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53. • Janet Mock

FROM REDEFINING REALNESS: MY PATH TO WOMANHOOD, IDENTITY, LOVE & SO MUCH MORE (2014)

Janet Mock is an author, a transgender advocate, and a TV host. Her memoir *Redefining Realness* is a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the 2015 Women's Way book prize. The excerpt from her memoir below speaks to the complexity and instability of the body and its relationship to one's identity.

[. . .]

What's difficult about being from Hawaii is that everyone has a postcard view of your home. Hawaii lives vividly in people's minds, like the orange and purple hues of the bird-of-paradise flower. It's a fantasy place of sunshine and rainbows, of high surf and golden

boys with golden hair, of pigs on a spit and hula dancers' swaying hips, of Braddah Iz's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and the North Shore, of hapa goddesses with coconut bras and Don Ho's ukulele.

[. . .]

Ages before Hawaii's sugar boom, voyagers from Tahiti left their home to see what was beyond the horizon. Navigating the seas in handcrafted canoes with the mere guidance of the stars, they arrived in Hawaii and created new lives. Centuries later, I landed in 1995, and it was here, on the island of Oahu, that I would mirror my ancestors on my own voyage, one guided through a system of whispers, to reveal the person I was meant to be. I will forever be indebted to Hawaii for being the home I needed. There is no me without Hawaii.

[. . .]

Though we came from our native Hawaiian mother, Chad and I were perceived and therefore raised as black, which widely cast us as outsiders, nonlocals—and being seen as local in Hawaii was currency. When we first returned to Oahu, we spoke with a Texas twang that also got us teased. Chad has strong emotions surrounding those first few months: he was traumatized by his apparent blackness, which was a nonevent in Dallas and Oakland, where we were among many black kids. In Hawaii, we were some of the few mixed black kids around. And both our parents taught us that because the world would perceive us as black, we were black.

That didn't erase the unease I felt when the kids in the housing complex took notice of our darkness and kinky hair. Skin color wasn't necessarily the target as much as our blackness was the target for teasing. I say this because the kids who teased us were as brown as us, but we were black. There was a racial order that existed even in this group of tweens. They teased that Chad and I were *popolo*, Hawaiian slang for black people. *Popolo* are shiny berries that grow in clusters in the islands and are so black that they shine purple on branches. Hearing *popolo* on that playground didn't sound as regal as its namesake berries. It sounded dirty, like something that stuck on our bodies, like the red dirt of the playground. I craved belonging, especially to be reflected in my mother and her family, local-bred Hawaiian people, and spent my earlier years trying to separate

from my blackness. I've since learned that I can be both black and native Hawaiian despite others' perceptions and their assertion that I must choose one over the other.

Ethnicity is a common part of conversations in Hawaii. Two questions locals ask are: "What high school you went?" and "What you?" Your high school places you on the island, shedding light on your character and where you are from. "What you?" refers to your people, whom you come from, what random mixture has made you. Jeff, whose father was also black, was perceived as Hawaiian, taking after Mom's side, looking like those bronze-skinned local boys who surfed and threw shaka signs at Sandy Beach. Jeff later told me that he didn't even know he was black until he was about eight because he didn't look it and barely knew his father beyond the two-hundred-dollar monthly checks Mom received throughout his childhood.

[. . .]

Wendi's first words to me were "Mary! You *mahu*?"

I was sitting on a park bench as Jeff ran around with his friends on the lawn that separated my school from his. Wendi was passing by with her volleyball in hand, her backpack bouncing on her butt, and her drive-by inquiry in the air. Though there was definitely a question mark floating around, her direct yet playful approach made me internalize her words as a statement. *If she's asking—even kiddingly—then I must be suspect*, I thought.

Everyone took notice of Wendi. She was hard to miss, prancing around Kalakaua Intermediate School in super-short soccer shorts, with her green mop of hair vibrantly declaring her presence. Subtlety was not—and still isn't—her thing. Her irritated red skin, peppered with acne, glistened with sweat as she played volleyball on campus. I'd never been this close to her, and her scrutinizing stare was intimidating.

