

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: LIFE UNCHARTED: PARENTING  
TRANSGENDER, GENDER-CREATIVE AND  
GAY CHILDREN

Jessica Ann Vooris, Doctor of Philosophy, 2016

Dissertation directed by: Professor Katie King, Department of Women's  
Studies

Gender non-conformity is often seen as an indication of a future queer sexuality, but children are thought to be too young to actually be gay or trans. *Life Uncharted: Parenting Transgender, Gender-creative, and Gay Children* seeks to answer questions about what it means to be a "transgender," "gender-creative" or "gay" child, and examines the experiences of families who parent against the norm, raising children who break assumptions about the body, gender, identity and desire. Drawing from media analysis, ethnography of parent blogs and family gender conferences, along with interviews with 28 families, I argue that these parents engage in "anticipation work" as they manage anxiety and uncertainty about their children's behavior, attempt to predict and manage their children's futures, and explain their decisions to others. While television documentaries offer simple narratives that often reify binary expectations of gender, and explain that transgender children are "trapped in the wrong body," my ethnographic research and interviews shows that defining a

transgender or gender-creative or gay child is more complex and it is not always clear how to separate gender expression, identity, and sexuality. As children socially transition at younger ages, when memory is just beginning to form, their relationships to the body and the notion of being "transgender" is in flux. Parents emphasize being comfortable with ambiguity, listening to children and LGBTQ adults, and accepting that it's not always possible to know what the future brings. These children's lives are unfolding and in process, changing our notions of childhood, queerness and transness.

LIFE UNCHARTED: PARENTING TRANSGENDER, GENDER-CREATIVE  
AND GAY CHILDREN

by

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## Dedication

For Fran,

I miss you every day.

Thank-you for always believing in me.

Love, your kiddo.

## Acknowledgements

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and it certainly takes a village to write a dissertation. I am grateful for the constellations of people, relationships, and communities that have sustained me, and this work over the past six years.

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Getting my PhD is part of the “Bucket List” I wrote in my Women’s Circle. This group has provided much support in achieving my academic goals as well as navigating life’s difficulties. Thank-you, Anne O'Connor for your leadership, Ari BenAissa for shared dog-walks, Valerie Brown for writing space, Jo Hurt for your warm hugs, Debra Cook for cups of tea, housing and more, and last but not least, Carson Lee for helping with food in the final weeks of writing.

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# Chapter 1: The Queer Child, Theories and Methodology

## Introduction

There was a media frenzy. Who would have guessed that this chubby-cheeked, Gerber ad-like baby would be at the center? In a widely shared photo, baby Storm held by dad, stares at the camera, brow furrowed, quizzical; almost as if asking, Why so much attention? At birth Storm's family made the decision not to reveal Storm's sex to people outside of the family in order to provide their youngest child a space for "freedom and choice in place of limitation" (Poisson 2011a). Emblazoned on the front page of the *Toronto Star* as "Parents Keep Baby's Gender a Secret," the story soon made international headlines (Poisson 2011a). No one, certainly not Storm's parents, expected the reaction that followed as the story became the most read article in the history of the *Star* and was shared, tweeted, and blogged around the world. While there were supportive comments left by readers, many of the reactions were angry, and commenters and bloggers accused Storm's parents of conducting a social experiment; some even made allegations of child abuse (Poisson 2011b, 2013). Diane Ehrensaft, a gender therapist for transgender and gender-creative children, voiced concern that Storm's parents were making this child a marginalized "other" in a society that highly values gender assignment (Poisson 2011a). Witterick and Stocker's various parenting decisions were also targeted, for example, the fact that they allow their children to choose their own clothes and hairstyles, and the fact that they "unschool" them.<sup>1</sup> This relatively privileged, white, (presumed) heterosexual, married, middle-class family was thus publicly and harshly examined for poor

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<sup>1</sup> A type of homeschooling that does not follow a set curriculum, but instead follows the child's lead/interests, with the idea that the necessary skills will be learned along the way.

parenting practices, framed by the decision not to share their baby's gender (Daemyir 2015).

People care intensely about parenting practices, particularly those involving children's gender, and proper gender socialization, as shown by this story, and the headlines that it garnered, "Canadian mother raising 'genderless' baby" (Davis and James 2011). A medical professional at the Gender Odyssey Conference illustrated this too, recounting her own experience of being interviewed for a documentary on transgender kids while visibly pregnant. The producer insistently interrogated her about the gender of her clearly soon to be born baby. After repeating over and over, "I don't know yet" or "I don't want to know," in exasperation she finally barked, "Puppies! I am having puppies!" (Vooris fieldnotes 2015; Mack "Your Questions" 2015). People invest strongly in knowing the gender of babies, even unborn ones, and the gendering of children begins before birth. Storm's story in particular makes explicit wide-spread social anxieties about gender ambiguity and the persistent desire to be able to place people into either a "boy" or "girl" box.

Even though publics have long been interested in stories of adult gender non-conformity, and stories about trans people in particular (Meyerowitz 2002), the last decade has seen increasing awareness and attention to gender non-conformity in *children* and thus the need to either correct the behavior of trans and gender-creative children or support them in their choices.<sup>2</sup> Whether it is a story about princess boys (Dube 2011), transgender children (Park 2011; Dvorak 2012, Green 2012, Huppke

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, the last couple of years have seen an increase in the publicity around transgender identities, with Laverne Cox and Caityln Jenner becoming house-hold names. In 2014, *Time Magazine* claimed that we have reached a "transgender tipping" point.

2013, Dvorak 2015), controversy over a photo in J.Crew of a mother painting her son's toenails pink (Donaldson James 2011), a father wearing a skirt in support of his son's preferences (Pickert 2012), or a mother supporting her son wearing girl costumes for Halloween (Duron "What Would People Think" 2015), news articles indicate that the social discourse around gender identity in children, and transgender identities in particular, has moved from a primary medical and private family sphere into a public one.

Increasingly children, parents, and professionals are (self) identifying and/or naming children as gay and transgender (Ehrensaft 2011; Brill 2008; Tando 2016), perhaps due to greater societal awareness of LGBTQ<sup>3</sup> identities as well as parenting practices that value children's autonomy. This dissertation, *Life Uncharted: Parenting Transgender, Gender-Creative and Gay Children*, extends our knowledge about how the categories of gender and sexuality are applied to children, and explores how families navigate parenting children who break with normative ideas about bodies, identities, and desire. Ultimately *Life Uncharted* seeks to answer these questions: What does it mean to be a "transgender," "gender-creative,"<sup>4</sup> or "gay" child? And how do parents navigate raising a transgender, gender-creative, or gay child?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

<sup>4</sup> While much of the psychological, medical, and academic literature uses "gender nonconforming" or "gender-variant" I prefer to use the term "gender-creative" for describing children who express their gender in ways that are counter to what is stereotypically expected. It is a more positive, or at least value-neutral description, one that Diane Ehrensaft introduces in *Gender Born, Gender Made*. She explains that it is "a developmental position in which the child transcends the culture's normative definitions of male/female to creatively interweave a sense of gender that comes neither totally from the inside (the body, the psyche), nor totally from the outside (the culture, others' perceptions of the child's gender), but resides somewhere in between." (2011, 5).

<sup>5</sup> While the first question interrogates the categories themselves, the second one will specifically

Drawing from media analysis, ethnographic research on parent blogs and at family gender conferences, along with interviews with 28 families, I argue throughout the dissertation that these parents engage in "anticipation work;" doing so when they manage anxiety and uncertainty about their children's behavior, when they attempt to predict and shift their children's futures, and when they explain their decisions to others. As these children's lives unfold, and their genders develop, shift, and coalesce, they and their families and communities of support are changing and creating, literally before our eyes, new social and cultural understandings of childhood, queerness and transness.

### *Anticipation Work*

One of the key concepts that I use throughout this dissertation is "anticipation work," which I developed from research by science studies scholars Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele E. Clarke. These theorists argue that we live in a time where "anticipation has become a common, lived affect-state of daily life" that "pervades the ways we think about, feel and address our contemporary problems" (248). They explore in particular the anticipatory mode created by modern biomedical advances, for example the networks surrounding sex education and the Gardasil vaccine and accompanying anxiety around girls' sexuality and fertility. Their arguments about the contemporary anticipatory mode are relevant to many aspects of life beyond this particular example, and indeed are made useful to the narratives of parenting transgender, gender-creative, and gay kids whose futures are unknown.

Adams et al write that,

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address parents whose children have been identified by the child, parents or professionals as transgender, gender-creative (or a similar term) or gay.

“Anticipation predicts where there is opportunity now for what was previously impossible... The palpable sense that things could be (all) right if only we anticipate them properly. Notions of global warming, precocious puberty, and genetic telescoping, for example, all work through anticipation to create the sense that the future is inevitable and in some senses already ‘here’ as a site for active intervention. It must not only be engaged, but also be engaged properly and effectively to avoid traumatic outcomes.” (257-258)

The form that anticipation takes today pervades all of our lives, even more so the lives of parents, especially parents of trans, gender-creative, and gay children. Parents take special note when a child breaks with normative gender scripts by wanting to wear a dress or by refusing to wear a dress—two different actions which take on significance based on the child’s sex assigned at birth, and on the shifting meanings of social gender at this historical moment.<sup>6</sup> Currently within the US, children’s toys, clothes, and activities are highly gender segregated<sup>7</sup>, and a child’s desire for something on the “opposite” side of the aisle raises questions. Parents anticipate possible social reactions to their child, and wonder about their gender and sexuality. Historically atypical gendered behavior was assumed to be connected to deviant adult

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<sup>6</sup> As Jo Paoletti points out, children’s clothing has changed significantly in the last century and a half. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century up till age 5 children primarily wore white dresses. Shifting clothing fashions have often reflected changing ideas about children’s gender and sexuality (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Peggy Orenstien explores the extreme “pinkification” of toys in *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*. The highly segregated nature of toys, clothes, etc., is changing in part due to activism by parents such as Orenstein, and by families with trans and gender-creative kids, who all want to see more diverse options for their children. Several companies have started up with gender-neutral clothing lines such as “Princess Awesome” which makes dresses with dinosaurs, math symbols, and trains on them; others are “Handsome in Pink,” “Girls Will Be” and “Free to Be Me.” Recently, Target has begun to organize their toy section by type of toy instead of “boy” and “girl” aisles, a move that has been applauded by some, and harshly criticized by others (Allen 2015; Masunaga 2015). As Jo Paoletti argues, it is clear that marketing is one of the driving forces behind the gender segregation of toys and clothing; so now consumerism supports the trend towards gender-neutral styles, although this process is uneven across brands, locations, etc (2012).



sexuality and gender identity, which brought with it the potential for being the victim of violence and harassment. Sometimes sharing these assumptions, some parents want to make sure that they respond to their children, “properly and effectively to avoid traumatic outcomes” (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 258). My research analyzes in detail how parents navigate this uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, by hunting for information and research about children’s gender, and connecting with other families, and LGBTQ adults.

I also illuminate and evaluate the possibilities for parents to come to a place where they are comfortable with ambiguity, where they are not constantly monitoring what the future may or may not bring. Adams, Murphy, and Clarke ask, “What would it mean to not-anticipate? What strategies of refusal might be imagined?” I would add, how might alternative possibilities of engaging the future be created? Throughout the blogs and interviews I analyze there are moments in which parents refuse to engage in anticipation work and decide instead to focus on the present moment unfolding. New futures un-anticipated then offer more opportunities for exploration.

### Chapter Overview

In the five chapters of this dissertation I 1) map the different fields of knowledge surrounding these children, 2) examine documentaries that educate families and the public on these kids, 3) detail the unfolding temporalities found on parent blogs, and 4) present the complex lived realities reflected in my interviews and ethnographic research.

This introductory chapter explores the concept of the “queer child” through an overview of relevant literature within psychology, queer theory, trans studies, and childhood studies. While the rest of the dissertation involves actual families and children as seen through the eyes of the media and their parents, in this chapter I examine the theoretical frameworks through which we understand gender, sexuality, and the child. For the most part queer theory and trans studies have assumed an adult subject, and have only recently addressed the question of children’s queerness, and/or transgender identities. Psychologists have been paying attention to gender non-conforming children for the last 50 years, with early treatment models dedicated to altering the course of children’s trajectories into adulthood in order to ensure heteronormative, gender-normative outcomes (e.g Green 1987, Zucker 2010). Childhood studies focuses on how the child has been conceptualized through history, and the child as a subject benefits from being read alongside queer theory and trans studies. Ultimately this chapter functions both as a literature review and an intervention and theoretical contribution to these shifting fields.

In Chapter Two, I turn my attention to places where transgender children are most visible—television documentaries, talk show specials, and news articles that educate the public about this phenomenon. The American TV public was first introduced to the idea of transgender children when Barbara Walter interviewed several families for an ABC special *My Secret Self* in 2007. Six year-old Jazz, with her long black hair, and candid smile, charmed audiences as she showed off her mermaid drawings and played on the beach. While this television special and the many that have followed seek to educate the public about these children, they also

produce particular narratives around children’s gender and sexuality, which center primarily on white, middle-class families. I argue that these TV narratives reflect anticipation work by focusing on past and present behavior—particularly adherence to gender norms and threats of harm. Educating viewers on the difference between sex and gender, they ultimately contribute to stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and often rely on “narratives of the extreme.”

Chapter Three introduces the reader to a selection of parent blogs and the children whose lives unfold on them. While these blogs depend upon similar narratives of anticipation about children’s gender and parents’ decisions as do the television documentaries, they also illustrate a much more nuanced view of the children’s lives. They include not only transgender children but also gender-creative, gay, and lesbian children. And, as archives of family life often shared over the course of many years, these blogs also offer some longitudinal data on children’s various gender identities and expression<sup>8</sup> as they grow through childhood, and they function as both autobiographies and community spaces for families and parents. I work with three blogs in particular, *Raising My Rainbow*, *Gendermom*, and *Amelia’s Huffington Post Blog*, and do so in order to examine parents’ anticipation work with terminology and community among LGBTQ adults. In the course of capturing birthday milestones, shopping expeditions, funny conversations, colorful artwork, bathroom dilemmas, difficult discussions, joyful experiences with friends, and many more

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the dissertation I use the word “gender expression” to describe the way that children show their gender preferences in relation to clothing, toys, hair styles, and mannerisms. Gender expression is different than gender identity, which refers to whether one considers themselves to be a boy, girl, or neither. I have chosen to use the word “expression” rather than performance/performativity due to its salience within the scholarly fields that I am working within, including psychology and trans studies, as well as its salience to parents and children.

moments in their children's lives, the bloggers contribute to the social discourse about what it means to be a transgender, gender-creative, or gay child. While exploring their specific family experiences they have reason to connect their stories to those of other parents of trans/gender-creative/gay children as well as to the lives of LGBTQ adults.

Chapter Four analyzes ethnographic data from conferences and interviews with parents. Parents describe the first moments they realized that their child had interests that were different from their peers, the fears and anxieties they have about the future, the complexities of their feelings of grief and loss, and the joy that they feel when connecting with other families and kids. Conferences are places where parents and trans folks, medical providers and mental health professionals, researchers and academics all come together to learn from each other, share studies, research, and experiences, and ultimately create new knowledge about trans and gender-creative children. I argue in this chapter that gender non-conformity is still most often seen as a sign of queer sexuality, but that we are also seeing an increasing awareness of gender as a separate category. With children transitioning at young ages as their memories are first forming, the very meaning of "transgender" is shifting as well.

Finally, the conclusion takes stock of the current climate for transgender, gender-creative, and gay kids. It is a meditation on the multiple temporalities surrounding these kids and their families, on memories that are recounted, and forgotten, and on the unfolding, unraveling, and rewinding that can happen in regards to figuring out a child's gender and/or sexuality. Written in the aftermath of the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting, I describe parents' reactions to this recent event as

well as to the consequences from recent legal legislation and “bathroom bills.”

Ultimately, I return to the story of Storm, updating readers on their family, and how this story of gender diversity and democratic parenting provides a model through which we can think about children’s gender and sexuality.

### Literature Review

#### **The Queer Child: Shifting Fields Come Together**

Questions around children’s gender identity and sexuality are embedded within larger narratives of childhood development and the idea of innocence, as well as adult understandings of sexuality, identity, and queerness. Drawing from different fields to conceptualize the child and queerness together, this review of the literature examines language and identity, the role of developmental theory in creating the category of the “child,” which actors count as transgender experts, and the resources that queer theory’s utopian futures and queer possibilities offer.

