

## Fogdog Interview

### INTERVIEW WITH JULIA SERANO, AUTHOR OF *WHIPPING GIRL*

EMILY BINGHAM

**D**r. Julia Serano, author of *Excluded: Making Feminists and Queer Movements More Exclusive*, was the 2015 scholar-in-residence for Women's History Month, sponsored by Wright State University's Women's Center and Women's Studies Program. Dr. Serano is a biologist, poet, spoken word artist, and renowned activist for LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex and Allies) rights. Dr. Serano has a PhD in biochemistry from Columbia University, and she worked as a researcher at the University of California, Berkley, for seventeen years. While visiting WSU, from March 24-26, Julia Serano discussed her nonfiction book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, which explores how trans women are uniquely affected by misogyny. In a follow-up email interview, *Fogdog* asked her about her experiences publishing *Whipping Girl*, the place of trans women in feminism, her ideal utopia, and more.

**When did you first know that you wanted to write *Whipping Girl*? What was the process of writing the book?**

In 2004, I began to focus my activism and writing on how misogyny and anti-feminine sentiment were a driving force behind why people tend to sensationalize, sexualize, and demonize trans women and others on the trans female/feminine spectrum. At the time, people talked about the marginalization of trans people as being rooted in the gender binary. And this is true to a degree: Any person who defies gender norms will no doubt face some negative

or questioning comments about that. But as a trans woman, I find that these comments don't just target me for crossing gender boundaries per se, but rather they ridicule or dismiss me for wanting to be female, or wanting to be feminine, as these ways of being are often viewed as inferior or less legitimate than their male and masculine counterparts.



Julia Serano

By 2005, I had a few spoken word pieces and a chapbook of essays exploring “trans-misogyny” (the term I used to describe this intersection between transphobia and misogyny), and I had started working on a website to get the word out about these ideas. But then (through a series of serendipitous events), Seal Press took an interest in my writings and eventually offered me a book contract.

My manuscript deadline was for December 2006. I only had a handful of completed potential chapters when I started. Plus I had a full-time job at

the time. So for a year and a half, working on that book was pretty much my entire life. I wrote every morning from 5 to 8 a.m. before work, and when I came home from work, I did research related to the book.

While the book evolved quite a bit from my initial book proposal, the main themes stayed consistent. I focused primarily on challenging assumptions and stereotypes about 1) transsexuals, 2) trans women and other trans female/feminine folks, and 3) feminine gender expression, because in my experience at the time, these three aspects of my person were regularly maligned in the straight mainstream as well as in many strands of feminism and queer activism. While I felt that redeeming these identities and expressions was vital, a drawback of that focus—in retrospect—is that there is less discussion about other trans-spectrum identities, and less consideration of how transphobia intersects with other various forms of marginalization. I like to think of *Whipping Girl* as a good starting point for exploring trans feminism, but I definitely encourage readers to additionally seek out writings from the perspectives of trans people of differing identities, backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and generations.

**Who have you found to be the audience of this book? Trans women or men? Cisgender people first learning about gender and queer theory? Or a mix of the two?**

I specif  
discussin  
the book  
reasons.  
intereste  
apprecia  
queer ac  
writing

For me  
when pe  
parts of  
courses—  
very few  
the class  
number  
that my  
to trans  
generall  
of the bo  
trans fol  
might st  
easy to u  
the way

**What is  
feminist  
instituti**

In my ca  
had a fa  
the majo  
dismissi  
positiv  
of the sp  
as activis  
feminism  
against u  
a solid m  
feminist  
gender e  
women v  
progress

I specifically wrote the book from the standpoint of a trans woman, and discussing how transphobia and misogyny intersect in my own life. Given that, the book probably resonates most with other trans women for understandable reasons. But thankfully, the book has reached many other audiences. People interested in transgender and femme activism have also shared with me their appreciation for the book. And it has also made some ripples in feminism and queer activism more generally. These are all things that I had hoped for when writing it.

