

TRANSFEMINISM HAS A NEW FACE

Queer authors Julia Serano and Helen Boyd are changing the way we think about gender.

By Diane Anderson-Minshall



Helen Boyd



Julia Serano

FOR MANY, the word entertainer means a celebrity—the actors, musicians, even athletes who we exalt to icon status. But to many dykes, authors, especially queer ones, are the greatest entertainers of all, for their ability to inspire, move and outrage us with their words. Two women doing just that, are Julia Serano, author of *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, and Helen Boyd, author of *She's Not the Man I Married*.

A transsexual lesbian feminist, Serano is a darling of San Francisco's queer lit scene (her readings are like mini-Butchies concerts). Helen Boyd, who has chronicled her husband's transition to her wife and championed the concerns of trans partners (especially straight-to-gay spouses), is a well-known feminist among the country's alt-leaning transsexual and cross-dresser scene.

We recently chatted with Serano and Boyd, and gained a few insights on femininity, passing and the sanctity of lesbian space.

Julia, you say we need to recognize that femininity is innate, not performance, but in some ways I'm really proud of "performing" my femininity. How can I reconcile the two?

Serano: Certain aspects of femininity are highly social in origin, while others are not. Gender expression is a complex combination of both socialization and biology. Obviously, femininity can be a performance, [and] I know that many queer women embrace the idea. Where I draw the line is when people claim that femininity is entirely artificial or constructed, or when they say that "all gender is performance." Gender is not any one thing.

Helen, is femininity innate?

Boyd: For some people, I suppose it might be. It never was for me, and I'm absolutely sure it's not for a lot of women. I [think] gender is some combination of nature and nurture, [and] there are very intricate feedback loops between biology and culture none of us really understands.

How do people keep from still "seeing" the gender that the trans person once was?

Boyd: Betty [lived] as a guy long enough to have picked up habits. I don't think of that as a bad thing. I'm a tomboy, and I like masculinity in women. I like people who have a couple of genders, and who are able to see and interact with a couple of mine. Betty doesn't mind when I can see the guy in her, since she can see the guy in me.

Serano: It's impossible for people who knew me

pre-transition to completely erase any memory of me having been male, [and] I don't think that it's necessarily unsupportive if they see the "male" in me, so long as they fully respect my female identity.

Helen, in terms of your marriage, how do you reconcile who you are with who you thought you'd become?

Boyd: [At first,] I needed to feel the validation I got from others [as] this weird tomboy punk rock grrl ... with the "catch" Betty was in guy mode. Now, they're not so impressed, but to me it just feels like the truth of who I really am, and always really was, has outed itself. The idea of [my] being married to an ordinary man—or an ordinary woman—is laughable.

Why is it easier for the lesbian community to accept a man who was raised female than a woman who was raised male?

Boyd: Despite everything, socialization still counts. We still raise boys and girls really differently. MTFs are often coming from straight worlds, and might come from very different points of view culturally, politically—you name it. It's a huge cultural divide that's about much more than transness.

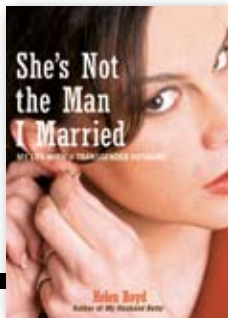
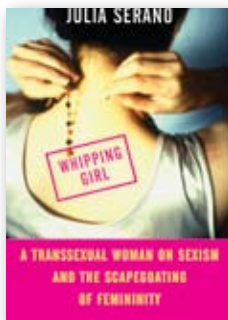
Serano: The argument that lesbian spaces should only be open to those who've been socialized female is a recent invention, one that's designed to allow trans men to stay in the community while continuing to keep away trans women. That trans women should be turned away because we "used to be men" seems [a] rather dubious [supposition] given how many trans guys, [even those experiencing] male privilege can be found in lesbian spaces these days.

While all trans people face discrimination, trans women are more severely impacted because ... in a world where femaleness and femininity are viewed as inferior to, and less legitimate than, maleness and masculinity, it's [easy] to ridicule or dismiss trans women than it is trans men.

Right now, most trans dykes don't feel welcome in lesbian spaces because many lesbians are openly dismissive or hostile toward us, and that behavior is tolerated by the community. Many still attend events that specifically exclude trans women and think nothing of it. As a lesbian, I expect my straight allies to stand up for me in my absence. By the same reasoning, if someone wants to be an ally to trans women, then they have to stop coddling or defending trans-misogynistic lesbians in their community. They need to call them out on their bigotry. Anything short of that is simply enabling anti-trans woman sentiment.

How do we combat our passing-obsessed culture (praising gays who don't flaunt, minorities who fit in), while allowing people to be who they want to be?

