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Blood money: The commodification of menstrual education in the United States

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Blood Money:
The Commodification of Menstrual Education within the United States
by
Meghan Alicia Radosevic

Thesis

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Thesis Committee:
Ramona Caponegro, Ph.D., Chair
Amanda Allen, Ph.D.

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Abstract

A girl's first menstrual cycle is often considered the first step of the seemingly ritualistic passage into womanhood. However, most girls within the United States who experience menarche fail to view it as a rite of passage, and instead see it as an event they must *endure* rather than celebrate. Menstruation is a mystifying process for young girls, and the mystification is intensified through the lack of open conversations between pre- and post-menarcheal females. While pedagogical strategies in period education have evolved over time, the one constant within menstrual education is silence. This thesis aims to write into the silence surrounding menstruation by examining the complex nature of menstrual education—the cyclical history of shame, the implementation of puberty self-help guides as surrogates for conversations, and new media approaches to menstruation—in an effort to understand and justify the fears and concerns young girls have towards their own impending menarche.

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Introduction—What’s Blood Got to Do With It? Why Menstrual Education Matters

A girl’s first menstrual cycle is often considered the first step of the seemingly ritualistic passage into womanhood. However, most girls within the United States who experience menarche fail to view it as a rite of passage, and instead see it as a burden, something they must *endure* rather than celebrate. The negative attitudes regarding menstruation correlate to the fear and confusion that young girls associate with puberty. Menstruation is a mystifying process for young girls, and the mystification is intensified through the lack of open conversations about menstruation between pre- and post-menarcheal females. While the pedagogical strategies in period education have evolved over time, the one overlying constant within menstrual education (and menstruation in general) is silence. Silence, and the prevalence of silence between pre- and post-menarcheal females, dictates how young girls feel about their impending menarche, as it forces girls to internalize their fears and concerns rather than openly discuss them within a community.

It is important to note that menstruation is both a biological and social issue, and when girls are taught about menstruation (be it through a private conversation with caregivers, public instruction at school, or a self-help guide) they are also taught a specific social perception or possible stigma associated with menstruation. If female caregivers avoid personally educating pre-menarcheal females about periods and instead rely on public school education or self-help guides, girls are more likely to learn the implicit social stigma associated with menstruation and feel a level of embarrassment or shame regarding their own impending menarche. Girls who learn of menstruation for the first time in the public sphere of a classroom or through various media outlets will most likely already understand the stigma associated with periods. In her book *Girls in Power: Gender, Body, and Menstruation in Adolescence*, Laura Fingerson includes

conversations with adolescent girls about menstruation. When asked how girls learned about menstruation, a sixteen-year-old female discussed how the media influenced her understanding of menstruation, stating, “It was in like third grade. Me and one of my friends...we were looking through one of the magazines like, *Seventeen*, or something like that cause we were curious and we were reading about this we were like ‘Oh my god, what’s going on?’ We’re reading all this stuff we’re like ‘Oh, I don’t want that to happen to me.’” (Fingerson 55). Similarly, when discussing her attitudes towards menstruation itself, a seventeen-year-old female stated, “It’s messy and it’s gross, and I don’t want to have to deal with it” (Fingerson 1). Hushed conversations between peers within late elementary and middle schools, incessant fear of menstruating in public, and the concealment of sanitary supplies exemplify the predisposed stigma girls associate with menses. While public educators may work to combat this stigma, girls are unlikely to ask questions or voice their concerns about menstruation because of the shame they have already learned to feel.

While medical studies concerning puberty have evolved, the public perception towards real-life menstruating females is one of silence and shame. I use the term “real-life” females, as the public perception shifts when discussing the commercialization of menstruating women. Commercials for sanitary products within the United States are constantly run on major television networks, and advertisements for the same sanitary products are found throughout female-oriented magazines that are often read by pre-menarcheal females. These commercials promote menstruating females as fearless and carefree (assumedly due to the level of protection provided by their chosen sanitary product), teaching young girls that the ideal menstruating female should be both “in the know” and “concern-free”—a goal they are unable to achieve due to the current modes of menstrual instruction. The silent public perception about concealment

versus the commercial onslaught of menstruation places pre-menarcheal girls in an interesting paradox. Through menstrual education (or the lack thereof), young girls are taught that menstruation is something that should not be discussed, yet through the commercialization of menstruation, young girls are taught to not only be hyper-aware of periods, but to also be unconcerned about them. While most biological women menstruate at some point in their lives, the lack of open conversation regarding the event teaches girls that menarche is something that should evoke concern and fear within young girls. Companies are no longer simply commodifying menstrual education, but they are also working to capitalize on the fears of prepubescent girls by advertising sanitary products that purportedly allow menstruating females to lead an active and concern-free lifestyle. As peer influence and self awareness peak during puberty, the period paradox both creates and reinforces the fears already surrounding menarche.

While there have been shifting pedagogical methods in regards to menstruation, the constant issue in menstrual education is the lack of open conversation and dialogue due to feelings of embarrassment. This trend continues through the implementation of puberty self-help guides working as surrogates for female-to-female conversations, which highlights the continued issue within the United States to control and commodify female bodies. Companies whose target audiences are prepubescent females (such as the American Girl company) see the lack of pre- and post-menarcheal female conversations as a gap in the market. These companies then create and promote self-help guides as a way to fill the gap. Puberty self-help guides address the needs of the adults (who want to avoid conversations about menses) as well as the needs of pre-menarcheal females (who need information about menses). Similarly, “first period kits,” marketed specifically towards parents to purchase for their pre-menarcheal daughters aim to fill the void of conversation by providing everything a young girl needs for menarche (including

sanitary products, instructions, and even a chocolate-based treat). Current trends on menarche education reflect age-old attitudes regarding female biological functions, as concealing menstruation is of the highest importance. By analyzing menstrual education within the United States, I hope to highlight how silence and the absence of conversations and education on periods work to control the female body, while also dismissing female companionship and mentorship as valid and worthwhile.

Silence dictates how young girls feel about their impending menarche, as it forces girls to internalize their fears and concerns rather than openly discuss them within a community. I believe that menstrual education within the United States is one of the largest silent spaces within girlhood. I undertook this thesis in an attempt to write *into* the silence—to trace the ways in which young girls learn about menstruation and to not only highlight, but to justify their fears and concerns regarding menstruation. My goal is not only to explore the existence of silence within menstrual education, but to also argue for how this silence impacts girls in one of their most crucial stages of physical, emotional, and cognitive development.

In my first chapter, I will explore how silence impacts girls' attitudes towards their impending menarche by outlining the history of menstrual education and the shifting modes of instruction within Western culture, primarily within the United States. The shifts within menarche education are subtle and are often poorly charted due to the imposed silence felt by women of the different time periods. By examining the subtle shifts, I chart how menarche education transitioned itself from the private sphere into compulsory education and subsequently, how the sanitary napkin industry infiltrated the public school curriculum. By looking at this history through a feminist lens, I will highlight how feelings of shame are central to menstruation and work to suppress females' concerns about their own bodies. Taking particular note of the

intersection of feminist theory and shame theory, I will argue that the pedagogical methods of menstrual education within the United States reinforce patriarchal ideologies while highlighting the control and commodification of the female body.

Next, I will focus on both the content and the marketing of current puberty self-help guides and how they shape twenty-first century attitudes towards menstruation. Looking specifically at the American Girl company's *The Care and Keeping of You* series, I argue that while the books themselves seek to empower young girls by revolutionizing the way in which they view puberty and menstruation as well as encouraging female support systems, the way in which the texts are marketed towards adults reveals that the books often serve as a surrogate for cross-generational conversations on menses. Within this context, the use of the books reinforces the shame of menstruation, the exact message the series seeks to undermine.

Lastly, my third chapter explores current marketing strategies and new media trends within menstrual education. Focusing on tween and teen designed sanitary products, "first period kits," and social media communities, I analyze how the current marketing of sanitary products specifically towards preteens and teenagers reinforces the commodification of menstruation. Additionally, I analyze how social media platforms such as YouTube and websites such as Being Girl work to build intragenerational female communities, yet do so under the umbrella of commodities.

Chapter 1—Cycles of Shame: The History of Menstrual Education and the Commodification of Shame in the United States

In current Western culture, menstruation is often viewed as a taboo topic, which is to be avoided in conversation. While menarche remains a monumental stage in a young girl's life, open conversations between pre-and post-menarcheal females are often avoided—further exacerbating the confusion and fear young girls feel towards menstruation. The lack of education and conversation with elder females teaches young girls to suppress their anxieties regarding menstruation. However, through the commercialization of feminine products, young girls are expected to be both “in the know” and concern-free. I call this conflicting message in menstrual education “the period paradox” and argue that this long-established trend relates to the larger issue of puberty and the construction of girlhood as a whole. Puberty is both beyond a girl's control and obsessively controlled by both herself and others. Due to the longstanding silence within the female community, as well as the onslaught of commercialized sanitary products, the period paradox allows for the commodification of shame while also reinforcing dismissive attitudes towards girlhood. By charting the history of menstrual education, I argue that the establishment and subsequent perpetuation of menstrual shame influences prepubescent girls' attitudes regarding their own impending menarche. The sanitary product industry then works to commodify this shame—reinforcing and recapitulating the period paradox for future generations of menstruating women.

When charting the history of menstrual education in Western culture, two issues become apparent. First, until the early nineteenth century, popular beliefs regarding menstruation were tied so closely to religious ideologies that they rarely evolved. Even the seemingly objective field of medical studies intertwined itself with religious ideologies so that little to no research was

done to separate the medical field from its patriarchal belief system. This lack of evolution in menses studies leads into the second issue: formal records regarding menstrual education are nearly nonexistent until the early nineteenth century. The absence of records on menses can be traced to the public perception of menstruation. Since the widely held belief in Western culture was that menstruation was a shameful biological occurrence, females were unlikely to make formal records tracking their own menstruation, let alone disclose to others how they were educated on the subject. Additionally, the lack of the female archive further erases any female-based records concerning menstruation. What remains of menstrual education before the nineteenth century are slight references in diary entries and hushed stories passed through generations, revealing that, throughout history, menstruation and menstrual education are topics persistently avoided by pre- and post-menarche females. Throughout this chapter, I will chart the history of menstrual education (or lack thereof) within the United States and explore how widely held attitudes and beliefs regarding menstruation allowed for the commodification of shame to be central to menstrual education. The static attitude about menses and its link to pedagogical approaches in menstrual education play a large role in the period paradox in which young girls are placed, where they are expected to be both ashamed and concern-free of their own impending menarche.

The commodification of menstrual education in the United States traces itself back to the othering and shaming of the female body that occurs within patriarchal societies. At the heart of patriarchy is the othering of women, and the exploitation of women's bodies and biological functions stems from this othering. Biological males neither have the ability to bear children nor menstruate. The female biological processes are subsequently othered and viewed as "less than" because of men's inability to perform them. Through a patriarchal lens, females are already

viewed as “less than” males, and menstruating females are further othered through societal attitudes that allow for shame-based rhetoric to surround the biological function. Shame theorist Gershen Kaufman describes the perpetuation of shame in his book, *Shame: The Power of Caring*. Kaufman states, “Shame is first of all an individual phenomenon experienced in some form and to some degree by every person, but it is equally a family phenomenon and a cultural phenomenon because it is reproduced within families, and each culture has its own distinct sources as well as targets of shame” (91). Therefore, while shame is first established as an individual concern, it can be inherited and passed throughout families and cultures. In the case of menstruation within the United States, menstrual shame has been passed throughout the female community through the avoidance of educating pre-menarcheal females. As women are raised within the patriarchal system, they learn to feel shame towards their bodies and biological functions. These feelings of shame impact not only a female’s perception of her own body, but of the bodies of other females as well.

The menstrual shame women feel is easily passed through generations because feelings of shame become a pivotal part of the female identity. In his text *Shame and the Exposed Self*, Michael Lewis notes that shame and guilt are in the same family of emotions, yet what separates the two is the role of identity. While feelings of guilt are attached to a particular action or moment, feelings of shame are attached to a person. Therefore, guilt emotes that a person has *acted* badly, whereas shame emotes that the person *is* bad (2). Feelings of shame can then be connected to self-objectification and negative self-scrutiny. Deborah Schooler, Monique Ward, Ann Merriwether, and Allison Caruthers connect the shame-filled self-objectification to menarcheal females in their article, “Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame, and Sexual Decision-Making,” writing, “Consequently, because feeling shameful frequently evokes a

critical evaluation of one's whole self, shame about menstruation is likely to extend more broadly to the body as a whole. It is not just the act of menstruating that is dirty and shameful: the young woman who menstruates becomes dirty and shameful" (325). As shame attaches itself to the body rather than to the act or biological process, menstruating females are likely to avoid conversations about menses and puberty in general as initiating conversations highlight their own perceived shame of not only menstruation, but shame of the entire developed female body.

Establishing menstruation as a shameful biological occurrence works to repress and silence female conversations about menses. The silence which revolves around menstruation results in the absence of conversations between pre- and post-menarcheal females, which then opens a market for educational materials to exist, as instruction on menstruation is needed, yet historically avoided. Therefore, formal modes of menstrual education (pamphlets, magazines, books, etc.) exist because of the shame that surrounds menses. While these pedagogical tools allow for pre-menarcheal females to learn about menstruation, they often reinforce the shame that has been established throughout the history of menstruation. I argue, then, that at the heart of menstrual education is the commodification of shame, which allows for the control of the female body as well as its biological functions.

In Eve's Fall We Sinned All

The earliest occurrence of shaming of both females and female biology occurs within Western culture's dominant religion of Christianity. The fall of Eve allowed for shame-based rhetoric to surround issues of female sexuality, namely menstruation and pregnancy. While Eve's biblical curse was specifically pain in childbirth, early Christian leaders (all of whom were male) were quick to associate menstruation with Eve's disobedience, allowing her action to be used as a vehicle to both blame and shame women for all that was believed to be evil in the world.

