



BOOKS»

A MANIFESTO FOR ALL

Bisexual trans activist and author Julia Serano wants to make feminism inclusive.

BY MARCIE BIANCO

In 2007, when Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* was published, there was no trans visibility in mainstream culture. Nearly a decade later, upon the book's reissue, trans visibility and issue awareness have reached a cultural apex, thanks to media and entertainment figures like Caitlyn Jenner, Janet Mock, and Laverne Cox. No one, especially bisexual trans activist and author Serano, could have imagined such progress for the trans community. It is for this reason that Seal Press published a second edition of the acclaimed trans-feminist book.

Named No. 16 on *Ms.* magazine's list of "100 Best Non-Fiction Books of All Time," *Whipping Girl* is one part theory, one part cultural studies, and one part personal essay that argues for a stronger coalition between feminists and trans activists. Back in 2007, long before the current iteration of feminism, Serano contended that we needed a new definition of feminism, one that was inclusive of all genders.

There is an undeniable rift between old-school feminists—Germaine Greer, for example—and the trans community. While it would be easy to call this rift generational, Serano suggests other differences are at the heart of it: "I think that there are a lot of younger trans-exclusionary radical feminists. I would say [the rift] is more philosophical than anything else. If you're entrenched in the idea that sexism is solely encapsulated by the notion that 'men are the oppressors and women the oppressed'—if you have that worldview—then you'll be a lot more inclined to be suspicious of trans people, as well as other various groups, the femme movement or the sex workers' rights, for example."

In *Whipping Girl*, Serano also scrutinizes how misogynistic attacks on femininity similarly affect trans women. "For those of us who move through the world and who 'pass' as cisgender women," Serano explains, "I would say that a lot of the sexism I face since I transitioned is very similar if not identical to what cisgender women face, because people treat me as though I'm a cisgender woman." Misogyny for both cisgender and trans women stems from how well society reads them as conforming to culturally accepted gender codes.

But many trans women experience an added layer of misogyny in the form of fetishization. Those who do not “pass” face a form of misogyny driven by transphobia, which Serano calls transmisogyny. “Trans women are sexualized in certain ways in our society, where we’re seen especially as sexually promiscuous, or that we transition for sexual reasons. There’s also the fact that as soon as people know I am trans, there’s the possibility that they will decide to not take my identity seriously. In the book, I talk about transmisogyny as being the intersection of transphobia and misogyny, and I think those are always at play when people try to undermine me, if they find out I am a trans woman.”

While grateful for the visibility provided by figures like Jenner, Serano believes that the media needs to more thoughtfully consider and represent women, whether cisgender or transgender, who are not paragons of femininity. “Completely absent is any discussion about the average person’s gender expectations—the way in which they are very binary, the way in which we view men and women as completely different, and the way in which we encourage people to be gender-conforming and discourage people who are gender-nonconforming. These seemingly minor events,” she concludes, “are the root cause for the reason that trans people face so much discrimination in society.”

She attributes the broad and rapid change in trans visibility to technology, which she also credits with helping isolated queer kids to connect with one another for support and community. “When I was a kid, going through what I was going through, I went to my local public library and couldn’t find any books. At my college, there were three psychology books that were awful and only one trans memoir . . . Nowadays, people who are gender-questioning can just get on the Internet and immediately have access to information and to organizations that can help create online communities.” When she was young, she says, “Trans communities were very much characterized by isolation. Today we are able to find one another and organize with one another in ways that just weren’t possible at the time.”

While there is some discussion about the

inclusion of the T in LGBT, statistically, it’s the B—bisexuals—who are the largest percentage of the LGBT community, and are erased and disrespected by the community. Serano feels that “the T has leapfrogged over the B, insofar as there are a lot of conversations about trans issues, whereas bisexuality is still seen as suspect within the queer community, and this sentiment isn’t really much different from what it was 10 years ago.”

Serano herself now identifies as bi; a decade ago, she split from her female partner, with whom she was in a monogamous relationship, and began to explore her attraction to men. “I know that for a lot of cisgender women who identify as lesbian for a long time and then start coming to terms with their attraction to men, it can be really difficult to come to terms with identifying as bisexual. For me, I felt it was another way in which I didn’t neatly fit into queer women’s communities.”

She believes that the first step in making bisexuals feel accepted is to acknowledge that they exist; trite generalities like “bisexuality is just a phase” are myths that perpetuate bigotry. But when pressed on how to make bisexuality visible without any verbal declaration, Serano agrees that it is challenging to do so, yet says that to counter biphobia we must collectively resist placing people in the binary of “straight or gay.” There is a tendency to make assumptions about a person’s sexual preference based on the gender of their partner, rather than on their own chosen sexual orientation.

“I think that dichotomy inherently erases people who are bisexual,” says Serano. “It is a binary that we don’t talk about as much as we do the gender binary, but it is out there and it does do work erasing people who have non-monosexual sexualities.”

At the same time, there is an increasingly prevalent concern within the queer community about “lesbian erasure.” Serano herself perceives that “the word ‘lesbian’ right now is in the same space as ‘bisexual’ in the larger community.” They exist on the margins of the larger LGBT community.

Having gone from identifying as lesbian to identifying as bisexual, Serano offers her thoughts on this concern. “I am well aware of people who suggest that their lesbian identity, especially butch identity,

is disappearing—that there are all these young people who might have identified as lesbian but who now identify as trans, or who have chosen to transition now but would’ve been lesbian in the past. I think that in different periods in time there are different options for people,” she says. “A lot of queer women who were of my Gen X cohort definitely went out of their way to identify as ‘queer’ or ‘dyke’ as a way to create some generational distance between themselves and the previous generations, who maybe held some beliefs that the younger generation didn’t ascribe to.” But for Serano, the notion of “lesbian erasure” is born out of fear and mourning, a sense of loss. Instead, she sees this erasure as “just an evolution in identity labels.”

For Serano, the debates—about which letters we include in our acronym, about the community’s power hierarchies, its fears and failures—point to a greater need for the entire queer community to have “more conversations about our history.” There is a tendency to erase history, and therefore to erase identities, in order to make room for what are perceived as more progressive ideas and identities. Serano disagrees with this revisionism. An “overwhelming majority of us don’t have the experience of growing up in our own communities,” she says. “We need to find ways to recognize problems that happened in history without necessarily condemning everything that happened in the past . . . It’s really easy in retrospect to look at those movements and events of the past and say today that they missed the boat, when in fact a lot of the things they did were important.” (juliaserano.com) ■

