

10 AUG WHEN BROWN WOMEN WRITE

When brown women write.

We are embraced with pride and celebration by the Pasifika community in many countries. The support, shares and encouragement is phenomenal. Nobody does #bookLove quite like our people. They bring your favorite food to book signings, and offer their homes for you to stay in. They drive hours to bring their children to meet you, "I want her to meet a real Samoan author, so she can see and know what's possible..." They organise book launches with all the warmth and richness of our cultures on vibrant exuberant display. They bring gifts for you and your children, take you out for dinner, and offer to pick you up for church.

Because we are brown, that means we are never an individual. You meet for the first time and find you are cousins, or that your parents taught them in high school, your auntie was their best friend in kindergarten, your mum cooked them dinner when they were sick, your grandfather paid their school fees, or they're from the same village as your Dad. The alofa they give is often a reciprocation of the generosity of others who have gone before you.

Because we are brown, we are a daughter, a grandchild, a niece, a cousin. You go to a place of strangers and feel in their welcome, the love and fa'aaloalo they have for your parents, grandparents, aunties...your village, your community. You may go alone, but you take your family ties with you and so it always feels like a welcoming home.

Because we are brown women, we are sisters, viewed within a feagaiga and tamasa covenant relationship. You see this expressed in beautiful ways when you go on book tour, as Samoan men of all ages treat you with respect and courtesy, going to great lengths to ensure you are safe and welcome in every setting.

Being a brown woman who writes is a powerful, joyous and humbling experience.

Until it isn't.

There's a pressure and a weight of expectations. Perhaps because there are so few of us, we are raised up as #theOne. Schools in white people countries invite you to speak to assemblies of brown children, to help inspire and empower. And you wonder, don't white children need to read our stories too? Universities study your work under the token brown writers label. Literature festivals invite you to bring diversity to their panels. You are asked for your opinion as a Brown Woman who Writes, and seen as a representative of Brown People Everywhere. When all you really are, is ONE brown woman writing ONE story, from ONE perspective. And can't that be enough?

And when #TheOne expresses a view that's different from the usual traditional/conservative/Christian/Samoan values – the disappointment from some in your community is very real. You have betrayed them. Upset the balance of their world view. Challenged the stone box of culture they are accustomed to.

When you write enough words (and have as many fiapoto thoughts as we writers often do), there will be those who disagree. I was prepared for debate, critique and even criticism. Because of what use are words if not to provoke thought and discussion? But I wasn't prepared for abuse, harassment and violence.

I have written enough words that I get called bitch, liar, slut, fat whore, thief, corrupt, fraud and plagiarist. A writer of 'trash' romance that tries to 'destroy the Christian values' of our people. A writer of 'psycho-bitch' feminist articles that hates men and wants to 'badmouth my religion'. A writer of columns who must be a paid government mouthpiece because I don't jump on the crucify-the-current-administration-bandwagon. A survivor writer of speeches and blogs about preventing child sexual abuse, who must be a liar 'making it up because she wants attention.' A writer who is an LGBTI ally and provides a platform for faafafine/faatama voices, and so I am fiapoto, fia-lelei, fia-bad, fia-intellectual. I am fia-everything-sinful-yes-that's-me.

Sometimes the problem is I am not brown enough. I am a rich afakasi with a big mouth and no understanding or respect for our Fa'aSamoa. I am stupid, ignorant and need to be taught better by my elders. I don't live in a rural Samoan village so of course I'm clueless. (And corrupt). Some say I failed high school. Others say, the problem is that I have too many university degrees, I'm prideful and think that I'm better and smarter than everyone else.

When they can't muster up an intelligent response to my columns – they try 'slut-shaming' me. They accuse me of having multiple extramarital affairs. 'Her poor husband' they say. 'What a bad mother, kalofae for her kids.' Slap her. Silence her. Fuki her hair.

Women chastise me for being a pa'umuku, mulilua. I bring shame to my family. I should be cast into the sea and drowned. In the next breath, they say they will pray for me to confess my sins (I assume BEFORE the mandatory drowning?) They write how disappointed they are in me. That "I used to be your biggest fan but now I want to set your books on fire". Women with pictures of temples in their FB say Lani will 'choke on all the dicks of the men she's sleeping with'. They tell me to hurry up and repent before God punishes me with sores in secret places and assorted other godly punishments.

Men tell me I should ask my father to explain certain things to me better so I won't write such rubbish. They tell my husband that they feel sorry for him being married to such a woman. 'Fa'asa'o her' they say. Make her behave. When my husband speaks up for me, they tell him to 'go kill yourself', and that it's none of his business. They threaten to bash him, cut him, kill him. I have observed though, that Samoan online abusers treat a man differently than they do a woman. My husband has reached out in a conciliatory way to several people that have written abuse and threats. They've had good conversations that ended in the abuser apologising to him and deleting their comments. Key words – to him. They may have written awful things about me, but the fa'amolemole and the agasala, is offered to my husband. (As my Biblical 'head' and leader?) When I have tried to reach out in the same way to my abusers, their attacks only intensify.