Glenda Lewin Hufnagel describes how the influx of the patriarchal religion of Christianity replaced matriarchal worship of mother goddesses, reshaping attitudes towards menstruation. Hufnagel writes, “Women’s menstrual blood, which had previously been viewed as a source of power was converted to a symbol of pollution. Religion defined menstruation as a ‘curse’; this is a reversal of the previously held belief that menstrual blood was a ‘blessing’ and a ‘woman’s friend.’” (34). The initial negative perception of menses remained unchanged throughout early Christianity. Early church leaders such as Pope Gregory I (604) recognized menstruation as a natural occurrence, yet conceded that public attitudes towards menstruation were more influential than its biological standing. In a letter where he commends menstruating women who refrain from receiving communion, the pope states, “The menstros habit in women is no sin, seeing that it occurs naturally; yet that nature itself has been so vitiated as to seem polluted even without human volition” (Gregory par. 4). While the religious leader recognizes the uncontrollability of menstruation, he allows the dominant public opinion of menstruating women to influence church rules and expectations, praising menstruating women who abstain from receiving communion, which allows for the further perpetuation and encouragement of shame. Similarly, theologians in the early 1300s deemed intercourse with a menstruating woman as a mortal sin (the highest and most-serious form of sin within Christianity). These theologians claimed that menstrual blood would cause birth defects, further reinforcing the belief that menstrual blood was impure or dangerous (Ranke-Heinemann 15). These early moments in Christianity not only establish the shaming of menstruating women within the patriarchal religious society, but also reflect the paradox of inevitability and shame which is at the heart of issues surrounding menstruation. Early church leaders recognized that menstruation was

inevitable, but also supported the restriction of menstruating women's rights based upon public attitudes and beliefs that they had helped to create.

It is important to note that the only documented discussions regarding menstruation in early church history are those of men. While the lack of female narratives can be seen as evidence of the patriarchal nature of Christianity, it also establishes and reflects the silencing of females that is seen throughout menstrual history. Early rules and practices regarding menstruation, as well as the belief system that influenced those rules, were created by the non-menstruating sex. The inherently biological female occurrence lacks any documented female narrative, and is instead overshadowed by both the male shaming of menses as well as the justification for shaming. Within this context, females were perpetually silent in regards to menstruation.

The early Christian patriarchal beliefs about menstruation dominated early Western attitudes surrounding menstruation. These beliefs continued throughout the inception of the United States. As religion acted as both a dominant ideology and a primary educational tool within the eighteenth century, shame and othering continued to adhere to Western societal attitudes on menstruation. Throughout the eighteenth century, as women internalized the shame surrounding menses, their silence continued. This silence was then passed down through generations of females, as women refused to discuss menarche with their daughters. The non-discussion and non-teaching of menstruation became the teaching itself and, due to religious ideologies, eighteenth century females failed to learn the biological function of menstruation, learning instead to attach feelings of embarrassment to menses and ultimately arriving at the desire to conceal any evidence of their own menstruation. Lara Friedenfelds describes female relationships and eighteenth century fears in her book *The Modern Period*, stating, "While there

is evidence of a strong sense of female community, in which women shared intimate knowledge of the body with each other, ‘women’s secrets’ were not shared with unmarried women” (21). The need for secrecy and assumed modesty within the female community restricted information available to pre-menarcheal females. The perception of pre-menarcheal innocence can also be assumed, as girls who had yet to experience menstruation were viewed as pure by menstruating women, who had already internalized the shame attributed to menses. Menstruating women would then want to shield young girls from any conversations about the female body to preserve this innocence. The internalized shame felt by menstruating women throughout the eighteenth century allowed for a continuation of silence regarding menstrual education. Victorian girls existed in an interesting paradox. As marriage was the ultimate goal of girls and women within the Victorian era, girls wished to remain pure and innocent until marriage, yet they could not get married until they were menstruating. However, Victorian girls were perceived to experience a loss of innocence when they reached menarche. This complex paradox of innocence centralized around menstruation placed many young girls in an information void. Most often, prepubescent females were not told anything about menstruation until they experienced menarche themselves. The lack of education or conversation between pre- and post-menarcheal females not only allowed for a traumatizing menarcheal experience, but also aided in the perpetuation of menstrual shame within the female community.

An Unanswered Call for Conversation

Those within the medical industry found the lack of teaching occurring throughout the eighteenth century problematic, and encouraged the female community to have open conversations about menstruation. In 1769, Scottish physician William Buchan wrote of his concerns regarding menses education, stating:

It is the duty of mothers, and those who are entrusted with the education of girls, to instruct them early in the conduct and management of themselves at this critical period of their lives. False modesty, inattention, and ignorance of what is beneficial or hurtful at this time are the sources of many diseases and misfortunes in life, which a few sensible lessons from an experienced matron might have prevented. (331)

While medical studies on menstruation were still evolving (Buchan held the belief that if girls began their first period without being properly educated, fear could cause menstruation to halt, resulting in further medical problems), physicians began to take issue with the lack of education within the female community. However, though Buchan encouraged discussions about menstruation, he failed to address larger societal issues which impacted the silence surrounding menstruation. While males like Buchan dominated the eighteenth century medical field, menstruation was expected to be hidden from males, and it was female midwives who administered care focused on female reproductive health (Friedenfelds 20). While Buchan called for a shift in menstrual education, shame continued to dominate societal attitudes and beliefs regarding menstruation. Therefore, Buchan's call for conversation acts as one of the first of many occurrences of the period paradox, as he asks women to overcome the internalized shame they feel towards menstruation and open a dialogue, while at the same time, he avoids the fact that the internalized shame extends into the medical field itself, as male doctors perpetuate shame through their avoidance of administering reproductive care to females.

Buchan's call for open menstrual education was ill-timed and unanswered, as the Victorian era's focus on purity amplified the need to conceal menses. Rather than purity for religious standards, the Victorian era's need for purity and innocence was a societal standard or class distinction. For Victorian women (particularly women of the middle and upper classes),

menses remained a topic too taboo and lower-class to discuss in both public and private spheres. Therefore, information on menses was seldom passed from mother to daughter as mothers refrained from acknowledging menarche in order to retain their daughter's perceived childhood innocence. This silence, however, further induced fear and shame in pre-menarcheal girls, as they had little to no preparation for their own menarche. Hufnagel discusses the impact Victorian codes had on young girls, writing, "Due to the lack of information, girls were frequently traumatized when at their own menarche...many adolescent girls experienced menarche with complete ignorance and the belief that they were hemorrhaging" (36). Through the withholding of information about menstruation, girls of the Victorian period often had traumatic menarcheal experiences. The shame Victorian daughters inherited from their mothers increased exponentially as it was passed through generations, as the lack of knowledge induced fear and trauma. Tamar Heller describes the connection between trauma and shame in *The Female Face of Shame*, writing, "Embodied female shame arises from the trauma of social denigration of females in our culture...The transformation of the denigration into a deadening sense of shame causes female victims to accede and reproduce their own devaluation" (167). As females of the Victorian period had already internalized shame, they then embodied shame by reproducing those feelings within their own children. The lack of education (and subsequent trauma) experienced by menarcheal females allowed for the continuation of shame felt by all menstruating women. This non-education was then passed throughout generations of Victorian women, all of whom worked to retain their daughters' innocence while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal attitudes towards the female body. While the reason behind the lack of education shifted from religious ideologies to Victorian values, what remained was the lack of education itself. Throughout the Victorian period, young girls knew very little of menstruation,

which enhanced their apprehension and fears. Unfortunately, girls felt that they could not disclose their fears and concerns due to the prevalent societal code. This trend continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century.

Margaret Sanger and Sexual Education

Breaking away from Victorian traditions, the influx of first-wave feminism called for females to take control of their sexual and reproductive rights. The reproductive revolution (led largely by Margaret Sanger) worked to promote all facets of sexual education for women. In 1911, Sanger wrote one of the first public guides mentioning menstruation. The series of articles, all published under the title *What Every Mother Should Know* (later combined and published as a book) discussed reproductive health through stories featuring various animals with the intention for mothers to educate themselves in order to pass the information onto their children (both male and female). Sanger's text briefly mentions menses within a discussion on the reproductive nature of mammals, titled, "The Mammals and Their Children." Sanger writes, "One egg develops at a time, and if it is fertilized it remains in its little nest (or uterus), and grows until it is ready to stand the changed conditions into which it must come after it is born. If it is not fertilized it passes on out of the body and is lost" (47). While brief, Sanger's mention of menstruation (though not by name) was revolutionary to sexual education for both male and female children. Even more revolutionary, however, was Sanger's awareness of feelings of shame central to sexual health and education and her willingness to speak openly about these feelings. Within another reproductive story, Sanger advises readers, "Teach the child that there is no shame in nature. Mothers should never say 'shame on you' when a child exposes any part of its body" (43). Sanger's open awareness and criticism of shame regarding "nature" and sexuality is one of the first of its kind. Where medical professionals had pushed for conversations about

sex, none of them addressed the issue of shame outwardly. While Sanger's brief guidance on shame did not revolutionize sexual education, she was one of the first to publicly note how shame influences childrens' learning about sexual health and reproduction.

In publishing the articles under *What Every Mother Should Know*, Sanger's intentions were to foster conversations on biology between mothers and daughters. However, a 1912 follow-up series of articles marketed towards young females, *What Every Girl Should Know*, (also later combined and published as a book) created a binary system within female reproductive education. Girls and mothers now had separate educational articles to read, and therefore a conversation between the generations of females was not necessary. *What Every Girl Should Know* could be considered the first puberty self-help guide for girls, as Sanger provided more explicit instruction on sexual health and menstruation, while also criticizing the way in which menstruation had been avoided in education. In her discussion regarding how the Yuman Indians of California educate pubescent females on menstruation, Sanger writes, "The girls are fully informed of menstruation. It has been said the knowledge of sexual relations is openly discussed and naturally taught...I relate it only to show that the savages have recognized the importance of plain sexual talks to their young for ages, while the civilization is still hiding itself under the black pall of prudery" (24). While her use of the term "savages" is problematic, Sanger's critique of the shame-focused avoidance of education within the "civilized" United States is fundamental to her rationale behind the creation of these articles. Sanger recognized that the pedagogical approaches (or lack thereof) to menstruation and puberty work to perpetuate shame and embarrassment. To fight this shame, Sanger called for a more open conversation about menstruation. Unfortunately, the binary nature of the series (texts exclusively for mothers versus texts exclusively for daughters) allowed for the continuation of silence between pre- and

post-menarcheal females. While Sanger's goal was to encourage conversations, the guides may have worked to allow for the avoidance of conversations, as post-menarcheal females could rely on *What Every Daughter Should Know* as a surrogate for a conversation about menstruation and sexual health.¹

The Influx of Public Education

The topic of menarche entered the public sphere even more prominently after World War I, when doctors and nurses felt the conversations on sexual health that were assumed to be occurring within the home were either nonexistent or ill-informed. Seeing the potential risks of young females being unaware of their own sexual health, medical professionals encouraged puberty and sexual health conversations to occur in a more public and regulated manner (Brumberg 45-6). With health awareness on the rise, public schools began implementing sexual education courses that discussed puberty and menstruation. These courses allowed for mothers to comfortably avoid conversations with their daughters, as girls were expected to learn about menstruation within the public school curriculum. Caitlin Flanagan explores this shift in her book *Girl Land*, writing, "Instructing girls about how to take care of this intimate aspect of their private lives [menstruation] was a role taken away from their mothers and sisters and filled instead by paid teachers, and put into the semipublic context of a classroom" (49). By introducing menstrual education into the public school curriculum, pressure was no longer placed on mothers to act as their daughters' guides through the menarcheal experience—a job in which they had been both uncomfortable and resistant for generations. However, while promoting menstrual education within the public school system provided girls with access to information, the shame that females felt towards menstruation did not dissipate. Instead, a form

¹ A continued analysis of puberty self-help guides and their function as surrogates for conversations between pre- and post-menarcheal females can be found in Chapter 2.

of silence still existed between mothers and daughters that continued to perpetuate shame. As daughters learned about menstruation within the public school setting, they became aware that most biological women (including their mothers) menstruate. However, mothers were not viewed as a primary source of information on menarche and most often remained absent within their daughters' menstrual education, leaving girls to feel as though menstruation was a shameful experience for their mothers (and therefore would be a shameful experience for the girls themselves). While the inclusion of menstrual education into the United States' public school curriculum revolutionized the way in which young girls received information, the subsequent influx of the sanitary napkin industry into menstrual education aided in the further perpetuation of menstrual shame.

Sanitizing Menstruation, Sanitizing Education

As the implementation of menstrual education in the public school system rose, so did the commercialization of feminine hygiene products. While Johnson & Johnson produced the first commercially disposable menstrual product, "Lister's Towels," in 1896, disposable menstrual products were not popular until the Kotex Company released the sanitary pad in 1920. Many factors could have caused "Lister's Towels" to fail, but as Elizabeth Arveda Kissling describes, the marketing of Kotex's products became key to the company's success. Kissling writes, "It wasn't until advertising executive Albert Lasker developed the strategy of placing coin containers in drugstores near the display of discreetly wrapped boxes of Kotex...that disposable pads began to have any commercial success" (10). If the marketing of sanitary products was fundamental to Kotex's success, it was because Lasker was able to recognize the now-inherent shame women felt towards menses and used this shame to the company's commercial advantage. While drug store coin boxes may have alleviated any discomfort in purchasing menstrual

products, they also reinforced the shame that women felt. No longer did women have to openly ask for menstrual products by name. Instead, they were able to purchase these products in a semi-private environment, which allowed for the further perpetuation of silence and shame.²

With the increase in the availability of sanitary products came a shift in the public perception of menstruation. Visible throughout history up until the 1920s, the public perception of menses within the United States was one of disgust and shame. As sanitary products became more popular and accessible to women, the issue of shame became more nuanced, as menstruation was now a concern of hygiene. The term “sanitary products” reflects this shift, as menstruation was something not only to be concealed, but also to be cleaned up. The sanitization perception was quickly popularized by the increase of disposable menstrual products and soon, these products were not only promoted within the public commercial spectrum, but also through the inclusion of promotional material within the public education sphere. As Caitlin Flanagan discusses, the burden of educating young girls on menstruation was passed down yet again, as educators began to rely on feminine hygiene companies as primary resources when educating young girls on menstruation. Flanagan writes, “Public schools partnered—in an unprecedented alliance—not with the mothers and families of the girls, but with the manufacturers of commercial goods who were eager to provide classroom content as a means of establishing brand preference from a young age” (50).

