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“13 Lunas 13/13 Moons 13: A Video-Project About Sexuality and Menstruation”

By Tina Escaja¹

Abstract

The subject of menstruation is filled with powerful socio-cultural implications involving language, religion and gender relations. Yet, the topic is often relegated to silence, considered taboo, and strongly associated with impurity and shame. This schism between the natural reality of menstruation and its socio-cultural damnation highlights the marginal and oppressed condition of women who are considered inferior and impure in many cultures and religions for the mere fact of menstruating, despite ancient practices that validated and celebrated women's menarche. The multimedia project *13 lunas 13/13 moons 13* allows for the interactive exploration of these themes while reflecting upon the patriarchal foundations of the taboo of menstruation. This essay examines primarily the video *13 lunas 13*, a video of testimonies by thirteen Spanish women from different generations and social backgrounds. Fear, shame, lack of sexual agency, are some of the common experiences expressed by the women interviewed, particularly among older generations. Along with these testimonies on sexuality and menstruation, this project seeks to collect and reveal euphemisms, myths and cultural practices that are being erased by global practices, while pointing to new technologies and attitudes towards menstruation. Other variables of this project include art installations, poetry, and an interface that allows the collection of testimonies via the Internet, reaching out to new generations of men and women wishing to expose an experience intrinsically related to their lives.

Keywords: Women, menstruation, menarche, sexuality, misogyny, religious oppression, sexual taboos.

Genealogy of a Project

The subject of menstruation is filled with powerful socio-cultural implications involving language, religion and gender relations. Yet, the topic is often relegated to silence, considered taboo, and strongly associated with impurity and shame. This schism between the natural reality of menstruation and its socio-cultural damnation highlights the marginal and oppressed condition of women who are considered inferior and impure in many cultures for the mere fact of menstruating. On the other hand, there is also a hidden desire to expose this issue by men and women wishing to share an experience intrinsically related to their lives.

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The “13 Moons 13” project began as a manuscript of poems published in 2011 under the title *13 lunas 13*. The intention was to reconsider and critique the patriarchal foundations of the historical, sociopolitical, and religious constructs that have discriminated against women in the past and by and large still do. Jill Robbins, in her prologue to the book, sums it up on the following way: “We come to understand that spatial and geological/theological exploration have been given form through this text’s very writing, in which the lyrical voice poses an alternative history of rebelliousness” (10).²

From then on, *13 Lunas 13* transformed from a poetic project into a call to arms, an existential, scientific and philosophical quest that aimed to expose, question and dismantle the patriarchal foundation of the canon. As such, the project looked into themes ranging from the cosmic (quantum physics; string theory) to the visceral; from the bodily (brain, vagina, menstrual discharge) to the strictly religious (Christian, Pre-Christian, and Saturnalia rituals). There are thirteen moons in the menstrual year, and in several cultures the lunar calendar was, and still is the standard, sometimes alternating with solar or lunisolar measures of time (Chinese, Hindu, Maya, Quechua-Aymara, etc.). In fact, menstrual cycles, which have been linked to lunar cycles,³ used to function in ancient cultures as a system of measurement, reference, and wonder, with a demiurgic value which was later rejected. The initial positive value of the fertile goddess and the mystery of her blood were transferred in later cultures (such as the Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures) to symbols connected with death, uncleanness, and sin.⁴

These connections to repugnance and secrecy provided the starting point for the video *13 Lunas 13/ 13 Moons 13*, a video of testimonies by thirteen Spanish women from different generations and social backgrounds around the subject of menstruation. At the 3rd World Conference on Women’s Studies I played a selection of the original video, presenting segments of six out of the thirteen original chapters, starting with the first one: “Can you have an opinion about menstruation?”⁵ :

- Amparo Escaja: In my opinion it was a real pain, but if we didn’t get it, it drove us crazy.
- MJ Tobal: It’s a pain in the ass.
- Goyi Ramajo: Well, it’s a nuisance. It’s a phenomenon of nature that we shouldn’t have to deal with because it’s very disagreeable.
- Mercedes Rivera: It’s very disagreeable. It’s disgusting. So many years, my God, and since I was 11 years old and on and on.
- Victoria Gómez: And me, since I was nine.

