

CREATED HE THEM

By Michael Ventura

April 20, 2012

Jenna Talackova, 23 years old, took it for granted that a transgender beauty like herself had a shot at Miss Universe. A commonsensical friend might have advised: “Girl, don’t try. They’ll break your heart.” But what broke was not her heart.

Talackova had made it to the finals of the Miss Vancouver competition when officials of Miss Universe Canada discovered she was not “naturally born” a female, as their rules stipulated. She was disqualified.

How she was disqualified is the most revealing aspect of her story.

The Miss Universe officials did not have a “How could you?!/How dare you!” attitude. Dennis Davila, Miss Universe Canada’s national director, said, “[S]he is a real girl.” Officially, his organization stated that it must abide by its rules. “We do, however, respect her goals, determination, and wish her the best” (*Daily Mail* online, March 24).

A public tussle ensued. Gloria Allred challenged the Miss Universe Organization’s owners: Donald Trump and NBC. Trump ordered Talackova reinstated; instead, she held out for a rules change. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation worked with the Miss Universe Organization to change its rules so that transgender women could compete in its pageants worldwide (these include America’s Miss USA and Miss Teen). Finally, on ABC’s *20/20*, a conversation with Barbara Walters – interviewer of superstars and first ladies – pinned the establishment’s bluest ribbon of media respectability upon Jenna Talackova’s status as a woman.

This attention is not just an aberration of the permissive West.

China Daily online, March 8, 2004: The transsexual Chin Lili was disqualified from the Miss Universe-China competition, but not entirely. She was allowed to address the audience before the contest, and to perform a song. Chen stole the show. “Chen seemed to outshine all the 37 beauty queen contestants on the stage” and “the audience gave her great applause.”

Three countries, three cultures. Canada seems a sensible place, as countries go; the United States is a crazy Norma Desmond country, a has-been capitalist star unable to regain its lost beauty and power; authoritarian China is a politically opaque colossus, the engine of the future -- but in each, the media is joined at the hip with the authorities and with their respective socio-political establishments. They might not want a transgender person to marry into their families, but they’ve cheered a transgender beauty queen. Historically, that signifies a sea change in gender perception. If civilization continues, this change will continue.

When I think of all the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people throughout history, and of all the fires they have walked through and been consumed by, and when I think of the fires that burn now and await in the future – well, I’m not ready to raise my personal freak flag in victory. Nonetheless, something enormous is changing in the way human beings inhabit bodies and in how we feel about this as a species.

Now, let’s go from beauty pageants to firefights – a front-page photo caption in *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2009: “American Marines rested at a make-shift patrol base in southern Afghanistan.” The photo shows four women in full Marine gear, hunched below

a mud wall, weapons in easy reach. The article was not about female Marines. Just Marines.

On Oct. 3, 2010, *The New York Times* ran a front-page photo of four women in full gear on patrol in one of Afghanistan's most dangerous regions. The article described a 40-woman Marine unit attached to a male company. Maj. Gen. Richard Mills "acknowledged that the female engagement teams are 'out on the point of the spear many times.' ... In a common side step [of Pentagon restrictions] ... women are 'attached,' rather than assigned, to combat units. ... To [unit leader] Captain Emily Naslund, the legal hoops are absurd when there are no front lines – and when members of her team are taking fire almost daily on foot patrols."

With typical gender hypocrisy, the United States won't admit its women in uniform fight. But they do. On Feb. 8, the Pentagon relaxed restrictions as to where and how women foot soldiers will be assigned. In real life, this means they'll fight more.

As for gays in America's military, an Associated Press headline from Oct. 15, 2011, says it all: "Active duty gays say coming out has been [a] nonevent." No major weirdness reported.

Meanwhile, Australia announced that its "female soldiers will soon be able to serve in all front-line combat roles" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2011, p.8). That already holds true in the militaries of Canada, Israel, and New Zealand. And "the Royal Navy confirmed ... that it had appointed the first woman in its history to command a warship" (*The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2011, p.6).

Two seemingly opposite gender roles for women and men, the beauty queen and the foot soldier – they don't mean what they used to mean.

One day, Miss USA will be a person who was born a boy and a woman's valor will merit the Medal of Honor. No doubt that medal has been awarded to gay men more than once, but its next gay recipient won't need to conceal his nature.

Resistance to these changes is inevitable and constant.

"[T]he Department of Veterans Affairs estimated that between 23 percent and 33 percent of [military] women have been assaulted" (*The New York Times* online, March 8). In some Muslim countries, this gruesome report from Pakistan is gruesomely common, citing "the torture-murder of five women and girls who were buried alive (three girls wanted to choose their own husbands, and two women tried to protect them)" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2008, p.WK10). Meanwhile, our Republican lawmakers drape their atrocities in legality, passing draconian laws against women's rights in every legislature they control. Hysteria against gender equality knows no conscience.

At the same time, one can't blame people who say, in honest bafflement, "Hey, come on. A man is a man and a woman is a woman. That's obvious."

Christians, Jews, and Muslims reverence Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image. In the image of God created he him: male and female created he them." But now science tells us that the emphasis in that verse should be on the inclusive word "them."

Alice Dreger is professor of clinical medical humanities and bioethics in the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University. In the summer of 2008, during the controversy over whether South African runner Caster Semenya was a man or a woman, Dreger wrote: "If a person has XY chromosomes, you declare him a man. If XX, she's a woman. Right? Wrong. A little biology: on the Y chromosome, a gene called SRY

usually makes a fetus grow as a male. It turns out though, that SRY can show up on an X, turning an XX fetus essentially male. And if the SRY does not work on the Y, the fetus develops essentially female” (*The New York Times* online, Aug. 22, 2008). Such people may look like men but feel like women or look like women but feel like men. Do we judge them by how they look or by how their genetic structures make them feel?

Dreger’s most surprising revelation regarding whether Caster Semenya is male or female: “[Semenya’s] doctors are not going to be able to run a test that will answer the question.” There exists no such test.

Are our perceptions creating a new gender reality or are we catching up to what has always been the reality of gender? Probably both. The future hurtles toward us, and, in that future, no one can predict what the words “man” and “woman” will mean.

Texana Dames singer Traci Lamar Hancock is in hospice and needs our help. You can contribute at traciforgrace.com. Traci and her family thank you.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.