

**JULIA SERANO**



**WHIPPING  
GIRL**

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





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SEAL PRESS

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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!”



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# 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

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 way 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 queer people 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 and 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, 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 blatant or 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 has often been the case 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.

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# Trans Woman Manifesto

THIS MANIFESTO CALLS FOR the end of the scapegoating, deriding, and dehumanizing of trans women everywhere. For the purposes of this manifesto, *trans woman* is defined as any person who was assigned a male sex at birth, but who identifies as and/or lives as a woman. No qualifications should be placed on the term “trans woman” based on a person’s ability to “pass” as female, her hormone levels, or the state of her genitals—after all, it is downright sexist to reduce any woman (trans or otherwise) down to her mere body parts or to require her to live up to certain societally dictated ideas regarding appearance.

Perhaps no sexual minority is more maligned or misunderstood than trans women. As a group, we have been systematically pathologized by the medical and psychological establishments, sensationalized and ridiculed by the media, marginalized by mainstream lesbian and gay organizations, dismissed by certain segments of the feminist community, and, in too many instances, been made the victims of violence at the hands of men who feel that we somehow threaten their masculinity and heterosexuality. Rather than being given the opportunity to speak for ourselves on the very issues that affect our own lives, trans women are instead treated more like research subjects. Others place us under their microscopes, dissect our lives, and assign motivations and desires to us that validate their own theories and agendas regarding gender and sexuality.

Trans women are so ridiculed and despised because we are uniquely positioned at the intersection of multiple binary gender-based forms of prejudice: transphobia, cissexism, and misogyny.

*Transphobia* is an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gender identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from societal norms. In much the same way that homophobic people are often driven by their own repressed homosexual tendencies, transphobia is first and foremost an expression of one’s own insecurity about having to live up to cultural gender ideals. The fact that transphobia is so rampant in our society reflects the reality that we place an extraordinary amount of pressure on individuals to conform to all of the expectations, restrictions, assumptions, and privileges associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

While all transgender people experience transphobia, transsexuals additionally experience a related (albeit distinct) form of prejudice: *cissexism*, which is the belief that transsexuals’ identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of *cissexuals* (i.e., people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned). The most common expression of cissexism occurs when people attempt to deny the transsexual the basic privileges that are associated with the trans person’s self-identified gender. Common examples include purposeful misuse of pronouns or insisting that the trans person use a different public restroom. The justification for this denial is generally founded on the assumption that the trans person’s gender is not authentic because it does not correlate with the sex they were assigned at birth. In making this assumption, cissexists attempt to create an artificial hierarchy. By insisting that the trans person’s gender is “fake,” they attempt to validate their own gender as “real” or “natural.” This sort of thinking is extraordinarily naive, as it denies a basic truth: We make assumptions every day about other people’s genders without ever seeing their birth certificates, their chromosomes, their genitals, their reproductive systems, their childhood socialization, or their legal sex. There is no such thing as a “real” gender—there is only the gender we experience ourselves as and the gender we

perceive others to be.

While often different in practice, cissexism, transphobia, and homophobia are all rooted in *oppositional sexism*, which is the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and nonoverlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires. Oppositional sexists attempt to punish or dismiss those of us who fall outside of gender or sexual norms because our existence threatens the idea that women and men are “opposite” sexes. This explains why bisexuals, lesbians, gays, transsexuals, and other transgender people—who may experience their genders and sexualities in very different ways—are so often confused or lumped in the same category (i.e., queer) by society at large. Our natural inclinations to be attracted to the same sex, to identify as the other sex, and/or to express ourselves in ways typically associated with the other sex blur the boundaries required to maintain the male-centered gender hierarchy that exists in our culture today.

In addition to the rigid, mutually exclusive gender categories established by oppositional sexism, the other requirement for maintaining a male-centered gender hierarchy is to enforce *traditional sexism*—the belief that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity. Traditional and oppositional sexism work hand in hand to ensure that those who are masculine have power over those who are feminine, and that only those born male will be seen as authentically masculine. For the purposes of this manifesto, the word *misogyny* will be used to describe the tendency to dismiss and deride femaleness and femininity.

