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Transsexuals Protest Academic Exploitation

Transsexual women accused a Northwestern university psychology professor of using them as research subjects without their consent for his controversial 2003 book on transsexuality, The Man Who Would Be Queen. For the first time, transsexual activists succeeded in speaking out publicly against academic exploitation.

Locale:

Evanston, Illinois

Categories:

Publications; transgender/transsexuality; marches, protests and riots

Key figures

Lynn Conway (b. 1938), professor emerita, University of Michigan

Becky Allison (b. 1946), medical doctor

Andrea James, transsexual activist and writer

Joan Roughgarden (b. 1946), biology and geophysics professor

Charlotte Anjelika Kieltyka (b. 1951), artist, photographer, and research subject known as “Cher Mondavi” in *The Man Who Would Be Queen*

J. Michael Bailey (b. 1957), professor and author of *The Man Who Would Be Queen*

Summary of Event

In March, 2003, J. Michael Bailey published *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender- Bending and Transsexualism*, a book that immediately became the center of a debate over the origins of male-to-female transsexualism and its relationship to sexuality. Employing a theory first advanced in the 1980’s by Ray Blanchard, a researcher and head of the clinical sexology program at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto, Canada, Bailey stated that there are two types of male-to-female transsexuals: homosexual transsexuals and nonhomosexual transsexuals. The former group, he wrote, are “extremely feminine gay men,” whereas the latter group “suffer” from a condition

called “autogynephilia.” Bailey argued that transsexuals with autogynephilia are “men erotically obsessed with the image of themselves as women.”

By describing transsexualism as a phenomenon best understood in terms of deviant sexual desire rather than as an issue of gender identity, Bailey angered many male-to-female transsexuals, and others, who felt that such a characterization ran counter to their own experiences and was not supported by valid, scientific research data. In response, former computer science professor Lynn Conway created a Web site dedicated to the investigation of Bailey’s research methodology and the implications of his conclusions. Activists Andrea James and Becky Allison also began posting criticisms of Bailey’s work on their online transsexual resource sites in April, 2003, stating that they, too, profoundly disagreed with his findings.

In late April, 2003, Stanford University biology and geophysics professor Joan Roughgarden attended a psychology lecture given by Bailey and wrote a scathing critique in the university’s newspaper, *The Stanford Daily*, of what she viewed as a “vulgar performance” of unfounded assertions about transsexuals based on stereotypes. Dismissing *The Man Who Would Be Queen* as “junk science” she then wrote an open letter to two presidents of divisions of the National Academy of Sciences in which she called for the academy to discredit the book as a scholarly publication. Roughgarden warned that Bailey’s conclusions were not based on empirical data and have worrisome implications for gay and lesbian people as well as transsexuals, “setting the stage for others to advocate the persecution of gays from a scientific perspective.” In early May of 2003, Charlotte Anjelica Kieltyka discovered that aspects of her personal life and sexual history had been published in Bailey’s book, under the pseudonym “Cher Mondavi,” without her knowledge or consent. Kieltyka contacted Conway, who posted a series of e-mails and interviews online

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on her behalf. On July 3, 2003, Kieltyka filed a formal complaint with Northwestern University, saying she had never been aware that Bailey considered her a research subject, and that he had not obtained her informed consent to participate as a human subject in his study. By the end of July, three more individuals used in Bailey’s research had filed formal complaints against him. On November 12, 2003, Northwestern University launched a formal investigation in response to the allegations that Bailey did not obtain the consent of his research subjects.

On December 12, 2003, the weekly academic newsmagazine *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that Bailey had been accused by a transsexual woman of “having sex with her while she was a subject of his research.” In January, 2004, an article by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) linked support of Bailey’s research to the Human Biodiversity Institute, which the SPLC terms a “neo-eugenics outfit” that also promotes racist scientific research.

One month later, *The Man Who Would Be Queen* was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award in the “Transgender/Genderqueer” category, spurring a massive protest and petition drive to have the title removed from the nomination list. On March 12, 2004, the nomination was rescinded after the panel of judges found that “the book was not appropriate for the category.”

In April of 2004, further complaints were filed with the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation against Bailey for practicing clinical psychology without a license and for publishing clinical case histories without permission. Bailey denied the accusations, saying he has “done nothing wrong.” On December 1, 2004, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that Bailey had resigned his position as chairman of the psychology department at Northwestern in October, in a move that a university spokesman said “had nothing to do with the investigation.” In letters to the transsexual women who had filed complaints against Bailey, Northwestern provost Lawrence Dumas wrote that the investigation had been concluded and he had “taken action that” he thought to be “appropriate in this situation.”

Significance

The series of protests stemming from Bailey’s publication of *The Man Who Would Be Queen* represented one of the most organized and unified examples of transgender activism seen to date. Linking issues of scientific research on homosexuality and transsexualism, the efforts of Lynn Conway, Andrea James, Charlotte Anjelica Kieltyka, Joan Roughgarden, and other transsexual women marked a new moment in transgender history.

–K. Surkan

Further reading

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