- Amparo Escaja: And sometimes you didn’t dare make the slightest gesture because it would leak. You were always fearful. When I got my period, I for one, was a person who went around scared that I would leak and stain. Come on, it was a real bother.

² “Llegamos a entender que la exploración espacial y geo-lógica/teológica ha sido una figuración de la escritura misma de este texto, donde la voz lírica construye una historia alternativa desde la rebeldía.” All translations by David Shames, unless otherwise noted.

³ The word “menstruation” comes from the Latin “Mens,” which means both “month” and “moon.” This connection is found in numerous languages, such as Mapuche, in which the word “küyen” means both “moon” and “month,” and “küyentun” means “to menstruate.”

⁴ For an interpretation of the origins of these concepts, see, among others, Tarja S. Philip.

⁵ All quotations from the video are transcripts translated, from the original Spanish, by Diana Barnes.

Secrecy, Myths and Euphemisms

The presumption of discomfort, repugnance and the fear of being “exposed” was a common sentiment expressed by almost all of the women I interviewed for this project. The secrecy that unites them pertains to a culture of censorship around this physiological reality that affects over half of humanity during an important part of their lives. The euphemistic terminology around menstruation, which abounds in all cultures, points to the general perception of repugnance, stain, and secrecy, and is one of the main cultural data that my project seeks to document:

- Victoria Gómez: “The redhead.”
- Elena Pérez: “To be sick.”
- Maite Maeso: “The ruler.”
- Mercedes Bragado: “Period.”
- Maite Maeso: “Cabbage.”
- Mercedes Bragado: Come on, you’re kidding, “I have the cabbage.” . . . “what a cabbage I’ve got” is “what **crap** I’ve got”
- Maite Maeso: Well no, here, “cabbage, cabbage” . . . “The sausage.”
- Amparo Escaja: So, you tell him “I’m with Uncle so-and-so,” “I’m with Saint Gregory,” because they say that Saint Gregory was the patron of women. “I’m with the patron of women, I’m with Saint Gregory.” Today, as open as they are, saying “I’ve got my period,” they didn’t say that. “My uncle is here.” Sometimes your husband would say, let’s go to bed,” “no, because my uncle’s here.” . . . And they would say it twenty-thousand ridiculous ways, but without saying directly “I have my period.” So we didn’t know what it was in the end.

The myths surrounding menstruation are connected to this culture of euphemisms, which infers the idea of menstruation as taboo, dirt, and a secret. In the Spanish region of Castilla, these myths are often associated with community activities such as the slaughter of livestock:

- Señora Angelita: With my p . . . being sick. . . let’s see if you get it. . . No, no, because it spoils the meat.
- Maite Maeso: Minced meat, to make sausages. The women during the pig-slaughter season, if they had their period, they couldn’t touch the meat, because the sausages would go bad and the meat would be spoiled for the whole year.

The primary reason for these myths (mayonnaise curdles; plants wilt when a menstruating woman touches them), derives from one of the foundational ideas of numerous cultures, and which is in turn endorsed by their respective religions: a menstruating woman is impure, and, by extension, all women are considered to be impure.

From Reverence to Shame

The Old Testament is filled with references to the impurity of women in relation to their menstrual discharges. This did not only transfer into general ostracism, but also excluded women from performing religious rituals. According to Leviticus, any emission of bodily fluids is reprehensible for both men and women, but the transgression is emphasized in the latter case: “...and he shall make atonement for her before Yahweh for her impure discharge” (15:30).

