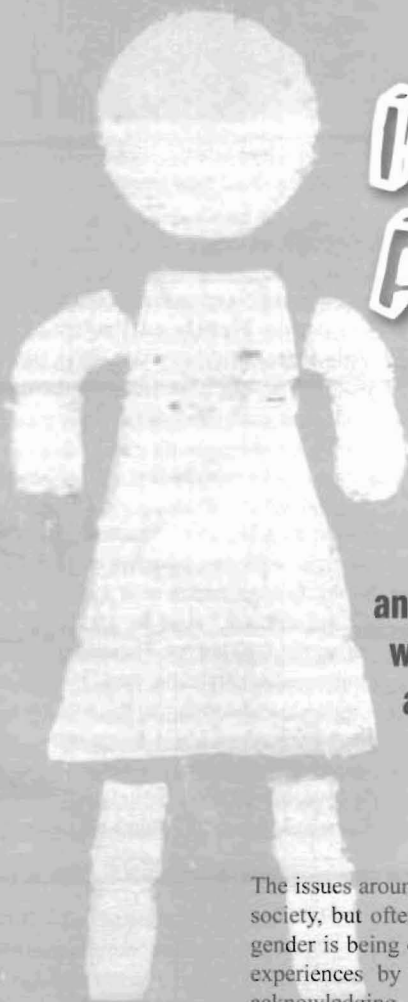


I WILL ALWAYS BE YOUR DAUGHTER.



I WILL ALWAYS BE YOUR SON.

**an overdue conversation
with writer, filmmaker, and
auto mechanic Juma Blythe Essie**

INTERVIEW

Ellen Marie Hinchcliffe

BOY/GIRL PHOTOS

Lou Oates



The issues around transgendered identities continue to gain more awareness in our society, but often the experience of transforming the body and the complexity of gender is being expressed through the eyes of white folks. Like most unexamined experiences by white people, these encounters are usually presented without acknowledging race. Juma Blythe Essie is a 30-year-old black man, writer, filmmaker and auto mechanic living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His take on being transgendered, black, and male pushes the conversation in a much-needed direction.

How do you describe yourself in relation to your gender?

I am a transsexual person. I would describe myself as a 30-year-old man who lived the first 29 years of his life as a black woman and now lives his life as a black man.

I have heard you describe your experience transitioning from female to male as going from being invisible to hyper visible. Can you explain what you mean?

I think black women in this society face a double bind. They are either hyper visible as in the caricature of the big, black, loud woman, or often they are just invisible, and I felt like I was mostly invisible. Now, as a black man in this society, I am hyper visible as a threat, as a predator, as a source of desire. I am seen a lot more now than I was as a black woman. In neither case was I seen for who I am, that is not what I mean by being seen, what I mean is being gazed upon in a different way.

I think black people are viewed through the lens of white supremacy as either "your nigger" or "that nigger." If the black person is "your nigger" they are there to entertain you, the black person white people can trust, the different one, the exception to the rule. If the person is "that nigger" it means they don't care what white people think of them and that makes a lot of white people nervous. You might start as "your nigger" and end up as "that nigger." Unfortunately some white people when I first meet them assume because I am open to being friends with them or because I have white people in my life that I am somehow not connected to black people. They will often show their true colors to me by using the word nigger or talking about other black people or people of color in a way where they think I am going to agree with it. I have to face that, and it's very disappointing.

How is your experience transitioning as a black FTM (female to male transsexual) different from a white FTM's experience?

There's a good book out by a white FTM called *Becoming a Visible Man*, and I guess I feel like I am becoming the hyper-visible yet still invisible man. For me it hasn't simply been about the physical changes. The social part of it has been huge. White FTMs (with a few exceptions) never talk in terms of being white men, just men. I can't separate the experience. For me every aspect of my transition is informed by being a black man in a white supremacist society on this planet. For white FTMs their whiteness informs their transition as well, but in white supremacy that is rarely acknowledged. The whiteness gets erased, and it's just about gender, but it's never just about anything because oppressions and -isms are interconnected.

That ties into my next question. What has it meant for you to become a man in a sexist society?

For me it's been about added responsibility. Since I began my transition the question I have been asking myself is, what kind of man am I going to be – not simply what kind of man am I going to look like? It's a big question. A lot of what we live out is roles. We act this stuff out over and over, but I think being an outsider, being a third gender person I can use 29 years living as a black woman to inform how I create my maleness. It's a very unique opportunity. Part of that is being honest about where I come from and what it was like for me to live as a black woman and then act accordingly as a black man.

So what would you say some of those things are that you are trying to act about gender, and piggybacking on that, what's hard about that?

I try not to ask myself "Am I being male enough?" and I think that makes me come off as effeminate to some people. I don't want to shape my masculinity on other men or something we all saw on television. I'm sure it's going to change as I continue to transition, but right now I am working on not thinking I have to walk like a man, or thinking "Oh, that's not what a man would say." I never want to think to myself what would a man do in this situation and for me that is the first step in deconstructing maleness. Now I want to mention that folks may be wondering if I am trying to deconstruct maleness why am I transitioning. Because I have a medical issue that needs to be resolved by bringing my physical body in line with my gender, this medical issue has deep social ramifications.

