

U.S. | PRIDE 2017

Julia Serano, Transfeminist Thinker, Talks Trans-Misogyny

By JEANNE CARSTENSEN JUNE 22, 2017

The biologist, performer and author Julia Serano is a leading transfeminist thinker and the author of “Whipping Girl,” which Jill Soloway, the creator of the Amazon series “Transparent,” cites as a major influence and the first book she gives to transgender friends, like Caitlyn Jenner.

Based on Ms. Serano’s experiences as a trans woman who transitioned in 2002, and deep engagement with feminist theory, her manifesto links transphobia with sexism and is a call to rethink attitudes toward femininity. She worked at the University of California, Berkeley, for 17 years doing postdoctoral research in genetics and evolutionary biology and is now a full-time writer and activist in Oakland. The following interview has been edited and condensed.

One of the main ideas “Whipping Girl” became known for is “trans-misogyny.” Please explain.

After I transitioned I experienced a combination of discrimination — for being a transgender person and also for being a woman. Trans-misogyny describes this complex interplay between transphobia and misogyny that trans women are faced

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What's an example?

Once in San Francisco I saw a trans woman dressed like an average feminine woman walk past a straight couple on the street. The man turned to the woman and sneered, "Did you see all that crap he's wearing?" He was referring to her dress and jewelry and makeup and all that. If a trans man had walked by, they might also have ridiculed him for being transgender. But I doubt very much they would have made fun of his masculine clothing.

When did you become a feminist? And why?

I identified as a feminist, or feminist ally, throughout my adult life. But after my transition around 2002, I began writing about my experiences with sexism as a trans woman, and that led me to become more passionate about and involved in feminism.

"Whipping Girl" is in many ways a celebration and defense of feminine gender expression. Why did you feel femininity needed a cheerleader?

Some people have feminine traits or gravitate toward feminine gender expression. Historically these things have been ridiculed in comparison to masculine interests and gender expression.

If people are going to make jokes about transgender people, they usually single out trans women. The underlying theme of the joke is how ridiculous it is that someone who was a man would decide to be a woman, to be feminine. The assumption is that femaleness and femininity are inferior. That's part of the joke.

Just as feminists have long argued that women are men's equals, we should also be saying that femininity is masculinity's equal.

Most feminist and women's groups today include trans women. But there are still tensions. Recently the Nigerian novelist and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie sparked controversy with comments suggesting that trans women aren't really women.

I don't think Adichie is opposed to transgender people per se. But she did go out of her way to make the case that trans women belong in a separate category.

Feminism is about putting an end to sexism, and as a feminist I personally want to see the end of sexism in all its forms: homophobia or transphobia or traditional sexism or whatever. I don't see why trans women need to be forced out into our own group separate from women in order to end sexism.

It's worth pointing out that there was a time when a lot of straight feminists similarly wanted to isolate lesbians. They accused them of being a threat to women and women's liberation. We see how wrong that was now.

Have you felt pressured to conform to certain norms of femininity?

It's complicated. Just like women more generally, trans women vary a lot. Some are high femme. Some butch. I call myself a femme tomboy — I have a little of both.

But there is a sense that to be taken seriously as a trans woman, you should fit into the ideal of femininity as much as possible. Yet trans women who are very feminine are often accused of going over the top and presenting a stereotyped idea of what women should be.

A lot of my trans women friends identify as queer or lesbian so they are not canonically feminine. We are very diverse, but the trans women who get media attention tend to fit the more feminine ideal or expectations.

Do you swing optimistic or pessimistic in terms of your trans activism?

In spite of the many obstacles, I tend to think we progress a little all the time. But since the election, I have been shocked at the rise of the alt-right and about how outspoken strongly sexist, racist, queer-phobic voices have become.

You began life as a male; fast-forward almost five decades and you're a trans woman feminist activist. Could you have imagined that?

Not in the way you might be thinking. It's true that when I was a young boy, I couldn't have imagined I would be a trans woman. But as soon as I learned about trans people, I thought transitioning might be a possible pathway for me. But being trans has influenced me in surprising ways. Not being able to take my gender for granted from a young age forced me to become a critical thinker. And facing the obstacles of living my life as an out trans woman has made me more self-confident — not just about my trans identity, but about everything. As a young adult, I mostly saw myself as a biologist and musician, but nowadays I'm working as a writer and activist.

Do you have any sisterly advice for Chelsea Manning as she embarks on her public life as a trans woman?

I don't feel comfortable addressing her or anyone specifically. But I would say to younger people in general that when it comes to trans people and transitioning, the only thing you can do is try not to let other people's expectations dictate what you do or what you become.

A version of this article appears in print on June 25, 2017, on Page F3 of the New York edition with the headline: The Transfeminist.

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