A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. . . . She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding. (12: 1-5)

The book of the Vedas also stresses the impurity of women and their blood. Similar concepts can be found in the sacred scriptures of the Torah and the Quran, both of which point out, with variations, the degree of a woman's impurity during menstruation and her ability to be involved in sacred rituals. These books often establish a hierarchy in gender relations which mostly submits women to a masculine authority, an authority which in liturgical terms is associated with the figure of the priest or officiant and in theological terms subscribes to a divine entity associated with a masculine God. The ancient polytheistic rituals, on the other hand, did indeed allow the presence of female priests and officiants in their religious foundations, who often made of menarche, or first menstrual period, a ritual of celebration. This is a stark contrast with the subsequent perception of the need for silence and shame surrounding the menarche, as reflected by the testimonies collected in *13 Moons 13*:

- Mercedes Rivera: For me, I was embarrassed to tell my mother. How embarrassing.
- Ángela Gutiérrez: Well, I don't know, I didn't like it because of that, because the idea of talking about it at home made me feel ashamed.
- Elena Pérez: At first. . . these women, for example talked about it to each other. I didn't want to tell anybody.
- Tita Fernández: I got my period at school and when I got home and told my mom and I said: don't tell my sister, but my sister was hidden behind the door and she heard. And I, dreadfully embarrassed, saying to her: if you say anything to dad, if you say anything to siblings, don't say anything.

The transfer of an understanding of menstrual blood as an exercise of order, measurement, and prestige in ancient beliefs, to the later demonization of the very same phenomenon as impure and polluting, signals to the dynamics of gender and power. As Tarja S. Philip states, the tension in the exercise of that power and its consequent threat to the principles of male superiority constitute the basis of the symbolism of female impurity (9). This is the main reason for the concept of "impurity" to be linked to "sin," and its associations with the profane and taboo. Menstrual blood went from being considered sacred to the exact opposite, something which stands in opposition to God as a result of its "unclean," sinful, liminal, or, as Amparo Escaja puts it in the *13 Moons 13* video, its "criminal" associations:

Before even washing the rags you had to hide it, like it was an offense. It was like you had committed a crime. If you had men in the house, or brothers, you had to hide it. You would put them in a pot soaking and when most of the blood was out you hid it because, ugh, so no one would see, so that no neighbor would see you washing it. In those days you did the washing in the river, in the puddles. It was

like you had killed someone and you had to hide the blood, with no place to get rid of it. It was taboo, something that now, at my age I want to laugh about it, but it was like that, and for me, it was traumatic hiding it from my father in the pot because for heaven's sake, it was like a crime.

As a result, the exclusion of women from sacred rituals, based on her presumed impurity, allows a patriarchal order that was originally feminine.⁶ The female deities (Kali, Astarte-Tanit, Selene, Mana, Agra, etc...) were often transferred into masculine entities, such as the pre-Islamic goddess Al-Lat, which prefigured Allah. The same could be said of the Catholic Cult of Mary taking the form of a multitude of Virgins, a possible legacy of pre-Christian polytheistic rituals around the sacred cult of women.

Women's Sexuality as Taboo

The menarche as a personal mark, or "curse" in colloquial terms in the United States, points to the beginning of female reproduction and to women's sexualization. The menstrual "stain" is then linked to the taboo of sex. In this sense some testimonies in *13 Moons 13* are particularly striking, especially those which shows both the silence and ignorance into which many women of their generation (and previous generations) were relegated, and their sexual repression.

- Amparo Escaja: If a man touches you, you won't have your period; if you don't have your period, you're pregnant. If you come home pregnant, your father won't love you anymore. I heard it said to my mother a bunch of times, with five sisters, and her father told her that he desired, he preferred the news of his five daughters drown down-river than to come home dishonored, because for them, to have been touched by a man was the honor of the family. Well this is what they instilled in you, and later no one ever explained how it was, and then if you went out with a boy and he touched your hand, it was such a fright. Or if he kissed you. I remember that I had been with your father for five or six months, and we were in [Zamora's] castle, and he told me: "what a fat moon," and I looked, and he kissed me. I took off running and I wouldn't leave the house for more than 15 days to avoid seeing him, because I thought it was a crime, because you didn't know where it came from.
- Mercedes Rivera: Well, I also thought . . . Now we are all the wiser, but I used to think that a kiss would get you pregnant. That by using the same towel as a man, you would get pregnant. How ridiculous is that?

Misinformation and repression are exchanged in a process which magnifies the feelings of guilt and sin, while simultaneously excluding women from exercising sexual agency:

⁶ There is substantial research to this effect, and Genesis 31: 34-35 is usually cited as indication of the shift from a sacred female order to a monotheistic masculine foundation: "Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. Rachel said to her father, 'Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I'm having my period.' So he searched but could not find the household gods." The relationship between the "period" and the "household gods," mostly feminine pre-Judeo-Christian entities, is evident in this passage. See also the popular fictionalization of this story by Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador, 1997).

