

Stories and Stories and Stories of Womanhood

Pandora is out of the box

Marieke Bivar

2022

a review of

All of Me: Stories of Love, Anger, and the Female Body Ed. Dani Burlison. PM Press, 2019

In this collection, women's bodies are discussed as sites of healing, burnout, grief, joy, transformation, and growth. The essays, interviews, and other writing vary immensely in tone and style, and there is a sense that this is a place where women's anger is being expressed freely, however the contributors choose to do so.

As Michelle Cruz Gonzalez puts it in her piece, "Grab My Pussy I Dare You," "You're right, we don't have proof, no DNA evidence, no fingerprints to lift from our skin, no audio, no video, just stories and stories and stories that we will tell that we will keep telling, because we are full, and you have lifted the lid. Pandora is out of the box."

As women, we often become so focused on the source of the violence, that we forget to see ourselves and other women as full, diverse, complex humans. Instead, we may unwittingly fall into a victim blaming mentality, trying to figure out what we can do to avoid our perpetrator's violence or lessen its impacts.

In her interview about Arming Sisters, a non-profit that uses self-defense as a tool of healing for women in Indigenous communities, contributor Patty Stonefish expresses her worry that sometimes the way we view women's self defense as a method of prevention can be problematic. To her, "martial arts...can be utilized as a tool of healing and should be...[because] this idea of prevention... just perpetuates the whole rape culture cycle[.] It puts the responsibility back on us and continues this whole victim-blaming cycle."

For Stonefish, practicing martial arts is something women can do to process the trauma of living under misogyny, not a tool to fight that tsunami of violence that they face day to day.

Some contributors are interested in examining the ways in which our coping strategies in the wake of violence against women can be problematic, exclusive, and racist. Much like Patty Stonefish's insight into the victim-blaming mentality behind prevention strategies, in "Notes on Racism, Trauma and Self Care from a Woman of Color," Lorelle Saxena argues against falling into a mindset in which we measure a woman's strength by expecting "an overfilled schedule and chronic fatigue."

In fact, she feels that "we're a little suspicious of anyone well rested and grounded" and laments that "we grant an implied badge of honor to women who are tired and stressed." Her hope is that our society can begin to "[grant] that badge of honor, instead, [when women prioritize] wellness and quality of life," as well as unburden Black women from the added stress of unacknowledged PTSD from living in a racist world.

A variety of experiences contribute to our understanding of what it is to be a woman in this world, and thankfully the experiences of trans women and non-binary people are also included and welcome in this collection.

Laurie Penny's excellent article, "How to be a Genderqueer Feminist," on identifying with women and feminism as a genderqueer person, is a perfect addition and sums up the ways in which their trans identity includes feminism: "Saying that gender is fluid doesn't mean that we have to ignore sexism. In fact, it's the opposite...Feminists and the LGBT community have this in common: we're all gender traitors. We have broken the rules of good behavior assigned to us at birth, and we have all suffered for it...I don't want to see a world without gender. I want to see a

world where gender is not oppressive or enforced, where there are as many ways to express and perform and relate to your own identity as there are people on Earth.”

Reading these pieces of writing and these interviews is painful. Not because they are exceptional, but because they are a familiar reminder that this world holds such hatred for women, like the stories of violence women carry around with them as warnings, as protection, and as knowledge they can't unknow.

For trans women, this knowledge can come in one swift, brutal slap in the face as the world begins to see and react to their womanhood. Ariel Erskine's experience of sexual and sexist violence since affirming her gender has been a crash course in being made to feel unsafe in public places. The first time a man sexually harassed her she “didn't know how to handle [the] situation as a target.”

She was experiencing what all women and girls learn in an embodied way at some point in their lives: that violence is part of being a woman. What Ariel experienced as an adult, some experience for the first time as children or teens. As Lydia Yuknavitch puts it in her piece, “Explicit Violence,” no matter when it happens, women learn to accept that “you can be a girl and a woman and travel through male violence like it's part of what living a life means.”

In January 2021, Quebec imposed the first of three Covid curfews, an extra tool of isolation during what are already long and difficult winter months. In the spring, the melt uncovered a record number of femicides.

When I was a child, I remember listening to the song “Why” by Tracy Chapman and being confused by the line “why is a woman still not safe when she's in her home.” It seems so obvious now This is another embodied knowledge many women and children can't unknow. Being trapped indoors, with the parent or partner who is not safe, is so common and part of how violence against women and children is simply part of a larger culture that hates women.

This hatred is such an intrinsic part of the dominant culture, but it morphs and adapts to target specific categories of women, as we learn with artist Candace Williams in her discussion of her experience of misogynoir, the intersection of sexism and racism, or when we think about transmisogyny, a combination of hating the femininity of trans women and hating their transness. No matter what kind of woman you are, there's a special place for you in the hatred of the dominant culture when it comes to women and women's power.

What every piece in this collection is working towards is making these different experiences visible, connecting them, and collecting them in one place. Although some of the conclusions drawn are less than radical (editor Dani Burlison and contributor Deya both believe strongly in voting, for example), others open doors to radical understandings of our bodies, our genders, and our collective capacity to not just cope with, but celebrate womanhood.

adrienne maree brown shares the idea of “Love as Political Resistance.” You can read “Auntie Starhawk's Sex Advice for Troubled Times” for some nuanced writing on sex, joy and trauma. Silvia Federici encourages us to “make connection with past and present” in order to face and challenge the way women continue to be oppressed. And, Melissa Madera has created a forum for women to share their experiences of abortion on her podcast, *The Abortion Diary*, shaking off the shame and stigma many women who have had abortions struggle with in isolation.

All of Me is a small sampling of the “stories and stories and stories” we carry about womanhood, and the contributors have carved out more space for us to continue speaking, writing, podcasting, and expressing our love and anger and supporting each other.

Marieke Bivar is slogging through another endless pandemic winter and keeping the fire going with writing, solidarity, rest, witchery, and precious love and care from her people.

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