

Reversing Eve's curse:

Mary Magdalene, Mother Earth and the creative ritualization of menstruation

Anna Fedele

From 2002 to 2005 I conducted fieldwork among what I came to identify as “Mary Magdalene pilgrims,” spiritual travelers to Catholic shrines in France that are dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene—sites such as Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, Saint-Maximin-en-Provence, La Sainte-Baume and Vézelay—but also shrines where dark Madonnas (that is, darkly colored statues) were venerated, such as Saint-Victor in Marseille and the Chartres cathedral. The pilgrims I accompanied traveled on their own or on organized tours, and included a British-American group, an Italian group and a group of Catalan and Spanish women. All the Iberian and Italian pilgrims had been raised Catholic, and in this article I focus on their theories and ritual practices as related to the menstrual cycle.

The pilgrims from traditionally Catholic countries such as Italy and Spain had come to reject traditional Catholic dogmas and rituals, finding instead what better suited their needs in the worldwide Goddess movement. Pilgrimage, then, was a way to “reclaim the power places” that they felt the “Church” had “appropriated” and transformed (Fedele 2013a, 2013b). Although the pilgrims I accompanied rejected Catholic religion as “patriarchal,” they did retain certain Catholic rituals and embraced theories that effectively transformed Christian figures such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene into Pagan gods and goddesses. Mary Magdalene, according to this discourse, was thus a kind of female equivalent or counterpart of Jesus whom the Church had demoted to a repentant sinner. The pilgrims from Italy and Spain, especially, remodeled Pagan theories that stemmed primarily from the United States and the United Kingdom (among others: Berger 1999; Pike 2001;

Salomonsen 2002; Magliocco 2001, 2004, Luhrmann 1989, 2001) to fit their Catholic backgrounds (Fedele 2013c). In order to reclaim “their” power places and “their” Mary Magdalene, these pilgrims needed to use Catholic churches and whatever theories about Magdalene that had been “created by the Church’s fathers.” There was a continuous tension then between their Christian background (and the misogynist and disempowering elements they experienced as inherent in this background) and their own spirituality. The Iberian group’s theories about the spiritual importance of menstruation coincided roughly with those of the other European and American pilgrims.

For brevity’s sake, I will refer to ethnographic descriptions of a specific group of Catalan and Spanish women I accompanied and their strategies to sacralize menstruation. Here, I analyze in detail a single personal ritual: the menstrual offering to Mother Earth created by Estrella, a Catalan pilgrim who was known for being the most committed to this kind of offering. This ritual, it should be said, mirrored one of the central rituals of the Iberian pilgrimage—the collective offering of menstrual blood, performed in the forest of the Sainte-Baume. Estrella’s personal ritual also had several elements in common with the offering of ritual blood to Mother Earth that the Italian pilgrims celebrated in the cave of the Sainte-Baume where, according to Christian legend, Mary Magdalene had resided after the death of Jesus.¹

This kind of menstrual ritual represents a striking case of blending: offering blood to Mother Earth using Christian symbols and actions while inverting their original meaning. Referring to the pilgrims’ ritual narratives I argue that, through the sacralization of menstrual blood, these women not only search for personal healing they also give voice to emotions that are ignored by religious and secular institutions, in other words, they challenge existing theories related to gender and sexuality. Through their rituals these pilgrims deconstruct the association between menstruation and female subordination (Héritier 1996), and try to repair a social order they perceive as oppressing women.

¹ For a detailed description of this collective ritual, as well as an analysis of Estrella’s life story, her theories and practices related to menstruation, see Fedele 2013a. For details about the Sainte-Baume, including the different meanings ascribed to it and the menstrual offering celebrated by the Italian pilgrims in the cave of the Sainte-Baume, see Fedele 2009, 2012, 2013a:83-122.

Goddess Wood and the sacralization of menstruation

The “Mary Magdalene’s Path, initiatory pilgrimage of the blood” was one of several activities that made up “Goddess Wood,” a group founded in 2002 by Dana, an Argentinean woman in her early fifties. In 2004 the group included nearly 300 women from different parts of Spain who participated now and then in rituals or workshops organized by Dana; of these, a group of 30-40 attended Goddess Wood’s activities on a regular basis. The women in this group derived most of their ideas and practices from American and British Pagans, but regarded the term “Pagan” as negatively charged and so preferred the use of terms such as “feminine spirituality” or “Goddess spirituality.”² Like Neopagans in the United States, Mary Magdalene pilgrims criticized institutionalized religion, particularly Christianity, as patriarchal and misogynistic; they held that the Christian vision of the body as a “place of sin” led Christians to despise the material world and to perceive sexuality as sinful. This general denigration of body and matter is, according to Neopagans, one of the principal causes of both the current ecological disaster and of widespread sexual abuse such as child molestation and the rape of women. In order to reverse this process, Neopagans advocate a sacralization of body and sexuality and a vision of nature and the planet Earth as inhabited by divine forces. Neopagans hope to realize this by creating non-hierarchical communities based on a deep respect for nature and for one another’s beliefs and choices.

The Catalan and Spanish women from Goddess Wood considered themselves the heirs of an ancient pre-Christian and pre-patriarchal cult of the Goddess; they also blamed Christians for the persecution of witches and for the patriarchal belief system that describes women as sinful daughters of Eve. My interlocutors emphasized the need to “re-consecrate matter” and to recover a deep connection with the Earth—what they identified as the divine feminine being, “Mother Earth.”

² The pilgrims shared theories and practices described by certain authors as “feminist spirituality” (e.g. Eller 1993), but held contrasting positions towards feminism (Fedele 2013a:151-152).