The understanding of homosexuality and transgender as separate categories derives from contemporary (20<sup>th</sup> century) descriptions of “gender” and “sexuality” as being ontologically and essentially different from each other (Valentine 2007; Meyerowitz 2002; D’Emilio 1983; Foucault 1978). Such categorization helps us make sense of the world and also shapes that world and what is seen as possible. Allowed access to particular terms and not others, specific gendered terminology may open up possibilities for children but may also foreclose others when essentialist and static. While psychological and academic fields of knowledge might regard sex and gender to be separate, as I will explain in various parts of this dissertation, in relation to children’s sexuality the connection between the two may be much more closely intertwined, and gender expression is often understood as a predictor of future

sexuality.

The word transgender comes from the term “transgenderist,” attributed to Virginia Prince in the 1970s. It was created in order to describe those who desired transition but not necessarily surgery or hormones (Valentine 2007; Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker 2006). In the 1990s it started to be used as a collective term for a variety of adult identities, including cross-dressers, butch lesbians, transsexual men and women, drag kings and queens, moving from being used as a noun to an adjective (Feinberg 1998; Stryker 2006; Valentine 2007). While this umbrella sense of the word has continued, especially in the form of the shortened “trans,” used as an umbrella for the “trans” community, in popular culture the term “transgender” has replaced transsexual.<sup>9</sup> Currently, transgender often refers to individuals who transition or claim one of two particular gender identities that is not the gender they were assigned at birth, ie a transgender man or transgender woman.<sup>10</sup> In the case of children, “transgender” almost always indicates a child who identifies with a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth,<sup>11</sup> while a variety of other labels,

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<sup>9</sup> Readers will note that I mostly use transgender to describe adult trans people, given that this is the most commonly used term for this contemporary moment. Indeed, transsexual, is often considered to be an old-fashioned term, and is even offensive to some given its history and use within the medical profession. There are some who continue to argue for the usefulness of using both “transgender” and “transsexual” where “transsexual” describes the experience of living in a gender different than the one you were assigned at birth, and transgender refers to the umbrella of all those who transgress gender norms in some ways. Julia Serano has supported this distinction, and has several essays that are useful for understanding debates about trans-related terminology (2011, 2014, 2015). In this dissertation, while I have chosen to mostly use the word transgender, or trans, I have used “transsexual” when referring to authors who use it (Serano 2007, Meyerowitz 2002), and when it fits due to the particular historical context I am referencing. It is also important to note that transgender while deemed the most appropriate term for this moment may indeed become outdated itself, as terms shift and change rapidly.

<sup>10</sup> For more discussion of the term transgender see Valentine 2007; Namaste 2000; Ekins and King 2006; Meyerowitz 2002; Serano 2013.

<sup>11</sup> An exception is Stephanie A. Brill and Rachel Pepper’s *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals*, which uses transgender as an umbrella term, addressing the parents of

such as gender-non-conforming, gender-variant, gender-fluid, gender-expansive, gender-bending, gender-creative, tomboy, tomgirl, pink boys, and princess boy, are used now also describe those who *express* their gender differently but still *identify* with the gender they were assigned.<sup>12</sup>

While the child is often defined as a natural category distinct from the category of the adult, and childhood is assumed to be a natural stage of life, “the child” and “childhood,” like sex, gender, and sexuality, are socially constructed and historically contextual phenomena (Corsaro 1997; Jenks 1996; Pufall and Unsworth 2004). When understood in binary opposition to adults, children are seen as not-yet fully formed human beings and inhabit a space of innocence or not-knowing. Because children are presumed to be heterosexual, or to grow up to be heterosexual, they have little agency to name themselves as gay or lesbian as these categories are thought to be adult ones (Stockton 2009). Furthermore, protecting the child from harmful adult

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gender-variant, gender fluid children, and transgender children. They are emphatic about the fact that many children who are gender non-conforming may not continue their cross-gender identification after puberty, and that they may or may not be gay.

<sup>12</sup> As mentioned before, Barbara Ehrensaft coined the term “gender-creative.” Pink boy, tomgirl and princess boy are terms I have seen used by parents, for example Cheryl Kilodavis (Kilodavis 2012) in her book *My Princess Boy* and Sarah Hoffman on her blog ([www.sarahandianhoffman.com](http://www.sarahandianhoffman.com)). One parent I interviewed who called her boy a “pink boy” said that she learned the term at a summer camp they attended for families of kids like hers. The blogger Accepting Dad writes that his boy calls himself a “tomgirl.”

These terms (pink boy/tomgirl/princess boy) are often derived from words that children have used for themselves. Gender-fluid when used as a term for kids most often refers to gender expression but sometimes also refers to gender identities, describing a child who moves between gender identities, from boy to girl and back again.

Organizations like Gender Spectrum use gender-creative, or more recently gender-expansive, while others like Camp Aranu'tiq continue to use the words gender-variant and gender non-conforming. A word that is often used by adults who identify outside the gender binary is “genderqueer,” but this is rarely used for children. One mother (who has an older gay son) used it on her blog—briefly—for her 4 year old, and another, *LabelsareforJars*, uses it to refer to her son who is about to hit puberty. Likewise, queer is rarely used to reference children, although one mother writing about her ten year-old lesbian daughter has titled her blog *Raising Queer Kids*.

subjects like sex and sexuality (especially ‘deviant’ and pathologized ones) is used to bolster anti-gay rhetoric (Levine 2002; Rivers 2010; Halberstam 2011).<sup>13</sup> This logic ensures that LGBTQ adults are seen as a threat to children, and thus children who may grow up to be LGBTQ, or are otherwise a part of LGBTQ communities, are not granted positive models of various sexualities, gender identities, and gender expression.

The idea of childhood innocence also relies on particular racialized and classed understandings of the child as white and middle-class. In fact, there is no singular experience of childhood, only multiple ones, each depending on children’s social and historical locations (Thew 2000). Race, class, sexuality, and resulting contexts of violence influence who is seen as a child and thus granted the right to protection (Corsaro 1997).<sup>14</sup> In the US black children are viewed as less innocent than other children, and are more likely to be treated as adults, because they are assumed to be older than white children of the same age (Goff 2014). Normative ideas of adult gender and sexuality which form the model for childhood development are also based on white, middle-class ideals.

Psychology and socialization theory, two of the dominant frameworks for understanding children, focus in particular on the move from childhood to adulthood,

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<sup>13</sup> Even though homosexuality was removed from the DSM in 1973, the de-facto pathologization of homosexuality continued for many decades afterwards, as seen in the forms of reparative therapies. While these have been condemned by the major psychological societies in the USA, and while gays and lesbians have gained social acceptance and legal support, in many ways homosexuality and transsexuality are still assumed to be deviant and pathological, posing more of a danger to “innocent” children than “normal” heterosexual identities.

<sup>14</sup> Corsaro discusses the role of violence in people’s perceptions of children, and in particular the Bulger case in England where two 10 year-olds were tried as adults for the murder of a two year-old. The children’s violent actions prevented them from being granted the protection of the category of “the child.”



thus the child is conceptualized as always “becoming” or “developing” into a rational adult (Corsaro 1997). This idea of becoming was reflected within the first areas of research on gender-nonconformity in children as psychologists in the 1950s and 1960s sought to prevent adult homosexuality, transsexuality, and transvestitism. Although girls were not completely ignored in this research, as tomboys were noted to be at risk of becoming lesbians, nevertheless, feminine boys received far more attention, perhaps due to general social anxieties around masculinity and the undervaluing of femininity (Bryant 2006). In general the media still tends to pay more attention to trans girls than trans boys, yet gender clinics are starting to see a shift in the ratio of male-assigned children versus female assigned children among their clients (Aitken et al 2015). This shift in who seeks out gender clinic help very likely reflects changing societal norms and awareness of trans identities. Indeed, the most recent media coverage has also included the stories of young trans boys, as I will explore in Chapter Two.

While medical professionals are just starting to acknowledge non-binary identities<sup>15</sup> (J. Olson 2015; Cohen-Kettenis 2015), the bulk of the research within the fields of psychology still continues to produce medicalized narratives that focus on distinct categories and anticipate defined futures. Indeed psychologists in earlier research worked hard to shape and disambiguate children’s multiple trajectories of growth and possible identities (Bryant 2008). Even today’s affirmative narratives sometimes rely on proving that transgender children are just like their peers. For example a study by Kristina Olson (2015) shows that transgender children have

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<sup>15</sup> Non-binary refers to gender identities outside of the gender binary of “boy” or “girl”/“male” or “female.”

consistent gender identity across measures, just like cisgender<sup>16</sup> children.

Contributing to the idea that heterosexual and cisgender identities are always preferred, narratives in advice books aimed at parents of gay children and adults emphasize how to deal with parental grief over their child's identity (Martin et al 2010). Even the work by doctors such as endocrinologists Norman Spack and Johanna Olson-Kennedy, and psychologists like Barbara Ehrensaft and Edgardo Menvielle, who are advocates for transgender and gender-creative children, can contribute to the idea that these children have essential gender identities and physiologies that can be mapped through medical and psychological models.

Barbara Ehrensaft's latest book *The Gender-Creative Child* (2016), which follows *Gender Born, Gender Made* (2011), presents her own taxonomy of kids as "apples" (those we might consider as transgender, who declare "I am a boy" or "I am a girl), "oranges" (for whom it is more about gender expression than gender identity) and "fruit salads" (gender-fluid/non-binary, or in between kids). Recognizing people's reluctance to create new categories, she asks "What about the concern that such categories simply make new boxes to bind children in, rather than giving them open space to wander and explore all the possibilities of gender?" (42) From her developmental psychology perspective, she responds that kids "are in the market for boxes—both for themselves and others" and cautions that we should "beware taking away boxes from children. They like boxes; they just don't want to be boxed into one that's a bad fit. And when it comes to gender, they do best with an ever-expanding variety of them, with fluid boundaries around each" (44).

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<sup>16</sup> non-transgender

It is also true that adults like boxes; they enable us to predict which category a child belongs to, in order to figure out the appropriate care. And indeed the ethical implications of related decisions—among them, social transition for young children, or puberty blockers and hormones for teenagers—motivate many psychological treatment models in an attempt to differentiate children who are transgender from children who are gender-creative (Vrouenraets et al, 2015).

Children with atypical gender expression are often diagnosed by mental health professionals and psychological researchers with Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood (DSM IV) or Gender Dysphoria (DSM 5).<sup>17</sup> The diagnosis of gender dysphoria is contingent on the symptom of discomfort, either with one's gender assigned at birth and/or with one's body. Many research studies have attempted to distinguish between children whose discomfort will persist and thus motivate intervention and transition (the so-called persisters) and those children who will over time instead become comfortable with their gender assigned at birth/and or their body, thus eventually accepting the experience of puberty in their natal sex (so called desisters) (Steensma et al 2013; Cohen Kettenis 2008; Hill and Menvielle et al 2010; Cohen-Kettenis and Klink 2015). A lot of time and energy has been focused on determining which children belong in the “persisters” box or the “desisters” box. Worries about what happens at puberty and the fears of medical decisions as irreversible make this distinction one fraught with social anxieties. Yet, as I explore in Chapter Four, it is not always clear which kids fit in which box. Children's

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<sup>17</sup> The DSM is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders which contains the diagnostic criteria for psychiatric disorders used by mental health professionals. We are currently on the Fifth Edition of the manual, published in 2013. As I will explore in more detail in chapter two, there are many questions about whether gender dysphoria should be a psychological diagnosis or a medical one.

experiences of their gender are varied and can change over time.

One statistic in particular is often used to bolster arguments against transition: the claim that 80 % of *gender nonconforming children* will not be *gender nonconforming* after puberty, sometimes translated as “80 % of *transgender children* will not be *transgender* after puberty.” Such slippage in terminology is common. Indeed, Kristina Olson, and Brynn Tannehill argue in their respective opinion pieces for the *Huffington Post* and *Slate Magazine* (Olson 2016, Tannehill 2016) that we must pay detailed attention to the groups of children these statistics seemingly refer to. Research that has high numbers of “desisters,” (such as the *Sissy Boy Project*, Green 1987) often included *both* gender non-conforming children with no gender dysphoria, along with children who have *severe* gender dysphoria and want to transition. Thus, those kids that we might refer to as “pink boys” and “tomboys” are being mixed together in a group with “transgender” kids. Olson and Tannehill also point out that many of these studies with a high “desister” percentage, include in their “desistence” data children and families that the researchers were unable to contact for the follow-up study. Thus there is no data on what happened to the children who were not contacted and whether their gender dysphoria persisted.

Ethical debates about the best practices for transition continue among medical and mental health professionals (Vrouenraets et al 2015), although gender clinics in general are shifting towards affirmative therapies. Some cultural critics of hormone blockers and cross-gender hormones for teenagers have argued that it is a form of eugenics, or at the very least, a way of creating gender-normative subjects (Jeffreys 2012). Jeffreys and various trans-exclusionary radical feminists posit that transgender

children are gay/lesbian children who are being made into transgender straight people. While caution about medical interventions, especially those that are irreversible,<sup>18</sup> is important, ultimately I argue that ethical questions about hormone treatment are less concerned with the body, and are more focused on a persistent idea of childhood innocence. Both critics and proponents continue to depend on the idea of the child who needs protection to make their case for or against the use of hormones. For those who disagree with medical interventions, the argument is that children's sexuality is being manipulated by adults, while adults who support children's gender identities and expressions rely on protecting children from self-harm and suicide (Vooris 2013; Vrouenraets et al 2015). Thus, less attention is actually given to exploring the various implications for the body, the cognitive and emotional development of the brain, or the social consequences of either giving youth blockers and hormones, or withholding access until the age of majority.

A lack of longitudinal data fuels these debates. Projects like Kristina Olson's Trans Youth Project, the Trans Youth Family Allies (TYFA) study through the University of Arizona, as well as research from the Amsterdam Gender Clinic, the LA Gender Clinic, and the Vancouver Gender Clinic are, and will be, important in bringing clarity about the consequences of various therapies and medical approaches (Olson, Key and Nicholas 2015; Meier forthcoming; Steensma et al 2013, 2015; Cohen-Kettenis and Klink 2015; de Vries et al 2015; J. Olson et al 2015;

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<sup>18</sup> Hormone blockers have been used for years to stop precocious puberty in children, are considered safe, and are reversible. As soon as a child stops using them, they will go through their "natural" or "endogenous" puberty. Cross-gender hormones in contrast, change the body in irreversible ways although the effect of testosterone is much more powerful than estrogen. This is the very reason many doctors advocate for hormone blockers, as it is very hard to make changes after a child has already gone through their endogenous puberty, especially if testosterone has changed their body.

Khatchadourian and Metzger 2014). These medical studies are only a part of the constellation of information and knowledge around children's gender and sexuality, but they are a valuable piece of the picture.

Outside the medical community, parents are creating their own narratives, negotiating understandings of their children's gender identities and expressions using the biomedical, psychological, and physiological narratives provided to them, as well as also using the stories that they forge amongst themselves (Meadow 2010). "[T]hese families tell gender stories" and "are using disciplinary knowledge in undisciplined ways, to forge unique and new identities, both creatively and consciously" (731), says Tey Meadows. It was Meadow's ethnographic research that inspired my own questions and research. She emphasizes the diversity in narratives as told by families themselves and highlights how different locations influence the stories that are told about children's bodies, genders, and sexualities.

I have focused on such ethnographic stories about children's gender to support my arguments in Chapters Three and Four. Childhood scholars William Corsaro and Chris Jenks remind us that children are knowledge creators and active subjects who make sense of their worlds, rather than passive learners. This is a crucial point when thinking about children's abilities to know their own genders, and about the ways they, in turn, are shaping adult understandings of gender and sexuality.

### **Trans Studies: Gender, Sexuality and Bodies**

The question of who controls the narrative about transgender bodies and transgender identities is a central concern of Trans Studies. Yet children's ability to control these narratives themselves is rarely theorized in the field, and the child as a figure is most commonly present in retrospectives and reflections by transgender adults. Dean

Spade for example, questions the idea of a universal “trans childhood,” as his own memories of childhood don’t match with the typical “knew at age 5” narrative (Spade 2006). This lack of attention to a “trans child” within transgender studies is due in part to the newness of transgender children being able to live openly. It is only in the last 10 years in the US that hormone blockers have been made available to transgender children (Boghani 2015) and as more children come out, more scholars within the field of trans studies are paying attention.

Still, even with a focus on adult narratives, work within Trans Studies is critical to understanding narratives around children’s gender and sexuality. Many scholars, including Susan Stryker, Lal Zimman, Joshua Gamson, Julia Serano, Dean Spade, and Joanne Meyerowitz, examine how trans people have been required to adhere to medicalized, pathologized, and (hetero)sexist narratives in order to receive treatment. These narratives are also often based on white, middle-class ideals of gender and sexual norms (as pointed out by Emily Skidmore, 2010, in regard to the Christine Jorgenson case). Yet, as trans people have gained more control of their own narratives—by sharing information with each other, working to remove gender identity disorder in the DSM, and accessing private clinics instead of those attached to hospitals—the role of expert has shifted from doctors to trans people, and the media have begun asking trans people themselves directly for information on the subjective experience of “living as trans” (Gamson 1998, Dame 2013).

