall, and rust bronze and iron.”88 Even animals were not free from the danger that a woman brought upon society by menstruating. Twelfth century writer Michael Scotus, for example, claimed that dogs who ate menstrual blood would become rabid and “their bites infected with an incurable poison.”89 Such radical beliefs continued in the nineteenth century, when A.F.A. King, a physician writing during 1875, argued that intercourse during menses resulted in gonorrhea90 and other medical texts claimed that men would acquire leprosy.91 All of these examples illustrate that in earlier centuries menstruating women were viewed as more of a danger to others than themselves. Beliefs about menstrual blood and its potential danger have changed significantly as people gained clearer knowledge of science and biology, nonetheless taboos against menstruation have reformulated in such a way that women still feel bad about their periods.

In other words, while the taboo surrounding menstruation is ever present in our culture, transgressing the code now jeopardizes a different target. Rather than primarily threatening those around them with pollution, *women themselves* are mostly threatened by the danger of embarrassment, ostracism, or dirt caused by their own periods. According to Jill Reirdan and Sally A. Hastings:

Even well educated informants have acceded to the “medicalizing” of menstruation and see menstruation and menopause as a problem to be managed, and not a natural part of a healthy women’s life. In retrospect, the apparently greater openness about menstruation on the television screen, selling menstrual hygiene products and joking about PMS, perpetuate the bias of viewing menstruation as essentially a matter of hygiene and disease.92
Many women admit that they feel “dirty” or “disgusting” when they menstruate. Martin, after conducting 165 interviews of women from all major classes and races, determined that this taboo was consistently addressed. She explains, “Because most women are aware that in our general cultural view menstruation is dirty, they are still stuck with the “hassle:” most centrally no one must ever see you dealing with the mechanics of keeping up with the disgusting mess, and you must never fail to keep the disgusting mess from showing on your clothes, furniture or the floor.”

Furthermore, the society’s vocabulary keeps women feeling self-conscious about menstruating. Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen suggest that most words used to talk about or describe female genitalia imply that it is “smelly” and “unpleasant.” Because women’s identities are so closely linked to their bodies, girls and women face internalized oppression, embarrassment, and shame. “In terms of gender we can say that in our society language and forms of knowledge about the female body uphold practices and justify ideas, behaviors, and policies that maintain patriarchal social relations and function symbolically to represent understandings of women’s roles.”

Like Martin, Lee and Sasser-Coen interviewed women who revealed women’s fears of “showing evidence of wearing pads or staining garments and sheets” and felt pressure to “conceal and hide evidence of menstruation.”

Making women themselves the ones threatened by their own menstruation privatizes the issues and women tended to accept this shift as it seemed to provide them exclusive control over their bodies. Knowing the feelings enforced by the menstruation taboo, it is not surprising that the issue remains a privatized one for women. According to Crawford, women in most European and Western countries long wished the issue to remain a private topic. “From a number of sources, it is clear that women viewed menstruation as a private matter. Although men spoke out publicly about menstruation, women were thought to resent this . . . Women had their own ideas about menstruation and did not necessarily share the views with their medical advisers.”

Additionally, signs of secrecy and silence surrounding the topic of menstruation reinforce a culture’s feelings of fear and embarrassment and the need to privatize it their natural cycle. According to Reirdan and Hastings, even women writers who broach the subject of menstruation are restrained. Rarely do descriptions in short stories illuminate
this part of a woman’s life. Rierdan and Hastings find that menstruation is virtually dismissed in their survey of fictional short stories produced between 1981 and 1988. Menarche, the beginning of a woman’s menstrual cycle, is mentioned periodically but more often than not is contains a negative connotation. On the other hand, Rierdan and Hastings argue that psychological research has become more participatory in the recordings and examination of menstruation in women’s lives, but this still has its drawbacks. Although research attempts to discover reality and reshape our knowledge and understanding of reality itself, it is often inaccessible and impersonal. Fiction writing and literature both express truths of life and influence our perceptions of life experiences. The fact that menstruation is still not positively addressed in literature speaks to the presence of a taboo. Additionally, Martin highlights the problems with present scientific writings and how the taboo becomes a consequence of evaluative terminology. Martin argues that the metaphor, which shows menstruation as a failed production, leads to our negative view of the process. In other words, terms used by common medical and scientific textbooks “convey failure and dissolution,” implying that a woman who menstruates has failed to accomplish her “biological” and “natural” obligation, birthing children. Even if not all texts contain this overwhelmingly negative terminology in the description of menstruation, scientific writings reflect the unconscious attitudes of a culture. These examples are just a few signs of evidence that new modern menstruation taboo has emerged in the twentieth century. Although it may seem tolerable and almost acceptable in comparison to the early taboos and practices followed by many early cultures and societies, disciplinary practices and etiquette that safeguard menstrual blood and reinforce the belief that menstruation is something to be controlled, concealed and unwanted reproduce gender differences, discrimination and further construct “women” in Western society.

Deconstructing the Menstruation Taboo

I have attempted to show that the menstruation taboo is an issue in our culture desperately in need of further rhetorical examination and analysis. Karen Houppert concurs, explaining that menstruation is a topic that “nobody spends time thinking about.” She states, “Research on Americans’ attitudes toward menstruation is very hard to come by. Periods are not a popular dissertation topic . . . When experts do focus their
attention on menstruation, it’s to emphasize its pathology: premenstrual syndrome.” Houppert’s claim provides further evidence for the existence of the taboo which has manifested itself in academia where research and study of menstruation is often avoided and scholars fail to engage the topic.

Not only is it important for scholars to continue to examine the taboo, but a modern examination of the menstruation taboo through a rhetorical lens is also necessary for many reasons. First, rhetorical analyses of the menstruation taboo are rare and difficult to find; most work existing on the topic is anthropological research. Although anthropological research has greatly contributed to the understanding of the menstruation taboo, such works investigate the taboo in different ways than a rhetorical analysis. For example, anthropologists have studied foreign menstruation taboos for decades but they often presuppose a negative symbolism in the rituals used to acknowledge the phenomenon. Thus, the anthropological studies remain descriptive but fail to explain why the taboo began in the first place and why it continues to occur today. A rhetorical analysis seeks to explain the conditions which make the taboo possible and the ways in which the discourse of the taboo are created, maintained, and harmful to society. Additionally, while the menstruation taboo has also long been a staple study in anthropology due to the extraordinary symbolic value assigned to it by different cultures, these studies are limited because they primarily examine ancient societies or Eastern and African tribes and cultures. As a result, such studies fail to adequately describe and interrogate the modern, American reaction to menstruation and the ways in which the taboo is enforced through the medium of the mass media. A rhetorical analysis of modern cultural artifacts will show how Western mass communication mediums, such as cinema, television, and advertisements, reinforce old and new beliefs about menstruation and directly or indirectly benefit from the existence of the taboo.

A second reason for why further examining the taboo is necessary is that such studies are important in improving women’s social status. As I have shown, all messages from the menstruation taboo have one uniting tendency: they all stem from society’s cultural assumptions and are used to enforce politics and hierarchies of sexual difference. These cultural beliefs continue to exist in our society today because the taboo is reinforced in the Western discourse of capitalism and entertainment. Additionally, rather
than exposing such discourse, feminist counter-discourse remains silenced and repressed. Numerous feminist scholars are opposed to the silencing of feminine issues. Discussion and education on menstruation is often severely hindered due to the formation of taboos which are continuously reasserted within texts created by the mass media and found in the public sphere. A taboo fails to provide any positive outcomes in modern society; rather it inflicts mental and social anguish on women. An examination of the menstruation taboo illustrates that the taboo operates in our society as a way to isolate populations and justify biological essentialism between the sexes. This “othering” risks the physical and mental well being of women and our society. It is precisely these negative discursive public practices that reinforce the privatization of the issue. Privatization has resulted not only in oppressive behaviors and a devaluing of the female body, but it has also allowed masking behaviors that are dangerous and life-threatening to women. As a result, the women’s movement must begin a fight to politicize the issue of menstruation which will further improve the status of women.

Rhetorical studies uniquely contribute to the goals of liberating movements, like feminism. Since rhetoric seeks to examine the discourse of exigencies, rhetorical scholars inspect cultural messages to find an entry point into addressing or changing a problem of discrimination or exclusion. As explained earlier, rhetoric is uniquely connected to the construction of identity and division. Burke illustrates that identification structures our society and creates a guilt-redemption cycle to continuously reaffirm similarities or differences among people. In the case of menstruation, women become the perfect scapegoat - their “flaw” is “bleeding” and women are “punished” through ritualistic cleaning practices and isolation, or subjected to feelings of embarrassment, neglect, or disgust. The public sphere demonizes menstruation in order to oppress and exclude women. Examining the discourse of the mass media provides insight into how the menstrual taboo constructs women’s identity, harms gender relations and maintains discriminatory practices against women. Confining the issue of menstruation to the private sphere and attributing negative associations to menstrual blood has become a familiar yet often undetected strategy for scapegoating women.

In addition to contributing to our understanding of identification, rhetorical studies illustrate the ways in which discourse is used as a tool for manipulation, control,
conformity, and oppression. Thus, repressing the public discourse and truth surrounding the subject is another social strategy that relegates menstruation to the private sphere and maintains its taboo status. Even though a particular form of “public” discourse on menstruation exists in our culture, its repressive nature removes true and open discourse on menstruation. The use of repressed discourse gives men and women a vehicle to mask language on the topic and reiterate false beliefs about the menstruation. Although at one time the topic of menstruation was preferred to remain private, attitudes have changed significantly. Due to the onset of medical advances and the feminist movement, women wish to address the issue differently in the public sphere. According to Martin, our general cultural conceptions place the issue of menstruation in the private realm of home and family, however, now “when women talk about menstruation they usually do not see it as a private function relegated to the sphere of home and family, but as inextricable from the rest of life at work and school.” As a result, many women agree menstruation discourse ought to be viewed as acceptable, neutral, and educational.

To help individuals end the oppressive nature of these discursive strategies, rhetoric exposes moments of possibility and conditions of freedom in order to articulate alternatives and strategies for reconstructing discourse. Because women’s issues and the rhetoric surrounding them are restricted to the private sphere, alternate approaches are necessary to liberate such topics and discourse to the public sphere. To succeed at this, scholars attempt to reconstruct the public through a feminine perspective. They attempt to accomplish this task in different ways. Some discover alternative methodologies and strategies for interrogation of the sphere. For example, Fraser argues that in order to truly create a Habermasian notion of democracy, critical theorists must acknowledge existing social inequalities and study the effects they have on the existing public spheres and its discourse. Landes claims that descriptions of the public sphere must acknowledge the fact that feminist discourse was engendered in the public sphere and the existence of such a paradox “demands that we continue a detailed exploration of the intersection of patterns of cultural representation with forms of public and private life.”

Other scholars find different ways to discursively deconstruct or reconstruct the public sphere. Benhabib suggests feminizing the practical discourse of the sphere. She explains “such feminization of practical discourse will mean . . . challenging, from the
standpoint of their gender context and subtext, unexamined normative dualisms, as those of justice and the good life, norms and values, interests and needs.” Likewise, Melissa Deem argues that alternative publics must be reimagined to account for the shortcomings of current public sphere and to offer mechanisms of transformation. She contends that the corporeality of the public body deserves greater discursive recognition to counter discrimination. The development of “publicly available intimacies” and “minor rhetorics” incorporates minority and oppressed groups and appropriates the language of domination. In the same way scholars have attempted to initiate a liberating feminist reconceptualization of the public sphere, women must challenge and rethink their own discursive practices when discussing menstruation and find tactics for changing the rhetoric of others. Producing counter discursive practices in the public are necessary to expose the oppressive nature of the taboo and grant women liberation from the unspoken hygienic regulations, rules, and behaviors. This paper is an attempt to further rupture the public/private divide on menstruation discourse and discover the discursive strategies that will assist society in overcoming this dichotomized thinking.

While the menstrual taboo has changed from the primitive notion that menstrual blood is a deadly threat to others, consumer industry and mass media employ the contemporary view that menstrual blood is dangerous for women. For this reason, I analyze mass media and their role in conveying messages of the menstruation taboo through lens of the public/private dichotomy. I contend that the visual imagery and warrants for the menstruation taboo are asserted through film, television, and other media typically identified as public. Digestion and enforcement of the taboo as a private threat also occurs through print advertisements that lead to the behavior of consumption of feminine hygiene products and, most recently, oral contraception. I argue that the existence of the taboo fuels the current trend to hide any sign of a period and eliminate a woman’s menstrual cycle entirely. The belief that products and consumerism restrict menstruation to the private sphere consistently motivates and influences women and their choice to engage in consumerism. I investigate media images of menstruation and the discursive strategies employed to examine the how the changing nature of the menstruation taboo confines women to particular behaviors and consumption habits.
Additionally such practices debilitate and control women by confining their bodies to the private sphere, countering feminist acts that publicize women’s issues.

Through the analysis, I hope to provide answers to the following questions:

1.) What conditions occurred within societal power relations to maintain the menstrual taboo and how is it possible that these relations continue to persist today? How do these conditions maintain the taboo and hierarchical gender relations?

2.) How does consumerism and industry use and reinforce women’s fears and insecurities to sell feminine hygiene products?

3.) How does the discourse surrounding the menstruation taboo reinforce the discursively constructed divide between the public and private sphere and assure that women’s bodies are restrained to the private sphere?

4.) How can we begin to break down the modern taboos of concealment and contamination in order to end women’s oppression through female embodiment?

In order to explore these questions, I adopt the approach known as “critical rhetoric” to illuminate how the taboo restricts access to the public sphere and limits freedom of women. Raymie E. McHerrow argues that a critical rhetorical scholar should promote praxis, or practices of rhetorical studies that seek to expose and deconstruct the discourses of power. 109 With the two Foucauldian approaches that allow us to investigate the power relations within society, 1) Critique of Domination (which examines the discourse of power and the ways in which it creates and maintains power) and the 2) Critique of Freedom (which moves toward liberation, or perfection, instead of privileging the powerful), McHerrow suggests that rhetoricians and critics can question the basic assumptions and patterns found in society and that affect our everyday life.

According to McHerrow, “The analysis of the discourse of power focuses on the ‘normalization’ of language intended to maintain the status quo. By producing a description of ‘what is,’ unfettered by predetermined notion of what ‘should be,’ the critic is in a position to posit the possibilities of freedom. Recharacterization of the images changes the power relations. . .” 110

To construct a text to allow critique of the power structures that reinforce the menstruation taboo, I adopt a technique developed by Michael Calvin McGee. McGee
argues that during the 1960’s rhetoricians had a stronger understanding of methods than texts, and exceedingly devoted their time to the study of singular texts. In contrast, McGee suggests that rhetoricians change their roles to become critics in a postmodern condition. In order to do this, rhetoricians must no longer emphasize interpretation and instead participate in text construction, the primary task of audiences and critics. McGee explains that “Critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we can call ‘fragments.’”

I employ McGee’s method of analyzing discursive fragments in order to create a text which exposes the modern myths surrounding menstruation and the enforcement of the taboo.

I build my text of the modern menstruation taboo using fragments from cinema and advertisements. In Chapter 2, I examine the role of visual imagery, particularly films, in influencing cultural beliefs. I contend that films visually connect the image of blood and menstruation to the logic of evil, danger, embarrassment, and dirt thus reproducing the menstrual taboo. Chapter 2 provides analyses of films that continually construct the images of the menstrual taboo as a private/public concern.

In Chapter 3, I address the issue of commodification and the role that menstruation taboos have on the feminine hygiene industry and consumption. I examine various advertising campaigns for feminine hygiene products to determine how the menstrual taboo is used to successfully sell products to women. In this chapter I contend that the presence of a Western menstruation taboo has lead to a repressive discourse in advertising campaigns for feminine hygiene products. An examination of the menstruation taboo through modern day advertisements illustrates, first, the ways in which Foucault’s repressive hypothesis applies to issues surrounding sexuality and menstruation in the twenty-first century and, secondly, shows the ways in which the patriarchy persists by silencing women’s issues to the private sphere, and thirdly, that consumption is used as a way to eliminate menstruation and deal with the presence of the taboo.
Finally, Chapter 4 discusses implications for the future of the menstruation taboo, and argues that rethinking the subject matter is necessary to further empower women on issues of embodiment. Finally, I examine artifacts that challenge the taboo and the ways in which the American menstruation taboo is spreading globally.

Tracing the historical progression of the menstruation taboo and examining the present myths surrounding it illustrates that the menstruation taboo remains a persistent and oppressive structure in society. Explaining the menstruation taboo’s cultural inscriptions of meaning and the impact it has on human relations is one method for interrogating gender politics of the West. I have shown that the menstruation taboo, although commonly recognized as a phenomenon unique to early societies and foreign cultures, remains an equally prevalent occurrence in Western societies, shrouded in silence and secrecy and feelings of repugnance. A rhetorical analysis critiques the discourses responsible for the taboo’s continuation and attempts to break down its repressive nature. Exposing the forces of patriarchal power through the discourse of the menstruation taboo is one way of reconstructing women’s identity and helping them gain acceptance of their bodies.
Notes


2 Multiple menstruation taboos exist not only throughout the world, but the taboo also varies throughout Western cultures. Although nuances ought to be addressed, the question of what explicit messages qualifies as the Western menstruation taboo is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, I examine the dominant, hegemonic messages found in American culture, media, and advertisements. In other words, the taboo message that “menstruation must remain hidden from the public” is examined in this paper.


4 Douglas, Purity xiii.

5 Douglas, Purity 3.

6 Douglas, Purity 4.


8 Douglas, Natural 101.

9 Douglas, Natural 111.


12 Burke, Motives 23.


14 Burke, “Philosophy” 38-39.

15 Burke, “Philosophy” 40.


17 Burke, Religion 175.


20 Habermas 14-15.
21 Habermas 32-34.
22 Habermas 27.
23 Habermas 50-51.
24 Habermas 58.
25 Habermas 146.
26 Habermas 168.
27 Habermas 152.
28 Habermas 161.


30 Habermas 28.
31 Habermas 155-156.
32 Habermas 235.


35 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Habermas and The Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT, 1992) 114.

36 Fraser 118.


40 Fraser 128.

41 Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgin Habermas,” Habermas and The Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT, 1992) 94.