- Señora Angelita: To tell you the truth, I didn't even know I was pregnant when I was pregnant.
- Amparo Escaja: When it was time for me to deliver, by the light that shines upon us now, I didn't know where [the baby] was coming from. When the nurses tell you "push like you have to go to the bathroom," and they want you to push like that, I thought it was coming from the other end. I didn't know where it was coming from. This is the truth, as true as we're sitting here right now. You know? That's the way it was, that's what happened to me. And when I went into labor, God knows, I didn't know where that baby was coming from. I was turning 20. I didn't have a mother, no mother-in-law, no one to tell me. And even if they could, it was taboo, too. So, what was it?

. . . .

one day we were having a conversation kind of like this. . . and this woman who had had twins and everything, because of what we were telling her, said that she didn't know what an orgasm was. A lot of women have died without knowing what an orgasm was.

Through this process of misinformation and transference of guilt, women, as the principal vehicles of cultural transmission, have historically been complicit. In almost all of my research on the role of mothers in previous generations, this topic is always kept at a distance, and misinformation is rampant. This avoidance is the usual response when mothers from previous generations in Spain faced the issue of menstruation with their daughters:

- MJ Tobal: I believe it was like that, between friends. And I suppose too, from my mother, but I don't recall a mother-daughter conversation like "look, at some point this is going to happen. . ." no.
- Amparo Escaja: I don't think it was talked about much, because since they didn't tell us, we didn't know what to say [to our daughters] either, and besides, they probably learned about it in school, with books.
- Ángela Gutiérrez: Probably they didn't know about these things.
- Mercedes Rivera: And my mother would always say "what can I tell you about life if you know more than I do?"
- Maite Maeso: And they explained it to us at school. My mother definitely not.

Loss of Historical Practices

The code of silence and sin traditionally associated with menstruation is also responsible for the loss of information about the methods women used in the past to deal with their periods. One of the objectives of this project is precisely to recover the cultural habits surrounding menstruation, and the video *13 Moons 13* focuses on Spanish culture. The documentation about the control of women's periods also deepens our understanding of dramatic sociocultural and historical realities. To wit, the detailed and reiterative explanation that Amparo Escaja gives to describe the washing of the towels or rags that were used during menstruation, emphasizing the painstaking labor and oppressive circularity which targeted women of that era and social class:

Every house had a chamber pot, because back then there was no toilet. It was a whole different ballgame. Now, you close yourself in the bathroom, turn on the tap, and go and be done with it. But then, as there was no running water, you had to go to the well or to the fountain, then carry the water, and then you had those chamber pots, stored under the bed for everything else, and you had an old one for this. Then you would stick it under some piece of furniture, or some old pot that you had in the yard or wherever, and you would cover it with wood. You'd put one [rag] there, and throw water on it, covering it up. And no one would go near it, not animals, not dogs, not cats, not family members, no one. You would go there with that chamber pot. When you saw that no one, no one, nobody was home, you would grab some buckets of water from the well and you took out the dirtiest stain. You would go back and stick it in there. Then it was a drama, when it was hard to clean it, you would have use soap. But back then there was not powered soap. There was that soap we made with oil and fat. Then you would grab a piece of soap and you would use it until you had it a little cleaner. When they were a bit cleaner, you would rinse it and put more soap and then put it in the sun on the roof, so no one would see it, you'd put it in the sun to take away the stain. There was no bleach . . .

