

The Rabid, Transphobic Hate-Mongering of the Anti-Pornography Movement

By Guest

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Abstract

Today's Guest Transadvocate is Dr. Joelle Ruby Ryan. Ryan describes herself as a "transgender, Feminist, Queer, Fat+, Activist, Educator, Writer, Speaker and Firebrand". She is also the author of Gender Quake: Poems and the co-producer of three autobiographical films. This weekend, there was a conference at the University of New Hampshire entitled "Pornography as Sexual [...]"

Article

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This weekend, there was a conference at the University of New Hampshire entitled "Pornography as Sexual Violence."

I was asked by the key organizer to co-present a panel with David Jacobsen at the conference. I titled the session Pornography and LGBT Identities: Documenting Harm, Plotting Resistance. My Power-point presentation was entitled: "From 'She-Male Sluts' to Trans-Sister Survivors: Interrogating the Degradation and Sexualization of Transgender Women in the Porn Culture" and I gave it the following abstract:

"For a number of years now, a sub-genre of pornography that depicts transgender women, offensively labeled "she-male", has been gaining in popularity. Like other forms of pornography, "she-male" porn is filled with degrading, misogynistic and racist images that function to further the oppression of transgender women in everyday life. In this presentation, Joelle Ruby Ryan will utilize words and images from this sub-genre of heterosexual pornography to discuss the backlash against feminism, the economic and cultural war waged against gender-variant people, and the ways in which racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia in pornography function to preserve the power and privilege of white, presumably-heterosexual, cisgender men. Against the backdrop of this archive of cruelty that celebrates rape, bigotry and abuse, trans-feminism can play a powerful role in fighting for a world which truly values all human beings and that will not stand for the fragmentation and destruction of our sacred sexualities."

Leading up to the conference, I did a Google search for Lierre Keith. I had seen her the previous summer at the Stop Porn Culture Conference in Boston and knew she was attending this conference at UNH. Most of the hits about her concerned her views on veganism, and she has indeed pissed off a lot of

vegans! However, I also discovered several troubling articles about her that linked her to transphobic bigotry:

here, and on a thread here a poster writes:

“This is a bit off-topic, but I just have to say that I find Lierre Keith’s ties to anti-trans politics troubling in the extreme. Keith is a founding and present member of the Radical-Feminist Lesbian Festival, which is ‘unalterably opposed’ to the existence of trans people. In addition to promoting the anti-trans works of Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, RadLesFes is explicitly opposed to allowing trans people access to trans-related health care.”

When I told the organizer about this, she reached out to Lierre and they had a discussion via email about this. Here are excerpts from that conversation in Lierre’s own words:

“Well, I’ve personally been fighting about this since 1982. I think ‘transphobic’ is a ridiculous word. I have no strange fear of people who claim to be ‘trans.’ I deeply disagree with them, as do most radical feminists.

Try this on. I am a rich person stuck in a poor person’s body. I’ve always enjoyed champagne rather than beer, and always knew I belonged in first class not economy, and it just feels right when people wait on me. My insurance company should give me a million dollars to cure my Economic Dysphoria. Or how about this. I am really Native American. How do I know? I’ve always felt a special connection to animals, and started building tee pees in the backyard as soon as I was old enough. I insisted on wearing moccasins to school even though the other kids made fun of me and my parents punished me for it. I read everything I could on native people, started going to pow wows and sweat lodges as soon as I was old enough, and I knew that was the real me. And if you bio-Indians don’t accept us trans-Indians, then you are just as genocidal and oppressive as the Europeans.

Gender is no different. It is a class condition created by a brutal arrangement of power. I can’t fathom how mutilating people’s bodies to fit an oppressive power arrangement is frankly anything but a human rights violation. And men insisting that they are women is insulting and absurd.

There is no such thing as ‘woman’ or ‘man’ outside of patriarchal social relations. These are not biological conditions-they are socially created, by violence in the end. If I can’t be a rich person born in a poor person’s body, then I can’t be a woman born in a man’s body. Not unless you are going to argue that man and woman are biological or essential conditions. The whole point of feminism is that they are neither; gender is social to the roots, and those roots are soaked in women’s blood.

So there it is.

*I would highly recommend reading the work that radical feminists have produced critiquing the entire culture of queer, including s/m and porn, that gave rise to the phenomenon of ‘trans.’ Sheila Jeffreys’s books *_Unpacking Queer Politics_* and *_The Lesbian Heresy_* would be a great start.*

[The Trans Community is] in fact deeply misogynist and reactionary when it comes to any understanding of male power. Indeed, they often claim it ‘oppresses’ them to even use the words ‘men’ and ‘women.’ Meanwhile, men are raping and brutalizing women on a mass scale. I hate to say this, but it’s porn culture that really created the whole concept of trans. I watched it happen... for your own edification, you might want to read up on Pat Califia, whom I talk about at length, and whose life and writing proves every point radical feminists make about queer politics, pornography, violence against women, sado-masochism, the eroticization of power and breaking boundaries (including the boundaries of children), and trans. All of it is right there” (italics mine).