43 Landes 204.

44 Benhabib 92.

45 Benhabib 93.

46 McLaughlin 80.

47 Benhabib 92.

48 Benhabib 89-90.

49 Benhabib 90.

50 Fraser 117.

51 Fraser 128-129.


54 Arendt 31.
Arendt 72.


57 Laqueur 27.

58 Laqueur 42.


60 Laqueur 38.

61 Laqueur 4.

62 Laqueur 152.

63 Martin 35.

64 Laqueur 193.

65 Laqueur 214.

66 Laqueur 217.

67 Martin 41.


69 Bullough and Bullough 114-115.

70 Bullough and Bullough 116.

71 Martin 48.


73 Grahn 18-19.


75 Montagu 65.

76 Montagu 40.
77 Montagu 40.
78 Montagu 41.
81 Grosz 204.
82 Grosz 203.
83 Grosz 205.
84 Crawford 61.
85 Bullough and Bullough 107.
88 Bullough and Bullough 107.
90 Bullough and Bullough 112.
91 Niccoli 10.
93 Martin 93.
95 Lee and Sasser-Coen 72.
96 Lee and Sasser-Coen 81.
97 Crawford 68-69.
99 Martin 48.
103 Martin 92.
104 Houppert 7.
105 Fraser 119-121.
106 Landes 204.
107 Benhabib 95.
110 McKerrow 450.
Chapter Two:
The Visibility of the Menstrual Taboo in Popular Film

There are many reasons for the fractured and fragmented state of American culture, but according to Michael Calvin McGee, new forms of media are one of the prominent causes. He states:

One clear truth will not change: The public’s business is now being done more often via direct mail, television spots, documentaries, mass entertainment, and “quotable quotes” on the evening news than through the more traditional media (broadsides, pamphlets, books, and public speeches.) A central requirement of our new circumstance is simply finding a place to start thinking about it.¹

McGee contends that complete “texts” in this fast-moving world have vanished altogether, leaving rhetorical scholars with nothing but “discursive fragments of contexts.” By examining fragments of “information,” McGee argues that rhetoricians create the context that explains the conditions of possibility for a particular discourse. Thus, the rhetorician’s job is to engage in text construction in order to understand the discursive trends, meanings, and artifacts in contemporary culture.

In this chapter, I analyze various fragments which I contend dramatically and visibly connect images of blood to the logic of the American menstruation taboo. Specifically, I read scenes from a variety of mainstream American films produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Although these fragments cannot single-handily account for all beliefs and cultural reinforcements of the modern menstruation taboo, they provide a starting point for examination of the visual, cultural and public artifacts that contribute to the modern menstruation taboo’s continuation.

Mass Mediated Images and Visibility in the Public Sphere

Motion pictures are an influential and popular form of visual communication in many cultures. Films make images and texts visible and disseminate the images to reach various audiences and publics. For this reason, films and cinema are critical components of the Western public sphere. Many scholars, like Habermas, John Dewey, and Kevin Deluca study the intersection of the mass media and the public sphere. Scholarly debates
persist over whether the mass media influence the public sphere in positive or negative ways. Although such debates remain important for understanding the nuances and effects of the mass media on the public sphere, it is not necessary for this project to explore the debate or conclude whether the mass media has positive or negative effects on democratic, political, and moral vocabularies of the public sphere. In order to show that menstrual taboo messages are disseminated in our culture through visual mass media, I argue that, first, the mass media influences the public sphere and audiences, and, second, the visibility and publicity of such messages and images reinforces and affects the behavior of individual citizens. Thus, this section provides a brief literature review of scholars who acknowledge the importance of mass media and visual imagery on the public sphere.

Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue that mass-mediated images are important despite the attempts by rhetorical theorists to denigrate art and visual practices. In its early development, scholars gave visual images a marginal status in rhetorical theory. Scholars labeled such artifacts as too emotional or spectacular, lacking knowledge and political value, and artistically confusing and lacking intent. In her critique of the film, John Q., Emily West contends that the diverse reactions in response to the film tell us that “Hollywood’s role in contributing to political discourse remains contested and unclear.” Today, however, due to the overwhelming growth of visual images in our culture, Hariman and Lucaites contend that resisting visual imagery is subsiding in the field. They state:

The study of various practices of visual representation is booming, so much so that it seems similar in scope to the “linguistic turn” that expanded across the human sciences in the twentieth century. It is becoming evident that Western culture has always been more dependent on visual materials than had been thought, that modern science and medicine have been driven by development of increasingly sophisticated modes of imagining, that critics and nations have been organized visually, that racial, ethnic, sexual, and artistic identities have been shaped by photography and other visual practices, that social reform and human rights advocacy have been advanced by photojournalism and other visual
arts, that social theory itself has been mediated by various forms of observation, and so forth and so on. Closer to home, everyone is increasingly aware that we now are awash in images . . . there is little reason to doubt that social actors are more and more likely to be thinking, feeling, acting on the basis of what they have seen rather than only heard or read.

Because images are prevalent and effect cultures, it is critical to rhetorically examine their relevance and meaning.

For Hariman and Lucaites, “visual culture” now makes up a critical part of “public culture.” Not only is American society immersed in visual images, but subjects use the mediated images to determine and understand cultural beliefs. Hariman and Lucaites contend that contemporary news media prove this claim through their reporting strategies; for example, media outlets currently overwhelm the national and international community with images of the Iraq War in order to determine the meaning of the government’s action in the Middle East. Thus, they state, “instead of supposing that the public sphere is only incidentally or unfortunately entangled with visual practices, images and their circulation are important means for the public opinion and public agency.” In their work, which studies iconic images that were first journalistic photographs and later became popular icons due to an array of mediated reproductions of the original image, Hariman and Lucaites ascertain and establish the inherent persuasive nature and political value which resides in images. In other words, Hariman and Lucaites show that images fulfill just as many important functions in public life as important literary texts and public addresses.

Specifically, scholars claim that images influence the way in which people view and think about their world. For example, John Berger argues that women become ever-recurring subjects (“naked as the spectator sees her”) due to the visual images of the nude women found in European oil paintings. The act of seeing and viewing the visual image of a nude woman reinforces women’s status in society. Berger explains: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves . . . Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”
Scholars like Berger and Laura Mulvey illustrate the ways in which art and film propagate the reality of the dominant patriarchal order, but critics of the male gaze, such as Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, argue that characters in certain films, like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, use visual images and the act of seeing to formulate a feminist subtext. In this instance, the visual shots of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russel subvert the objectifying male gaze and instead construct positive identification with the other woman. Thus, images are important because they can both challenge a shared assumption or reaffirm it. Although images are used to support societal views or are read as consistent with cultural beliefs, they also have the ability to check arguments and challenge assumptions. Hariman and Lucaites explain: “Images, because they are both richly articulated and verbally mute, can stop the unreflective train of thought. Of course, they also can reestablish hegemony.” In the following analysis of films, I illustrate the ways in which mainstream film use visual scenes to reaffirm the negative characteristics associated with menstruating women. Later, I suggest that scenes from independent films obscure and challenge these assumptions to show how they threaten the hegemonic and patriarchal meanings ascribed in the menstrual taboo.

Hariman and Lucaites endorse using a “visual reason” in order to address the public’s primarily visual features and to understand how texts and images interact to create and influence culture. Other scholars who have written extensively about the public sphere and the ways in which a particular text or image affect a cultural rhetorically. First, according to Michael Warner, visual images and other texts bring an audience into existence when presented in public. Warner explains that when writing to a public, a relation among strangers find a commonality that forms them into a public. He states: “Writing to a public incorporates that tendency of writing or speech as a condition of possibility . . . reaching strangers its primary orientation. In modernity this understanding of the public is best illustrated by uses of print or electronic media . . . in modern forms strangerhood is the necessary medium of commonality.” This “new” public is not “new” in the sense that publics have an ongoing life and circulate in time, but the presence of a supposed discourse and a postulated response allows a text to form a group of strangers into a public and address them. Warner explains:
Public discourse craves attention like a child. Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. Look here! Hey! In doing so they by no means render us passive. Quite the contrary. The modern system of publics creates a demanding social phenomenology. Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to, and performs their extension.13

Hariman and Lucaites concur with Warner and argue that public texts are the crucial link in creating spectatorship and publics. “In the visual public sphere, publics cohere through a common spectatorship, the image becomes the focal object of public thought, and public opinion forms by association.”14

Using Warner’s analysis, Shawn Shimpach argues that images, specifically film, become an entry into a public existence.15 Early Hollywood cinema allowed the mass media audience to recognize itself as a collectivity rather than a group of individuals. By choosing to view a film, a subject becomes part of a public. Shimpach explains: “To go to the movies and enter into this category of the motion picture audience, statistics everywhere reminded, was to imagine oneself as one part of a collective whole.”16 The existence of a public of a motion picture is significant for Shimpach because the film becomes a mass medium to learn from and a realm to enter in. In other words, watching a movie allows us to visualize the relationship between a private self and its publicity. Visual representation becomes a mode of public address that constructs the person as a social object. Thus, one’s behaviors, activities and identities develop as one mirrors his/her self-definition and submits to public scrutiny. Shimpach explains:

No matter how personal the experience of watching a movie, this publicity assured the movie’s mode of address was understood to be public – the sheer numbers guaranteed that – and so becoming an audience involved the particular process of self-alienation that is a pre-condition for entering the public sphere. The complex mediation of public presence and mode of address (both gathering and watching) represented by motion pictures provided an early template for modern mass media in which ‘we go “there” to see each other seeing each other’ offering an early form of
precondition in which the media ‘sphere’ offered a ‘collective image of the collective.’

Not only does an audience come into being when images are shown, but according to Davi Johnson, building upon the theory of Robert Asen, citizenship is closely connected to identification of a larger collective and visualization and imagination of those identities. Johnson explains that “individuals are only citizens when they are somehow identified with a larger collective . . . This identification occurs partially through imagination . . . Visual modes of communication are vital to this process of imagination and constitution of the citizen “identifies” that are at once individual and collective.”

Since imagination engages and facilitates representation and identification, viewing visual mediated forms allows citizens to create images of the self and others and to identify similarities and differences. Thus, films about menstruation not only impacts the ways in which women view themselves as female citizens, it also tells men that menstruation is an activity that differentiates women from them. As the film analyses will show, since menstruating women are often treated or described in negative and degrading images and discourse in films, men are taught to identify and attribute those qualities to the female sex.

Based on the growing importance of the images and spectacle in our culture, recent communication scholars contest Habermas’ contention that words, reason, and dialogue should be privileged over spectacles because the latter undermine democratic culture. Specifically, Habermas claims that citizens replace public deliberation with consumerism and consumption, and that such transformation in public activity is facilitated by mass mediated spectacles. Habermas argued that the mass media would harm deliberation and participation in the public sphere. According to Habermas, forms of media, although influential in the public sphere, should be considered subsidiary to the public sphere. Richard Butsch argues that this can no longer be the case, because “given the growth in media variety, size, and convergence in the late twentieth century, media have become the primary focus and force for today’s public sphere.” Because Habermas avoided theorizing about the impact of visual images on the public, scholars were left with a void in public sphere theory.
Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples attempt to reconsider this unexamined aspect of the sphere by privileging visual images and their publicity and reappropriating it as a positive, essential concept. Thus, they craft the notion of the ‘public screen.’ DeLuca and Peeples contend that the Internet and other forms of technology, such as photography, film, radio and television completely transform “the media matrix that constitutes our social milieu” and influence public perceptions. Understanding that participatory politics and social change are now produced and facilitated in a mass mediated society means that scholars should use the metaphor of the “public screen” as a supplement in order to understand the political scene of contemporary society. Additionally, DeLuca and Peeples explain the relevance of the creation of the new term, “public screen.” They state:

Such a concept takes technology seriously. It recognizes that most, and the most important, public discussions take place via “screens” – television, computer, and the front page of newspapers. Further, its [sic] suggests that we cannot simply adopt the term “public sphere” and all it entails, a term indebted to orality and print, for the current screen age. The new term takes seriously the work of media theorists suggesting that new technologies introduce new forms of social organization and new modes of perception.

Technology and mass media are now crucial for understanding the shifts in the public sphere. DeLuca and Peeples argue that a notion of the public screen supports the claims of media theorists who argue that “media produce culture, but they are also the primal scene upon which culture is produced and enacted . . . media produce the public sphere and public screen as primal scenes of Being. Particular configurations of media institute the scene or open the spaces from which epistemologies and ontologies emerge.” In other words, public discourse not only takes place through images, but images are now largely responsible for creating reality.

In their analysis, DeLuca and Peeples examine how members of the anti-globalization movement, advocating at the WTO protests in Seattle, both strategically used and unintentionally gained from mass mediated coverage and televised images to attract the attention of the world. Such images initiated a public dialogue and
deliberation, moral politics, and brought the controversial policies of the WTO to the broader public. Additionally, since Habermas maintains the utopian dream that all citizens gain equal access to the public sphere, the “public screen,” although still impacted by power relations of private ownerships and monopolies, shows that the disenfranchised citizens can still achieve entrance into the public through the “public screen.” Most importantly, the public screen changes our assumptions of the mass media and creates a place to theorize and understand the political and cultural. DeLuca and Peeples explain:

Thinking about rhetoric, politics, and culture through the prism of the public screen, however, enables a seeing of the world anew. Pro-democratic globalization protests, TV sitcoms, Hollywood films, advertising, and public relations do not represent lack, multiple signs of the decline of civilization. Instead, thought through the metaphor of the public screen, such practices are productive of new modes of intelligence, knowledge, politics, rhetoric, in short, new modes of being in the world. 24

Thus, the public screen is an important tool to understand how the public sphere has changed as well as the changing nature of how people interact with the public sphere today. DeLuca and Peeples specifically examine the ways in which spectacles bring attention to social causes, such as WTO protests. They acknowledge that their work “is not an exhaustive treatment of the public screen.” 25 Thus, this chapter illustrates the ways in which Hollywood films also contribute to theoretical foundation of the public screen, for it intersects and extends DeLuca and Peeples’s claims that films “deliver the definitive verdict for public memory.” 26

Finally, spectacles and the public screens prove to have implications for people’s cultural behaviors. Scholars argue that images create reality by teaching people how to behave or perform in our culture. Hariman and Lucaites explain: “Public spectatorship is exercised primarily through the experience of looking at images of a public world of actors, action, and events. Here the iconic image is illustrative . . . More important, the images are performative: imitations of civic life that call for action on behalf of the community.” 27 A theory of performance and its effect on society is explained the in
work, *Gender Trouble*, by Judith Butler. Butler explains that men and women, by following visual images and imitating others, “perform” their gender. In other words, Butler contends that gender and sex are concepts constructed through discursive and non-discursive practices and as a result of these practices; bodies become “gendered” through the individual’s continual performance of gender. The performance of gender is “a repeated stylization of the body” which is learned through experiences and images. Thus particular body images and repeated acts or “performances” that occur rigidly and regularly, produce an appearance of substance and ontology of gender. Most importantly, performance is not only facilitated by public images, the performance itself becomes a “public action.”

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enactment these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this “action” is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame – an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject.

For Butler, acts, gestures, and enactments of gender labeled “performatives” are fabrications or imitations inspired by images and sustained by corporeality. As gender is enacted in the public sphere it gains its ontological status. Thus, Butler contends that the act of performance consolidates a subject’s being. Butler’s theory explains why men react to the menstruation taboo and why women perform the acts which attempt to conceal menstruation. By following gender roles citizens engage in mandatory and strategic performances. Public bodies face dire consequences, such as social exclusion, if they do not follow the ideological images to construct their identities. Thus, men who watch films that reinforce the disgusting nature of menstrual blood are expected to perform their repulsion if they encounter menarche in
every day life. Likewise, women perform surveillance and management of their body due to what Carole Spitzack called the “ideological images of the body as dangerous.”

Due to modern spectacles, such as imagery that reinforces norms of menstrual hygiene, and the increasingly public character of women’s bodies, women’s management of menstruation also become a performance of one’s gender. Spitzack explains: “Women’s private activities and choices become increasingly public performances in the wake of beauty culture.”

Due to the importance of imagery in influencing and creating reality, citizenship, and gender roles, rhetoricians must pay special attention to highly disseminated images in our culture. Films are a critical site for analysis since they reach large audiences and produce spectacles that teach citizens how to perform their identities in society. In the next section, I conduct close readings of mainstream films to illustrate the conditions and contexts responsible for illuminating the modern beliefs behind the menstruation taboo. I contend that films visually connect the image of blood and menstruation to the logic of four negative qualities: evil and terror, danger and threat of death, embarrassment and shame, and finally, dirt and the abject.

**The Menstruation Taboo in Mainstream Films: Four Themes**

1. **Evil and Terror**

   No film is a better touchstone for the association of evil to menstruating women than the 1976 horror film, *Carrie.* Based on Stephen King’s novel, the film tells the story of Carrie White, a high school student who is viewed as a social outcast and rejected by her classmates. In the opening scene of the film, Carrie showers in the girl’s locker room after gym class and begins her first period. A repressed girl who is often misinformed by her fanatical, religious mother, Carrie knows nothing of menstruation and begins to panic, believing that the blood indicates a medical disorder. While Carrie grows hysterical in the shower, the other girls in the shower room begin to mock her by throwing sanitary pads and tampons at her while screaming “Plug it up! Plug it up!” Soon this scene is interrupted by the Physical Education teacher who helps Carrie clean up, properly educates her on the subject of periods and sends her home for the rest of the school day. In the principal’s office before leaving school, Carrie shows the first signs of holding telekinetic powers which seems to have been brought on by her menses. In the
end of the film, after experiencing endless torment by her peers, Carrie turns her telekinetic powers on her mother and hateful classmates, killing them all and eventually herself.

Stephen King’s *Carrie* is both a popular book and film. According to Karen Houppert over 1.3 million books were sold, and since 1976, with the production of the film, millions have viewed Brian DePalma’s *Carrie*, making it one of the most popular revenge films in our culture. The overwhelming image of blood present throughout the film encourages audiences to connect the onset of Carrie’s powers with menstruation. Not only does the opening scene mark the onset of the telekinesis, but before the climatic ending in which Carrie destroys her high school and classmates at the Prom, Carrie is covered with pig’s blood, a cruel joke planned by a group of her peers.

Carol J. Clover’s analysis of *Carrie* illuminates ways the film teaches audiences to fear and avoid the publicity of menstruation. Clover agrees that the source of Carrie’s pain “soon becomes the source of her power: ‘She also has a mild telekinetic ability which intensifies after her first menstrual period.’” For Clover, the connection between menstruation and evil or danger is apparent to the film’s audience and, most importantly, the images of a monstrous, bleeding woman is symbolic of larger societal issues. For examples, many film theorists, like Robin Wood, claim that horror films represent the unconscious fears of our society. Because Wood describes popular films as reflecting the “collective dreams of their audiences,” he concludes that “it becomes easy, if this is granted, to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our collective nightmares.” Thus, Clover argues that Carrie is female “victim-hero . . . whose status in both roles has indeed been enabled by ‘women’s liberation.’” In other words, Carrie’s victimization, anger, and horrific revenge are all made possible by feminism; thus, our fear of Carrie represents society’s fear and resistance to the feminist movement. The portrayal of this fear seems acceptable given that Clover argues that both the actual and implied audience for occult horror, slasher, or exploitation films largely consist of young males. For this reason, the horror film becomes a critical artifact for analysis. Clover states that “the slasher film, not despite but exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least
among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience, than do the legitimate products of the better studios.” Occult horror films speak deeply and compulsively to male anxieties, yet, according to Clover, they also constitute a possible adjustment of gender representations and an important shift in our understanding of film theory and the voyeuristic gaze. Carrie, a complicated figure, is clearly monstrous, but also simultaneously the victim of the monstrous acts completed by her peers. Therefore, Clover contends that films like Carrie indicate that both boys and girls can identify with screen females in fear and pain, as victim or avenger, rather than viewing through the male gaze. She states:

The boy so threatened and so humiliated, King seems to be saying, is a boy who recognizes himself in a girl who finds herself bleeding from her crotch in the gym shower, pelted with tampons, and sloshed with pig’s blood at the senior prom . . . What this “gym shorts and glasses” remark of King’s admits, glancingly but unmistakably, is . . . the possibility that male viewers are quite prepared to identify not just with screen females, but with screen females in the horror-film world, screen females in fear and pain.