Just as all transgender people experience transphobia and cissexism to differing extents (depending on how often, obvious, or out we are as transgender), we experience misogyny to differing extents too. This is most evident in the fact that, while there are many different types of transgender people, our society tends to single out trans women and others on the male-to-female (MTF) spectrum for attention and ridicule. This is not merely because we transgress binary gender norms per se, but because we, by necessity, embrace our own femaleness and femininity. Indeed, more often than not it is our expressions of femininity and our desire to be female that become sensationalized, sexualized, and trivialized by others. While trans people on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum face discrimination for breaking gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism), their expressions of maleness and masculinity themselves are not targeted for ridicule—to do so would require one to question masculinity itself.

When a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity, they become the victims of a specific form of discrimination: *trans-misogyny*. When the majority of jokes made at the expense of trans people center on “men wearing dresses” or “men who want their penises cut off,” that is not transphobia—that is trans-misogyny. When the majority of violence and sexual assaults committed against trans people is directed at trans women, that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny.<sup>1</sup> When it’s okay for women to wear “men’s” clothing, but when men who wear “women’s” clothing can be diagnosed with the psychological disorder transvestic fetishism, that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny.<sup>2</sup> When women’s or lesbian organizations and events open their doors to trans men but not trans women, that is not transphobia—it is trans-misogyny.<sup>3</sup>

In a male-centered gender hierarchy, where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity, there is no greater perceived threat than the existence of trans women, who despite being born male and inheriting male privilege “choose” to be female instead. By embracing our own femaleness and femininity, we, in a sense, cast a shadow of doubt over the

supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity. In order to lessen the threat we pose to the male-centered gender hierarchy, our culture (primarily via the media) uses every tactic in its arsenal of traditional sexism to dismiss us:

1. The media hyperfeminizes us by accompanying stories about trans women with pictures of us putting on makeup, dresses, and high-heeled shoes in an attempt to highlight the supposed “frivolous” nature of our femaleness, or by portraying trans women as having derogatory feminine-associated character traits such as being weak, confused, passive, or mousy.
2. The media hypersexualizes us by creating the impression that most trans women are sex workers or sexual deceivers, and by asserting that we transition for primarily sexual reasons (e.g., to prey on innocent straight men or to fulfill some kind of bizarre sex fantasy). Such depictions not only belittle trans women’s motives for transitioning, but implicitly suggest that trans women as a whole have no worth beyond their ability to be sexualized.
3. The media objectifies our bodies by sensationalizing sex reassignment surgery and openly discussing our “man-made vaginas” without any of the discretion that normally accompanies discussions about genitals. Further, those of us who have not had surgery are constantly being reduced to our body parts, whether by the creators of tranny porn who overemphasize and exaggerate our penises (thus distorting trans women into “she-males” and “chicks with dicks”) or by other people who have been so brainwashed by phallocentricism that they believe that the mere presence of a penis can trump the femaleness of our identities, our personalities, and the rest of our bodies.

Because anti-trans discrimination is steeped in traditional sexism, it is not simply enough for trans activists to challenge binary gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism)—we must also challenge the idea that femininity is inferior to masculinity and that femaleness is inferior to maleness. In other words, by necessity, trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement.

Some might consider this contention controversial. Over the years, many self-described feminists have gone out of their way to dismiss trans people and in particular trans women, often resorting to many of the same tactics (hyperfeminization, hypersexualization, and objectification of our bodies) that the mainstream media regularly uses against us.<sup>4</sup> These pseudofeminists proclaim, “Women can do anything men can,” then ridicule trans women for any perceived masculine tendency we may have. They argue that women should be strong and unafraid of speaking our minds, then tell trans women that we act like men when we voice our opinions. They claim that it is misogynistic when men create standards and expectations for women to meet, then they dismiss us for not meeting their standard “woman.” These pseudofeminists consistently preach feminism with one hand while practicing traditional sexism with the other.