The shift from private to public education could be viewed as positive, as information was now regulated through corporations and pre-menarcheal girls were more knowledgeable and prepared for menses. However, the influx of the sanitary product industry into the public school curriculum caused two issues to arise. The first was that young girls learned about menstruation

² The semi-private nature of drug-store coin boxes has reentered the marketing of 21st century menstrual products in the form of discreet monthly subscription boxes which are purchased online. This phenomenon (and its perpetuation of menstrual shame) is further discussed in Chapter 3.

through the lens of sanitization. Where earlier education materials (such as Margaret Sanger's *What Every Girl Should Know*) focused on menstrual education in terms of sexual reproduction and fertility, the sanitary product industry focused on hygiene, implying that menstruation was a hygienic issue rather than a biological occurrence. As young girls' education aligned with product use, the focus in puberty education became the control of bodily functions, specifically menstruation, through the use of sanitary products. The changing focus in education indoctrinated girls into a society that places just as much (if not more) emphasis on hygiene as it does on biological education.

The need for sanitization led into the second issue as sanitary products entered the school curriculum: the establishment of brand loyalty. Menstruation was a hygienic issue that could only be resolved through the use of sanitary products, specifically the sanitary products which were marketed within the classroom. Young girls were receiving menstrual education exclusively in the context of commodities, as much of the reading material provided by manufacturers also included complementary product samples. Through this medium, young girls were educated on not only the process of menstruation, but also (and in many cases more importantly), name-brand products that were to be used during menstruation. This education through commodities is seen in the Kimberly-Clark Corporation's 1929 pamphlet, *Marjorie May's Twelfth Birthday*.³ The pamphlet narrated a mother telling her prepubescent daughter about menstruation, focusing on the issue of hygiene and sanitary products. As *Marjorie May* was distributed within schools, menstrual education continued to occur within the public sphere. However, the return of the mother figure within the pamphlet notes a shift back towards the private sphere. While the fictional conversation occurred within the private sphere of the home. Within *Marjorie May's Twelfth Birthday*, the mother explains to her daughter:

³ The Kimberly-Clark Corporation is a personal care corporation that produces Kotex brand menstrual products.

“You have sometimes seen in my cupboard this blue box labeled Kotex. You see it almost every day in the shop windows wherever you go. Now, darling, take one of these pads for I want you to examine it while I finish telling you how nature is soon to provide you with the wonderful purification which performs to keep your new physical development free from waste.” (Callender 11)

Within their educational pamphlet, Kimberly-Clark reinforces issues of sanitation (viewing menses as a “purification” process) while also highlighting an important part of the period paradox, making note that young girls are exposed to menstrual products everyday through advertisements and product placement. However, at the heart of the pamphlet is the focus on the Kotex brand. The mother continuously reinforces to her daughter that *Kotex* will absorb the “impure” blood. The pamphlet then works to establish brand loyalty before the daughter (or reader of the pamphlet) requires the product. As *Marjorie’s Twelfth Birthday* and similar pamphlets entered the public school curriculum, girls learned of menstruation through a sanitization and hygienic lens. They learned not of the fertility aspect of menstruation, but instead focused on product use and the need to conceal menses. Concealment and sanitization reflected and reinforced the shame felt by menstruating females, and the menstrual product industry was able to commodify this shame by teaching girls that disposable sanitary products were the one true path to successful concealment.

In addition to encouraging product use as a means of sanitization and concealment, the rise in the consumerism and commercialization of menstrual education sparked the privileging of impersonal education to the personal. This evolving perspective on education through commodities highlighted class distinctions, and informal means of learning (such as conversations between peers) became associated with lower socioeconomic classes—further

suppressing education grounded in discussions within a female community. Information passed down by post-menarche females was now seen as ineffective, implying that the “correct” way in which to teach young girls of menstruation is through corporate pamphlets. In earlier decades, girls feared the unknown, as they were ill-informed of menstruation. The rise of the sanitary product industry highlighted the need for hygiene and control, evoking fear in girls (more so than the fear already felt and expressed), as they became hyper-aware and concerned of their own menarche. In her article, “What Every Girl Should Know,” Debra L. Merskin explains how the rise in consumerism marked a rise in the focus on sanitization, stating:

Booklets from school nurses and counselors, films produced by Kotex and Modess, and ‘training kits’ from manufacturers provided information on becoming a woman... The point was to use ‘our’ product because ‘nothing will show’; ‘no one will know’; ‘your secret will be safe.’ We were meant to deodorize, sanitize, remove any evidence, and hide all shame. Above all cover it up! Hide yourself! (121)

The rising concentration on modesty, reminiscent of Victorian ideals, highlighted the omnipresent aspect of menstrual education: the need for shame of menstruation. While education shifted from the private sphere to the public, the commercialization of sanitary products reinforced the concept that girls should internalize their concerns and fears regarding menstruation.

As menstruation advertisements and educational films about sanitary products became a part of mainstream media during the 1930s, the period paradox emerged full force. Product placement in educational brochures and advertisements became prevalent throughout American culture, yet young girls were taught to conceal both their concerns regarding menstruation as well as their own impending menarche. Pre-pubescent girls were expected to be “in the know”

about their periods, while, at the same time, they were expected to conceal menstruation from not only men, but from other females as well. Joan Jacobs Brumberg discusses the influence menstruation media had on young girls, stating:

Although the postwar sanitary products industry encouraged autonomy in teens, it also stimulated angst. Advertisements for sanitary protection consistently played to adolescent awkwardness, concern about peers, and the embarrassing specter of soiled clothes. For young girls who were already self-conscious and uncertain about their maturing bodies, the right sanitary product, used correctly, was promoted as the most important form of social insurance. (49)

Through highlighting sanitization, sanitary products evolved from necessities to “social insurance.” Menstruation became a *problem* that needed to be resolved through means of sanitization rather than a natural biological occurrence, as stressed by Sanger in the early 1900s. The way in which sanitary products were marketed in the media both highlighted menstruation and stigmatized it, and young girls who were already hyper-aware of their changing bodies became further entrapped in the double bind built by menstrual education.

Marketing the Menstruating Girl

As both print and commercial advertisements for menstrual products became popularized throughout the twentieth century (and remain popular today), it is important to analyze how these advertisements construct menstruation as well as the implicit messages they send to pre-menarcheal females. Early menstrual product advertisements worked to commodify the shame felt by women during menses. Kotex napkins assured women they would “Eliminate those tell-tale lines and conspicuous bulkiness so often associated with old-fashioned methods” (Treneman 157). Through advertisements such as these, pre-menarcheal females learned that the largest

concern felt by menstruating women was the need for concealment. Concealment was also reinforced through the language used within the ads, as discussed by M.R. Simes and D.H. Berg in their article, “Surreptitious Learning: Menarche and Menstrual Product Advertisements.” When analyzing advertisements from 1949 through the 1960s, the authors note, “The reader of these advertisements would have had to have some requisite knowledge about menstruation and menstrual products in order to understand the advertisements. This is well illustrated in the Modess advertisements, picturing women in glamorous gowns with the only text being, ‘Modess because.’ (458). Early advertisements highlighted femininity and concealment, which both work together to reinforce menstrual shame. The women portrayed in advertisements are glamorous and hyper-feminine, yet they must conceal an inherently female occurrence. The ultra-feminine woman in sanitary product advertisements is a recurring trend. As Hufnagel notes, “The advertising industry employs a strategy which portrays contemporary women as caught in the state of idealized ultra-femininity which is threatened by menstruation. Thus, ironically, to be perceived as feminine, women must hide the fact that they menstruate” (68). Viewing menstruation as a threat to femininity is possible because of the shame surrounding menses. While menstruation is inevitable, the threat itself stems from the fear of disclosing menstruation by menstrual blood leaking through clothing. As menstrual product advertisements claim, the only way to protect oneself against the threat of menstruation is not only to use disposable sanitary products, but to use specific *brands* of sanitary products. It is only through commodities that females can retain their hyper-femininity.

Similarly, the name brands of the sanitary products themselves reference the shame and threat of menstruation, highlighting the commodification of shame occurring within menstrual products. Brands such as New Freedom, Carefree and Stayfree clearly beg a question: freedom

from what? Most likely, these brands are implying that they allow women freedom from the threat of menstruation. In this sense, freedom acts as the antithesis of shame. However, the use of the word freedom works to reinforce and perpetuate the shame, as these names suggest menstruation is something from which women should want to break free rather than embrace.

This freedom is also suggested through the clothing worn by females in commercial advertisements. As Debra L. Merskin notes in her analysis of sanitary product advertisements, “These women were wearing, if not white then at least tight clothing such as leotards and leggings. In some cases the photographs focused on the buttocks and/or perineal area” (125). The theme of wearing white or tight clothing suggests these commercialized females are free from fear of menstrual leakage, assumedly due to their confidence in their chosen sanitary product. These advertisements highlight both sides of the period paradox for young girls. Simes and Berg discuss the ways in which, by reflecting fears, menstrual product advertisements instruct girls regarding how they should feel about their own impending menarche. The authors state:

When [the adolescent girl] turns to the advertisements for information, she learns that there are many ways that she can be discovered menstruating and thereby be embarrassed. Since not being embarrassed and appearing normal at all times are crucial for teenage girls, the advertisements play on these insecurities, heightening them with the end of selling more of their products. (459)

Wearing white or tight clothing is a fear many young menstruating females have and the sanitary product industry is reflecting those fears to women. At the same time, however, these companies also picture an idealized female who wears white, tight clothing during her menses yet is care- and concern-free. Therefore, the ideal menstruating female is one who conceals her own menses with specific brands of sanitary products and then is fearless in her outfit choices.

Additionally, advertisements that refrain from drawing attention to menstruation itself perpetuate the silence and shame surrounding menstrual education. As noted by Simes and Berg, readers of the Modess advertisement must have prior knowledge of the function of Modess products to understand the point of the advertisement. This form of advertisement then creates an insider audience, which is reminiscent of communities of married women within the Victorian era. Ads that do not blatantly mention menstruation work to shield outsiders (i.e. pre-menarcheal females and *all* males) from embarrassment, as in order to understand the ad, one must be part of the “insider” community of menstruating females as well as have a prior knowledge of the disposable sanitary product brand.

As pre-menarcheal females are exposed to menstrual product advertisements, they are fully immersed in the period paradox. Advertisements remain a pivotal tool in menstrual education, as girls learn to feel shame towards their impending menarche. While implying feelings of shame and embarrassment, advertisements also teach girls to conceal these feelings as they learn that the ideal menstruating female is concern- and worry-free. With the inclusion of these advertisements in magazines directed to prepubescent girls, the period paradox and commodification of shame continue to impact modern menstrual education.

Material Magazine Girls

Both the commercialization and stigmatization of menarche are continuing issues in twenty-first century menstrual education. While there has been a decrease in health education and sexual education courses within the public schools, conversations between pre- and post-menarcheal females have yet to surface as a primary form of education. Therefore, magazines and texts marketed towards pre-pubescent girls (specifically magazines such as *Discovery Girls*, *Girls Life*, and *CosmoGIRL!*) have capitalized on the lack of circulating information and claim to

be vital sources of puberty and menarche education. Curiosity and concern regarding menarche are unavoidable, and the topic of menstruation dominates girls' magazines, most of which include at least five advertisements for sanitary products as well as feature columns on menstruation (Driscoll 95). These magazines for young girls follow trends previously set in place by sanitary product brochures: heavy use of diagrams, letter/responses (in a "Dear Abby" formatting), and, most importantly, incessant advertisements for various sanitary products. Catherine Driscoll explains the rhetoric at work in late twentieth and early twenty-first century girls' magazines, stating, "The discourse of menstruation aimed at girls creates a norm—the ideal menstruating girl—to which girls compare themselves...The girl of girls' magazines is in the field of puberty and yet not in control of it—she is in need of instruction, guidance, and helpful illustrative models" (95). As companies producing girls' magazines realized their audience's need for menstrual education, more columns and articles began to focus on menstruation. However, the letter/response section continues to be the most prevalent and popular mode to distribute menstrual education. The letter/response format is similar throughout these magazines, as anonymous questions and situations submitted by young girls are answered by "experts" within the field. (These experts usually consist of various post-menarche females). Additionally, the letter/response section further reinforces to readers that girls' intimate concerns and questions are felt by *many* young girls, building a community of females within the magazine. Young readers will often have similar questions to the ones addressed within the text, and can seek comfort in knowing they are not the only ones who are concerned about such things. The answers to these questions then allow for girls' magazines to provide further information on menstruation while also encouraging readers to access these communities (both peers and post-menarcheal women) within their own lives. The rhetorical mechanisms used

within girls' magazines reinforce the messages of both identification and discipline—recognizing that all biological females menstruate by incorporating letter/response features, while also emphasizing that there is a *correct* way in which girls should approach menstruation through product advertisements and a strong focus on sanitization. While the focus on impending menarche within girls' magazines can be seen as a reflection of the needs of the target audience, the magazines also act as a mechanism that both creates and reinforces societal expectations for girls. The hyper-awareness of puberty and menstruation in girls' magazines reinforces the double bind placed upon girls. While nearly all biological women menstruate at some point in their lives, menarche unsurprisingly evokes concern and fear within young girls. However, this hyper-awareness should be expected, as fears and concerns are reiterated within each installment of these magazines. Companies are no longer simply commodifying menstrual education, but they are also working to capitalize on the fears of prepubescent girls. As peer influence and self awareness peak during puberty, every issue of girls' magazines works to create and reinforce the fears surrounding menarche.

As menstrual education continues to be a topic of fear in both adults and young girls, companies have begun to create various pedagogical tools for menstrual education. While girls' magazines continue to be a medium to discuss menstruation while also selling sanitary products through advertising, companies like American Girl have created full-length self-help guides in an attempt to address menstruation in a single text rather than to disperse questions across several issues of a magazine. These guides indicate yet another shift in menstrual education. Menstrual self-help guides work to decrease the fear that many sanitary products use as a marketing strategy. However, self-help guides still work to commodify the embarrassment and silence that continue to surround menarche. Whereas early forms of menstrual education marketed

themselves on the unknown and the fear that young girls had towards their own impending menarche, more recent forms of menstrual education (particularly self-help guides) address the fears young girls have while, at the same time, continue to perpetuate silence between pre- and post-menarcheal females. Rather than working to commodify the fear of the unknown, menstrual education is now capitalizing on fear of embarrassment and silence (felt by both pre- and post-menarcheal females) as a platform for commodification. The cyclical history of menstrual education continues to revolve around (and monetize) the absence of the female community in the lives of pre-menarcheal females. Reflective of the long-established trend of silence and shame, corporations (both within and outside of the sanitary product industry) continue to perpetuate the now-inherent shame women feel towards their menses—continuously placing girls within the period paradox.