So there it is? Umm, so there it ISN'T. Lots of hogwash that belongs back in the 1970s. Needless to say, it is quite obvious from this diatribe alone that Lierre Keith is a transphobe. Since she finds the word so ridiculous, perhaps we can call her a trans-hater instead. Would that pass muster, Lierre? And how dare she put my identity in scare quotes; but in the spirit of tit for tat, I will put her identity "radical feminist" in scare quotes, since my version and vision of radical feminists do not hate an entire group of people due to prejudiced and bigoted assumptions and stereotypes. Keith's rant is not even remotely original, but an old page out of Jan Raymond's hate-fest *The Transsexual Empire* (right down to her ludicrous comparison between transgenderism and race-switching) and Sheila Jeffreys's bullshit, attention-craving prose. Any one who calls a life-saving surgery (Sex Reassignment Surgery) a "mutilation" is, by definition, a rabid, anti-trans hate-monger, and not someone I wish to have anything to do with. And I love how Patrick Califia somehow becomes a stand-in for all trans people, or somehow emblematic. Because it is so fair to stereotype an entire community based on one individual, right?

Despite this, I decided to go forward with the conference. I thought it would be easy enough to avoid Lierre and her ilk. And I had a project that deserved attention. The feminist critiques of pornography have not been inclusive of looking at images of transgender women, just like they have done little to be inclusive of women of color, gay men and others outside white, heterosexual pornography. As is typical with feminism, the needs of white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual women have been elevated above the needs of all others. In addition, the voices of non-white and non-cisgender critics have been glaringly marginalized in feminist anti-pornography discourse. White cis women (lesbians and heterosexual) and white, straight cis men have dominated anti-pornography discourse for far too long. My experiences both this summer and today don't hold much promise for this changing, as this is a movement which is utterly uninterested in inviting diverse identities into the fold as they are too obsessed with propagating their narrow, outdated "radical feminist" and "lesbian feminist" ideology rather than welcoming in fresh voices. While Bob Jensen asserted that he and the rad fems are against she-male porn, you would not know it from their writings since they ignore the topic.

Early in the conference, I went to the women's restroom and found this lovely hate screed next to the toilet in a plastic case:

No Such Thing as a Transsexual By Margaret Jamison:

If there are so many males who "just want to change their body," without regard to gender, then why are they calling themselves "women" after they've had themselves chopped up? A mutilated male is a mutilated male. As I've said before, if males just want to hack off their penises and shove plastic bags under their pecs, how about they call themselves eunuchs instead of "women," "transwomen," and "transsexuals"? How about calling themselves males who wanted to chop off their penises and have it fashioned into a hole?

I get so sick of seeing women defend the "transwomen" they know in real life with reminders that not all "transwomen" want to wear dresses and pantyhose. OK, fine, they don't want to wear dresses. What does that have to do with the fact that they're still walking around calling themselves all manner of "woman"?

That is the crazy part. That is what makes them insane. One cannot change sex, and any indulgence of the, yes, insane, notion that they can is anti-female. I don't give a damn what eunuchs wear or don't wear. All I care about is whether or not society is actually obliging them in any way by calling them

women. They are not women, insofar as ‘woman’ means adult human female, and they never will be.

I took the hate screed down and found another one in its place several hours later. A third copy of this hate speech was found in a bathroom on a lower level. While it is unknown who put the hate flyers there, I will leave you, smart reader, to your own devices to figure it out.

Finding the hate speech flyer was very upsetting. To be honest, I wanted to leave the conference but decided to go through with the session. David and I gave our respective talks and got to the Q&A part. I specifically did not talk about anti-trans feminism during my Power-point talk as I was not interested in “going there.” However, during the Q&A, a person asked about community for David and I as members of the LGBT community who are lodging critiques of pornography. I stated that as a transgender woman, I am caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, there is the queer and trans communities, which for the most part are caught up in the whole “sex-positive” or “sex-radical” tradition that tends to celebrate pornography, BDSM and prostitution, while on the other hand the rad fems have a long history of bigoted views of transsexualism and transgenderism dating back to the 1970s, views that sadly have not been updated in 30 years, apparently! Several more questions were answered until the last question, when Bob Jensen decided to launch into a full frontal attack on me as a transgender person. He just had to “challenge” my description of radical feminists and their views on transgender identity. Apparently, I have been mistaken all these years. Their views are not bigoted, nor are they hateful! They are a righteous political critique of transsexuals and our horrible habit of preserving rigid gender roles! Someone pass the puke bucket.