It is time for us to take back the word “feminism” from these pseudofeminists. After all, as a concept, feminism is much like the ideas of “democracy” or “Christianity.” Each has a major tenet at its core, yet there are a seemingly infinite number of ways in which those beliefs are practiced. And just as some forms of democracy and Christianity are corrupt and hypocritical while others are more just and righteous, we trans women must join allies of all genders and sexualities to forge a new type of feminism, one that understands that the only way for us to achieve true gender equity is to abolish both oppositional sexism and traditional sexism.

It is no longer enough for feminism to fight solely for the rights of those born female. That strategy has furthered the prospects of many women over the years, but now it bumps up against a glass ceiling that is partly of its own making. Though the movement worked hard to encourage women to enter previously male-dominated areas of life, many feminists have been ambivalent at best, and resistant

worst, to the idea of men expressing or exhibiting feminine traits and moving into certain traditional female realms. And while we credit previous feminist movements for helping to create a society where most sensible people would agree with the statement “women and men are equals,” we lament the fact that we remain light-years away from being able to say that most people believe that femininity is masculinity’s equal.

Instead of attempting to empower those born female by encouraging them to move further away from femininity, we should instead learn to empower femininity itself. We must stop dismissing it as “artificial” or as a “performance,” and instead recognize that certain aspects of femininity (and masculinity as well) transcend both socialization and biological sex—otherwise there would not be feminine boy and masculine girl children. We must challenge all who assume that femininity and vulnerability is a sign of weakness. For when we do open ourselves up, whether it be by honestly communicating our thoughts and feelings or expressing our emotions, it is a daring act, one that takes more courage and inner strength than the alpha male facade of silence and stoicism.

We must challenge all those who insist that women who act or dress in a feminine manner take on a submissive or passive posture. For many of us, dressing or acting feminine is something we do for ourselves, not for others. It is our way of reclaiming our own bodies and fearlessly expressing our own personalities and sexualities. It is not us who are guilty of trying to reduce our bodies to mere playthings, but rather those who foolishly assume that our feminine style is a signal that we sexually subjugate ourselves to men.

In a world where masculinity is assumed to represent strength and power, those who are butch and boyish are able to contemplate their identities within the relative safety of those connotations. In contrast, those of us who are feminine are forced to define ourselves on our own terms and develop our own sense of self-worth. It takes guts, determination, and fearlessness for those of us who are feminine to lift ourselves up out of the inferior meanings that are constantly being projected onto us. If you require any evidence that femininity can be more fierce and dangerous than masculinity, all you need to do is ask the average man to hold your handbag or a bouquet of flowers for a minute, and watch how far away he holds it from his body. Or tell him that you would like to put your lipstick on him and watch how fast he runs off in the other direction. In a world where masculinity is respected and femininity is regularly dismissed, it takes an enormous amount of strength and confidence for any person, whether female- or male-bodied, to embrace their feminine self.

But it is not enough for us to empower femaleness and femininity. We must also stop pretending that there are essential differences between women and men. This begins with the acknowledgment that there are exceptions to every gender rule and stereotype, and this simply stated fact disproves all gender theories that purport that female and male are mutually exclusive categories. We must move away from pretending that women and men are “opposite” sexes, because when we buy into that myth it establishes a dangerous precedent. For if men are big, then women must be small; and if men are strong then women must be weak. And if being butch is to make yourself rock-solid, then being a femme becomes allowing yourself to be malleable; and if being a man means taking control of your own situation, then being a woman becomes living up to other people’s expectations. When we buy into the idea that female and male are “opposites,” it becomes impossible for us to empower women without either ridiculing men or pulling the rug out from under ourselves.

It is only when we move away from the idea that there are “opposite” sexes, and let go of the culturally derived values that are assigned to expressions of femininity and masculinity, that we may finally approach gender equity. By challenging both oppositional and traditional sexism simultaneously, we can make the world safe for those of us who are queer, those of us who are



feminine, and those of us who are female, thus empowering people of all sexualities and genders.

