


A photograph of a person's back, seen from behind. They are wearing a light-colored, possibly white, tank top. A string of small, dark and light-colored beads is draped over their shoulder and down their back. Two hands are visible, one on each side of the spine, holding the beads. A bright pink rectangular label with a black border is superimposed over the lower back area.

JULIA SERANO

**WHIPPING
GIRL**

A white rectangular box with a thin black border, positioned horizontally in the center of the page, between the 'WHIPPING GIRL' label and the main title.

**A TRANSSEXUAL WOMAN ON SEXISM
AND THE SCAPEGOATING
OF FEMININITY**

WHIPPING GIRL

**A TRANSSEXUAL WOMAN ON SEXISM
AND THE SCAPEGOATING
OF FEMININITY**

JULIA SERANO



SEAL PRESS

Whipping Girl

A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity

Copyright © 2007 by Julia Serano

Published by Seal Press

A member of the Perseus Books Group

1700 4th Street

Berkeley, CA 94710

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the publisher, except by reviewers who may quote brief excerpts in connection with a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Serano, Julia.

Whipping girl : a transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity / Julia Serano.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58005-154-5 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-58005-154-5 (alk. paper)

1. Transsexualism. 2. Transsexuals. 3. Feminism. I. Title.

HQ77.9.S47 2007

306.76'8—dc22

2007003954

10 9 8 7

Cover design by Rodrigo Corral Design

Interior design by Megan Cooney

W16-1
56

WHIPPING GIRL

for Dani
who (once again) provided me with
invaluable feedback, inspiration, support, and love

and in loving memory of Coby
our jenday conure
who used to sit contentedly on my shoulder
while I would write
she was one of the sweetest,
quirkiest, and best friends
that I have ever had
she is dearly missed
“love you, Coby. love you!”

CONTENTS

Introduction.....1

Trans Woman Manifesto.....11

PART 1 **Trans/Gender Theory**

- 1** Coming to Terms with Transgenderism and Transsexuality.....**23**
- 2** Skirt Chasers: Why the Media Depicts the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels.....**35**
- 3** Before and After: Class and Body Transformations.....**53**
- 4** Boygasms and Girlgasms: A Frank Discussion About Hormones and Gender Differences.....**65**
- 5** Blind Spots: On Subconscious Sex and Gender Entitlement.....**77**
- 6** Intrinsic Inclinations: Explaining Gender and Sexual Diversity.....**95**
- 7** Pathological Science: Debunking Sexological and Sociological Models of Transgenderism.....**115**
- 8** Dismantling Cissexual Privilege.....**161**
- 9** Ungendering in Art and Academia.....**195**

PART 2

Trans Women, Femininity, and Feminism

- 10** Experiential Gender.....215
- 11** Deconstructive Surgery.....229
- 12** Bending Over Backwards: Traditional Sexism and Trans-Woman-Exclusion Policies.....233
- 13** Self-Deception.....247
- 14** Trans-Sexualization.....253
- 15** Submissive Streak.....273
- 16** Love Rant.....277
- 17** Crossdressing: Demystifying Femininity and Rethinking “Male Privilege”283
- 18** Barrette Manifesto.....315
- 19** Putting the Feminine Back into Feminism.....319
- 20** The Future of Queer/Trans Activism.....345

Introduction

*“If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be
crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and
eaten alive.”*

—Audre Lorde

WHEN I FIRST TOLD people that I was working on a book based on my experiences and perspectives as a transsexual woman, many of them immediately assumed that I was writing an autobiography (rather than a political or historical account, a work of fiction, or a collection of personal essays). Perhaps they imagined that I would write one of those confessional tell-alls that non-trans people seem to constantly want to hear from transsexual women, one that begins with my insistence that I have always been a “woman trapped inside a man’s body”; one that distorts my desire to be female into a quest for feminine pursuits; one that explains the ins and outs of sex reassignment surgery and hormones in gory detail; one that completely avoids discussions about what it is like to be treated as a woman and how that compares to how I was treated as a male; one that whitewashes away

all of the prejudices I face for being transsexual; a book that ends not with me becoming an outspoken trans activist or feminist, but with the consummation of my womanhood in the form of my first sexual experience with a man. I am not surprised that many would assume that I was simply writing yet another variation of this archetype. Until very recently, this was the only sort of story that non-trans publishers and media producers would allow transsexual women to tell. And while I respect any trans woman who has been brave enough to share her story with the world, the media's narrow focus on the most palatable or sensationalistic transsexual storylines has resulted in making invisible the vast diversity of perspectives and experiences that exist among trans women. Further, this has dumbed down the intricate and difficult relationships many of us have with our own genders and physical bodies. It has also erased the difficulty we face in dealing with the gender stereotypes that other people project onto us because we are women and because we are transsexuals.

