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A Student's Journal: On Menstruation

Yolette Garaud
Melanie Kaye describes herself as “a 32-year-old lesbian who lives, works, and makes trouble in Portland, Oregon—sometimes all at once.”

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The following is an excerpt from a journal written for the Introduction to Women’s Studies course taught this year by Naomi Rosenthal at the State University of New York at Old Westbury. Yolette Garaud is not a native English speaker; she was born in Haiti in 1952 and came to the United States in 1971. She is now an undergraduate at Old Westbury, where she is majoring in biochemistry. Unable to write the first journal assignment, she produced the following piece within six weeks of the beginning of the course. Interestingly, according to the instructor, it was being asked to write on the topic of menstruation that elicited the students’ best papers and the highest degree of classroom unity.

When I was a child I was told that a girl past eight years old was not supposed to eat certain fruit, like pineapple. Anything that was sour was a no-no. When I asked my grandmother why, she told me that it was because at that age a girl’s body is changing and those fruits interfere with certain chemicals, and that death could be a result of such interference. Not knowing better, I just swallowed the story. Years after, I discovered it was just one of the thousands of myths surrounding menstruation.

I wonder why people make such a big deal about menstruation. Little boys are told the story about the birds and the bees as soon as their voices change. There is no myth about that, and they know what it means. It is the opposite for us girls. We have to learn everything the hard way. Our parents, our mothers were young once and knew the trauma of a young girl seeing blood coming between her legs thinking that she is dying. They should spare their daughters what they had to go through.

Every time I remember the hell that I went through because my family kept me in the dark, I swear that if I have a daughter I won’t let her learn about her body the hard way. As young girls we are programmed to ignore our bodies and their functions. It is a taboo (almost) for a girl to tamper with her body. A body is something to care for, not to enjoy. The first time I explored my body was when I was living with my lover and it was a thrilling experience.

I have a big laugh every time I remember the first time that I had my period. It was during the summer recess. I was playing house with a cousin who was visiting. As I was sitting down on the floor, she screamed and I asked her why. She told me there was blood on my underwear. I thought that I had hurt myself playing, so I swore my cousin to secrecy and went to bed faking a headache. I stayed in bed the whole day. I did not want my mother to know that I was hurt and maybe dying.

So here I was, a ten-year-old girl, lying on a bed, not knowing what was happening to me, scared to death. The only person I could talk to was my grandmother. I waited until my mother went to work to tell her. At first she laughed and told me that now I was “une jeune fille.” There is no translation in English for the concept behind this word. Let me try to explain it to you. When you are “une jeune fille” you are not a woman yet and not a child anymore. At times you are not allowed to go on a date without a chaperone (mainly because you could get pregnant). To go back to our story, my mother sat beside me, telling me that now I should not let boys touch my body because that could get me in trouble and I could also go to hell.

I could not wait for school to open so I could brag about having my period. Some children at school were always saying that they were told by their parents not to look at boys too much because they could get pregnant. So here I was hearing different stories. I did not know what to believe. I was so confused that one time I thought I was pregnant. How did that happen to a twelve-year-old? The whole thing was a misunderstanding on my part. One Sunday, I went to church without my grandmother. Instead of sitting in the family pew, I went to the balcony where most of the young people hung out. It was crowded. A young man was standing behind me. He was pressing his body so hard against me that I could feel his manhood. I ran home and went right to bed. I did not have a friend to confide in. So I went to the lady who used to do the washing in our house and asked her how people get pregnant. She told me the facts. I was mad because I went through hell for nothing.

During the first year my menstruation was a handicap to me because back home we do not use sanitary napkins. We used something like those cloth diapers, and they were white. We do not have washing machines, so we had to wash them by hand and they had to be white as snow. People could judge you by their whiteness. It was unbelievable. Your boy friend will pass by and will look for them hanging on the clothes line. It was embarrassing. Now I understand why we had to put them on display. It was a way to show our future husband how well we could wash.