will live in a culture where violence to our beautifully embodied selves is acceptable and expected. The antidotes to shame are affirmation and celebration. We can and we do gather to mourn our losses, resist our oppressors, and celebrate our passionate and loving selves. We need to affirm one another’s sticky, sultry, messy, and miraculous humanity in every possible way. We need to celebrate often, and well. Not just yearly and in large gatherings, but day by day and person to person. Shame is the first betrayer, but love can, and will, overcome.

If you want to read more about HERE AND QUEER, try:
* What It Feels Like When It Finally Comes: Surviving Incest in Real Life by LEAH LAKSHMI PIPIZNA-SAMARASINHA
* Why Nice Guys Finish Last by JULIA SERANO

If you want to read more about MUCH TABOO ABOUT NOTHING, try:
* How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman? by KATE HARDING
* Who’re You Calling a Whore?: A Conversation with Three Sex Workers on Sexuality, Empowerment, and the Industry by SUSAN LOPEZ, MARIKO PASSION, SAUNDRA

If you want to read more about SURVIVING TO YES, try:
* Sex Worth Fighting For by ANASTASIA HIGGINBOTHAM
* Killing Misogyny: A Personal Story of Love, Violence, and Strategies for Survival by CRISTINA MEZTLI TZINTZÚN

**19 Why Nice Guys Finish Last**

by JULIA SERANO

SEXUALIZATION AND INTIMIDATION haunt all of us who move through the world as women. I have had men talk over me, speak down to me, and shout angrily at me when I’ve tried to deflect their unwanted passes. Strange men have hurled catcalls and sexual innuendos at me, and have graphically described what they’d like to do with me as I pass by them on city streets. I’ve also survived an attempted date rape. And frankly, I consider myself lucky that nothing more serious than that has happened to me. Needless to say, like all women, I have a great interest in bringing an end to rape culture.

Having said that, being transsexual—having had the experience of navigating my way through the world as male prior to my transition to female—has given me a somewhat different take on rape culture than the view that is often taken for granted among many cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) women. From my perspective, much of the existing rhetoric used to describe and theorize sexual harassment, abuse, and rape is, unfortunately, mired in the concept of “unilateral sexism”—that is, the belief that men are the oppressors and women are the oppressed, end of story.
Some of those who buy into unilateral sexism believe that men are inherently oppressive, dominating, and violent. Others believe that the problem is rooted in patriarchy and male socialization conspiring to condition men to become sexual predators. While there is certainly some truth to the idea that men are socialized to be sexually aggressive, even predatory, this is not the only force at work in their lives. Male children and teenagers are also regularly and explicitly reminded that they should be respectful of girls and women, and are often punished severely for picking on, or “playing rough” with, their female peers. Further, the men-are-just-socialized-that-way argument fails to explain the countless men who never sexually abuse or harass women in their lifetime.

The truth is that rape culture is a mindset that affects each and every one of us, shaping how we view and respond to the world, and creating double binds for both women and men. I call this phenomenon the predator/prey mindset, and within it, men can only ever be viewed as sexual aggressors and women as sexual objects.

The predator/prey mindset creates many of the double standards that exist in how we view female versus male sexuality. For example, on numerous occasions I’ve heard heterosexual female friends of mine ogle some man and make comments about how he has a nice ass. While one could certainly make the case that such discussions are “objectifying” or “sexualizing,” what strikes me is that they don’t feel that way. But if I were to overhear a group of men make the exact same comments about a woman, they would feel very different. They would feel sexualizing.

Similarly, if a male high school teacher were to have sex with one of his female teenage students, we would all be appalled. The incident would clearly feel like statutory rape to us. However, when the roles are reversed—when the adult teacher is female and the teenage student is male—it generally feels like a completely different thing to us. While it still fits the definition of statutory rape, we often have problems mustering up the feeling that the boy has been violated or abused. In fact, after one recent high-profile case, comedian Bill Maher joked that such teenage boys are “lucky,” and the audience broke into laughter.

What these anecdotes reveal is that the predator/prey mindset essentially ensures that men cannot be viewed as legitimate sexual objects, nor can women be viewed as legitimate sexual aggressors. This has the effect of rendering invisible instances of man-on-man and woman-on-man sexual harassment and abuse, and it makes the idea of woman-on-man rape utterly inconceivable. It’s also why women cannot simply “turn the tables” and begin sexualizing men. After all, if a woman were to shout catcalls at a man, or were to pinch a guy’s ass as he walked by, her actions wouldn’t mean the same thing as they would if the roles were reversed. Her actions would likely be seen as suggestive and slutty, rather than intimidating and predatory.