Other people who know me from my work as a transgender activist and trans-focused performance poet might have assumed that I was working on a "transgender revolution" book: one similar to those books by Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and Riki Wilchins that influenced me so much when I was first coming out; one that challenges readers to look beyond the gender binary; one that encourages all transgender people (whether they are transsexuals, crossdressers, genderqueers, drag artists, etc.) to recognize that we are all in the same boat, all victims at the hands of the same rigid cultural gender norms. While I do believe that all transgender people have a stake in the same political fight against those who fear and dismiss gender diversity and difference in all of its wondrous forms, I do not believe that we are discriminated against in the same

ways and for the exact same reasons. I have found that the ways people reacted to me back when I identified as a mostly closeted male crossdresser, or as a bigendered queer boy, were very different from one another and yet again different from the way people react to me now that I am an out transsexual woman. The focus on “transgender” as a one-size-fits-all category for those who “transgress binary gender norms” has inadvertently erased the struggles faced by those of us who lie at the intersection of multiple forms of gender-based prejudice. And while I agree with many of the points “shattering-the-gender-binary”-themed books regularly make, I have come to the realization that they only tell part of the story.

The idea that all anti-trans discrimination arises from the fact that, as transgender people, we “transgress binary gender norms” does not resonate completely with my personal experiences. As a somewhat eccentric kid, I was given plenty of leeway to opt out of boys’ activities and to cultivate an androgynous appearance and persona. I was sometimes teased for being different, for being an atypical or unmasculine boy, but it was nothing compared to venom that was reserved for those boys who acted downright feminine. And now, as an out transsexual woman, I find that those who wish to ridicule or dismiss me do not simply take me to task for the fact that I fail to conform to gender norms—instead, more often than not, they mock my femininity. From the perspective of an occasional gender bender or someone on the female-to-male spectrum, it might seem like binary gender norms are at the core of all anti-trans discrimination. But most of the anti-trans sentiment that I have had to deal with as a transsexual woman is probably better described as misogyny.

The fact that transsexual women are often singled out to bear the brunt of our culture’s fascination with and demonization of

transgenderism is a subject that has been ripe for feminist critique for about half a century now. Unfortunately, many feminists have been extraordinarily apathetic or antagonistic to the experiences and perspectives of transsexual women. In fact, the few non-trans feminists who have written about us in the past have usually based their theses upon the assumption that we are really “men” (not women), and that our physical transitions to female and our expressions of femininity represent an appropriation of female culture, symbolism, and bodies. Besides being disrespectful of the fact that we identify, live, and are treated by the world as women, such flawed approaches have overlooked an important opportunity to examine far more relevant issues: the ways in which traditional sexism shapes popular assumptions about transsexual women and why so many people in our society feel threatened by the existence of “men who choose to become women.”

The intent of this book is to debunk many of the myths and misconceptions that people have about transsexual women, as well as gender in general. By turning the tables on the rest of the world and examining why so many different facets of our society have set out to dehumanize trans women, I hope to show that we are ridiculed and dismissed not merely because we “transgress binary gender norms,” as many transgender activists and gender theorists have proposed, but rather because we “choose” to be women rather than men. The fact that we identify and live as women, despite being born male and having inherited male privilege, challenges those in our society who wish to glorify maleness and masculinity, as well as those who frame the struggles faced by other women and queers solely in terms of male and heterosexual privilege.

Examining the society-wide disdain for trans women also brings to light an important yet often overlooked aspect of traditional sexism: that it targets people not only for their femaleness, but also for their expressions of femininity. Today, while it is generally considered to be offensive or prejudiced to openly discriminate against someone for being female, discriminating against someone's femininity is still considered fair game. The idea that masculinity is strong, tough, and natural while femininity is weak, vulnerable, and artificial continues to proliferate even among people who believe that women and men are equals. And in a world where femininity is so regularly dismissed, perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than male and transgender expressions of femininity.

I have called this book *Whipping Girl* to highlight the ways in which people who are feminine, whether they be female, male, and/or transgender, are almost universally demeaned compared with their masculine counterparts. 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—that it is artificial, contrived, and frivolous; that it is a ruse that only serves the purpose of attracting and appeasing the desires of men. What I hope to show in this book is that the real ruse being played is not by those of us who happen to be feminine, but rather by those who place inferior meanings onto femininity. The idea that femininity is subordinate

to masculinity dismisses women as a whole and shapes virtually all popular myths and stereotypes about trans women.

In this book, I break with past attempts in feminism and queer theory to dismiss femininity by characterizing it as “artificial” or “performance.” Instead, I argue that certain aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and can both precede socialization and supersede biological sex. For these reasons, I believe that it is negligent for feminists to focus only on those who are female-bodied, or for transgender activists to only talk about binary gender norms. No form of gender equity can ever truly be achieved until we first work to empower femininity itself.

