Wake Up Call

The Mental Load: A Feminist Comic

By Emma, Translated by Una Dimitrijevic

New York, NY; Seven Stories, 2018, 216 pp., $18.95, paperback

Fruit of Knowledge: The Vulva vs. The Patriarchy

By Liv Strömquist

Seattle, WA; Fantagraphics Books, 2018, 144 pp., $22.99, paperback

Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman

Here's a not-so-fun fact: did you know that clitoridectomies were performed by doctors in the United States? At least one of the more recent such recorded cases involved a five-year-old girl who was being treated to prevent … masturbation.

Here's another not-so-fun fact: only just in 1998 was the broader anatomy of the clitoris discovered by Urologist Helen O'Connell. This finding is as yet incomplete, in the sense that we still don't exactly know how female genitalia work nor can we pinpoint where the nerve endings of the more accurately termed "clitoral complex" begin and end.

Liv Strömquist's recent graphic cultural history, *Fruit of Knowledge: The Vulva vs. The Patriarchy*, is full of such not-so-fun facts, packaged in a book that is—perhaps surprisingly, given its often devastating content—a page-turner. Strömquist's delightful—sometimes bawdy, sometimes deadpan—sense of humor winds its way through each historical detail and astute observation, resulting in an assemblage that is both motivating and depressing; it entertains even as it leaves you stupefied.

If you've already done your feminist homework, much of the information packed into the book by the Swedish cartoonist, activist, and radio-show host will not be news. She documents patriarchal abuses masked as medicine such as when Freud and his friend, the ear, nose, and throat doctor Wilhelm Fliess, collaborated on the case of Emma Eckstein, a patient whose complaint of slight stomach cramps eventually resulted in a botched and definitely unnecessary surgery on her nose, leaving her permanently disfigured and the men more strongly bonded with one another. Strömquist illustrates Sartre asserting, in his famous existential treatise *Being and Nothingness*, "above all, the female sex organ is a hole." For this great philosopher, this hole was a space meant to be literally filled by the male organ and also exists at the root of women's feelings of inferiority, the void to their void. Lesser known is Princess Marie Bonaparte, a figure heavily influenced by Freud's groundless, widely accepted, and enduring theory of mature (vaginal) versus infantile (clitoral) orgasms—a myth anatomically dispelled but twenty years ago. Bonaparte (great-grandniece of Napoleon, in case you're wondering) elected to have multiple, unsuccessful surgeries in order to move her clitoris closer to her vagina, since she could have clitoral orgasms on her own but not vaginal ones with her husband.

"It was easier to surgically relocate her own clitoris than to simply relocate Prince George's hand!!!!" our narrator yells at us in a sentence built of thick, all-caps letters, followed by three panels filled with additional, even more outsized exclamation points. In four chapters consisting of such vibrant, usually densely-packed pages of black-and-white comics, and one distinct allegorical chapter presented in full color, Strömquist moves from antiquity to the Middle Ages on through the Enlightenment and into our contemporary moment—and back again. The book also traverses the globe, citing, for example, the presumed origin of the word "taboo" as stemming from the Polynesian word "tupua," a word that means menstruation though it also translates as "sacred." Sprinkled between her one-dimensional, often over-the-top illustrations—these are images meant to help you think and feel, not to linger over—Strömquist includes reproductions: photographs of stone figures, relics, and sculptures found by archeologists in places across the world, including the southwestern Pacific, Malta, Greece, Germany, and the former Yugoslavia; and cut-and-pasted words and diagrams, bits of research culled from additional sources, like textbooks and advertisements, and put here into provocative juxtapositional contexts.

Strömquist squeezes so much into most pages, with lettering at times rendered small enough to make you squint. The overall effect of the book is to get you, quite justifiably, "good and mad," as the title of a recent feminist treatise you may have heard of puts it, as well as thinking about the damage inflicted by invisibility in close combination with hyper-visibility.