Influenced by theories derived from *Daughters of Copper Woman* (1981) by Anne Cameron³ (cf. Eller 1993:86), the women of Goddess Wood believed that Native American women once menstruated together (cf. Gottlieb 2002:382; Buckley 1988; Knight 1988; 1991; Lamp 1988), following the moon's cycle and gathered in moon huts, where the women sat on moss and bled directly onto the earth. Referring to the existence of an ancient matriarchal society, the Goddess Wood women also held that by offering their blood to Mother Earth, they were revitalizing an ancient matriarchal ritual that had been wiped out by Christianity's menstruation taboo. They held that, with the gradual imposition of patriarchal values, the blood flow that characterizes each woman's period of fertility and her power to give birth had been labeled impure, and dangerous. Mary Magdalene was a key figure in this syncretism between the Christian and pilgrim spirituality. Appearing both as "Jesus' companion" and as a priestess of the pre-Christian Goddess, Mary Magdalene was defined within Goddess Wood as "the guardian of the blood."

The pilgrims were assiduous readers and the leaders of the three organized pilgrimages I accompanied read book excerpts that affirmed their own assertions (Fedele 2013a). In the case of the menstrual blood offering, Dana's theories derived directly or indirectly from books and articles published in the 1990s about menstruation and female spirituality, including Lara Owen's popular article "The Sabbath of Women" (1991), Vicki Noble's *Shakti Woman* (1991) or Miranda and Robert Gray's *Red Moon, Understanding and Using the Gifts of the Menstrual Cycle* (1994). Such works present menstruation as a wise counselor that allows women to learn about their psychological problems and to heal themselves. The psychological and physical symptoms usually identified as PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome) are interpreted as a consequence of the general discomfort women experience, living in a world organized according to men's rules. These symptoms may then disappear if the woman recognizes her period is a sacred moment during which she is most likely to achieve self-insight. These and other theories derived from these works played an important role in

³ The pilgrims knew Cameron's theories indirectly, through books translated into Spanish that drew on Cameron's text.

the pilgrims' process of ritually transforming Christian dogmas and symbols.

When texts about the moon's influence on women's cycle and menstrual blood's ritual power included bibliographical references (many did not), they all referred to Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove's 1978 work, *The Wise Wound*.⁴ This book (incidentally, the earliest common source I could find) contains not only the most common theories about menstruation—theories I then heard from the pilgrims—but also their main ideas about Mary Magdalene. According to Shuttle and Redgrove, each woman who bravely heads out to discover her own menstrual cycle and transform the negativity surrounding it will find her way to her own source of power. This text, in turn, shed light on the strategy the pilgrims' used to confront the Christian belief system in their discourses and their rituals, a strategy which consisted of taking the basic tenets of the Christian cosmivision, its images, symbols, stories and rituals and attributing to them the opposite meaning. According to this reinterpretation, the original Christian tenet is patriarchal and misogynist, while the new version is more authentic and more sexually egalitarian.⁵ For Shuttle and Redgrove, menstruation is a blessing that was turned into a curse, and it is this inversion, labeling more than half the world's population as inferior, that explains the aggressiveness of Western civilization. In Christian terms, menstruation is construed as Eve's curse and thus evokes fear and pain. But if a woman learns not to be afraid of her sexuality and the blood she sheds monthly, neither menstruation nor childbirth need be experienced as painful. In this way, the authors, who describe menstruation as “a moment of truth which will not sustain lies,” (2005:56) see it as inspiring women to confront the lies upon which Western society is based.

Overlooked in this critique are basic misogynistic assumptions in Christianity and Christian history. Shuttle and Redgrove accept, for instance, that most of the women burned in witchcraft persecutions really were witches, rather than ordinary women who confessed under torture—a stance

⁴ The book itself had not been translated into Spanish or Italian; the pilgrims had read its main theories in translations of *Shakti Woman* or in *The Sacred Prostitute* (Qualls-Corbett 1988).

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the literature on menstruation that influenced the pilgrims, see chapter 5 in Fedele 2012.

that in effect confirms the witch-hunters' assumptions.⁶ In fact, the conclusion drawn by the authors, and the pilgrims for that matter, is that all women are potential witches and the basis for their power is menstruation.

An especially important reference for Dana and the Goddess Wood pilgrims was Lara Owen's now-classic article about menstruation, the Spanish version of which was easily found on the Web. In "The Sabbath of Women" (1991) Owen argues:

When you find the places where a culture splits from a natural truth you have found a key - a way inside the diseases of the culture. I began to understand that the split between, on the one hand, the wisdom and power of bleeding that I was perceiving, and on the other, modern society's attitudes to the womb, lay at the heart of the subjugation and denial of female reality and experience.

The movement affirming the power and importance of menstruation had developed by the end of the 1980s. Together with movements that helped women to establish a new relationship with their vaginas, like that described in *The Vagina Monologues* (Enslin 2004:43-50), workshops on menstruation offered women positive images and ideas about their reproductive cycle.⁷ Not surprisingly, Lara Owen's article became a kind of menstrual manifesto for this movement. Regarding her own offering of menstrual blood, she says:

It was a mixture of things, it was a sacrament; it was recognizing that my blood was fertilizing the earth, that it was useful, that my blood had a use, a purpose, that it wasn't just something to flush down the toilet, rich in minerals; it was a connection to the earth; it was also a sacrament, I was

⁶ In her *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (1996), Diane Purkiss refers to these and other theories as the "Myth of the Burning Times"; she also deconstructs them.