Chapter 2—*The Care and Keeping of You(teri): The Role of Self-Help Guides in Menstrual Education*

The lack of pedagogical tools available for both young girls and adults on menstruation has been an ongoing issue in puberty education. While the evolution of biological studies sparked a change in the medical field's perception of menstruation, the prevalent view in Western culture regarding menses has consistently been one of shame, which often manifests itself in silence. As women from the Victorian era and beyond were taught to feel shame about their own menstruation, they internalized any fears or concerns and withheld crucial information from their daughters in order to preserve social conventions and expectations. Through the lack of conversation and dialogue between pre- and post-menarcheal females, young girls who were on the cusp of menarche themselves were implicitly taught to be shameful of their own bodily functions—unknowingly inheriting the silence of their mothers. This cycle of silence and shame has been reinforced throughout generations and continues to be an issue in current menstrual education.

Starting in the 1920s, the sanitary product industry created a shift in the public perception of menstruation, as magazine advertisements and commercials promoting various sanitary products were mass-marketed. However, the main focus of these promotional materials was (and continues to be) concealment, reinforcing that menstruation is a shameful and silent *issue*, rather than a natural biological occurrence. By marketing on the platform of concealment, the sanitary product industry commodifies the shame women feel about their own menses. The culmination of centuries of shame can be found in sanitary product advertisements directed towards premenstrual girls, which are often found within middle grade magazines such as *Discovery Girls*, *Girls Life*, and *CosmoGirl!*. The incessant advertisements for sanitary products aimed at

young girls, in conjunction with the lack of conversations between pre-and post-menarcheal females, create a conflicting message for young girls. Pre-menarcheal girls lack guidance from their parents or guardians, yet sanitary product advertisements create the unrealistic expectation that young girls are expected to be both “in the know” and concern-free regarding menstruation. I call this conflicting message in menstrual education “the period paradox.”⁴

While the sanitary product industry continued to dominate menstrual discourse, menstrual education evolved from corporate-sponsored pamphlets to book-length self-help guides beginning in the late 1970s. Multiple scholars have addressed how pre-menarcheal girls use fictional texts such as Louise Fitzhugh’s *The Long Secret* (1965) and Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* (1970) as forms of bibliotherapy⁵. The lasting power of these texts, in addition to the more recent publication of similar books such as Lisa Rowe Fraustino’s edited anthology *Don’t Cramp My Style: Stories About “That” Time of the Month* (2012), demonstrates that research on fictional accounts of menstruation is valid and crucial to children’s literature scholarship, as it reflects how young girls often turn to (or are guided to) modes of instruction outside the living female community to answer questions regarding menstruation. However, this chapter focuses on nonfiction self-help guides that are written for and marketed to pre-menarcheal girls specifically. There is a large gap in nonfiction children’s literature scholarship and an even larger gap in examining nonfiction self-help guides for children. While bibliotherapy for children is often couched in self-help guide language, actual self-help guides for children are a growing market, especially self-help guides for girls. Of the self-help guides marketed towards girls, the most popular books are those that discuss puberty and menstruation,

⁴ A further definition and analysis of “the period paradox” is available in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁵ One pivotal article that discusses the use of these texts is Michelle Martin’s 1997 article, “Periods, Parody, and Polyphony: Fifty Years of Menstrual Education through Fiction and Film,” published in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*.

which is evident with American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of You* series becoming a staple on the *New York Times*' Bestseller List for Middle Grade Children's Literature⁶. The popularity of these guides not only demonstrates the significance of self-help guides in children's literature, but also raises questions regarding the marketing of menstrual self-help guides to both prepubescent girls and their parents. While self-help guides could indicate a shift in the commodification of menstrual education, they can (and are most often used) as a reinforcement of the period paradox.

The Inception of Puberty Self-Help Guides

Published throughout the early 1900s, Margaret Sanger's *What Every Mother Should Know* and *What Every Daughter Should Know* series broke new ground as instructional puberty texts marketed towards prepubescent females and their mothers. However, as the sanitary product industry worked to monopolize menstrual education, it took over 50 years for the next non-product related book-length guide on female reproduction to be published, with the publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1971. While the text was not intended specifically for prepubescent females, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* discussed women's issues frankly, and encouraged readers to do the same in their own lives. As *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was authored by women for women, the publication of this self-help guide appeared to work against the period paradox by building a community of females as well as teaching women how to advocate for themselves within the healthcare industry. In the preface to the original publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective discussed their motivation behind creating the text, stating, "We found we could discuss, question, and argue with each other in a new spirit of cooperation rather than competition. We were equally struck by how important it

⁶ At the time of this research, *The Care and Keeping of You* was number 6 on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for Middle Grade Children's Literature and had been on the list for 77 weeks.

was for us to be able to open up with one another and share our feelings about our bodies. The process of talking was as crucial as the facts themselves” (4). The authors believed that opening a dialogue was key to understanding and promoting women’s issues in the public, and by establishing a female community within the text, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* could encourage readers to establish similar communities outside of the text. As *Our Bodies, Ourselves* stemmed from female conversations, the goal of the text was not to *replace* those conversations, but to encourage others to open a dialogue with other females. However, as self-help guides began to be marketed to younger females, the progressive dialogues shifted, and guides reverted back to acting as surrogates rather than supplements for conversations between females.

After the publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a number of puberty self-help guides were published, most notably *Period. A Girl’s Guide*. Short texts on menstruation and puberty were not new to young girls, as these discussions had been occurring in girls’ magazines for a number of years, as well as in commercialized pamphlets. While magazines generally addressed menstruation through a lens of sanitization, menstruation had become a topic addressed openly in mainstream publications for girls. However, the influx of book-length publications about puberty was a new development in prepubescent literature, and several publishers worked quickly to take advantage of the growing pre-menarcheal market. One of the earliest menstrual self-help guides to be published for prepubescent girls was JoAnn Loulan and Bonnie Worthen’s 1979 *Period. A Girl’s Guide*. Based on the paratextual elements, *Period.* is marketed to parents. The back cover states, “Here is everything your daughter needs to know to prepare for her own body’s changes, plus a removable Parent’s Guide” (Loulan and Worthen n.p.). The Parent’s Guide relieves parents’ stress in discussing puberty with their daughters by providing step by step instructions on how parents should discuss menstruation with their daughters (with instructions spanning

from how to approach the topic to creating personal rites-of-passage for the newly menstruating girl). Separate from the Parent's Guide, the book itself is dense for its intended 10-12 year old readers. Chapters are broken down into various aspects of menstruation (the changing body, female anatomy, product usage, and emotional health). Pages of text broken up by simple black and white line illustrations may be overwhelming for readers. However, the way in which *Period.* markets itself to parents is key to the guide's success (and possibly the reason it remains a foundational text for puberty self-help guides).

The back cover of *Period.* assures parents that "In simple terms, and without getting into sex education, the authors explain the changes all girls go through and how to handle the onset of their menstrual cycle" (Loulan and Worthen n.p.). Published in the midst of the sanitary industry's monopoly on menstrual education, *Period.* falls in line with the industry's focus on sanitization and avoidance of sexual health, assuring parents that their daughters will remain blissfully ignorant of the reproductive side to menstruation—a difficult task for a book that intends to educate girls on the biology of menstruation. When attempting to discuss the anatomical side of menstruation, Loulan and Worthen state, "By the time the egg reaches the uterus, the lining of the uterus is full and rich and soft. If the egg is going to stay for awhile and become a baby, this lining will make its stay healthy and comfortable. But, most of the time, the egg just visits and then passes on through" (25). By avoiding a discussion on reproduction, *Period.* leaves girls with unanswered questions that are also not addressed in the Parent's Guide. While its explanation (or lack of explanation) of various topics can be viewed as problematic, *Period.* remains a crucial book in menstrual education, with over 200,000 copies in print. However, this book is often overshadowed by a more current self-help guide series published by a company who wrote the book on brand loyalty—American Girl.

The Care and Keeping of You

From its creation in 1986 by the Pleasant Company, American Girl's target audience has been prepubescent females. By maintaining a target audience of girls ranging from ages eight to twelve, the American Girl company has and continues to successfully market their brand and create loyal consumers. While the American Girl company was originally known for their dolls and companion books, the brand has expanded to include monthly magazines, craft activity kits, and (most notably), self-help guides.

With the influx of sanitary product advertisements within girls' magazines, *American Girl* magazine, first released in 1993, felt the need to address menstruation within its own pages. The topic of menstruation is often mentioned in the magazine, but is done so in reader submissions rather than in content created by the magazine's adult authors. Readers write in to the magazine with humiliating menstrual stories for the "Embarrassing Moments" section and address questions and concerns about menstruation in the magazine's letter/response section. Both of these sections are crucial to the magazine, as they give young girls a safe space to share their own menstrual stories as well as voice their fears and concerns. Such aspects of the magazine are reminiscent of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, as, like the book, the magazine develops a community of females within the text, which encourages the building of a community outside of the text. While reader-generated content helped to reiterate that young girls were not alone in their menstrual fears, authors of *American Girl* magazine were not addressing menstruation in full-length articles. As Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown discuss in their book *Packaging Girlhood* (2007), *American Girl* is traditionally written with a particular type of girl in mind, and the focus on menstruation detracts from the modesty-infused message for which the magazine strives. Lamb and Brown write:

Content suggests that American girls are squeaky clean and like pets, cooking, giggling with friends, foolish fun, and crafts. They shine, have heart-to hearts, volunteer in their communities, and lend a helping hand... They are encouraged to be nice, be cheerful, and change the subject when something irritates them. For this reason, *American Girl* magazine has a finishing-school feel to it. (193-4)

As *American Girl* magazine worked to promote the “ideal” American Girl (these values are also reflected in the American Girl doll companion books), the American Girl company was aware that prepubescent girls wanted to address their concerns and fears surrounding menarche. However, rather than allowing the sole focus of *American Girl* magazine to become menstruation, the company produced a text—*The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls*. Published in 1998, the first edition of *The Care and Keeping of You* works to combat the commodification of fear that was prevalent in mainstream media by presenting menstrual education through the perspective of independent empowerment. While *The Care and Keeping of You* mirrors the format of girls’ magazines through its structure, the content and educational focus within the text work to dispel fear and empower young girls. Measuring at 10.8 by 7 inches, *The Care and Keeping of You* is closer to the size of a magazine than an informational text. A continuation of this format is seen throughout the book’s structure. The opening pages of the text include a letter to readers (much like a letter from the editor often found in magazines), and the book is divided into sections, each of which includes paragraphs of text, multiple pictures, and diagrams. Additionally, the end of every chapter features a letter/response section (formatted identically to the letter/response section found in *American Girl* magazine). This magazine format helps aid in the transition from pubescent educational materials provided in magazines to an entire text devoted to puberty education. Because most girls will have previous

experience with magazines (especially those who subscribe to *American Girl* magazine), they will be able to recognize the structure of the book and feel comfortable reading it. However, *The Care and Keeping of You* distinguishes itself from girls' magazines through its content.

The Care and Keeping of You eases girls into the discussion of menstruation by first acknowledging other aspects of puberty that are not as stigmatized as menstruation. Starting first with hair, ears, eyes, teeth, and face care, the guide focuses on every day grooming and moves to breast development and bra shopping before moving onto the largest chapter within the book, "Big Changes," which devotes itself solely to menstruation. The chapter starts with a biological overview of menstruation through terms that young girls can easily understand. The guide states, "[Your body] is preparing to do the grown-up work of having a baby someday. Every month your body practices for this by building a "nest," a place for a baby to grow inside your uterus...Because there's no baby, the lining is shed and you have a period" (Schaefer 70). While early educational materials published by the sanitary product industry emphasized hygiene, the use of anatomical terms such as "uterus" and "vagina" throughout *The Care and Keeping of You* helps to reiterate that menstruation is a biological occurrence, rather than an issue of cleanliness. Similarly, the illustrations within the menstruation section provide a basic overview of the female anatomy, diagramming the urethra, vagina, and uterus in easy-to-understand watercolor and ink pictures. As these terms may be new to young girls, the nest metaphor (similar to the "visiting egg" metaphor found in Loulan and Worthen's *Period*.) helps to ground readers' understanding of the menstruation process.

In addition to providing biological information, *The Care and Keeping of You* consistently reiterates that every girl is different, breaking away from the focus on normalization, something most often found within menstrual education materials. As Lamb and Mikel Brown

discuss, the function of girls' magazines is to sell the image of normalcy. Lamb and Brown write, "Because these magazines sell a version of girlhood, girls reading them try to figure out what a normal girl should feel, think, and act like and what she should wear or buy to create the image of normal" (193). Catherine Driscoll expands on the focus on normalcy in her book, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (2002), stating, "Through a cult of normalization and an eroticization of the adolescent woman's concern with normalizing her body, the feminine adolescent body is constructed in girls' magazines as a range of desires trespassed upon by a variety of physiological imperfections" (94). Many girls' magazines emphasize one true path for normalcy, and the pressure prepubescent girls feel to conform to the expectations of normalcy can evoke fear of failing to conform, especially in regards to issues of the body. *The Care and Keeping of You* refrains from such overarching statements by qualifying the information presented, often by using the terms "some girls" or "most girls." These qualifying statements are consistent throughout the text, but are emphasized within the menstrual chapter, with statements such as "Some girls have a menstrual period every 25 days. Other girls get them up to 40 days apart. All are normal" (Schaefer 70). By qualifying these statements, girls are less likely to feel abnormal when their experience falls outside of those experiences detailed within girls' magazines. As the intended audience for this message is in a developmental stage when self-esteem decreases drastically, American Girl places all readers on an equal playing field, breaking away from the cult of "normal body standards" which, in girls' magazines, is often (ironically) depicted in unrealistic standards (Clay, Bignoles, Dittmar 453).