Because of the predator/prey mindset, when a woman does act in a sexually active or aggressive way, she is generally not viewed as a sexual aggressor, but rather as opening herself up to being sexually objectified by others. This is why rape trials have historically dwelled on whether the woman in question was dressed in a revealing or provocative fashion, or whether she met with the man privately, and so on. If she did any of these things, others are likely to view her as inviting her own sexualization, as “asking for it.” The underlying assumption is that women should simply know better—they should recognize that they are prey and men are predators, and they should act “appropriately.”

What should be becoming increasingly clear is that the predator/prey mindset enables the virgin/whore double bind that feminists have long been rallying against. Women, as prey, are expected to play down their sexuality—to hide or repress it. Good girls, after all, are supposed to be “virgins.” Women who do not downplay
or repress their sexualities—that is, who do not act like prey—are viewed stereotypically as "whores." As stereotypes, both "virgin" and "whore" are disempowering, because they both frame female sexuality in terms of the predator/prey mindset. This is why reclaiming their sexuality has been such a double-edged sword for women. If a woman embraces her sexuality, it may be personally empowering for her, but she still has to deal with the fact that others will project the "whore" stereotype onto her and assume that she's inviting male sexualization. In other words, a woman may be personally empowered, but she is not seen as being sexually powerful and autonomous in the culture at large. In order for that to happen, we as individuals must begin to challenge our own (as well as other people's) perceptions and interpretations of gender. We must all move beyond viewing the world through the predator/prey mindset.

To do that, we must examine an issue that has traditionally received far less attention: the ways in which the predator/prey mindset complicates the lives of men. Trans perspectives (those of trans women, trans men, and other transgender-spectrum people) can be really vital in this regard, as many of us have had the experience of moving through the world as both women and men at different points in our lives, and thus can consider the male position without undermining or dismissing female perspectives (and vice versa). In thinking about these issues, I draw heavily on my own experiences being raised as a boy, and as a young adult who was viewed by others as a heterosexual man (as I am primarily attracted to women). It is not my intention to speak on behalf of all men, both because I never fully identified as male at the time, and also because I had a very specific and privileged male existence (for example, I am white and middle-class). It will take the experiences of other trans folks and cisgender men to fill in the whole picture.

Just as it is difficult for women to navigate their way through the world, given the fact that they are nonconsensually viewed as prey, it is often difficult for men to move through a world in which they are nonconsensually viewed as predators. When I was male-bodied, it was not uncommon for women to cross the street if I was walking behind them at night, or to have female strangers misinterpret innocent things that I said as unsolicited sexual advances. It is telling, I think, that I had to deal with the predator stereotype despite the fact that my appearance was about as unthreatening as it gets: I was a very small and unmasculine/androgy nous man. Bigger and more masculine-appearing men have to deal with this stereotype much more than I ever did. Perhaps no issue exacerbates the male predator stereotype more than race. I have heard several trans men of color say that they feel that the male privilege they have gained since transitioning has been very much offset by the increased visibility and the societal stereotypes of black men as predators that others are constantly projecting onto them.

While the predator stereotype affects men's interactions with women, it probably has an even greater impact on their interactions with children. When I was male-bodied, I found that if I were to interact enthusiastically with children, women would often give me dirty looks. A trans male acquaintance of mine recently told me that the greatest loss he experienced upon transitioning from female to male was his ability to interact freely and enthusiastically with children. He teaches young children and has found that he's had to modify his whole approach—for example, keeping more distance and not being as effusive or affectionate with his students as before—in order to avoid other adults' viewing him as creepy or suspect.

Obviously, men make up the overwhelming majority of sexual predators. But that does not mean that all men are necessarily sexual predators. It is important for us to keep in mind that the men-as-predator stereotype is exactly that—a stereotype—and it creates obstacles that all men must navigate, whether they are predators
or not. This is especially true for those men who are additionally marginalized with regard to race and class. Given how destructive and injuring sexual abuse and violence are to those who experience them, I wouldn’t dare suggest that it is the (potential or actual) victim’s fault for propagating these stereotypes. At the same time, the truth is that we cannot begin to have an honest discussion about how to dismantle rape culture unless we are willing to acknowledge the negative impact that this stereotype has on those men who are not predatory.

The predator stereotype also complicates and constrains male sexuality. While many feminists have discussed how the sexual object/prey stereotype creates a double bind for women in which they can only ever be viewed as either “virgins” or “whores,” not enough have considered how the sexual aggressor/predator stereotype might create a similar double bind for men. Having experienced this dilemma myself firsthand, I have come to refer to it (for reasons that will be clear in a moment) as the assholes/nice guys double bind. “Assholes” are men who fulfill the men-as-sexual-aggressors stereotype; “nice guys” are the ones who refuse or eschew it.