It is significant that men and women relate to Carrie’s emotions, because they likely understand the range of emotions Carrie experiences when she starts menstruating. Nonetheless, despite the identification, men and women learn also view firsthand the social exclusion and terror that results once menstruation enters the public sphere. Carrie provides the link and reifies the notion that menstrual blood is a mysterious, humiliating and scary experience. The film’s ending and its association to telekinesis also indicates that menstrual blood is terrifying to others or associated with evil.

Clover continues to illustrate the anxieties that are perpetuated in occult horror films, such as Carrie, by addressing the common female and male narratives found in such films. Clover explains:

When Carrie’s mother links menstruation to the supernatural, she articulates one of horror’s abiding verities. At the very least, a menstruating woman is a woman ‘open’ . . . ‘Menstruation,’ a British gynecologist once wrote, ‘is like a red flag outside an auction sale; it
shows that something is going on inside.’ In the world of occult horror, in any case, menstrual blood would seem to have little to do with castration or loss and much to do with powerful things going on behind closed doors.  

Clover shows that many occult horror films concern themselves with penetration or colonization of the female body or its orifices. Thus, the female body is constantly “open” which allows it to be invaded while also allowing fluids and offspring to flow out of it. In some ways this can be viewed as empowering. Clover explains that “Film after film interrogates what Beyond Evil calls the “physical presence” of a woman: forces it to externalize its inner workings, to speak its secrets, to give a material account of itself – in short, to give it literal and visible evidence.” Although feminist readings of these films occur through the imagery of female bodies gaining vengeance, the dominant subtext of these films often show male characters attempting to understand and control the female body through science or rationality. In the end, the female body and its “insides” remain a powerful and dangerous mystery.

Furthermore, the “open” woman is still portrayed as a threat, especially when the invisible elements of the female body become visible by entering the public sphere. In Carrie, visual images of menstruation are associated with horrific violence and dangerous powers, reinforcing the message that menstruating women are dangerous. Knowing that stories connecting the power to menses with telekinesis are fictional does not alleviate the discourse of the taboo. Even if men and women do not feel susceptible to such a danger when interacting with menstruating women, women and men will likely understand the horror of the opening scene. Women relate to the embarrassment and danger of social exclusion that occurs when menstruation is exposed openly to society. The girls in Carrie’s gym class emphasize negative reactions of disgust and repulsion to the sight of menstrual blood. The girls’ insensitive and nasty responses to Carrie’s tears and screams reinforce the belief that menstrual blood is unwelcome even in a private space, like a women’s locker room. Women may not fear that the image of their blood will lead to their own death, as it eventually does for Carrie, but they will certainly understand from this movie how exposure of menstrual blood can lead to the social death of exclusion. Similarly, men are not likely to assume that menstruating woman will kill them with
telekinetic powers; nevertheless, the film teaches them how to respond to the women who identify with Carrie’s embarrassment. Men react with the same repulsion and disgust to the sight of menstrual blood as the girls in the locker room scene. This fear, in turn, causes women to respond to their menses by hiding it from the public to avoid social exclusion. Yet this reaction makes menstruation’s presence even more mysterious to men, thereby perpetuating the taboo.

Like Carrie, the film Audrey Rose, directed by Robert Wise, also connects the prepubescent young woman to strange, terrifying powers although the connection to menstrual blood is not as explicit as the references in Carrie. In the film, Ivy Templeton, a pre-teen girl approaching her twelfth birthday, is haunted by terrible nightmares that grow exceedingly worst around her birthday. Meanwhile, her parents’ lives are problematized when a mysterious man named Elliot Hoover, who has been following the family, informs Ivy’s parents that he has reason to believe the soul of his 5 year-old departed daughter, Audrey Rose, is reincarnated in the body of the Templetons’ 11 year-old daughter.

Although the Templetons explain that their daughter experienced similar night tremors in the past near previous birthdays, the nightmares seem to grow exceedingly worst and more severe now that Ivy approaches her twelfth birthday. The fact that Ivy’s body is changing and growing remains a constant reminder throughout the film. In an early scene, audience witness Ivy’s fascination with menstruation. The following dialogue occurs between her and her mother, Janice:

Ivy. Um, by the way dear Jill O’Connor said that she started to, you know what . . .
Janice. No. What?”
Ivy. *Menstruate.*
Janice. Ohhh.
Ivy. And she’s only nine. Mom, do you believe it?
Janice. No, I think she is a fibber.
Ivy. She’s a liar.
Janice. I didn’t say that. Girls like Jill just like to fantasize.
Although Jill’s fantasy and Ivy’s feelings of jealousy do not seem to imply that menstruation is a negative event but rather an anticipated moment in a young girl’s life, the context and plot of the movie implicitly reinforces negative and worrisome characteristics around menses. First, the fact that Ivy’s nightmares are horrific and are referred to in critiques and the film as “childhood possession,” once again associates the prepubescent girl to images of evil and terror. According to Adrian Schober, Ivy’s body is overtly sexualized throughout the film. He states: “Significantly, Ivy is on the verge of her twelfth birthday – a week away, in fact. She is ‘growing up,’ approaching womanhood, hence the almost obligatory early aside reference to puberty as Ivy marvels over her friend Jill’s premature start to menstruation (she is only nine years old).”

Like Carrie, it seems that Ivy Templeton/Audrey Rose becomes a horrific character. Clover explains: “Virtually the first line of dialogue in Audrey Rose, a reincarnation-possession story, consists of young Ivy’s report to her mother that a girlfriend has just gotten her first menstrual period at the age of nine. Ivy herself is approaching her twelfth birthday, and within hours of the “menstrual” conversation with her mother she begins to exhibit . . . possession.” Her nightmares are frightening, uncontrollable and dangerous to herself and others. She destroys her room and home, physically endangers her mother, and burns her own hands on a cold window pane, actions which never occurred prior to this moment in her life. Once again, the prepubescent female’s body is turned into a mystery since there appears to be no medical explanation for the change in her behavior. Perhaps Ivy’s “out-of-control” tendencies represent the state of women suffering from Premenstrual Syndrome. PMS is typically considered threatening according to Houppert who quotes expert Nada Stotland who has found that “there is data to show that most women and men in this society believe that women have adverse behavioral and emotional effects from the menstrual cycle, especially premenstrually.”

Additionally, Audrey Rose plays upon another aspect of the taboo, as addressed by Schober: menstruation as the beginning of overt sexuality. According to Houppert, the American culture, among others, has a “shrill history of fretting over sexual precocity in girls.” Countless images and stories reinforce the cultural myth that the sexuality of young girls is something to be protected and concealed. Although the beginning of menses is often connected to the beginning of a woman’s sexuality and understanding of
sexual relations, a young girl’s sexuality has become increasingly problematic and dangerous since the average age of menstruation has rapidly decreased. Houppert notes that J.M. Tanner’s 1976 publication of a study showing that girls were maturing at a younger age “hit a nerve” even though there is no link between early menstruation and early sexual activity. Houppert states:

Tanner’s ‘early menarche’ theory, while of questionable accuracy, quickly became the jumping-off point for a new round of hysteria about sexually precocious girls. Beginning in 1976, the media latched onto the theory and spun dozens of alarmist stories. Newsweek, Time, The Nation all wrote about Tanner’s findings, asking what we were to do with this nation of sexually precocious girls. In the ensuing years, the press recycled they story with predictable regularity.

Thus, Ivy, who anxiously awaits menstruation, seems to grow sexual each day. The connection of Ivy’s body to her sexuality is emphasized when Elliot Hoover is spotted watching and following her home from school. Elliot Hoover is dressed as the stereotypical pervert: he has a full beard, wears a long trench coat, and is described as having “a weird spaced out look about him.” When a purse for Ivy is found in a bag of groceries brought home by her father, Janice Templeton becomes convinced that the stranger is “after” Ivy, thus mistaking Elliot Hoover as a pervert. The images and dialogue within Audrey Rose, reaffirm two aspects of the menstruation taboo: menstruation as evil and menstruation as the onset of sexual activity.

Finally, in the film, I’m Gonna Git You Sucka, a parody of black exploitation films, the evil nature of menstruation appears in a comedic context. When Jack Spade declares revenge on Mr. Big, the powerful local crime lord responsible for the death of his brother, Mr. Big hires men to abduct Cheryl, Jack’s love interest. In the scene, Cheryl, who is a server at a local diner, quickly waits on her numerous customers. As she serves their dinners, Cheryl reveals a pained expression of discomfort as one of her customers yells for a coffee refill. Cheryl ignores him and begins rummaging through her purse and holds up a bottle of “Midol 200.” Her inner monologue exclaims: “These cramps are killing me!” When her impatient customer continues to scream for his coffee, Cheryl slams a pot of coffee on the counter and is quickly approached by another server.
Server. Cheryl, are you okay?

Cheryl. I think I better go home. It’s my ‘time.’

Server. Girl, me, too.

Cheryl. I’m gonna go and lay down, okay?

Server. I know exactly how you feel.

Cheryl. Be strong.

Cheryl’s declarative statement to “be strong” implies that menstruation is a difficult and negative experience and that women must have strength and motivation to get through the monthly occurrence. The server’s comment (that she knows exactly how Cheryl feels) further propagates the myths that menstruation is commonly identified as a monthly hardship among all women and that such “hardship” is experienced in the same way.

Finally, this scene is relevant because it links the over-the-top horrific visual images in the following scene with the negative stereotype that menstruating women are something to fear. In the next scene, Cheryl leaves the diner and is shown walking alone on an inner-city street. Cheryl is unaware that two men named Willie and Leonard, who work for Mr. Big, wait in a parked car for her to leave the diner. Leonard begins to follow Cheryl, eventually stopping her and informing her that she must come with him. When Cheryl protests and asks to be left alone, Leonard responds by yelling “Bitch, I said you are coming with me!” When Cheryl turns around, she looks like a woman possessed by a demon, and the soundtrack is similar to the music played during The Exorcist. Cheap special effects are used to create the image that Cheryl’s eyes are glowing. The effects also create the visions that an evil spirit is inciting the wind to blow fiercely, and causes Cheryl to make frightening, snarling noises. The dialogue continues:

Leonard: Oh, shit! You must have the devil in you!

Cheryl: No. Cramps!!!

Cheryl then grabs Leonard by the collar of his jacket, picks him up and throws him against the wall. She yells: “I asked you nicely, now I’m going to rip your balls off!”

Although humorous, the scene in I’m Gonna Git You Sucka reaffirms an image of menstruating women as possessed and therefore evil. According to these cultural images, when a woman is menstruating, she is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as a person
possessed by the devil. Thus, the scene implies that the menses possess the women; it takes control away from them and makes them vulnerable to demonic presence. The scene is particularly humorous because it misleads the audience to think that Cheryl is in danger. Imitating the stereotypical exploitation film in which the woman walking in an urban street alone at night is typically at risk of danger, the scene surprises audiences. Cheryl is not the one who is actually in danger; because she is on her period, she is actually the person who Leonard should fear. Thus, the film warns men to avoid the menstruating woman and to resist a woman’s empowerment. When Willie arrives and knocks Cheryl unconscious, he tells Leonard that it was a good thing he came to his aid and got the “bitch” off of him. Leonard denies screaming:

   Willie. I heard you screamin’ from all the way over there, and . . .
   Leonard. I wasn’t screamin’, all right?
   Willie. But I heard you . . .
   Leonard. I wasn’t screamin’! I was whistling!”
   Willie. You was whistling: ‘Willie, help get this bitch off of me’?
   Leonard. Yeah!

Leonard’s denial reaffirms that the power of a woman should never overcome the power of a man. It is an embarrassment to his ego, as the patriarchal view locates women as the “weaker” sex. By attributing Cheryl’s power to menstruation, the film plays upon the taboo that women gain special powers and abilities with menarche, which disempowers women in general. This is especially the case in the United States where the powers are gained are usually portrayed as evil and violent and never viewed as a source of good. Instead of acknowledging menstruation’s life-giving powers, menstruation, as shown in these films, is dangerous because it destroys and damages lives. Such taboo beliefs are not only found in films, they are found in American culture. Julie Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily argue that practitioners of menstrual politics are convinced that women are naturally and permanently limited by menstruation. They state:

   In this second wave of the American woman’s movement, at a moment in history when man has so mastered his universe that he is beginning to redefine even life and death, women are still hearing from people like Edgar Berman, a physician and Democratic party functionary, who
announced in 1970 that he would not like to see a woman in charge of this country at a time of national crisis because her “raging hormonal imbalances” would threaten the life and safety of all.50

Regardless of whether films inspire Berman’s thoughts or the cultural opinions influence the films, the images clearly reinforce one another. Although I question whether the scene in this parody film has the ability to reveal and expose the absurdity of the menstrual taboo, I fear that the film’s humor only challenges the racism of the movie industry and the racial stereotypes found in popular films while failing to defy sexist stereotypes. Thus, the stereotype of the evil menstruating woman remains.

2. Danger and Threat of Death

Carrie, Audrey Rose/Ivy Templeton and Cheryl are threats to society because they are menstruating or pubescent women. Even when menstruating female film characteristics are not portrayed as “evil,” they are often presented as dangerous in other ways. In the 2000 science fiction film, Pitch Black, the first film in a trilogy based on the science fiction character Richard B. Riddick, survivors of a space transport vessel crash find themselves abandoned on a desert planet. In addition to lacking adequate food and water and worrying about Riddick, escaped convict and fellow passenger, the ten survivors must avoid being hunted by the strange planet’s flesh-eating inhabitants. The survivors soon learn that the planet’s eclipse, which occurs every 22 years, is about to take place again, bringing the aliens to the surface to hunt and consume all signs of life. Led by authorized captain Carolyn Frey and the unpredictable Riddick, the 10 survivors search for an escape shuttle and try to avoid a brutal death.

In the very first scene, Riddick’s voiceover presents audiences with foreshadowing. While traveling in the space transport we hear his inner monologue about the other passengers. He explains: “Smelled a woman. Sweat, boots, tool belt, leather. Prospector type.” Riddick has two powerful and unnatural abilities. First, he has surgically-enhanced eyes that permit him to see in the dark, and second, he has an incredibly accurate sense of smell. In his voiceover, Riddick describes various observations about many of the passengers. He discusses what he hears and sees, yet when he discusses “the woman” he talks about what he can smell. Although Riddick may be capable of smelling men as well, he never admits it. Instead, he remains fixated
on the “smell of the woman.” As discussed earlier, Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen found that many women share a fear that they smell when menstruating.52 The taboo is so prevalent, they argue, that companies successfully sell menstrual products to women by telling them that people will not “smell you” by the addition of perfumes and deodorants.53 Although Riddick has a fictional and uncommon ability to smell, the film clearly links his capability to detect the scent of women to the fact that women menstruate.

When the survivors (now only seven remaining) realize that they are being tracked by the flesh-eating creatures, Riddick makes a plan but warns the crew, “These bad boys know our blood now.” When the aliens attack again and the crew loses their power sources for lighting, Riddick informs them that the aliens are tracking the scent of menstrual blood flowing from a young orphaned or runaway girl who was passing as boy. He reveals his ability to sense the menstruation when a member of the crew suggests continuing onward.

Riddick. Oh, I don’t know about that. That’s death row up there Especially with the girl bleeding.
Johns. What? What are you talking about? She’s not cut.
Riddick. Not her. Her.
Johns: You’ve gotta be kidding me.

When Riddick reveals the “bleeding” woman, he exposes the apparently male youth “Jack” as Jackie. This scene is significant because it characterizes menstruation as the one trait that truly separates the sexes, a trait that also reveals women’s weakness and inferiority. When Jack/Jackie is exposed she immediately becomes feminized. She begins to cry and apologize explaining that she thought “it’d be better if people took me for a guy. I thought they’d might leave me alone instead of always messing with me.” Captain Frye also begins to act more feminine and empathetic. She suddenly steps out of the role as a captain and into a mothering role. They seem to now share a special bond, yet they also seem to instantaneously become detriments to the group. While Frye comforts Jackie, Riddick explains to the other men: “They’ve been nose-open for her ever since we left. In case you haven’t noticed they go off blood.” Riddick reveals that the menstruating woman is dangerous to the group as a whole because the scent of her
blood has attracted the aliens. This plays on the myth that women are capable of attracting wild animals due to their scent. According to Houppert, this belief is proven false by sound scientific studies and documentation. Nonetheless, exposure to menstruation in this scene is reaffirmed as a threat to society.

The scene in which Jack is revealed as a menstruating girl becomes a turning point in the film. Interestingly, Frye seems demonized along with Jackie, not because she is menstruating but simply because she, too, is a woman. When Frye learns that Jackie is menstruating she tells the others: “This is not going to work. We’re gonna have to go back.” Johns immediately challenges the captain, arguing that she made a bad choice by attempting to escape the planet and challenging her authority. Johns exclaims: “So I say mush on. The canyon’s only a couple hundred meters, after that it’s skiff city. So why don’t you butch up, stuff a cork in this fucking kid and let’s go.” When others come to Frye’s defense, Johns attempts to turn them against her by revealing that Frye contemplated sacrificing the crew when the ship was about to crash. Later, Johns recommends killing the “the girl” as way to distract the aliens from the group. These elements in plot are relevant because they all occur after the menstruating girl is revealed. Jackie’s menstrual cycle seems to act as a reminder that menstruation debilitates women, further weakening Frye’s power as captain. In short, Pitch Black sends the message that women make better sacrifices than captains and that a menstruating woman remains a threat to her community.

Even in adult cartoons, women are assumed to be dangerous, irrational, and untrustworthy because they have monthly menstrual cycles. In South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut, a film based on the television show, creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone negatively mock the behavior of menstruating women. When the mothers of the four South Park Elementary School boys blame Canada for the corruption of America’s youth, eventually leading to a war with the neighboring country, the boys’ teacher, Mr. Garrison, blames their mothers’ bad decisions and poor leadership on their periods.

Mr. Garrison. Well, your moms are just upset. They’re probably all on their periods or something.

Gregory. Mr. Garrison, Wendy and I think that was a sexist statement.
Mr. Garrison. Well, I'm sorry, Wendy. But I just don't trust anything that bleeds for seven days and doesn't die.

Once again, sexist assumptions are rationalized based on essentialist beliefs about menstruation. Women are portrayed as an irrational being or an uncontrollable threat or danger to their society because their bodies are unmanageable.