In addition to expanding the definition and range of normalcy, *The Care and Keeping of You* works to bring mothers and other female support systems back into the menarche conversation by encouraging readers to ask questions and confer with their mother or doctor for

further advice and assistance. In the first few pages of the book, an opening letter to readers explains this mission, stating, “We hope that the head-to-toe advice in this book will give you the words to start a conversation with your parents or other adults you trust. Your parents were there for you when you were little, and they can still be there for you now. If you speak up, no matter how awkward you feel, your confidence and spirit will grow right along with your body!” (Schaefer 3). By reincorporating the parents and female community into puberty education, *The Care and Keeping of You* works against the messages often found within sanitary product brochures and girls’ magazines: that menstruation is to be concealed from everyone (including parents and caretakers), and should not be discussed. Breaking the message of silence at the beginning of the text is crucial, as readers who have been exposed to girls’ magazines and sanitary product advertisements have most likely already internalized this silence. Parents and other post-pubescent females are an important resource in menstrual education, and *The Care and Keeping of You* not only acknowledges their roles but encourages young girls to seek out these people as vital sources of information. The support of a female community is continuously emphasized in the menstruation chapter, as American Girl encourages young girls to consult mothers, siblings, teachers, and doctors with questions. When a young girl is faced with menarche and she does not know what to do, American Girl advises, “Find your mom, an older sister, or a woman you trust. Take a deep breath and say, ‘I think I just got my period. Do you have something I can use?’ You may feel like crawling into a hole, but remember, getting your period is *normal*. There’s no reason to be ashamed. The older person will probably remember how it felt *her* first time and be glad to help” (Schaefer 71; italics in original). By reminding young girls that not only is menstruation a natural event, but that older women menstruate as well, girls are more likely to feel comfortable in discussing their concerns with other females.

Often in girls' magazines and girl culture in general, young girls are bombarded with images and articles that are inherently egocentric. Through media, girls are taught to become so involved in their own world that they often forget to realize other (and older) women have endured similar issues. Additionally, the wide range of normalcy, which has already been addressed within the book, reassures young girls that they are not outside the range of normal, but included in a large community of menstruating women. The communal aspect of the advice, in addition to the message that "there's no reason to be ashamed," breaks from the larger societal perception that menarche is a shameful event. While other self-help menstrual texts—especially those created by the sanitary product industry—commodify the inherent shame women and girls feel regarding menstruation, American Girl explicitly states that menstruation is not shameful. By reminding girls of the female community to which they are members, *The Care and Keeping of You* encourages and empowers girls to have conversations with women, especially about topics that are often thought to be taboo.

The normalcy and commonality of menstruation is reiterated in the letter/response section at the end of each chapter in *The Care and Keeping of You*. Anonymous questions and situations, made to appear as if they were sent in by young readers, allow for the text to address questions that may not have been answered within the chapter. Additionally, the letter/response section further reinforces to readers that their intimate concerns and questions are often felt by many young girls. Through this format, American Girl not only encourages readers to build a community of females outside the text, but builds one within the text as well. Young readers will often have similar questions to the ones addressed within the text, and can seek comfort in knowing they are not the only ones who are concerned about such things. Similar to girls'

magazines, *The Care and Keeping of You* builds a community among readers that is based upon shared questions and concerns.

Lamb and Mikel Brown find that girls' magazines often employ the letter/response format to reveal universal vulnerabilities and imperfections among readers (201). When focusing on issues outside of menstruation, *American Girl* addresses concerns that many girls have, such as acne and bullying. One fictional reader writes, "I am ten years old and I have 13 zits. I've tried everything to get rid of them, but they always come back. I don't even eat a lot of junk food. Recently people have been calling me Pizza Face. What should I do?" (Schaefer 37). While the question itself helps girls to understand the commonality of puberty and acne, the response to the letter is what sets *The Care and Keeping of You* apart from many girls' magazines, as *American Girl* acknowledges the reader's feelings and takes the issue seriously. Dismissive attitudes towards prepubescent girls and their fears are prevalent in Western society. While some girls' magazines will address these fears in written content, they will often reinforce societal expectations by including highly-edited pictures of young girls who meet the "ideal" standards in both body and complexion. Through the inclusion of these images, the magazines fail to do what *The Care and Keeping of You* is successful in doing: understanding its audience and acknowledging that these concerns and fears are very real for young girls—and therefore addressing them with sincerity.

In the menstruation chapter in particular, the letter/response section addresses many recurring menstrual concerns: late bloomers, differences between tampons and pads, and fear of menarche occurring in a public area. The answers to these questions then allow for *American Girl* to not only provide further information on menstruation, but to encourage readers to access female communities within their own lives. One fictional reader writes in about her current

issues with menstruation, stating, “I’ve had my period for a year now, and I still haven’t gotten used to walking around feeling like I’ve wet my pants. I’m the only one of my girlfriends who has it. My mom is here to talk to me about it, but I don’t want to. I don’t want to keep it to myself, either. I feel like I don’t even want to grow up” (Schaefer 81). While the text has addressed some of these issues within the guide, the letter/response section allows for readers to get the perspective from a “real” reader. As these are concerns that many readers have, readers are first able to identify with the girl, and acknowledge that they are not alone, which aids in building a community. American Girl’s response to this question not only validates the concerns of the reader, but continues to build a community outside of the text. The responder writes back:

You sound lonely, scared *and* uncomfortable, and that’s too heavy a load for any girl to bear. For starters, it might help if you change your pad more often or consider giving tampons a try. Both will make you feel drier. Next, you need to screw up your courage—every ounce you can muster—and talk to an adult you trust. If you can’t face your mom, pick an aunt, a teacher, a doctor, or a school counselor. It may be hard to imagine now, but talking it out with an adult who has “been there, done that” will make you feel much better. (Schaefer 81; italics in original)

By first acknowledging the feelings of the reader, American Girl provides the reader with something that is seldom given outside of the text—validation of her concerns. The response does include advice, but focuses on the positives of talking to females outside of the text. As readers will hopefully feel encouraged and empowered to discuss their concerns with other females, American Girl works to rebuild and rebrand the mother/daughter conversations—highlighting the importance of the female community as a vital source of education.

For the prepubescent reader, *The Care and Keeping of You* is a positive and empowering text for young girls. However, the way in which the text is given to a young girl is just as influential as the messages within the book. Young girls who are given the book in addition to a dialogue with a parent or guardian are much more likely to take the book's advice on reaching out to a female in a time of need. Laura Fingerson writes about the importance of parent/daughter dialogue in her book, *Girls in Power: Gender, Body, and Menstruation in Adolescence* (2006). Through interviews with several teenage girls, Fingerson found that pre-menarcheal girls' interactions with their families (specifically their mothers and older sisters) about menstruation set the tone for how girls viewed their own impending menarche (50). If a post-menarcheal female has already sparked a discussion on menses and puberty, *The Care and Keeping of You* can act as a reference point for pre-menarcheal girls both during and after the conversation. Therefore, when readers have a question that has not been addressed within the text, they are comfortable asking their elders. Within this context, *The Care and Keeping of You* is an effective pedagogical tool. However, when the book is used by parents and guardians as a surrogate for a conversation, the book loses much of its effectiveness. Oftentimes, *The Care and Keeping of You* is seen as a replacement for a conversation. Post-menarcheal women who have been interpolated into a society that regards menstruation as shameful are often at best uncomfortable in discussing menstruation with their daughters, and at worst refuse to discuss the subject entirely. The cycle of shame continues throughout generations, as discomfort or silence on menstrual topics implicitly teaches pre-menarcheal girls how to view their own impending menarche. The text's empowering messages that encourage girls to talk to elders are ineffective when girls are given the book without any context or conversation, as a dialogue is only possible when both parties are willing to entertain such conversations. When used as a surrogate for a

conversation, *The Care and Keeping of You* acts as a commodity of shame itself—contradicting the messages within the text.

Rebranding, Re-Commodifying

The Care and Keeping of You quickly gained popularity among both young girls and parents, and continues to serve as a go-to book in puberty education. In 2012, American Girl rebranded and rereleased *The Care and Keeping of You*, turning the single book into a two part series: *The Care and Keeping of You 1: The Body Book for Younger Girls* and *The Care and Keeping of You 2: The Body Book for Older Girls*. The majority of positive, empowering messages found within the original publication of the text have carried on into the rebranding of the series, as the series continues to acknowledge readers' fears while also encouraging the building of community. However, by dividing the guide into two distinct books, concerns regarding commodification and branding, which were implicit within the original publication, have become explicit in the rebranding of the series. While both revised books continue to follow the magazine style formatting in the structure of content, *The Body Book for Younger Girls* is the only book of the two which retains the dimensions of a magazine. Measuring at 9 by 6 inches, *The Body Book for Older Girls* is closer to the size of a novel or handbook. The shift in size also alters the font and image size within the second book, making *The Body Book for Older Girls* appear much more like a junior novel than a magazine. *The Body Book for Younger Girls* retains a majority of the information presented in the original publication of *The Care and Keeping of You*. The largest difference comes within the menstruation section, as the diagrams depicting how to insert a tampon are replaced with diagrams on how to use a sanitary napkin. While the text has a brief mention of using tampons when playing sports or swimming, the book states that tampon education is addressed within the second book in the series: *The Care and Keeping of*

You 2: The Body Book for Older Girls. While many young females first use sanitary napkins, there is no age requirement in order to use tampons. However, through this shift in information, *The Care and Keeping of You* series implies that the use of tampons first requires experience with sanitary napkins. Additionally, the differences in intended ages for the books within the series (*The Body Book for Younger Girls* is intended for ages eight and up, *The Body Book for Older Girls* is intended for ages ten and up), further reinforces the idea that sanitary products are designated by age rather than by comfort.

The promotion of the second book within the first also leads to questions of commodification and marketability. While *American Girl* is known to self-promote throughout both their books and magazines, *The Care and Keeping of You* had been free of any promotional materials other than a mail-in card for a subscription to *American Girl* magazine attached to the back cover of the book. Where the minor self-promotion did not hinder readers of the original publication, the lack of information on tampons within *The Body Book for Younger Girls* hinders readers' understanding of available sanitary products. *The Body Book for Older Girls* mirrors the commodification seen within the first text by making assumptions that readers have previously purchased and read the first book with claims such as, "Since the most basic facts about periods are covered in *The Care and Keeping of You* [*The Body Book for Younger Girls*], you probably already know that a period, short for menstrual period, is the time each month when a woman loses some blood through her vagina" (40). The claims made regarding readership place some girls at a disadvantage. Girls who missed the intended age range to read *The Body Book for Younger Girls* and skipped directly to *The Body Book for Older Girls* are likely to have a weaker understanding of menstruation, as the text makes the assumption that, by age 10, girls should have previously purchased, read, and understood the information presented within the first text.

Marketing to Parents

In addition to the commodification of the series, the marketability of the revised *The Care and Keeping of You* series sends mixed messages to parents and young girls on how the books should be used. Within the series, the books' messages encourage and empower young girls to have discussions with their parents or other females, but some adults are likely to see the texts as a surrogate for a conversation. While this was a concern in regards to the first publication of *The Care and Keeping of You*, the promotional marketing of the rebranded series makes this issue explicit. In an interview published by American Girl, author of the revised series Cara Natterson discusses how the series can be used as a resource for parents. Natterson states:

When it comes to talking about puberty, it can be very difficult for parents to start the conversation. Using a book like *The Care and Keeping of You* can help by introducing topics that neither one of you feels all that comfortable bringing up. It was important to me to stress over and over that girls do best when they share information with their parents or other trusted adults. Both books remind them of that repeatedly; better yet, they give the girls advice about how to begin to talk to those adults. (American Girl "About" n.p.)

Instead of having a conversation before providing girls with *The Care and Keeping of You* series, parents may now be more likely to see this book as a replacement for the conversation.

Additionally, knowing that the books encourage girls to *begin* conversations regarding puberty and menstruation, parents may feel that their daughters will come to them if and when questions arise rather than prompting discussion themselves. This places a great deal of pressure and responsibility on the young girl. While *The Care and Keeping of You* series can be seen as a base for puberty and menstrual education, further conversations between parents and daughters not

only provide young girls with further education, but they also allow the parents to take an active role in their daughters' health. *The Care and Keeping of You* series can only encourage and empower a young girl so far, and if a parent is uncomfortable and unwilling to have a discussion on menstruation, young girls are more likely to internalize fears and concerns rather than address them with an elder.

Continuing her advice on how *The Care and Keeping of You* series should be used by parents who are uncomfortable having a discussion with their daughters, Natterson suggests, "If you aren't sure what to say, suggest that your daughter read the relevant section in one of the *Care & Keeping of You* books, and then you can have a chat. Sometimes it is a relief to let words on a page serve as the icebreaker in a touchy conversation" (American Girl "Find" n.p.). While the books are effective in the education of girls, the implied message the author presents is not only that parents can pass the burden of puberty discussions to *The Care and Keeping of You* series, but an implicit need exists for these books to be used as such. Natterson's use of the term "icebreaker" when referring to the guide highlights the shame and embarrassment felt by many adults when discussing these issues. Where icebreakers are usually used as a tool to create dialogue between strangers, Natterson's belief that the "touchy" topics of puberty and menstruation require icebreakers reflects and reinforces the idea that parents should feel uncomfortable with this discussion and that *The Care and Keeping of You* can act as a way out of this discomfort. By encouraging parents to force a text on their daughter in lieu of a conversation, menstrual education reverts back to corporate-sponsored education, where the sanitary product industry created pamphlets to teach girls about menstruation, as mothers were too ashamed to discuss such matters themselves (Brumberg 35). While *The Care and Keeping of You* series encourages and empowers young girls to talk to their parents about menstruation and

other puberty-related topics, they imply that parents will be willing and prepared to hold such conversations. However, when the book is marketed towards parents as a surrogate for parental guidance and conversations, a large dissonance is created between the two messages. Within the texts, girls are taught not to feel ashamed about menstruation. However, through the unwillingness to be directly accountable for the education of their daughters, parents are implying a level of embarrassment and shame—sending daughters mixed messages on how to feel about menarche. While any information is better than silence in regards to menarche education, it is important to understand how girls learn about their bodies and whose interests are being considered. In the case of *The Care and Keeping of You* series, young girls seem to be of the utmost importance within the text. However, the marketing of the series highlights the interests of the parents by placing the burden of continuing their education beyond the texts on the girls themselves.