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# PART 1

## Trans/Gender Theory

## Coming to Terms with Transgenderism and Transsexuality

MOST NON-TRANS PEOPLE are unfamiliar with the words that we in the transgender community use to describe ourselves, our experiences, and our most pressing issues. Books and websites that discuss transgenderism and transsexuality often include some kind of glossary, where these terms are laid out and defined in a nice, orderly, alphabetical fashion. However, a potential problem with the glossary approach is that it gives the impression that all of these transgender-related words and phrases are somehow written in stone, indelibly passed down from generation to generation. This is most certainly not the case. Many of the terms used these days to describe transgender people did not exist a decade ago. Conversely, many of the terms that were commonly used a decade ago are now considered to be out of fashion, outdated, or even offensive to many people in the transgender community. Even the terms that are used frequently today are regularly disputed, as individual transgender people may define words in a slightly different manner or have aesthetic or political preferences for certain words over others. So in lieu of a glossary, I will use this chapter to define many of the transgender-specific terms used throughout the book and to explain why I chose the particular words and phrases rather than others.

It is difficult to talk about people who are transsexual or transgender without first defining the words “sex” and “gender.” “Sex” commonly refers to whether a person is physically female and/or male. Because the physical traits that we most often take into account when describing “sex” are biological in origin (e.g., sex chromosomes, hormones, reproductive systems, genitals, and so forth), there is a tendency to see sex as being a “natural” aspect of gender. However, this is not quite the case. Cultural expectations and assumptions play a large role in shaping how we determine and consider sex. For example, in our culture, such assumptions are very genital-centric: A person’s sex is assigned at birth based on the presence or absence of a penis. Thus, our genitals play a far more important role in determining our legal sex than do our chromosomes (which in most cases are never actually examined) or our reproductive capacity. After all, a woman can have a hysterectomy, or a man can have a vasectomy, without changing or nullifying their legal sex. Indeed, the fact that we even have “legal” sex demonstrates that society greatly shapes our understanding of sex. Thus, throughout the book, I will use the word “sex” primarily to refer to a person’s physical femaleness and/or maleness, but I will also sometimes use it to refer to the social and legal classes that are associated with one’s physical sex.

The word “gender” is regularly used in a number of ways. Most commonly, it’s used in a manner that’s indistinguishable from “sex” (i.e., to describe whether a person is physically, socially, and/or legally male and/or female). Other people use the word “gender” to describe a person’s gender identity (whether they identify as female, male, both, or neither), their gender expression and gender roles (whether they act feminine, masculine, both, or neither), or the privileges, assumptions, expectations, and restrictions they face due to the sex others perceive them to be. Because of the many meanings infused into it, I will use the word “gender” in a broad way to refer to various aspects of

person's physical or social sex, their sex-related behaviors, the sex-based class system they are situated within, or (in most cases) some combination thereof.

Now that we understand “sex” and “gender,” we can begin to consider the word *transgender*, which is perhaps one of the most confusing and misunderstood words in the English language. While the word originally had a more narrow definition, since the 1990s it has been used primarily as an umbrella term to describe those who defy societal expectations and assumptions regarding femaleness and maleness; this includes people who are transsexual (those who live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth), intersex (those who are born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of female or male), and genderqueer (those whose identity is outside of the male/female binary), as well as those whose gender expression differs from their anatomical or perceived sex (including crossdressers, drag performers, masculine women, feminine men, and so on). I will also sometimes use the synonymous term *gender-variant* to describe all people who are considered by others to deviate from societal norms of femaleness and maleness.

The far-reaching inclusiveness of the word “transgender” was purposely designed to accommodate the many gender and sexual minorities who were excluded from the previous feminist and gay rights movements. At the same time, its broadness can be highly problematic in that it often blurs or erases the distinctiveness of its constituents. For example, while male crossdressers and transsexual men are both male-identified transgender people, these groups face a very different set of issues with regard to managing their gender difference. Similarly, drag queens and transsexual women generally have very different experiences and perspectives regarding gender, despite the fact that they are often confused with one another by mainstream society.

