

Judges' Commentary on "A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender"

by

Mark Pelusi

**"A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender" won second prize
in the University of Pittsburgh's
2009/10 Composition Program Writing Contest**

Mark Pelusi's essay, "A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender," shows what is possible when a writer treats the essay as a space for inquiry—for testing out ideas and engaging intimately with texts. Unlike strict argumentation and proof, "A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender" thinks on a very personal level with the ideas and with the text, Kate Bornstein's book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, that provides the occasion for writing. Pelusi appears to have truly taken up the assignment's call to "write an essay in which you grapple with some *specific* ways in which your reading of *Gender Outlaw* might lead you (and others) to see gender differently." We see this attention to specificity in response to a passage in which Bornstein questions the biological bases for gender categories. Pelusi quotes Bornstein: "Are you a woman because you can bear children? Because you bleed every month? Many women are born without this potential, and every woman ceases to possess that capability after menopause—do women cease being women? Does a necessary hysterectomy equal a gender change?" He then uses a quite personal example to take on Bornstein's concerns as his own and to self-reflexively imagine his own experiences in a new way:

These questions are odd for me because my own mother has had a hysterectomy and it feels strange to think of that surgery as a 'gender change,' but I understand the point Bornstein is making. I could legitimately imagine someone trying to define a woman as someone capable of producing offspring.

He exemplifies both a willingness to imagine possibilities outside the usual or obvious ways of thinking of gender and a capability to interpret the passages of *Gender Outlaw* as raising larger questions about definition and complexity—questions inextricably linked not only to gender but to writing itself. Likewise, he employs such

autobiographical facts as the pitch of his own voice and his longstanding boredom with culturally ascribed "masculine" activities to think through the limitations of assigning gender at all. More than mere comprehension of the text, Pelusi sincerely inhabits the space Bornstein creates for the reader—a space to consider how strictly enforced gender categories have made many of us potential gender "outlaws." His essay also marks a smooth movement between critical reading and narrative, between the work of the scholar and the work of the storyteller, revealing these two voices as part of the same inquiry rather than as binary styles of writing.

This essay demonstrates one of the significant goals of composition courses at the University of Pittsburgh: engaging in writing as a creative, disciplined form of inquiry. Pelusi writes at the intersection of the creative and the critical, conjuring up images from his childhood, from his family history, to raise questions about gender, about the constructedness of his own life, and about the deep connections between identity and voice.

To read the full text of Mark Pelusi's essay, [click here](#)