⁷ One of the most important foundations in this area in the United States is the Red Web Foundation (<http://www.redwebfoundation.org>). In 2007, its advisory board included Vicki Noble, the author of *Shakti Woman* (1991), and Christiane Northrup, who publishes on woman's health and sexuality. Most of Dana's pilgrims were familiar with Northrup's book, *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health* (1994).

working with the idea of the blood of Jesus turning into wine and the idea that the original blood was sacrificial blood from animals, but maybe before it was menstrual blood.

(Personal interview, May 28, 2005)

As we see below, the relationship between Jesus' blood as a sacrifice for humanity and the sacrality of women's menstrual blood is key to the personal and collective rituals of menstrual offering to Mother Earth.

Before continuing, however, I should point out that applying anthropological theories about menstrual rituals to the Magdalene pilgrims' ritual choices is complicated by the fact that such theories and practices are based in part on popularizations of classic anthropological theories, such as those in Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966) and Alma Gottlieb and Thomas Buckley's *Blood Magic; The Anthropology of Menstruation* (1988). Moreover, as other scholars have pointed out (among others: Jencson 1989; Bell 1997:263-264; Grimes 2000:100-107; Salomonsen 2003; Pike 2001:20; Gilmore 2011:98-102), contemporary ritual creators also draw upon ritual theories such as those of Arnold Van Gennep, Mircea Eliade, James Frazer, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Ronald Grimes and others to create their ceremonies. Such "textual poaching" (Jenkins 1992) is typical of "New Age" as well as Pagan rituals, and when analyzing these rituals it is important to keep in mind this textual dimension.⁸

The Offering of Blood to the Earth

Some months after participating in the "initiatory pilgrimage of the blood" following "the path of Mary Magdalene" and taking part in the collective offering of menstrual blood to the Earth celebrated in the wood of the Sainte-Baume, I explained to fellow pilgrims that I wanted to learn how to offer

⁸ For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see Fedele 2008 and 2013a, an important part of which is dedicated to the analysis of texts that have influenced the pilgrims.

my own blood to Mother Earth. They suggested that I ask Estrella, who regularly made these kind of offerings and had already taught other pilgrims how to initiate their own rituals.

Here, I analyze Estrella's personal offering; an exploration of the pilgrims' responses to the collective blood offering at the Sainte-Baume appears later in the essay.

With her long black hair and colorful skirts Estrella looked like a proud Roma, and she herself admired the Roma. Born in 1968 into a conservative Catholic family in a town near Tarragona, Spain, Estrella had suffered from the "macho" attitude of both her father and elder brother, who made her feel that "being a woman, she had to obey." Every Sunday her mother would go to mass to fulfill a vow made when Estrella's father had nearly died from a severe accident. At 17 Estrella moved away from home, to Barcelona, to study at an art college and she later specialized in photography. Until the age of 30, she led a self-described promiscuous life, going out nightly, having multiple affairs and so on. Eventually, however, she felt she wanted to change, and after a trip to India she began to lead a quiet life that included meditation and studying the kabbalah. Since 2000 she has regularly attended rituals held by a heterogeneous group of Latin-American "shamans" who either lived in Barcelona or visited there to hold workshops and who advocated for the recovery of Native American traditions; some also used sacred plants—marijuana, peyote, infusions such as the ayahuasca drink—in their rituals. In 2001 Estrella began to join Dana's ritual activities and to study healing using crystals. When I met her she was working as a freelance photographer, struggling to earn a living.

One cold day in the autumn of 2004 Estrella led me into a wood just outside Barcelona where, at a chosen spot, we were to offer our menstrual blood to Mother Earth. While looking for the ritually appropriate place, Estrella explained that she had been offering her menstrual blood since 2000, following the invitation of an elder Mexican shaman woman who would visit Barcelona once a year to hold workshops for women and sweat lodges for men and women, both. During her workshops, she invited women not to discard their blood—in effect, throw away their personal power. As the

expression of a woman's power, menstrual blood should be offered to Mother Earth, she urged, much as indigenous Mexican women would do.

The day before my meeting with Estrella, I had followed her instructions exactly and collected my menstrual blood in a bowl by wringing out my sanitary napkin (which had been soaked in water) and conserving the blood-and-water mixture in the refrigerator. I had also chosen food that I felt I wanted to offer to the Earth. Once we found the place in the woods that she felt was appropriate, Estrella created a protective circle (*círculo de protección*) to chase away evil spirits and create a safe environment. She did this by standing in the middle of an imaginary circle and, beginning at the east, tracing a circle clockwise, saying "God, in thy name I trace this circle." She then summoned the seven directions (the four cardinal points, the center, Father Sky and Mother Earth), while reading from a sheet of paper that contained instructions from Dana.

We sat down inside the circle and each began to dig a hole in the earth to create "the altar" for our offering. Estrella then drew out a red bag which held a red glass, a red bottle and several crystals. She had also brought along apples, oranges, a pomegranate, walnuts and some chestnuts. Each of us lit a candle and an incense stick at the top of our altar-hole. (Instinctively, I had dug a round hole, while Estrella had given her hole the ovoid shape of a vagina.) She decorated her altar-hole, laying a red silk shawl and several crystals around the brim. Near the candle, she set out the Star tarot card, which she associated with Mary Magdalene—the card features a woman pouring water from two jugs, which, according to Estrella, symbolized the two ovaries. She then handed me a card with an icon of Mary Magdalene holding a red egg in her hand, symbolizing women's ovaries and the process of menstruation. Also on Estrella's altar were her magic wand and a picture of Amma, a living Indian saint who is believed to be an incarnation of the Divine Mother. Each of us then drew a card from a set of Native American-themed cards that depicted sacred animals, putting our cards on our respective altars. (Each of our chosen animals would wisely suggest appropriate changes and

teachings to adopt during the period before our next menstruation.) Following Estrella's example, I decorated the inside of the hole with fruit and the food I had brought with me.

