

A Matter of Perspective: A Transsexual Woman-Centric Critique of Dreger’s “Scholarly History” of the Bailey Controversy

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Published online: 23 April 2008
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As someone who is both an academic scientist and a transsexual woman and activist, I would very much welcome a proper historical analysis of the controversy over Bailey’s book *The Man Who Would Be Queen*: one that fully explores the many ethical issues raised by both the book and the backlash that ensued, one that thoughtfully articulates the perspectives of both researchers/gatekeepers and their transsexual subjects/clients while taking into consideration the institutionalized power that the former group holds over the latter. On paper, Dreger seems well suited for the task given her experience as a science historian, ethicist, and an advocate for sexual minorities in her past work with the Intersex Society of North America. Unfortunately, while Dreger describes her article as a “scholarly history,” it fails in this regard for numerous reasons, several of which I will address here.

The first rule of thumb when conducting a historical analysis—particularly one involving any backlash or tipping point event—is to provide the necessary background and the socio-political context in which the involved parties are situated within in order to understand the underlying forces that helped to shape the ways in which people reacted and events unfolded. In her lengthy article, Dreger devotes approximately 14 pages to Bailey’s conceiving and writing the book and the subject matter contained therein, 17 pages to describing the backlash against the book (with an overwhelming emphasis on purported attempts by a handful of trans activists to “ruin” Bailey), and 13 pages to clearing Bailey of most of the charges of misconduct that were made against him. In other words, it is primarily a Bailey-centric reading of the controversy. What is

conspicuously absent from Dreger’s account is an adequate examination of transsexual women’s realities and perspectives on the issue. Indeed, in her discussion of the backlash, she offers one mere paragraph to address the role that “the long history of oppression against trans people” may have played in fueling trans activists’ responses to the book. And in that paragraph, she offers one brief and vague acknowledgement of the fact that “trans people...have had their identities unnecessarily medicalized and pathologized” without even mentioning that it is Bailey himself (and other psychologists/sexologists) who pathologize us. From a trans perspective, the Bailey controversy is part of a much larger story, one that has unfolded over the last half century, during which time there has been growing resentment and resistance within the trans community to having our identities and realities defined by nontrans researchers/gatekeepers. Because Dreger overlooks this background and power dynamic, her article is largely an ahistorical “scholarly history.”

Dreger glosses over or completely ignores three realities of trans women’s lives that are crucial to appreciate if one wants to truly understand why the backlash against Bailey’s book occurred. First, transsexuals’ gender identities and lived experiences as members of our identified sex are deemed to be less socially and legally valid than those of nontranssexuals (Currah, Juang, & Minter, 2006). Most of the discrimination, demonization, harassment, etc., that trans people face in our daily lives is predicated on this double standard. For this reason, transsexuals are constantly placed into positions where we have to account for, and/or fiercely defend, our gender identities in order to obtain the same rights and respect that nontranssexuals take for granted. Second, transsexual women are routinely sexualized in our culture (Serano, 2007). This can be seen in the media, which sexualizes our motives for transitioning by portraying us as either sexual deceivers who “prey” on unsuspecting heterosexual men, or as men who

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simply “get off” on the idea of being a woman (suspiciously resembling the “homosexual” and “autogynephilic” transsexual stereotypes Bailey forwards). In my own experience, I have found that as soon as people discover that I am a transsexual woman, they often feel entitled to openly objectify my body, make sexually graphic comments, and/or ask lurid questions that are far more debasing and hardcore than anything I experience when I am presumed to be a nontranssexual woman. As with all forms of nonconsensual sexualization, this has the very real negative effect of disempowering trans women in our day-to-day lives. Third, the delegitimization and sexualization of trans women’s gender identities occurs not only in mainstream society, but within medical/psychological/sexological settings. To this day, transsexuals have to submit to psychological pathologization and live up to psychologists’ often sexist and heterosexist standards of womanhood or manhood in order to physically and legally transition. The gatekeeper role positions psychologists and sexologists as “experts” on transsexuality—their opinions and perspectives on our experiences are typically deemed more valid than those of trans people themselves. Further, the gatekeeper system has regularly sexualized trans people on the MTF spectrum (while largely ignoring those on the FTM spectrum) with regards to taxonomy, theories of etiology, descriptions of case histories, and diagnoses, and it is well documented that many gatekeepers have based their recommendations for sex reassignment on whether they considered the trans woman in question to be physically attractive and/or willing to dress and act in a hyperfeminine manner (Bolin, 1988; Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007).