3. Embarrassment and Anger

According to such scholars as Emily Martin, Lee and Sasser-Coen, and Jill Reirdan and Sally Hastings, women experience feelings of secrecy, shame, embarrassment and unpleasantness during their monthly menstrual cycle. According to Lee and Sasser-Coen, young girls are taught to expect such reactions to menstruation at a young age and many experience a range of negative feelings from “ambivalence” to “trauma.” Lee and Sasser-Coen explain:

The Western ‘cultural backdrop’ represents menarche as a traumatic and debilitating experience at the same time that girls are instructed and expected to act ‘normal’ and conceal . . . Both public and private discourse surrounding often reduce it to the biological/reproductive processes involved, and treat it as a hygienic crisis or a symptom-laden illness . . . As a result, many girls learn only that they are under the control of strange biological processes that are very painful and somehow connected to reproduction, and further, that these processes must be denied and concealed . . . The strength of these sociocultural messages is evidenced by the fact that as early as fifth grade, girls report that they expect to have menstrual symptoms and distress.56

Among the many sociocultural messages that young girls receive from parents, teachers, and materials distributed by the sanitary products industry, girls also receive such negative messages about menstruation from films directed toward teenage audiences. In the film My Girl,57 Vada Sultenfuss, who is eleven and a half, begins her period unexpectedly one summer day. Although the audience does not view Vada’s menstrual blood, screams and shouts from a panicked Vada who runs out of the bathroom indicate to the audience that she has started menstruating. She is convinced that she is
hemorrhaging until Shelly DeVoto, her father’s new girlfriend and colleague, explains what is happening to Vada’s body.

Although My Girl is a “family movie,” unlike the previous films unanalyzed, it is still responsible for propagating elements of the modern menstrual taboo. First, the film again makes the connection that the start of menstruation means the onset of sexual activity. In the scene immediately following a panicked Vada running out of the upstairs bathroom, Vada and Shelly are shown ending their talk about sex.

Vada. My Mommy and Daddy did that???
Shelly. It’s actually a very beautiful thing. And look, there wouldn’t have been a Vada.
Vada. I think it should be outlawed.
Shelly. Believe me someday you will feel differently.

This scene is significant for two reasons. First, in the brief scenes, we never actually hear Shelly explaining to Vada the facts of menstruation or the “sexual education” part of the conversation. Thus, the film symbolically eliminates any informed discussion, making Vada’s first menstruation appear visually terrifying and painful, and never correcting these assumptions to show that it is natural and nothing to fear. Secondly, a few scenes later, Vada suggests to her best friend and playmate, Thomas J. Sennett that they experiment with kissing by kissing one another. Thus, shortly after the start of Vada’s menstruation, the once incredibly innocent and tomboyish girl begins to feel curious about sexuality and intimacy. Additionally, Vada also becomes more feminized, like Jackie in Pitch Black. This reaffirms the cultural code that a female’s transition from girlhood to womanhood begins with menstruation. This, however, is not due to an actual biological association of menstruation to womanhood, rather, it illustrates that menstruation often initiates the “performance” of womanhood in American culture.

Immediately after their sex-education talk, Vada and Shelly hear a knock at the door. Vada says: “That’s probably Thomas J. I don’t want to see him. It’s not fair. Nothing happens to boys.” This statement remains unchallenged by Shelly. Through this quote Vada implies that periods are negative and “unfair” aspect of growing up. Additionally, it reifies the distinction between men and women and, like other consistent,
cultural messages, privileges the male experience. The next dialogue between Thomas J. and Vada is equally problematic for different reasons:

Thomas J. Hi Vada. Can you come out?
Vada. I don’t know.
Thomas J. Please. It’s real hot maybe we can go swimming.
Vada. No! Get out of here! And don’t come back for five to seven days!

When Vada yells at Thomas J., she aggressively pushes him across the floor of the front porch. She then proceeds to angrily slam the front door in his face. Vada is clearly angry about the injustice that occurred that day: the start of her period. Not only does this scene send the message to young girls that periods are unpleasant and a sign of inferiority and injustice, but it also upholds the stereotype of the angry, uncontrollable menstruating woman. Members of the audience are left feeling bad for Thomas J. and his ignorance. Vada appears irrational and violent. The problem is that as an audience we cannot know the source of her anger – Is it due to her feelings toward menstruation or the description Shelly gave her? Or, is Vada merely reacting to hormones or the supposed unmanageable “power” brought on by menstruation? Both young girls and boys who do not know a great deal about menstruation at this age are likely to gain knowledge of cultural attitudes and stereotypes of menstruating women from this film.

4. Dirt and the Abject

Finally, the last common characteristic in films that show or encounter menstruation is a reaction toward menstruation of disgust and a treatment of blood as abjection. One brief scene in the parody film, Scary Movie 2 epitomizes this reaction. In the scene, the heroine Cindy Campbell explores a haunted house in an attempt to explain the mysterious occurrences. While walking with her friend, Buddy, Cindy shouts “Look!” and points to bloody shoeprints leading down the hallway to a book shelf. Buddy replies in a repulsed tone of voice: “Dude! Someone’s on the rag!”

In Volatile Bodies, Grosz uses Kristeva’s notion of the abject to explain our resistance toward bodily fluids, like menstruation. Grosz argues that society codes the female body as uncontrollable because its leaks are unpredictable due to reproductive and hormonal changes. The clean, proper and obedient, law-abiding and social body emerges
only after it minimizes abjection. If Grosz is correct that women’s corporeality is culturally inscribed as seepage, then the 2007 film, Superbad, simply reinforces a culturally acceptable, although troubling and harmful, image of women.

Superbad is a film about three high school friends who are determined to have sex before they leave for college. While on their way to big party, the boys are detained and distracted by series of comedic, wild, and unlucky events. When Seth and Evan accidentally end up at a college house party, Seth finds himself trapped on the dance floor with a drunk, promiscuous woman who erotically dances with him. The nameless woman says only five words to him during the time they dance and, after a few songs, she leaves him. When Seth walks past two guys at the party, they stop and ask him: “What is that?” The guys point to a red, bloody stain on his pants. After a long dialogue in which Seth denies being cut, one guy asks him: “Were you dancing with some chick in there?” Seth eventually realizes that the blood is menstrual blood and exclaims: “I’m going to fucking throw up! Someone perioded on my fucking leg . . . This is so disgusting!” Although the people are clearly repulsed by the site of the menstrual blood, numerous people are called over to “look at the period blood.”

Dude. I’m gonna go get Bill. He’s gotta check this shit out.
Seth. No. Who’s Bill? Don’t tell Bill! Bill has nothing to do with this!
Dude. This kid’s got period blood on his slacks.
Seth. It’s Merlot. That’s what you don’t get.

Throughout the long scene, Seth attempts to silence the guys and deny the presence of the blood. Clearly embarrassed and disgusted, Seth attempts to escape the attention. Like the prominent cultural attitude, Seth attempts to hide and conceal menstrual blood from the public. It is also significant to point out that many quotes in this scene (consistent with other quotes from film scenes that also include imagery or reference to menstruation) include profanity which frames the discourse and/or images of menstruation in the film. Thus, such words reinforce menstruation as abject by including words viewed as “abject” language.

It is also significant that, although Seth “wears” the menstrual blood, he does not become the abject, rather, the girl, who we later learn is named Jacinda, embodies the abject body. Not only does she leak uncontrollably, but she exemplifies numerous
negative qualities, such as being intoxicated, sexually promiscuous, and “trashy.” In Grosz’s account of Kristeva she explains that “The clean and proper body’s development is directly linked to the child’s negotiations with the demands of toilet training and the regulation of bodily fluids. Within this cultural constellation it is not surprising, then, that women’s menstrual flow is regarded not only with shame and embarrassment but with disgust and the powers of contaminating.”61 Thus, Jacinda’s actions expose her as a woman who is disobedient and improper. Additionally, even though she does not “wear” the menstrual blood herself, she also faces social exclusion and embarrassment. She yells at Seth:

Jacinda.  You humiliated me.

Seth.  You used my leg as a tampon!

By using Seth’s leg “as a tampon,” Seth is contaminated by Jacinda’s abjection. Because he is marked by Jacinda, Jacinda’s boyfriend, Mark, attempts to start a fight with Seth. Thus, once again, audiences view menstrual blood as a threat or danger to members of the society.

Conclusion

Films are one of the many fragments that continually construct the images of the menstrual taboo as a private/public concern in American culture. Men and women learn from these films that there menstruation is portrayed in particular ways: it is evil, threatening and dangerous to others, a negative experience for young girls, and a sign of abject that society must reject. Thus, when menstruation is openly revealed to the public, female characters and members of society face negative consequences and men learn to enact the taboo in order to control women’s leaky bodies. The visibility of the menstrual taboo is not only present in popular culture; it also reaffirms overwhelmingly negative messages to women and subjects their bodily seepages to the private sphere. The images that audiences encounter in regards to menstruation both create aspects of the taboo and also reaffirm cultural myths and beliefs. These multiple images continue to allow the taboo to perform in public culture. Additionally, as I show in the next chapter, it produces many negative consequences for women; in particular, women are manipulated, regulated and policed which permits the continuation of patriarchal and capitalist systems.
The visibility of menstruation encourages performative gendered acts from men and women in the public sphere. Men and women are taught to show repulsion at the publicity of menstruation because the menses appears threatening for many reasons. Menstruation causes women to act possessed, undermines the female community as weakness, causes embarrassment for women, and makes women feel dirty and “unclean.” Although all of these characteristics of menstruation need not occur, women performatively act or accept these to be true. As in the case of Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), Houppert explains that numerous studies reveal that society believes negative effects of menstruation occur frequently, despite scientific studies proving otherwise. For example, one study concluded that “socially mediated expectations and beliefs determine the incidence of premenstrual beliefs.”62 Due to the influence of the visual images of menstruation and the effects it has on women and their bodily and social experiences, it becomes critical to examine the importance of visual imagery and its influence on the public. When society and scholars underestimate the power of the visual, false beliefs are unquestioningly perpetuated and oppressive images are continually disseminated. Additionally, failing to understand the significance of mediated images reinforces the dominant paradigm of patriarchy because few find or create representations that challenge such beliefs. Thus, it is necessary to demand positive images of menstruation in order to challenge the assumptions currently ascribed in the taboo.
Notes

1 McGee 75.


4 Hariman and Lucaites 5.

5 Hariman and Lucaites 295.


7 Berger 38.


9 Hariman and Lucaites 298.


11 Warner 417.

12 Warner 420.

13 Warner 120.

14 Hariman and Lucaites 299.

15 Shawn Shimpach, “Representing the Public of the Cinema’s Public Sphere,” Media and Public Spheres (New York: Palgrave, 2007)

16 Shimpach 144.

17 Shimpach 146.

19 Habermas 163.


22 DeLuca and Peeples 131.

23 DeLuca and Peeples 132.

24 DeLuca and Peeples 147.

25 DeLuca and Peeples 145.

26 DeLuca and Peeples 146.

27 Hariman and Lucaites 299.


29 Butler 178-179.


31 Spitzack 13.


33 Houppert 119.


35 Clover 3.

37 Clover 4.
38 Clover 22-23.
39 Clover 4-5.
40 Clover 77-78.
41 Clover 82.
43 Adrian Schober, “East meets West: Representing the Possessed Child in Frank De Felitta’s/Robert Wise’s Audrey Rose,” Literature Film Quarterly 32.1 (2004): 60-70.
44 Clover 77-78.
45 Houppert 180.
46 Houppert 62.
47 Houppert 55.
48 Houppert 55-56.
52 Lee and Sesser-Coen 67-68.
53 Lee and Sasser-Coen 58, 68.
54 Houppert 211-212.
56 Lee and Sasser-Coen 34.


59 Grosz 192.


61 Grosz 206.

62 Houppert 181.
Chapter Three:
Reading Menstrual Product Print Advertisements
Through Foucault’s Repressive Hypothesis

The film analyses in the previous chapter provide one example of the way that the menstrual taboo is reinforced in modern society. This chapter illustrates one effect of the presence of menstrual taboos: manufacturers exploit it to generate consumerism and profit. While films normalize the ideology of the menstrual taboo, advertisements work to regulate women’s behaviors and their interactions with society while menstruating. Because the taboo operates as a cultural discourse authorized and obscured by such powerful institutions as capitalism, it is essential to examine its exploitation as a rhetorical problem to expose it to critique. Engaging menstrual product advertisements through Michel Foucault’s theories of power clarifies their patriarchal implications.

My analysis will explain Foucault’s theory of the “repressive hypothesis,” and demonstrate how modern print advertisements for menstruation products follow a similar discursive logic in order to benefit companies and sustain the capitalist system. I argue that advertisements in women’s magazines play upon the fears and hopes of menstruating women, revealing how the modern taboo shapes public discourse about menstruation. This causes women to experience menstruation in a particular way and reinforces the taboo for capitalist gain. In short, my analysis explains why the taboo continues to pervade our contemporary culture and exposes the institutions that benefit from it.

Foucault and the Repressive Hypothesis

Textual analysis of print advertisements of feminine hygiene products reveals that society perpetuates modern taboos through discursive strategies initiated and reinforced by the feminine hygiene industry. The “repressive hypothesis” argues that attempts to restrict sexuality to the private sphere in the Victorian era did not succeed. Instead, this repression required extensive public discourse about sexuality in various coded forms. As this “incitement to discourse” became prevalent, governments began to enact “biopower” through managing sex’s public existence. I contend that the discursive characteristics surrounding the topic of menstruation emulate the discursive trends that these populations practiced when discussing issues of sexuality. The discourse used in public artifacts, such as print advertisements of feminine hygiene products, conceals
menstruation’s publicity and perpetuates the taboo. In order to trace the conditions of possibility that allow this to occur, I will show how Foucault’s historical narrative that produced the repressive hypothesis theory resembles twenty-first century discourse surrounding and confining menstruation.

Foucault explains that in the seventeenth century explicit sexual discourses were deemed inappropriate for the public sphere. A repressed discourse surrounding the topic of sex began with the presence of the Victorian bourgeoisie; Foucault calls this period the “age of repression.” Foucault states, “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule.”¹ In other words, Foucault argues that the Victorian era began a censorship of sex. The discussion of sexual conduct was excluded from public discourse; it was only permitted within the sanctity of the marriage, church confessionals, mental institutions and brothels. Foucault explains that this was largely due to Puritanism which “imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence.”²

While the strict limitations placed on sexual discourse appeared to eradicate most public talk of sex, Foucault’s close examination of this time reveals instead an explosion of authorized discourses. A new type of sexual rhetoric emerged and pervaded public discourse. He states: “But this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results.”³ In other words, despite the intense regulations, the early eighteenth century witnessed the creation of multiple discourses that engaged sex while simultaneously regulating and masking it. The more society attempted to control and repress sexual discourse, the more attention sex proliferated throughout society. Foucault explains this phenomenon through the “repressive hypothesis.” “At their level of discourses and their domains, however, practically the opposite phenomenon occurred. There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex – specific discourses different from one another both by their form and by their object: a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the
eighteenth century onward.” The discourses which emerged were highly coded and characterized by new “rules,” such as insinuation and symbolism. Foucault explains:

A whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified. Without question, new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements. A control over enunciations as well: where and when it was not possible to talk about such things became much more strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which speakers and within which social relationships.

Foucault stressed that the division of public and private into distinct spheres created the conditions which made the repressive hypothesis possible. Sexuality was not completely hidden or removed from public discourse; its presence was unavoidable. But citizens constructed new discursive approaches to discuss sexuality publicly while simultaneously maintaining it as a “private matter.” Sustaining this unstable arrangement required a public vigilance that encouraged and demanded discourse. Foucault states:

One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit, even if the speaker maintained the distinction for himself . . . one had to speak of it as a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted, into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was in the nature of a public potential; it called for management procedures . . .

Citizens followed the examples set by authoritative regimes and adopted the acceptable strategies and procedures for discussing sex. This authorized discourse dictated the ways in which citizens were to manage and enact their sexuality. In other words, society tolerated the public discourse surrounding sexuality because it became a discussion of management procedures. As such, discussions of sex became necessary; information about sexuality became a means for governments to issue biopolitical control over their populations. The state used assumptions about sex and sexual deviance to maintain and control population size, institutionalize the “insane,” and enforce criminal justice.
Foucault stresses that the emergence of the Victorian’s obsessive discourses surrounding sexuality is the consequence of repression. He asks “What does the appearance of all these peripheral sexualities signify? Is the fact that they could appear in broad daylight a sign that the code had become more lax? Or does the fact that they were given so much attention testify to a stricter regime and to its concern to bring them under close supervision?” Foucault attempts to provide an answer to his questions; this answer, I argue, also applies to modern society. He states:

In terms of repression, things are unclear. There was permissiveness, if one bears in mind that the severity of the codes relating to sexual offenses diminished considerably in the nineteenth century and that law itself often deferred to medicine. But an additional ruse of severity, if one thinks of all the agencies of control and all the mechanisms of surveillance that were put into operation by pedagogy or therapeutics.7

During the nineteenth century, Foucault illustrates that discourse was one way to enact biopower over populations and the sexuality and bodies of individuals. Although our medical community has alleviated the medical pathology of sexuality and women’s bodies, additional and severe “agencies of control” have emerged and remain present in American society. Thus, Foucault argues that despite the proliferation of sexual discourses, contemporary society and explicit issues of sexuality remain hidden in the private sphere. Current print and mediated advertisements illustrate that despite the limits on sexual discourse, a secretive, yet obsessive discourse around sex and menstruation remains present. Advertisements attempting to sell sexual or feminine hygiene products are constantly present on television and in magazines, yet licit and shameless discourse is rarely used. Instead, censorship, symbolism, and euphemisms are used to safely cover up the inappropriate and dangerous discourse. This pattern has clearly been seen since the 1920’s when menstrual products first appeared in advertising.8 Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen explain:

Society maintains taboos against positive discussions of menarche and menstruation, and, as a result, reinforces cultural values that see menstrual blood as dirty and smelly, polluting, and contaminating. If menstruation were not so “icky,” companies would not got to such great lengths to
emphasize that if you use their products no one will know you are menstruating, be able to see unsightly bulges, or smell you. Today, society still confines the threat, presence and visibility of menstruation to the private sphere, thus alternative discourses have emerged within the advertisements to tell women that menstruation needs to remain private.