It is important to note the geographic and socioeconomic variables in the previously cited testimony. The first disposable sanitary napkins were brought to the market around 1920, though they did exist before that date.⁷ Until then, and for decades after, the most common method in Spain and in many other countries involved reusable towels or rags. As MJ Tobal remarks, these sanitary napkins were usually too expensive or inaccessible for many women up until the 1960s. What is remarkable about Amparo Escaja's testimony, besides addressing the subjugation of women in social and domestic terms, is perhaps her comment about women from generations prior to hers who did not even use rags or cloth to control their menstrual flow:

My grandmother, for example, I heard her say that there were no kinds of pads. Most of them, the poor ones, didn't even wear underwear. I have seen instances where women standing, and I've seen the blood run down their legs. What happened was that they would wear those black, long skirts and craftily, wipe it away with the black. Just think about it, a woman like that in the summer, with her period, the black coat, and cleaning it away. And they would wear the coats more than one day and more than two. But of course, I didn't know why when a little old lady . . . They weren't that old, but before they looked older. A 40-year-old woman seemed a lot older. And they would take off the black apron and would stick it in between their legs; lift their skirts and stick them under there when they were sitting with their neighbors. I have seen this. And sometimes in a pinch, they would even use the black head scarf.

⁷ See, among others, Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb's compilation, *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*.

New Technologies and Paradigms

In recent years, women have gotten involved with the technology related to menstruation and contraceptive measures, which is often controversial, just as is hormonal control and the suppression of menstrual discharge. Alternatives to the traditional pill include contraceptive patches, injections and implants, the intrauterine system, or the progestogen-only pill. The newest technologies related to menstruation, often devised and led by women, include tracking apps, menstrual cups, and self-absorbing underwear. Unsurprisingly, influential commercial interests on behalf of the pharmaceutical industry and the profitable businesses dedicated to the sale of pads and tampons make forays into this controversy as well. Women entrepreneurs with alternative products threaten this multi-billion market and often face gender bias when seeking investments for their products (Paquette). However, these new products and entrepreneurial initiatives by businesswomen point to a fundamental change in the perception and marketing of menstruation, moving from the taboo into the open: "The more of us that go out and talk about our own experiences," says Lauren Schulte, founder and CEO of Flex, a company of innovative period products, "the more mainstream it becomes" (Paquette).

"13 lunas 13," as a project, is part of this trend of raised awareness, and the women interviewed consistently celebrated the opportunity of talking about their periods while stating a sense of personal and socio-historical liberation. At this point, the testimony morphed into a conversation, a celebration of solidarity and the relevancy of a reality which my itinerant project, within the context of a (literal, personal, cultural, historical) journey, aims to articulate and bring to light. The digital interface I published in 2011 to collect testimonies via the Internet⁸ transfers these voices to a new generation, a generation that is finally breaking with the taboo of menstruation while questioning its patriarchal foundations. Young women are embracing new menstrual products created by women; openly voicing their individuality, sexual agency and strength. Their reassurance became dissent when opposing Donald Trump's misogynist comments and campaign thorough social media ("Periods for Pence"; #PeriodsAreNotAnInsult). Creative initiatives such as Andrea Gonzales and Sophie Houser's video game *Tampon Run*, where the characters throw tampons at their attackers, not only allows for a normalization and destigmatization of menstruation, but for the empowering of all women through art, coding (a field staunchly dominated by men), and humor. The more information and involvement we have, the greater the inclusiveness, also in terms of historical significance and the range of cultural habits which concern all of us.⁹

⁸ See <http://www.uvm.edu/~lrg/13lunas/>

⁹ My project continues along on its digital and itinerant route and is open to anyone who wants to participate. For more information, visit my webpage: www.tinaescaja.com, Section "Project 13 Moons 13."



This piece is a feminist stained-glass poem entitled “Te envolveré en terciopelo” (“I will Wrap you Up in Velvet”). It belongs to the itinerant project “13 lunas 13” (13 moons 13), and was originally presented as an installation in Burlington, Vermont, in 2012 (University of Vermont; Flynndog Gallery) and 2013 (Art Hop). As part of the “13 moons 13” project, this installation reflects upon misogyny, now from the point of view of organized religion. The poem is written from the patriarchal point of view claiming “protection” of women as a justification for restricting their liberties and rights. This oppression is emphasized by the insertion of a burqa into a traditional hood wore by Spanish brotherhoods during the Holy Week. The materials used in this piece include painted church window fragments as well as menstrual blood in the moon, thus “staining” the piece while implicitly claiming the power of the female, ultimately connecting with the project. For an explanation of this piece, visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PqRBSW-Uf8>

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