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Mature Content

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MATURE CONTENT

LARA LANGER COHEN

I was still a girl—awkward and prickly, but not exactly angry—when *Angry Women* came out in 1991. I only learned of its existence a couple years later, from reverential allusions in Riot Grrrl fanzines and the bookshelves of older, cooler friends, and even then I never owned it. One time I remember paging through it in the aisle of a bookstore on South Street in Philadelphia, crouched on the floor. It looked something like the kinds of fanzines I made and read: a compilation of interviews, photos, and hand-drawn borders, dense with exclamation points and italics. But its explicit, enthusiastic, copiously illustrated discussions of women’s pleasure and pain, rendered in tabloid size and with alarmingly high production values, jolted me in ways I did not recognize. I was riveted but ready to thrust it back on the shelf if anyone approached. Why did I never buy it? Was I afraid my parents would catch sight of the photos of dildos; bodies covered in mud, blood, and glitter; Carolee Schneemann pulling a scroll from her vagina? Or was I more afraid of giving it a place in my own life?

Angry Women collected interviews with sixteen women: poets, performance artists, visual artists, sex writers, academics, musicians, and filmmakers. All were activists; many also had experience in sex work. It put bell hooks next to lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes, avant-garde novelist Kathy Acker next to a pre-*Push* Sapphire, seething composer (and, as one learned from the interview, casual racist) Diamanda Galás next to the upbeat “post-porn modernist” Annie Sprinkle. This capaciousness makes *Angry Women* something of an anomaly in RE/Search’s publishing history. While RE/Search identified itself closely with underground cultures, many of the women the volume profiled had the imprimatur of academic or state institutions (although in the case of Hughes and Karen Finley, that approval—funding from the National Endowment for the Arts—was later unceremoniously revoked). It was also broader in subject matter than other titles. While RE/Search’s best known books tended to focus on arcane art objects (*Incredibly Strange Music*, *Incredibly Strange Films, Zines*), or people conceived as art objects (the body modifiers of *Modern Primitives* or the spectacularized subjects of *Freaks*, whom the cover referred to as “a fantastic gallery”), the category of “angry

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women” was far more open-ended, presumably comprising a large swath of humankind. The book was forthright about its range: although it profiled a group of artists it considered “most in tune with the times,” it argued that *all* women should be angry women.¹ Moreover, “our inherited patriarchal, hierarchical system” has wreaked such destruction that, as the book’s first line put it, “*Angry Women* is not just about women, but about the future survival of the planet.”²

The tensions of this statement—between the claims of women and the planet, between ferocity and sustenance, between the demands of the present and the future—turn out to be the most interesting and sometimes frustrating aspect of the book. In many ways, it did not soft-pedal its anger. Each page was framed by a border of poisonous flowers; an index in the back helpfully listed the toxic part of each one and its telltale symptoms. Its cover featured a painting of Medusa, her mane of snakes chewing—or maybe brandishing—remote controls, light bulbs, cigarettes, and rockets. (One of the volume’s more compelling features was that, citing Donna Haraway, it embraced technology on feminist grounds.) “Medusa expresses *anger*,” Juno and Vale wrote in their introduction, and her place on the cover was “a minor antidote to the loss of rich and meaningful feminine mythology in our lives.”³ (One of the volume’s less compelling features was this prominent strain of second-wave goddess discourse.) The title *Angry Women* was at once ironic and declarative. It ventriloquized dismissive responses

to feminism, which equate “rebelliously critiquing society” with being a “*prime bitch*,” as Juno and Vale put it.⁴ But it also owned this conversion of women’s political critique into emotion by insisting that “anger can be a source of power, strength and clarity as well as a *creative force*.”

Yet despite Juno and Vale’s condemnation of “binary oppositional pairings,” their celebration of angry women hinged on an essential distinction between women’s anger and men’s anger. “Women have a different, less destructive relationship to anger than men,” they wrote. “Women’s rage does not “fester . . . internally” but “can be channeled creatively”; it “can spark and re-invigorate; it can bring hope and energy back into our lives and mobilize politically against the status quo.”⁵ I remember finding—as I still find—this distinction between men’s gnawing, destructive anger and women’s nourishing, creative anger exhausting. This book had helped awaken a desire to smash things; now it wanted to route that desire into the familiar labor of responsibility: to build, to nurture, to feel good? Elsewhere, though, the book offered a more interesting take on the relationship between anger and gender identity. In her interview, bell hooks posits, “Rather than thinking we would come together as ‘women’ in an identity-based bonding, we might be drawn together rather by a *commonality of feeling*.” hooks, referencing her 1990 book, describes that feeling as a “yearning, to just have this domination end.” Juno responds by translating that “yearning” into explicit oppositionality

(as indeed hooks herself does in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*): “For many women, what bonds us is: what is *against* us.”⁶ Here there’s no presumption that women necessarily share any common traits, endowed by the goddess or otherwise. What draws women together is the recognition that their relationship to “what is” is antagonistic. Rather than viewing the category “women” as determinative of anger, anger becomes determinative of the category “women.”