Through television and other social media the trans expert educates the general public and other trans people about what it means to be transgender. While this expert has usually been an adult writing an autobiography or being interviewed

on television, increasingly youth use social media to educate others on their experiences and connect with others like themselves on youtube, tumblrs, blogs, and websites (Dame 2016). As transgender children become more visible, their parents are also being viewed as experts alongside their children, and are being featured in television documentaries and news articles (Vooris 2013).

Until recently this media trans subject has been white and middle-class, although this is changing. For example, author Janet Mock and actress Laverne Cox educate the public on their experiences as black trans women and challenge the idea that there is a monolithic “trans story” or “experience.” Still, the majority of folks showcased in the media, or who attend family conferences are white and middle-class; and whiteness plays a role in producing the young and innocent trans child that is worthy of audience sympathy.

Tracing the use of the term transgender in popular discourse and educational articles, Laurel Westbrook (2010) argues that while the term “made more ways of doing gender legitimate” it also “reproduced the idea that all people have a knowable gender” (44). Given that “trans terms and practices change understanding of gender” and can “expand or constrain ways of living gendered lives” (Westbrook, 2010, 45), it is worth querying the ways that the term “transgender” influences our narratives around children’s gender. Trans children and gender-creative children could change our understanding of gender--in particular how gender is attached to a sexed body or at what age one knows one’s gender—and allowing access to adult categories such as gay and trans will open up possibilities for children. Yet other options will be foreclosed by such categorization. As Kathryn Bond Stockton elegantly writes, “What



this specific labeling will mean for children's creative occulting of themselves in metaphors or narrative strings is, of course, anyone's guess. What will get lost through this way of being found?" (Stockton, 19). When knowledge becomes codified in particular ways, previous ways of knowing are forgotten.

When children transition just as they are beginning to have memories, they experience their own gender, gender norms, and the concept of being transgender very differently than those who transition later in life, as I explore in Chapter Four. Furthermore "identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power, always historically determined" (Visweswaran, 1998, 8). Certain language and narratives may constrict, even as they offer freedom.

#### **Queer Theory's Futures and Possibilities**

Queer theory is another important theoretical field for thinking about sexual and gendered identities, in particular for its interventions into medical and popular discourse about sexuality, the family, and the state. Recently queer theory has also considered the temporal differences between adulthood and childhood, and the discourses around the "queer child." Throughout the dissertation, but especially in Chapters Three and Four, I explore the different temporalities that surround transgender, gender-creative, and gay children, and their families.

Foucault wrote that the homosexual became a "species" in the 19th century, as the focus on homosexuality changed from sexual acts, to the body and the self (Foucault, 1976). The growth of gay identities was also aided by the rise of industrialization and the movement of populations from rural areas to more urban ones, which increased individuals' ability to connect with each other (D'Emilio 1993).

While this movement from behavior to identification, allowed for the creation of community and organized activism, it also created policing and surveillance. As communities and identities coalesce, norms are created and self-monitoring occurs (Foucault 1976).

Queer theorists have critiqued parts of the LGBT rights movement for being assimilationist and homonormative and for promising rights through an individual, de-politicized framework, rather than one which challenges the dominant institutions. A politics of homonormativity works to make some subjects worthy, while in turn producing others as undesirable (Warner 1999, Duggan 2004, Cohen 2009). In general, queer theory understands identities to be shifting, partial, and dependent on the context of our everyday lives and the terms that are available to us. It is also critical of heteronormative and homonormative narratives and the valuing of capitalist heterosexual (re)production.

Lee Edelman, a queer negativity theorist, analyzes queerness ultimately as anti-Child, anti-future, and anti-production. Queerness, he argues, insists upon an end to childhood, which is why conservatives want to keep the knowledge of queerness, and queers themselves, away from children. “The sacralization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer” (Edelman 2004, 28). However, within his framework there is no space within which to consider the queerness of children themselves, nor examine the privilege inherent in being able to reject the future. For some, a future has never been guaranteed.

Other queer theorists, while valuing Edelman’s critique of hetero/homonormativity, disagree with his political negation. While Jose Muñoz, Elizabeth

Freeman, and Jack Halberstam critique heteronormativity and homonormativity for celebrating the nuclear family and reproduction, they continue to argue for a queerness of utopia, possibility, and hope that counters normative assumptions about time, linearity, and even reproduction. Muñoz's book, *Cruising Utopia*, calls for a methodology of hope, in which "[q]ueerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2009, 1).

For children we may see that queerness then allows us to think beyond a constrained present to consider multiple futures and ultimately queer children. Muñoz emphasizes the importance of memory and bringing the past into the present as a type of world-making, the creation of a utopian present, not just a utopian future. He also points out that the future may only belong to some children. He acknowledges Edelman's argument that "the future of the child as futurity is different than the future of actual children" but points out that "his framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white" (95). Stockton adds the question, "How does innocence, our default designation for children, cause its own violence? For example how do children of color display that their inclusion in "the future for our children" is partial, even brutal?" (2009, 5). Extend this question further: what types of future do we imagine for trans kids? What kinds of children are seen as worthy? As I explore further in Chapter Two, often the queer (trans) children on television are worthy of protection only when they fit conventional gender norms, are white, and from middle-class families.

Overall, queer theory opens up possibilities for shifting identities, understanding complicated temporalities of the past and future, and, I would argue, is

an important site for debates that theorize children's gender and sexuality. Halberstam writes, drawing on Stockton's queer child, that the emphasis on proper socialization, especially around heterosexuality, reflects that children are always already queer. "If we were all already normative and heterosexual to begin with in our desires, orientations, and modes of being, then presumably we would not need such strict parental guidance to deliver us all to our common destinies of marriage, child rearing, and hetero-production" (Halberstam, 2011, 23). Children's existences are lively, emotional, exploratory, and do not follow the same structures of time that adult lives do, they already exist within a queer time that is different than a heterosexual/ "chrono-normative" time.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than positing the child and queerness as antithetical to each other, the concept of a "queer child" offers a way to disrupt our categories of innocence and heteronormativity and to think about utopian possibilities, as well as to consider what I call fabulous futures.<sup>20</sup> What if children did not have to "grow up" into adult normativity? How can queer possibility create new trajectories for them? While some argue that it is not worthwhile to imagine utopian possibilities when there are day-to-day aspects of living to attend to, I agree with Butler who instead argues that, "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent" (2004, 29). Even as we work to create change in the

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<sup>19</sup> Chrono-normative is a term Elizabeth Freeman uses in *Time Binds*.

<sup>20</sup> Drawing from the tagline on Lori Duron's *Raising My Rainbow*, "Adventures in raising a fabulous, gender-creative son."

present and the now, we must not forget a yet to be known utopia and other ways of living, other possibilities of expression, and emergent identities.

### Conclusion

“Children’s lives are not preparation for the future, they are life itself.”  
Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play*

Most young children are a delight and a challenge to be around. They laugh and run and shriek and cry and bounce and talk and ask questions and touch everything.<sup>21</sup> Children, in their quest to understand the world around them can make seemingly endless inquiries, “why”/“what’s that?”/“why?” and challenge adults to explain aspects and details of the world that adults take for granted. My favorite age is 2-5, when (many) kids are learning language, beginning to categorize things, and are in general engaged and curious about all that is around them. It is an age where something that seems small is treated like the biggest disaster in the world (have you ever cut a sandwich in half and then discovered that the two year old wanted it whole?) and other things that adults consider “big” (like someone changing genders), does not phase them. (Or at least it doesn’t unless adults alert them to the idea that it should). Someone’s transition is simply another new thing to be synthesized into their meaning-making of the world, a new data point to be applied to their understanding of gender, and the people around them.

Children learn from adults but they also teach adults new ways of being and thinking. Recently this is especially true in regard to gender and sexuality as adults listen to and support children who have different ways of expressing their gender and

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<sup>21</sup> I realize that this description assumes a general child who is able-bodied, with access to particular movements, and neurotypical, with the ability to communicate verbally.

sexuality, insistent that dominant theories of sex and gender are not accurate. We are in the midst of a cultural shift, one fraught with tension over what is the right path to take with our children. Supportive parents of trans kids for example argue about the importance of the happiness of their child or of avoiding suicide, while the religious right frets over the value of proper gender roles, agonizes over which bathroom trans children should use, and advocates conversion therapy to fix their minds.

In my dissertation I describe and analyze this current moment in history, when transgender, gender-creative, or gay children can live openly and families are navigating a new kind of parenting. In my analysis of the media, ethnographic research online and at conferences, and interviews with families, I analyze and evaluate the complex realities and temporalities that these parents and children experience, as they navigate public and private spaces, go to school, celebrate family holidays, make legal name changes, debate medical decisions, and more. I argue that parents engage in anticipation work, trying to manage their children's identities and plan for the best possible future, while also trying to live in the present moment. The children's lives I am studying are still unfolding, and their parents, professionals, and researchers are making their best guesses and creating knowledge based on what is currently known, even as the field continues to shift under our feet.

## Chapter 2: Trapped in the Wrong Body: Transgender Children in the Media

### Introduction

Waiting in the dentist's office I pick up the recent issue (Sept 2015) of *Parents Magazine* and randomly flip to a page in the middle where I am surprised to see the photo of a girl that I recognize. Her bright pink hair is not easy to miss. A glance at the caption confirms that it is Avery, a young trans activist: “She was a preschooler when she informed her mom that she was a girl on the inside. Like the other kids pictured, Avery, 7, has made a ‘social transition’ to her preferred gender.” *What is this article?* I wonder, quickly turning the page to find the headline, “Transparenthood: Raising a transgender child isn’t something anyone is prepared for” (O’Connor 2015, 85).

Here I am in the middle of my conservative, small hometown on the Eastern Shore of Maryland looking at a national US parenting magazine that introduces readers to families who are “loving and accepting [their] kids for who they are.” This is a pivotal moment for my research, as it shows how mainstream the topic of transgender children has become, and how the media narratives now emphasize parental support rather than uncertainty and controversy. <sup>22</sup>

This magazine article, along with other news stories focusing on transgender children, is part of a recent surge in media attention to trans lives. *Time Magazine*

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<sup>22</sup> As I have continued working on the dissertation, trans children have continued to gain attention in the media, and the passage of HB 2 in North Carolina has made trans kids an even greater part of public conversation, which I will discuss further in my conclusion.

claims we have reached a “Transgender Tipping Point” in regard to visibility, featuring Laverne Cox on their cover in 2014 (Steinmetz 2014). Caitlyn Jenner, the former Olympic gold medal decathlon athlete who is a part of the Kardashian Clan and who transitioned publicly at age 65 was one of the most searched for names on Google in 2015 (The Year in Search). Her reality tv show *I am Cait* (2015), along with movies like *Tangerine* (2015) and *The Danish Girl* (2015),<sup>23</sup> are also bringing trans lives to the wider public. Transgender children and their families have been highlighted on various news channels and articles, and are the focus of family biographies and memoirs like *Becoming Nicole* (Nutt 2015), *Raising Ryland* (Whittington 2016), *Being Jazz* (Jennings 2016), as well as the fictional movie *About Ray* (2015) starring Elle Fanning.

This chapter in my dissertation examines television documentaries, talk show specials, and news articles from 2007-2015<sup>24</sup> which seek to educate the public on the phenomenon of trans children. Children’s identities are validated through their young age, the strength of their identification with gender norms, and the extreme distress that they exhibited prior to transition. In the narratives around children’s bodies and identities we see anticipation work, which reflects particular understandings of the past to make sense of the present, and involves preparing for the future, while

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<sup>23</sup> *Tangerine* with trans actresses playing the trans characters was more warmly received by people within the LGBTQ community compared to *The Danish Girl*, which brought awareness to a piece of history that many do not know, the story of the first attempted surgical transition, but received criticism for the casting of a cis man, and for presenting femininity as artifice. (Lang 2016; C. Grant 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Media attention has exponentially increased in the last six months with the passage of HB 2 in North Carolina, and there have been several new television specials about trans kids, and Jazz has had her own show on TLC. The proliferation of materials has been beyond my ability to integrate everything within this chapter. However, I will discuss in more detail recent events and legislature like HB 2 in my conclusion.



grappling with the ambiguity of future identities and possibilities (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009). As I will argue throughout this dissertation, anticipation work, in which parents are preparing for the best possible outcome in terms of their children's well-being and happiness, permeates narratives of parenting transgender/gender non-conforming/queer children. While increasing media attention has helped to educate the general public about the possibility of a child being transgender or gender-creative, it has also produced particular narratives that focus on the idea of children being “trapped in the wrong body,” narratives of harm, and identification with binary gender norms.

### Background

The recent attention to trans lives and experiences is perhaps unprecedented in relation to the number of trans individuals whose stories have been highlighted, but this public interest is not new (Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker as quoted in Pasulka 2015). Historian Joanne Meyerowitz's book, *How Sex Changed*, explores the attention to Christine Jorgenson's transition story in 1952 and how this press educated not only the general public about transsexuality, but also gave many trans people the language to describe their condition and seek medical attention. The latter part of the 20th century saw the publication of several memoirs by trans people, and with the popularization of the internet, trans people have been able to connect with each other online, sharing their stories and experiences on sites like Tumblr and Youtube (Dame 2013; 2016). While medical professionals are still given the ultimate authority in validating trans identities, and often act as gate-keepers to medical transition (Spade

2006), trans people are increasingly seen as the experts on the subjective experience of being transgender (Dame 2013, Pasulka 2015).

Yet, this trans subject, until the 1990's, was assumed to be an adult, and it is only in the last couple of decades that the term “transgender” has been applied to children. Five years ago when I started this research there were only a handful of articles in mainstream media outlets addressing transgender children—who were often referred to as gender-variant children, or boys wanting to be girls. Frequently ambivalent in tone about the phenomenon, these articles presented transgender children as highly unusual and treatment as controversial.

One of the first articles was “A Boy’s Life” in 2008, authored by Hanna Rosin for *The Atlantic*. The article follows a family with a child assigned male at birth, who transitions over the course of the investigation. Like many early articles the author uses male pronouns for this child and refers to other trans children by their “natal” gender. Rosin questions whether parents are indulging their children too much, presents different scientific theories, and includes both the perspective of gender-affirming therapists,<sup>25</sup> as well as the work of Kenneth Zucker, who proposes gender-conforming therapies.<sup>26</sup> Published a year after *My Secret Life*, a television special which I discuss in detail later in this chapter, it captures a moment in time when the

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<sup>25</sup> Gender-affirming therapists support a child’s gender expression and gender identity, recommending that parents’ give their children the space to explore what they like in terms of clothing/toys regardless of gender stereotypes, and recommending that parents support a child living in the gender they identify as, regardless of gender assigned at birth. The term “affirming” is used by the therapists themselves, such as Diane Ehrensaft, Eduardo Menvielle, and Jean Malpas, though Rosin does not use this specific term in her essay.

<sup>26</sup> As far as I can tell from his work, Zucker simply considers himself a doctor of gender identity in children. While some call his approach “reparative therapy” or “coercive therapy” or gender-conforming therapy (Tannehill 2016b), he sees it as simply therapy to help children be comfortable in their own skin.

very first families were beginning to affirm their children’s gender identity (publicly), and presents both options—allowing children to transition or forcing them to conform--as fraught and complicated. “In either case, it meant choosing a course on the basis of hazy evidence, and resolving to believe in it” (Rosin 2008). In this articles, as well as other written around the same time, there is no middle ground. There is no mention that parents might consider allowing a child to be gender non-conforming but not transition; the options given are either full transition or enforcing gender normativity.

In the years since those early news stories, a plethora of news and popular media outlets like *CNN*, *The Washington Post*, *the NY Times*, *the Boston Globe*, *the LA Times*, *the Chicago Times*, *MSNBC*, *OWN*, *ABC*, *TLC*, *Parents Magazine*, and *Cosmopolitan* have addressed the phenomenon of trans and gender-variant children (Adler 2014; Baker 2015; Dvorak 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; English 2011; Frosch 2013; Gorman 2012; Green 2012; Lambert 2015; O’Connor 2015; Park 2012; Padawar 2011; Sharp 2014; Swartzapfel 2012). These stories tend to have an affirmative framework, meaning they support a child’s gender identity and present the idea that a child can truly *be* transgender. Being transgender is seen as an inherent, essential identity, probably caused by biology—perhaps pre-natal hormones—though the articles point out that the exact cause is unknown. Children are often described as being trapped in the wrong body, for example, this MSNBC article opens with the line, “It's unclear how many children around the world have felt trapped in their own bodies the way 11-year-old Josie Romero has struggled with hers (Nguyen

2012). Some articles talk about a “boy” brain or a “girl” brain<sup>27</sup> stuck in a “girl” body or “boy” body (Lambert 2015). As I explore in this chapter, while this media attention to transgender children educates the wider public about their experiences and provides the opportunity for other children and parents to access language that can bring clarity to their identities,<sup>28</sup> the media representations also contribute to particular narratives about what it means to be transgender.