Foucault’s theory illustrates that repression of actions and discourse and confinement to the private sphere cannot succeed. When repression occurs, attempting to conceal the original action or discourse, a proliferation of coded, public discourse develops and this, in turn, further draws attention to it. Thus, repression backfires and results in often newly-invented, coded discourses that emerge in the public sphere. Foucault explains:

We are dealing not nearly so much with a negative mechanism of exclusion as with the operation of a subtle network of discourses, special knowledges, pleasures, and powers. At issue is not a movement bent on pushing rude sex back into some obscure and inaccessible region, but on the contrary, a process that spreads it over the surface of things and bodies, arouses it, draws it out and bids it speak, implants it in reality and enjoins it to tell the truth: an entire glittering array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstination of powers, and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure.⁹

The Repressive Hypothesis and the contemporary Menstruation Taboo

Historical accounts of society’s attitudes toward menstruation reveal that discourse about menses was largely relegated to the private sphere prior to the twentieth century. As with discourse surrounding sexuality, Victorian society viewed public discussions about menstruation and women’s personal hygiene as unacceptable. Alia Al-Khalidi explains that “the onset of menstruation marked the beginning of a different and more limited existence for Victorian girls, where ‘simply to manage the hygiene of menstruation in a household where it could not be acknowledged or revealed created a sense of anxiety or shame.’”¹⁰ Management and hygiene limited women’s existence because it restricted their education and communication to the women’s home. Furthermore, the secrecy and etiquette surrounding menstruation meant that
communication within the home and private sphere was also carefully negotiated and regulated.

To some degree, silence and verbal concealment of menstruation continues in elements of contemporary society. Al-Khalidi analyzed early advertising texts to reveal the public’s distaste for the visibility and presence of menstruation and feminine hygiene products in American culture. Al-Khalidi identified 1880 as the year that material culture first began to market control of menstruation with the release of the first patent for the sanitary towel.

Elizabeth Arveda Kissling points out that communication restrictions make up the core of the modern menstrual taboo, which is driven by “the belief that menstruation should not be talked about.” Kissling explains:

Menstruation must be concealed verbally as well as physically, and communication rules and restrictions permeate and define the concealment and activity taboos. A substantial majority of American adults and adolescents believe that it is socially unacceptable to discuss menstruation, especially in mixed company. Many believe that it is unacceptable to discuss menstruation even within the family.

While the taboo works to confine menstruation as private discourse, it generates pressure for a growing presence of and references to menstruation and feminine hygiene products in the mass media. Thus, Foucault’s theory of the repressive hypothesis explains the simultaneous development of public restriction of menstruation and extensive discourse advertising devices to contain it. While even women often confine open discussion of menstruation to the private sphere, the modern explosion of “appropriate,” public discourses surrounding menstrual products regulate the threat of menstruation. These discourses framed menses as an issue of private “hygiene.” Maintenance of women’s hygiene required products based on the idea that visible or public menstruation was threatening, which constrained both the appearance of and talk about one’s menses. In the same way that Victorians used specific contexts and discursive strategies to craft acceptable speech about sex, our society accepts that the selling of feminine hygiene products to deflect public recognition of menstruation. In a sense, we can trace the emergence of coded public discourse about menstruation to the creation of sanitary towels.

Al-Khalidi identifies 1880 as the year that material culture first began to market control of menstruation with the release of the first patent for the sanitary towel.
product first necessitated public discourse about the hygiene of menstruating women. Society tolerated such discourse because it primarily engaged management procedures—such as controlling the visibility of blood, eliminating the presence of odor, or obscuring other physical signs of menstruation. Analyzing advertisements for such items reveals that menstruation became a “public issue” only between the individual and hygiene industry. To sustain the feminine hygiene industry market and capitalize women’s bodily processes to generate profit, menstruation needed to have a “public” presence, but discourse controlled and policed its appearance. Not only did the discourses produced surrounding menstruation police and control the consumer to adopt the illicit, metaphorical, and coded discourses and vocabularies, it also led to consumers to purchase feminine hygiene products, like maxi pads and tampons, to police their bodies and control their menstruation.

Al-Khalidi explains that the attempt to sell personal hygiene products through catalogs did not increase visibility, but rather urged the issue to remain a private topic by emphasizing discreetness and attempting to limit the products visibility in stores. Al-Khalidi argues that women’s situation today is the same: “The continuation of such strategies – emphasizing concealment and user compliance with standardized menstrual etiquette – remains evident in contemporary consumption practices.”

Likewise, Lee and Sasser-Coen agree that information and discourse regarding menstruation are characterized by practices of discipline and concealment. Girls are introduced to this rhetoric at an early age.

Girls are exposed to a plethora of subtle and not-so-subtle messages, whispered secretly in school playgrounds, stated matter-of-factly in lectures and documentaries, and boldly exclaimed in television commercials. Sometimes girls receive no direct personal information about menstruation at all, and occasionally they receive affirming and positive messages.

Thus, these examples illustrate that explicit discourse in mainstream advertisements was concealed and repressed, while a coded proliferation of discourse simultaneously emerged. The discourse which relieves women of embarrassment and social anxiety and provides proper education on the subject of menses, remains privatized and avoided.
Such discursive trends encourages women to “hide menstruation or else.”

An examination of the menstruation taboo through modern day advertisements illustrates, first, the ways in which Foucault’s repressive hypothesis applies to issues surrounding sexuality and bodily control in the twenty-first century and, secondly, shows the ways in which the patriarchy persists by regulating women’s issues and bodies to the private sphere. Additionally, this analysis reveals the complex nature of sexual discourse and it exposes the power and politics which influence our historical constructions and meanings of sexuality and gender. In other words, examining the current discourses surrounding menstruation first illustrates that surveillance, normalization, and agents of control are more present in the lives of women than men. Thus, the attempts to repress issues of sexuality and menstruation are directly linked to issues of power and politics. A second implication of the repressive hypothesis is that even though society labels menstruation taboo, the coded discourse surrounding menstrual products proliferates throughout our culture. Talk surrounding menstruation appears everywhere, yet educated and truthful discussions about sexuality and women’s bodies, are continually sanctioned to the private sphere. The advertisements analyzed in the next section illustrate this point.

Feminine Hygiene Advertisements and the perpetuation of the Taboo

The following analysis examines print advertisements for feminine hygiene products made by the pioneer and market leaders Kimberly-Clark (makers of Kotex® pads, liners, and tampons), Proctor & Gamble, (makers of Always® pads and Tampax® tampons), and Johnson & Johnson (makers of o.b.® tampons). I read the advertisements and selected advertising campaigns that were found in a small assortment of popular women’s magazines from 2004-2007 to expose the coded and repressive discursive strategies within each advertisement and explain their rhetorical implications.

The first example of the repressed discourse of menstruation is found in an advertisement for Kotex Bodyfit Ultra Thin™ Sanitary Napkins. The print at the top explains: “Great news. But you can’t hear it.” The center of the advertisement is taken up by a large sketch drawing of a young woman. The woman’s headshot is drawn in shades of gray and the woman’s index finger is held up to her mouth, depicting the American hand gesture for “quiet.” Since her lips are slightly parted, it looks as if she is quietly
verbalizing the sound, “shhh.” A solid red dot, representing the red stone on a ring, is found on the ring finger. The caption below the sketch reads: “Only Kotex® makes quiet pad wrappers. Less crinkling, less crackling. Because some things just aren’t meant to be broadcast.” The bottom right corner contains a picture of the product and the company motto: “Kotex® fits. Period.”

The advertisement appeals to the tabooed belief that members of society should never know you are on your period. While advertisements typically play on the fear of the sight of blood, this advertisement largely focuses on preventing the sounds now associated with periods. Recently, advertisements have begun emphasizing to women that in addition to hiding and concealing their menstruation, they must also hide and conceal from the public the products and materials needed to cover up their menstruation. Karen Houppert explains, “Forget the natural dismay of discovering you’ve bled through your skivvies to your skirt: these ads zeroed in on women’s fear of exposure, promoting a whole culture of concealment. Tapping into that taboo, ads reinforced the idea that any sign that you were menstruating, even purchasing menstrual products, was caused for embarrassment.” Additionally, advertisements remind women that the sight of menstrual products cannot show in all public institutions. Thus, the taboo now encourages women to conceal all products attempt to sell their products by highlighting plain wrappers and small sizes. Houppert continues, “the copy reminds readers how embarrassing it is to reach into a handbag for lipstick and pull out a tampon . . . .”

In this advertisement, Kotex® emphasizes a woman’s need to conceal even the sound made by their feminine hygiene products. Since the most likely place to hear “crinkling” and “crackling” is in women’s public restrooms, Kotex® tells consumers that such noises are inappropriate even in semi-private spaces; secrecy becomes required even between women. Kotex® not only emphasizes the need for quiet products so as to not expose women using feminine hygiene products, but Kotex® also reinforces the belief that advertisements cannot openly discuss products and what it is designed to do without using coded language. In this instance, shame and secrecy remain the primary message.

Other print advertisements in this advertising campaign are stylized and composed similarly and represent a variety of different women. While the woman in this picture has characteristics such as hair texture and coloring and skin tone of a white
woman with blonde hair, other drawings change the skin tone and hair color to represent women of color. Through this depiction, Kotex® illustrates that the feeling of menstruation as an embarrassment and secret is a shared sentiment for all women regardless of ethnicity or race. The drawing also reinforces the taboo because the lips and the mouth are the only facial features drawn on the woman’s face. The woman does not have eyes or a nose. The lack of eyes or open eyes is another characteristic shared by all the drawings of women in this particular series of Kotex® advertisements. While the missing eyes may act as another way of collectively representing women and diminishing differences between women, the lack of eyes is also relevant given that the taboo necessitates hiding the sight and smell of blood from the public.

Finally, coded discourse is apparent and enacted by the presence of the red dot, a socially sanctioned symbol for a woman’s period. This advertisement conceals the obvious terminology of menstruation by replacing language largely with symbols. Rather than using the words “menstruation,” the dot (creatively placed in the advertisement as the exaggerated stone on the woman’s ring) is colored red in order to symbolize a literal red “period.” The elimination of words reinforces the hidden and private nature of menstruation. According to Richard Weiner, in Public Relations Quarterly, Kotex® achieved recognition in 2000 when they first featured the red dot in an advertisement to symbolize a woman’s period.21 Today, the red dot is used in most magazine ads and network TV commercials and has become a graphic icon. It is interesting to note that the word “period” also exists in this advertisement, but in this instance it is a play on words and contains double meaning. Thus, rather than directly using the term period in the context of menstrual blood, it is used to emphasize the claim that “Kotex® fits.” The obscured presence of “Period” indicates that the motto enacts the very strategy it advertises.

Bob Garfield further reifies the taboo by praising Kotex’s® creative use of the word “period” and the red punctuation mark and by arguing that the symbols and euphemisms go far enough. He states: “All the stilted talk about “freshness” and all the blue-dye demos in the world fail to get to the point. By the same token, any more graphic use of the color red probably would be too much to stomach. So, in the realm of venturing into new frontiers, the colored punctuation mark is precisely far enough.”22
Reviews, like Garfield’s, provide insight into the vicious cycle of the menstrual taboo: the industry does not use words and graphics that may offend their audiences and consumers, yet it is the continual usage of euphemisms and codes that instruct citizens that menstruation is a private matter.

Advertisements for Proctor & Gamble products employ the same discursive strategies as shown through this advertisement for Tampax® Pearl Tampons™ which appeared in *Cosmopolitan* in 2005. In this advertisement, a scuba diver is pictured swimming underwater and appears only a few yards away from a giant shark. The caption reads “A leak can attract unwanted attention.” Although the terms “menstruation” and “period” are never stated, this advertisement clearly represents a menstrual cycle to women. “Leak,” although ambiguous, remains a common and alternative word created as acceptable public discourse. In most advertisements in women’s magazines the leak either refers to menstrual blood or urine. Thus, women are forced to look for other “clues” in the advertisement to determine which feminine hygiene product the advertisement is promoting. In this particular advertisement, a small picture of a box Tampax Pearls™ appears in the bottom, right corner; however the box does not contain the word “tampon.” According to Lee and Sasser-Coen such equation of products with brands is not uncommon in the feminine hygiene industry. Often, women receive literature and information on menstruation from product companies which use their product’s specific name interchangeably with menstrual supplies generally, furthering the ability of companies to eliminate and substitute discourse while also regulating products and practices on women’s bodies and lives. Additionally, “this product-related information functions as a kind of ‘propaganda,’ and plays an important part in molding behavior and disciplining the body. It also, of course, maintains corporate capitalism.”

The most significant element of the advertisement is its message which tells women that “leaking” blood is not without consequences, often dangerous and deadly consequences. In this advertisement, it plays upon the old tabooed message that leaks of blood can cause harm by attracting dangerous and deadly wild animals. According to Houppert, Harry Finley, curator of the Museum of Menstruation located in New Carrollton, Maryland, seeks to determine whether animals such as sharks and bears are
really attracted to the odor of menstruation. Houppert states: “‘Sound scientific documentation supporting such gender-biased malarkey is hard to find,’ he reports. ‘Actually, one is more likely to run across studies concluding quite the opposite.’”

Houppert also cites a 1991 article in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* that reports the results of studies conducted by the U.S. Forest Service. In the studies, bears consistently ignored used tampons and menstruating women. Despite this research, a particular modern truth remains implicit in the advertisement: leaks can cause so much embarrassment and shame that you will feel like dying rather than engage in the social sphere.

The Tampax Pearl™ Tampon advertisement is also significant because of its symbolism. First, the entire advertisement contains shades of the color blue, and secondly, the advertisement shows ocean water. Both the color blue and the image of water represent a sense of cleanliness and purity. Additionally, the color red is eliminated from the advertisement. In most advertisements, the color red symbolizes the “period,” so by discarding the color, women are encouraged to hide their menstruation from the public and convinced that the use of tampons will assure such concealment. Thus, women are encouraged to buy tampons because they associate the cleanliness and hiding their blood with the application of the tampon.

Other advertisements for Tampax Pearl™ Tampons portray more realistic scenarios for menstruating women, but they still emphasize social consequences and dangers for those who leak blood and expose their menstruation. Two advertisements show actual women engaging in activities that are traditionally viewed as unsafe and risky for menstruating women’s participation. The first advertisement, which appeared in *Glamour* in 2006, shows a crowded party scene. A young woman is sitting on the shoulders of a young man, amongst a crowd of similar-aged young adults. She looks comfortable, happy and confident. She is wearing white pants. The second advertisement, found in *Jane* in May 2007, shows a woman on a diving board. She is wearing a white bathing suit, and is holding out her arms as if she is preparing to dive. The text on the advertisement exclaims, “The braid makes you brave.” The caption in small, white print reads “Only Pearl gives you trusted Tampax® protection and a revolutionary leak-catching braid.”
In these particular advertisements, the menstruating woman is portrayed as naturally unconfident. Thus, in order to maintain her confidence and social status, a woman must engage in proper hygiene and purchase the best product for hiding signs of menstruation. These advertisements are particularly interesting because, in one way, they appear to disprove the tabooed message that women cannot participate in the public sphere and engage in behaviors if they are menstruating. Even though the advertisements display women “freed” from the taboo’s restrictions, they also reinforce it by implying that the menstruating woman is only permitted in the public sphere with the correct hygiene and menstrual products; naturally, the menstruating woman does not belong and cannot employ the same level of participation. In this instance, patriarchy is upheld by sending women the message that they must liberate themselves from their bodies. Women learn to “pass” in public so that they can meet their culture’s masculinist norms and expectations.

Julie Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth explain the phenomenon they refer to as “menstrual politics.” They argue that the system of menstrual politics, which links women to their biologically determined roles, did not disappear with twentieth century. They state: “Practitioners of menstrual politics have one basic tenet in common: They are convinced that women are naturally and irrevocably limited by menstrual function.” Historically, menstrual politics created discrimination against women in activities, particularly sports. According to Delaney, et al, such fear originated from two principles of menstrual politics that were established in the early twentieth century and continued throughout the 1970’s: “Girls in any condition do not participate in strenuous exercise because it might harm their female organs, and women cannot compete successfully in sports because their menstrual blood might “stain” the playing fields.” Thus, by showing a woman, specifically a woman wearing a white bathing suit, the advertisement appears progressive because it sets aside an old-fashioned belief surrounding menstruation. However, in order to sell their product, Tampax® needs to maintain the fundamental belief of menstrual politics. Hygienic gate keeping procedures must occur prior to entering the public sphere. If they do not, women will be condemned to isolation and the private sphere because menstruation cannot be made public.
Symbols and codes are once again present in the Tampax Pearl™ advertisements. In this advertising campaign, advertisers use the same strategy of eliminating all references to “period,” “menstruation,” and “tampon” and instead include a small picture of their product. The fact that these advertisements do not include the word “tampon” is interesting since the word is considered more acceptable than other words referring to menstruation and menstrual products. According to Weiner, “the word period is used creatively but there is a reticence to using such common words as menstruation, menstrual flow and menstrual product. It seems that some menstrual product companies may be embarrassed to be associated with bleeding.”

With the elimination of the word “tampon,” it seems that Tampax® is also embarrassed to be associated with its product, despite the literal connection to the product’s name. The symbolic removal of tampon also emphasizes the necessary erasure of the visibility of menstruation, and even menstrual products, from the public. In addition to the symbolic images, colors are again significant in the advertisements. In the advertisement containing the photo of the diver, the young female diver stands on a diving board and is set against the blue sky. As she prepares for her dive, she resembles a religious icon, a vision of white and a sign of purity from the sky. Readers and consumers cannot see the stain of her impurity. The second advertisement surprisingly includes shades of red and pink, due to the glow of candles and other low lighting in the bar/club. However, the only color contrast in the photograph is created by the woman’s white pants. The advertisement reminds female consumers that the color red is visually appropriate, as long as menstrual blood remains invisible and women remain unstained and clean.

Proctor & Gamble’s advertisements for their line of Always® sanitary napkins are also very popular in women’s magazines, and emphasize elements of the Western menstrual taboo. A 2006 Always Clean™ advertisement which appeared in multiple women’s magazines including Cosmopolitan and Glamour, attempts to sell Always® pads by highlighting the personal cleansing towel that comes with the maxi pad. The advertisement displays the image of the wrapped sanitary napkin and reveals the cleansing towel packaged with it. The background is a light shade of blue. Above the image is a showerhead and below the image is a floral pattern, similar to the common pattern found on bath mats. The advertisement explains “Feel the clean without the
shower.” Thus, this advertisement plays upon the insecurity of looking, smelling or feeling “dirty” while menstruating. It also states, “Clean feels good. That’s why new Always Clean™ is the first and only line of pads to come attached with individually wrapped wipes. So it helps you feel shower clean after every change.” The taboo helps the feminine hygiene industry profit with the consumption of new products and gimmicks, like the personal cleansing towel. It becomes a way to eliminate menstruation’s visibility and smell and deal with the presence of the taboo.

Additionally, this advertisement never states the words “menstruation” or “period,” yet women understand the meaning of the term “change.” Also, like the previous advertisements, blue remains the dominant color on the advertisement. Blue, along with an image of a showerhead, reaffirms the need for cleanliness when menstruating. Furthermore, the advertisement sets up an impossible expectation for women to maintain: a woman ought to feel “shower clean with every change.” Since women are meant to “feel good” when clean, the obvious negative implication remains that, while menstruating, women have no choice but to “feel bad” because they are “bleeding,” which is an unclean act.