Thus, the best way to reconcile the nebulous nature of the word is to recognize that it is primarily a political term, one that brings together disparate classes of people to fight for the common goal of ending all discrimination based on sex/gender variance. While useful politically, *transgender* is too vague of a word to imply much commonality between individual people's identities, life experiences, or understanding of gender.

Another point that is often overlooked in discussions about transgenderism is that many individuals who fall under the transgender umbrella choose not to identify with the term. For example, many intersex people reject the term because their condition is about physical sex (not gender) and the primary issues they face (e.g., nonconsensual “normalizing” medical procedures during infancy and childhood) differ greatly from those of the greater transgender community.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, many transsexuals disavow the term because of its anti-transsexual roots or because they feel that the transgender movement tends to privilege those identities, actions, and appearances that most visibly “transgress” gender norms.<sup>2</sup> This tendency renders invisible the fact that many of us struggle more with issues related to our physical femaleness or maleness than we do with our expressions of femininity or masculinity. Throughout this book, I will use the word *trans* to refer to people who (to varying degrees) struggle with a subconscious understanding or intuition that there is something “wrong” with the sex they were assigned at birth and/or who feel that they should have been born as they wish they could be the other sex. (It should be noted that some people use the word “trans” differently as a synonym or abbreviation for the word *transgender*). For many trans people, the fact that their appearances or behaviors may fall outside of societal gender norms is a very real issue, but one that is often seen as secondary to the cognitive dissonance that arises from the fact that their *subconscious* sex does not match their physical sex. This *gender dissonance* is usually experienced as a kind of emotional pain or sadness that grows more intense over time, sometimes reaching a point where it can become debilitating.

There are many different strategies that trans people may use to ease their gender dissonance. Perhaps the most common one is trying to suppress or deny one's subconscious sex. Others may allow their subconscious sex to come to the surface occasionally, for example through either crossdressing or role-playing. Still others may come to see themselves as *bigendered* (having a mixture of both femininity and masculinity and/or femaleness and maleness), *gender-fluid* (moving freely between genders), or *genderqueer* (identifying outside of the male/female gender binary). And those of us who make the choice to live as the sex other than the one we were assigned at birth are commonly called *transsexuals*.

Perhaps the most underacknowledged issue with regard to the transgender community—and one that is a continuing source of both confusion and contention—is the fact that many of the above strategies and identities that trans people gravitate toward in order to relieve their gender dissonance are also shared by people who do not experience any discomfort with regards to their subconscious and physical sex. For example, some male-bodied crossdressers spend much of their lives wishing they were actually female, while others see their crossdressing as simply a way to express a feminine side of their personalities. While many drag artists view themselves primarily as entertainers or enjoy performing and parodying gender stereotypes, some trans people gravitate toward drag because it provides them with a rare opportunity to express aspects of their subconscious sex in a socially sanctioned setting. And while many trans people identify as genderqueer because it helps them make sense of their own experiences of living in a world where their understanding of themselves differs greatly from the way they are perceived by society, other people identify as genderqueer because, on a purely intellectual level, they question the validity of the binary gender system.

Thus, not only do transgender people vary in their perspectives and experiences, but individuals within the same transgender subcategory (whether it be crossdresser, drag artist, genderqueer, etc.) may also differ greatly in what drives them to embrace that identity. And while this book primarily focuses on transsexuality, and more specifically on trans women (as that is my experience and perspective), it is not because I believe that transgender people who are not transsexual are any less important or legitimate; their expressions of gender are just as valid as mine and the discrimination they may face as a result of those expressions is just as real. It is also crucial for us to recognize that it is equally valid for a trans person to decide to transition and live as the other sex as it is for them to instead choose to blur gender boundaries and identify themselves outside the gender binary. There is no one right way to be trans. Each of us simply needs to figure out what works best for us and what allows us to best express who we feel we are.