Serano: People will often say that I pass as a woman, but that's not how I experience it. Passing—which implies that one is hiding or actively managing other people's perceptions of them—that's what I did before my transition. I passed as a man, but I am a woman.



Boyd: I want to add, as someone who has passed as a dyke for most of my life ... sometimes passing is more like a mistake in observation, and not an active attempt at deceiving anyone.

It seems like sometimes the narrative about how trans women know they're women include things that a lot of lesbians never had (playing with dolls, liking makeup).

Boyd: Culturally we're raised to believe that femaleness and femininity are one in the same. For many lesbians, that means that they were socialized to be feminine because they are female. This may conflict with their own inclinations to be more androgynous or masculine. As a result, they may be accused of not being "real" women, and they may grow up to question the very idea of womanness.

Serano: For trans women, it tends to be the other way around. We grow up with a profound, persistent, subconscious understanding that we should be female. Like women in general, some of us are feminine, some masculine, some a little of both. But more often than not, what drives us to transition is not our desire to express femininity, but rather our sense of femaleness.

I was so concerned about losing my visibility as a dyke, that for the first six months I told everyone that my husband used to be my wife and I'm really a lesbian. Helen, did you experience this—in the opposite way?

Boyd: For a while I probably mentioned my heterosexuality a little too much [mostly] in queer spaces, where I was trying to make some room for partners like me. I'm a punk at heart and can't help [challenging] people. It amuses me to see how scornful people can get when I mention I'm heterosexual.

Serano: Ironically, my partner Dani dealt with these issues more before my transition than after. She had identified as a dyke for most of her adult life, and ... when we were first going out, she would often talk about how weird it was for her to be in a relationship that most people read as straight. So when I transitioned ... she didn't have to struggle with drastic changes in identity.

Helen, you're really aware you're losing privilege. How much does that impact you?

Boyd: It's absolutely astonishing to move from being an ally of LGBT people to being perceived as LGBT myself. I thought I had a clue; I didn't. My guess is that most allies are similarly clueless. The loss I've experienced has made me more political, more visible, and more out. This second-class citizenship really pisses me off.

In *She's Not*, you write that now that you're two women you don't know who's on top or who pays the cab driver. Why did things have to change?

Boyd: It's not so much because we're two women, but because Betty [realized] she's way more submissive than she was ... pretending to be. Honestly, she really sucked at playing the top, [when] she did. I like both ... so I just didn't want to feel locked into [one]. I'm still hoping she'll evolve into a switch, [but] at least she's willing to play the part when I need her to.

I have to say that I loved *Whipping Girl*, but was honestly disappointed that it wasn't an autobiography.

Serano: When I first started writing and performing spoken word, I really wanted to do [material] that was more autobiographical. [But] most people ... had these stereotypes [about] what a transsexual woman is supposed to be, and they were just projecting those onto me. So I started working on ways to challenge those stereotypes ... and that eventually evolved into this book. I do hope to finish that one-person show at some point, so you may get your wish! ■



JD Disalvatore

The writer-producer-director sounds off.

"I RIPPED my clothes off at karaoke," says JD Disalvatore, admitting to one of her more impulsive schemes to raise money for her first film project as writer-producer-director, *Gay Propaganda*. She's less in need of creative financing since producing *Eating Out 2: Sloppy Seconds*, which led to Paul Colichman from here! Networks providing the financing for her latest feature film, *Shelter*, and an offer on her next picture *The Road to Dinah*, a lesbian romantic comedy that takes place at the annual lesbian invasion of Palm Springs. — Laurie K. Schenden

Does *The Road to Dinah* have anything to do with golf?

This picture is a nod to classic romantic comedy road pictures. It's about a butch and a femme from New York City traveling cross-country to go to the Dinah Shore Weekend. In the script it's sort of like the lesbian Mecca, that which you must do before you die. No, golf's not mentioned once!

Why do you think the perception that gay films are bad seems to persist?

It's because there's no fucking money in it. [Audiences] might not understand that to make LGBT films for our community, most people have to mortgage their homes. They look homemade because they are. It's economics; people will finance gay films when gay people make [the films] profitable, go to the theatres and buy a ticket or purchase the dvd and therefore prove to financiers and companies that we are a viable audience and worth the investment.

Is your goal then to make films that appeal to all audiences?

I'm in the business of making entertainment for and about the LGBT community. When I'm asked about the crossover on *The Road to Dinah*, I simply say, "That is not my audience." I want to make a film by and about lesbians. If it strikes a chord like *Bound* did, that's great, but I am not watering down my subject matter or changing anything to do that. ... In *Road to Dinah*, everyone's gay. I don't think there's a straight person in the whole script.

How did you wind up in charge of two man-meat flicks?

When you have a lot of cute, half-naked men around, you really need to hire a dyke to make sure someone concentrates on work. ■