The television documentaries curate transgender children’s identities as realities that are consumable and knowable by the viewer. Given the way that the trans child is framed as the “Other,” the intended viewer is presumed to be a cisgender person with no prior knowledge about transgender people, and certainly not transgender children. Film studies scholar Elizabeth Cowie argues that documentary film enables identification with the Other and fulfills our desire to “pull away” the wall and gain knowledge of the Other’s life (Cowie 2011). She also writes that “documentary informs us of the world, offering us identities in the images and stories of other lives that it presents that become fixed as known and knowable through its account and explanation of the world it shows” (88). Children’s identities and lives become known and fixed within the scope of the television documentary and the images function as the truth of their reality.

While these documentaries position parents and children as experts on their experiences, the producers ultimately rely on doctors and mental health professionals

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<sup>27</sup> For a thorough examination and critique of the idea of “male” and “female” brains, see the work of Cordelia Fine who discusses the role of neurosexism in shaping our scientific understanding of gender and the brain in *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences*.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Julie Ross explains on her blog “George.Jessie.Love” that it was the Boston Globe article “Led by the child that knew” which helped her ten year old trans daughter to come out. In my own ethnographic research and interviews with parents, many participants have mentioned that they realized their child might be transgender after watching a television special like 20/20’s *My Secret Self*.

as the experts who can verify the validity of the children's conditions and predict their future trajectories. Additionally, to be considered valid, proper subjects and accurate knowledge-producers parents and children must fit into middle-class, white, heterosexual norms of respectability.

### Anticipation Work

#### **This is Who I Am: The Authenticity of Youth and the Reification of Gender**

The first TV special on transgender children was ABC's 20/20 episode, *My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children*, which aired in 2007. Since then transgender children have been seen on *The Tyra Show*, *Dr. Oz*, *Anderson Cooper's 360*, *Our America with Lisa Ling*, *PBS*, *OWN*, and *TLC*. Sympathetic in their portrayals, these shows serve to educate viewers about trans children. In contrast to critics who argue that children cannot know their gender at such an early age, these television documentaries and talk show specials use the children's young age as a way to authenticate their claims. Children's normative gendered behavior functions as proof that this is who they really are, and is used to justify their parents' decisions.

*My Secret Self* highlighted the story of two trans girls, six year-old Jazz and ten year-old Riley, as well as a 14 year-old trans boy, Chris. Early shows like *My Secret Self* (2007), *Boys will be Girls* (ABC 2011), and *Anderson Cooper: Children and Teens Trapped in the Wrong Body* (CNN 2011) tended to focus more on female-identified children than on male-identified children, which is indicative of society's greater anxiety about femininity in male-assigned children (Bryant 2006). The boys who were included in these show were often teenagers, which also reflects general demographic trends of trans youth, as many trans boys come out at puberty having lived fairly comfortably as tomboys until then (Beemyn and Rankin 2011).

Since those early shows there has been more of a balance, *Becoming Me* (2012) highlights the story of trans boys, Jake (age 5), Jay (age 7), and Dan (age 12), as well as a young trans girl, Jackie (age 7), and two older trans-feminine teens Kaleigh (age 15) and Will (age 17). The UK Channel 4's program *My Transgender Kid* (2015) follows a trans girl, Paddy (age 7), and a trans boy, George (age 8), and in 2015 both *MSNBC* and *CNN* highlighted the stories of trans boys--Jacob (age 5) and Ryland (age 6). Again, this increased attention to trans boys in the media may reflect larger demographic trends, as data from clinics show that mental health and medical professionals are seeing a shift in the ratio of trans boy/girls referred to gender clinics (Aitken et al 2015).

It bears repeating that the idea that a child may be transgender is a new phenomenon, something the media makes clear every time they showcase a story about trans children, calling the parents “pioneers” and emphasizing that the story they are about to share is about one of the youngest transitions ever!<sup>29</sup> The narratives in these shows destabilize the idea that children don’t have a notion of gender till they are older, as the interviewer and/or narrator expresses surprise at how young children exhibit gendered behavior. Emphasis is placed on the fact that children’s first words correct their parents’ pronouns or are statements that negate the gender they were assigned at birth like “I am a boy” or “I am a girl.” There is also a focus on the extreme nature of their “cross” gendered behavior. Part of these documentaries’

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<sup>29</sup> In 2007, Jazz was the youngest kid to be on tv at age six, after transitioning at age five. More recent documentaries in 2014 and 2015 show-case children who transitioned at four and are now five, ie *MSNBC Nightline*’s special on 5 year-old Jacob. Jacob transitioned only three months after his fourth birthday (Lemay 2015).

function is to convince the viewer of the children's self-identification, despite anatomy and fears that it might be a "phase."

Concerns that this gendered behavior might be a phase highlights the way that adults understand childhood and childhood desires as ever-changing, fleeting, and in the process of becoming (Jenks 1997; Corsaro 2004). It is assumed that children will "grow out" of their gender non-conforming behavior, just as children change their tastes, hobbies, and friends. Read any article about transgender children on the internet and you are sure to find a comment from someone who wanted to be a "dog" or a "robot" as a child, and now is happy as a human, which proves that these children will eventually stop "wanting" to be a boy or a girl.

*My Secret Self* addresses the idea of a phase in the introduction, as the narrator announces that this will be a show about transgender children, diagnosed with gender-identity disorder, whose "parents insist it is not a phase." In each of the documentaries, parents discuss the way that their children did not grow out of "this phase" as expected. Jazz's mom says, "A phase is called a phase because it is just that, it ends, and this is not ending, it is just getting stronger," a sentiment echoed by many other parents in various documentaries. Catherine Hyde, mom of a trans girl and regional director of PFLAG, puts forth this argument: "If it is a phase, it will end, if it is not, it won't. We don't make that call, the child makes that call" (*Becoming Me*). This refutes the myth that all gender-non-conforming children are going through a phase, while acknowledging that it *could* be a phase and arguing that the most important thing is to acknowledge children's agency and self-identification.

This question of “growing out of this behavior,” “going through a phase,” or “desisting” as it is referred to by medical professionals, is a fraught debate within public discourse, family circles, and psychology fields, as I outlined in my first chapter. Recently, there have been a number of online opinion pieces debating whether children should be allowed to transition, given that many gender non-conforming children will not grow up to be transgender. Articles like Debra Soh’s “The Transgender Battle Line: Childhood” argue that children should be supported in their gender *non-conforming* behavior, but that transition shouldn’t be considered until they are older (Soh 2015). This is a shift from earlier news articles, where the options were presented as transition versus forcing gender *conforming* behavior. And unlike conservative religious arguments against transgender children’s rights within schools, these more recent debates reflect liberal ideas about the fluidity of gender (Green 2012). In fact, a group of “gender critical” parents who question the “trans child narrative” have recently begun writing online, arguing that transgender children are really gay and lesbian gender-nonconforming children who are being forced to behave as straight transgender subjects (*4th Wave Now* “The Surgical Suite” 2016), an argument that follows radical feminists like Sheila Jeffreys who caution that “transgendering” children is a form of eugenics (Jeffreys 2012). The author of *4th Wave Now* does not go as far as Jeffreys in denying transgender adults’ identities, but argues that transition is a choice that only adults should be allowed to make.<sup>30</sup>

Still, while the larger discourse reflects complex debates about transition, the television documentaries, television talk show specials and news articles primarily present these children’s gender identities as authentic despite what might be seen as

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<sup>30</sup> I examine the narratives found on this blog more closely in my conclusion.



an anatomical mismatch between identity and body. Overall, they destabilize the idea that children don't know their gender until they are older, through presenting the argument that it is NOT a phase, as well as by emphasizing a child's young age, and the strength of their identification to gender norms.

While the children's young age brings up questions about whether they will grow out of this stage of their life, their age is also used to authenticate their claims and to make a case for an inherent gender identity. In the original 20/20 special, *My Secret Life*, Jazz's parents detail the way that she unsnapped her onesies to make a dress at the age of 18 months, a claim verified by home-video images of Jazz as a toddler. Throughout the documentary Barbara Walters emphasizes age, often repeating what a parent has just said about the age that a behavior occurred. For example when Jazz's parents recount how she would say "no, mommy, I am a good girl, not a good boy." Walters repeats, "And that was when she was only 2?" When Riley's parents describe her childhood depression, Walters emphasizes that Riley was only 4. The emphasis on age is used to authenticate their claims to a particular gender identity—how could they have been socialized into this behavior when they are exhibiting it as an infant or toddler?

These television shows contribute to a narrative that enforces the idea that to be truly transgender you must know at a young age, and in so doing make other narratives or transition stories less legitimate.<sup>31</sup> In one of my interviews with the parent of a teenage boy, she said that some people have asked her if she thinks he is

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<sup>31</sup> This is something that Dean Spade critiques in "Mutilating Gender"—the idea that trans people all had a gender non-conforming childhood, or that in order to be truly trans you must have known as a child

really transgender, since he didn't tell her he was a boy at age four or five (Interview 27). A medical professional at Gender Odyssey commented that people question a five year-old's identity because a five year-old is thought to be too young, but then those same people will also question a 15 year-old who comes out because the teenager did not declare a trans identity at five (Gender Odyssey notes, 8/15/15). Thus while the documentaries are educating people that children can be transgender, they also contribute to a narrative where being transgender means having self-knowledge of your gender at an early age.

Along with the verbal proof of their children's identity, parents also provide evidence of their children's interest in particular clothing and toys. There are scenes of the children's rooms as appropriately masculine or feminine to match their gender identity and attention is given to scenes of the children getting dressed, putting on make-up (girls) and having their hair cut (boys). Viewers are assured that these are children who fit the gender norms of their gender identity, and thus can be imagined to grow up into proper gender normative (heterosexual) adults. They may have been born with a particular anatomy, but their gender has been the same in the past, present, and is assumed to continue into the future. Often parents comment that they thought they had a gay child, but that they now know that gender and sexuality are different, and their child is actually transgender, without any discussion of the fact that someone can be transgender and gay (ABC's *My Secret Self*; CNN's *Raising Ryland*).

In a chapter I wrote for *Chasing Rainbows: Exploring Gender-Fluid Parenting Practices*, I argued that while these documentaries complicate ideas about

the connection of sex and gender, they end up reifying gender norms (2013). As Julia Serano writes “because [trans people] are a threat to the categories that enable traditional and oppositional sexism, the images and experiences of trans people are presented in the media in a way that reaffirms, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes” (2007). Trans girls and women in particular are showcased in the markers of femininity—dresses, heels, make-up—in a way that indicates the artificiality of femininity. In many ways these children’s stories uphold mainstream understandings of what it means to be a boy or a girl; regardless of biological anatomy, girls like pink and wear dresses and boys like sports and have short hair.

Interestingly, as journalist Jesse Green points out, sometimes liberal parents have more trouble accepting a transgender child than those who are more conservative because their ideas of gender are more fluid (2012). It can be harder to recognize a transgender child if you are comfortable with a boy liking pink or wearing a dress. While none of the families shown on the media were comfortable with their “boys” wearing dresses, the parents of 6 year-old Ryland thought he was a tomboy, and allowed him wear masculine clothes, bow-ties, and vests from an early age. However, they did keep his hair long, and it wasn’t until he became increasingly distressed that they listened to not only his preferences in regard to clothing and toys, but also how he was identifying himself.

The issue of being complicit with the gender binary is one that has frequently been attached to transgender identities. Transgender people often have been accused of sexism, and there were clashes in the 1970’s between radical transphobic feminists

and transsexual<sup>32</sup> activists over this issue of “reifying the gender binary” (Meyerowitz 2002, Stryker 2006). However, while some transgender people may be misogynistic, they are no more so than non-transgendered people, and often the gendered behavior of public transsexuals such as Christine Jorgenson was shaped by a politics of respectability and the racialized and gendered politics of the time (Meyerowitz 2002, Skidmore 2012).

Thus while I am critical of specific gendered behavior being used as proof of these children’s gender identity, I understand that this framing is part of a larger narrative around transgender identities. Along with social acceptance, trans people’s access to critical medical treatment, such as hormones or surgery to alter the body, has depended on fitting conventional gender norms (Meyerowitz 187, 225). Parents’ decisions to allow their child to transition are more acceptable and relatable to the public if that child’s behavior fits the gender norms of their gender identity. And, as pointed out above, the media has a role in shaping a narrative that emphasizes binary gender expressions and validates parents’ decisions based on how closely their children fit social gender norms.

Yet, it is possible to narrative the lives of transgender children in a more complicated fashion, as shown by the documentary *Becoming Me* (2012) made by the media company *In the Life*. *Becoming Me* does not include a visible interviewer, as many of the other news stories and TV documentaries do, nor does it include doctors

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<sup>32</sup> I use transsexual here purposefully due to the salience of the word transsexual in the 1970s. Transgender was not popularized until the 1990s within trans communities, and wasn’t known to the general public until the last decade.

as experts, instead focusing on the families and their children.<sup>33</sup> While many of the narratives mirror those in the other documentaries, especially in regard to children's identification with particular clothes, hair-styles and toys, the details of each story are more nuanced and diverse than what is typically showcased in the media. The family of Jake, a five-year old biracial trans boy, point out that his identification as a boy does not depend on his choice of toys. His male identity does not preclude him playing with his sister's toys, nor do they expect him to act a certain way to fit into the category of "boy." His mom says, "Our approach is to not box him in. There are boys who like dolls and there are girls who like boy things. He is a kid, let's let him be a kid." This documentary also includes a kid who does not identify as transgender, but rather as "just a boy"—an identification that I discuss more in detail in Chapter 4.

*Becoming Me* also presents gender outside of a binary model, and suggests that gender non-conformity and being transgender looks different for everyone. One of the teenagers, Will, tried taking estrogen and then decided it wasn't the right choice for her. She explains, "Not everyone on this journey is going to end up with a sex change...trans means a lot of things." Another mother tells viewers that for her daughter surgery is necessary, but that not everyone struggles with physical gender dysphoria.<sup>34</sup> Finally, *Becoming Me* also includes the story of Joel, who was gender

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<sup>33</sup> It does include an expert alongside the families, Joel Baum from the organization Gender Spectrum. But he is not a medical expert, he is a parent and advocate.

<sup>34</sup> Gender dysphoria refers to discomfort and distress related to an incongruence with how a person feels about the way they experience their gender, and the physical state of their body, and/or the way that society and people treat them based on how they appear. A person can experience physical/genital dysphoria, as well as social dysphoria, which might arise from being called the wrong name or pronoun. This is a medical term, which was a part of the Gender Identity Disorder Diagnosis, and is now the name of the diagnosis itself. The American Psychiatric Association explains in a hand-out on the diagnosis that "gender nonconformity is not in itself a mental disorder. The critical element of gender dysphoria is the presence of clinically significant distress associated with the condition." It is often used by trans people, as well as their families as a way to describe discomfort and distress around

non-conforming as a child, but identities as a gay man now, which shows that childhood gendered behavior can lead to multiple adult possibilities.

While all of the documentaries, from *My Secret Self* to *My Transgender Kid* are primarily focused on parents' accounts of the children, they also include the children's perspectives. Each child is offered the space to explain their experience and reality, even as the documentary functions to order that reality. Noticeably, more recent documentaries such as *My Transgender Kid* and short specials such as *Raising Ryland* (CNN 2015) and *Life as a 5 year old Transgender Kid* (MSNBC 2015) place more emphasis on self-identity: "I am a boy" or "I am a girl" than on gendered behavior. Moments where a child drew a self-portrait of themselves or declared that God made a mistake are highlighted more than children's clothing and toy choices, which may reflect a shift towards a narrative which emphasizes the difference between gender identity and gender expression. In the BBC documentary, *My Transgender Kid*, seven year old Paddy corrects the interviewer who asks her if it is a secret that she wants to be a girl, saying "I don't want to be a girl. I AM a girl." Paddy is also emphatic in another part of the documentary that she hasn't transitioned from boy to girl, declaring "I was *never* a boy."