At this point, Estrella began to sing ritual chants invoking the Virgin Mary, the four elements and Mother Earth, after which she poured her blood from the red bottle into the red glass, lifting the glass briefly while asking Mother Earth to accept the blood, then letting the blood sink and flow into the fruit-filled hole. She then added honey as the blood filtered down slowly, and bathed some of her crystals in this mixture.

I followed her example. Once the liquid had been absorbed Estrella suggested that we "lay down on Mother Earth so that She could take away from me all the negative energy." After some time spent lying on the ground, Estrella offered tobacco to Mother Earth, inviting her again to accept the blood; she then asked that the psychological and physical problems she was having be resolved. After completing the offering, we covered both our altars with earth. Estrella then dismissed the spirits of the four directions and closed the protective circle. At that point we left.

A re-volution of the Christian worldview

As Sabina Magliocco has shown (2001), the altar is a central element of Neopagan rituals, allowing practitioners to establish a relationship between the human and divine dimensions. Home altars of Neopagans include ritual objects such as their sacred cup and knife, images of gods and goddesses, crystals and pictures of loved ones. Objects placed on the altar serve to focus the person's attention on a particular aim or goal. Pagans consider these objects much as they would symbols with the power to tap the unconscious and help a person to gather and mobilize whatever energy is needed to attain the desired goal (Magliocco 2001: 8-9). Estrella referred to this symbolic function of the altar when explaining to me that "the altar has to be beautiful, because the beauty brings healing power with it."

After our offering in the woods, I asked Estrella how she had chosen which elements to put on the altar, whether she always used the same objects and how I could choose objects for any future offerings I might make. Estrella did not provide exact indications but rather general guidelines based on my own intuitions and feelings. She said that there were some elements she always used, like the red glass and the magical wand; usually, she added, she would throw a card to help her glean information about whatever issues were important to attend to during the following cycle. But for this particular offering, there were other objects she had wanted to bring along as she prepared her bag for our outing. Then there were the fruits, which would vary depending on the season, as would the other kinds of food one might want to offer. I should rely on my intuition, she stressed, choose objects I felt were powerful and decorate the altar in a way that conveyed to me a feeling of beauty. On this, as on many other occasions when participating in crafted rituals, I found that the person most concerned about the exact ritual sequences, restrictions and objects was the anthropologist. For ritual creatives, it is their own emotions and bodily responses to the ritual that take precedence over obedience to ritual schemes (Fedele 2013:145-190). Even so, a ritual cannot be created *ex nihilo*, and ritual creatives invariably draw on existing theories and traditions to construct their ceremonies (Grimes 2000:4). In the case of the Spanish pilgrims, they followed Neopagan theories and practices while also integrating many Christian symbols, figures and gestures. Even when trying to struggle free from Christian limitations and biases that they themselves experienced as world- and female-denying, these women returned to the very symbols and actions they had interiorized growing up in a world imbued with Christian values.

The inverted Christian symbols and ritual actions in Estrella's offering were those particularly associated with the Eucharist, seemingly in correspondence with Estrella's desire (and the desire of the other members of Goddess Wood) to up-end the world order created by patriarchal Christianity. In this inversion, Mary Magdalene assumes a key role as the female equivalent of Christ and the guardian of menstrual blood.

Describing the healing process of the blood offering, Estrella turns to the language of metaphor:

When you offer your blood to the Earth, it is as if you lower your blood inside a vessel down to the earth. I mean, you lower it to the well to draw some water from it, but at the same time you leave your water. Then you pull up the container again and the energy is so powerful because it is the energy from Mother Earth. She makes the energy rise up to the heart and there you meet Mary Magdalene.

(Personal interview, September 18, 2005)

The offering thus allowed Estrella to establish a deep bond—literally, blood ties—with Mother Earth and Mary Magdalene, the two female entities she perceived as being most closely related to menstruation. As we will see later on, other women from Goddess Wood also described the healing effects they experienced emotionally and physically, relating them to issues of gender and sexuality. Like Estrella the women tended to describe their healing experiences in terms of energy (Fedele 2009), using psychological terms. For the members of Goddess Wood, Mary Magdalene symbolized the archetype of the lover, the woman who dissociated sexuality and maternity and was therefore linked to the process of menstruation. As the guardian of menstrual blood, Mary Magdalene expressed both the beginning of fertility that brings with it the onset of sexual liaisons, and the absence of ongoing maternity. The woman who was sexually active without being married and/or with no children was no longer seen as the Christian sinner or the mother who failed to fulfill her duties as child bearer, but as the sacred lover who was able to offer her blood to nurture Mother Earth, much as Christ had offered his blood for humanity.

These particular notions and ideas derived from texts linked to the Goddess movement (Noble 1991; Owen 1993)—texts whose authors state that before the arrival of patriarchal religions, blood

sacrifices were menstrual blood offerings and thus did not involve wounding or killing either animals or humans. In the sedentary and peaceful ancient matriarchal societies, the menstrual blood was considered sacred, and there was no need for the bloodshed of warfare (Eller 1993:168). By contrast, a patriarchal belief system founded upon the domination of men holds that menstrual blood is considered dangerous and impure; and the link between women and this impure blood is used to justify their inferiority and to inculcate sin and shame about embodiment. Books and articles about the sacredness of menstruation often point out that by stigmatizing menstrual blood and associating it with the fall of mankind through the figure of Eve, what could be the very symbol of women's power and creativity has been converted into that of sinfulness. As we have seen, Lara Owen's text (above) figures large in such literature, and invites women not only to recognize the process of demonizing menstruation fostered by Christianity but to break free from this view of their period.

