



JANET MOCK

REDEFINING FEMINISM

WHY JANET MOCK IS THE WOMAN WE ALL NEED.

INTERVIEW: MARQUITA HARRIS PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTELLE DE CASTRO

It's a breezy, sunny afternoon near Tompkins Square park in the East Village, when Janet Mock strolls up, hair freshly windblown. She's in a pair of chic lounge pants, with Cleo, her adorable cockapoo, in tow. Even with a warm "hello" and a disarming smile she's intimidating as all hell. This feeling is not solely due to her curriculum vitae: best selling author, activist and journalist. Janet radiates the confidence of a woman who owns herself and it's as inspiring as it is daunting.

"In middle school and high-school everyone was trying to be like everyone else. I wasn't trying to be like anyone else but myself and that put a target on my back. People always had things to say about me," she says. "It built this resolve inside of me, this core of self-assuredness to thrive and do more. So now when people have things to say about me, I simply don't care because they've been talking about me since I was in the seventh grade. After a while you learn to be unapologetic."

For those unfamiliar with Janet's story, the abridged version goes something like this: she is and has always been a girl. Period. However, she physically became a woman at age 18, when she flew from her home in Hawaii to Thailand alone for gender reassignment surgery. She then embarked on a life journey in the body she was denied of for so long and made her way into a successful career as a journalist for *People.com*. Only those closest to her knew the whole story. Then, in 2011 that changed when she decided to tell all in a piece for magazine *Marie Claire*, headlined: "I was Born a Boy." For a black, transgendered woman to reveal her story to a predominantly white, presumably straight readership was bold to say the least. It was brave, transgendered women like

actress Laverne Cox and model Carmen Carrera had yet to be folded into mainstream culture.

The magazine article only scraped the surface, and centered on the physical transition she made from male to female. "This happened three years ago, when that piece came out and I think we've learned and we've transformed so much within the last year or even the last six months as a culture," she says. Dissatisfied with the way her story was told, Janet made the decision to tell her own story in her memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*.

"I told my story when I was 27 and it came out when I was like 28. My life changed at that age. This was when I first stepped into the woman I was always meant to be. It felt like the first time I was going to evolve and grow," she says assuredly. "It was the first time I felt like I evolved beyond whatever the universe gave to me as raw materials. I then had to use those materials."

It took Janet three years to get a lifetime's worth of painful and eye-opening experiences into one *New York Times* bestseller. While she knew her life would completely change, it was without a doubt a story that had to be told. "Anytime you write a memoir or anything personal, it's always a cathartic process. I also knew that my personal story was so much more than just about me, even though I wrote about me. I knew that people still took it as a platform of representation," she says.

In February of 2014, Janet appeared as a guest on CNN's now canceled "Piers Morgan Live" show and it wasn't pretty. It made the same mistakes of the *Marie Claire* story and thensome, as Piers' questions centered on genitalia and ultimately sensationalized Janet's story. Shortly after her appearance, she publicly criticized the now ex-CNN host, for his insensitive remarks about her transitioning. It was because of this interview a Twitter war began. Members of the LGBT community and beyond showed support for Janet by also calling Piers out for his lack of care, regarding a community that — according to the 2013 National Health Interview Survey — makes up nearly four percent of the U.S. population. The Piers interview shed light on a broader issue and it went beyond the scope of the show's guest. It uncovered just how much the media and the public as a whole needed to reevaluate what it means to be trans and how that is perceived.

There's a powerful Youtube video of Janet Mock and Fusion network host, Alicia Menendez floating around. In a mock interview (no pun intended) Janet and Alicia trade places.