In general, however, *Angry Women* was less interested in collective identity than in personal identity. It posited anger as a path to “personal transformation”: to heal from our traumas, to become more sexually open, to find a spiritual practice, to love ourselves. Performance artist Linda Montano, for example, suggested that the expression of anger could be a way to “houseclean our interior soul” so that “other people say, ‘That’s not so bad!’ or ‘That’s great—you really did well with that sludge!’”⁷ As an adolescent, I was impatient with these moments of what seemed like navel-gazing; looking back now, they seem more like a post-traumatic response to the 1980s. *Angry Women* was unquestionably a product of the Reagan-Bush years, trailing clouds of the Meese Report, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the war on drugs, Operation Life,

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the first Gulf War, the Bhopal disaster, and Phyllis Schlafly. Juno especially often posed interview questions as if from the edge of apocalypse. (Vale, meanwhile, tended to look toward the past, bent on exerting the gravitational force of ‘70s punk, which he saw—as he told an apparently unimpressed Lydia Lunch in their interview—as itself an extension of beatnik poetry, which was in turn an extension of Surrealism.) The book’s emphasis on the personal mirrored the way that so many of the decade’s political battles had been fought on the terrain of individual bodies, especially women’s bodies. But this emphasis on the personal and the reparative sometimes left the role of anger in doubt. In many of the interviews, anger comes off as a necessary experience that allows one to find something more valuable beyond it. As Lydia Lunch put it, “To be free of these negative, self-defeating, painful, alienating, lonely feelings, is to really accomplish a *great achievement*.”⁸ This model of anger values

it as cathartic; it sets other feelings free. But it necessarily dissipates itself in the process.

Reading *Angry Women* at 15 or 16, I would not have expressed my misgivings about it in these words, of course. I didn't really have any words for them at all. Perhaps I could have connected them to my own lingering embarrassment about sexuality, or my embarrassment about this embarrassment. Certainly I was very far from the joyous experience of embodiment the book advocated. Or perhaps I should have understood my anger at *Angry Women* as a symptom of feminism's tendency to shape itself around narratives of generational conflict. But I wonder if the issue of age difference worked quite in this way. Certainly, *Angry Women* was mature. It was mature not just because it addressed "women," not just because it was written by and about adults, not just because of its so-called mature content, but also because of its grown-up attitude. It confronted anger responsibly, in search of balance and acceptance. It understood maturity as the evolution into true selfhood. Annie Sprinkle, for instance, recounted that years after transforming herself from dowdy Ellen Steinberg into the exuberantly sexy Annie Sprinkle, she had arrived at a new identity: Anya, "a more mature woman" who is finally able not to be "anyone else's fantasy" but is simply "being myself."⁹ But if Sprinkle and the other *Angry Women* celebrated evolution, and whereas academic feminists told feminism as a linear history, Riot Grrrl embraced immaturity without needing to see it diachronically. Its identification with girlhood

made immaturity an identity in its own right, rather than an ascent to maturity. It was not even an assent to maturity!

In other words, the immaturity of Riot Grrrl promised a different relation to anger. It evoked outbursts, manias, confrontations with authority. Its fury clearly drew on the example of *Angry Women*, especially in its insistence on saying out loud things that one was supposed to keep secret—abuse, desire, self-hate. But its commitment to immaturity also opened other possibilities. Without the assurances of "being oneself," its mode was more collective than individual. *Angry Women* identified all of its interview subjects as "cutting-edge performance artists." For many (Linda Montano, Karen Finley, Valie Export, Lydia Lunch, Susie Bright, Holly Hughes, Annie Sprinkle) the category made obvious sense; for others (Sapphire, Avital Ronell, Wanda Coleman, bell hooks) it did not, but the use of the term seemed to highlight the book's sense of anger as the province of an expressive self. But while Riot Grrrl was often confessional (and rightly criticized for this tendency to translate its radical politics into personal stories), its characteristic art forms—fanzines and punk bands—were strongly communitarian. As a result, it was both less inwardly-focused and less outwardly-focused. Where *Angry Women* applied personal anger to the regeneration of the planet, Riot Grrrls looked to other Riot Grrrls, whether in fanzine exchanges or in girls-only or girls-in-front shows; they didn't particularly care if their anger served a reparative purpose for anybody else. They were

stirring and hectoring but their proud amateurism meant that they did not aim to be educative. Most fundamentally, while *Angry Women's* mature perspective meant that it saw anger as a means to an end—"a revolutionary feminism that encompasses wild sex, humor, beauty, and spirituality *plus* radical politics," as the back cover put it—Riot Grrrl valued anger as an end in itself. It did not invoke anger to expunge it but for its own insurgent, exultant, libidinous, hilarious possibilities, conjured by the word "riot." Where "Angry" modified "Women," "Grrrl" embraced anger in its very name, which conflated a girl with a growl. If, as an adolescent, I didn't have the words to explain why a book like *Angry Women* both exhilarated me and left me unsatisfied, Riot Grrrl made room for that juvenile inarticulateness.

Twenty years later, I'm returning to the same subject in the form of a 2000-word personal essay reflecting backwards on my youth, clad in the armature of academic vocabulary and institutional life. I'm pretty sure I have written what I meant to write about *Angry Women*. But I wonder how different this piece could be if I had not traveled so far—in years, in social worlds, in the genres those worlds afford—from the immaturity that made me unable to put words to the book in the first place.

/ **Notes** /

¹ Andrea Juno and V. Vale, introduction to *Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1991), 4.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ bell hooks and Andre Juno, "bell hooks," in Juno and Vale, *Angry Women*, 83.

⁷ Linda Montano and Andrea Juno, "Linda Montano," in Juno and Vale, *Angry Women*, 61.

⁸ Lydia Lunch and Andrea Juno, "Lydia Lunch," in Juno and Vale, *Angry Women*, 107.

⁹ Annie Sprinkle and Andrea Juno, "Annie Sprinkle," in Juno and Vale, *Angry Women*, 34.

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