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# Not all (bikers) are welcome

A Bentonville mural, Arkansas library books and the push to make queer people invisible.



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When I first heard about the controversy over a public mural in Bentonville back in May, it seemed absurd. Three months later, to this non-Bentonville resident, it still seems absurd. But the story isn't just about a mural or a certain city anymore. It's another arena in a statewide and nationwide effort to keep LGBTQ people unseen and unheard in public life.

See if you agree as I connect these dots.

Seeing red (and pink and turquoise)

First, for those who haven't been following along, let's get you caught up: We're talking about a big, long painting along a public trail in Bentonville, featuring the innocuous,

wholesome phrase “All Bike(r)s Welcome.”

The mural was painted by an artist and scores of volunteers last fall, but it first became a public disagreement [in May](#), when some city officials complained that certain colors in certain spots changed between the approved design and the final result. I get the sense that the mayor and city staff were a little embarrassed to fully explain the issue. Council Member Aubrey Patterson was much more direct, as the Bentonville Bulletin reported: “The assertion is they snuck in a trans flag,” she said.



*The transgender flag*



*The mural.*

Can you spot the trans flag? I can't. But I suppose that's only because I'm not an eagle-eyed lookout always on guard for any insidious queer messages within my line of sight. To someone with the eyes to see, those pink and blue stripes in the upper left corner seem *pret-ty* friendly with each other, don't they? A little *too* friendly, if you know what I mean.

Not to worry: Concerned citizens are on the case.

"The mural was approved by the Art Board and the City Council; however, it has come to light that the imagery and symbolism (specifically, the trans flag) within the piece represent a divisive ideology that does not reflect the values of our broader community," reads [a form letter](#) the city received more than a dozen times leading up to the Council's Aug. 12 meeting. "Public art should bring people together, reflect the community as a whole, and celebrate what unites us."

Put plainly, these unnamed, backward people don't think the disgust and obsession that leads to seeing trans flags around every corner is the divisive ideology here. No, it's the existence, acknowledgement and support of trans people that's dividing us.

There's another line of opposition to the mural, saying that it advertises for a nonprofit, All Bikes Welcome, in a way that a public mural shouldn't. Indeed, the city has had some Instagram tags removed to address this point, and the artist, Paige Dirksen, just this week [submitted a proposal](#) to the city to remove the flower bicycle wheel design and the parentheses around the R, both of which are references to the nonprofit.

But note that All Bikes Welcome's involvement in the project was glaringly obvious [almost a year ago](#), when the proposed mural was going through multiple rounds of city approval. The group told the city that it was planning an unveiling event and wanted to hold special

bike rides at the mural “as a way to highlight the work that All Bikes Welcome does in our community.” This was no secret.

I don't think that the mural's nods to the group are really the problem. The nonprofit had a fitting name that the city wanted to amplify in a harmless public art project. The problem, for some, is where this little saga began: trans people. The opponents belatedly realized that All Bikes Welcome wholeheartedly supports cyclists of non-traditional gender identities, and they won't stand for it.



*A group walks down Dickson Street in downtown Fayetteville last June during NWA Equality's 2025 Trans March.*

## The bigger story

Bentonville council member Beckie Seba gave the game away at the Aug. 12 meeting. She was the most vocal about the supposed advertising issue and called for the entire mural to be removed. She also said, “I am someone that believes that transgender ideology is very dangerous.”



Seba went on to say that a common shorthand for transgender identity — that is, being born in the wrong body — is a lie: “A lie to make someone feel better about themselves is still a lie and not loving.”

I’m not trans, and most of us aren’t, either. But some people are. Some people’s gender identity is more complicated or in-between, sometimes for very straightforward biological reasons ([here’s one example](#)). This is a [natural and genuine](#) aspect of human variety, and that’s OK. It’s not a lie.

Despite the falseness of Seba’s statement, however, her words and a little reading between the lines get us to the heart of the matter. Transgender ideology is dangerous? What is the danger that she sees? Behind the specific words and circumstances, it’s the same old danger that anti-LGBTQ bigots have been seeing since the ‘60s and before: that the visibility of queerness — in colors, books, people, whatever — is what makes people queer.

The fear is wrongheaded and stupid. Some people are, and always have been, blurring the rules of gender, feeling attracted to the same sex or otherwise growing up different, even in those places and times that it’s frowned upon, shunned, illegal or fatal. As a kid in Nebraska, I crushed on other boys even when I didn’t understand it, when it terrified me, when I hated it and when I knew others would hate it, too. I didn’t become queer when I saw a gay couple on TV or read about it in a book. Those things made me a little more understanding and loving only of what was already there.

Once you can recognize this rightwing fear, several nonsensical and seemingly disparate

things in Arkansas and around the country become both clear and connected.

Is Trump [coercing universities](#) across the country and threatening billions of dollars in federal funding over transgender inclusion in sports because [0.002% of college athletes](#) are some threat to fairness and competition? No, it's because he and the GOP want trans athletes not to exist.

Did Florida this week [remove a rainbow crosswalk](#), which ran by the site of 49 queer people's murders nine years ago, because the state doesn't want the streets used for politics? No, it's because the state of Florida doesn't want anyone thinking it's good to be queer.

Here in Arkansas, are conservatives taking over public libraries in [Craighead County](#), [Crawford County](#), [Saline County](#) and [statewide](#) because queer authors and their books might harm kids? No, it's because they don't want there to be queer kids. Same for why the state is restricting [gender-affirming health care](#).

And is Bentonville talking about taking down a mural of brightly colored shapes and bicycle parts because it referenced a cycling nonprofit's name? No. It's because the mural and its creators might — *might* — give someone the idea that it's OK to be trans.

In a way, I can appreciate this absurd controversy for illuminating the truth. The statement on the mural was a little too aspirational, a little too rosy. Even today, not all are welcome.

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