Do you have any role models as an FTM?

I can't say I have found many models for being an FTM, but for being a man, I have found many models I like. James Baldwin

comes to mind – just artistic, weirdo black men, and there are a lot of them! (Laughs) And they inspire me to just be myself.

Talk about black weirdos.

There is this perception that the eccentric, creative, complex artist is not a black person. There is still the idea of this single black reality or this little space of identity that black people can occupy. There are so many of us black weirdos out there doing our thing, and I think we do seek each other out.

What is your experience dealing with other black men?

Yeah, I went to a Digable Planets show, and this white guy tries to pick a fight with me, which was bizarre at a Digable Planets show. So this brother comes over and says to me, "Just walk away man, he's not worth it." And for me that is something I have been experiencing through out my transition, a kind of camaraderie with men of color, especially black men. It has been really beautiful for me but really heartbreaking at the same time because where was that camaraderie when I was being seen as a black woman? And it's not to say that with every black man I come across there is this brotherly love, but I have definitely felt a simple acknowledgement from other black men that I didn't get as much as a woman.

We live in a sexist, homophobic society, and some people are homophobic and some aren't. But whenever two black people get together and say something it becomes the black community – I don't know how. Why is it never the white community when some white idiot says something?



A lot of what we live out is roles. We act this stuff out over and over, but I think being an outsider – being a third gender person – I can use 29 years living as a black woman to inform how I create my maleness.

Lets talk about sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

I'll start with this: sexism is real, it exists, and we don't even need to go into that. Now homophobia and transphobia exist as well, but they are not oppressions. They are punishments where sexism is the oppression. Susan Pharr wrote in her book *Homophobia as a Weapon of Oppression* that sexism is about gender; it's about gender roles, and when you break those by being gay, lesbian, or transgendered you are breaking sexist rules and so you are punished. I think a lot of times people don't acknowledge that sexism is the root of transphobia and homophobia. And a lot of people have this idea that dealing with sexism or talking about feminism isn't "sexy" anymore with expressions like "this is not your mother's feminism."

I hate that saying. Like it was all square before, and now we are so cool.

Yeah, and it's bullshit because we need feminism, and we need what came before us more than ever. I think people are basically good but also a little selfish, and I think when you really see the interconnectedness of struggles and people you begin to see yourself in others, and it can bring out that goodness in yourself. I know that sounds hokey, but I think to see yourself in everything is where it's at. On a political level that means seeing past your issue that affects just you as a white gay man or transman or what have you.

When people start talking in boxes like race is a black person's issue. Well race is so much a white person's issue just as sexism is not just what the girls should worry about. The boys should worry about it too! This really ties into the idea of solidarity.

Yeah, you go to the HRC (Human Rights Campaign) website, and one of their corporate sponsors is Shell. so you should go buy your gas from Shell because they give domestic partner benefits – they're great! Have you people never heard of Nigeria? How can you call yourselves the Human Rights Campaign and support Shell when they are tied to political murders and environmental devastation and the continued theft of a people's natural resources? I mean whose human rights? I went to a Le Tigre show and they had this slide show for a song about visibility or something and they had a slide of a Shell station with a rainbow over it. Just lost me right there.

Okay, so what about the perception that the black community is somehow more homophobic then the rest of the country?

Well that's white supremacy talking. (Laughs) We live in a sexist, homophobic society, and some people are homophobic and some aren't. But whenever two black people get together and say

something it becomes the black community – I don't know how. Why is it never the white community when some white idiot says something? Now I have heard black people say that too about black people being more homophobic, but I find often really what they are talking about is their moms or their brothers and so on. Or people say the black church is so homophobic. Again, what about the white church? I grew up in the black church; I was there at least two times a week and let me tell you there were gay people there. I just don't buy it. When the senate votes to decide if they should ban gay marriage, how many of those people voting are black? My union will not cover my healthcare needs as a transman. Well the union board of trustees is white by the way. It's not run by the black Pentecostal church! (Laughs) Let's talk about power and perspective and who sets these agendas.

What about racism in transgendered spaces?

Like other spaces in white supremacy, white people don't have to acknowledge being white and can assume their experience is the norm. It's not like there is less white supremacy in transgendered spaces. In fact often when groups of people that feel or are oppressed include white people they don't feel they have to deal with being white or they are exempt somehow from white supremacy, and that is not the case.

What has been the hardest thing for you to deal with as an FTM transitioning?

Funny, the hardest thing for me hasn't been about being black. It's been about being a union member. My union refuses to cover my health care needs that include chest surgery and a hysterectomy. That's been the most painful thing for me, and that is about class. As a working class person I cannot afford these surgeries otherwise. The ironic thing is if I had a non-union job I would have more recourse to fight to get my health care needs as a transsexual covered, especially in Minnesota where the law against discrimination includes transgendered people. But as a privately held plan the union makes the decisions.