Perhaps the most difficult issue that I have had to contend with in writing this book is the varied backgrounds of the audiences I am hoping to reach. Some readers may be transsexual themselves, or may be very active in the transgender community, but may not be tuned in to the many discourses about gender and transsexuality that exist in academia, clinical settings, feminism, or queer politics. Others may take an interest in this book from a women’s, queer, or gender studies perspective, being familiar with what non-trans academics have had to say about trans people, but without ever having been exposed to a transsexual woman’s take on these many dialogues and debates. Still others may be completely new to the subject, having picked up the book because they want to learn more about transsexuality, how to be a trans ally, or because they have a particular interest in the subjects of femininity and/or sexism. For me, it has certainly been a challenge to write a substantial book about such complex topics that can simultaneously be easily understood and enjoyed by audiences who so greatly differ in their prior knowledge and their presumptions.

While I have written this book in “lay language” and with a general audience in mind, the use of transgender-specific or -related jargon is unavoidable. I have not only had to define a lot of preexisting terms for those who are new to this subject, but redefine or even create new terms to clear up confusion and to fill gaps left by the strange hodgepodge of clinical, academic, and activist language typically used to describe transgender people and experiences. While creating new terms can potentially be disconcerting to readers at first, I feel that it is necessary for addressing and challenging the many assumptions that are commonly made about gender and trans women.

“Trans Woman Manifesto,” which follows this introduction, is the piece I’ve chosen to set the stage for many of the ideas put forward in this book. It is followed by Part 1, Trans/Gender Theory, which focuses largely on depictions and representations of transsexuals in the media, medicine and psychiatry, social sciences, academic gender studies, and queer and feminist politics. Because transsexuals make up a relatively small percentage of the population and have little to no power or voice in these fields, non-transsexual depictions regularly stand in for or trump the perspectives and experiences of actual transsexuals. This is highly problematic, as many of these depictions are sensationalizing, sexualizing, and/or outright hostile. Other depictions are not intended to be blatantly demeaning, yet they still have a drastic negative impact on the lives of transsexuals because they frame transsexuality in terms of non-trans people’s assumptions and interests. This forces transsexuals to describe ourselves and our experiences in terms of non-trans terminology and values, which inevitably place us in a subordinate position (i.e., non-trans genders are seen as “normal,” “natural,” and “unquestionable,” whereas

transsexual genders are presumed to be “abnormal,” “artificial,” and perpetually in question and open to interpretation). This also has the rather dubious consequence of positioning non-trans people who merely study transsexuality as “experts” who somehow understand transsexuals better than we understand ourselves. I spend a great deal of this section debunking non-trans representations of transsexuality because they effectively silence trans people’s political voices and prevent us from describing our lives the way we see and experience them.

Of course, it is impossible to discuss such issues without having to grapple with another gender binary of sorts—that between gender essentialists (who believe that women and men represent two mutually exclusive categories, each born with certain inherent, nonoverlapping traits) and social constructionists (who believe that gender differences are primarily or exclusively the result of socialization and binary gender norms). For this reason, I have included my own view of gender in this section, one that accommodates my experiences both as a trans person and as a practicing biologist; one that acknowledges that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors help to shape the way that we come to experience and understand our own genders.

Part 2, *Trans Women, Femininity, and Feminism*, brings together my experiences and observations—pre-, during, and post-transition—to discuss the many ways fear, suspicion, and dismissiveness toward femininity shape societal attitudes toward trans women and influence the way trans women often come to view ourselves. In the last two chapters of this section, I bring together several of the main themes in this book to suggest new directions for gender-based activism. In chapter 19, “Putting the Feminine Back

into Feminism,” I make the case that feminist activism and theory would be best served by working to empower and embrace femininity, rather than eschewing or deriding it, as it often has in the past. Such an approach would allow feminism to both incorporate transgender perspectives and reach out to the countless feminine-identified women who have felt alienated by the movement in the past. And in chapter 20, “The Future of Queer/Trans Activism,” I show how certain taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions that are prevalent in contemporary queer and transgender theory and politics ensure that trans women’s perspectives and issues will continue to take a back seat to those of other queers and transgender people. I argue that, rather than focusing on “shattering the gender binary”—a strategy that invariably pits gender-conforming and non-gender-conforming people against one another—we work to challenge all forms of gender entitlement (i.e., when a person privileges their own perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of other people’s genders over the way those people understand themselves). After all, the one thing that all forms of sexism share—whether they target females, queers, transsexuals, or others—is that they all begin with placing assumptions and value judgments onto other people’s gendered bodies and behaviors.