Just as women receive mixed messages in our culture—some encouraging them to be “virgins,” others encouraging them to be “whores”—men receive similar mixed messages. As I alluded to earlier, male children often receive lots of explicit encouragement to be respectful of women. Even in adulthood, men who make blatantly sexist comments, or who suggest (in mixed company, at least) that women are “only good for one thing” will often be looked down upon or taken to task for it. So when it comes to their formal socialization, boys/men receive plenty of encouragement to be “nice guys.”

The problem is that boys/men receive conflicting messages from society at large. This informal socialization comes mostly from the meanings and expectations that are regularly projected onto women and men, especially in the media and within the context of heterosexual relationships. Just as women are expected to fulfill the stereotype of being sexual objects in order to gain male attention, men are expected to fulfill the sexual aggressor stereotype in order to gain female attention. In other words, they have to act like “assholes.” Granted, this isn’t true in all situations. For example, in the progressive, artsy, and/or queer circles I inhabit nowadays, men who act like “assholes” don’t get very far. But in the heterosexual mainstream culture, men who unapologetically act like “assholes” tend to thrive.

This really confused me in my late teens and young adulthood. I had lots of close female friends back then, and it always used to bum me out when they would completely fall for a guy doing the “asshole” routine: acting confident to the point of being cocky, being sexually forward if not downright pushy, and relentlessly teasing girls in a junior high school–esque way with the expectation that they would smile and giggle in response. It always seemed really contrived to me. I suppose I was privy to insider information: I had the experience of interacting regularly with many of those same men as a man (not a woman), and in those situations they did not act nearly as cocky or presumptive or dismissive toward me as they did around women they were interested in.

Anyway, time and time again, my female friends would fall for an “asshole” and then be crushed because he never called her the next day, as he’d promised, or because he started bragging to his guy friends about his “sexual conquest,” or because he tried to push things along faster and farther sexually than she was willing to go. Sometimes after being hurt by some “asshole,” my female friends would come to me for advice or to be consoled. They came to me because I was a “nice guy.” In their eyes, I was safe. Respectful. Harmless. Sometimes during these post-“asshole” conversations, my friends would go on a tirade about how all men are jerks and
cannot be trusted, or they’d ask, “Why can’t I find a guy who will treat me with respect?” Whenever they did this, I would point out that there are lots of guys who are not jerks, who are respectful of women. I’d even name a few. Upon hearing the names I suggested, my friends would invariably say something like “I don’t find him attractive” or “I think of him more as a friend.”

Just as women who refuse to play the role of sexual object often fail to attract male attention, “nice guys” who refuse to play the role of sexual aggressor typically fail to attract female attention. (Note that I’m not speaking here of the type of man referred to in the feminist blogosphere as a Nice Guy, who is the sort of man who argues that being a “nice guy” entitles him to sex with whomever he wants, thus revealing himself to be merely a closeted “asshole.”) In high school and college, I had several male friends who, apparently concerned with the lack of action I was getting, literally told me that women like it when guys act like “asses.” For them, it was just something one did to attract women. And as much as I hate to admit it, it generally seemed to be true. During my college years, I watched a number of “nice guys” transform into “asses.” And when they did, women suddenly became interested in them. The most stunning transformation I witnessed was in this guy who lived in my dorm, whom I’ll call Eric. Freshman and sophomore years, he was a super-sweet and respectful guy. Despite the fact that he was fairly good-looking, women were not generally interested in him. Somewhere around junior year, he suddenly began acting like an “asshole” (around women, at least). Instead of engaging women in conversations (as he used to), he would instead relentlessly tease them. The things he would say sounded really dismissive to me, but often the intended recipient would just giggle in response. Suddenly he was picking women up at parties, and I’d occasionally overhear women who never knew Eric back when he was a “nice guy” discussing how cute they thought he was.

The last time I saw Eric was about two years after college. We had both moved to New York City, and a mutual friend came up to visit and suggested that we all go out together. The bar that we went to was really crowded, and at one point, Eric started talking about how in situations like this, he would sometimes fold his arms across his chest and subtly grope women as they walked by. Between the fact that the bar was so crowded and the way he held his arms to obscure his hands, women weren’t able to figure out that it was Eric. Upon hearing this, I walked out of the bar, appalled.

