

Review of *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*. Julia Serano. Berkeley: Seal Press. 2013. ISBN 978-1580055048.

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Published in a year of popular and scholarly interest in ‘intersectionality,’ (see Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013) Julia Serano’s *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (2013) enters the fray of a politics whose concern is less with matters of exclusion from the mainstream but with feminist and queer politics itself. Serano’s book aims to expose the ‘fallacies in our theory and activism’ (5) that lead to ‘narrow’ feminist and queer movements and, on that basis, to outline ways of thinking about gender and sexuality that are conducive to the building of an inclusive feminist and queer activism.

Serano’s first target is the obvious one: ‘feminism’, about which she claims: ‘the way we describe and set out to challenge sexism is irreparably broken’ (3). Yet with *Excluded*, Serano seeks to transcend ‘the genre of the popular trans feminist polemic’ (Heyes 2007, 40). Serano describes feminist and queer thinking, as well as both radical and mainstream approaches to marginalization, as beginning with ‘a handful of foundational, albeit incorrect, assumptions’ (3) that lead to ‘one-size-fits-all models’ and an imperative to ‘conform to some uniform ideal with regards to gender and sexuality’ (6). While clearly aspiring to a form of consciousness-raising, a grave tendency toward oversimplification

evident throughout *Excluded* has the effect of limiting its impact to those schooled in gender or queer politics.

'Part 1: On the Outside Looking In' gathers autobiographical essays, spoken word pieces and speeches written between 2005 – 2012 that address Serano's own experiences of exclusion. Beginning with the literal exclusion of trans women from the (now infamous) Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, this section of the book recounts the difficulties encountered by Serano, a 'kinky bisexual femme-tomboy:' dating and 'the cotton ceiling' (a term used to refer to cissexual lesbians' refusal to see transgender women as sexual partners), coming out as bisexual, and claiming a non-queer femme identity. Serano frames these personal anecdotes as illustrating the pernicious forms taken by intra-movement marginalization, seeking to highlight 'the hypocrisy of policing other people's gender and sexual identities and behaviors within spaces that were supposedly founded on anti-sexist principles' (4). Readers familiar with Serano's work will recognize her particular concern with forms of policing and hypocrisy that transgender femininity has traditionally attracted.

In 'Part 2: New Ways of Speaking' Serano gives her account of how feminist thought and activism leads to such 'atypical' forms of marginalization (119). The intriguingly-titled opening chapter of this section, 'The Perversion of the Personal is Political' is uncomfortable reading for those familiar with feminist and queer scholarship on gender. Here Serano reduces and oversimplifies decades of such work to take aim at what she figures as 'gender artifactualism' and the concomitant belief in 'the gender system.' In condemning gender scholars 'tendency to see, conceptualize and depict gender as being primarily or entirely a cultural artifact' (119), Serano conflates fundamentally divergent strands of feminist social constructionism. As such, her argument relies on portraying the thinking of Bernice Hausman, Marjorie Garber, Judith Butler, Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys as more significantly similar than different, as all regard gender as 'merely the product of socialization and social norms' (144). However, this polemical 'summing up' gesture disregards crucial differences between, for example, Raymond and Butler. Similarly, Serano argues that any version of

'the gender system' – a shorthand for all systemic feminist analyses – is used to assess the behaviour of individuals as either subverting or reinforcing that system (thus the perversion of the personal is political). As such, she states that feminists must 'stop pretending that there really is a gender system as the more atypical forms of sexism cannot adequately be explained via the concepts of patriarchy, or heteronormativity, or the gender binary, and so on' (119).

A frustrating feature of Serano's argument in this key chapter is its reliance on a fundamental misunderstanding of queer theory on gender, which she misrepresents as portraying gender as 'merely' social, citing for evidence 'the popular slogans that are often quoted in feminist or gender studies settings – "all gender is performance" or "gender is just a construct"' (118). The recurring distortion of Judith Butler's notion of gender as 'performative' into gender as 'performance' is further exacerbated by the blurring of scholarly and activist understandings of gender politics. Thus post-structuralist feminist scholarly work since Butler is understood as naively and insensitively calling for a 'move beyond gender' or the 'end of gender' in the conduct of individuals (128). It would be a shame if, as a result of Serano's caricature of gender studies and queer theory, feminist and queer activists were to regard all of academic work on gender as antithetical to their goals.

In 'Homogenizing Versus Holistic Views of Gender and Sexuality,' Serano proposes revivifying the 'nature versus nurture' debate in order to prove that 'gender artifactualism also happens to be flat out incorrect as a theory to explain how gender and sexuality arise' (138-139). Serano uses concepts from genetics such as 'phenotypic plasticity' to demonstrate that gender and sexuality are not merely cultural, indeed, that biology offers a language for their variety (162). The care taken to correct popular misconceptions and oversimplifications of biology forms a striking contrast to her schematization of queer and feminist thought. Serano claims that biology accounts for dimensions of gender and sexuality that 'gender artifactualist' perspectives reductively overemphasizing (and thus 'homogenizing') 'the social' cannot. Serano positions this as emphatically 'debunking' feminist and queer perspectives yet this 'debunking' relies on a

deeply flawed account of that scholarship.