Because Dreger is either ignorant of, or unconcerned by, the ways in which trans women have been historically and institutionally marginalized in society and within psychology, her accounts of the trans community’s reaction to Bailey’s book are superficial and patronizing. For example, she dismisses trans people’s accusations that Bailey’s views and his book are “transphobic” by claiming that he advocates sex reassignment for transsexuals and he genuinely likes trans people. This belittles trans people’s legitimate concerns that Bailey’s book (1) is highly pathologizing, reducing trans womanhood to the status of a paraphilia, (2) encourages readers to think of trans women as either “homosexual” or “autogynephilic” *men*, thus fostering the idea that our female gender identities are not to be taken seriously, (3) routinely and extensively sexualizes trans women and encourages a largely trans-ignorant lay audience to do the same, and (4) he positions himself as an authority on transsexuality and repeatedly claims that trans women whose experiences and perspectives contradict his “expert opinion” must be purposely trying to deceive or mislead others. Dreger also chides Roughgarden, Allison, and others for panning Bailey’s book upon first seeing the cover art without any recognition that, being trans women, they would be highly cognizant of how such

imagery both taps into and reinforces the historical delegitimization and sexualization of trans female identities. And Dreger plays down the numerous sexualizing comments Bailey makes about trans women’s physical attractiveness (or lack thereof) by describing these remarks as “germane to his discussion.” Dreger’s repeated attempts to overlook, underplay, or purposely discount trans women’s concerns about Bailey’s book are reminiscent of the way men often dismiss women’s concerns about sexism, or the way heterosexuals are often oblivious to homophobic remarks. Marginalized groups tend to be more fully aware of, and sensitive to, the obstacles, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices they face than those who do not share their experience. The fact that Dreger (who is nontranssexual) so thoroughly dismisses trans people’s concerns about Bailey’s book strikes me as insensitive at best and condescending at worst.

Nowhere is Dreger’s trivializing of trans women’s perspectives more pronounced than in the way she frames the “autogynephilia” debate. Specifically, she creates a false dichotomy between trans women who buy into an overly simplistic “woman trapped inside a man’s body” model and psychologists like Bailey who simply reject that “feminine essence” narrative. Framing the issue this way dumbs down transsexual perspectives of gender. In my experience, most trans people recognize that gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression all vary from one another and interact in different and sometimes confounding ways from person to person. Those of us who reject causal theories of autogynephilia typically do so, not because we believe that we are “women trapped in men’s bodies,” or that sexuality plays no role in our explorations of gender, but because such theories naively conflate sexual orientation with gender expression, gender identity, and sex embodiment in a way that contradicts our personal life experiences and that is inconsistent with the vast diversity of trans women that exist. In fact, most trans critiques of autogynephilia center on the fact that this scientifically unsubstantiated theory forces all trans women into one of two rigid categories, nonconsensually defines us in ways that contradict our own personal sense of selves, mistakes correlation for causation, handwaves away nonpathological alternative models that better explain the data, unnecessarily sexualizes and delegitimizes our identities, and has the potential to jeopardize our access to sex reassignment and our social and legal status as women (e.g., Barnes, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Roughgarden, 2004; Serano, 2007; Wyndzen, 2004). Dreger’s false dichotomy invisibilizes this body of work, thus enabling her to overstate the validity of Bailey’s claims without ever seriously considering the real negative impact they might have on trans women’s lives.

While autogynephilia has long been controversial, the backlash against Bailey’s book was admittedly far more intense than anything that had come before it. Dreger seems to attribute this to a calculated attempt by three trans activists,

Conway, James, and McCloskey (CJM), to personally “ruin” Bailey. In Dreger’s article, CJM are portrayed as single-handedly initiating and orchestrating the entire backlash against the book via personal attacks on Bailey. I would argue that this is a rather myopic view, as it both overstates these activists’ influence within the community and underplays the broad consensus of trans activists, allies, and advocates who found the book to be unapologetically arrogant, crass, stigmatizing, sensationalizing, and a distortion of both trans people’s lives and the scientific literature on the subject. If CJM did not become involved, and if no personal attacks were carried out against Bailey, the backlash still would have occurred and it would likely have been just as contentious. The reason is that Bailey’s book—which encourages readers to sexualize trans women and to view us as “men”—was being marketed to a mainstream audience as “science.” This constituted a very real potential political threat to trans women, despite all of Dreger’s dismissive claims to the contrary. Further, the backlash was not merely a response to Bailey’s book, but to decades of having our gender identities and perspectives undermined or reinterpreted by psychologists who claim to know more about us than we know about ourselves.