The reason I tell this story is that it complicates many of the existing presumptions regarding the origins of rape culture. Some have suggested that men are biologically programmed to be sexual predators. The existence of Eric (and others like him) challenges that argument because, after all, he was a “nice guy” for most of his life until about the age of twenty—well after his sex drive kicked in. Eric challenges overly simplistic men-are-socialized-to-be-that-way arguments for the same reason: He made it to early adulthood—well beyond his formative childhood and teenage years—before becoming an “asshole.” It would be really hard to make the case that Eric became a sexual predator because he was influenced by media imagery or pornography, or because his male peers egged him on. Like I said, I lived in the same dorm as he did, and I never once saw any guys teasing him for being a “nice guy” or coercing him into being an “asshole.” I would argue that the primary reason Eric became sexually aggressive was that he was interested in attracting women. And, as with many men, once Eric began disrespecting women on a regular basis, the lines between flirting and harassment, between sex and violation, between consensual and nonconsensual, became blurred or unimportant to him.

Not to sound corny, but we all want the same things in life: to gain other people’s attention, to be adored, to be sexually desired, to be intimate with people we find attractive, and to have great sex.
In a culture where women are generally viewed as sexual objects, some women will take on that role in order to gain attention and to feel desirable. By the same token, in a world where men are only ever viewed as sexual aggressors, some men will take on that role in order to gain attention and to feel desirable. So long as the predator/prey mindset predominates and a demand remains for women and men to fulfill those stereotypes, a large percentage of people will continue to gravitate toward them.

This is why single-tact solutions to abolish rape culture will always fail. For instance, many people in both the political/religious Right, as well as many anti-pornography feminists, seem to take what I call the “virgin” approach. Their line of reasoning goes something like this: Because men are predators, we should desexualize women in the culture by, for example, banning pornography and discouraging representations of women (whether media imagery or actual women) that others can interpret as sexually arousing or objectifying. This approach not only is sexually repressive and disempowering for many women, but it also reinforces the idea that men are predators and women are prey. In other words, it reaffirms the very system that it hopes to dismantle.

I also get frustrated by people who think that it’s simply up to male allies to call out those men who are sexist or disrespectful of women. While this approach can have some positive effect, I believe that many cisgender women overestimate its potential. First off, it essentially makes the “nice guys” responsible for policing the “assholes.” This overlooks the fact that in the heterosexual mainstream, “assholes” are seen as being higher up in the social pecking order than “nice guys.” As a result, a “nice guy” calling out an “asshole” about how he needs to be more respectful of women tends to have as much societal clout as if the geeky girl in class were to lecture the cheerleaders about how they shouldn’t play dumb and giggle at every joke that the popular boys make.

Such comments, when they are made, are often ignored or outright dismissed. Furthermore, I’ve experienced a number of situations in my life (e.g., high school locker rooms) where I honestly did not feel safe enough to protest the sexist comments that some boys and men make. After all, one of the ways in which the hierarchical status quo is maintained in male circles is through the threat of physical intimidation and violence.

Any attempts to critique men for being sexually aggressive, or to critique women for fulfilling the role of sexual object, will have a very limited effect. These tactics, after all, fail to address the crucial issue of demand. So long as heterosexual women are attracted to men who act like aggressors, and heterosexual men are attracted to women who act like objects, people will continue to fulfill those roles. In contrast, critiques that challenge why individuals desire stereotypical “sex objects” and “sexual aggressors” seem to me to get closer to the root of the problem.

I have heard many feminists critique men who prefer women that fulfill the sexual object stereotype. Many of these critiques (rightfully, I think) suggest that the man in question must be somewhat shallow or insecure if he’s willing to settle for someone whom he does not view as his intellectual and emotional equal. What I have seen far less of are critiques of women who are attracted to sexually aggressive men. Perhaps this stems in part from the belief that such comments might be misinterpreted as blaming women for enabling the sexual abuse they receive at the hands of men. While I can understand this reluctance, I nevertheless feel that it is a mistake to ignore this issue, given the fact that many men become sexual aggressors primarily, if not solely, to attract the attention of women. In fact, if heterosexual women suddenly decided in masse that “nice guys” are far sexier than “assholes,” it would create a huge shift in the predator/prey dynamic. While I wouldn’t suggest that such a change would completely eliminate rape or sexual abuse.
(because there are clearly other societal forces at work here), I do believe that it would greatly reduce the number of men who harass and disrespect women on a daily basis.