Jeff, whom I picked up every day after school while Chad was at basketball or baseball practice, wasn't paying attention, but I remember feeling self-conscious. I was afraid that if I got close to

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Wendi or someone saw me interacting with her, I would be called *mabu*—a word that I equated to *issy*. In my playground experience with the term, it was an epithet, thrown at any boy who was perceived to be *too* feminine. Until Wendi crossed paths with me, I was under the impression that I was doing a good job at being butch enough that such words wouldn't be thrown my way.

[. . .]

At the time, *mabu* was limited by our Western interpretation, mostly used as a pejorative. What I later learned in my Hawaiian studies classes in college was that *mabu* defined a group of people who embodied the diversity of gender beyond the dictates of our Western binary system. *Mabu* were often assigned male at birth but took on feminine gender roles in Kanaka Maoli (indigenous Hawaiian) culture, which celebrated *mabu* as spiritual healers, cultural bearers and breeders, caretakers, and expert hula dancers and instructors (or *Kumus* in Hawaiian). In the Western understanding and evolution of *mabu*, it translates to being transgender in its loosest understanding: to cross social boundaries of gender and/or sex. Like that of Hawaii's neighboring Polynesian islands, *mabu* is similar to the *mabu wahine* in Tahiti, *fa'afafine* in Samoa, and *fakaleiti* in Tonga, which comes from the Tongan word *faka* (meaning "to have the way of") and *leiti* (meaning "lady"). Historically, Polynesian cultures carved an "other" category in gender, uplifting the diversity, span, and spectrum in human expression.

To be *mabu* was to occupy a space between the poles of male and female in precolonial Hawaii, where it translated to "hermaphrodite," used to refer to feminine boys or masculine girls. But as puritanical missionaries from the West influenced Hawaiian culture in the nineteenth century, their Christian, homophobic, and gender binary systems pushed *mabu* from the center of culture to the margins. *Mabu* became a slur, one used to describe male-to-female transgender people and feminine men who were gay or perceived as gay due to their gender

expression. Despite *mabu's* modern evolution, it was one of the unique benefits of growing up in a diverse place like Hawaii, specifically Oahu (which translates to "the gathering place"), where multiculturalism was the norm. It was empowering to come of age in a place that recognized that diversity existed not only in ethnicities but also in gender. There was a level of tolerance regarding gender non-conformity that made it safer for people like Wendi and me to exist as we explored and expressed our identities.

The first person I met who took pride in being *mabu* was my hula instructor at school. Kumu Kaua'i was one of those *mabu* who reclaimed her place in society—specifically, being celebrated in the world of hula, where the presence and talent of *mabu* was valuable. Some trans women, who actively engaged in restoring native Hawaiian culture, reclaimed *mabu* at that time, choosing to call themselves *mabuwahine* (*wahine* is Hawaiian for "woman"), just as some people in marginalized communities reclaimed formerly derogatory words like *dyke*, *fag*, *nigger*, *queer*, and *tranny*. It was theirs to claim, use, and uplift. Kumu didn't call herself a woman or gay despite her femininity and preference for *she* and *her* as pronouns. She simply identified as *mabu* and had no qualms about the vessel she was given and nor any desire to change it.

[. . .]

Kumu bewildered me initially because I had been raised within the strict confines of male and female. This was a far cry from football Sundays with Dad in the projects. I was shaken by the dissonance of bright floral dresses and long hair on the form of a male-bodied person, someone who expressed her femininity proudly and visibly. Adding to that was the regular presence of Kumu's "husband," a tall, masculine man who appeared Samoan in stature and looks. He would pick up Kumu at the end of our practices, affectionately kissing her and helping her load the truck with the hula instruments—the *ipu* (a drum gourd) and *'ili'ili* (set of smooth black stones)—that she brought for us to dance with.

I now realize that my fascination with Kumu wasn't that she puzzled me; I was in awe. She resonated with me at age twelve as I yearned to explore and reveal who I was. With time, I accepted Kumu's own determination of gender and learned to evolve past my ironic need to confine her to the two boxes I had been raised to live within. Kumu Kaua'i, like *mabuwahine* who came before, staked a given righteous place in Hawaii by uplifting, breeding, and spreading many aspects of native Hawaiian culture, specifically through hula. Kumu taught me, this mixed plate of a kid, how to mirror the movements of my ancestors and give thanks for the island culture that respected various other identities.