Estrella, like the American and British Neopagans and the other Mary Magdalene pilgrims I encountered, believed that social change could begin only with the individual (cf. Fedele 2014). Consequently, a key turning point in healing the social order would be ever-increasing numbers of women who had healed their relations to their menstrual cycle and experienced this physical process as sacred. By offering their blood to the earth, these women would re-establish an ancient alliance with Mother Earth that would reinforce their power and self-esteem as women. Celebrations of the menarche and menopause through "rites of passage" also helped Goddess Wood's members embrace these processes of deep personal change (Fellous 2001; Houseman 2007, 2010; Salomonsen 2003).

Through their menstrual rituals and especially their menstrual blood offering to Mother Earth, these women were inverting basic tenets of the Christian tradition, thereby advocating revolution in the original sense of the term: turning *upside down* Christian symbols and rituals so that body and spirit could be unified and wholly inhabited by the divine, and menstrual blood and sexuality, otherwise considered impure and dangerous, could become sacred and healing. The divine force now resided in the earth, rather than in heaven, and possessed female traits, as opposed to those associated

with God the Father. The blood offering of Estrella, a ritual created by integrating her own intuitive ideas, images and notions with those she had gleaned from teachers with the Goddess movement in Barcelona, symbolized this inversion. A formal scheme of these opposing and analogous Christian and Neopagan elements can be seen in Table 1, below.

Table 1:

Christian Eucharist

Male blood

Provoked and controllable outflow

Sacred blood

Healing blood

Offered in a cup

Communion with God Father / Jesus

Offering of menstrual blood

Female blood

Spontaneous and uncontrollable outflow

Sacred blood

Healing blood

Offered in a cup

Communion with Mother Earth

and Mary Magdalene

Each element of the ritual is a material, creative expression of Estrella's ideas and values. The altar is dug into the earth, as opposed to constructed vertically, above ground. Incense and candles are used, as in Christian churches, but the figures venerated are Mary Magdalene and Amma, the incarnation of the Divine Mother. Blood is offered in a cup together with food, fruit of the land. What Estrella offered is not red wine symbolizing Christ's blood—that is, issue from a man-made wound that in turn foreshadowed death—but real female blood which flowed spontaneously and naturally from a woman's womb, mixed with another earth element, that of water. Symbolically, the blood referred to Mary Magdalene, guardian of menstrual blood, Jesus' lover and female counterpart, and testified to woman's potential to give birth. Altogether, these elements exert their ritual power: so, just as God's bliss descends from the sky to worshippers below who celebrate the Eucharist and commune with Jesus, so Mother Earth receives the offering and radiates her healing power, absorbing "negative energy" back into herself.

According to the Catholic belief system, when the faithful participate in the Eucharist they consume the blood and flesh of Jesus, which is present thanks to the miracle of transubstantiation; it is this offering of his own blood for mankind by which Christ atoned for original sin. The women pilgrims with Catholic backgrounds wanted to find a way to show that menstruation was not a curse caused by the first woman's sin, but a blessing for women and for men. They therefore enacted a ritual equivalent to that of the Eucharist but without the intervention of a male divinity. Even so, Dana was surprised when I pointed out the similarity between the Eucharist and her performance of the collective offering of menstrual blood to the Earth at La Sainte-Baume, saying she had never thought about it, although she then agreed that there were several similarities.

What struck me was that Estrella had developed her ritual offering after 2002, independent of Dana, and yet there were many similarities between both created rituals. Dana had never formally been Catholic, but did have a good relationship with the Christian belief system, Catholic churches

and even statues. Estrella, on the contrary, rejected her Catholic upbringing, criticized her parents' religiosity and distrusted members of the Catholic Church. Catholic rituals provoked her disgust and anger. Nevertheless, both Dana's and Estrella's rituals involved the invocation of spirits, the creation of an altar, and the offering up of blood in a chalice. There were other similarities as well between the Goddess Wood common offering and Estrella's. Both were centered on a hole dug in the ground. Dana's common ritual emphasized sharing the blood by inviting the pilgrims to drink from a chalice that contained wine mixed with the homeopathic dilution of the women's own menstrual blood, ritually prepared the prior evening.⁹ Dana thereby reinforced a sense of sisterhood and the bonds with Mother Earth but also allowed the women to incorporate the divine by ingesting it, not unlike what transpires when bread and wine are shared during the Eucharist.¹⁰ Estrella's ritual was centered on communing with the healing forces received from Mother Earth. She did not drink her blood during the offering; that said, she had drunk it for several months in the form of a homeopathic dilution, in order to gain strength and healing.¹¹

From an analytical standpoint, we can see that by replacing Jesus' blood with menstrual blood, the pilgrims were trying to ritually deconstruct the associations they felt existed between menstruation, impurity and female subordination. These associations had to be addressed; for one thing, the blood of Christ and menstrual blood both have ambiguous status because both are linked to life and death, purity and impurity. In Western Christianity (Rousseau 2005), for instance, the blood that issued from the body because of menstrual periods or because of wounds was identified with the Latin word "cruor." "Sanguis" referred to the blood circulating through the body; safely contained, as

⁹ For a detailed description of the preparation of this homeopathic dilution of menstrual blood, see Fedele 2013a: 145-190.