Additionally, the advertisement also speaks to the need to hide other physical characteristics of menstruation, such as the bulkiness that is associated with wearing sanitary napkins. Thus, Always® encourages women to hide menstrual blood and remain clear while wearing “ultra thin” pads. The advertisement illustrates the obvious double bind women face when menstruating. Society encourages women to “hide menstruation” and “not leak.” Simultaneously, this encourages women to wear “small” and “thin” pads or tampons to conceal the fact that they are menstruating, yet they also need to maintain ultimate “coverage” and “protection” to prevent leaks. As a result, menstruating women often face a constant state of fear, embarrassment, and paranoia. They also face the pressure to conceal and remain clean, two standards difficult to maintain when menstruating. Most significantly, these advertisements express all these implicit feelings without directly stating any explicit words. Thus, the constant integration of coded discourse within our society and on menstrual product advertisements continue to impose the ideas that open discussion of menstruation is “taboo, nonexistent, and should remain silent.”
The final advertisement was also found in multiple women’s and teenage girl’s magazines including Cosmopolitan and Seventeen in August 2007. The advertisement is printed on both sides of a magazine page. On the front of the advertisement, a 2 x 1½ size green box is centered in the middle of a white background. It reads, “Why be big if you don’t have to be?” The o.b.® logo is located below the text and the text beneath the logo reads: “mighty. small.” On the back, the same size box, but turquoise-colored, appears in the center of the page surrounded by white background again. The text in the box reads: “Don’t underestimate small. It can be pretty powerful. Take the o.b.® Tampon. It’s designed small to protect big, expanding all-around to fit your shape perfectly. And with its new SilkTouch™ cover and Fluid-lock™ grooves for locked-in protection, this tiny tampon is as tough as it gets.”

The message in this o.b.® advertisement is significant for two reasons. First, it once again plays upon the taboo that menstruating women should not show any sign of their menstruation. Rather than emphasizing the “leak” or the sound of “crinkling” wrappers, this advertisement also reminds women that wearing a pad, especially a large, bulging and absorbent pad, risks society detecting your menstruation. It thus plays upon the taboo differently than the previous advertisements because it focuses attention on women’s awareness that their pelvic area is perceptible and under public scrutiny. The advertisement claims that the best protection is found in small, yet powerful tampons. Secondly, this advertisement is significant because it appeals to women by emphasizing the societal expectation for young girls and women to remain thin. In our society, obesity is associated with feelings of shame and isolation, the same feelings equated with women who leak or show signs of menstruation publicly. Even more disturbing is that the advertisement links the menstrual taboo to social taboos about fatness, thereby reinforcing society’s expectation that young girls should be thin. Lee and Sasser-Coen argue that “such a discourse is especially aimed at teenagers, encouraging them to conceal bodily functions and keep their growing bodies small and thin lest they take up too much space, exercise power, or show evidence of failing in the disciplinary regimens of feminine bodily hygiene/care.” Thus, girls are taught that the same pressures and societal burdens they feel to maintain their weight and shape are also placed upon them to maintain cleanliness and hygiene during their monthly period.
In addition to sending women and girls messages about regulating and maintaining their bodily hygiene, the advertisement, once again uses codes and symbols to communicate additional messages. For example, the graphic of a small box of o.b. tampons is more evidence that a trend exists to equate a particular brand with a product and to avoid using the words “menstruation” and “period.” Additionally, colors and images reinforce messages of purity and naturalness. For example, the white space surrounding small boxes remain “unstained” and pure. Additionally, the colors of the boxes are light green and turquoise. The boxes also contain images of plants and flowers. Together, the colors and decorative prints portray o.b.® Tampons as natural and healthy.

Until recently, due to the introduction of all-cotton tampons, tampon usage has been linked to Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), a potentially fatal disorder that occurs in a disproportionate number of menstruating women, and the increase of dioxin levels in women’s bodies. However, advertisements, like that for o.b.® tampons, use symbols, colors, and codes to overcome the fear of health risks from tampon usage and instead emphasize the fears and threats that accompany the publicity of menstruation. Houppert explains:

> In most ways, the menstrual products industry is like any other. It plays on women’s insecurities – Am I leaking? Will this pad show? – and develops ad campaigns to maximize these fears. Where it departs from mainstream corporate culture is in the secrecy that permeates every aspect of the business. Promising the invisibility of its products, it carries that commitment into its factories and boardrooms, cultivating a low profile that precludes public scrutiny.

Coded discourse, euphemisms, symbols, and the erasure and avoidance of certain words produce attitudes toward menstruation which carry over into all areas of society. The lack of open and direct discussion of menstruation, hygiene, and menstrual products allow the continuation of myths, taboos and dangerous health risks, threatening the safety of women. Until menstrual discourse changes, women will most likely privilege small and, at times, risky feminine hygiene products in order to enter the public realm and tolerate the menstrual taboo.
Conclusion

Foucault’s notion of an “authorized vocabulary” is clearly revealed in contemporary advertisements for maxi pads and tampons. Particular discursive strategies, such as allusions, metaphors, and codes, are consistently used in all advertisements. First, images and euphemisms are used to replace words that describe and represent the menstrual cycle. Second, colors are also symbolic and graphics and pictures often contain religious, shameful, secret and deadly undertones. Finally, the absence or elimination of certain words, such as “menstruation,” reinforces the idea that menstruation is a taboo occurrence that must be confined to the private sphere and carefully regulated and controlled in the public sphere. Additionally, the analyses of menstruation product advertisements reveal the reinforcement of three consistent and taboo messages. First, women are naturally leaky. Second, as a result of their leakiness, women are dirty, dangerous, or in danger. Third, since purity is good, women must strive to achieve that state-of-being by hiding the naturally dirty and bad act of menstruation, hiding any sign of its presence.

The shift in the menstruation taboo from one that affects the public to one that affects women’s personal interests appears to coordinate with the emergence of mass-produced feminine hygiene products and their consumption. As science began to disprove the myths and dangers originally associated with women’s menstrual blood, the feminine hygiene industry successfully found ways to portray the taboo as a private and personal threat to women. Thus, women needed to confine the visibility of menstruation to the private sphere while engaging in the public sphere, creating the need for feminine hygiene products and supporting an estimated $1.7 billion industry. While the creation of feminine hygiene products helped women access the public sphere, the way in which products are sold today still maintain the taboo and feelings of shame, anxiety, embarrassment, and fear.

The examination of these advertisements illustrates how the emergence of new, contemporary discourses in modern print advertisements allows repression to continue and encourages women to find new acts of liberation. Today, modern discursive trends and formations surrounding menstruation produce three consequences. First, outside of the occasional commercial or print advertisement, some men and women still completely
avoid and/or silence positive and educational discussions about menstruation in the public sphere. This risks the physical health and emotional well-being of young girls and women who may incorrectly use tampons or live their lives feeling victimized and ashamed due to their menstrual cycle.

Second, despite the attempts of feminist movements and conscious-raising groups to break away from the private sphere, the proliferation of subtle and overt discourses surrounding menstruation illustrate that women remain oppressed. Western society uses discursive words and coded vocabularies in order to discuss the topic. Even though the public was “exposed” to women’s issues through the production and advertising of feminine hygiene products, the proliferation of discourses keeps the visibility and knowledge of menstruation private. As shown in these advertisements, a proliferation of public discourse confines bodily hygiene to the private sphere and allows women to succumb to masculinist and hegemonic cultural norms. By keeping menstruation and the enactment of hygiene private through coded discourse, Western culture discursively maintains the contemporary taboo.

Third, although this chapter examined the ways in which advertisements for feminine hygiene products uses the menstrual taboo to sell products, it is essential to address the fact that the menstrual taboo is also appearing in the advertisements of other products, such as birth control. A number of recent birth control advertisements appeal to a woman’s desire to completely eliminate the menstrual and decrease monthly symptoms before mentioning its actual purpose as an oral contraceptive. For example, an advertisement for Yaz\(^39\) shows a photograph of three, young women who are sitting together, laughing and looking content and relaxed. The advertisement declares: “Don’t let monthly symptoms interfere with your life. Discover Yaz, a birth control pill that can help.” Instead of “helping” with contraception and the avoidance of pregnancies, Yaz attempts to sell its product on the claim that it can help relieve symptoms of Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder and shorten and lighten the menstrual cycle. With the emergence of new types of oral contraceptives that eliminate women’s periods, the feminine hygiene industry will likely lose business. Because the threat of the menstrual taboo has become so severe, women are now looking for more radical approaches to eliminate menstruation
entirely. Birth control methods, rather than feminine hygiene products, are becoming the strategy for managing the taboo.

The effects of the menstrual taboo will continue until women and other institutions in society begin to question the fundamental assumptions behind the taboo. One such problematic assumption is illustrated in the comment by Garfield, who commends a Kotex® advertisement for permitting women to worry about the side effects of menstruation. Although he acknowledges that critics complain about the ad because it unfairly exploits women’s insecurity, Garfield argues that “it finds out what consumers are insecure about, then cheerfully invents things to mitigate them.” He goes on to explain: “While research shows that many women feel in control during their periods, and even revel in their mastery of their cycles, others genuinely feel victimized by the monthly tyranny of cramping, mood swings, absurdly heavy flow and so forth. These commercials are aimed at them.” Garfield ignores the fact that women’s menstrual cycles are not responsible for victimizing women, rather society is accountable for creating a taboo that debilitates women. Delaney, et al. explain:

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that menstrual politics has dominated social and economic relations between the sexes since the beginning of time. In all their struggles for equality – the suffrage movement, the labor movement, the struggle for ERA – women have been obliged to fight against an enemy who will not contend with them in the halls of Congress or the courts of law. The enemy is within every woman, but it is not her menstruation. Rather it is the habit of mind regarding menstruation into which she has been led by centuries of male domination.40

Like other forms of patriarchy, the menstrual taboo is a taught, societal symptom rather than an inherent feature of the female body. As long as aspects of the taboo confine women’s bodies and hygiene to the private sphere and silence explicit, educated discourse, women will remain oppressed by society’s and their own self-induced biopolitics.
Notes

1 Foucault 3.
2 Foucault 4-5.
3 Foucault 27.
4 Foucault 18.
5 Foucault 17-18.
6 Foucault 24.
7 Foucault 40-41.
8 Lee and Sasser-Cleon 68-69.
9 Foucault 72.


11 Al-Khalidi 67.


13 Kissling 293-294.
14 Al-Khalidi 67.
15 Al-Khalidi 65.
16 Lee and Sasser-Coen 61.
18 Copyright permission to display the figures in this version could not be acquired in a timely manner.
19 Houppert 14.
20 Houppert 14-15.
21 Weiner 27.

22 Bob Garfield “Finally a Feminine Hygiene Ad gets straight to the Point,” Advertising Age 71.45 (October 30, 2000): Communication and Mass Media Complete.


24 Lee and Sasser-Coen 66.

25 Houppert 211.

26 Houppert 211-212.


29 Delaney et al. 47-48.

30 Delaney et al. 48.

31 Delaney et al. 55.


35 Lee and Sasser-Coen 60.

36 Houppert 13-40.

37 Houppert 36.

38 Houppert 41.


40 Delaney et al. 55.
Chapter Four:  
Conclusions, Discussion and Areas of Future Inquiry

For the first few months of 2008 it has been nearly impossible to watch television or read a magazine without encountering advertisements for the Proctor & Gamble “Protecting Futures” Campaign.¹ One particular advertisement features a desolate scene: a young, African girl in a school uniform sits alone at a wooden desk in a barren field. She appears completely isolated by her community. The advertisement displays this message in white, bold lettering: “There are lots of reasons kids miss school. Being a girl shouldn’t be one of them.” Although the purpose of the advertisement is initially unclear, further examination of the advertisement and recognition of the Always® and Tampax® logos, reveals the claim that the purchase of P&G’s feminine hygiene products will lead to the education and societal inclusion of young African girls. The advertisement explains P&G’s philanthropic campaign:

In some regions of the world, many girls have to stay home when they get their period just because they don’t have protection. Which means they may fall so far behind, they drop out. You can help change that. Your purchase of Always or Tampax helps us donate 1.4 million through 2008 to the United Nations Association’s HERO campaign to provide feminine protection and education to girls in Southern Africa. Because every girl deserves her chance to shine. Use your period for good at www.protectingfutures.com.²

On the surface, the campaign appears positive and powerful. Always® now endorses a new slogan that encourages women to “use their period for good,” which seems like a progressive move away from the contemporary taboo. Additionally, the seemingly innocent campaign is largely viewed as an act of generosity and charity. Bree Kessler and Summer Wood describe the goals of the project:

the Protecting Futures campaign proposes to help keep young girls in school by providing schools with comprehensive support, including clean water, new classrooms, and bathrooms, year-round feeding programs, teacher training in puberty education, traveling health educators and
Despite the good intentions of P&G’s campaign, I agree with Kessler and Wood, who argue that the advertisements are “not-so-simple.” Although the advertisement claims to reduce the effect of the taboo in Africa, it does so in a way that reaffirms the American taboo’s stance that menstruation is debilitating and needs control. Thus, the recent images of the “Protecting Futures” Campaign signal an exigency in American society. This campaign not only reminds women that the menstrual taboos continue to exist throughout the world, the campaign also indicates the American menstrual taboo is spreading through globalization, therefore an examination of its recent discursive formations is necessary.

This advertising campaign is one of the many reasons that a rhetorical examination of the modern, American menstruation taboo is important. Understanding the taboo from a rhetorical perspective illustrates the ways in which discourse continues to operate, particularly how it negatively affects women and their bodies. A rhetorical approach clarifies how the taboo is continually disseminated even to international, non-Western areas, through texts like the “Protecting Futures” Campaign. This chapter concludes my project by answering the questions posed in chapter one and discussing the implications of the menstrual taboo for public sphere theory and feminism. Additionally, this chapter provides contrasting cultural artifacts that begin to challenge and change the nature of the menstruation taboo. Specifically, I examine the films A Walk on the Moon (1998) and The Slums of Beverley Hills (1998), and promotional materials for non-mainstream feminine hygiene products, Lunapads. These artifacts offer alternative and positive images of menstruation and, in some instances, explicitly resist the modern menstruation taboo.

Before proceeding to the questions posed in chapter one, it is necessary to explain how conditions for intelligibility and relations of power are made possible. It is through the creation of discursive formations that messages like those found in the menstrual taboo are “permitted” to persist or cease in Western society. In his work, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault identifies a “discursive formation” as a range of possibility for which a statement, or, a basic unit of discourse, can exist. In
other words, statements, concepts, and objects are subject to the “rules” established by the discursive regime. When determining how discursive formations develop, Foucault identifies the “enunciative function” of statements, that is, the conditions under which a statement can be said or formulated. Foucault argues that in scientific inquiry a “threshold,” or a point at which an enunciative function influences a statement, must emerge in order to “transform” or “create” a discursive formation. Foucault explicitly describes this process:

When the epistemological figure thus outlined obeys a number of formal criteria, when its statements comply not only with archaeological rules of formation, but also with certain laws for the construction of propositions, we will say that it has crossed a threshold of scientificity. And when this scientific discourse is able, in turn, to define the axioms necessary to it, the elements that it uses, the propositional structures that are legitimate to it, and the transformations that it accepts . . . we will say that it has crossed the threshold of formalization.

Once a discursive formation has been shaped, its significance is accepted throughout the community and eventually throughout society.

In the first chapter, I posed the following questions: What conditions occurred within societal power relations to maintain the menstrual taboo and how is it possible that these relations continue to persist today? How do these conditions maintain the taboo and hierarchical gender relations? This first set of questions I suggest that specific conditions produce the enunciative functions of the menstrual taboo. After examining the discursive trends in the Western menstruation taboo, I conclude that the menstruation taboo’s enunciative functions changed over time in relation to shifting historical contexts and thresholds. The history and texts examined in chapter one’s literature review reveals that the changes and shifts in the taboo (from “threat to others” to “threat to oneself”) coordinates with the onset of cultural changes and new discursive trends and formations from societal institutions, such as the emergence of the feminine hygiene industry and new paradigms and knowledge in the scientific community. In other words, I suggest that a new menstrual taboo discourse was necessary in order to
regulate and control woman’s bodies and their consumption in a time when American society was beginning to award women additional rights.

During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, women entered the public sphere, campaigning for the abolition of slavery and creating a suffrage movement that eventually led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920. Meanwhile, during this same time, significant advances were made in medical knowledge and professional texts, especially in the understanding of menstruation. According to Gigi Santow, although the science of menstruation remained “baffling and unexplainable” throughout the eighteenth century, “the nineteenth century, especially toward its end, was characterized by remarkable progress . . . Embryology made great advances and physiology some . . . Thereafter, operative successes ‘slowly guided the profession into surgical channels, and were largely responsible for the new specialty – gynecology.’”7 Since scientific advancement disproved the logic behind previous taboos, society needed to find means to keep the abject, menstrual blood, outside the public sphere. Therefore, as women entered the public sphere, discursive regimes adapted to create different taboo messages about menstruation. Delaney, Lupton, and Toth refer to this discursive strategy as “menstrual politics.” They explain:

Since the advent of modern science, the fears and prejudices surrounding menstruation have given way to an acceptance of it as a normal bodily process – at least in print. But the habits of centuries are not easily unlearned by men who depend on women’s manifest physical differences to give a rationale for their belief in her emotional, economic, and social otherness. That is why the system we call menstrual politics has by no means disappeared with the twentieth century and the ‘emancipation’ of women from their biologically determined roles.8

Thus, regulatory and essentialist discourse that attempted to keep women’s bodies from the public sphere slowly disappeared from medical texts; however discourse that regulated aspects of women’s bodily functions were found in other elements in our culture. I argue that today we find the harmful discourse in visual imagery and
consumerism, such as advertising and films. Thus, advertisements and films become part of the discursive regime that reiterates the messages of the menstrual taboo.

This leads to the second question I posed: *How does consumerism and industry use and reinforce women’s fears and insecurities to sell feminine hygiene products?* Through the case study of modern advertisements for feminine hygiene products, I argue that the menstrual taboo does not exist because members of society are explicitly being educated to follow a taboo; rather cultural discourse reinforces and models the taboo to women. In other words, the repressed nature of the public discourse surrounding menstruation -- euphemisms, code words and symbols substituted for realistic images and words describing menstrual blood -- becomes the method for teaching and illustrating that menstruation is a taboo topic. According to Foucault, a repressive discourse surrounding any term or concept is problematic because society often conflates open, public discourse with allowance, acceptance, or social sanctioning of a particular topic. Although discourse appears better than silence or erasure, Foucault argues that repressive discourse is just as harmful and potentially more dangerous since people engage in the discourse thinking that their discourse contains emancipatory potential when it does not. Thus, this project has shown how repressed discourse acts as a strategy used by the mass media to maintain a taboo, successfully selling products to help women deal with menstruation, a “problem” that no one appears to openly discuss.