Additional Critiques on the Series

While the marketing of *The Care and Keeping of You* series is inherently flawed, the content within the text is often redeemed as positive (and one of the reasons it remains a bestseller) as it teaches girls the basic facts of menstruation, addresses common concerns, and sends overall a message of empowerment to girls. However, there have been critiques on the limited scope that *The Care and Keeping of You* allows readers in both the portrayal of girls within the series as well as the menstrual products they teach young girls to use. Both the original and revised guides include illustrations of young girls. While the American Girl company is known to encourage diversity through their doll and companion book series (Native American, Hispanic, African American, and girls of differing abilities, to name a few), the dominant race within *The Care and Keeping of You* series is White. Illustrations of African

American and Asian American girls are dispersed throughout the series, but the series fails to depict its diverse readership throughout the illustrations. Additionally, the limited scope of menstrual products featured within the series restricts readers' understanding of products available. While disposable sanitary napkins and tampons are the most common menstrual products, neither books within *The Care and Keeping of You* series, nor the original publication of the text, mention menstrual cups or reusable sanitary products. The exclusion of reusable menstrual products may reflect the dominant discourse of sanitary products as disposable, but it also reinforces the inherent fear or disgust of menstrual blood. Disposable sanitary products provide the perception that menstrual blood is something to be tossed out or flushed down the toilet, a quick and clean method for disposing of any evidence of menstruation. Reusable sanitary products such as menstrual cups and cotton napkins require users to engage with menstrual products (and therefore menstrual blood) for a longer period of time, forcing users to be more comfortable with their own menses. The exclusion of these tools within the series not only works to reinforce prevalent attitudes towards menstruation, but it also restricts readers' understanding of menstrual products in addition to othering females who choose to use menstrual products not depicted within the series.

The prevalence of shame in menstrual education is not a new phenomenon, as it can be traced to patriarchal religious and societal customs. However, the ways in which menstrual shame manifests itself (and the tools used to retain silence) have evolved over time. The period self-help guide itself exists as a commodity for a biological occurrence in an industry that capitalizes on the fear and shame felt by girls and women in order to expand its business. While American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of You* can be viewed as another tool in the cycle of menstrual shame, it is also one of the first books intended for prepubescent girls that encourages

female communities and empowers young women to break the cycle of silence. Though its initial popularity could be attributed to the American Girl brand, the lasting power of *The Care and Keeping of You* may indicate a shift in the perception of menstruation. However, in order to truly empower young girls, the series must market itself not as a surrogate but as a supplement to a continuous dialogue between pre- and post-menarcheal females, a message the brand is currently failing to send to adults.

Due to the mass acceptance of this series (selling over four million copies altogether), the information within the guides and the way in which the information is presented both create and reinforce American educational standards on puberty, specifically menstruation. While *The Care and Keeping of You* series seeks to revolutionize how girls learn about menstruation, the acceptance and praise of these texts by parents and pediatricians⁷ highlight the norms they have created within menstrual education. Although the texts market themselves as empowering girls to discuss menstruation, they empower parents to avoid such discussions. Within this context, the guides make young females responsible for their own education on menarche, a topic they have been trained to fear through their parents' silence. In order to encourage young girls to regard menarche as a normal biological occurrence, parents must be proactive in their daughters' education and willing to engage in conversations about menstruation. The discrepancies between how readers are encouraged to use *The Care and Keeping of You* series and how parents perceive these texts reflect the double bind in which the media consistently places girls. While they have been taught to become hyper-aware and concerned about menarche, young girls are now required to be proactive in their own menstrual education, implying a level of shame felt by parents.

⁷ Author of the revised series, Cara Natterson is a pediatrician who, before writing the revised series, recommended the original *The Care and Keeping of You* to patients.

Silence, and the prevalence of silence between pre- and post-menarcheal females, dictates how young girls feel about their impending menarche, as it forces girls to internalize their fears and concerns rather than openly discuss them within a community. Menstrual education is one of the largest silent spaces within girlhood, and this silence extends into children's literature scholarship. The lack of scholarship and research on self-help guides for girls helps to perpetuate society's dismissive attitude towards various aspects of girl culture. By not recognizing the importance of self-help guides (both in the lives of their readers as well as in the larger scope of menstrual education), scholars silently approve of the perpetuation of menstrual shame. Further research on puberty self-help guides will not only help to validate the fears and concerns of young girls, but also highlight current issues with the implementation of such guides as a pedagogical tool. As self-help guides continue to gain popularity in the lives of girls ranging from prepubescence to adolescence, the need for scholarship on this literary form grows. Continued research in the field of self-help guides will not only shine light on one of the many silent spaces within girlhood, but it will also initiate further analysis on how these guides impact the lives of girls during one of their most crucial stages of physical, emotional, and cognitive development.

Chapter 3—Thinking Inside the Box: Period Starter Kits, Preteen Packaging, and New Media in Menstrual Education

Menstrual self-help guides have become a standard pedagogical tool in Western menstrual education. While early self-help guides were often created by a particular sanitary product company and included a multitude of self-marketing, current menstrual self-help guides (like American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of You* series) are not affiliated with sanitary product companies, and therefore resist the self-promotion and brand-loyalty encouragements that earlier guides included. Instead, guides like *The Care and Keeping of You* give a brief overview of disposable tampons and pads without mentioning particular brands. While resisting brand specificity allows young girls to explore a variety of menstrual products and companies, the decision on *which* brand or product to purchase can still be daunting for young girls. While the average age for menarche in the United States is 12.5 years old, menstrual products are seldom developed and designed with a preteen female body in mind ("Menstruation").

Television shows and magazines that are directed to preteen girls include countless advertisements for menstrual products. Ironically, the products featured in these advertisements are the same products used by adult females. Menstrual products are often created for a more mature female body in both length and width. While sanitary product corporations have been a dominating force within menstrual education for decades, it appears that the products themselves are intended for an older menstruating female. The discrepancy between the marketing of the product and the product itself could indicate that sanitary companies wish to build a brand loyalty before a girl requires the products (which unfortunately, may not actually fit her needs). However, for young girls who experience menarche on or before the United States' average age, finding products that are developed for younger girls' bodies can be difficult. The difficulty of

finding products can further exacerbate the embarrassment or shame a young girl may feel upon menarche, especially if she begins menstruation at a young age. The availability of new product designs from the sanitary product industry, as well as menstrual product subscription boxes and first period kits for preteens, are working to bridge the gap in product availability while also changing views on menstruation as a whole. While these products are working to make young girls feel comfortable and confident during menstruation, they are doing so under the umbrella of commodities and corporations. However, through tween-focused design and social media platforms, new marketing techniques from the sanitary product industry allow for the creation of online female communities, which provide girls with more agency to create their own communities both in online and physical spaces. Unfortunately, the communities young girls access through online platforms are primarily with their peers rather than older females. While these communities allow for more open dialogue, they still work to stigmatize conversation between younger girls and elder females, restricting the information girls receive.

“It’s like Santa for your vagina!”

In 2013, Naama Bloom launched HelloFlo, a subscription-based online company that delivers monthly menstrual products to women. While cosmetic subscription boxes such as Birchbox (founded in 2010) and Glossybox (founded in 2011) were already widely popular, HelloFlo was the first subscription box devoted solely to menstrual products. HelloFlo sends out monthly boxes that are tailored to a female’s menstrual cycle and needs. After answering questions based on flow (light, medium, or heavy), product preference (tampons only, tampons and pads, or pads only), and brand preference (Tampax, Always, or Organyc), as well as estimated period start dates, customers receive HelloFlo shipments monthly, and the company works to sync shipment to the subscriber’s menstrual cycle. In an interview with *The Riveter*,

Bloom discusses how HelloFlo was created out of the need for convenience, stating, “I work outside of my home—so I generally get my period in the middle of the day and have nothing with me. I thought, how excellent would it be if someone could knock on my door a few days before my period each month and say ‘Here, put these in your purse!’” (Pritchard n.p.).

While Bloom emphasizes the concept of convenience when discussing the creation of HelloFlo, there is an underlying message of shame. On the “About” section of the HelloFlo website, Bloom continues to explain the convenience behind HelloFlo, but also reflects on the overall shame involved in purchasing menstrual products, stating, “I didn’t want to trek through my office with a practically see-through plastic bag with tampons” (Bloom). HelloFlo may work to act as a convenient reminder for women of their upcoming menstrual cycle, but, as Bloom explicitly states, the service also serves as a way to privately purchase menstrual products. With privacy in mind, the HelloFlo subscription service is reminiscent of the coin boxes placed in pharmacies during the 1920s, which allowed women to purchase sanitary products without taking them to the cashier.⁸ In addition to the discreet method in which HelloFlo allows women to receive menstrual products through the mail, the packaging of the products further reflects menstrual shame. The HelloFlo shipment boxes are standard brown cardboard which, when closed, simply read “Hello” on the front in basic black text. Printed on the inside flap of the box (which can only be seen upon opening) is the word “Flo.” As neither the contents of the package nor the entire brand name is posted on the outside of the box, when the package is shipped to the subscriber’s home, the products remain undisclosed. While HelloFlo may emphasize convenience for women, the implicit message of concealment and secrecy reflects age-old feelings of menstrual shame.

⁸ A longer discussion of sanitary product coin boxes can be found in Chapter 1.

While HelloFlo implicitly reflects menstrual shame, the subscription service outwardly promotes itself as a company focused on female empowerment. The concept behind HelloFlo may have started as a simple monthly reminder for women, but Bloom always had both older and younger females in mind, stating, “One friend in particular had an 11-year-old girl at the time; we started talking about girls approaching puberty and what goes on in their minds. Girls are trying to be independent at that age, but then you get your period, it’s kind of a step back because you have to negotiate getting these supplies and things with your parents” (Pritchard n.p.). Bloom notes the lack of agency young girls have in purchasing menstrual supplies for themselves. In addition to having to navigate the fears of menstruation, the pressure involved in purchasing menstrual supplies is a prevalent issue for many preteens and teenagers who are under the age of sixteen, as most young females rely on adults for money as well as for transportation. While menstrual subscription boxes still require young girls to ask their parents or guardians for money, the need for transportation is unnecessary—making subscription boxes a convenient option for girls who either want more agency or are still uncomfortable discussing menstruation with their parents. The goal behind incorporating younger girls into the subscription service is that, if young girls had the agency to choose their own sanitary products (privately), they would approach menstruation with less fear. However, the subscription boxes may also omit the need for any dialogue on menstruation between young girls and their parent or guardian. Through the private shipments and discreet packaging, young girls who are subscribers to HelloFlo may feel they have no need to discuss menstruation with their caretakers, possibly closing any opportunity for a community and dialogue between generations of women. The service may allow young girls to feel as though they have more agency and control over their

menstrual needs, but it does so at the possible loss of parent-to-child dialogue, further silencing and shaming menstruation.

For parents of preteens (and preteens themselves), HelloFlo created the “Period Starter Kit.” While they are primarily a monthly subscription service, HelloFlo is best known for their “Period Starter Kit” due to the viral online commercials for the kits, “Camp Gyno” and “First Moon Party.” Both commercials became viral successes through their use of humor to discuss menstruation. “Camp Gyno,” the first online commercial to be released, tells the story of a preteen who is the first one to get her period while at summer camp. Using her experience to become popular, the preteen begins providing products and advice to other campers in a dictator-like fashion. The self-proclaimed “Camp Gyno” states, “For these campers, I was their Joan of Arc. It’s like, I’m Joan, and their vag is the ark” (“Camp Gyno”). However, once campers begin receiving HelloFlo “Period Starter Kits,” the Camp Gyno is forced to close her doors for good, stating, “It’s like Santa for your vagina! How can a Camp Gyno compete with that?” (“Camp Gyno”). For nearly two minutes, the commercial delivers deadpan humor which undermines the seriousness found within most feminine hygiene commercials. Additionally, the upfront nature of the HelloFlo commercial signals that the company refuses to delicately speak *around* menstruation. Like the Camp Gyno, HelloFlo is a company that discusses menstruation openly, rather than secretly and shamefully.

While the first HelloFlo commercial was focused specifically on peer influence, HelloFlo’s second commercial, “First Moon Party,” approaches the mother/daughter relationship with similar deadpan humor. After all of her friends have already gotten their periods, a preteen “fakes” her period by placing red nail polish on a sanitary pad. While knowing her daughter is lying about starting her period, the mother throws her a “First Moon Party,” complete with a

uterus piñata, and “pin the pad on the period” game. Rather than focusing on the too-often awkward conversations between mothers and daughters regarding periods, HelloFlo once again undermines the menstrual shame felt by both young girls and women through humor. The focus is not on the embarrassment of menstruation, but the overall embarrassment a mother can evoke in her daughter. Both the “Camp Gyno” and “First Moon Party” commercials have turned into viral hits. “Camp Gyno” currently has well over 9 million views, and “First Moon Party” has nearly 30 million views. The popularity of the commercials not only indicates effective marketing strategies, but also reveals the need for more humor in menstrual product advertising. HelloFlo’s honest and upfront approach to menstruation works to undermine the shame-based rhetoric that surrounds the majority of advertisements for menstrual products.

Through their humor-focused campaigns involving young girls, HelloFlo presents a utopic version of how girls feel about menstruation. The featured girls in both commercials are not fearful or embarrassed when they experience (or fake experience) menarche. Instead, the girls are excited and proud, embracing the experience as (in the words of “Camp Gyno”) a “Red Badge of Courage.” While some girls do feel empowered when entering menarche, menstruation is often a time of fear and confusion for many young girls. The fears and concerns surrounding menarche are very real for young girls, and embracing menstruation like the young girls featured in “Camp Gyno” and “First Moon Party” is not often a first reaction of girls, especially when they lack open and supportive female communities. While both “Camp Gyno” and “First Moon Party” feature young girls, and the product itself is intended for young girls, the advertisements are humorous for post-menarcheal women who no longer wait in fearful anticipation of menarche. For young girls who are watching the HelloFlo advertisements, “Camp Gyno” and

“First Moon Party” may simply reinforce the period paradox⁹ in which young girls exist, as they present ideal menstruating girls who feel prepared and in control of their bodies. In comparison, self-help guides intended for pre-menarcheal girls, such as American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You* series, aim to validate feelings of fear and confusion. While well-prepared and confident girls are ideal in regards to menarche, HelloFlo’s humor falls flat on girls who do not view their impending menarche as a source of power. However, as seen in the overwhelmingly positive response to both “Camp Gyno” and “First Moon Party,” the advertisements are extremely effective for women who are outside the affected age range of the period paradox.