"You may think it's a problem that the part of the body known as the 'female genitalia' has been made invisible and shameful in our culture…," she writes on one of her opening pages, her drawn alter-ego/narrator sporting a thick, elevated braid, with an otherwise deadpan posture and expression. The "MUCH, MUCH bigger" problem is those "certain men who've been entirely TOO interested" in this part of women's bodies, she continues, before she starts into her top-seven list of overly invested parties. (Spoiler alert: in the number one spot is the gang of men who petitioned to exhume the body of Queen Christina in Rome over three-hundred years after her death, in order to get a good look at her "private parts" as a means of explaining such "non-feminine physical and mental features" as her "minimal interest in clothing.") In a subsequent chapter, our narrator describes the ways that the vulva has so often been erased "in both language and image," an erasure that psychologist Harriet Lerner, quoted and simultaneously drawn in as a cartoonish talking head, terms "psychic genital mutilation."

Fruit of Knowledge is not, and doesn't claim to be, an academic work, and some of the research sources and recounted facts and figures are not always as accurate and credible as one might want them to be. There's even (shudder) a Wikipedia citation on one page. But the text is wholly faithful to the ways that women's bodies have been the site of moral and ideological enactments of paternal domination and manipulation, and the feelings of shock, frustration, and rage that the acquisition of the specific details of this longstanding history, piled together in close proximity, might evoke. The book offers one possible antidote to the continued effects of living with such a distorting history: taking representation, and knowledge, into one's own hands; willfully exposing contortion and contradiction; determining to look, and listen, with more intensity.

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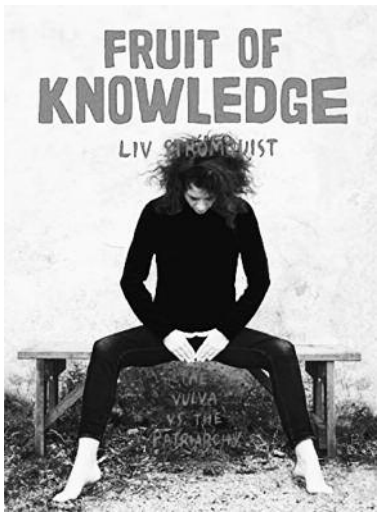
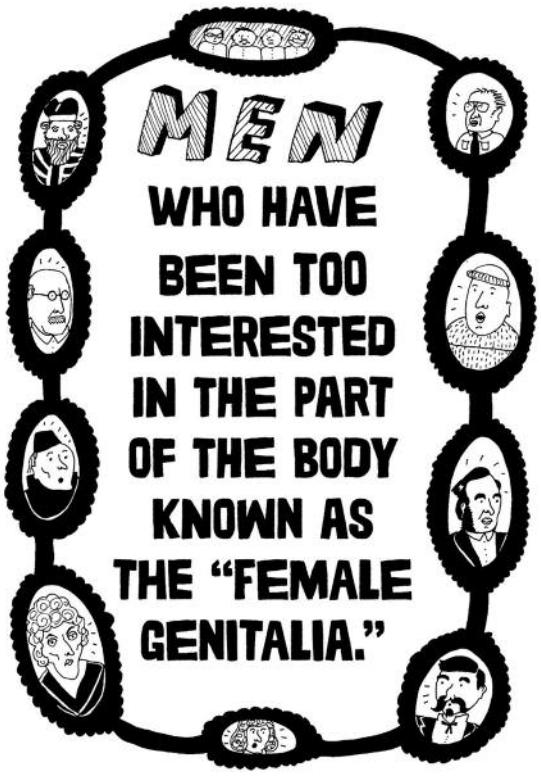
French cartoonist Emma's *The Mental Load: A Feminist Comic* has a similar goal to Strömquist. If *Fruit of Knowledge* is focused on the ways that invisibility often goes hand in hand with hyper-visibility to create problematic individual and collective portrayals of women, *The Mental Load* relegates itself mostly to the realm of making the invisible visible.