Wendi similarly captivated me because she refused to be jailed by anyone's categories or expectations. There was no confining this girl. I noticed her everywhere after our brief exchange, during which she recognized something in me that I thought I had expertly hidden behind buzz cuts and polo shirts. I took note of her slamming her volleyball at recess, whipping her flamboyant bob around campus, carrying her black flute case as she sashayed to band practice. What still stuns me about Wendi is that no one tolerated her. She was not something to be tolerated. She was accepted as fact just as one would accept the plumpness of the lunch ladies or the way Auntie Peggy, the counselors secretary, would grab your palm as you waited for a meeting and read you your future (I recall her telling me, "You're going to get married in white!"). Wendi's changing hues, her originality, her audacity to be fully herself, was embraced and probably even more respected at an age when the rest of us were struggling and striving to fit in.

I refuse to pretend, though, that her uniqueness didn't make her a target. Wendi was called *faggot* at recess and asked when she was going to get her sex change. She used such ignorance as ammunition, threatening to kiss the boys who sought to humiliate her. I wasn't as daring as Wendi, and looking at her I was frightened by what I saw: myself. I told no one about her calling me *mabu* at the swings and avoided her as her long legs in her rolled-up shorts and knee-high socks glided past me in the halls.

Instead, I became all the more unwavering in my commitment to being the good son that year. I didn't put up a fight when it came to haircuts at the beauty school that offered barber discounts. I earned awards for my academic performance in class, was bumped into advanced courses, and even worked as an editor for the yearbook and the quarterly newspaper. My teachers praised and encouraged me, and in the spring of 1996, I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society. I was the only boy from our class to be inducted. I loved the distinction of *only*, though the boy part I could've done without.

[. . .]

As I look back, what impresses me about my family is their openness. They patiently let me lead the way and kept any confusion or worry to themselves during a fragile period in my self-discovery. I recognize this as one of the biggest gifts they gave me. On some level, I knew they were afraid for me, afraid that I would be teased and taunted. Instead of trying to change me, they gave me love, letting me know that I was accepted. I could stop pretending and drop the mask. My family fortified my self-esteem, which I counted on as I embarked on openly expressing my rapidly evolving self.

Reflecting on this pivotal time in my life, I think of the hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) youth who are flung from intolerant homes, from families who reject them when they reveal themselves. Of the estimated 1.6 million homeless and runaway American youth, as many as 40 percent are LGBTQ, according to a 2006 report by the Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless. A similar study by the Williams Institute cited family rejection as the leading cause of the disproportionate number of homeless LGBT youth. These young people are kicked out of their homes or are left with no choice but to leave because they can't be themselves. That's something both Wendi and I fortunately never faced.

With an air of acceptance at home, it was fairly easy to approach my mother and declare my truth. Sitting at our kitchen table, I told Mom, with no

extensive planning or thought, "I'm gay." I was thirteen years old and didn't know how to fully explain who I was, conflating gender identity and sexuality. What I remember about that brief exchange was Mom's warmth. She smiled at me, letting me know that it was okay. I felt loved and heard and, more important, not othered. From her lack of reaction—her brows didn't furrow, her brown irises didn't shift from side to side—I felt as if I had announced that I had on blue today, a simple fact that we were both aware of. Mom later told me that she remembers feeling afraid for me because she sensed that there was more I wanted to say but didn't know how to. "My love for you never diminished, but a part of me was scared that people would hurt you, and that is what I had a hard time with," she told me recently.

A part of me was scared, too. I couldn't acknowledge the gender stuff because I didn't have a full understanding of it. Saying "I think I am a girl" would have been absurd for many reasons, including my fear that it would be a lot for my mother to handle. I didn't know that trans people existed; I had no idea that it was possible for thirteen-year-old me to become my own woman. That was a fantasy.

[. . .]

It was in Wendi's room that I heard about hormones. She mentioned them as if discussing milk, something you had to drink in order to grow. She told me the older girls she knew ("These fierce, unclockable bitches!") went to a doctor in Waikiki who prescribed hormones for girls as young as sixteen. "I'm going to get my shots down when I turn sixteen," Wendi, who was fourteen at the time, said with excitement. "Trust."

