

blind spot: a gender-deviant jew on erasure and the naturalization of dominant culture
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this piece is a critique of a few aspects of a book which i like a lot, and think is quite important in many ways. julia serano's *whipping girl* is the work which best brings together the discussions around gender politics emerging from the radical trans and queer communities i feel closest to. it's also one of the few books which actually does a good job at both its theoretical and its practical political projects without becoming unreadably jargon-filled or disingenuously simple. many of serano's specific interventions are effective and useful, from the very beginning of the book on. her distinctions between "traditional sexism" and "oppositional sexism" and among "transphobia", "cissexism" and "trans-misogyny" in themselves make an often-tangled theoretical web both elegant and capable of more than catching abstract flies. *whipping girl's* fabulous demolition jobs on past and present toxic psychological and media approaches to trans folks (trans women in particular) are just as powerful – i suspect we're all going to be cribbing her arguments and punchlines for a long time.

another particularly important one of the many things that make me admire *whipping girl* and its author (most of which i won't mention here for reasons of space) is serano's openness all the way through the book about the dirty little secret of most theoretical work: we do it to find the modes of thought which "best explain [our] own personal experiences" [78]. serano's willingness to be explicit about her work's roots, and to describe how those roots feed the theory she has cultivated, is unusual and delightful. she also makes the political implications of this understanding very clear, in part by defining the shared ground of struggle of trans folks, women, queers, and others targeted by patriarchy as "challeng[ing] all forms of gender entitlement. . . a person privileg[ing] their own perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of other people's genders over the way those people understand themselves" [9]. the approach serano takes here is one which i believe – and hope – invites the kind of criticism i'm about to make of some of her work.

from its subtitle on, *whipping girl: a transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* places at the center of its analysis the often derided or dismissed figure of femininity. serano's work is so powerful partly because it takes femininity and masculinity seriously, not subordinating them to the parallel categories of gender (woman/man) or sex (female/male). in fact, she highlights this pairing as primary in many ways, repeatedly stressing her belief that "certain aspects of femininity (and masculinity as well) transcend both socialization and biological sex" [6, 18 in this phrasing]. this is in many ways the foundation of her "intrinsic inclination model to explain human gender and sexual variation", since its inclusion of gender expression as an intrinsic urge alongside sexual orientation and "subconscious sex" is what allows the model to explain "exceptional gender expressions", including those shown by trans folks [all 98-99].

the clearest statement of the relationship between this centering of femininity and masculinity and the overall project of *whipping girl* comes almost at the end of serano's explanation of her theoretical model for gender and sexuality. she writes:

“I would argue that our culture’s oppositional gender system can only be held so firmly in place because it resonates with the majority’s gender inclinations (that most - but not all - men gravitate towards masculinity and women to femininity).” [111-112]

this passage, like much of serano’s “intrinsic inclination model” is shaped by her consistent and generally solid opposition to both essentialist and ‘strong’ social constructionist approaches to gender. her dual critique is summarized immediately before it – that both an essentialist notion of the One True ‘right/natural/god-given’ way to be a man or a woman and a constructionist model that argues for the One Truth of gender fluidity or androgyny are expressions of gender entitlement, privileging their creators’ views of everyone else’s genders over those of the ‘everyone else’ who actually experience those genders.

unfortunately, serano’s approach to femininity and masculinity – and the sentence i just cited in particular - does its own version of this very maneuver.

throughout *whipping girl*, “feminine” and “masculine” have essentially their conventional early-twenty-first-century-u.s. meanings, thoroughly re-evaluated through a critique of traditional sexism. while serano explicitly rejects both a monolithic understanding of femininity and the notion that there is a single origin (biological, sociological, or mixed) of feminine characteristics, she’s equally clear that in her view this “heterogenous, non-female-specific collection of traits” [325] is a specific, stable group, in relation to which all people have an “intrinsic inclination”. while serano does not provide a direct definition or description of what she means by “femininity” anywhere in *whipping girl*, over the course of the book this cluster of feminine traits and characteristics includes (paired with the corresponding masculine ones when serano does so):

passive / aggressive; weak / tough; emotional / practical; small / big [103];
verbally effusive; emotive [320]; empathy or altruism; interest in adornment [327].