While the online videos increased HelloFlo’s popularity, the “Period Starter Kit” indicates the newest shift in pedagogical tools for menstrual education. Intended for girls who have yet to enter menarche, the “Period Starter Kit” includes a number of sanitary products to prepare girls for menstruation (1 package of Always Totally Teen sanitary pads¹⁰ and 1 package of Always Dailies Liners), a canvas pouch for holding menstrual products, and various “treats” for young girls, including hard candy, lip gloss, hair ties, and a bracelet. Like the advertisements, HelloFlo’s “Period Starter Kit” seeks to change the way young girls feel about their impending menarche. By including “treat” products, the kit shifts attitudes about menarche from anticipation of a fearful experience to an opportunity for girls to pamper themselves. In addition to the products within the box, HelloFlo includes two guides in the “Period Starter Kit”: *The Get Ready Guide for Girls* and *The Get Ready Guide for Parents*. Both guides, written by none other than Dr. Cara Natterson, author of American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You* series, are

⁹ Described in further detail throughout Chapter 1, the period paradox is the concept that through the lack of education and conversation with elder females, girls are taught to suppress their anxieties regarding menstruation. However, through the commercialization of feminine products, young girls are expected to be both “in the know” and concern-free.

¹⁰ A larger discussion and analysis of Always Totally Teen sanitary pads can be found later in this chapter, within the section “Not Your Mom’s Sanitary Products.”

intended to be key resources for girls and parents alike. *The Get Ready Guide for Girls* presents a general overview of menstruation while also including a nod to normalization and the female community. The guide starts by stating, “Every single woman gets her period. *Period*. So why be embarrassed? You probably haven’t thought about it this way before, but once you realize that we all bleed, it feels a little more normal” (Natterson *Get Ready Guide Girls* 1). Reflective of the information presented in American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You* series, HelloFlo assures readers that all women menstruate and works to include young girls in the larger female community while also reinforcing normalization. While *The Get Ready Guide for Girls* presents the basics on menstruation, it also encourages young girls who have further questions to not only talk to post-menarcheal females, but also to use various resources outside of conversation. Natterson writes, “When you have questions, there are great resources available where you can find answers. If you’re too embarrassed to ask someone out loud, look online or in a book” (*Get Ready Guide Girls* 1). As a more current guide, the inclusion of the internet as a resource may be viewed as common. However, HelloFlo is one of the few self-help pamphlets that encourages girls to access information outside of conversations with adults. In addition to receiving a privately-shipped kit of products, the *The Get Ready Guide for Girls* sends the message that pre-menarcheal females of the twenty-first century may be able to avoid all conversations about menstruation with their parents. Additionally, as the author of the extremely popular book series on periods and puberty, Natterson’s suggestion for young girls to receive information from a book works as a not-so-subtle cross promotion to her extremely popular series *The Care and Keeping of You*.

While young girls are told that technology allows for conversations to be avoided, *The Get Ready Guide for Parents* encourages menstrual education to be an ongoing conversation

between parent and child. The parent guide begins by stating, “Talk. The single best thing that a parent can give to his or her child is good information. You don’t hesitate when it comes to safety or the importance of working hard in school, so why hold back here?” (Natterson *Get Ready Guide Parents* 1). *The Get Ready Guide for Parents* accepts that discussing menstruation may be uncomfortable or awkward, but stresses the importance of having the conversations about menstruation. The contradicting messages within *The Get Ready Guide for Girls* and *The Get Ready Guide for Parents* stand in opposition to the messages sent by American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You* series.¹¹ While both the *Get Ready Guides* and the American Girl series were authored by Cara Natterson, *The Care and Keeping of You* encourages young girls to initiate a dialogue with their parents, yet *The Get Ready Guide for Girls* provide readers with resources that allow girls to avoid such conversations. Additionally, the promotional materials surrounding the American Girl series suggests parents will be able to use books as a replacement for a conversation, where *The Get Ready Guide for Parents* stresses the importance of parent and child dialogue. The contradictory messages presented in the separate guides place girls and parents in a similar cycle of avoidance that Natterson presented within *The Care and Keeping of You*.

As Natterson suggests girls to use the internet as a resource for information, HelloFlo promotes their website on both *Get Ready Guides*. HelloFlo’s website, specifically the “Ask Dr. Flo” section, presents additional period instruction for girls. On “Ask Dr. Flo,” users can submit any period and puberty related questions, which will be answered by the author of the *Get Ready Guides*, Dr. Cara Natterson. As the two informational sources share the same author, most of the information found on the “Ask Dr. Flo” website (especially answers to questions submitted by

¹¹ An extended analysis of how *The Care and Keeping of You* series is marketed to parents is available in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

preteens) is similar to that found within *The Care and Keeping of You* series.¹² For example, in a question regarding irregular periods, Natterson writes:

Getting your period at age 12 is very healthy, just like you! It can be completely normal for girls to start getting their period as young as 8 or 9 or as old as 15 or 16. Some girls get regular periods from the very start: every 4 weeks, like clockwork, it comes. This can be surprising because you hear a lot about how it is often irregular at first. But again, this is totally normal. (Natterson n.p.)

Natterson's focus on normalization and the various ranges of normalcy for young girls is highly reminiscent of her work in *The Care and Keeping of You* series, which highlights the many definitions of normal for prepubescent girls. While the topics featured on the "Ask Dr. Flo" webpage are few in number, the HelloFlo website has the potential to turn into a larger hub for information on menstruation with cross-marketing to *The Care and Keeping of You* series. The HelloFlo website mentions Natterson's work on the American Girl series; however, the minimal amount of publicity for Natterson on this site is surprising, given the popularity of *The Care and Keeping of You* series. Currently, the HelloFlo website functions primarily as a product store rather than as an educational resource. Yet the popularity of the online commercials and the privacy that HelloFlo allows customers by having sanitary products delivered to the home, further helping with the concealment of one's period, could make "Period Starter Kits" and tween subscription boxes a popular tool for prepubescent girls.

Not Your Mom's Sanitary Products

In 2010, the Kimberly-Clark Corporation (a cornerstone in the menstrual product industry) launched U by Kotex™. While the products within the U by Kotex line appear to be

¹² A longer analysis and discussion of American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of You* series can be found in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

similar to those within the traditional Kotex line, the appearance of the boxes indicates a shift in the intended audience. In their press release, Kimberly-Clark states, “U by Kotex...provides outstanding product performance complemented by a colorful, cool design and attitude. Black boxes and neon wrappers signify the bold stand that U by Kotex is taking to turn current category conventions upside down” (Kimberly-Clark n.p.). While Kimberly-Clark did not explicitly state that the revamp of the Kotex line was directed towards a particular age demographic, the sleek black boxes with neon-colored wrappers signified that Kotex was directing their products to a younger demographic. Additionally, the U by Kotex website reflects a similar shift in age focus. By featuring females who appear to be in their late teens to early twenties and promoting their “Save the Undies” campaign (a promotional campaign to stop “senseless leaks” from sanitary products) on a variety of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Vine, and Youtube), the targeted audience appears to be females in their late teens or younger.

As the slogan for U by Kotex is “Break the Cycle,” the brand’s goal is to challenge the stigma around menstruation. In their first web-only commercial, U by Kotex mocks the well-established conventions of sanitary product commercials, namely females twirling in white clothing and the use of blue liquid rather than red to show absorbency power. While Kotex is prepared to break away from the well-established menstrual product conventions, the brand’s use of web-only commercials may indicate that widespread menstrual shame still exists. However, as the video has been viewed over 1.6 million times on YouTube, these views may indicate that the intended audience (females in their teens and early twenties) are able to easily access and view these videos (“Reality Check”). While the message and packaging of the U by Kotex line has

shifted to appeal to a younger demographic, the contents within the box remained the same—sized for a more mature female body.

In 2011, U by Kotex expanded their line to include U by Kotex Tween. With the marketing slogan “Tween Attitude. Serious Protection.,” the Tween line is the first sanitary product designed for the preteen, featuring an 18% shorter and narrower design than the regular U by Kotex pads (Newman n.p). In addition to creating a product specifically for preteens, the U by Kotex Tween pads appeal to tweens through packaging. While the box is still in the U by Kotex black, it is covered in glitter and decorated with heart, star, and swirl doodles. The tween design continues on the inside of the box, as both the outer colorful neon wrapper and the pad itself feature heart and star doodles. Designed with younger girls in mind, each U by Kotex Tween pad includes instructions inside each pad’s wrapper. Rather than simply having a pamphlet inside each box of pads, the individualized instructions may act as a comfort for young girls who are still unsure about using sanitary products, as they now have step-by-step instructions to follow every time they replace their pad.

While U by Kotex has an entire line of feminine products (pads, liners, tampons, and wipes), the U by Kotex Tween line consists of only pads. While it is common for most girls to use only pads when menstruating for the first time, the message U by Kotex Tween sends is that age designates product use. This message is reflected throughout menstrual education materials for young girls, as American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Younger Girls* focuses on sanitary pads, while *The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Older Girls* provides information on tampons. Additionally, none of the big-name companies who are known for their menstrual products (Kotex, Always, Playtex, Tampax) have designated tampons specifically for tweens or teens. While a “slender” size does exist for most brands, none have

designed a product marketed for preteens or early teenagers. While the designated tween line of pads helps to provide products that fit a younger girl's body, it restricts product options based on age rather than on comfort. Additionally, the decision to incorporate a tween line into the U by Kotex products may indicate that the company's focus is on brand-loyalty. The U by Kotex brand grows up with girls, providing various products (and product packaging) that is styled with the age of the user in mind. As the U by Kotex product line includes tampons, a young girl can age out of the U by Kotex Tween line, and begin using the variety of products available in the older (and less glittery) U by Kotex line without having to switch brands.

The tween branding continues on the U by Kotex website (marketed prominently on the product box), where a "Menstruation 101" link provides a brief background on menstruation with frequently asked questions. While the information is similar to that found within self-help guides, it is marketing the U by Kotex brand, a strategy reminiscent of early self-help guides provided by sanitary product corporations. When a question regarding participating in sports during menstruation is posed, U by Kotex assures the readers that girls can still be physically active during menstruation, but continues to market the Kotex brand by directing readers to shop specifically Kotex products, stating, "And, if you're worried about leaking during sports activities, check out Find My Kotex Fit to find the pad or tampon that will protect you best" ("First Period"). While the promotion exists, it is assumed that females who access the website have already purchased a U by Kotex product. While this does not make the self-promotion less apparent, it is a shift from the promotional products found within the educational pamphlets once distributed in schools. In addition to providing promotional advice to young girls, the U by Kotex website is also a hub of female empowerment. Though the average user of the website appears to be in her late teens, U by Kotex encourages females of all ages to post positive,

uplifting messages (both menstruation-related and not) to the website. Through these positive messages, U by Kotex is working to build an online community of females that spans generations. By promoting themselves on a variety of social media platforms, U by Kotex is shifting out of the private sphere and into the hyper-public online world, encouraging girls to participate in these online communities. U by Kotex appears to not only be marketing to a younger demographic, but it is working to change the way menstruation is viewed by young females. The design of the product appeals to preteen girls, making young girls more excited to purchase products. Additionally, the website encourages discussion and dialogue centered around menstruation, decreasing the menstrual shame and silence and encouraging female communities. Through products specifically designed for them, preteen girls are able to feel ownership over their own menstruation, a feeling often absent in the lives of young females.

In 2012, only one year after U by Kotex released their “Tween” line of products, Procter & Gamble’s sanitary product line, Always™, released a “Totally Teen” line. Similar to the U by Kotex Tween line, the Always Totally Teen™ line contains only sanitary pads, with a similar concept that once young girls grow past the Totally Teen line, they can use Always products that are in the larger (adult) line. Just like Kotex Tween, Always Totally Teen is designed with a younger audience in mind. More colorful than U by Kotex Tween, the Always Totally Teen box has shimmering hues of pink, purple, blue, yellow, and green. Additionally, the tween-style “doodle” design covers the box, with hearts, stars, flowers, and swirls. Like the U by Kotex Tween, the doodle design continues on the individual multicolored product wrappers. While the Always Totally Teen pads do not have complete individualized instructions included in each pad, a portion of the wrapper indicates which side is the “front” of the pad, which may help to suppress the fears of first-time sanitary product users. On the outside of the box, girls who want

more guidance are encouraged to scan a QR code which will direct them to the Always Totally Teen website, where a YouTube video of a girl appearing to be in her teens, Sarah, demonstrates how to use a sanitary pad (using the Always Totally Teen pad). The instructional video is relatable for new sanitary product users, as Sarah uses humor to give pertinent information for new users, stating, “Do not flush it [sanitary pad]! Whatever you do! Because you’ll probably back up the toilet and you might even flood the whole bathroom! You definitely don’t want to be that girl” (“Protect Those Panties”).

After watching the demonstration video, girls are encouraged to find more videos and tips at Procter & Gamble’s puberty focused website, Being Girl. Like the U by Kotex website, Being Girl is a hub for tips, facts, and overall female empowerment. However, rather than focusing solely on menstruation, Being Girl is a marketing platform for all of Procter & Gamble’s female-focused products (Always™ and Tampax™ sanitary products, Secret™ deodorant, Olay™ face care, Venus™ shaving products, and Covergirl™ cosmetics). Similar to puberty self-help guides like American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You*, Being Girl covers the primary stages of puberty with which young girls often have questions: perspiration, skin and hair care, and menstruation. Like most self-help guides, menstruation is clearly the main focal point of Being Girl, as the central feature of the website is the YouTube channel “Period Diaries,” where teen girls explain various aspects of menstruation. Additionally, the website includes a “First Period” page, where various articles such as “8 Common Questions about Your First Period” and “First Period Stories” are featured and frequently read with over 900,000 views currently. Like the U by Kotex website, Being Girl is clearly marketing Procter & Gamble’s products while distributing information to girls. Articles such as “3 Signs of Your First Period” include links to the Always Totally Teen line of products, with sentences such as, “Most girls use pads for their

first period. Your first period will probably be fairly light, so Always Totally Teen pads will be a good choice of protection” (“3 Signs”). While the marketing of Proctor & Gamble branded products continues throughout the other articles, the content of the website is reflective of the vital content within many menstrual self-help guides. In an article titled “Dreading the first period talk? It’s not as bad as you think!,” girls are provided with step-by-step instructions in initiating a conversation with their parents. Additionally, Being Girl provides printable pre-written letters that young girls can give to their parents if they are too nervous to initiate the conversation. Letters are brief and are written in casual teen-speak. The “Can we talk?” printable letter states, “Dear [insert name here], You and I have had “the talk.” I’ve learned about it in health class. And, well, now ‘it’ has arrived! Let’s talk about it tonight—maybe on the way to the drugstore to get some that-time-of-the-month supplies. Isn’t this exciting?!” (“Dreading” n.p.). While the letters may help girls begin a conversation with their parents, and the “exciting” component of the letter attempts to switch the tone of period talks from fearful to positive, the avoidance of the words “period” or “menstruation” works in opposition of the letter’s positive undertones and reinforces the shame that girls are culturally conditioned to feel towards menstruation. Additionally, the letter is focused on commodities. “The talk” will occur on the way to purchase “that-time-of-the-month” supplies (assumedly Always branded products). The large Always logo at the bottom of the letter reinforces the commodity focus of the letter. While the printable letters may decrease the fear young girls have when discussing menstruation with their parents, the content of the letter itself is reflective of early instructional menstruation pamphlets—centralizing around commodities rather than the need for open dialogue regarding menstruation.