### **Trapped In The Wrong Body**

Along with gendered behavior, children's bodies are also central to the television documentaries, especially in relation to the medical and psychological issues that parents and children struggle with. Past traumas are examined along with future

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the body and social gender norms. Many parents that I interviewed used the word to describe their children's relationship to their body, which I will explore further in Chapter 4.

possibilities around hormones and surgery. Explanation of the children's distressed past is the reasoning for parents' present decisions, alongside attempts to prevent a negative future. Distress is still part of the gender dysphoria diagnosis, which means that for children to receive treatment and diagnosis they must reach a particular level of distress.

Furthermore, on each of these documentaries, with the exception of *Becoming Me*, it is a mental health and/or medical professional who defines transgender, and/or gender identity disorder for the audience. Doctors are thus presented as the ultimate experts on trans children's identities. Facing opposition to their declarations of a gender identity and having been told that their body/biology is the ultimate marker of their gender; many of the children have reacted in extreme ways with self-harm and/or suicidal ideation. Hailey's mother, interviewed by Lisa Ling for the *Our America* special, describes how her daughter ran into a busy street, and afterwards said she was trying to die. On *ABC's My Secret Self* Riley's mother recounts Riley saying that she wished that she didn't exist because then she would not be dealing with her pain, but her mommy wouldn't miss her.

Expressions of extreme psychological pain, the threat of death, depressed children—these are all shocking, and worthy of documentation. While it is essential that we recognize these children's realities,<sup>35</sup> it is equally essential that we understand how emphasizing the extreme makes invisible children who do not feel an urgent need to change their bodies. Furthermore, I propose that this narrative of the extreme

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<sup>35</sup> This is especially important in light of research that shows that having an accepting family drastically reduces rates of self-harm and suicide (Ryan et al 2010). Self-harm and suicide are also part of many family stories, and I do not want that to be erased or made light of.

indicates that children's ability to make choices about their gender identity is only justified by the threat of a death.

I am going to turn now from the television documentaries to focus briefly on a particular story of suicide that gained a lot of media attention—first online, through Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter, and finally within mainstream media as it highlights some of the complexities of the suicide narrative in regards to trans youth. In December 2014, a white 17 year-old trans girl, Leelah Alcorn, committed suicide by walking into busy highway traffic, leaving behind a note on Tumblr which was shared hundreds of thousands of times, despite her parents trying to delete the original post. In the note she writes about the reparative therapy her parents made her go to, as well as her feeling that there was no hope for her as she wouldn't be able to transition until adulthood. Urging readers to make her death “mean something,” she implores them to “fix society.” (Mohney 2014; Kellaway 2015). While her story raised attention to the lives of trans youth in the US and spurred activism in regards to ending reparative therapy for minors, I am concerned about the way that her story, as well as media attention to subsequent trans suicides, contributes to narratives which inextricably link trans teenagers with narratives of death. It is hard for trans youth to see a future for themselves when the narratives they have access to continually present the view that life is not possible for them. And it must be difficult for trans teens in small, close-knit communities to continually be presented with the deaths of their peers.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, memorializing those who are gone can glorify their suicide and the idea that only through death can trans lives “mean something.”

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<sup>36</sup> In the spring following Leelah Alcorn's death, four trans teens committed suicide in San Diego over a span of a few months (Abeni 2015).



Teen activist Skylar Lee addresses this in his<sup>37</sup> own suicide note: “Don’t turn my name into a hashtag. Don’t treat this like glory suicide-fest. I am not killing myself because I am trans and queer” (Brook 2015). In order to avoid his story becoming a viral sensation on Tumblr his family chose to delete his suicide note (which is a different reasoning than Leelah’s parents who denied her trans identity). In some ways I think this is unfortunate because in his note, which I was able to access through internet archives,<sup>38</sup> Skylar offered a complex analysis of the reasons for his death, and the problems he had faced as a trans teen of color. In particular he linked his parents’ struggle with accepting him to the effects of colonialism, imperialism, and the pressures of being in immigrant communities, and emphasized that he didn’t want his story to contribute to racist narratives of homophobia within Pacific-Islander communities. This is an important story and perspective to tell. However, I also understand his wish to not be a part of the dominant narrative that connects trans youth to death and suicide.

In response the proliferation of suicides, trans adults have attempted to offer hope to youth about their futures. For example, Red Durkin started the hashtag, #RealLiveTransAdult in order to let youth know that there are transgender adults who are alive and surviving, and in many cases thriving (Shalby 2014). Some of the

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<sup>37</sup> I use “he” pronouns as these are the most commonly used across news articles as well as within Lee’s obituary (Cress Funeral Service 2015). A photograph of Skylar Lee (Dennison 2015) with a sign listing his identities and pronouns gives evidence that he used both “he” and “them,” and identified as both a “trans boy” and “???”.

<sup>38</sup> I initially wrote this in November 2015, when a search on tumblr for “Skylar Lee” gave me access to his original tumblr. However, in summer 2016, it is no longer online. And while it is possible to sometimes trace the ever-vanishing links, and ephemera of the internet through archival sites like The Wayback Machine, without an original link, I am unable to find my way back to his note. However, a news article on *Transgender Planet* includes part of an essay that Skylar Lee wrote, which gives a sense of his critical thinking around the intersections of race and LGBTQ identities (Dennison 2015).

people used the hashtag to emphasize that they transitioned as an adult, in order to push back against the privileging of early, pre-puberty transitions. A year and a half after the hashtag was created, it is still being used on Twitter by trans adults tweeting about their transition, and their experiences as trans people (for example Glaze 2016).

Other activists and writers have addressed the attention to Leelah Alcorn's story, and examine in particular the role of whiteness in creating trans martyrs and heroes. In the essay "Who Gets to be Human in Death: Leelah Alcorn and Trans Legacies" *BlackGirlDangerous* contributor Eunbyul Lee critiques the disproportionate attention to white trans lives and deaths, placing it within a history of white-washing LGBTQ stories, arguing that "Particularly in the face of the senseless murders and subsequent erasure of trans people of color, this insidious pattern of constructing white individuals into emblems and heroes is anything but harmless" (2015). David Valentine, who conducted ethnographic work of trans communities in New York in the 90s, writes that the narratives of violence against trans women of color often focus on extreme violence like murder and physical assault and do not address the micro-aggressions and systemic violence that these women face, not only because of their transgender identity but also because of class, race, and poverty. Similarly Leelah Alcorn's story places the focus on her parents and conversion therapy, without acknowledging that many trans teens struggle even when accepted by their parents because of the way their identities are delegitimized in larger society. Finally, the attention on white trans youth erases the violence that many trans youth of color face and their experiences of homelessness, sexual violence, and poverty. Again, while it is important to pay attention to stories of violence, suicide, and harm,

we also need to tell complex stories, and acknowledge different possibilities of survival, resistance, and success.

### **Narratives of the Extreme and Disability**

Returning to the television documentaries and specials, I want to examine more closely the narratives of the extreme and narratives of disability that are created around transgender children's lives and bodies. Meyerowitz describes the way that increasing information and press about transsexuals in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave people the language to describe their desires and let them know that they were not alone. Fraught with issues of control and authority, trans people learned to tell the stories that the doctors wanted to hear, making sure they fit diagnostic categories, presenting a respectable demeanor and proper femininity or masculinity, and emphasizing the urgency of surgery by discussing suicide (Meyerowitz 2002, Spade 2006). In the television narratives around these children and their parents' decisions, a similar dynamic is occurring—the television documentary helps educate others about transgender children's experiences, but also emphasizes a particular urgency around transition that is not always generalizable. Again, these narratives not only educate the public but also socialize these children into the proper role of being “transgender” (Zimman 2009).

Media representations use the frameworks of “trapped in the wrong body” and having a “birth defect” to explain these children's experiences.<sup>39</sup> Gender is

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<sup>39</sup> At the Debilitating Queerness Queer Studies Symposium held at UMD in 2013, an audience member who listened to my presentation on narratives of disability and transgender children commented that he had not heard this narrative of a “birth defect” being applied to adult trans people, and that it was interesting to hear that it was being used for children. It is a statement that I heard more in documentaries/news articles around 2011 than now, as it seems “trapped in the wrong body” or “born with a girl body” or “born with a boy body” is more the norm today.

understood to be linked to the brain, rather than to one's physical sexual anatomy, and is seen as inherent. "'Trapped in the wrong body' is a blanket statement that makes trans\* people's varying journeys and narratives palatable to the masses," writes author Janet Mock (2012). In her 1983 essay, "The Empire Strikes Back" Sandy Stone argues that "In fact, 'wrong body' has come, virtually by default, to define the syndrome...we need a deeper analytical language for transsexual theory, one which allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities which have already so productively informed and enriched feminist theory" (231, 2006). In the three decades since Stone's essay was written, the narrative of "trapped in the wrong body" continues to dominate the discourse around transgender lives, even as trans scholars continue to argue against this particular framing.

Transhumanist scholar Eva Hayward suggests "transpositions" as a way of understanding that transitioning is always situational and particular to each individual. In her essay "Spider City Sex," she proposes that rather than focusing on the idea of being in the wrong-body transsexuals focus on the "trapped" part of the "trapped in the wrong body" metaphor. This describes the feeling of dysmorphia and the sense of being trapped by societal pressures but can also be the opening of possibilities. Using the metaphor of a spider web, she argues that one can get caught in spider web, but that a web is also something that can be re-spun and re-made.

Unfortunately counter-narratives like Stone and Hayward's have not made it into mainstream discussions of transgender identity. Children themselves learn to use the dominant narratives like "trapped in the wrong body" to explain their identities. Eight year-old Josie talks to Tyra Banks about her "birth defect" (CW 2010). Jazz

explains that she is a girl with a girl brain and a boy body (ABC 2007; Jennings and Herthel 2014). While this is a simple way to describe the concept of transgender, which can be helpful when explaining it to really young kids (Tando 2016), it also reinforces the idea that a body with a penis is a boy body and a body with a vagina is a girl body. Trans activists and theorists are working to complicate this narrative. For example, a comic about 11 year-old trans girl Stephe created by Sophie Labelle pushes against this cissexist assumption, by arguing that girls have all kinds of bodies. A drawing of Stephe is accompanied by the text “I am a girl. My body is mine. Therefore I have a girl’s body.” (See Appendix 2. Figure 1.) “Trapped in the wrong body” contributes to a narrative of “correct” bodies and “wrong” bodies which over-simplifies the relationships that trans people have with their bodies and contributes to binary ideas of gender and sex. This statement along with “having a birth defect” also create links to disability in ways that assume that a cisgender body is an able-body and that a transgender body is a disabled body, which must be fixed through surgery and hormones.

The majority of the children shown within the documentaries are children without physical disabilities, although there are conversations about mental illness such as anxiety, depression and distress. One child, Tammy in the CNN documentary has apraxia—a brain disorder which affects speech-- and her first statements of being a girl were in American Sign Language (ASL), however for the most part, disability is absent from these stories. Studies show that many children who are

transgender are also diagnosed on the autism spectrum (de Vries et al 2010; Lindberg et al 2015), however, I have not seen any autistic trans kids within media stories.<sup>40</sup> There is one family showcased in the TV media who have a six year-old trans boy who is deaf--The Whittington family. Their story first went viral when they shared a personal family video on Youtube (The Whittington Family) and then CNN produced a mini-documentary about them (2015). Recently Ryland's mother published a memoir about his transition (Whittington 2016). Their story is particularly interesting for thinking about intersections of disability and transgender identity. While his parents express fear about both identities, it is clear through their choice of cochlear implants, the emphasis on Ryland being able to be mainstreamed in school, and statements about their success in getting him to speak verbally (all statements made in the CNN video) that they see his deafness as an impairment to be overcome, rather than as an identity.

On the media specials following their family and their own Youtube video there is no mention of ASL, and their fears of him never "speaking" or "communicating" privilege verbal speech. In the much more detailed family memoir of Ryland's transition, his mom mentions learning ASL before his surgery for the implants. However, there is also discussion about their fears of ASL impeding speech, so they have opted to focus on verbal communication over signing (Whittington 2016, 67). When Ryland is able to attend a mainstream school, his mother writes with relief, "Finally, we are a normal family" (85).

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<sup>40</sup> There is one blog, *Papasudasi's Blog* which is included in my overall blog sample in Chapter Three, who talks about her autistic trans daughter, and the challenges that come with navigating gender identity, waiting for hormones, etc., with a child who is not neurotypical.

Although they indicate in the memoir that they are part of a community of other families with deaf and hard of hearing children, the insistence on verbal speech, their emphasis on fears about him living in silence, and other of their statements demonstrate that they have embraced his trans identity in a different way than his deafness. Alison Kafer's *Queer, Feminist, Crip* describes the media attention to the story of a Deaf lesbian couple who intentionally try to conceive a deaf child by using a known donor who is Deaf. This family received a lot of criticism about this decision to have a child with a disability, criticism which also reflected homophobia, as Deaf heterosexual couples with Deaf children are not judged as harshly when they conceive "naturally." Kafer writes that "The case of the Deaf lesbians acquired the mileage that it did because of its evocation of a queer disabled future; heterosexism and ableism intertwine, each feeding off and supporting the other" (77). In the Whittington case, we also see the intertwining of fears based in heterosexism and ableism.

In Whittington's memoir she describes her fears about the future—first when it became clear that Ryland couldn't hear, and then when he became increasingly defiant about his masculine gender expression. When Ryland's parents first explore the possibility that he might be transgender, his mother is upset that he would be dealing with being different in two distinct ways, and that such complications might affect his ability to be successful. Her research makes her feel more relaxed about his future, but it is clear that she has concluded that while deafness needs to be fixed, his gender identity does not. In describing his first day of school, she writes of the

emotional magnitude of witnessing her “once-deaf child, who can now speak and hear” starting his first day of school as a boy.

Ryland himself seems to be proud about both aspects of his identity. He states, “it is cool that I have two kind of things. My cochlear implants and I am transgender” (CNN 2015). Again however, this emphasis on the cochlear implants over being deaf suggests that he is not being raised with an awareness of Deaf culture. This case brings up complex questions about the intersections of trans identities, disabilities, and ableism.

### **Whiteness, Respectability and the Category of Expert**

In the documentaries, while stories of distress are first narrated by parents, and the children explain their understanding of their bodies, medical experts are brought in to verify these stories. In the *20/20* special *Boys will be Girls* (ABC 2011), Dr. Johanna Olson from the Children’s Hospital in L.A, points out the necessity for parents to support their children and to recognize that gender non-conformity looks different for everyone. She argues “there are some kids who absolutely cannot function unless they socially transition” and asks parents “would you rather have a dead son than an alive daughter” because “these kids have a suicidal rate that is astronomical.” Again, we see the way that the suicide narrative is ubiquitous in conversations about trans children, and that parents are assumed to only support their kids because of the threat of death—few parents would choose a dead child over another option, no matter how undesirable.

In contrast to Dr. Olson and Dr. Spack, who help children receive hormone blockers to delay puberty and then take hormones for the gender they identify with, Dr. Zucker, a Canadian doctor supports reparative therapy for children, arguing that



most children can be taught how to conform to proper gender roles. His research concludes that the depression and anxiety that these children feel are from underlying psychological problems and that gender identity disorder is a symptom, rather than the other way around (Zucker and Wood 2010). As I outlined in the introduction to this chapter, while Zucker is quoted in some of the first news articles on transgender children, he has been absent from recent media representations— pointing to ways that the film-makers and reporters are invested in finding medical experts that can back up the experiences of parents and children and support these families’ choices.<sup>41</sup> However, while the children are presented as “normal” within the documentaries, the inclusion of their diagnosis of gender identity disorder (for documentaries prior to 2011), discussion of therapists, and the use of medical experts means that their identities are still pathologized and medicalized.

Furthermore, it is Dr. Zucker, not Dr. Spack or Dr. Olson who was part of the committee that rewrote the GIDC (gender identity disorder of childhood) diagnosis for the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association (2013). This new edition changed the diagnosis of “Gender Identity Disorder,” which focused on the mismatch between gender identity and the sexed body to “Gender Dysphoria” which refers to the distress and incongruence that many trans people experience with their gender identity and their sexed bodies. In addition, “Gender Dysphoria” has been removed from the

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<sup>41</sup> Recently, the Center for Addiction and Mental Health where Zucker led a gender identity clinic was shut down for review, and Zucker has been removed from the center, a decision that has been cheered by those who support affirmative therapies for these kids (Ford 2015, Tannehill 2016). Others feel that his work is being misunderstood and mis-represented during the external review of the clinic, and that the center was pressured by trans activists to fire him (Singal 2016).

sexual disorders section of the updated DSM (American Psychiatric Association 2013). While this change is a step in the right direction because it removes “disorder” from the name and instead focuses on the distress that people feel, it still remains a psychological diagnosis.<sup>42</sup>

Although this new diagnosis is not discussed much in the documentaries—rather children are labeled as transgender—as I detailed above, children’s distress about their bodies is referenced, and parents share details about their children’s genitals. Several of the documentaries reference instances of children trying to cut off their body parts, or hurting their genitals, and it is assumed that this is a part of a transgender child’s experience with their body. However, as my interviews with parents, as well as conversations with parents at conferences have shown, not all transgender children experience genital dysphoria, and their relationships with their bodies are more complex than the media narratives. Due to the focus on distress about the body and stories of trying to cut the genitals, body hatred and disgust becomes part of how the general public understands what it means to be a transgender child. As I explain in more detail in Chapter Four, this means that some parents do not recognize their children’s identities at first because they do not fit this particular profile of a trans kid.