For me, the most surprising thing was when people began using *Whipping Girl* (or parts of it) as teaching materials in college courses—at the time that I was writing it, very few actual trans voices ever made it into the classroom. As a result, I've had quite a number of cis [cisgender] people tell me that my book first introduced them not only to trans issues, but to gender theory more generally. I tried to make the “theory” aspects of the book accessible, as I figured that a lot of trans folks who were relatively unfamiliar with gender studies or queer theory might stumble onto the book, and I wanted to make these subjects relatively easy to understand. Little did I know that many cis readers would also appreciate the way that I introduced and presented these subjects.

---

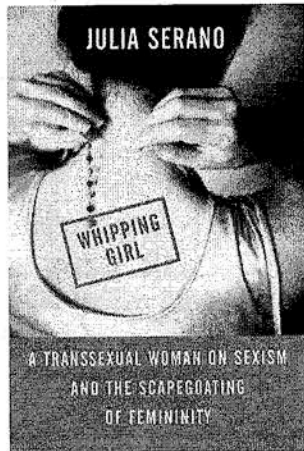
In my utopia . . . what we think of as “gender” or “gender expression” would still exist, but we would cease strictly associating them with any given sex. This would mean an end to compulsory femininity for girls, and masculinity for boys.

---

**What is feminism's relationship with trans women now, in 2015? How can feminists make their spaces more trans-inclusive? How can this be applied institutionally, like on a college campus?**

In my early days as a trans feminist (around 2003), it felt like trans women had a fairly small number of allies and supporters within feminism, whereas the majority of feminists seemed to be either somewhat suspicious or outright dismissive of us. Things have changed dramatically since then, in a mostly positive way. I think that many feminists who are on the more progressive side of the spectrum now see trans women as legitimate women and feminists, and as activists to work side-by-side with. While more mainstream expressions of feminism mostly ignore trans issues, at least they are no longer actively working against us. And feminists who wish to exclude trans women—who used to be a solid majority—are now relatively marginalized within feminism, as most cis feminists now see their ideology as outdated, discriminatory, and anathema to gender equity. To be clear, I am not saying that everything is OK now for trans women within feminism. But I do feel that it is important to acknowledge the progress we have made.

As far as making feminist spaces and college campuses more trans-inclusive, there are a plethora of articles on the subject that can be found readily online, and that provide specific, tangible steps that can be taken toward this end. But as I stress in my recent book *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*, in addition to taking concrete steps to make specific marginalized groups feel welcome and empowered in the space, inclusivity also requires us to be more generally accepting of difference, and welcoming of perspectives that differ from our own.



Often within feminism (as well as in other forms of activism), we come up with very fixed ideas of how people should be, of what behaviors are “liberatory” or “conservative,” of what beliefs people should hold, and so on. Then, when someone from a different background or experience (e.g., a trans woman) comes along, they might not fit the group’s ideals, or they may have a different view of things. And often this becomes the focal point for exclusion. For instance, some cis feminists will accept me as a trans feminist so long as I agree with their worldview. But as soon as I say, “Well, as a trans woman, I see this issue differently,” they may be less willing to hear what I have to say. In *Excluded*, I start from the premise that people are fundamentally heterogeneous, and I forward strategies to create feminist and activist movements that are more accommodating of a multiplicity of different identities and viewpoints.

**You mentioned in the book talk that you had to remove the word “transgendered” from an early draft of the book. How has the language surrounding queer and trans theory changed and how has that changed your writing?**

Yes, it was commonplace in the 1990s and early ’00s for trans people to refer to ourselves as “transgendered.” Around the time that I was writing *Whipping Girl*, some trans activists began arguing that it should instead be simply “transgender” (with no “-ed”), which has since become the standard usage.

In the years since, I have witnessed countless similar debates erupt over trans language, where certain words that trans activists had long used are suddenly deemed problematic or derogatory. If the 2003 version of me was suddenly transported to today, other trans activists would probably end up calling out most of the trans-related language that I used! And it’s not because I was ignorant back then, or that I was expressing internalized transphobia. It’s simply because language has evolved so much since then.