Additionally, the rhetorical analyses of the advertisements show that women are taught specific, negative associations to menstruation through the images and messages in the print advertisements. According to Houppert, advertisements for disposable pads, such as Kotex, have been full of dire warnings about preventing offensive hygiene and odors, since the products first emerged in the 1920’s. “Fast-forward fifty years and Playtex plays on the same insecurities.” Rhetorical readings of print advertisements reveal that reoccurring themes of shame, secrecy, social exclusion, dirtiness and leakiness are consistently found in advertising campaigns, supporting Houppert’s conclusions.

Not only do these messages affect the way in which women relate to their body, but they also cause serious and dangerous implications for women. For example, fear appeals in advertising persuaded women to purchase products that were physically harmful and deadly. According to Houppert, in 1980 alone, 38 women died of Toxic
Shock Syndrome (TSS), a potentially fatal disorder that occurs in a disproportionate number of menstruating women, and has been linked to the use of tampons.\textsuperscript{10} This large number of deaths correlated with the introduction of Rely, Proctor and Gamble’s most absorbent brand of tampons to hit the market. That same year, Houppert explains, Proctor and Gamble (P&G) mailed 60 million free samples of Rely to consumers across the country. As the popularity of the product spread and the Center for Disease Control reflected on the increase cases of TSS since 1979 (55 deaths and 1066 cases of nonfatal TSS), the center took note that the cases tended to primarily occur in young, menstruating women. Soon after, studies and investigations revealed the connection between tampons and TSS. While medical and scientific studies indicated that all major brands of tampons are associated with TSS, The National Academy of Sciences cited four studies which showed a correlation between the use of Rely and an increase risk of toxic shock.\textsuperscript{11} Shortly thereafter, in September 1980, P&G removed Rely from the market.

According to Houppert, Rely was “made of superthirsty synthetics such as carboxymethylcellulose and polyester” and “was billed as the most absorbent tampon ever to hit the market.”\textsuperscript{12} Exacerbated by P&G’s neglect of consumer complaints\textsuperscript{13} and the FDA’s lack of testing and labeling requirements for the industry,\textsuperscript{14} women became victims of the feminine hygiene industry’s profits. Although today TSS is an identifiable and understood risk to most young women who wear tampons, the TSS scare is still relevant because it illustrates the consequences which can occur when advertising campaigns scare consumers thus encouraging them to purchase products that are potentially deadly. Even though TSS is a commonly recognized risk, the misinformation or lack of information surrounding menstruation and brought on by the menstruation taboo, continues to leave young girls at risk.

Recent scientific studies suggest that tampon use not only puts women at risk of TSS, it exposes women to high trace levels of dioxins. If dioxin toxins are building in women’s bodies at a faster rate due to tampon use, women may risk hormonal changes that are medically linked to decreased fertility, ovarian dysfunction, and endometriosis.\textsuperscript{15} Houppert notes that concern about dioxin has not yet sparked consumer outrage.\textsuperscript{16} She explains that this is further evidence that “the code of silence surrounding menstrual
hygiene leaves consumers with little information and less clout.” Lack of open communication about menstruation and feminine hygiene products as well as the emphasis on fear appeals is a dangerous discursive combination because it leads to negative material effects on women’s bodies, such as illness and even death. Thus, the desire to eliminate all evidence of menstrual blood and the negative social effects of menstruation described in advertisements are most likely continuing to expose women to bodily harm.

It is important to acknowledge that while some feminine hygiene products have a negative effect on the bodies of women, the industry has also had a positive effect on women’s lives. With the addition of mass-produced feminine hygiene products, Western women were no longer limited to the private or domestic sphere during their menstrual cycle. Delaney, Lupton, and Toth explain:

The turning point seems to have come around the time women gained the vote; large percentages of the female population were gaining advanced degrees, entering the professions, and in general reaping the benefits of the ‘century of struggle’ for legal and political equality. An enormously liberating factor in these advances was the mass marketing of disposable sanitary napkins after World War I.

Feminine hygiene products provide women with an easy and more effective means for concealing menstrual blood from the public. The ability to conceal menstruation made it easier for women to access jobs, careers, and education; such areas previously excluded menstruating women. Although the feminine hygiene industry contributed to the improvement in women’s societal status, they also harmed women by reinforcing a menstrual taboo in order to sell products. While the menstrual products are not inherently problematic, the discourse used when selling and advertising such products to women remain unnecessarily harmful and negative.

The TSS and dioxin threats illustrate that the menstruation taboo has deadly affects when it confines information and discussion of menstruation to the private sphere. However, the creation of a feminist hygiene industry helps women access the public sphere. Thus, this discourse reveals that the menstrual taboo has a complex relation to the public/private sphere. This leads to the third question I seek to answer: How does the
discourse surrounding the menstruation taboo reinforce the discursively constructed divide between the public and private sphere and assure that women’s bodies are restrained to the private sphere? The case studies which examined films and advertisements, as well as the application to Foucault’s repressive hypothesis reveal the ways in which the menstruation taboo upholds and perpetuates the discursive constructions of the “private” and “public” spheres. Tracing the history of the menstrual taboo and its shifting discursive formations reveals a public/private correlation is found in the construction of the menstruation taboo as a threat. My earlier analysis illustrates that despite social and political gains, society regulates and biopolitically controls women’s bodies, restricting them to the private sphere.

Additionally, this project shows that although the taboo confines menstruation to the private sphere, images and discourse about menstruation are exposed and simulated in the public sphere in order to teach society the parameters of the taboo and to assure that menstruation will only appear in the public in the form of simulacra. Images and visibility of menstruation and the menstrual taboos are permitted in films and advertisements so that the cultural discourse of the taboo is made accessible to the public. Thus, the current discourse conceals and restricts menstruation to the private sphere.

Understanding the relationship between the menstrual taboo and the public/private spheres informs public sphere theory in two distinct ways. First, this paper supports DeLuca’s and Peeple’s claim that public sphere theory needs to acknowledge the importance of the mass media on influencing publicity and the performance of public action, such as the concealment of menstruation and the exclusionary tactics and attitudes toward menstruating women. Notions such as DeLuca’s and Peeple’s ‘public screen’ show that a ‘public’ is discursively constructed, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance and influence of images on audiences, shared experiences and performances, and everyday reality. A second implication for public sphere theory is that Foucault’s theory of the repressive hypothesis challenges the ways feminists and Habermas initially conceived public discourse as denoting liberation. Foucault reminds public sphere scholars that escaping the private sphere does not assure acceptance and discursive emancipation. Although feminists recognize that menstruation is a necessary subject, just as unavoidable in public as the topic of sexuality, society continues to construct
discursive strategies to restrict, police, and control how menstruation is talked about, further regulating it to the private sphere.

This project attempts to open spaces for alternative views of the public sphere. Through examining the menstruation taboo as a case study, I have shown that the traditional Habermasian public sphere needs further interrogation. Problematizing and providing alternative “publics” are critical for overcoming the limiting nature of the current public sphere. Following the works of Benhabib and Deem, I suggest challenging dualisms, normalizations, and initiating liberating feminist reconceptualizations of the public sphere in order to find tactics for resisting the privileged, patriarchal public sphere. If scholars do not examine the discursive impact that public and private spheres have on particular issues, like menstruation, women will likely continue to face oppression. The current rhetorics that uphold a Habermasian public and private theory privileges the public, excludes or devalues cultural elements and characteristics (such as the mass media), and fails to thoroughly understand how public/private theory reify the oppression of minority groups by excluding them or their shared experiences from the public sphere.

This project complicates rhetorical readings of the public and private spheres. Understanding how rhetoric intersects with the public realm allows for a greater understanding of these complex cultural issues. Furthermore, it is important for rhetorical critics to conceptually elaborate on the study of the public, since an examination of the public and discourse remains the foundation of the public and the private spheres. An examination of the modern menstruation taboo reveals the ways in which the public and private spheres create arbitrary distinctions and inconsistencies and create discriminatory messages to minority groups. The politics of the public and private spheres limit and exclude groups and populations from society. Messages, like “menstruating women are to be avoided and excluded,” reaffirm hierarchical power relations and threaten the liberation of women.

**Alternative media images**

The final question I posed asks: *How can we begin to break down the modern taboos of concealment and contamination in order to end women’s oppression through female embodiment?* Although this question is difficult to answer, I contend that we can
find some insight from images and discourse that portray menstruation or sell menstrual products without reinforcing the menstrual taboo.

According to Barbara Biesecker, rhetoricians have a specific obligation when using the theories of Foucault. Biesecker argues that McKerrow fails to tell rhetorical scholars “how transgressive, counter-hegemonic or, to borrow McKerrow’s term, critical rhetorics can possibly emerge as anything other than one more instantiation of the status quo in a recorded and thus barely recognizable form.” In other words, Beisecker argues that McKerrow does not elaborate a Foucauldian theory of resistance. Thus, Beisecker contends that rhetorical scholars must illuminate the conditions of possibility permitted by present power relations. She states: “the critical rhetorician’s task is to ‘make these virtualities visible’ by the strategic and deliberate codification of those points of resistance . . . the task is to trace new lines of making sense by taking hold of the sign whose reference had been destabilized by and through those practices of resistance, lines that cut diagonally across, and thus disrupt, the social weave.” In other words, rhetoric ought to make visible the moments or tactics of resistance in culture. Following the Biesecker’s lead, this section reveals moments and images of resistance that are used to fight against the assumptions and myths of the menstruation taboo. Positive images of menstruation exist in the media, but they are rare and not typically present in mainstream outlets. Examples of positive portrayals of the start of menses and using menstruation as tool to empower women exist in both films and advertisements. This section will examine these alternative visual images.

Two films that portray menstruation as a positive or empowering experience are Walk on the Moon and Slums of Beverley Hills. Although these texts contain some characteristics, discourse, or visual imagery that can be read as reiterating taboo belief(s), I conclude that these films portray menstruation as a positive or neutral experience or strategically embraces menstrual blood as a tool of resistance. Overall, the films are useful representations to illustrate how directors and writers can represent alternative experiences in popular films and challenge societal assumptions.

Walk on the Moon displays Pearl Kantowitz and her daughter Alison’s mother-daughter relationship, and engages the experiences of growing up and struggling with womanhood. During the summer of 1969, Alison experiences numerous significant
“firsts,” including the start of her first period. When Alison starts menstruating, she calls for her grandmother, Lillian – who she calls “Bubbie” – and asks her to come right away. Sensing some anxiety in her granddaughter’s voice, Lillian rushes into the bathroom, kindly asking her “shainekehuh” what is wrong. Alison slowly lifts up her dress to reveal a bloody stain on her underwear hanging around her knees. Lillian reacts enthusiastically and smiles with delight. She says: “Oh my God. Mazel tov.” Bubbie then congratulates Alison by slapping her across the face.

Alison. [Gasps.] Why’d you hit me?
Lillian. [Holding her hands to her face] It’s a tradition. My mother, your great-grandmother, Sonia – may she rest in peace – she did the same thing to me.
Alison. It’s a stupid tradition.
Lillian: It’s the stupidest goddamn tradition. It’s true. You know what I did? I slapped her right back.
[Alison slaps her Lillian.]
Lillian. Ow! Bandeet!
Pearl. [Pearl enters the bathroom] What’s going on in here?
Lillian. Pearl.
Pearl. What?
Lillian. I got news. Today Alison became a woman.

Pearl grabs her daughter by the face she smiles, laughs and yells “oh!” She kisses her daughter, looks at her and then proceeds to hug and kiss her again.

Pearl and Lillian convey a positive reaction to Alison’s physical development. Throughout the scene, while Lillian and Pearl flaunt over Alison, viewers notice a significant change in Alison’s attitude. Initially, her facial expression conveyed feelings of fear and uncertainty when she called Lillian into the bathroom. However, as her Bubbie and mother continue to gloat over her menstruation, Alison noticeably changes, smiling and laughing by the end of the scene.

Additional positive reinforcement is found in another scene found shortly later in the film. Bubbie seems worried because Alison has been “hiding away for an hour” and “didn’t even eat any supper.” Pearl, Bubbie, and Pearl’s friend, Rhoda, assume that
Alison has cramps but soon Alison emerges from the house wearing a beautiful summer dress and pleasantly smiling. Alison announces: “I have . . . my first date” and that Ross is taking her to the Fun Fair to ride the go-carts.

Alison. “Mother, this is the most exciting night of my life. You’re not going to ruin it for me.

Pearl. No. Of course not. I was just worried. Maybe you weren’t feeling up to it.

Alison. I’m fine.

Rhoda. You look so . . . womanly.

Lillian. You see, my shainehkugh. You become a woman, the world looks brighter.

This scene from A Walk on the Moon is significantly different from the scene in the film My Girl, which also presents a visual enactment of a young girl’s first menstruation. First, from the moment she starts menstruating, Veda appears traumatized and terrified, whereas, Alison, although initially troubled, does not react as horrified to the sight of her own menstrual blood. Interestingly, in My Girl, viewers do not see the image of menstrual blood; they only witness a hysterical Veda running out of the bathroom. In A Walk on the Moon, viewers actually see the visual stain of blood on Alison’s panties. However, the image of menstrual blood on Alison’s panties is contained and minimal, therefore realistic. It is vastly different from horrific visions, like the opening scene in Carrie, where large amounts of blood flow down Carrie’s legs and hands in an unnecessarily gory fashion. I contend that the image in A Walk on the Moon alleviates the fears and negative feelings associated with the onset of menstruation, whereas My Girl leaves viewers imagining the worst by keeping menstruation from the public’s view. Thus, the scene in A Walk on the Moon shows a realistic and less traumatic image of the onset of menstruation.

Additionally, A Walk on the Moon is a more positive depiction of menstruation due to the reactions of Alison’s family. Lillian and Pearl provide positive messages and reassurance when Alison’s menstruation begins. In My Girl, although Shelly attempts to lifts Veda’s spirits and provide a positive image of menstruation, Veda seems doubtful, disgusted, and angry. Additionally, at the end of the scene Shelly fails to challenge
Veda’s assertion that “boys are lucky” because “nothing happens to them.” Additionally, *My Girl* does not include a scene depicting Veda discussing the onset of her menstruation with her father. Viewers are left to assume that he does not know, further reifying the belief women must “hide” menstruation from men. In *A Walk on the Moon*, this assumption is openly challenged when Alison hears an announcement over the summer camp’s public announcement system “Long-distance telephone call for Alison Kantowitz. It’s your father! You’re a woman now, Alison. Mazel tov, darling. And may you be blessed with a happy marriage and many, many beautiful children.” Although Alison expresses some embarrassment, she is surrounded by clapping and cheering friends and neighbors, showing viewers that the community also views menstruation as a positive and celebratory event in a woman’s life.

Although *A Walk on the Moon* offers a positive image of menstruation that largely resists the hegemonic and culturally dominant messages of the menstruation taboo, the film also portrays aspects of the taboo including, feelings of shame, embarrassment and the myth that menstruation initiates early sexual activity. However, a close rhetorical reading illustrates that the film often counteracts these messages by presenting a discourse and images that expose the taboo and reveal its absurdity.

For example, in a sense where Alison and her friend Myra, shop for tampons, they are startled when their boyfriends enter the store and see them. The girls nervously drop the box of sanitary napkins behind them and kick them out of sight. Ross asks “What? What was that?” Simultaneously the girls answer: “Nothing.” They laugh and then quickly change the subject. Clearly, Alison and Myra recognize that menstruation is embarrassing and needs to remain hidden from society, especially boys. In the next scene, prior to the announcement made over the public address system, the taboo is again portrayed when Alison tells her mother: “Don’t tell Daddy I got my period.” Despite these dialogues and scenes, the film upholds a positive portrayal of menstruation. The images and plot counteract the messages of the taboo. First, Alison and Myra, although standing in the feminine hygiene aisle, are not “caught” or embarrassed by the boys. Additionally, even though she needed to shop for sanitary napkins (often viewed as an uncomfortable experience), the film does not emphasize the negative aspects of the experience but instead accentuates Alison’s newfound legitimacy as a “woman.” Finally,
the positive PA announcement, which reveals her father’s knowledge of her first period, once again depicts optimism, good wishes, and respect toward Alison.

The final aspect of the taboo portrayed in the film is the myth that menstruation is associated to sexuality. This is illustrated through the plot, because the same summer that Alison starts menstruating, she also experiences her first emotional and intimate relationship with a boy. Although this reaffirms the fear that early menstruation may lead to early sex, it is important to note that Alison does not engage in a sexual relationship with her boyfriend. Thus, even though Alison develops a new appreciation for relationships with the opposite sex and encounters her first romance, she does not reinforce the stereotype of the overtly sexual menstruating teenager. Additionally, Alison also points out the inconsistencies that exist for young girls when “womanhood” is equated with the onset of menstruation. After the menstruation scenes, Alison asks her mother for permission to camp out at Woodstock with her boyfriend. When Pearl refuses on account that Alison is only 14 years old, Alison yells: “First everyone tells me I’m a woman now; then I’m not old enough? I hate you!”_ A Walk on the Moon_ reminds viewers that the onset of menstruation does not actually correlate with the freedom of womanhood or sexual promiscuity. Instead it shows viewers that menstruation is an exciting and happy moment in a young girl’s life -- a normal and necessary rite of passage that is encountered long before a young girl truly “becomes a woman” or enacts her first sexual experience.

_Slums of Beverley Hills_ also presents a view of menstruation that challenges the dominant message that menstruation is only a disadvantage or inconvenience. The film follows the experiences of a nomadic and dysfunctional family while telling the coming-of-age story of Vivian Abromowitz. In an early scene, the Abromowitz family --Vivian, her two brothers, her cousin and her divorced father, Murray -- walk through a parking garage at an apartment complex. The family has been invited to eat dinner at the home of Murray’s new girlfriend, Doris. He tells his children and niece: “We’re going to try to act normal. She’s a lady.” He explains that the dinner is important because he has “to be with people my own age once in awhile.”

During dinner, Vivian realizes that she is still menstruating, even though she thought her period was finished. Vivian reaches in between her legs and looks at her
fingers, looking at what viewers can only imagine to be blood; she shifts in her seat and looks down at the dining room chair cover. Doris notices and asks: “You didn’t spill on the seat cover, did you?” “Oh no, I’m just admiring this fabric. It’s so beautiful. I can’t find my napkin.” Vivian excuses herself to use the bathroom and proceeds to search through Doris’s bathroom drawers looking for feminine hygiene products. After an unsuccessful search, Vivian calls Doris into the bathroom. In the next scene, Doris presents a surprised Vivian with a sanitary napkin belt and a box of additional napkins. After showing Vivian the elaborate ritual to hooking the pad to the belt, Doris tells Vivian: “You can take the box with you.” In the next scene, Vivian, her two brothers, and her cousin watch “Let’s Make a Deal” while Doris cleans up after the dinner. While talking to Murray, Doris picks up the napkin draped over Vivian’s chair and sees blood on the dining room chair cover, a cover that she stitched herself in needlepoint. Vivian screams and drops a glass. Murray, startled, asks, “What happened?” Doris points at the chair with a look of terror on her face and yells: “Blood! Blood on my needlepoint! Blood!” The scene ends with the Abromowitz family walking into their home. They express looks of defeat. Vivian carries Doris’s giant box of sanitary napkins. After a long silence, Ben, Vivian’s older brother says: “Quite a success.” Vivian, Ben and Rita laugh hysterically.