I put heart and soul into writing an essay, and the first comment will be from a Samoan man asking, "Are you married?" When I ignore him, he escalates to "Answer the question bitch", and then finally, "This fat bitch thinks I want her?! What a joke." He says he's coming to Samoa and will kill my husband, replace him, show me who's boss. Later he private messages my husband to apologise to him, because "it's just jokes us!"

A favorite tactic is to claim that the only reason my writing has had any success, is because of other men. They say my novels are famous – because I have a famous author uncle and I ride on his reputation. They say I write my columns to gain favour and cash from powerful men –

because the Prime Minister pays me to think these thoughts and have these opinions. Strange men write that “You suck Tuilaepa’s sweaty balls” and “Fuck you corrupt hypocritical bitch”.

As a woman who writes, I supposedly use my alluring devious woman-ways to influence people. I am one of the “most dangerous and manipulative women in society”, using my #fatWhore sexuality to dazzle men to do what I want. It seems inconceivable to many Samoans, that a woman could have achieved any measure of success in her career – without using sex to advance herself.

There are rape and death threats. Brown men say that they want to sniper me. Drown me. Stab me. Sons, fathers and grandfathers with Jesus pictures in their Facebook profile say they want to lock me in Tafaigata prison so I can be gang raped. Put tiny flaccid inadequate pieces of their anatomy in my mouth to shut me up. They write with eloquence, “I’m going to chop you up and drag your carcass along the road, cook you like a pig in a umu.” They claim we are family, ‘but that won’t stop me from punishing traitors like you’. Then they go play the piano at church choir practise.

Others say they’re going to fly to Samoa and burn my house down. They’re sending my picture to all their family and friends in NZ and Australia so they can wait for me and punish me when I travel.

This is another key element of the abuse I experience as a brown woman who writes. The overwhelming majority of the abusers are Samoans who live overseas. Yes there are a bare few who are using fake profiles to write their abuse from, and so I don’t know where they live or who they are. They could very well be that lady at the breadshop down the road. Or the man sitting next to me at church. But 99% of the threats and harassment is coming from Samoans in Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

Because we are Samoan and that means we are never an individual, my family is also dragged in to it. They cite a 20yr old news item about my father being charged with a crime. And conveniently neglect to add the news article where all the charges were dismissed. They call for him to confess, to be killed ‘before he dies of old age’. They call my extended family aiga – thieves, liars and fraudsters – who must be beaten and publicly shamed. Then most disturbing of all, they go after my children, my ‘piglets’ who need to be punished. Simply for being unfortunate enough to have me, ‘that greedy pig’ as their mother.

Dealing with the abuse is exhausting. Especially when my parents and my children were attacked. I couldn’t understand how people could be so cruel. Especially our own Samoan people, from the same communities overseas who have been so generous and supportive in the past. Why?

I no longer ask why. It just is. You get numbed to it after a while. You accept that this is your reality. It no longer surprises you when people say you’re a dirty whore who writes too much about things that no good Samoan woman would write about. Perhaps this is indicative of what Chimamanda Adichie spoke of, with the danger of the single story? That this is what happens when #TheOne writes a story that doesn’t fit the usual narrative of what a Samoan woman should write? And what’s needed is many more of us, writing many more stories about Brown Women’s rich diversity of experience...

Or maybe people are just horrible. And the internet makes it easier for abusers to target their victims, and get away with it.

So what do you do about the abuse?

You report it – and when Facebook says it doesn't violate their community standards, then you take a deep breath and try to ignore it. You unfriend anyone who LIKES the abusive pages and profiles. You have trusted friends screen your messages and comments so you don't have to read any more abuse. You delete, block and mute. You report death threats once, twice, three times. And when Facebook says nope, then you realise that FB only cares about profits and not about women being abused and harassed. You deactivate for a while. Then you delete your profile completely and savor the peaceful silence it brings.

You go to the doctor because you can't sleep at night, you have panic attacks on airplanes, you're tired so very very tired all the time, you cry at odd moments, you snap and #badMother rage at the little things that shouldn't bug you at all. The doctor prescribes you medication for anxiety and depression and refers you to a therapist.

Well-meaning people tell you, 'oh just ignore the trolls' and 'It's just words. Don't worry about it.' And you want to scream at them because death threats and cyber bullying is violence. It's not just words. And to say so, is to gaslight a victim and negate the impact of that abuse.