The backlash against Bailey’s book was a tipping point event, one that was enabled by a decade of trans activism during which trans people finally began to gain a collective voice and to redefine themselves in non-pathological ways (e.g., as transgender or gender variant). There was a broad consensus within the community that Bailey’s book demeaned and misrepresented trans women’s lives and countless trans people and allies expressed their opinions on this manner in legitimate ways (e.g., by writing critiques of the book, signing petitions, writing letters to editors, and so on). Dreger belittles this legitimate community effort by exaggerating the number of trans people who support Bailey’s claims (in my experience, such people represent a very small yet vocal minority within the community) and by focusing almost entirely on the actions of three individuals (CJM). By centering the discussion around the most extreme and unsavory aspects of the backlash, Dreger creates the impression that the entire breadth of the trans community’s response to Bailey’s book was wholly unjustified, unprovoked, and irrational. This, in combination with her failure to provide sufficient historical background and context regarding trans people’s marginalization in society and within psychology, and her continual dismissiveness toward trans people’s concerns about the book, practically strong-arms the reader into viewing the entire backlash as a mass hysterical overreaction on the part of trans people.

To state for the record, I do not condone personal attacks on people. And I believe that Dreger is rightly concerned about the way in which such attacks and threats can create a censoring environment in which people are afraid to say what they believe. The problem is that she seems to have approached the Bailey controversy, not to truly understand why it happened or

why trans activists almost universally decried the book, but rather to solely focus on allegations that CJM tried to “ruin” Bailey. In fact, she seems to have settled on her thesis (i.e., that trans activists took things too far and are a threat to academic freedom of expression) back in June 2006, before she began her investigation into the Bailey controversy (Dreger, 2006). The reason why many trans activists feel that Dreger’s article is problematic is not because they believe that personal attacks are a legitimate tactic in activism, but because their own concerns (i.e., the psychological pathologization, delegitimization, and sexualization of trans identities) have been virtually written out of the story. In this sense, one cannot help but draw parallels between Dreger’s article and Bailey’s book: both are one-sided renditions of issues that critically impact trans people’s lives, both fail to take trans people’s concerns, objections, and differing perspectives seriously, and both are touted as authoritative accounts (Bailey’s as “science” and Dreger’s as “scholarly history”), creating the impression that they are necessarily objective, well reasoned, and academically valid, in opposition to the accounts of trans people, which are (by implication) irredeemably subjective, unreasonable, and academically invalid.

Perhaps the most striking oversight in Dreger’s article (given her position as a bioethicist) is that she eagerly defends academic/scientific freedom of expression without ever engaging in the equally important issue of academic/scientific responsibility. In our society, people tend to view opinions as being inherently valid when they are spoken in the name of science and when the person voicing them has an advanced degree in a germane field. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in public discourses on transsexuality, where the opinions of nontrans “experts” (whether they be psychologists, sexologists, historians, sociologists or gender theorists) regularly trump, or completely stand in for, the perspectives of actual transsexuals. The fact is that when a self-appointed “expert” like Bailey claims that transsexual women transition for purely sexual reasons, and that they are lying if they state otherwise, people will believe him because of his academic/scientist status. For this reason, it is disturbing that Dreger would exonerate Bailey of most of the scientific misconduct charges made against him primarily on the basis that his book was not “science,” without ever taking him to task for misrepresenting his book as “The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism” in the first place. In her article, Dreger claims that Bailey wrote the book “more like a science journalist than a scientist,” but this ignores the fact that he consistently positions himself as a scientist and an expert on transsexualism throughout the book: he claims to know feminine men’s childhood histories and sexual orientations without having to ask them, claims he can tell “homosexual” and “autogynephilic” transsexuals apart just by looking at them, and claims to know which transsexuals are being “honest and open,” and which ones are “lying” and “misleading” (depending on

whether their personal stories support or contradict his worldview).

As a scientist myself, I feel that it is important that we defend scientific freedom of expression. But we must also recognize that with that freedom comes the responsibility not to abuse our positions as scientists. Unfortunately, there has been a long history of dubious research that has lent scientific credence to prejudiced beliefs that already exist in the culture: studies that have claimed to show that people of color are inherently less intelligent than white people, that homosexuals are more criminally-inclined than heterosexuals, or that women are biologically ill-suited for leadership positions. Often, such studies are embraced by the public despite their methodological flaws because they reaffirm and reinforce presumptions and biases that already dominate in the culture. Bailey's book claims to provide a scientific basis for three of the most commonly repeated sexualizing stereotypes of trans women: that we are either perverted men who "get off" on the idea of being women, gay men who transition to female in order to pick up straight men, and/or that we are "especially well suited to prostitution" (Bailey, 2003, p. 185). Like most research that merely confirms popular stereotypes, the data supporting Bailey's claims are weak: He relies primarily on Blanchard's correlations and his own impressions, speculations, and anecdotes. The cavalier way in which Bailey forwards these sexualizing stereotypes with no concern for the profound negative impact they have on trans women's lives is scientifically irresponsible and a misuse of the institutionalized power that he holds over trans people as a psychologist.

The fact that Dreger does not consider this institutionalized erasure of trans women's identities, perspectives, and concerns to be ethically important is troubling in its own right.

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