What has brought you the most joy?

Just being present in my body. You know I could never see myself as an aunt, and I never thought about having close relationships with children, and now that I am an uncle I feel so open and involved. I never saw myself as a mother, but now I'm so excited about being a father. I feel like my world has opened up to possibilities in a way that I wasn't open to before because I don't think I fully inhabited my world before.

I'm curious how transitioning and living as male has affected your creative life?

Art has always been a way of understanding for me, a processing tool. For the last year things have been changing so much in me that I haven't even been able to wrap my head around it. So my creative life has been kind of underground. I also feel my medium has changed, before my transition I mostly did spoken word/poetry and now I find myself doing a lot of video because I am absolutely obsessed with looking at myself! (Laughs)

I'm sure many trans folks can relate to that.

Oh yeah. And so video has really inspired me. Before it was always coming out of my head in terms of poetry and flow, and obviously the words are still there but the visual impact has become so important to me.

Talk about the video you are working on right now called, "A Seed in You, Inside Your Mother's Womb."

I'm trying to reconcile my relationship with my mother, which actually isn't about my transitioning, which she has been accepting of, but we have some things between us that go a lot deeper than that. I think every single person is here for a reason, and I think about when baby girls are born they have all the eggs they are ever going to have for their whole life. So at her birth your mother had this seed that is one day going to be you inside her. That is heavy; it's so beautiful and I love it. I think there is something very deep about these connections, but we can't always reconcile them with the people we share them with. I don't feel I can reconcile this with my mother so I'm trying to work it out with video.

I like in the film that you are touching on this transformation of your body but also genetic memory and things this transformation will not change.

I still have the same chromosomes, and I will always have these chromosomes. Within me is history and my grandmother and her grandmother and her grandmother and on and on. Within each of us we carry so much joy, so much pain, and so much promise. ■

Ellen Marie Hinchcliffe is a white woman, writer, childcare worker, filmmaker, and above all a loving auntie. She received a Jerome Foundation commission to create a performance piece called, "Dirty the Bones—On Being White and Other Lies," which will premiere this November at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis, MN. She has written most recently for Z Magazine. You can email Ellen at ehinchcliffe@yahoo.com.

resource: **\$pread Magazine**

Most industries offer trade magazines for their workers and artisans. Four New York women decided that there should be one for the world's oldest profession.

Audacia Ray, executive editor of *\$pread*, founded in early 2005, views her subject with ambivalence. "It's good and bad," Ray, 26, says of sex work, "for the same person at different times."

For Ray, a Jill-of-all-media trades in the New York porn scene, addressing the needs of sex workers is part of the labor movement. And because sex work affects the rights of women and LGBT people acutely, advocating for them is a part of the feminist and queer rights movement, she believes. *\$pread* deals with the direct needs of dancers, escorts, et al. It offers interviews with figures in the adult movie industry and debates over things such as the use of condoms in adult films. A recent issue reviewed sex work laws around the globe and addressed the rising costs today's strippers face. For example, more dancers these days are independent contractors who pay a club to work. *\$pread* has a reformer vision for the industry. "Sex work should be fun," Ray says.

\$pread has critics who disapprove of its effort to legitimize sex work by advocating for better working conditions. Some even challenge the editors' devotion to feminism. "There is the idea that women selling their bodies can never be a feminist act," Ray says. "It is something to think about."

\$pread is open to all perspectives, including those of feminists with anti-sex work views. "If they have good arguments I love it," she says. The magazine has no official editorial stance, and encourages debate. In order for the editors to avoid potential legal entanglements,

however, each issue contains a disclaimer that says *\$pread* does not condone prostitution. The editors are concerned for sex workers who are the victims of trafficking and abuse while others have chosen the trade and take pride in their profession. *\$pread* accepts both realities, Ray says.

The magazine is non-profit, and everyone involved has been working on a volunteer basis. Writers and artists, many of whom are sex workers, contribute work pro bono. The magazine's wild launch parties create positive media buzz and *\$pread* received recognition from the *Utne Reader*. Ray recently curated a small exhibit featuring art by sex workers in New York. It featured art with a mix of both the sensuality and sorrow involved in sex work, such as a photograph of a nude woman washing herself with the words "No matter how much you wash you'll never get clean" across the frame. Some other

photos featured female models with faces that could easily be expressing ecstatic fervor or genuine angst. The show received mixed reviews.

There are challenges: It has a low budget and the editors would like more diversity in their staff and stock of contributors. But *\$pread* is getting advertising, the editors are applying for grants and they remain optimistic about the maga-

zine and the industry. "Our response," Ray says, "is that doing sex work is taking control of one's erotic output."

-Ari Paul

For more information, visit www.spreadmagazine.org

To profile sex and gender resources, libraries, or museums in your area, email sexandgender@clamormagazine.org