¹⁰ This ritual had striking similarities to the way in which the mass is celebrated by the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, a religious organization founded at the beginning of the 20th century and influenced by the teachings of the English occultist Aleister Crowley, also an influential figure for Neopagans. In that mass microscopic amounts of blood and semen are ingested, amounts which have either been diluted in wine or baked into communion bread. I am grateful to Sabina Magliocco for pointing this out to me.

¹¹ The card depicting Mary Magdalene that Estrella integrated into her ritual offering after the pilgrimage, as well as the legend related to the card, offer another parallel between menstruation and Christ's sacrificial blood (Fedele 2013a: 183).

it were, this blood signified the life force; the *cruor*, however, was considered impure, a sign of the body's corruptibility and mortality, symbolizing life ebbing from the body. Christ's blood, theologically speaking, is unlike all other human blood; it supersedes the ordinary opposition of pure and impure by implying impurity and purity, fall and redemption (Rousseau 2005:8-9). By associating menstrual blood with Jesus' blood, the Goddess Wood pilgrims endowed menstrual blood with special status: as the only blood that flows spontaneously out of the human body, without wounding or harm, women's menstrual flow makes Jesus' sacrifice, and any further shedding of blood, unnecessary.

Historical studies about Christianity confirm that these pilgrims were not alone in associating menstrual blood with that of Jesus. Medieval Christian believers, according to historian Caroline Walker Bynum, might "see the blood Christ shed in the circumcision and on the cross as analogous to menstrual blood or to breast milk" because "all human exudings – menstruation, sweating, lactation, emission of semen and so on — were seen as bleedings; and all bleedings – lactation, menstruation, nosebleeds, hemorrhoid bleeding and so on — were taken to be analogous" (1991:113-114). Dana's pilgrims used the similarities between these two bloods to neutralize negative conceptualizations of menstruation and to assert the sacrality of menstrual blood—attesting to its equality to that most sacred of all blood, at least in Christian terms, that of Jesus.

Healing the body, repairing the social order

The 2002 JRS special issue "Blood Mysteries: Beyond Menstruation as Pollution" edited by Janet Hoskins explores theories and practices related to menstruation from a transcultural perspective. Building upon Gottlieb's and Buckley's findings (1988), the authors in this issue do not consider menstrual beliefs and restrictions an expression of some universal taboo that operates uniformly around the globe. These articles further consolidate Buckley and Gottlieb's theory that menstrual

flow can be used in unexpected, empowering ways. Hoskins, however, seems critical of what she identifies as “the New Age fashion of glorifying menstruation”; referring to Lara Owen’s article, Hoskins criticizes the “New Age” “eclipsing mention” of menstruation’s “reported dangers,” and “purging cultural associations with death, disease, and loss” (2002:299).

It is true that some of Dana’s pilgrims tended to romanticize the ways in which menstrual blood was conceptualized in traditional societies, but my own fieldwork validates the fact that my interlocutors were well aware of menstruation’s associations with death, disease and loss (Fedele 2013a:191-216). The pilgrims were not passive receptacles of theories they had read in books or heard in workshops (Fedele 2013a:3-29), and several were familiar with menstrual taboos and preconceptions still very much alive in places such as Italy or Spain or in Mexico and Argentina (Fedele 2013a:145-190). My interlocutors used ritual to address the ambiguity of menstruation—a cycle that symbolizes not only fertility but also the failure to conceive (Van de Walle and Renne 2000; Hoskins 2002:199). They also opposed the rules about corporeality and sexuality they had received from their Catholic families, stating their right to embrace sexuality independent of the pressure to procreate (Fedele 2013a:145-216).

Buckley and Gottlieb (1998) have also shown convincingly that menstruation is not necessarily marked because it is linked to a subordination (see also Stewart and Strathern 2002) based on women’s association with nature and the domestic sphere. However, even if I agree that the relationship between menstruation as a marked bodily process and female subordination should not be taken for granted, I also believe it is important to bear in mind that this association exists not only in many traditional societies but also in contemporary Western societies, where it continues to have a powerful grip over conceptualizations of corporeality and reproduction. It was this persistent negative association that the pilgrims wanted to deconstruct through their theories and ritual practices.

This tension—or continuity—between traditional and contemporary attitudes towards women cannot be underestimated. Françoise Héritier’s analysis of male and female in traditional societies

(1996), for instance, highlights the fact that female menstrual blood is considered uncontrollable (woman cannot prevent its flow), while men's blood flow is provoked by an inflicted wound, and so can be controlled; that is, it can be both provoked and stopped. Then Héritier shows how, going back to Aristotle (1996:26), this biological fact has been interpreted culturally as a sign of female inferiority, and the notion that women cannot master their bodies is then used to justify women's social oppression. Unlike men, who can make blood flow as part of hunting or fighting, fertile females experience periodic bleeding which is beyond their control (1996: 234-235).

By contrast, the women of the Goddess Wood conceptualized this spontaneous flow of blood as a sign of women's superiority; they could bleed without suffering, without having to be wounded. Furthermore, women could decide to offer their blood for the sake of humanity, just as Christ's blood sacrifice had redeemed humanity from original sin. For them, in pre-patriarchal times at least, such an offering once resulted in the disappearance of human sacrifice in war and the reign of a period of peace during which matter, the Earth, the body and sexuality were all honored—a period that led to equality between women and men. Through their offerings, the pilgrims wanted not only to transform the relationship they had with their periods but also to provoke a shift in the social perception of menstruation. Using Héritier's terms, we could say that through their rituals, the pilgrims transformed menstruation from a sign of women's inferiority and the inability to master their own bodies into a sign of women's superiority that signaled their ability to bleed without having to be wounded.