Hair by Andrew Fitzsimons
Wendi Miyake using Mac Cosmetics



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To mimic her many experiences as a guest on so many shows, Janet interviews Alicia in the same manner she's often been approached. Rapid-fire questions like "Do you have a vagina? When did you feel your breasts budding? Do you use tampons?" were asked openly, with no hint of sensitivity. If you felt awkward reading those questions, imagine a stranger asking you them on live television. When the fake interview was over, Alicia sunk down in her seat and you immediately wanted to sink down with her. "Having uncomfortable discourse and debate is what is going to lead us to transcend the ignorance that we're living in now. If we're all being comfortable and pleasant with each other we'll never evolve," says Janet.

And evolve is exactly what *Marie Claire* did when they asked Janet to come back to the magazine as a contributing editor, in late summer of 2014. She came full-circle. "In terms of the awareness of trans issues, I think the editors have learned a lot. That's probably one of the reasons why they invited me to come back," says Janet. "The fact that I even have a say in where their content is going, has put me in an amazing space."

Janet is also an active Twitter user, and has utilized the social platform to connect to thousands of users. This has helped her to become a leading figure for not just the transgendered community, but for young adults. Her online campaign #GirlsLikeUs, has steadily become a hashtag of empowerment and solidarity for trans women of all races and backgrounds. Most importantly it's become a social tool for adolescents and adults seeking encouragement and to understand that they are not alone.

In a survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality organization, an estimated 41 percent of responders have attempted suicide, compared to 1.6 percent of the general population. Let that number sink in. Of the same group, 47 percent reported that they had been fired, denied a promotion or not hired at all because of being transgendered or non-conforming.

Janet's activism and visibility has been vital. In some ways it's hard to believe the kid she wrote about in her autobiography and the woman sitting in front of me are the same. In her book she gives readers a glimpse into her childhood or "girlhood," as she calls it. This was the period in which she began to navigate the shortcomings of a society determined to label her, without her consent.

"Young people's agency is simply not respected. Whether you're coming into your identity as a queer or trans person, or fighting to be an artist when your parents want you to be a lawyer, it's difficult. Many youth issues tend to focus on

being taken seriously as you discover yourself."

In her book, Janet revealed stories about being bullied as a kid, and the trials of navigating those hurdles were moving to say the least. It was no surprise that pop music and the women who ruled that space, became a major source of inspiration. She even devoted an entire chapter of her book to Beyoncé and Destiny's Child. It's also no coincidence that her name is also shared with a certain member of the famous Jackson family.

"Anytime there's like some carefree girl of color, I'm always like YES girl! Like Rihanna, or Willow [Smith] I live for all of them. We need to celebrate that carefree, free girl," she says. However the female-led inspiration doesn't just halt with big name celebrities and pop stars. At her core she is an activist and a writer and remains motivated by such women. "I'm inspired by those girls and also from legends and other writers. Audre Lorde and bell hooks (*sic*), Maya Angelou, their work was the blueprint for me to even do what I do. That's how I get inspired to tell the truth, the uncomfortable truths," she says taking a sip of her iced green tea.

What makes Janet's and other trans stories so vital to cultural progress, are that these stories force us to reevaluate the old and rotted definition of gender. It makes everyone—gay straight, trans, bi-sexual, asexual, whatever—sexual—to beg the question: what does it all mean? These stories make us more cognizant that at the end of the day, we're all just people.

There are few labels Janet has willingly taken on, specifically: woman of color, activist and writer. However it wasn't until recently the word "Feminist" became one of them. For many women — whether gay, straight or trans—the idea of being a Feminist incites images counter to how they view themselves. In a personal essay written on the heels of Beyoncé's now legendary, 2014 "MTV Video Music Awards" performance, Janet revealed her hesitation to accept the label. Whether Janet agreed to the label or not, the minute she decided to live openly and boldly as a trans woman, she became a Feminist. And while she may not have Beyoncé's legion of fans and level of fame, Janet has one thing Beyoncé does not: accessibility. And for the many youngins' just beginning to discover themselves and choosing roads less traveled, having an icon like Janet to look up to, really does make all of the difference. ■

Learn more about Janet on janetmock.com and check her out as she hosts MSNBC's new weekly show, *So POPular!*

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