When discussing transsexuals, it is often necessary to distinguish between those who transition from male to female—who are commonly referred to as *trans women*—and those who transition from female to male—who are called *trans men*. I prefer these terms over others because they acknowledge the lived and self-identified gender of the trans person (i.e., woman or man), while adding the adjective “trans” as a way to describe one particular aspect of that person's life experience. In other words, “trans woman” and “trans man” function in a way similar to the phrases “Catholic woman” or “Asian man.” Because many trans people choose to relieve their gender dissonance in ways other than transitioning, I will often use the phrases *male-to-female (MTF) spectrum* and *female-to-male (FTM) spectrum* to describe all trans people (regardless of whether they are genderqueer, transsexual, crossdresser, etc.) who experience their gender as being different from or more complex than the gender they were assigned at birth.

Sometimes people have a tendency to dismiss or delegitimize trans women's and trans men's gender identities and lived experiences by relegating us to our own unique categories that are separate

from “woman” or “man.” This strategy is often adopted by non-trans folks who wish to discuss trans people without ever bringing into question their own assumptions and beliefs about maleness and femaleness. An obvious example of this phenomenon is the prevalence of the terms “she-males,” “h-shes,” and “chicks with dicks” in reference to trans women. Sometimes attempts to *third-sex* or *third-gender* trans people are more subtle or subconscious than that, such as when people merge the phrase “trans woman” to make one word, “transwoman,” or use the adjectives MTF and FTM as nouns (for example, “Julia Serano is an MTF.”). I do not identify as a “male-to-female”—I identify as a woman. These attempts to relegate trans people to “third sex” categories not only disregard the profoundly female gender identity of the transsexual in question, but also ignore the very real experiences that trans person has had being treated as a member of the sex that they have transitioned to.

When discussing transsexuals’ lives, it is important to find words that accurately describe the gendered experiences in both the past and present. Many trans people say they understood themselves to be female or male for most of their lives despite the fact that it wasn’t the sex they were assigned at birth. Therefore, when a trans person transitions, their subconscious sex or gender identity essentially stays the same—rather, it is their physical sex that changes (hence the term *transsexual*). With regard to the trans person’s original sex, I will often use the somewhat clunky phrase *the sex (or gender) they were assigned at birth* to emphasize the nonconsensual nature of how we are raised, socialized, and treated by society on the basis of our physical sex. For convenience, I may also refer to it as the *assigned gender/sex* or (to a lesser extent) their *birth sex*. I may refer to the sex that the trans person has transitioned to as their *preferred sex*, their *identified sex* (to emphasize the fact that it agrees with their gender identity), or their *lived sex* (to emphasize the fact that they now live and experience the world as a member of that sex).

It is common for people to assume that being or becoming a transsexual involves some kind of “sex change operation.” However, this is not necessarily the case. While some transsexuals undergo numerous medical procedures as part of their physical transitions, others either cannot afford or choose not to undergo such procedures. Indeed, attempts to limit the word “transsexual” to only those who physically transition is not only classist (because of the affordability issue), but objectifying, as it reduces all trans people to the medical procedures that have been carried out on their bodies. For these reasons, I will use the word *transsexual* to describe anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of whether they have had such procedures. Further, because there are so many different paths that a transsexual person may take toward living in their identified sex, I will use the word *transition* to describe the process of changing one’s lived sex, rather than in reference to any specific medical procedure.

The most common medical procedure for transsexuals to seek out is *hormone replacement therapy*, which involves taking testosterone in the case of trans men, or taking estrogen (and sometimes progesterone) in the case of trans women. These are the same sex hormones that kick in during puberty in all people and they produce many of the same bodily changes in adult transsexuals as they do in adolescents: Some effects are changes in skin complexion and muscle/fat distribution, breast growth in trans women, and deepened voices and facial hair growth in trans men. The hormone-produced body changes are often referred to as *secondary sex characteristics* (to distinguish them from so-called *primary sex characteristics* such as reproductive organs and genitals). Secondary sex characteristics are the cues that we most often use when we classify adults as being either women or men, which explains why hormone replacement therapy is often sufficient to allow trans people to live unnoticed in their identified sex.