Initially, this scene appears to reify our negative attitudes toward menstruation. Vivian encounters some feelings of embarrassment and attempts to conceal the menstruation. During the dinner, Vivian slips under the table pretending to look for her napkin. She pulls her cousin Rita under the table with her and asks: “Do you have tampons?” in gibberish, the secret language they spoke as children. The use of the secret language in this scene is portrayed as necessary to conceal the reference to menstruation. Additionally, while Vivian is in the bathroom with Doris, Ben jokes about the situation. He whispers “female problems” to his little brother, causing Rickey to spit milk across the table and laugh. Finally, Doris reacts with repulsion and disgust when she realizes that Vivian bled on her dining room chair. The fact that the family leaves shortly after this discovery reaffirms that the consequence of poor menstrual hygiene results in social exclusion. Although all of these messages are part of the taboo, the laugh at the end of the scene creates a contrasting message. In this final image Vivian does not show her as
experiencing feelings of shame or embarrassment, rather she, along with her brother and cousin, find immense humor and pleasure in the incident. Additionally, as she walks with her family, Vivian openly and visibly carries Doris’s box of sanitary napkins.

I argue that Vivian’s menstruation can be read as a tool of resistance and empowerment. Her final reaction toward the situation suggests the audience should view her menstruation on Doris’s needlepoint as strategic. The blood on Doris’s needlepoint can be read as retaliation or sabotage for Doris’s backhanded complaints and her snobbish and superior attitudes toward the Abromowitz family. Doris clearly comes from a different class than the Abromowitzs who struggle with financial security throughout the film. Although Vivian sincerely tries to act respectful and make a good expression for the sake of her father, it becomes obvious that Doris is not the woman for Murray. Doris seems concerned and intolerant with the less than perfect behavior displayed by Murray’s children throughout dinner. Later in the film, we learn that Doris’s attitude is consistent: Murray tells Rita: “Doris wants me to move in with her because she wants a companion. Doris wants me to send the kids back.” In other words, Doris advises Murray to send his three children back east to live with their mother. Viewers get the sense that Doris considers Murray’s children an inconvenience, like a stain on her needlepoint. Additionally, although the film takes place in during the summer of 1976, the fact that Doris stopped menstruating before the introduction of beltless sanitary napkins reinforces that fact that Doris is old; this is another reason Vivian does not find Doris an acceptable companion for her father. Murray’s children and Rita consistently deny that Murray is aging, and he acknowledges this too when he tells Rita that the kids keep him young. The kids clearly love and care for their father and uncle, and, often, they seem to know what is best for him. Thus, the menstrual blood stain becomes a strategy to discourage and end Murray’s choice of companionship.

This scene starts to visualize ways in which women’s menstrual blood can be used as tool of empowerment or resistance. However, such an appropriation and conceptualization of menstrual blood is only possible because the taboo exists. In other words, if society did not reject the image of menstrual blood, it would lose its emancipatory and retaliatory power. For example, workers who teach women self defense and work at rape hotlines, often advise women to discourage potential attackers
by claiming to menstruate at the time of the rape. Thus fear of menstrual blood as a pollutant may actually empower and help women avoid sexual attacks. In this case it is difficult to eliminate the taboo entirely or we lose the meaning of menstruation as potential resistance. Thus, to balance the negative images of menstruation it becomes important that more films produce images of menstruation as a tool of empowerment. This discourse will help women appropriate and change the meaning of menstruation.

Like the messages in these films, consumers also occasionally find non-mainstream advertisements that downplay and even challenge the menstruation taboo. An advertisement for Lunapads is an example of one such advertisement. The advertisement contains a Polaroid picture of a young woman. The young woman has natural, curly hair and is wearing minimal makeup. She is a larger built woman, larger than most models and women pictured in mainstream advertisements. Her clothing and accessories, both shades of brown, also look natural, free-flowing, and comfortable. They are not overly revealing or overly fashionable. Placed next to the woman’s Polaroid picture is a quotation that reads:

“The bright, fun Lunapads completely changed my attitude towards my period, and I hadn’t even realized I had had an attitude about it in the first place! My period stopped being something I needed to clean away and has become something that is an important part of being a woman.”

-RHEA L., USA

Spread out on display near the Polaroid picture and the quotation are actual images of photographed Lunapads and Divacups. Next to the pictures of the products, the advertisement reads: “Lunapads and the Divacup are smart alternatives to disposable pads and tampons, made by women and guaranteed.”

The first element noticeably different from the advertisements analyzed in chapter three is the use of color. Rather than using shades of blue to indicate purity, the advertisement is mostly pink and with a strip of green. The text within the green box reads is: “Lunapads.com happier periods, naturally.” The colors are symbolic of the advertisements message. First, the green represents “nature,” because the products are natural, not made of synthetic materials, like other mainstream products. Additionally, they are reusable and therefore better for the environment. The color pink is important
because shades of red and pink are rarely used in feminine hygiene product advertisements. Thus, Lunapads, attempts to regain the image of menstrual blood. They are determined to sell their product by linking it to menstruation, but also be changing the meaning of menstruation as something we fear and detest to something that is naturally part of womanhood.

Unlike the previously analyzed advertisements, which failed to reference the products that they were attempting to sell, this advertisement proudly displays its products to visualize the difference and indicate to customers that menstruation and products should not be hidden or considered embarrassing to society. Most importantly, this advertisement refuses to refer to the menstrual taboo as a way to sell its product. Indeed, the advertisement actually fights against the menstrual taboo by revealing the ways in which society and capitalist, environmentally-unfriendly industries make women feel about themselves, their bodies, and their menstrual cycle. Additionally, unlike mainstream advertisements that often disguise the products and the parent company that produces the feminine hygiene products, Lunapads brightly and boldly displays its website, encouraging women to ask questions and gain more explicit information about its products. At their website, www.lunapads.com, the owners and makers of Lunapads further reaffirm the message that periods are a natural and empowering part of a woman’s life. “Our mission is to help women have healthier and more positive experiences of their menstrual cycles, and by extension, their bodies overall. Our team is made up of a passionate group of gals who believe that using natural menstrual products is a creative and empowering way to honor and care for ourselves and the planet.” The website includes a link to their blog, where such topics as feminism, activism, and women’s health are discussed.

Lunpads.com includes numerous testimonials, like one on their advertisement, presented as comments from actual women. The testimonials are further evidence that the creators of Lunapads advertise and sell their products by explicitly appealing to women who acknowledge the menstrual taboo and wish to regain their bodies from such harmful imagery. One testimonial states: “Lunapads are so soft and comfortable, and I feel like I have a better body image now than what I did before since I have to care for them. I no longer see menstruation as a hassle!” Trina L.” Additionally, Lunapads
specifically counters the image of menstrual blood as “bad” or “ugly.” This is critical for the small company, since Lunapads sells products that must be washed and reused in to reduce the personal consumer cost and environmental effects of disposable pads. The washing of the pad and the visual image of menstrual blood is embraced rather than avoided. The website explains:

Menstruation is a literal symbol of our power as women to be able to create life, and as such should not be treated as garbage. By not throwing away all those pads and tampons, you are honoring this fact. Being more present with your menses by washing your pads can bring about a wonderful sense of self-acceptance that can extend to other aspects of your physicality. Using Lunapads enables you to be self-sufficient and to incorporate a ritual of self-care into your monthly cycle.

Again, the website reiterates this message with a testimonial: “As I rinse my Lunapads, I think, I am releasing all the old energy from the past month and making way for the new. I like being more aware and in touch with my cycle and with what is actually happening in my body.” Renee S.

In addition to embracing the image of menstruation, Lunapads reconstructs and appropriates the meaning of “sanitary.” The menstrual taboo encourages women to dispose their pads quickly and secretly, but Lunapads identifies this as negative construct used to sell more products and pollute the environment. It explains that for women who use Lunapads, “there has been a profound shift in consciousness, and the idea of going back to disposables is unimaginable. What we once thought of as innocently “disposable” now seems like pollution and what we once accepted as “sanitary” has become to us unnatural and even toxic.” Thus, Lunapads offers a consistent message and places women’s health and finances over profit. For example, their products are made with 100% cotton, and organic cotton is also available. Additionally, women matter-of-factly and openly discuss such issues as heavy flows, various fits, leaks and stains (stains on the Lunapads are characterized as natural, since you are, after all, shedding tissue and blood from the uterus). Finally, Lunapads attempts to appeal to women at various ages and who are experiencing different stages of aging. Whereas most advertisements only show or illustrate young women, Lunapads are useful for all ages of women, especially those
experiencing pregnancy, postpartum, or even incontinence. Finally, they have positive images and messages directed at teens: “Starting early with Lunapads helps young women to feel proud of their cycles and get in touch with their bodies in a healthy, positive way.”

The artifacts illustrate that visual images are capable of resisting the dominant and cultural taboo and that discussions of menstruation and the advertising of feminine hygiene products are possible without reinforcing negative feelings toward menstruation. Unfortunately, an examination of these artifacts indicates that such images and messages are rare and do not typically reach a wide audience. For example, it is rare to find the magazine that publishes the advertisement for Lunapads, *Bitch*, in a check out line at the grocery store. The magazine describes itself “a feminist response to pop culture,” but it is not widely circulated, probably due to its lack of advertisers. Similarly, the films examined in this chapter are not as popularly known to mainstream audiences as the films analyzed in chapter two. In particular, *Walk on the Moon* and *The Slums of Beverley Hills* are considered independent films and did not reach as wide of an audience as the other films. Also, it is highly likely that these films attracted a very different audience than the horror, science fiction, and comedic parodies analyzed in the earlier chapter.

In all three of these artifacts, women played a larger role constructing the messages found in the films or advertisements. Both films are based on screenplays written by women. Additionally, *Slums of Beverley Hills* was also directed by its writer, Tamara Jenkins, and Lunapads is identified on its website as a women-owned small business that was first created and designed by Madeleine Shaw in 1993. Thus, male-domination in the fields of film writing, directing and advertising may account for the hegemonic presence of the taboo in mainstream American media. Despite the differences between these films and advertisements and the ones analyzed earlier, writers, directors, and advertisers can choose to neutrally or positively portray the experience of menstrual and even change the meaning of menstruation by openly challenging the cultural attitudes that make up the taboo.

**Recent Developments and Future Research concerning the Menstrual Taboo**

Today society still witnesses the American menstruation taboo, but recent discursive formations indicate that the message is now expanding globally. A rhetorical
analysis of the “Protecting Futures” campaign I discussed earlier reveals that its messages reify the hegemonic discourse of the Western menstruation taboo, assert Western, liberal feminist ideals, and ignore third world voices for the sake of capitalism. First, the campaign is based on the claim that menstruation is the main obstacle to a young girl’s equal education in countries like Africa. Kessler and Wood argue that this is a troubling claim because it is based on a problematic assumption that “menstruation is a debilitating, polluting phenomenon in need of control.”

Although menstruation taboos exist throughout various societies and cultures, it is not the case that menstruation is the same experience for every woman in every culture throughout the world. For example, in some parts of Africa, women celebrate the start of menstruation and are given respect and status. Additionally, it is often a matrix of cultural beliefs that is responsible for limiting the equality of women in these countries. The problems that exist in countries like Africa are not simply eliminated with the addition of consumerism or Western products. Thus, it is unclear whether the claims made in the advertisement are founded assumptions and whether the conflation and grouping of nations, religions, cultures and populations are justified or accurate.

Furthermore, the campaign is problematic because it implies that “periods are inherently bad” and such an idea can only change if women purchase and use feminine hygiene products. This has implications for both the United States and countries in Africa. First, this campaign affects women in the United States because it conflates feminist activism with bourgeois, consumerist and humanistic values. The “Protecting Futures” Campaign offers American women the feeling that they can and do make a difference; however it is problematic because it allows people to acquiesce to the solutions offered by a major corporation, like P&G. Kessler and Wood ask: “What happens to the schools when P&G’s five-year commitment ends? In areas lacking adequate waste-management or sewer systems, are non-biodegradable, non-reusable pads and tampons more of a problem than a solution? Should a private corporation like P&G even be in the business of reforming African school systems?”

“Protecting Futures” is certainly another corporate-run consumer campaign, “in which consuming isn’t just a way to raise money for the solution, it is the solution.” In other words, the message that women can help by buying tampons and sanitary napkins and encouraging other women
to do the same “isn’t consumer activism so much as consumption in place of activism.”

By gaining hegemonic status in American culture personal and corporate philanthropy signal a loss of civic participation and a loss of understanding for non-Western cultures. It also encourages American women to purchase mainstream products and consume the mediated and advertising images without questioning or challenging the reiteration of the Western menstrual taboo. Women overlook the fact that the menstrual taboo causes material harm because the advertising is repackaged and accepted as charity work.

Finally, the rhetoric of “Protecting Futures” troubles because it attempts to transfer aspects of both the Western menstruation taboo and masculinized notions of Western citizenship to Africa. “Personal hygiene” becomes a requirement for all women, thereby teaching African women that in order to enter into the public sphere and become “citizens,” women must use disposable pads and buy into the same negative messages about their bodies that Western women accept. Additionally, when the West attempts to define and discursively construct women from other cultures through a Western lens, they deny the non-Western cultural identity, and that culture’s perspective of citizenship. By using the “Protecting Futures” Campaign, the West fails to identify, change, or solve the aspects of its own menstrual taboo; instead it reframes the taboo by drawing attention to extreme, non-Western menstrual practices found in some foreign nations. Although the West has good intentions, Chandra Mohanty argues that such characterizations and focus on the Third World creates a paternalistic attitude toward third world women.

She states:

> When the category of “sexually oppressed women: is located within particular systems in the Third World that are defined on a scale that is normed through Eurocentric assumptions, not only are Third World women defined in a particular way prior to their entry into social relations, but, since no connections are made between First and Third World power shifts, the assumption is reinforced that the Third World just has not evolved to the extent that the West has.

Rather than attempting to eliminate the tabooed messages in American culture, “Protecting Futures” simply reifies notions of the Western menstruation taboo, thus persuading African women to use tampons and sanitary napkins because they, too, are
“leaky.” Additionally, rhetorical globalization occurs through the metaphors and concepts of “citizenship” found in the campaign’s advertisements. Through P&G’s campaign, Western notions of citizenship -- such as accessing the public sphere by following masculinist hygiene norms -- are reframed as global and international elements of citizenship. The campaign unquestioningly assumes African women will successfully gain equal citizenship through the same means as Western women.

The “Protecting Futures” Campaign deserves further attention from feminist and rhetorical critics. Over time, such scholars should ask: How will the campaign positively and/or negatively affect Western perspectives of menstruation? Will the non-Western taboos change due to these types of advertising campaigns? In what ways is consumption discursively constructed as an answer to the “problem” of menstruation? How does this reconstruct or complicate the relationship between menstruation and consumerism? Is the menstrual taboo being used to reassert Western dominance and colonial control in countries like Africa? Additionally, more feminist research and activism is needed to help end the suffering of women and the exclusion of women’s bodily processes throughout the world. Perhaps some solutions exist in Lunapads’ “Goods4Girls” campaign. The campaign launched on March 5, 2008, encourages customers to directly purchase Lunapads kits to donate areas of Africa. Lunapads also makes a monthly donation, independently from their consumers and the company’s profits. In the end, they send more positive messages about menstruation and healthier and environmentally-friendly products to the region.

My project has shown the ways in which the menstruation taboo is rhetorically asserted, practiced and reinforced in the United States and other Western nations. It also exposes the subtle ways in which the Western menstrual taboo is at risk of becoming an unconditionally-accepted, hegemonic discourse. It is critical that the discursive strategies of the taboo are exposed and challenged in an attempt to end the bodily oppression of women. Counter-narratives -- such as those found in the Slums of Beverley Hills, Walk on the Moon, and in the Lunapads business and advertising -- are critical ruptures found amongst the hegemonic, status quo discourse. It is important that society produces more of these types of messages to counter the mass production of messages reifying the menstrual taboo.
More importantly, women must model similar counter-narratives as Foucauldian acts of resistance against the menstrual taboo. In “Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” Foucault states: “The problem is not to try to dissolve them [power relations] in the utopia of completely transparent communication, but to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible.” Thus, individual acts of freedom (rather than processes of liberation) are critical strategies and modes of resistance against the current power relations established by patriarchy. Gloria Steinem’s humorous 1978 essay, “If Men Could Menstruate,” illustrates the importance in regaining narratives and constructing resistance against hegemonic power justifications. She explains:

But listening recently to a woman describe the unexpected arrival of her menstrual period (a red stain had spread on her dress as she argued heatedly on the public stage) still made me cringe with embarrassment. That is, until she explained that, when finally informed in whispers of the obvious event, she had said to the all-male audience, “and you should be proud to have a menstruating woman on your stage. It’s probably the first real thing that’s happened to this group in years!”

Laughter. Relief. She had turned a negative into a positive. Somehow her story merged with India and Freud to make me finally understand the power of positive thinking. Whatever a “superior” group has will be used to justify its superiority, and whatever an “inferior” group has will be used to justify its plight. Steinem argues that if men menstruated instead of women men would view the bodily function as an “enviable, boast-worthy, and masculine event.” The characteristics and power justification that are identified through this project would simply disappear or be reversed. Thus, Steinem concludes, “The truth is that, if men could menstruate, the power justifications would go on and on. If we let them.” Steinem reminds women that we have the capability of challenging the logic of our own oppression. As consumers of harmful mediated images, films, advertising campaigns, and even products, we have the ability and choice to resist and end its consumption. By challenging the current rhetoric.
of the menstruation taboo with new meanings, appropriations, and discursive constructions, women can continue to strive for equality and better material and bodily conditions and experiences.
Notes

1 Protecting Futures Campaign by Proctor & Gamble, advertisement, Cosmopolitan Apr. 2008: back cover.

2 “Protecting” n.p..


5 Foucault, Archaeology 38.

6 Foucault, Archaeology 187.


8 Delaney et al. 47-48.

9 Houppert 37.

10 Houppert 29.


12 Houppert 29.

13 On an average, P&G received 177 consumer complaints about Rely during each month it was on the market. While not all of the complaints centered on the connection of Toxic Shock Syndrome, salespeople and marketers were instructed by the corporation to deny “any link between tampons and toxic shock” (Houppert 30).

14 The FDA failed to require tampon manufacturers to label warnings on the side of the box nor did they standardize ranges of absorbency (Houppert 31).

15 Houppert 23.

16 Houppert 18-28.
17 Houppert 28.


19 Biesecker 353.

20 Biesecker 361.


24 Lunapads cover page.


26 Kessler and Wood 13.

27 Kessler and Wood 13.

28 Kessler and Wood 13-14.


30 Mohanty 40.


33 Steinem 366.