I knew about hormones and puberty and safe sex from the handouts Coach Richardson gave us in health and physical education class. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he'd lecture us about how we were raging with hormones, changing the shape and feel of our bodies. I felt nothing, barely five-two and a little chunky in the face and thighs: puberty hadn't really touched me. But I noticed the suppleness of the girls in class, the ones who seemed to be towering over

many of us in height and shape. They began to separate from the pack swimming way behind in the puberty kiddie pool.

"Your grandparents are going to let you do that?" I asked Wendi, stunned.

"They don't know what *that* is and can barely speak English," she said matter-of-factly. "My aunt's gonna take me."

I trusted that, she would do exactly as she said she would, and I admired her unstoppable determination. Wendi's friendship gave me the audacity to be noticed. One morning after one of our beauty experiments, I walked into student council homeroom with arched brows that framed my almond-shaped eyes, which were sparkling with a brush of silver eye shadow that Wendi said no one would really notice because it was "natural-looking." The girls in class, the ones who wore the white SODA platform wedge sneakers I so coveted, said, "I like your makeup." I remember tucking my short curls behind my ears, beaming under the gaze my new look warranted.

One early evening after playing volleyball, Wendi and I visited a group of her friends in a reserved room at the recreation center. They were rehearsing for a show they did at Fusions, a gay club on Kuhio Avenue in Waikiki. Most of them were drag queens, but a select few were trans women who performed as showgirls. Society often blurs the lines between drag queens and trans women. This is highly problematic, because many people believe that, like drag queens, trans women go home, take off their wigs and chest plates, and walk around as men. Trans womanhood is not a performance or costume. As Wendi likes to joke, "A drag queen is part-time for showtime, and a trans woman is all the time!"

The lines continue to be blurred due to the umbrella term *transgender*, which bundles together diverse people (transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, drag performers, crossdressers, and gender-nonconforming folks) living with gender variance. Unfortunately, the data on the transgender population is scarce. The U.S. Census Bureau doesn't ask about gender identity, how trans people self-identify varies, and many (if asked) may not disclose that they're trans. The National Center for Transgender Equality

has estimated that nearly 1 percent of the U.S. population is transgender, while the Williams Institute has stated that 0.3 percent of adults in the United States (nearly seven hundred thousand) identify as transgender, with the majority having taken steps to medically transition. This number does not take into account the number of transgender children or individuals who have expressed an incongruity between their assigned sex and gender identity or gender expression.

Despite the misconceptions, I understood the distinction between a drag queen and a trans woman because I came of age in the mid-nineties, and drag queens were in vogue. There was the 1995 release of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. I hated that movie because Wendi would tease that Noxeema Jackson—Wesley Snipes's drag character—was my “Queen Mother.” Drag queens were on Cori's favorite talk shows, *Sally* and *Jerry Springer*, and then there was RuPaul, “Supermodel of the World.” It was a time when a brown, blond, and glamorous drag queen was a household name, beaming on MAC Cosmetics billboards at the mall in shiny red latex.

Like RuPaul, the queens at the rec center staked their claim on a smaller scale in Hawaii, part of the fabric of Oahu's diverse trans community. Toni Braxton's “Unbreak My Heart” was blasting from a boom box, and they were huddled together, about ten of them, discussing their choreography. I watched, seated on the cold tile floor with my backpack and volleyball at my side. They soon reconfigured, gathering in a circle of arms as one woman knelt at the center, hidden by the fort of mostly rotund queens. With the tape rewound, each queen walked clockwise, slowly descending into a kneeling position as the lady in the center rose, lip-synching Toni's lyrics.

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Lani, who wore a pair of knee-length denim shorts and a stretched white tank top with black bra straps visible on her shoulders, kissed Wendi on the cheek. I stood behind Wendi, looking at Lani's winged

black eyeliner, which she had whipped all the way to a sharp point where it nearly intersected with her penciled-in brows. The other girls gathered around her when Wendi turned around to introduce me. They were the first trans women I had met outside of Wendi.

I extended my hand to Lani, and she pulled me to her fleshy chest and gave me a kiss on the cheek, which left a red lip print on my face. My heart was racing because they were staring at me. Tracy was standing off to the side, uninterested, brushing her hair. I could hear her raking through her mane, strands snapping with each stroke of her brush.