To demonstrate that both queer and feminist movements fundamentally (mis) understand gender, Serano illustrates her arguments throughout with instances where individual (gender) expression is invalidated. In particular, Serano returns to the scenario of clothing choices, specifically between dresses and jeans (50, 55, 63, 174 -179, 251, 254). This recurring 'clothing dilemma' positions gender as a matter of personal expression rather than a category whose cultural and political significance might exceed the personal. Illustrating her arguments regarding the politics of gender in queer, feminist and activist contexts in this way also underscores the pervasive misreading of performativity: that gender is a personal choice. The fact that it is clothing that Serano returns to for her examples seems apt for an account of gender that wants to stress it as a domain of personal choice and expression. Serano's critique of 'the perversion of the political' culminates with her advocating a shift of focus, toward 'becoming ethically gendered individuals' (249), a term repurposed from ethical non-monogamy (250). By Serano's account, we must pay attention to how 'acts of sexism occur, not by how we dress, or identify, or have sex, but through the way we see and treat other people' (132). Challenging sexism (or 'gender entitlement') thus would entail getting out of each other's way and committing to rigorous self-reflection, including 'self-examining desire' (257 - 262). In this way, Serano's proposed solution again focuses on individual conduct, circumscribing the 'political' to the choices made in interpersonal (intra-movement) interaction.

Serano's thinking relies heavily on the notion of double standards, which she admits to preferring over 'isms' as an accessible means by which individuals may reflect on gender politics in their everyday lives (210). The argument that double standards encourage a form of comparative reflection is compelling. However, relying almost exclusively on this form of analogical reasoning limits ways of conceptualizing feminist and queer politics. The frequent use of examples that draw analogies between her own differing experiences of exclusion, for example of transphobia and biphobia, illustrates how this can tend toward seeing all kinds

of oppression as functioning in the same way. Indeed, *Excluded* proposes its schematic as widely generalizable, indeed as a manual for recognizing all forms of marginalization, which unsurprisingly all take the form of double standards. By arguing varying oppressions manifest in the same ways, Serano flattens specificities and the possibility of qualitative differences between them. This is how Serano can propose social justice movements organize around 'generic' experiences of oppression, such as 'invalidation' rather than intersections of systemic oppression. In this regard, relying on phenomena like double standards risks sacrificing a complex and situated understanding of intersectionality and propogating a 'one size fits all model' of the sort she criticizes heavily.

An unrelenting proliferation of neologisms is a defining feature of *Excluded*, which at times can make Serano's argument hard to follow. This is a strategic move and Serano makes her case for inventing or re-purposing words to label (and thus to expose) varied forms and mechanisms of marginalization spawned by queer and feminist thinking. The usefulness of this kind of labeling for pointing out hitherto unacknowledged forms of privilege has been proved by the history of 'cissexism' (see Koyama, 2005) or in Serano's case, 'transmisogyny' (Serano, 2007). The shortcomings of this approach are evident in the way that Serano applies her labels to extant queer and feminist thinking, where genuine engagement is sacrificed for a reductive form of name-calling. Indeed, Serano relies so heavily on (re)naming and inventing a new language for oppression, that there is ultimately insufficient space in *Excluded* to pursue or demonstrate the utility of any one of these new terms or concepts. Further, in addition to potentially lacking nuance, relying so heavily on labeling as unproblematically 'exposing' oppression risks feeding the kinds of intra-movement squabbling, indeed name-calling, of the very sort Serano critiques in feminist and queer movements. Serano's measured discussion of the limitations of 'call out culture' in the chapter 'Balancing Acts' indicates she is aware of the online social justice spaces in which such politics reach their grim apotheosis. Nevertheless, the way that Serano's neologisms and taxonomies of oppression in *Excluded* operate according to similar logic suggests that providing more labels with which to expose marginalization is an insufficient solution.

Relatedly, the weight Serano gives to the fallacies that guide intra-movement exclusion rests on the presupposition that, to borrow the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved' (2003, 139). This is why the outline of Serano's 'holistic feminism' consists largely of elucidating the double-standards and flawed thinking that promotes exclusion. Serano does provide ample evidence of the unevenness and inconsistency in many instances where queer and feminist movements marginalize individuals who desire to be counted as queer and feminist. However, the effectiveness of her procedure for creating more inclusive movements is questionable. While *Excluded* assumes that performing such exposures must necessarily motivate change toward more inclusive movements, it is doubtful whether intra-movement politics of this sort are entirely the domain of logic. As such, it is unlikely that Serano's logical argument for a 'holistic feminism' will persuade those not already sympathetic to the cause. However, it is likely that *Excluded* will contribute to the empowerment of those already seeking more inclusive queer and feminist movements.

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