While keeping some kind of diagnosis in place may be preferable because it allows individuals to access care, there are professionals such as Boston Medical Center’s endocrinologist Dr. Norman Spack who argue that gender fluidity should be considered a medical, rather than a psychological diagnosis (Swartzapfel 2012).

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<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed analysis and explanation of the changes see Winters 2012.

Given the current landscape of transgender health-care, and public understanding of trans identities, parents must manage these medical/psychological narratives as they work to not only explain their children's identities but also plan for a future in which their children have access to hormones and surgery if they so desire them.<sup>43</sup>

Discussions around trans children center on each individual family's experience, without situating their lives within larger historical narratives of transgender people's lives and societal pressures around gender conformity. Class and race delegitimize particular youth's ability to access what I call the category of innocence, while parents' ability to access the category of expert and fully understand their children's situation is based on heteronormative parenthood.

As with many other groups of people considered deviant, transgender people have worked to create a respectable image of themselves, one which has often relied on white, middle-class norms of respectability (Skidmore 2010). Within the media on transgender children we see similar narratives of respectability, as families are introduced as "normal, American families" (ABC's *My Secret Self*), "ordinary" (OWN's *I Am Jazz*), and are often white, heterosexual, and middle-class. When a family does not fit this normative model, there is increased skepticism and critique of parents' decisions around their children's transition.

CNN's *Transgender Children: A Painful Quest to be Who They Are* (2011) highlights the story of Tammy, an 11 year-old trans girl, who was briefly mentioned earlier. Tammy was adopted by her parents Debra Moreno and Pauline Lobel when she was a toddler. She was originally very withdrawn. Living with apraxia—which affected her speech--she learned sign language, and the first thing she signed was "I

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<sup>43</sup> For more on parents' narratives about their children's gender identities, see Meadow 2011.

am a girl.” While her parents initially thought she was confused about the signs, she insisted that she was a girl, and transitioned at age eight. According to the article that accompanies the video clip, “They have been accused of terrible parenting by friends, family, and others” and Moreno said people think “that we're pushing her to do this. I'm a lesbian. My partner is a lesbian. That suddenly falls into the fold: 'Oh, you want her to be part of the lifestyle you guys live” (Park 2011). This is reflected in the comments, as people argue that Tammy is being forced to live as a girl because she is growing up with lesbians and lacks a father figure, ignoring the fact that the couple have two older sons who are male identified.

**lamponhill** said, “Funny that this boy who thinks he is a girl has two moms! Has anyone thought that he identifies with women because he doesn't have a male to identify with? Sad that he doesn't have a father.”

**gimmetheax** responded, “Funny that some commenters haven't noticed that he has two brothers who are very ‘masculine’ and who, coincidentally, ALSO have two moms....” (Park 2011).

Parents’ proper guidance on gender roles is contingent on their position as heteronormative parents. Heterosexual parents are seen as neutral, whereas Moreno and Lobel’s sexuality is considered to be a possible cause of Tammy’s gender “deviance.” Joshua Gamson’s “Talking Freaks: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families on Daytime Talk TV” discusses the way that familial acceptance of LGBT family members hinges on normalizing discourses (2001). On talk shows, families are often called on to accept and love their gay and lesbian adult offspring, but bisexuals and trans people are portrayed as freakish and monstrous. Described as selfish, they are outside of the normative, conservative family model, and therefore are undeserving of acceptance.

This narrative of the “freak” is also part of the television documentaries, and is deflected from the children through a normalizing narrative that empathizes their youth and innocence. Barbara Walters states that, “most transgender youth live in the shadows, hiding from a world that sees them as freaks” before presenting us with families that do support their children, emphasizing how normal these families and children are. Paddy’s dad from the Channel 4’s *My Transgender Kid* states, “she is not a freak, she is a normal girl with different plumbing.” As the children’s age is used to verify their identity claims, their age is also emphasized in order to show that they are “just children” who deserve love, care, and protection. Again, as I explained earlier, part of this normalizing discourse also depends on an adherence to the gender binary.

With the exception of *My Transgender Kid* and the documentary *Trans*,<sup>44</sup> overall in the media children are not showcased next to trans adults, and there is a distancing from trans adult narratives.<sup>45</sup> Other trans people are often only mentioned in regards to fears that parents held because of their stereotyped ideas of trans people being “prostitutes” or their fears of violence for their child. And in documentaries that discuss blockers and cross-sex hormones, the ability for children to appear as appropriately feminine or masculine is used as a reason for the importance of blockers, in a way that often focuses on gender normativity and aesthetics rather than

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<sup>44</sup> *Trans* showcases the stories of several trans adults, and includes the story of a young child, Haley, as well. *My Transgender Kid* includes a trans man who forms a mentoring relationship with eight year-old George.

<sup>45</sup> In contrast, many of the parents that I interviewed talked about the importance of having adult trans friends, and knowing people who transitioned at different ages.

transphobia and structural violence. Their young age becomes a reason for protecting them and supporting their identities.

Emily Manuel argues that transgender children are treated more sympathetically than adult trans people because they are seen as innocent, natural, and non-sexual, yet “[w]hile it’s wonderful to see trans children treated as actual living breathing human beings, and more positive representations will definitely help those children gain access to blockers and hormones, what happens when they grow up?” (2011). Furthermore, raced and classed inequalities are un-addressed in these documentaries which focus mostly on white, middle-class families. As Stockton points out, “children, as an idea, are likely to be both white and middle-class. It is a privilege to need to be protected--and to be sheltered--and thus to have a childhood” (2009 31).

Most of the early documentaries focus on white families, with the exception of the one about Mario, a 14 year-old black trans boy whose mother was interviewed by CNN for their transgender children’s special in 2011.<sup>46</sup> It is only recently (2015-2016) that others families of color are showcased on TV. For example, the family of Penelope, an 8 year old trans boy (Cosmopolitan.com 2015). Penelope’s family lives in Brooklyn, and the conversations around private-school tuition, only eating organic food, the type of apartment that they live in, may be indications of a middle-class status. This video is notable because it is one of the first showcasing a black family

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<sup>46</sup> It is also worth noting that the author of *My Princess Boy*, who made several media appearances, is black and her book features a black child, however, none of the characters have facial features, which creates a strange disconnect between the reader and the characters. It also focuses primarily on the mother’s distress and concern about teasing, and while it is celebratory about the princess boy’s gender expression by the end of the book, presents gender non-conformity as something that will always get negative reactions.

who is supportive of their child, and like the interview with Mario’s mother, challenges stereotypes that black parents are more likely to be homophobic than white parents.

The conversation about gender is also nuanced, and focuses primarily on the fact that Penelope is a boy because he identifies as a boy; it is about identity, not expression. Notably he hasn’t changed his name from “Penelope” which is traditionally a girl’s name, though he does go by the nick-name “Penel.” His mother comments about the importance of recognizing “gender constructs” and having conversations about gender, and states that no matter what Penelope decides at puberty in regards to his body, he is a boy, and his body won’t change that. This is one of the few videos where I have seen a clear affirmation of diverse body types, and the idea that there are multiple paths through transition.

There has also been a short video produced by the Trans United Fund showcasing a racially diverse group of mothers (2016) which relies heavily on a narrative of protection, and the specter of suicide. Created in response to “bathroom bills” like HB 2 in North Carolina, it is one of few media representations with parents of color. The message of “Meet My Child” seems to be one of unity—we all love our trans child—and does not address any racial differences that might be found between the families (Trans United Fund 2016). The video can be understood in relation to other assimilation politics of diversity—focusing on representational inclusion—rather than a radical politics which seeks to change the systemic structures of difference and hierarchy (Cohen 2009; 240).

One of the mothers showcased in the Trans United Fund also wrote an op ed for *The Advocate*, which is one of the few places that I have seen the specific needs of trans kids of color addressed. Here we see an acknowledgement of how black children are not allowed to access the category of innocence, and the fact that trans girls of color are dealing with both transphobia and racism:

We know there has been much progress fighting racism in our country, but far too many people still look at young black boys and see danger instead of children. And my daughter, Trinity, who is trans, lives at an intersection of prejudice that is terrifying, and with good reason. (Neal 2016)

She continues by saying that:

Too often our families and churches, the very institutions built to sustain and protect us, instead tell us that we must choose between our blackness and our gender identity and/or sexuality. Despite the pressure to choose one part of our identity at the expense of another, the broader world makes no such distinction. In fact, it is trans people of color who disproportionately face assaults, arrests, homicides, homelessness, and HIV. (Neal 2016)

This is one of the few instances where I have seen a conversation around racism and transphobia within the media, and acknowledgement of the fact that it is trans people—and I would specify trans women—of color who deal with the most violence. It is notable that the source of this opinion piece is *The Advocate*, an LGBTQ-focused online (and print) magazine, rather than a mainstream channel like CNN, MSNBC, or ABC. Indeed, the above mentioned ad, which included several mothers of color was also produced by an activist organization—the Trans United Fund--rather than a mainstream media outlet.

Within the mainstream media and on the television documentaries and talk shows, many of the white, middle-class families discuss their fears that their children



will be murdered or beaten. However, there is often no conversation about the way that white privilege and class privilege, as well as the privilege of early intervention and family support actually might protect these kids. Of the 21 trans women who were killed in the US in 2015, the majority were women of color (Kellaway and Bryndum 2016). The trans women who experience the violence that frightens these families often come from very different class and raced backgrounds than these white trans kids. Discrimination is more pervasive and devastating for trans people dealing with structural racism as well as trans-related bias. “People of color in general fare worse than white participants across the board, with African American transgender respondents faring worse than all others in many areas examined” (2) states the *Injustice At Every Turn Report*. Yet the *Injustice* report shows that the intersections of trans-bias and racism are complex. For example, while American Indian, Asian, Black, and Latino participants were more likely to experience family violence due to trans-bias, Black and Asian participants were less likely to lose a close friend due to their gender expression/identity than the other racial cohorts (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2011, 100).

David Valentine argues that reports of violence becomes part of the toolkit by which social activists get others to care about trans people (2007, 211), and that we must be careful about the way knowledge of this violence is constituted, and packaged into stories. As I have argued in regards to media narratives of suicide and of extreme harm—it is not that we should not pay attention to violence, difficult experiences, and fear, but that these cannot be the only stories told, and must not be the only reason that we care about trans people. Furthermore, Valentine argues that

violence against trans people is often narrated in such a way that many stories erase the intersectional experiences of trans people of color, especially violence they experience due to race and class. He writes,

“violence, pain, and suffering are neither simple nor precultural facts-- they are produced through and drawn into the complexities of daily experience, given meaning, talked about, mounted as claims, and deeply felt. For violence to be understood as violence, a story must be told about it, the horror relived but also re-ordered and given narrative form with each telling" (Valentine, 2007, 228).

For parents violence is understood through the telling and re-telling of stories about their fears and concerns for their children, and these in turn become part of the dominant media narratives. They become the reason to care about transgender children, which then elides the complexities of their lives.

### Conclusion

These documentaries and news articles have undoubtedly helped raise awareness of transgender children, and through them, various families have been able to understand their children's experiences and access care. For many the media is the first source of information that they have about their children. Yet, these media narratives also produce particular knowledge, mobilize specific ideas of what it means to be a transgender child and why we should care about them, and in turn, create a narrative about what it means to be a boy or a girl. The narratives about transgender children as shown in these television documentaries emphasize the young age of the children, the extreme distress that they exhibit, and the normative nature of their families.

We need to tell stories that do not only focus on the “trapped in the wrong body” trope. Not all trans people identify with this concept, while others do.

Individual ways of relating to the body and to gender norms are complex, and multiple. Importantly, I think that we need to validate the fears of parents, and acknowledge the violence faced by many in the trans community for transgressing gender norms, while also making sure that we are not defining transgender lives by this violence. My next two chapters explore some of the complexity and identity that is lost through media narratives that are trying to create a neat, educational story for a large audience. While media narratives produce a static, packaged story, the blogs and interviews capture the unfolding, various temporalities surrounding these children's lives.

## Chapter 3: Uncharted Waters: Parents Connecting Through Blogs

### Introduction

*“I have been told...that I must, must, must learn to “tolerate the ambiguity” but, the truth is, I don’t want to anymore. I want someone to tell me where we are going, how we are going to get there and where we are going to land. Is that too much to ask?” (Julie Levinson, “What I Hate,” 2012).*

Television documentaries and news articles on transgender children have often served to educate the public<sup>47</sup> on the existence of transgender children. This public sometimes includes parents who are struggling with their children’s gender expression, as well as children themselves, who learn about the possibility of being transgender. For ten-year old Jessie, the Boston Globe article “Led by The Child Who Knew” about a trans girl, Nicole Maines (English 2011), gave her the language to tell her mother that she was a girl. Through her blog, *George.Jessie.Love*, Julie Levinson<sup>48</sup>, Jessie’s mom, documents their story, showing us the complexities of parenting a transgender child,<sup>49</sup> the negotiations that occur in relation to school, clothing, friends, as well as the nuances of her own feelings regarding Jessie’s identity, particularly around the ambiguity that comes with what the future will bring. It is hard for her not to know how the story will end (Levinson, “Fifty Shades of Grey,” 2014), and yet of course, it *is* too much to ask for the future to be revealed to us. Parents cannot know where their children are going, or where they are going to land, even as they engage in anticipation work in an attempt to make the future more

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<sup>47</sup> A public which is presumed to be cisgender, and uninformed about transgender identities

<sup>48</sup> Also known as Julie Ross

<sup>49</sup> Jessie was ten when the blog was started, and is now a teenager, almost 17 years old.

clear.

It was this ambiguity that drew me to Levinson's blog and others like it, and it was these online spaces where I was first introduced to the subject of trans and gender non-conforming children. Blogs such as *Labels are For Jars* and *Accepting Dad* – which I began reading in 2009 before I came to UMD for graduate school – fascinated me because these children and families were living outside of the gender norms of society. Curious about where these gender non-conforming children would end up in terms of identity, I wondered whether the blogs would answer my questions. Were the kids gay, trans, straight or something else that we don't yet have language for?

In Chapter Two, I talk about the anticipation work that parents engage in as they try to understand their children's identities. I outline the way that in the media children's present identities are understood based on their past gender non-conforming behavior, rigid adherence to gender norms, and declarations of self-harm. In the blogs the actual process of anticipation work is made even clearer as parents are often in the middle of figuring out their children's identities and are writing as a way to help with their parenting anxieties or with the hope of gaining clarification and answers from fellow bloggers and blog readers.

In the blogs we see compelling, real-time, temporal shifts in understanding. This is not a finished, edited, packaged memoir about a family's experience with gender; these blogs capture particular identities, expression, and realities that may shift over time as children begin to understand themselves more clearly and find the language to identify in one way or another. Some of these blog narratives complicate

the idea that it is easy to identify a trans kid, as parents like the authors of *Girlyboy Mama*, *Pink is the New Blue*, *My Migraine Family*, and *It's Hard to Be Me* show that it can be difficult for children and parents alike to discern between expression and identity. Each of these aforementioned blogs contain the stories of children whose identities shift from gender-nonconforming to trans over the years. In some cases, like *Girlyboy Mama*, the mother is adamant that her “boy” child is not transgender, and yet, a year or so later, without explanation, begins talking about her daughter’ (also noted by Madisson Whitman, unpublished masters’ thesis). On Lisa Keating’s blog she announces that her child has come out as a gay boy, and then a few months later, introduces her child as her transgender daughter (“My Kid is Gay” 2015, “Transgender, A Label” 2015). It can be difficult not only for adults but also for the children themselves to navigate identity and language.

In this chapter I provide an overview of the blogs I have become immersed in over the years, before focusing on three in particular. I use a combination of ethnographic methods and literary analysis to analyze the blogs, ultimately approaching them through an autobiographical framework. Reading them as archives of family life, I use the concept of anticipation work—where parents are continually preparing for the future based on what they know in the present--to think about the way that parents understand their children’s identities and connect with the wider LGBTQ community.