“Mary, she's fish, yeah,” Lani said with a chuckle, holding me at arm's length by the biceps. The girls around her nodded. Then, looking directly into my eyes, she added, “You're going to be pretty, girl. Trust!”

I tried my best to smile, aware that she was giving me a compliment—blessing me, even. To Lani, my fishiness was something to boast about. To be called fish by these women meant that I was embodying the kind of femininity that could allow me access, safety, opportunity, and maybe happiness. To be fish meant I could pass as any other girl, specifically a cis woman, mirroring the concept of “realness,” which was a major theme in *Paris Is Burning*, the 1990 documentary about New York City's ballroom community, comprising gay men, drag queens, and trans women of color. Ball legend Dorian Corey, who serves as the sage of the film, offering some of the most astute social commentary on the lived experiences of low-income LGBT people of color, describes “realness” for trans women (known in ball culture as femme queens) as being “undetectable” to the “untrained” or “trained.” Simply, “realness” is the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviate from the norm. “Realness” means you are extraordinary in your embodiment of what society deems normative.

“When they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies,” Corey says in the film, “those are the femme *realness* queens.”

Corey defines “realness” for trans women not just in the context of the ballroom but outside of the ballroom. Unlike Pepper LaBeija, a drag legend who said undergoing genital reconstruction surgery (GRS) was “taking it a little too far” in the film, a trans woman or femme queen embodies “realness” and femininity beyond performance by existing in the daylight, where she’s juxtaposed with society’s norms, expectations, and ideals of cis womanhood.

To embody “realness,” rather than performing and competing “realness,” enables trans women to enter spaces with a lower risk of being rebutted or questioned, policed or attacked. “Realness” is a pathway to survival, and the heaviness of these truths were a lot for a thirteen-year-old to carry, especially one still trying to figure out who she was. I was also unable to accept that I was perceived as beautiful because, to me, I was not. No matter how many people told me I was fish, I didn’t see myself that way. My eyes stung, betraying me, and immediately I felt embarrassed by my visible vulnerability.

[. . .]

With Wendi at my side, I felt I could be bold, unapologetic, free. To be so young and aiming to discover and assert myself alongside a best friend who mirrored me in her own identity instilled possibility in me. I could be me because I was not alone. The friendship I had with Wendi, though, is not the typical experience for most trans youth. Many are often the only trans person in a school or community, and most likely, when seeking support, they are the only trans person in LGBTQ spaces. To make matters worse, these support spaces often only address sexual orientation rather than a young person’s gender identity, despite the all-encompassing acronym. Though trans youth seek community with cis gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer teens, they may have to educate their cis peers about what it means to be trans.

When support and education for trans youth are absent, feelings of isolation and hopelessness can worsen. Coupled with families who might be

intolerant and ill equipped to support a child, young trans people must deal with identity and body issues alone and in secret. The rise of social media and online resources has lessened the deafening isolation for trans people. If they have online access, trans people can find support and resources on YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, and various other platforms where trans folks of all ages are broadcasting their lives, journeys, and even social and medical transitions. Still, the fact remains that local trans-inclusive support and positive media reflections of trans people are rare outside of major cities like Los Angeles, New York, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Recently, the media (from the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* to ABC’s *20/20* and *Nightline*) has focused its lens on trans youth. The typical portrait involves young people grappling with social transition at relatively young ages, as early as four, declaring that they’re transgender and aiming to be welcomed in their communities and schools as their affirmed gender. As they reach puberty, these youth—with the support and resources of their welcoming families—undergo medical intervention under the expertise of an endocrinologist who may prescribe hormone-blocking medications that suppress puberty before graduating to cross-sex hormones and planning to undergo other gender affirmation surgeries.

To be frank, these stories are best-case scenarios, situations I hope become the norm for every young trans person in our society. But race and class are not usually discussed in these positive media portraits, which go as far as erasing the presence of trans youth from low-income communities and/or communities of color. Not all trans people come of age in supportive middle- and upper-middle-class homes, where parents have resources and access to knowledgeable and affordable health care that can cover expensive hormone-blocking medications and necessary surgeries. These best-case scenarios are not the reality for most trans people, regardless of age.

[. . .]