These crafted rituals, then, allowed participants to invest their bodies with new meanings that were also perceived as repairing the current social order (see also Salomonsen this volume). The women created a physical bond with the divine, a blood tie uniting them with Mother Earth; at the same time they embodied the divine, celebrating their own blood as sacred and ingesting it by drinking. When they spoke about the collective ritual of offering during the pilgrimage, the women described feelings of communing with the other pilgrims and a sense of unity with Mother Earth. Dana had explained that “the offering of blood was an initiation ritual” that marked a change in each

pilgrim's life: women would feel that there had been a distinct before and after—no longer were they the person they had once been. Most of the pilgrims agreed with her assessment, saying that after the pilgrimage, and particularly after the ritual of blood offering, they did in fact feel different.

Maria Antònia, a woman in her late fifties, had grown up in a hard-working Catalan family where she had learned to deny what she identified as her “femininity.” She told me about the important change that she experienced after the menstrual offering she had performed with her fellow pilgrims in the wood of the Sainte-Baume, how it had affected her capacity to live out her femininity:

It was a total liberation and I think that from that point on there really began to exist a before and an after. I had experienced the rest of the pilgrimage more internally, but that was for me the moment of inflection, there was a major change after that moment, a change within (...) I think that there was, I would say that a change in my perception took place, (...) from that moment on I felt myself really a woman. Woman, goddess, or... but I really felt my connection with the Feminine. For me that was the absolute change of perception, in that moment and after that moment even more. But I feel that was, for me, the first ritual of total connection with my femininity, with the Feminine, in capital letters. I mean, with the Goddess, with the Mother, with the Earth. I became really conscious of my being, of my person, of my interior as feminine and I know that this represented a before and after. Because the previous events were, I suppose, steps towards this, but from that ritual onwards everything was really totally different. And I know that my life has changed from that moment. (June 4, 2005)

I asked what Antònia meant when she spoke about a feeling of “connection with the Feminine.” Had she never had that feeling before? How did it manifest itself? Antònia answered that she was familiar with the feeling, she had experienced it on special occasions in the past, but she had not been able to identify it as such, she “was not conscious of it”:

I had no consciousness of it. Because of my human experience, as a consequence of the kind of society I lived in, the environment I lived in, femininity was not an element that was really [considered] important. I renounced living out my femininity for a very long time, I accepted it [my femininity] grudgingly because there was no other solution. It was clear that physically I was a woman, but it was very hard for me to accept my femininity. But I really think that from that day on, I was able to reconcile with my femininity in an authentic way, from the most profound part of my being. (June 4, 2005)

Space prohibits our exploring the ritual experiences of the other pilgrims; suffice it to say that others told stories of healing (Fedele 2013a:145-216) which also showed that their crafted rituals had offered them ways of enacting values and embodying new meanings, of helping the women to redefine their identity in terms of gender, sexuality and religion. As Maria Antònia's example shows, these rituals allowed the pilgrims to live out parts of themselves they felt they could not acknowledge or deal with beforehand. In other words, these crafted rituals served as a "means to explore alternatives" (Grimes 2006:135), at once a way to demonstrate that a different world is possible, and to experience that world.

According to the women of Goddess Wood the inversion of meaning ascribed to the menstrual cycle and the menstrual blood offering to a female, immanent divinity as Mother Earth might well lead to inverting the present social and ideological system. Ideally, at least, this offering had once led to the end of human sacrifice in warfare and to an extended period of peace during which the Earth, body and sexuality were honored, as was the equality of men and women. The women of Goddess Wood did not want to return to a patriarchal society; what they wanted was a new, non-hierarchical society based on gender equality.

Dana's pilgrims also stated their right to dissociate sexuality from procreation and to offer the blood shed as a consequence of their choosing not to conceive to nurture Mother Earth. To them, the

menstruating woman was giving birth to a new, more conscious self. Most of the pilgrims I accompanied rejected the contraceptive pill, for instance, as offering a “fake” menstruation; they also opposed hormone therapy during menopause. Dana even said that governments should allow menstruating women to take time off work, although she did not address the effect of such a law on attempts to gain equality in the workplace.

Emily Martin does just that, by suggesting a possible relationship between the premenstrual syndrome and the working conditions of women in late industrial societies (Martin 1988:161-185). She observes that women’s performance does seem to decline premenstrually. Literature about the premenstrual syndrome describes women as malfunctioning, needing to have their “hormonal imbalances fixed,” instead of questioning the way in which work and society are structured and the constant discipline and productivity related to it (Martin 1988:165). Martin also suggests that the anger women perceive premenstrually may derive from their “perception, however inarticulate, of their oppression in society” and their “coercion into roles inside the family and out that demand constant nurturance and self-denial” (Martin 1988:177).

In accordance with Martin’s theories the pilgrims refused to see their bodies as dysfunctional and to consider emotions such as the anger surfacing before and during the menstrual period, as inappropriate for women. They saw menstruation and its related emotional states as an opportunity to recognize emotions that were typically suppressed at other times during a woman’s cycle. Menstrual emotions therefore appeared to these women as a monthly alert to check-in emotionally and to address problematic aspects of their lives. They held that women who were choosing to menstruate (that is, neither to conceive nor take oral contraceptives) could use their life-creating potentialities to foster their own spiritual elevation and to work towards a new kind of society based on equality between men and women.

We can see that the pilgrims’ rituals focused on healing with respect to both the individual and the social body. Their menstrual rituals were a means not only of coming to terms with their own

menstrual cycle but also opposing the ways in which menstruation and, more generally, the female body were conceptualized by the social order—an order these women experienced in their everyday lives.