I begin by examining parents’ fears for their children’s safety, arguing that the blogs include narratives of “haunting” (Gordon 1997) around bullying and suicide, which shape parents’ ideas about the future as well as their affective reactions to their

children's identities. Exploring in more detail the anticipation work that goes into parenting a child who breaks childhood norms, I argue that parents balance wanting to know who their child will be in the future with the need to support their child now. Terminology is key to both parents and children, even as children are assumed to be too young to use particular words. I also examine how these parents create community, especially in relation to LGBTQ adults, and argue that this is part of the anticipation work they engage in as they try to create better futures and presents for their children.

### Background

#### **The Blogs**

When I first began reading these blogs in 2009, found through blog lists on feminist and lesbian mother blogs, there were only a handful of blogs available to read. In the past five years, however, as I have focused more closely on my research on transgender, gender-creative, and gay children, I have become immersed in an ever-widening network across the web. My blog-list currently numbers over 40. New blogs have been found through Google alerts, blog comment sections, and blogrolls, and, as the number of parents writing has increased, so has the number of blogs. In some cases, a blog has been in existence for several years as a family blog, but has only shifted toward trans and/or gender subjects when a child has transitioned or began expressing gender atypical behavior. While not all of these 40+ blogs are currently active, and some only have a couple of entries, overall the increase in parents writing about their children reflects the increase in attention and acceptance of gender variant and transgender children in the US.

While the media tends to focus on transgender children, the blogs address the

various gender identities of children, both male-assigned and female-assigned, who identify as tomgirls, pink boys, tomboys, trans boys, trans girls, gay boys, and lesbian girls.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the media, which tends to separate transgender children and gender-non-conforming children (and pays more attention to the trans kids), these blogs often connect to each other and address the experiences of a variety of children, thus creating a community or network across gender identities and gender expression. As I will discuss later in this chapter, while these parents understand their children to have specific, unique identities (a trans boy is not the same as a tomboy), they also consider them to be part of a larger LGBTQ and gender-non-conforming community with similar needs and experiences.

Of the 41 blogs that I have been avidly reading, 37 of them are written by a mother, three are written by a father and one is written by both the mother and father. There are 12 blogs that follow the lives of children who were assigned female at birth: ten have transitioned and identify as trans boys,<sup>51</sup> one identifies as a lesbian,<sup>52</sup> and the other is gender non-conforming and calls herself a “half-half.”<sup>53</sup> The number of children assigned male at birth is much higher in this blog sample, as might be expected given the attention to femininity in “boy” children that I have noted before (Bryant 2006). Of the 29 children assigned male at birth, 15 are trans girls<sup>54</sup> (a few of

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<sup>50</sup> See chapter one for a more detailed discussion about these different terms

<sup>51</sup> *He’s Always Been My Son; It’s a Dot, Dot, Dot; It’s Hard to Be Me (was a gender non-confirming girl when the mom first began writing); Life Uncharted; My Kennedy’s Story; Not Just a Tomboy; Rainbow Brick Road; Raising Orlando; Transparenthood; Trans\*Forming Family.*

<sup>52</sup> *Raising Queer Kids*

<sup>53</sup> *Savage Mama*



these were gender non-conforming boys when their parents started writing), one is a trans teen<sup>55</sup> who is genderqueer,<sup>56</sup> 12 are gender-nonconforming boys (2 of whom are gay),<sup>57</sup> and there is one gender-typical boy who is gay.<sup>58</sup>

It is difficult to know the racial make-up of the blog authors, because the majority of them do not provide many identifying details on their pages. A few of the parents, like Mara Migraneur (My Migraine Family) and Pasapatidasi (Pasapatidasi's Blog) openly address race from the positions of white people who are interested in racial justice. A few of the other parents explicitly comment on being white parents raising adopted kids of color. Lori Duron, the author of *Raising My Rainbow*, a blog I explore in detail in this chapter, describes her husband as an Irishman and her father as "a devout born-again Christian and macho Mexican-American. Enough said." She does not mention race or ethnicity otherwise elsewhere on the blog, or identify herself or her children in relation to her husband or father's ethnicities. For the most part race is unmarked on the blogs. Other markers of identity are more visible, and these authors are more diverse than what is shown in the television media in terms of religion (pagan, Jewish, Mormon, Catholic, and non-denominational Christian), ability (the disability of a parent/and or child is discussed on several blogs) and

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<sup>54</sup> *Camie's Song, Dangling Possibilities, Gendermom, George.Jessie.Love, Girlyboy Mama's Open Salon Blog, Helping her Find her Way, My Migraine Family, Nonconforming Mom, Parenting the Transgender Teen, Pasapatidasi's Blog, Pink is the New Blue, Progressive Dad, Transcendent, Trains and Dresses, Wayne Maines Huffington Post Blog*

<sup>55</sup> *Because I Am Fabulous*

<sup>56</sup> Genderqueer means that the person identifies outside of the gender binary, as neither a boy/man/male, nor as a girl/woman/female.

<sup>57</sup> *Accepting Dad, Catching Our Rainbows, It's a Bold Life, HE SPARKLES, Labels Are For Jars, My Beautiful Little Boy, My Purple Umbrella, Pink is For Boys (.com), Pink is For Boys (wordpress), Pink is My Favourite Colour, Raising My Rainbow, Sarah Hoffman,*

<sup>58</sup> *Amelia's Huffington Post Queer Voices Blog*

family make-up (married, divorced, single, heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, and queer)--compared to a majority of married, heterosexual parents seen in the documentaries that I discuss.

While anything that is publicly accessible on the internet (viewable without a password) is considered “published”<sup>59</sup> I have decided, for ethical reasons, to focus on three well-read blogs. While I will draw from other blogs as appropriate, I have chosen to closely analyze *Raising My Rainbow*, *Gendermom*, and *Amelia’s Huffington Post blog* as there is no question that they intend their words to be public and widely-read, unlike some of the smaller blogs on my list which detail more specifically family life and address a small group of readers. Additionally, these three blogs have been written continuously for more than three years, and have a significant amount of entries (ranging from 70 to 300 posts). This consistency of entries is another reason I chose to focus on these three; these parents have been writing regularly over the course of several years, so they not only have many blog entries, but also a large readership.

Unlike the television documentaries in the last section, or memoirs that reflect several years of a person’s life—blogs are written in real-time--parents and blog readers alike watch the unfolding of these children’s lives and identities. When CJ’s mom first began writing *Raising My Rainbow* in 2011,<sup>60</sup> she had a three-year old who

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<sup>59</sup> This question of whether something is published and thereby public can be particularly difficult to discern, especially in regards to blogs that are public, then become private, and then become public again. This is another reason I have chosen these three blogs which are clearly written to a large audience.

<sup>60</sup> CJ’s Mom declares herself to be the “first” mommy blog about raising a gender-non-conforming kid. It strikes me as odd that she couldn’t find any other blogs, given that *Accepting Dad*, *Labels are For Jars*, and Sarah Hoffman’s *Pink Boy* blog, were all started in 2008, and I began reading them in 2009. Of course, it is possible that she was unable to find those blogs because of the search terms she was

loved Barbie Dolls, all things pink, and “girls’ clothes.” She describes him as “slightly effeminate, [and] possibly gay,” and asks “the gays” for advice about raising him. With a gay brother who came out as an adult, she wants to make sure that CJ had the support that her brother did not have and while she uses a lot of humor, and keeps the tone upbeat, she is obviously concerned about her child’s behavior, and what it might mean for the future. The reader also experiences this anxiety, wondering what will happen to CJ, and how he will ultimately define himself.

Over the course of the years, many people online and in the family’s life wonder is CJ gay? Or transgender? Some commenters ask if she has considered the possibility of him transitioning. They offer different ways of understanding his identity, and labeling his behavior. Soon after starting her blog, CJ’s Mom begins to use the term “gender non-conforming” rather than “effeminate” to describe CJ. This is the word that CJ learns to use, and continues to use for himself now. CJ’s Mom has shifted however, to using Diane Ehrensaft’s term “gender-creative” because she prefers its positive connotation (“Reflections” 2013; Ehrensaft 2008). Although she originally assumed she had a pre-gay child, in later entries, she writes about how gender, sex, and sexuality are different things and that his future sexuality can only be guessed at. While many have asked about whether he is transgender, currently, in 2016, the term does not fit. As the years go by, CJ has continued to identify as a boy. And yet, she writes that the word cisgender does not quite fit either given his continued love of all things feminine (“The New Gender Binary” 2016). In 2013, CJ’s Mom “comes out” as Lori Duron, and publishes a memoir based on her blog,

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using, or that they were not active enough at the time to show up in a Google search, or she did not locate herself and her child within their particular narrative.

also titled *Raising My Rainbow* (“I Wrote a Book” 2013).

CJ’s sexuality is not yet clear but this is not the case for all children. Another blogger, Amelia, first wrote about her 6 year-old son’s crush on Blaine, a character on *Glee*, on her personal Tumblr blog ([gettooobsessed.tumblr.com](http://gettooobsessed.tumblr.com)) in 2011. This post went viral—meaning it was shared thousands of times across the internet and drew a lot of attention—and due to this, she was asked to become a contributing blogger for *The Huffington Post*’s “Gay Voices” section.<sup>61</sup> Since that original post, her son has come out as gay and has gone through second, third, and fourth grade as an out gay elementary school student. Amelia’s blog is more political than the other two, as she often writes about current legislation and addresses issues of legal discrimination. Furthermore, each post is clearly meant to stand alone, as she often repeats the same story of her child coming out at 7.

Although she does include a few posts about mundane family events like her family’s Thanksgiving, her blog does not include the ephemera of *Raising My Rainbow*—which includes photos of artwork by CJ, snippets of funny conversations, or synopsis of family outings. On Amelia’s Tumblr page, she includes reposts of comics, a few pictures of her family, advertisements for events, and political posters, but her *Huffington Post* blog entries are tightly focused on her experience raising a gay child, as well as larger LGBTQ politics like same-sex marriage, presidential campaigns, and trans rights bills. Although she is writing in a slightly different genre of blog than *Raising My Rainbow*—more akin to an opinion piece or column than a family journal—I have included her here because she is the only parent of a young gay

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<sup>61</sup> Now called “Queer Voices”

child who regularly blogs.<sup>62</sup>

The third blog that I analyze is *GenderMom*, started in 2013 by “gendermom” aka Marlo Mack.<sup>63</sup> Although she has not been writing for as long as the other two, I have chosen her because she is one of the more popular blogs by a parent of a trans child. Her videos have even been used in professional training sessions at gender conferences that I have attended, like Gender Odyssey. She began writing shortly after her child transitioned at 5, and has chronicled her experiences parenting her daughter over the last few years, navigating a transition before kindergarten and being almost “stealth”<sup>64</sup> in elementary school. As I write this, her daughter has just finished second grade. Like Amelia’s blog, this one stays pretty close to the subject at hand (in this case: parenting a trans kid) and focuses on navigating school, attending conferences, dispelling myths about trans kids, and the difficulty of navigating disclosure and privacy with a young child.

### **Online Ethnography**

I have been reading these blogs for years and consider my work to be a type of online ethnography, in which I have become familiar with particular individuals, families, and networks, and have immersed myself within their cultural context and

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<sup>62</sup> The other two blogs with gay male children only have a few entries, and the child’s sexuality is not a main focus, having been mentioned only in passing. *Raising Queer Kids*, which is written by the mother of an 10 year old lesbian reflects similar themes found in Amelia’s blog, and also includes writing by her daughter. However, she only wrote for one year, and does not have a great number of entries, which is why I ultimately did not choose to focus on this blog here.

<sup>63</sup> Also a pseudonym

<sup>64</sup> This term refers to not telling others or being out about one’s trans identity. Although many prefer to use the word “undisclosed” due to the connotations of secrecy or shame that can come with “stealth;” I purposely use this word here because it is the term that Marlo Mack uses on her blog. I discuss disclosure, especially in regards to young trans kids, in further detail in the next chapter.

world (Gajjala et al 2007).<sup>65</sup> As parents have documented the unfolding narrative of their children’s lives, I have been held in suspense alongside the parents, wondering where they are going, and where everyone will “land.” When I discover a new blog, I am excited about the possibility of learning about another child and family—curious to see how their story is related to the other stories and family lives that I have been reading, and how it will be different. And when a parent stops writing, I continue to think about them, wondering how their children are doing now.

Years of following a family online, makes me feel that I know them, and I certainly do care about their children, silently cheering them on through successes, aching for them during the difficult moments. The photographs of kids bouncing on trampolines, grinning proudly over artwork, spinning in delight in new clothing, and blowing out candles on a cake fill me with delight, as well as wonder. How it is possible that another year has passed and that they have grown so much older? Will their expression and identities shift as they enter kindergarten and witness the reactions of other kids? How will they feel about themselves and their bodies as they

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<sup>65</sup> I consider my blog research to be an ethnography because of the temporal experience of reading them and the deep immersion into these families’ lives. I began reading most of these blogs when the parents first started writing them, and thus learned about each family, their experiences, and the child’s life as they unfolded in real time. Much like an ethnographer who is immersed into a particular physical location and community, I became intimate with the details of these families’ lives, the blog networks they were a part of, and witnessed the conversations (in the comment sections) between bloggers and readers. While the blogs are technically text, they are not complete texts with a clear beginning, middle and end, but rather are snapshots of family life and online relationships across time. It is true that a blog does not allow for the same “witnessing” of social interactions that a traditional ethnography does and blogs are carefully edited. Parents choose what to share, are curating the particular narrative on a blog, and sometimes moderate comments, however, this is true of a traditional ethnography as well. I know from my experience with an onsite ethnography in Zinacantán, Mexico, that people also “edit” themselves and what is deemed shareable about their lives. Finally, my choice in research methods—blogs as online ethnography, interviews with families across the US, and participant observation at conferences reflect the particular moment that I began this research, when there were fewer families with trans children who I could directly connect with in my local area. Were I starting this project today, I could do a more in-depth ethnography—potentially staying with families for periods of time—as I am connected with a much wider network of families, and more and more parents are openly supporting their trans children.

approach puberty? How will the terms that they call themselves change as they get older?

Deep immersion into the online lives of the families of trans, gender-creative, and gay children has given me a close look at individual family experiences, and in this chapter I analyze the commonalities and differences that I have found across the blogs. Over time I have recognized the salience of particular terms like “transgender,” “gender-creative,” and “gender non-conforming,” and identified the topics that often come up for parents, including navigating public spaces, talking to extended family, and supporting their children in school.

Recently, as I narrowed my focus to these three blogs in particular, I used the online mixed methods tool, Dedoose, to help verify the themes that I have been noting over the last few years in relationship to anticipation work. To do so, I copied each blog post into Dedoose, and then highlighted and applied a specific “code” (word) to different excerpts.<sup>66</sup> I could then compare codes across the three blogs, and add my analysis of the codes to my previous close readings and ethnographic immersion. For example, the codes “school” and “harm” came up frequently in all three blogs, and supported my development of the concept of “haunting” that I explore later in this chapter. However, the code “bodies” came up more frequently on *GenderMom* than the other two, as she often talks about what it means for her daughter to navigate the world as a girl with a penis. This “bodies” code then helped me look more closely at the way the concept of “transgender” is constructed on her blog, as compared to the term “gender-creative.” Ultimately Dedoose helped me think

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<sup>66</sup> See Figure 2, 3 and 4 in Appendix for screenshots of the program.

through the ways that these blogs defines what it means to be “transgender,” “gender-creative,” and “gay.” One useful aspect of the program is the concept map,<sup>67</sup> which gives a visual picture of the codes. Overall, this program helped verify the importance of particular terminology and themes used on the blogs, especially in regards to the three that I closely analyze here.

### **Blogs as Autobiography**

I also approach the blogs through a literary framework and key to my work is Leigh Gilmore’s *Limits of Autobiography*, about autobiography and trauma, Kate Douglas’s *Contesting Childhood*, which examines memoirs on childhood, and Aimee Morrison’s research on mommy bloggers. The blogs, like the television documentaries and news articles in the previous chapter, contain constructed narratives. While not in a traditional book-length format, blogs are a type of autobiography and “autobiographies are of course, fictions of the self” (Visweswaran 1994) and “[provoke] fantasies of the real” (Gilmore, 1993, 16). They may reflect the realities of the families as they understand their own lives but parents carefully curate the blogs and construct a particular narrative. Although the intimate nature of the blogs makes the reader, including me, feel that they know the family, and have a real connection with them, it is different than knowing a family through day to day interactions and in-person relationships.

In an early entry of *Raising My Rainbow*, for instance, Lori Duron writes that her child CJ is not only her “effeminate, possibly gay son” but that “sometimes he’s very much our slightly masculine, possibly heterosexual, totally rambunctious son.”