less clearly stated – and acknowledged as more directly tied to hormonally-influenced aspects of sex than to gender expression as such – but strongly implied to have connections to the feminine/masculine spectrum are the equally conventional pairings of physically weak/strong and low/high sex drive [69-75 passim].

these, then, are the traits which serano considers to define one of the central “intrinsic inclinations” which explain gender and sexual variation, and which (whatever their various sources are) “roughly correlate with physical sex, resulting in a bimodal distribution pattern... [such that] women on average are more feminine than men” though in any given mixed-sex pair either person may be more feminine or more masculine [99-100].

serano’s assertion here is a remarkable one, calmly and scientifically phrased though it is. to critique it properly, though, i need to put some of the “personal experiences” behind my theoretical perspective in the open.

i was lucky enough to be raised in a u.s. jewish context where the echoes of the traditional ashkenazi (eastern european jewish) gender system still guided many of the expectations for my behavior as someone assigned male at birth. the gender egalitarianism of 'second-wave' feminism was also a part of my upbringing, but in many ways served to reinforce ideas of 'appropriate' masculine behavior that came from my family's main culture of origin.

traditional ashkenazi culture had a gender system policed by as firm a traditional sexism and oppositional sexism as contemporary 'mainstream' u.s. culture (or the roman/christian european culture of which that 'mainstream' is a part). but the ideal feminine and masculine traits valorized as 'appropriate' and 'correct' for ashkenazi women and men were almost exactly opposed to those considered so in the surrounding christian communities (in part as a means of reinforcing the divide between the two cultures and communities). among ashkenazim, the feminine characteristics expected of women included being aggressive, tough, practical, stubborn, businesslike, worldly, physically strong, and having a large sexual appetite; an ideally masculine ashkenazi man would be passive, emotional, expressive, dreamy, empathetic, separated from the world, physically fragile and sexually responsive or compliant.

over the centuries of traditional ashkenazi culture's more-or-less autonomous existence on a large scale (roughly 1503-1939 AD, with clear lineages extending to ~1000 AD and another millennium or so of antecedents), ashkenazi literature as well as scholarly research shows no more or less adherence to this gender system than other communities show to theirs. which is to say that although there may have been few people considered perfectly ideal feminine or masculine individuals (according to the community's standards), and while a few exceptionally gendered folks are certainly documented, most ashkenazi women showed traits considered to make them acceptably feminine by the definitions sketched above, and most men conformed to their culture's profile of masculinity. it's also worth stressing that, as in any traditionally sexist community, the traits considered masculine were valued and those considered feminine were demeaned. the echoes of this can be seen in the misogynist depictions of ashkenazi women in the work of male ashkenazi u.s. artists like phillip roth, woody allen and norman mailer, and (to a lesser degree) in the stereotypes they helped create of the 'jewish mother' and 'jewish american princess', which merge traditional ashkenazi sexism with traditional roman/christian sexism.

a number of scholars have traced the history and destruction of the traditional ashkenazi gender system (the definitive work is daniel boyarin's *unheroic conduct: the rise of heterosexuality and the invention of the jewish man*, which i highly recommend), and some recent gender theorists have taken its legacy into account in their descriptions of the personal experiences and histories which ground their theoretical work. in fact, the prevalence of ashkenazim among u.s. theorists of gender and sexuality (bornstein, feinberg, butler, wilchins, newton, kosofsky sedgwick, halberstam, meyerowitz...) speaks to the fact that the experience of growing up with the traces of a different gender system as well as the dominant one can be an important source of insights into the functioning of the dominant gender system, and of gender systems in general. this kind of experience yields the same kind of dual vision "from the outside in and from the inside out" [290] as serano (adopting bell hooks' description of the effects of marginalization) describes among women, queers, and trans folks.

