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A TransAmazon Takes on 'The Man'



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By Jacob Anderson-Minshall

You may think the brouhaha over the film *The Gendercator* is heated, but it's nothing compared to the controversy over 2003's *The Man Who Would Be Queen* by **J. Michael Bailey**, a psych professor at Northwestern University. As **Joelle Ruby Ryan**—a graduate student at Bowling Green University—can attest, it may be four years later but the Bailey Controversy is still boiling over.

With an impressive c.v. and two documentary films to her credit, Ryan recently became the first MTF-spectrum trans person to receive a prestigious Point Foundation Scholarship, but that's not what's getting her noticed these days.

Ryan (joellerubyryan.com) inadvertently stumbled into the fray around Bailey's book, his research methods and alleged professional misconduct (including accusations that he had sex with several of his trans), and his latest defender, intersex researcher/activist **Alice Dreger**.

The Man raised the ire of trans women by re-asserting Ray Blanchard's theory that transsexual women are either "feminine homosexual males who want to be women" ("Perhaps," Bailey writes, "because many of them seem incapable of sounding or acting like typical males even when they try to do so.") or they suffer from "autogynephilia: a sexual attraction to, and love of, the idea of oneself as a woman."

Ryan, who identifies as a transgender woman and a genderqueer, pansexual trans-feminist, says Bailey's taxonomies are "patently ridiculous. In addition, this theory furthers the notion that transgenderism and transitioning are sexually motivated. People don't transition for sexual reasons—they transition because of their gender identity."

She claims that Bailey's writing is misogynistic and offensive to the LGBT community. "His theories on male bisexuality (it does not exist), his endorsement of gay gene selection (eugenics) and his connection to Kenneth Zucker (who supports reparative therapy for gender-variant youth) [also] taint him as an enemy to [our] community."

Still, Ryan thought the Bailey controversy was over until this summer, when Dreger (alicedreger.com) released a 62-page paper (to be published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* next year) defending Bailey and accusing a number of high profile trans women of attempting to "ruin" him. In light of the pending Dreger piece, Ryan proposed a panel for 2008's National Women Studies Association conference entitled "The Bailey Brouhaha: Community Members Speak Out on Resisting Transphobia and Sexism in Academia and Beyond."

"I briefly considered wording it in such a way that allowed those more sympathetic to Bailey and Dreger's work to participate," Ryan admits. "But I quickly discarded the idea. This simply isn't a both sides type of panel. Trans people have repeatedly been silenced by powerful elites. We've been endlessly researched and talked about by others. We've been objectified and gazed at like a butterfly pinned to a wall. [Now] we refuse to let others define us in ways that we know to be harmful, specious and destructive. The reaction to Bailey is a pivotal milestone in this history of resistance."

After posting an official call for proposals on an international women's studies listserv, Ryan was surprised when Dreger herself responded, calling Ryan's post "laden with factual errors and misrepresentations," and, in reference to another post, noted, "I also appreciate your advising Joelle Ruby Ryan 'that she was putting herself at risk... within a controversial field (trans issues) by tolerating tactics that breed fear and stifle academic freedom'."

"As a junior scholar," Ryan says, "I was floored to be so viciously attacked by a senior-level scholar with a prestigious appointment. What I did... is a standard procedure. What is not standard is to be so brazenly attacked by a senior-level colleague in front of one's academic peers. I think what happened on the listserv was a sort of warning and possibly even a threat. Clearly, Dreger has used her considerable power as a tenured professor at a prestigious university, as a guest on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, as well as her privilege as a middle-class, white, cisgendered woman to bear on someone with less cultural and institutional power than her. Such actions are appalling and unethical and absolutely anathema to feminist principles."

When she's not raising the ire of senior colleagues, she's currently working on her PhD dissertation, "Reel Gender: Representations of Trans People in Film and Television", which examines images of trans people in sitcoms, horror films, comedy-dramas and documentaries.

"The point of the dissertation is to ask what the images reveal about mainstream America's ambivalent relationship to the trans community. Ultimately, I want to use film and TV as a benchmark to see how far transgender liberation has come in the US."

Ryan has had her own role in creating films, having co-produced two autobiographical documentaries: 1995's *A Transgender Path* and 2003's *TransAmazon: A Gender Queer Journey*. With her next film (tentatively titled *Translucent*), Ryan hopes to examine what she calls "passing privilege."

"Passing is a thorny and controversial issue," Ryan admits. "As a 6 ft. 6 in. individual, people often react to my physical size and call me sir. At one point in time, it upset me. Now I see that it doesn't matter, for me. I'm the same person regardless of how one addresses me. I'm genderqueer-identified and see my identity in a more fluid way. While I'd never question someone's personal desire to pass, I do question those who assume we all should want [or] be able to pass. I think the whole paradigm of passing is outdated and insidious and should be toppled. It's time for a new vision of gender freedom."

In addition to being author of the 2005 poetry collection, *Gender Quake*, Ryan is a well-seasoned trans activist and speaker. She's the founder of the grass-roots organization New Hampshire Transgender Resources for Education and Empowerment, and formed the Bowling Green State University student group Transcendence.

"To me, trying to promote radical change in society is my reason for living. Gender is much more about power, privilege and oppression than hormones, genitals or chromosomes."

Trans writer, Jacob Anderson-Minshall, co-authored Blind Leap, the second book in the Blind Eye Mystery series, available in October. Contact jake@trans-nation.org or visit Anderson-minshall.com for more information.