I used to  
labels we  
others. E  
is extrem  
can be a  
it in that  
interpre  
is impos  
on challe  
intention  
the word  
also fost  
as activi  
geograph  
language

**In one o  
were oft  
Do tran  
books fe**

This is a  
for. I thi  
I called i  
as these  
trans wo  
(where p  
positive,  
where tr  
and/or p  
very wel  
it is to b  
written b  
a trans w  
It was p  
number  
and exp

**In this i  
literatur  
turn an  
gender e**

I used to think that certain trans-related labels were inherently better (or worse) than others. But now I recognize that language is extremely contextual. Virtually any word can be a slur if someone intentionally uses it in that manner, or if the person listening interprets it that way. So while language is important, I've become more focused on challenging the negative meanings and intentions behind the words, rather than the words themselves. I think that this can also foster inclusivity in our movements, as activists of different generations and geographies will most certainly use different language than we do.

---

I like to think of *Whipping Girl* as a good starting point for exploring trans feminism, but I definitely encourage readers to additionally seek out writings from the perspectives of trans people of differing identities, backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and generations.

---

**In one chapter of *Whipping Girl* you discuss the tropes that trans women were often forced into in movies such as *Ace Ventura* and *The Crying Game*. Do trans women fare better in literary depictions? Do you have any favorite books featuring trans women?**

This is a great question, although one that I can't provide a definitive answer for. I think that forms of visual media are especially prone to falling into (what I called in *Whipping Girl*) the "deceptive" or "pathetic" trans women archetypes, as these categories are largely shaped by whether the viewers initially read the trans woman in question as cis or trans, respectively. You might think that books (where people are not visually judging the characters) might be more trans-positive, but I am not sure that this is the case, as there are plenty of examples where trans woman characters in novels are written in a highly sensationalistic and/or problematic manner. If literary depictions do tend to be better, it may very well be because it is easier for trans writers to get a book published than it is to break into the TV or film industry. There are a ton of amazing books written by trans people out there. If I had to pick a favorite book centered on a trans woman character, I'd probably choose Imogen Binnie's novel *Nevada*. It was published by Topside Press; in the last few years, they've released a number of novels and short story collections centered on trans women's lives and experiences, so I encourage folks to check them out!

**In this issue of *The Fogdog Review*, we include a student survey on dystopian literature and visions of the future, so we thought we'd take a more optimistic turn and ask you what a future utopia would look like for you, in regards to gender expression or any other facet of society.**

A lot of feminists say their end goal or utopia is a world where gender is eliminated. It is unclear to me exactly what they envision, because much of what they would describe as “gender” arises when we associate certain human traits with either male or female bodies. And there will always be male and female (and other) bodies, so we will necessarily have some language to describe these differences that exist between people. Additionally, many behaviors that we think of as constituting gender expression—for example, being competitive, or nurturing, or technically oriented, or communicative, or aggressive, or appreciating beauty, and so on—are simply human traits that exist to varying degrees in most or all people, and will likely remain with us.

So in my utopia, these aspects of what we think of as “gender” or “gender expression” would still exist, but we would cease strictly associating them with any given sex. This would mean an end to compulsory femininity for girls, and masculinity for boys. We would also cease projecting stereotypes, meanings, and good or bad connotations onto these human traits. This would not be a world where all people would end up completely androgynous, as I do think that some people naturally gravitate more toward the masculine or feminine side of the spectrum(s). Rather, it would be a world full of gender and sexual difference, albeit one where an individual’s bodily autonomy and consensual behaviors are not constantly policed.

PAT  
AND  
MO  
GR  
PRE  
VEE  
YO

*“Fashion  
the stre*

*—Coco C*

**W**  
conflict  
Accord  
Chanel  
women  
attitude  
by fash  
what a  
A num  
Ilya Pa  
suggest  
decisiv  
To  
she arg