personally, i benefited from the survival of parts of the traditional ashkenazi gender system in the form of the ‘jewish sissy-boy option’, which allowed me to avoid a great deal of the dominant culture’s pressure to conform to the roman/christian model of masculinity as aggressive, physical, stern, and inexpressive. while still demanding that i be a boy, my family and immediate cultural context was supportive and accepting of me as ‘a boy like *that*’, in ways that many others would not have been. more recently, i’ve come to understand how important traditional ashkenazi femininity (and the particular merger of it with feminism which i grew up with) has been to my understandings and expressions of my gender. it’s also been interesting and inspiring to me (over the past decade or so especially) to see trans and gender-deviant ashkenazim who were assigned female at birth exploring the possibilities of traditional ashkenazi masculinity as an alternative to the dominant roman/christian model of masculinity.

but to return to serano and *whipping girl*. in serano’s system of “intrinsic inclinations”, the traits of roman/christian femininity and masculinity “roughly correlate with physical sex” [99-100], ensuring that “our [european christian] culture’s oppositional gender system... resonates with the majority’s gender inclinations (that most - but not all - men gravitate towards masculinity and women to femininity)” [111-112].

among the millions of people who lived in traditional ashkenazi communities, however, the traits of traditional ashkenazi femininity and masculinity are the ones which roughly correlate with physical sex – which is to say that there is almost the exact opposite distribution of traits to the one serano describes. this means that either ashkenazim have an entirely different intrinsic makeup from folks in contemporary ‘mainstream’ u.s. culture, or that gender and sexuality among ashkenazim result from some entirely different process than the overlap of intrinsic inclinations. for either of these to be the case, we would have to assume that ashkenazim are an entirely other kind of being from the members of what serano calls “our culture”. which seems unlikely. not least because plenty of gender-system-conforming members of “our culture” are the children, grandchildren, and more distant descendants of folks who conformed to the traditional ashkenazi gender system.

or, of course, there could be something wrong with the theory. the elegance and concision of the “intrinsic inclinations model” makes it very appealing, but in the end its ability to explain gender variation – and thus both ‘conventionally’ and ‘exceptionally’ gendered individuals – depends on the proposal that the roman/christian model of femininity and masculinity which defines gender expression in the dominant culture of today’s u.s. is universal, if not eternal. to those of us who do not come from that system of gender expression (or do not come from that system alone), this is at best a blatant form of gender entitlement, anchored in a mesh of incompletely-examined ethnic, cultural, racial, class and religious entitlement which allows the dominant culture to pass as the One Truth in this area if not in others.

i don’t have an alternate grand unified theory of human gender and sexuality variation to propose. it seems unlikely to me that the “intrinsic inclinations model” can be adjusted to account for the extremely disparate definitions of feminine and masculine traits in the world’s cultures. it also seems to me that the existence of even the few trans folks i know who describe their transition as freely chosen rather than a response to diverging “subconscious sex” and sex assigned at birth poses a serious challenge to an entirely separate part of serano’s theory (which

in any case never proposes an explanation for the source of people's "intrinsic" "subconscious sex").

which leaves me in the uncomfortable position of dismantling an elegant theory without having a good replacement ready. i have to confess a certain doubt about how much energy we should put into developing a single theoretical model to explain the fabulously fertile variety of human gender and sexuality. what i can put forward wholeheartedly, however, is a set of characteristics which serano's work models as necessary elements of any successful approach. such a model must be able to integrate social, cultural and biological information and approaches. it must be able to explain both conventional and exceptional gender expressions and sexualities. it must be rooted in a feminism which rejects both traditional and oppositional sexism (and their offspring: cissexism, misogyny, trans-misogyny, transphobia and effemimania). and, above all, it must not slide into or support gender entitlement in any form. i'll be excited to see what the theoretical efforts around gender and sexual variation following those in *whipping girl* will look like. and i'm glad to have serano's book as a tool and inspiration for the struggles for liberation which will continue whether or not we ever have a persuasive and lasting theory.