The book's famous opening chapter, "You Should've Asked," went absolutely viral as an independent piece translated into English, posted on Emma's blog, and re-shared on blogs and social media across the internet in May 2017. The eighteen-page comic, now divided across 8½ by 10-inch pages rather than presented as a long, single chronicle to scroll down through, opens with a first-person account. "Back when I was in my first job, a colleague invited me over for dinner," the story begins, and what follows is a series of fragmented scenes depicting similarly shaped cartoon figures dressed in a variety of pastels and grays with a loose, generally sparse narrative running over the images. There's a lot of white space visible on these pages, an aesthetic choice that lends something of a light and airy atmosphere to what are otherwise serious, potentially infuriating subjects.

"What a disaster! What did you do?" the colleague's male partner berates her, and the comic moves more broadly into the subject of invisible labor, the "mental load" of the book's title. "The mental load," our narrator tells us, "means always having to remember. / Remember that you have to add cotton swabs to the shopping list. Remember that today's the deadline to order your vegetable delivery for the week. / Remember that we should have paid the caretaker for the last month's work by now."

Our narrator's point is, of course, well taken, and scores of women have had to wrestle with this persistent, destructive fabrication, the essentializing idea that they are somehow more ambitious when it comes to domestic cleanliness, or caretaking; that they're naturally more organized, more meticulous, more nitpicky over such details. But the message, for all of its worthiness, is too gently delivered, particularly when taken out of the context of the comic's original platform. Indeed, the first time I encountered this piece was on a friend's social media "wall," with an unraveling comments section testifying to the never-ending series of objections, disputations, and explanations people will offer up in order to avoid accountability. Looking at such responses, and the identical ones





that popped up soon after, potently affected many onlookers, whether or not we ourselves engaged in these conversations. It made us angry, and energetically aware.

Recently, Jessica Valenti wrote a short, aptly titled article on the same subject as Emma's opening chapter. The piece, published on *Medium.com*, was titled, "Kids Don't Damage Women's Careers—Men Do." Essentializing, though in a different way, and also, like Emma's work, focused on a clearly narrow demographic (what of the professional caretakers, most invisible of all?), Valenti's piece, fleetingly, like Strömquist's book, more totally, gets the feel right. It burns and scorches where a light, gentle touch just won't do.

To be sure, *The Mental Load* is a worthy text, covering a range of relevant concerns with a perceptive narrator who is able to fashion clear, careful connections between issues of labor, oppression, and responsibility using a variety of valuable storytelling modes and topics as framework and fodder. In one chapter, Emma powerfully illustrates a story she heard on French radio, of twenty-seven-year-old Mohamed, an Egyptian immigrant living in Paris following the 2015 terrorist attacks, who was shot by French police, held captive for four days while cuffed to a bed and questioned, and left traumatized for the crime of existing as a working-class immigrant of color. In other chapters, she skillfully relates problems of invisible labor with broader questions about expectations surrounding work cultures in the Western world and the kinds of work that are so frequently valued, or not valued.

Perhaps it's our current political climate, and the catastrophes that seem to unfold daily, that moves this reviewer to want to see these subjects depicted with the kind of intensity I feel when I turn on the news or scroll through my freed. Perhaps it's unfair to judge potentially enduring works of art through the intemperate emotional states of a subject living on what often feels like the cusp of yet another disaster. But perhaps, too, this is just the right time for gravitating to forms that are intemperate, newfangled, messy, provocative. Perhaps our time simply demands it.

Tahneer Oksman is an assistant professor at Marymount Manhattan College, the author of *"How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (Columbia University Press, 2016), and the co-editor of the forthcoming anthology, *The Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell: A Place Inside Yourself* (University Press of Mississippi, 2018). She often reviews graphic novels and illustrated works for the *Women's Review of Books*.