Thanks to Bob, the panel, and really the whole conference, ended on a completely sour note. Despite my best effort to bite my tongue, Lierre and Bob just had to push their HATE-MONGERING agenda. Lierre and Co. had wandered out for most of David and I’s session. But when I confronted Lierre about her rabid bigotry, she and her pals decided to quickly jet. Unfortunately, Bob decided to stay. For what seemed like the next hour (it was at least half an hour) Bob Jensen berated me about my trans identity, transgender issues, sex reassignment surgery, the invasion of “men” into women’s spaces like the Michigan Womyn’s Hate-Fest and the “failure” of transgenderism as a political project. Over and over again, he said that he was neither a bigot nor hateful. It reminded me of the person who says “I am not a racist” and then goes on to say the most incredibly racist things. Bob, you may not think of yourself as an anti-trans bigot, but I certainly do! Can you imagine the outrage if the identity under attack was Jewish, or Gay, or African American? But when is a hate crime not a hate crime? When it happens to a transgender woman, that’s when!

I won’t bore you with the outpouring of hogwash from Dr. Jensen, but I can assure you it was vile and pathetic. I learned that all drag queens are a bunch of horrific misogynists parodying real women, that sex reassignment surgery is a tragic mutilating procedure, and that the transgender movement that I belong to is an utter “failure.” While gay male and transgender politics and communities were raked over the coals, Bob could not wait to strongly defend all facets of 1970s-style “lesbian feminism”. It was a humiliating and grueling experience--having your identity attacked and told that your politics are reactionary and inherently anti-feminist. And when I complained about the oppression of transgender women, Bob informed me that that was not due to radical feminists, but due to the patriarchy. Umm yeah, kind of like when Audre Lorde called Mary Daly out on her virulent racism and she said racism was because of men and patriarchy--a perfect way to eschew taking responsibility for the very real hate

that feminists also are responsible for. And, a convenient way to avoid actually transforming feminism to be inclusive of the lives of trans women and women of color. (And yes, the phrase “false consciousness” was ACTUALLY used! Another word I thought had been left to decompose 20 years ago.) I certainly hope Bob has never had any transgender students; I pity them if they have to put up with his obvious ideological bias and never-ending “fountain of undiluted foolishness.”

During the Q&A after the film screening, Bob told a story about an audience who watched the documentary “The Price of Pleasure.” It was made up mostly of people from the porn industry. Bob mistakenly thought they had had a civil dialogue after the film, and seemed genuinely surprised to find blogs that trashed him and the film in the days and weeks following the screening. I don’t know if he thought our “dialogue” (which was really him using his white, straight, male, cisgender privilege to talk AT us) was either civil or productive; so let me erase all ambiguity: NOT. EPIC FAIL. Sorry, Bob, I am NOT one of your students! I’ve got the same Ph.D. after my name as you, and your hate-filled bullshit did not alter my absolute pride in my transgender identity one iota, nor did it prompt me to think that your ideology, or Jan Raymond’s or Sheila Jeffreys’s, is not 110% WRONG. So thanks for wasting your breath. And though you said you had a “gay past” David and I want you to know that we were queer yesterday, queer today and queer tomorrow; we can’t run headlong into straight male privilege like you so easily can, Bob.

During her history of the anti-pornography movement (much of which consisted of bashing Patrick Califia and feminists who did not toe the line of HER ideology) Lierre Keith stated that there can be no middle ground. And so, the sex wars détente continues unabated. It is precisely this unwillingness to find common ground that means this movement will continue to be dead in the water. And it is precisely this unconcealed hatred of diversity of thought and multiplicity of social identity in this movement that will guarantee its continued failure. With friends like these, who needs enemies? As Dr. Bob goes back to his wife and kid (though he was gay for a “period”), and his religion as a “radical Christian” (so it is possible to be a “radical Christian” but fundamentally impossible to be a transgender woman and a radical feminist. Huh?) , and his work as a tenured professor (although he is not, as he says, an academic; I wonder then what the University of Texas thinks they are paying him for, exactly?) I will also go back to my life: as a transgender individual, as a feminist woman, as a queer person, as a person of size fighting sizeism, as an economically-challenged person, as a first-generation scholar, as a non-tenure track instructor, and as a person who does not use my “radical” politics to shit all over one of the most oppressed, maligned and vulnerable populations in the society.

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