You report it to Netsafe. They are very sympathetic. They file complaints with social media and website hosts. Pages get taken down. People get put in the proverbial dogbox. For a few days. A week. Then it starts up all over again. But the abuse intensifies because hey, who's gonna stop us? Netsafe says, take it to the next level, file with the District Court. And you have to ask yourself, do I want to prolong this shit? Can I afford to hire a lawyer for this?

You report to the police. In different countries. They tell you how limited their resources are, how they really want to help but what can they do? They give you long explanations of why internet crime is so hard to prosecute, how they don't have jurisdiction, how they're very sorry but cyber crime is growing faster than they can respond to it and until someone actually tries to physically attack you they can't do anything. **SO I NEED TO GO TO AUSTRALIA AND HOPE THAT MR X DOES TRY TO CHOP ME IN PIECES AND DRAG ME BEHIND HIS CAR? THEN WILL POLICE BE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING?!**

In the meantime, they tell you to screenshot everything as evidence. Which means you keep records of every threat and attack. It gets to be so many though that you stop because it's like carrying a sack of rocks on your back. I stopped at 800+ screenshots.

Police tell you to improve your online security. You take down pictures of your children, un-tag everyone who you love, erase any mention of your address or phone number. You stop blogging in honest, funny, open ways about your family because it gives twisted evil people too many clues. You don't post on social media about your travel plans in advance, you check all your photos and posts to make sure there's no clues about your family's location overseas.

You take precautions in your offline everyday life. You never know when you or your kids could run in to a person who has said they want to bash you. You rev up your already extreme measures for your young children, where they can go and with who. You pray for the older ones

who you can't be with every day. Please Lord give them the strength to withstand whatever anyone may write about them. Please don't let them meet any of these people. You warn your relatives not to give strangers your address or phone number.

You turn down invites to do author events because why expose yourself to possible violence and abuse in 'real' life as well? Just so you can sign books and chat with readers? Is the risk worth it? Is the anxiety before and during, going to impact on your being able to write afterwards? Maybe it's better to just stay home where it's safe.

You want to buy a gun. Join the shooting association so you won't shoot your foot by accident. Take self-defense classes. But you also don't want to leave the house. You have a better understanding of why people 'take the law into their own hands'. Because the law is so useless in these situations. When the Prime Minister says social media is causing violence, you know exactly what he means. Because John Wick is looking pretty good right now. (Yes I'm joking. #not)

Police suggest that maybe you shouldn't write about certain topics anymore? Then the abusers won't abuse you? Which sounds a lot like – don't wear a short skirt and then you won't get assaulted again... But you do it. Because you have children, and parents that are eighty years old, that shouldn't have to deal with the venom that your writing attracts. Because you have a beloved husband who desperately wants to keep you safe, who would do anything to protect you, who is ready and willing to find every one of the abusers and make them stop.

And because deep inside, past the point where you tell lies to yourself, you're afraid.

You're afraid that someone will get through your barbed wire fence, past your pack of ferocious dogs – and kill you in your sleep. That next time you get on an airplane by yourself, a 'troll' will have you trapped at their mercy. That when you go to the mall, strangers from the internet will recognise the #fatWhore and stab you. Bash you. Follow you to the car park and rape you.

Because you know that all the #feagaiga and #SamoanCultureAndAlofaAndFaaaloalo means nothing to these people.

And the things that make us a close-knit community where everyone-knows-everyone and everyone-is-your-cousin-somehow no matter where we go in the world, are the same things that make it incredibly frightening and dangerous to be a Brown Writer. No matter where we go in the world.

So you self-censor for awhile. You hold back. Despising yourself for it because it feels like you're writing lies. You see other women being abused online by the same people, and you want to say something. But you don't. Because the abusers will come for you more. You hate yourself because you're writing scared and God didn't give you the gift of words so you could hold them in your throat and swallow their fire. And the unspoken words, they burn in your chest and keep you awake at night.

You wonder, does this happen to brown man writers too?

So what now? I wish I had answers. Some wise counsel to offer other Brown Women who Write. Or some solutions for how to make writing a safer thing for us to do. But I don't.

I've come a long way though.

I look back and know that when I first started writing and publishing, I was delightfully naive. Clueless. I just wanted people to like my writing. Ha. Now, I know better. Now I don't care if people like it or not. Go ahead, burn my books and dance around the fire. Just leave me and my family alone.

Now I know that Brown Women who Write must do so with fortitude and with eyes wide open to the risks., Be prepared to write through storms and fire. Without approval or Likes. Write through the battlefield of abuse and harassment, uncovered by any tiputa.

Until they succeed in silencing us.

Until they kill us.

E pala mala ae e le pala le tala.