While there are a number of possible surgeries that a trans person may undertake, the one that

seems to most capture public imagination is *sex reassignment surgery (SRS)*, which involves reconstruction of the genitals to better match that of the transsexual's identified sex. Some trans people object to the term *SRS* and instead prefer alternatives such as *genital reassignment surgery*, *gender confirmation surgery*, or *bottom surgery* (to contrast it with *top surgery*: the removal and enhancement of breasts). Personally, I am not bothered by the technical name of the surgery so much as I am by the fact that it gets so much attention in the media and the general public. After all, as someone who is not a cardiologist nor has ever had a heart condition, I really don't feel a compelling need to know all of the technical names or hear play-by-play accounts of heart surgeries. Nor do I need to know all of the specific names and doses of chemotherapies in order to be touched by the story of someone who has survived cancer. For this reason, I am rather disturbed by the fact that so many people—who are neither medical professionals nor trans themselves—would want to hear all the gory details regarding transsexual physical transformations, or would feel that they have any right to ask us about the state of our genitals. It is offensive that so many people feel that it is okay to publicly refer to transsexuals as being “pre-op” or “post-op” when it would so clearly be degrading and demeaning to regularly describe all boys and men as being either “circumcised” or “uncircumcised.”

While the specific details of transsexual-related medical procedures should be readily available for those contemplating sex reassignment, such information is neither relevant nor necessary for one to understand the experiences and perspectives of trans people. After all, while my physical transition occurred primarily over a period of a year and a half—a mere fraction of my life—what has remained constant and pervasive (both pre-, during, and post-transition) has been the resistance and prejudice that I have faced from those who are not transgender, those who become irrationally uncomfortable or disturbed by my gender expression and/or female identity, and those who presume that their identified gender is more natural or valid than my own. For this reason, I believe that one cannot begin to fully understand transsexuality without thoroughly examining and critiquing the prejudices and presumptions of the non-transsexual majority. So although I will be discussing transsexual experiences throughout this book, I will also be spending a great deal of time discussing the beliefs and attitudes common among cissexuals—that is, people who have only ever experienced their subconscious self and physical sex as being aligned. Similarly, people who are not transgender may be described as being *cisgender* (although I will be using this term less often, since the focus of this book is on transsexual women rather than the transgender population as a whole).<sup>3</sup> I prefer these terms, but I will occasionally use the synonymous terms *non-transsexual* and *non-transgender*.

Some might feel that all of these trans- and gender-related terms I've introduced are overwhelming or confusing. And others, particularly those in the fields of gender and queer studies, might dismiss much of this language as contributing to a “reverse discourse”—that is, by describing myself as transsexual and creating trans-specific terms to describe my experiences, I am simply reinforcing the same distinction between transsexuals and cissexuals that has marginalized me in the first place. My response to both of these arguments is the same: I do not believe that transsexuals and cissexuals are inherently different from one another. But the vastly different ways in which we are perceived and treated by others, and the way those differences impact our unique physical and social experiences, lead many transsexuals to see and understand gender very differently than our cissexual counterparts. And while transsexuals are extremely familiar with cissexual perspectives of gender (as they dominate in our culture), most cissexuals remain largely unfamiliar with trans perspectives. Using only words that cissexuals are familiar with in order to describe my gendered experiences would be similar to a musician only choosing words that nonmusicians understand when describing music. It can be done

but something crucial would surely be lost in the translation. Just as musicians cannot fully explain their reaction to a particular song without bringing up concepts such as “minor key” or “timbre signature,” there are certain trans-specific words and ideas that will appear throughout this book that are crucial for me to use in order to precisely convey my thoughts and experiences regarding gender. To have an illuminating and nuanced discussion about my experiences and perspectives as a trans woman, we must begin to think in terms of words and ideas that accurately describe that experience.



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