Those feminists who have critiqued the tendency of women to be attracted to sexually aggressive men often refer to the phenomenon as “internalized misogyny.” In other words, they presume that because women have been socialized to take shit from men, they have become conditioned to continually seek out men who will treat them like shit. Personally, I find this explanation unsatisfying. I don’t think that women are attracted to sexual aggressors because they believe that those men will treat them like shit. Rather, they tend to be attracted to other aspects of sexual aggressors, and only later become disappointed by the way they are treated.

This phenomenon is more accurately viewed as a form of “externalized misogyny.” There are a lot of subliminal meanings built into the predator/prey mindset: that men are aggressive and women are passive, that men are strong and women are weak, that men are rebellious and women are harmless, and so on. It is no accident that the meanings associated with women are typically viewed as inferior to, or lamer than, those associated with men. Given this context, I would argue that “nice guys” are generally read as emasculated or effeminated men in our culture. In a world where calling a man “sensitive” is viewed as a pejorative, the very act of showing respect for women often disqualifies a male from being seen as a “real man.” I believe that this is a major reason why many heterosexual women are not sexually interested in “nice guys.”

I think that women who are attracted to sexual aggressors are primarily drawn to the rebellious, bad-boy image they project—an image that is essentially built into our cultural ideal of maleness. The odd thing is that for many men, fulfilling the aggressor role represents the path of least resistance. How rebellious can it be to fulfill a stereotype? “Nice guys,” on the other hand, are rebellious, at least in one sense: They buck the system and refuse to reduce themselves to the predator stereotype. It is time that we begin to recognize and celebrate this rebellion.

Lots of women I know want to create a world in which women are allowed and encouraged to be sexual without having to be non-consensually sexualized. This is a laudable goal. But having been on the other side of the gender divide, I would argue that for this to happen, we will also have to work to simultaneously ensure that men can be respectful of women without being desexualized. One cannot happen without the other. I think that a lot of men would be eager to work with women to create such a world. A movement that refuses to render invisible and desexualize men who are not predators, and that attempts to debunk both the virgin/whore and the asshole/nice guy double binds, would excite and attract many male allies.

Perhaps most important, understanding the predator/prey mindset can help us to recognize that rape culture is reinforced both by people’s actions and by their perceptions. The system will not be dismantled until all (or at least most) of us learn not to project the predator stereotype onto men and the prey stereotype onto women. Just as we must learn to debunk the many racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, and ageist cultural stereotypes we’ve absorbed over the course of a lifetime, we must also learn to move beyond predator/prey stereotypes. Honestly, I find this the most personally challenging aspect of this work. Moving through the world as a woman, and having to deal with being harassed by men on a regular basis, makes me wary of letting my guard down in any way. Viewing all men as predators is a convenient self-defense mechanism, but it ignores the countless men who are respectful of women. I am not suggesting that we, as women, ignore the important issue of safety—to do so at this moment in time would be beyond unwise. What I am suggesting is that we won’t get to where we want to be until the
YES MEANS YES

men-as-predator/sexual aggressor assumption no longer dominates our thinking. It's difficult to imagine getting there from here, but we're going to have to try.

If you want to read more about HERE AND QUEER, try:

- Queering Black Female Heterosexuality by Kimberley Springer
- Shame Is the First Betrayer by Toni Amato

If you want to read more about MANLINESS, try:

- Toward a Performance Model of Sex by Thomas Macaulay Millar
- Hooking Up with Healthy Sexuality: The Lessons Boys Learn (and Don't Learn) About Sexuality, and Why a Sex-Positive Rape Prevention Paradigm Can Benefit Everyone Involved by Brad Perry

If you want to read more about MUCH TABOO ABOUT NOTHING, try:

- How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman? by Kate Harding
- The Process-Oriented Virgin by Hanne Blank

ONE OF THE WOMEN who trained me as an instructor of full-impact self-defense urges students to answer the question What are you willing to fight for? This is a course where people train to fight through realistic rape and attack scenarios as a way to prepare for and protect against violence. Within the first hour of class, students land full-force blows against well-padded instructors portraying their assailants. Few things feel as satisfying.

When asked to consider what's worth such a fight in real life, students name loved ones, usually their children and parents. Some wonder whether they would fight for property that has special significance. Others cut right to “My life,” and leave it at that. As a woman and feminist, I put sex on the list—very near the top.

Sex that's chosen and wanted is as vital to my survival as love, respect, and money to pay the bills. Long before I ever approached the stage when I might have initiated sexual exploration, I had the right to experience my pleasure free of inhibition and free of harm.

I've been robbed of that right repeatedly since childhood. But I always get it back, and only with a fight.

It's not the act of sex I care about so much as the whole universe of sex—from my anatomy to my attractions, from the liveliness of