Social scientists have observed that the dominant Western paradigm distances women from their bodily processes and that the biomedical model presents female bodies, especially, as dysfunctional and in need of being fixed (among others: Martin 1987; Davis-Floyd 1992; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996; Klassen 2001). However, we must bear in mind that using these texts to analyze the pilgrims' theories and practices is complex, for the very reason that such rituals have been influenced by popularized versions of many of these very texts. Nevertheless, drawing on the ethnographic examples I have analyzed here, we can see how these crafted rituals offer a clear strategy of resistance against cultural processes of bodily distanciation and alienation. This kind of alienation seems to be particularly evident in the case of menstruation, as the menarche histories of girls in the United States clearly show (Golub 1992; Houppert 1999; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996). Menarche and more generally menstruation are still experienced with great shame and discomfort (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996), a fact that attests "to the continuing existence of a virtual taboo against discussion of the subject in most contexts" (Gottlieb 2002:385). The virtual nature and consequent invisibility of this taboo makes it particularly difficult to acknowledge and deconstruct it.

Conclusion

Consistently, we have seen that rather than rejecting Christian imagery and theories, the Mary Magdalene pilgrims I accompanied accepted Christianity's basic assumptions, attributing to them a wholly different meaning—in effect, radically transforming such assumptions. Frustrated by the secondary role assigned to women in the Catholic Church and by the rigid and disempowering education received in conservative Catholic families, the women of Goddess Wood had gradually

learned to see familiar Christian figures in a new light, even finding a new way of accessing the Catholic pantheon. Advocating a feminist reading of Jesus' message, Dana and the other members of Goddess Wood managed to blend two apparently opposed belief systems and to make peace with opposing tendencies: the attraction they felt towards the well-known Christian figures and rituals, and their deep desire to feel fully accepted as independent women, body and flesh. Just as they reinterpreted the harlot Magdalene as a sacred prostitute and priestess of the Goddess, so the pilgrims reinterpreted many other Christian elements; this process of reinterpretation culminated in the ritual offering of menstrual blood to Mother Earth, a ritual performed collectively as well as individually. I have argued that through this ritual these women took the central ritual of Christianity, the Eucharist, and turned it upside down. Using this subversive strategy, the women ritually transformed menstruation from a curse into a blessing, thereby acquiring, and embodying, new images, ideas, beliefs and values about the body and sexuality.

For the pilgrims, menstrual blood represented a symbolically and physically powerful departure point for the transformation of a male-dominated world. By replacing the blood of Christ during Eucharist with an offering of their own menstrual blood, in effect, usurping the traditional role of priest by serving as the offering priestess, the women autonomously established the importance of their wombs and bodies and their right to dialogue directly with the divine. Opposing some of the most controversial issues currently facing the Catholic Church (contraception, extramarital sex, women's right to priesthood), Goddess Wood's members considered themselves followers of the example set by Mary Magdalene, who knew about the mysteries of sacred blood and sacred sexuality, and who shared her wisdom and power with Jesus. In this context Mary Magdalene, a controversial saint from early Christianity onward, continues to play an important role, acting as an ambiguous *trait d'union* between the Christian and Pagan worlds.

Comparing the pilgrims' theories about menstruation with historical data about the Christian conceptualization of menstrual blood, I have suggested that there is historical continuity within

Christianity itself in establishing a relationship between Christ's blood and menstrual blood. I have also argued that theories and ritual practices related to menstruation in a Neopagan or "New Age" context deserve to be taken seriously by anthropologists. Ritual actors are not passive recipients of theories; if anything, their creative conceptualizations and ritualizations of menstruation display the complexities and ambiguities that are present in other traditional societies. The way to grasp these is through attentive ethnography (Fedele 2013a; cf. Gottlieb 2002:384).

With respect to anthropological studies about menstruation, I have argued that even if the association between menstruation as a marked process and the subordination of women cannot be considered universal (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Hoskins 2002), this association still plays out in Western societies. Drawing on Françoise Héritier's analysis of the meaning of menstrual blood, I showed that it is through ritual that these pilgrims look for healing on a personal *and* social level, by trying to provoke shifts in general perception. Proclaiming the sacrality of menstrual blood, the women are reformulating a cultural mechanism that interprets women's ostensible inability to control their bodies (i.e., stop menstrual bleeding) as a sign, and a justification, of their social inferiority. Reinterpreting the exclusively female capacity to bleed without being wounded, the women are creating new ways of conceptualizing the female body. Transforming Eve's curse into Mary Magdalene's blessing, these women are conceptualizing menstruation as a process that is not only elemental to their bodies but also to their female empowerment and thus to their construction of a female critique of religious and secular institutions.

Just as Gottlieb (2002:387) and Hoskins point out (2002:317-333), the absence of explicit menstrual taboos does not imply a vacuum in culturally shaped assumptions about menstruation. The association between menstruation and female subordination inherent in Western thought since Aristotle (Héritier 1996) still has a powerful grip on the bodily self-perceptions of women in Western societies; we know this from studies of persistently shameful perceptions of menarche and menopause in a highly developed (and ostensibly liberal) country such as the United States (Golub

1992; Houppert 1999; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996; Gottlieb 2002:385). The menstrual rituals analyzed in this article explicitly address the association between menstruation and female subordination and make visible the “virtual taboo” (Gottlieb 2002:385) that still exists in traditionally Catholic countries in Southern Europe such as Italy and Spain (Fedele 2013a:157-158). More research is needed about the often invisible taboos related to menstruation and their attendant ritual practices in other Western societies. Meanwhile, these crafted menstrual rituals offer a powerful example of the ways in which Catholic, Neopagan and even anthropological notions about menstruation can be creatively combined in a quest for healing and social change.

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