The letter format that is occurring through the Being Girl website is clearly opposing the way non-brand affiliated guides encourage young girls to talk to their parents about menstruation. American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of You* series focuses on the benefits of talking to parents about menstruation, with comments such as, "Find your mom, an older sister, or a woman you trust. Take a deep breath and say, 'I think I just got my period. Do you have something I can use?...There's no reason to be ashamed. The older person will probably remember how it felt her first time and will be glad to help'" (Natterson 69). Where the focus of the Being Girl letter format is commodities (seeing the parent as both transportation and financial resource), *The Care and Keeping of You* views the parent as a vital source of information, at least within the text. Instead of highlighting the importance of intergenerational communities, Being Girl focuses on the intragenerational community. While both forms of communities are important for pre-menarcheal girls, both Being Girl and the U by Kotex website fail to highlight the importance of parents. Instead, the website platforms view parents, and conversations with parents, as a means to an end. As framed in the Always letter format, "the talk" implies that a conversation with parents about menstruation occurs once, whereas the online community dialogue is continuous. Contrastingly, self-help guide texts encourage girls to talk to their parents more openly and frequently about menstruation—highlighting elder females as a valid educational resource.

While the content of the Being Girl website revolves around Proctor & Gamble products, the comments sections on the various menstruation-related articles work as message-boards to build a positive intragenerational online female community. In order to comment on a Being Girl article, users must register and create a Being Girl username. While registration requires an email address, there is no age restriction on the website. By reading through various usernames (e.g.

hockey_girl05, madddyie9, piegirlrocksthehouse) as well as the content of the messages, it can be assumed that the average commenter on the Being Girl website is a preteen or in her early teens. Over 3,000 comments have been posted on the “3 Signs of Your First Period” article. While a number of comments are from young girls sharing their first period stories, the majority of comments are questions and answers, as young girls work together to tell stories and share tips and information regarding menstruation. Questions primarily revolve around vaginal discharge, menstrual cramps, and period symptoms. Girls are quick to answer one another’s questions while also sharing their own experiences. When one user commented, “Quick question. I’ve realized that there is a light brown discharge in my underwear. Is that normal??? Thanks,” another user wrote, “Yes, it is normal to have a brownish discharge, it means that you should have your period soon. That’s what happened to me! Make sure to pack pads in your book bag...wear liners to if you haven’t all ready! Hope this helped!” (“Girls First”). While the intended purpose of the comments section may not have been to create a positive online community, Being Girl nevertheless provides an interactive platform for girls to seek answers, share stories, and help one another.

While positive communities are built within menstrual self-help guides such as *The Care and Keeping of You* series, the Being Girl website allows for real-time interaction that a physical book cannot provide. Additionally, the ways in which young girls happen upon the information within a self-help guide in comparison to an online community may have a significant contribution to their attitude towards the information. Self-help guides such as *The Care and Keeping of You* series are often purchased for girls by adults (most often, parents). While the series is extremely popular among young girls, unless the girl requests the book by name, it is often assumed that an adult is purchasing the book for her without being asked. Contrastingly,

girls who are accessing websites such as Being Girl are most likely doing so independently of their parents. Additionally, girls who have questions that are not addressed within the content of the articles posted on Being Girl are free to anonymously post their own concerns. However, if a concern a girl has is not addressed within a self-help guide, she is unable to anonymously pose a question. While girls may feel more comfortable reading through information and asking questions online and apart from their parents and other adults, the lack of focus on the importance of intergenerational female communities on the Being Girl website indicates a shift in the focus within menstrual education. This shift is extremely problematic, as it places a divide between younger and older females, encouraging dialogue between younger peers while viewing adults as financial resources rather than sources of information.

Just as the brands favor websites as platforms for community building, both the U by Kotex Tween and Always Totally Teen sanitary product lines rely on online promotions rather than television or print advertisements. While both the Kotex and Always products for tweens and teens are ideal marketing products for both girls' magazines and other media outlets aimed at preteen and early teenage girls, neither product has produced large-scale ads for either television or print magazines. While the online-focused marketing may indicate a shift in marketing strategies for preteen and teen products, it also reflects a larger societal issue of menstrual shame specifically towards younger females. In the few blog posts and articles posted on the U by Kotex Tween line, authors appear shocked and uncomfortable that tweens may require sanitary products. The dismissive attitudes adults place on the tween and teen products may be a reason that Kotex and Always have chosen to market their products for younger users strictly online. For example, on the popular parenting blog "Mommyish," author Koa Beck criticizes Kotex for capitalizing on young menstruating girls, in her 2011 blog post, "Kotex's Glittery Pads Are a

Way to Torture Mothers of Tweens.” Beck writes, “As if mothers of tweens don’t have enough things to stress about with their daughters. Now pads are a fashion accessory!” Refusing to acknowledge that the tween-specific line of products may help to dispel fears for young girls, Beck instead goes on the defense for mothers who feel burdened by their tween daughters. The comment section of Beck’s article indicates that tween users of the products feel drastically different than Beck, as comments from actual tweens praise the Kotex Tween line for its design and comfort. One commenter, Lilly, wrote, “Hey, take down this article! I’m 11 years old, and the kotex tweens [sic] are a lifesaver, because they actually fit!” Other commenters agreed with Lilly’s claim, stating that the Tween line made them feel less embarrassed about menstruation. While the “us-against-them” attitude that Beck presents is the opposite of the female community that self-help guides encourage, it is reflective of the intragenerational communities existing on the U by Kotex Tween and Always Totally Teen websites, as well as on the “mommy blogs.” Rather than viewing the products as beneficial for girls who reach menarche at a young age, Beck’s dismissive attitude towards the U by Kotex Tween line reflects the larger societal issue of viewing preteen females’ wants and needs as irrational and unimportant. While the products *are* working to capitalize on the tween market, the overwhelming positive responses from tweens indicate that a need existed for products designed for the younger menstruating female. The current trend in niche marketing is the preteen demographic. Yet, the U by Kotex Tween and Always Totally Teen products are doing more than capitalizing on the market; they are giving young females agency through both product design and their social networking platforms. Though still occurring under the umbrella of commodities, the online community shifts away from the menstrual shame that existed in earlier menstrual product promotions.

Voices from the (Period) Trenches

Whereas website platforms such as U by Kotex Tween and Always Totally Teen allow for interaction among menstruating preteens and teens, preteens have begun to use other social media platforms to discuss menstruation outside of the umbrella of corporations, which allows for more agency within the dialogue. However, the focus of the web-based platforms outside of corporate websites quickly refers back to corporations, as the primary concept of most platforms' discussions of menstruation is menstrual products. Many preteens and teens have created individual and collaborative YouTube channels which they use as a platform to discuss menstruation-related topics. Some of the most popular period-focused YouTube channels include: ForGirlsFromGirls (1,400 subscribers), girltalk132333 (1,748 subscribers), thoseperiodgirls (10,109 subscribers), and Precious Stars Pads (24,394 subscribers). Individual channels such as girltalk132333 and Precious Stars Pads spotlight individual girls producing YouTube videos, while collaborative channels such as ForGirlsFromGirls and thoseperiodgirls feature several girls ranging in ages from 12-14 years old filming individual videos for the channel. While the topics discussed in the videos range from first period stories to general menstruation question and answer sessions, the majority of the videos from all of the content creators are reviews and "hauls" of various sanitary products. Haul videos, which have become extremely popular on YouTube, are when a content creator features a run-through of items recently purchased, often discussing product details or highlights with a general review of the product. Through the focus on featuring a large amount of products, haul videos are the pinnacle of the commodification of menstruation and reflect the successful marketing of teen and tween sanitary products. An example of a menstrual product haul video is thoseperiodgirls' "Updated Period Storage ~ Cailey," a six minute haul and storage video in which thoseperiodgirls' content

creator Cailey discusses her period storage and gives reviews on the products she currently has within her period storage (over 25 different disposable sanitary products, including both U by Kotex Tween and Always Totally Teen). Cailey gives an overall review of each product, highlighting her favorites. The video currently has over 145,000 views—making it one of the most popular videos on thoseperiodgirls’ channel. Similar haul videos span the popular period-focused YouTube channels, with a comparable amount of products included. As menstrual products like U by Kotex Tween and Always Totally Teen have shifted to a more teen-focused appearance, the products themselves have shifted from necessities to collectibles. While the haul videos include reviews, the focus is on the quantity of products. The majority of content creators focus on disposable sanitary products (primarily sanitary napkins and panty-liners). However, some content creators like Precious Stars Pads focus specifically on reusable sanitary products, such as menstrual cups and cloth sanitary napkins. Yet, even reusable-central channels include haul videos featuring a large amount of products.

While some content creators show their faces on YouTube, the females on a majority of the popular menstruation YouTube channels film from the neck down. In an introductory video, Paris, one of the contributors to thoseperiodgirls, states, “I will never show my face. My family doesn’t know about my channel so this channel is anonymous... Well, they know about my channel but they don’t know what it’s about” (“Hi I am Paris”). While the content creators’ anonymity may suggest feelings of shame, the content itself indicates that girls are not uncomfortable discussing their periods and various menstrual products anonymously with the public. Similar to the anonymity provided on websites such as Being Girl, young girls are able to both post videos and comments on YouTube without any concerns about public embarrassment. However, it appears as though content creators like Paris are more uncomfortable in talking to

their parents about the content of their channel rather than their peers. These complex feelings of shame indicate that while social media platforms like YouTube have allowed for interactive female communities to exist among preteens and teenagers, the mother/daughter or adult/child female communities that are idealized in self-help guides are less easily attainable. The cliché phrase that “parents just don’t understand” aptly applies to this issue. While younger females recognize these YouTube channels as valid forms of information and connection, adults who may still be uncomfortable discussing menstruation with preteens and teenagers have difficulty seeing the validity of online female communities. However, the ongoing dialogue between preteens and teens on social media platforms and interactive websites such as the U by Kotex and Being Girl indicates that positive female communities *do* exist among the younger generation. While adults may be dismissive of online communities, young girls are finding methods to connect and receive information regarding menstruation. While most channels are anonymous, menstruation-focused YouTube channels may indicate a shift in menstrual education—transitioning from private conversations to more public and communal information.

Access to the internet has revolutionized not only the way in which young girls receive information regarding menstruation, but also the way in which they interact with their peers. However, as indicated on platforms such as U by Kotex, Being Girl, and even non-corporate sponsored platforms such as YouTube, commodities are central to the intragenerational female community. Whereas young girls build relationships through products and brand-names, the intergenerational female community builds relationships among shared experiences. The current focus on products, as well as the separation between pre- and post-menarcheal females, reflect the ongoing commodification of menstrual education. While young girls may feel comfortable being in anonymous dialogue with their peers, they lack guidance outside of product knowledge.

The focus on commodities in current media platforms within menstrual education highlights the need for intergenerational female communities. Current media platforms empower young girls to discuss menstruation, yet they do so under the umbrella of sanitary product corporations.

Conclusion—Breaking the Cycle: Where Do We Go From Here?

While there have been shifting pedagogical methods in regards to menstruation, the constant issues in menstrual education are shame and the lack of open conversation and dialogue due to feelings of embarrassment. Although puberty self-help guides such as American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of You* encourage young girls to discuss their fears with adults, the guides most often work as surrogates for intergenerational conversations. New media have allowed for young girls to participate in dialogues on menstruation, yet most online communities remain anonymous and intragenerational. Additionally, sanitary product “haul” videos produced by menstruating tweens and teens reflect how the sanitary product companies have succeeded in commodifying menstruation and menstrual education.

Through self-help guides, corporate-sponsored pamphlets, and online platforms, pre-menarcheal girls of the twenty-first century have access to more information surrounding puberty than all previous generations. However, readily-available information has only further bound girls within the period paradox as now more than ever before, young girls are expected to be “in the know” about menstruation. Unfortunately, the access to information has allowed for parents and guardians to easily avoid conversations with young girls, teaching girls to suppress any anxiety or fears while also implying a level of shame surrounding menstruation. Pre-menarcheal girls have access to instruction surrounding menstruation, yet due to the lack of public, face-to-face conversations, girls are taught to either suppress their concerns or seek answers independently through anonymous online platforms or printed self-help guides.

At the heart of the period paradox is Western society's dismissive attitude towards the concerns of preteen and teenage girls. As reflected in the backlash surrounding the U by Kotex Tween line, the concerns and needs of young girls are often dismissed as irrelevant and

inconvenient in the larger scope of society. This paradox then extends to most areas of girl culture. When preteen and early teenage girls voice concerns within an intergenerational public space, they are often labeled as “teenyboppers,” seen as naïve and materialistic, while unimportant to the larger culture. Yet it is often the marketing of large companies (like the sanitary product industry) that work to both reflect and perpetuate the tween stereotype as well as the paradox in which young girls exist. By downplaying the wants and needs of young girls, Western culture refuses to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of media and education, both of which force young girls to be in control of their own education while also stripping them of their right to be worried about such issues. From this perspective, Western culture sends a false empowerment message to young girls. Girls are able to feel empowered and vocal, but can often only do so within intragenerational communities.

In order to break the cycle of shame and commodification that not only surrounds menstrual education, but girl culture as a whole, scholars must continue researching and analyzing how girlhood in Western culture is constructed and commodified. Girlhood is not only a large silent space for parents and young girls themselves, but it is also a silent space among scholars of children’s literature and culture. In order to stop further perpetuation of shame and silence, scholars must continue to research and write into the silence, rather than away from it. By filling the research void with text and product analysis, scholars can validate the fears and concerns of young girls while also pushing for more open dialogue between younger and older generations of females. The fears and concerns felt by young girls are indicative of the cultures in which they are raised. Therefore, the dismissive attitudes towards and silencing of preteen and teenage girls reflect larger issues within a culture and should be both contextualized and analyzed accordingly. In order to truly send a message of empowerment to young girls, fears and

concerns must be addressed and validated within the public sphere through continuous open dialogue between intergenerational female communities.

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