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Transsexual finds sexism in feminism

Reviewed by Julie Foster
Sunday, June 17, 2007

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Whipping Girl

A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity

By Julia Serano

SEAL PRESS; 390 PAGES; \$15.95 PAPERBACK

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Femininity is under attack, and not just from the usual culprits. According to writer, biologist and spoken-word artist Julia Serano, in our society being

feminine is still second rate. And in her erudite and entertaining analysis of the issue, nobody gets away without a "shame on you" for perpetrating these calcified notions of womanhood.

"This scapegoating of those who express femininity can be seen not only in the male-centered mainstream, but in the queer community, where 'effeminate' gay men have been accused of holding back the gay rights movement, and where femme dykes have been accused of being the 'Uncle Toms' of the lesbian movement. Even many feminists buy into traditionally sexist notions about femininity."

The seed for this noteworthy collection of essays, "Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity," took root after Serano attended Camp Trans in 2003. Serano, who lives in Oakland, explains that she had the good fortune to have transitioned in one of the "trans-friendliest places on the planet." Though the process wasn't easy, Serano was able to keep her wife, her friends, her housing and her job. Still, she was cognizant of the prejudice toward transsexual women.

For readers who may not be aware of the events leading up to the formation of Camp Trans, here's a little history. This annual summer gathering of transgender people and their allies is held in Michigan and was organized with the intent of protesting the exclusion of trans women from women-only spaces, such as the nearby Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival began in 1976. Each August in the bucolic woods of Hart, Mich., women gather for relaxation and music. The weeklong event has hosted performances by Holly Near, Indigo Girls, Cris Williamson and Sweet Honey in the Rock. The event, it seems, favored a WBW attendance policy -- meaning that only women born as women were welcome. However, in 1991, after revealing herself as a transsexual, one participant attending the festival was asked to leave, beginning the ferment out of which Trans Camp was founded. Serano learned that even within this female Eden a nasty little serpent slithered sporting misogynist tendencies.

Serano acknowledges one of the biggest hurdles in writing the book was making it accessible to the "varied backgrounds of the audiences I am hoping to reach." Serano ambitiously reaches across political and cultural boundaries. Her intent is that the book



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will resonate with those who know nothing about the subject but are open to learning, transsexuals who are active in the transgender community, members of the women's queer or gender studies community, and those who may have a particular interest in sexism or femininity. "Instead of attempting to empower those born female by encouraging them to move further away from femininity, we should instead learn to empower femininity itself."

These 20 essays range in tone and content from the jargon heavy, "Pathological Science: Debunking Sexological and Sociological Models of Transgenderism," to the humorous yet still enlightening, "Barrette Manifesto." Serano delicately inserts her feelings about what it feels like to be a transsexual woman into the larger framework of how society views transsexuals. Through literate discussions of historical references, psychological and psychiatric studies and sociological data, the reader cannot help but receive an education. But Serano also warns readers that her story is not to be taken as a "definitive statement on transsexuality" but should be seen as one transsexual woman's experience.

"All trans people have different insights into gender, insights that arise out of the very unique combinations of privileges and life histories that we each bring to the table."

The essays are divided into two sections. The first is Trans/Gender Theory. Here Serano deals with how transsexuals are portrayed in the "media, medicine and psychiatry, social sciences, academic gender studies, and in queer and feminist politics."

In the essay, "Ungendering in Art and Academia," her discussion ranges from the HBO movie "Normal" to the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "Middlesex," and then she tackles the work of sociologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's "Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach."

The second section, Trans Women, Femininity, and Feminism, contains Serano's acute observations, beginning as an 11-year-old boy of small stature with a desire to be female, with a look at the derogatory attitudes toward femininity in our culture, showing how these concepts shape society's attitudes toward femininity and transsexual women.

Though at times the material is weighty, she never leaves the reader buried. She provides clear explanations often coupled with levity. She also includes notes for further research, if the reader is so inclined. With "Whipping Girl," Serano has, depending upon your vantage point, either opened a door into a new world or widened the scope of an already informed discussion of gender, transsexuality and femininity. From either perspective, her work is worth investigating.

Julie Foster is a Sacramento writer.

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