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<sup>67</sup> See Figure 4



(“Slightly Masculine” 2011). While this entry, which lists ways that CJ is “masculine,” points to constructed notions of “boyness” and “girlness” or “femininity” and “masculinity” (as it lists things like climbing trees and catching bugs as evidence of masculinity/boyness), it also shows that by foregrounding CJ’s femininity in other entries Lori Duron may sometimes elide the complexity of his identity and gender expression. We cannot hope to reach an absolute truth of a particular person’s life or a part of history by reading a blog or through a single interview, but “since [a participant’s] telling of her life is part of her life, what we have is something that may not be the truth, but it is something otherwise invaluable: her interpretations of her experience” (Wekker, 2006, 6). Duron centers CJ’s femininity because it is particularly salient to her experience of parenting him and her interpretations of that experience are invaluable in thinking about larger narratives of children’s gender and sexuality.

As Kate Douglas points out in her book on childhood memoirs of trauma, *Contesting Childhood*, autobiographies reflect not only individual memories, but also “cultural memory” and what is deemed worthy of remembering. She writes that “we are intrinsically aware of what we are supposed to remember and document, of which stories and events are culturally valuable, of what is speakable and unspeakable (at any given time) about our childhoods” (2010, 23). For many of these parents, the fact that their children are gender non-conforming or transgender is something that has only recently become something “speakable.” The stories about parenting a transgender, gender-creative, or gay child are deemed valuable, interesting, or necessary for the parents to write because in this current historical moment they are

unusual and their children are going against societal gender norms.

It is worth noting, as I have elsewhere, that there are more children assigned male at birth in the sample, as stories about tomboys receive less attention and are not deemed as memorable. There are also fewer children in this blog sample who are identified or identify themselves as gay. This might be due to sexual attractions not fully developing until puberty but I also think it is because we are still not ready to think about queerness and children.<sup>68</sup> Folks are okay with a five year-old girl wanting to marry Prince Charming, but when a little *boy* wants to marry Prince Charming people become concerned. As Amelia writes, “To a lot of straight people, being gay is all about sex, and sex isn’t what they want to be thinking about with a third-grader” (“Stop Waiting” 2013). Because queer sexuality is assumed to be about sex and children, as innocent beings, are meant to be protected from sex (Levine 2002, Rivers 2010), people are uncomfortable with the idea of children declaring a sexuality.

Even though trans and gender-creative children are becoming more accepted, and it has become possible to speak about their lives, parents’ support of their children is still controversial, and these blogs receive negative comments by readers who do not agree with their choices. *Gendermom*, for example, has been told that her child is “sick” and that she is abusing M. by allowing M. to wear dresses. Others have questioned whether these parents should make their children’s lives visible online, and have received criticism for being public about their children’s gender expression.

NerdyAppleBottom, a blogger who posted a picture of her five year-old son

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<sup>68</sup> Stockton makes a similar point in *The Queer Child*, noting in the introduction that documentaries of trans kids are becoming common, but there hasn’t been the same attention to gay/queer kids. In a personal conversation with Stockton at the Queer Studies Symposium 2016 at UMD, she noted that almost a decade after *The Queer Child* was published this still seems to be the case. (personal communication, April 22 2016)

dressed as the cartoon character Daphne from *Scooby Doo* for Halloween had more than 50,000 comments left on her blog after the photo was shared widely across the internet.<sup>69</sup> Part of the controversy was over the title: “My Son is Gay,” though the first sentences of the post stated, “Or he’s not. I don’t care” (Nerdyapple 2010). Ultimately her post is a reaction to the negative responses that Boo received because of his costume choice. As was the case with baby Storm there were many supportive responses to NerdyAppleBottom’s post, but she was also harshly criticized, especially in regard to her decision to put her son’s feminine gender expression in the spotlight (Ferran 2010). Lori Duron, Amelia, and Marlo Mack have all chosen to not include photos of their children that show their faces, and all started off writing anonymously, although they have become more public in various ways over the years. Each of these bloggers continues to carefully negotiate what it means to blog about their children alongside issues of privacy. This negotiation of public/private—the sharing of intimate personal details, while keeping identifying information anonymous—is characteristic of many mommy bloggers who are creating online communities and spaces to share their experiences but also want to protect their children’s identity and privacy (Morrison 2010, 2011).

Kate Douglas writes that “children’s lives are traditionally constructed as valuable only for what they can tell us about adult lives, or about adult preoccupations with childhood. The subject of the autobiography must be deemed “worthy” to the critics of the time—or else it risks being labeled trivial or inconsequential” (2010, 159). This is particularly relevant given that mommy blogs

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<sup>69</sup> The original post has since been taken down, but can be found on BlogHer’s website (Nerdyapple 2010).

themselves are often deemed trivial or less literary than other blogs (Morrison 2010), and that these blogs by parents of trans, gender-creative, and gay kids have gained value, followers, and support from LGBTQ adults who praise these parents for supporting their children. The role of LGBTQ adults on these sites is something that I talk about more in this chapter when I discuss the community building that parents engage in.

Ultimately these blogs are archives that show the value of these kids' lives. Cvetkovich argues that "it takes the documentation of everyday life in order to insist that every life is worthy of preservation" (2003, 269). While they are constructed narratives, as all autobiographies are, they give us a more complex and nuanced narrative about trans, gender-creative, and gay children than is shown within media documentaries, and are a testament to the importance of these children's lives. There is something unique to the blog format, which "allows for the posting of a silly photo, a political rant, a meme questionnaire, and a midnight cry for sleep advice as the need arises and circumstances permit, day to day, in a manner that arguably better reflects the emotional cadence of early motherhood than literary print models of memoir or autobiography" (Morrison, 2010, unpaginated). I would also argue that this format better suits the complex, non-linear lives of trans and gender-creative children, who are navigating childhoods that push against a binary understanding of gender and our assumptions of what it means to "grow up."<sup>70</sup> As texts that are ever in process (at least for active blogs), they allow for more shifts in the narrative than a closed, published text like a memoir or documentary, or at least there is an understanding that

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<sup>70</sup> Here I am referencing Stockton's idea of children growing sideways, vs. growing up.

the story is not over yet, that it is still unfolding.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, the television documentaries and talk show specials, as I discuss in Chapter Two, capture a particular moment in time, creating a static picture of these children's identity. The blogs are family archives and they offer a rare longitudinal view of a group of kids who are challenging our assumptions about gender and sexuality.

In comparison to media narratives -- where doctors are brought in as the ultimate experts -- on the blogs, parents prove to be the experts on their children. Despite often referring to professionals, studies, and books that support understandings of their children's behavior, these parents are the experts in regards to interpreting their individual child's gender expression and the details of their lives and identities. Lori Duron writes that a couple of mental health professionals have said that CJ is transgender, and should transition, but that their idea of what should be done doesn't fit her sense of who he is or how he has reacted to exploring female pronouns or being a girl ("Trust" 2015). Again, when looking at the neat, linear stories of trans children—where super feminine behavior means a trans girl identity—it would be easy to assume that CJ is transgender. Yet, the intricacies of his gender expression, the conversations that his family has had over the years about gender, his experiences with friends transitioning, all show that it is not always simple. Ultimately, Duron who lives with CJ every day and has been paying attention to his gender since he was 2 and first asked for a Barbie, is an expert on his identity and she is open about the fact that his story is still unfolding.

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<sup>71</sup> Since Lori Duron's *Raising My Rainbow* (2013) memoir was published, there have been more memoirs and biographies--including *Becoming Nicole* (2016) and *Raising Ryland* (2016), both about raising trans kids. Unlike the blogs, which I argue show an entanglement of knowledges, communities, and are unfolding in real-time, the memoirs, like television documentaries capture a particular moment in time, and package it neatly into a narrative with a beginning, middle and end.

As I stated above, in many ways I consider my work with these blogs a form of ethnography, where I have become immersed in the culture and lives of these people and the relationships they have with others. Over time, I have been able to see what sort of knowledge and information is important to them, and how they understand their own identities and the identities of their children. Tey Meadow explains that "Communities of gender variant and transgender children engage in ethnographic projects of their own, examining each other's children, trying to determine where to place their own on the gender spectrum" (733). While she was referring specifically to families that she had met and worked with at family gender conferences, this observation rings true of the ways that these families on the blogs are also sharing information, examining each other's children, and determining where they might end up in terms of gender and sexuality.

As community spaces, blogs allow for story-telling that not only uses children's past and present, but also the collective past and presents of their readers to imagine children's various futures. Comments on entries and interactions between blogger and reader demonstrate how it is not only narrative, but dialogue, connection, and evolving definitions and knowledge-creation that are in process.

### Anticipation Work

#### **Haunting**

As I discussed in the introduction, science studies scholars<sup>72</sup> Adams, Murphy, and Clarke argue that we are in an era where the future is seen as something that can be predicted, even if that is an uncertain prediction, and that as a result, "anticipation

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<sup>72</sup> Science studies is an interdisciplinary field which seeks to analyze science and the contexts through which scientific knowledge is created and disseminated.

has become a common, lived affect-state of daily life” (247). Throughout the dissertation I argue that this type of anticipation about the future permeates the narratives of trans kids, and that anticipation is often accompanied by fear and anxiety about what these children’s behavior might mean in wider society. Diane Ehrensaft in her recent book *The Gender Creative Child* talks about the “gender ghosts” that parents deal with: “the internalized thoughts, attitudes, feelings, beliefs and experiences that draw us toward culturally defined binary gender boxes and make us anxious when we or anyone else strays from them” (2016, 128). She argues that parents have to dispel these ghosts in order to be able to accept and support their children, a process that readers witness on the blogs, as parents wrestle with their own feelings about their children’s behavior.

Unfortunately, even when parents dispel their own personal gender ghosts, their families, and their children in particular, are still navigating a homophobic and transphobic world. Part of the anticipation work that parents’ engage in is the prevention of harm, particularly in the form of teasing, bullying and suicide. Parents are especially haunted by the possibility of violence and loss. Avery Gordon writes that “Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future” (Gordon 1997, xvi).

This is particularly evident on *Raising My Rainbow* as Duron’s brother is gay, and her parenting of CJ is influenced by her own childhood experiences watching her brother get bullied about his assumed sexuality and, in turn, being bullied herself. She does not want to repeat the mistakes that her mother made, which means that she sometimes overcompensates. For example, when she tells her son Chase that she is

not expecting grandchildren, she does so because she doesn't want to put undue pressure on him to have children, but she ends up hurting his feelings. In reflecting on this moment, she writes, "My history was interfering with my present, as it tends to do" ("I Don't Expect" 2013). On her blog we see different temporalities colliding, experiences of her childhood, and her children's childhood over-lapping and becoming entangled, confused, and also unraveling, as she recognizes that while CJ's feminine gender expression mirrors her brother's he might not grow up to share the same sexual identity as "Uncle Uncle." Furthermore, CJ, growing up in a household where his gender expression is accepted, and in a society where being gay no longer carries the stigma that it did a couple of decades ago, is experiencing a different kind of childhood than his uncle did, even as there are moments that are parallel within each of their lives.

These parents are constantly vigilant for bullying and teasing, and these were two codes that I used frequently used on blog entries. The blogs also often refer to the suicides of LGBTQ youth like Leelah Alcorn, and it is clear that these parents are haunted by the possibility that this could be their kid. Amelia asks, "how do I keep my son from becoming another statistic, another young person pushed to deadly means to end torment by those who think his existence is a sin, ugly, and wrong?" and then adds, "Well, there is no guarantee that I can, but I can sure as hell try. I can keep reminding him he is perfect and loved" ("That Could Be My Son" 2012). Again, these parents do all they can in the present in order to prevent particular futures, though "there is no guarantee" and it is impossible to control every outcome.

The stories of the harm that other children have experienced make it even



more important for them to support their children and to teach them about resilience. They all recount conversations with their kids about how to answer curious questions and how to deflect teasing.<sup>73</sup> Suicide prevention is not just about loving their children, it is also about creating community connections, fighting for better policies, and teaching their children to speak up for themselves. Additionally, their advocacy for the LGBTQ community is not only for their children, but for LGBTQ youth in other families, especially those who do not have supportive parents.

Amelia in particular talks about how she has received thousands of messages from gay youth who do not have supportive families, and it is clear that she is haunted by their pain,

"Mostly children at first, they told me about their fears of coming out of the closet, about living with homophobic parents, or about their struggles to figure out just who they are. There were also stories of joy and hope, but most contained a lot of pain and loneliness. Every second of free time (and what should have been sleeping time) was suddenly filled with writing to these kids. I needed to let them know I cared. Through the Interwebs I tried to send some of my love to these children, whose parents were so desperately letting them down. I passed on resources far more qualified than I, in case they needed to contact someone for help. (Thank you, Trevor Project, for existing.)" ("It's Been an Amazing Year" 2012)

"Kids as young as 14 have sent me messages. So many are scared children, who sure as hell did not choose this for themselves, living in fear of their family finding out because they know full well what their mom and dad will say. And they tell me they wish I was their mom." ("Lessons From Sharing" 2011)

Amelia is not only haunted by her concerns about her own child, but also other

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<sup>73</sup> In Lori Duron's memoir she recounts in details the bullying that CJ's brother Chase experiences for three years due to CJ's gender expression. It is so pervasive that at one point he becomes suicidal. With the help of the ACLU and other anti-bullying advocates, his parents finally get the school to take their concerns seriously and to remove the bully from Chase's classroom, and get him (the bully) some counseling. It is clear to CJ's parents and the anti-bullying advocates that he was in need of some intervention himself based on his behavior.

children who send her messages who are dealing with family situations that are not as accepting. These kids and her kid are living in different realities and different temporalities. While some are living in a time where it is possible to be an openly gay child, and to be accepted and loved by ones family, for many others that time has yet to come.

For Marlo Mack, haunting involves fears she has about her daughter's future and her safety. She emphasizes on her blog the importance of connections with other trans adults, who help dispel these myths around trans lives,

"When I'm around Kate and my other new trans pals – strong, healthy, confident thirtysomethings who have no doubt that they're going to change the world – I realize how much of my fear has been based on that age-old enemy of courage: ignorance. While there are some very real dangers to fear (transphobic violence among them), most of my fears have been exposed for the rubbish they are: phantoms born of circus-side-show-style sensationalism (think Jerry Springer) and – perhaps even worse – silence: an obliterating silence about the fact that transgender people exist at all.

The reality is that my new trans friends are living lives chock-full of the same kinds of boring problems I face: Bad bosses, lame boyfriends, allergies, acne. In many cases they have also endured a host of persecutions and terrors that few cisgendered people can contemplate. And yet, they're doing...[sic] OK. They're muddling through this life just like I am. I think about this and say to myself: "Yeah, my kid will be alright." ("Trans Kids Grow Up" 2013)

While the hauntings that Amelia, Marlo Mack, and Lori Duron experience in regard to their children are from the real-life stories of violence and suicide that they have read about or the bullying that they or their children have experienced, it is also from the lack of positive stories about trans (or gender-non-conforming or gay) lives. As Mack points out, she has become more comfortable thinking about her child's future as she has learned about the lived realities of her trans friends, and has dispelled the "phantoms" that were created from sensational stories and silence. This

is one of the reasons I think it is important to not only tell narratives of the extreme that I discussed in Chapter Two, as the types of stories that are highlighted in the media influence what is seen as possible. We need to have more diverse stories, happy stories, mundane stories, so that families can see how trans adults and trans kids are “muddling through this life” and doing okay.

Lori Duron writes that having a gender non-conforming kid may sometimes mirror the experience of caring for a special needs child, in that “we spend so much time worrying, predicting, planning and protecting” that it can be hard to remember that so many days are actually good days (“We Don’t Know” 2014). Being in an anticipatory mode makes it hard to focus on the present moment and yet, given the continually shifting landscape around children’s gender and sexuality, all parents (and blog readers and researchers) can do is witness the unfolding, knowing that the current moment is only that—a moment—in the middle of a much larger story of these children’s lives.

### **Anticipation and Questions of Identity**

Parents are looking for answers about who their children are and online blog spaces are one place where they connect with others who have similar experiences. In this next section, I argue that through their blogs these parents contribute to the contemporary social discourse about children’s gender and sexuality, and what it means to be a “transgender,” “gender-creative” or “gay” child. I show how parents have engaged with questions about their children’s identities, the idea that their children are too young to know their gender or sexuality, specific terminology and language that they use, and what it means to be comfortable with ambiguity.

One of the biggest questions for these parents, particularly when their children

are very young (3, 4, and 5), is a question about their future identity. Who will my child become? And relatedly, how can I support who they might become? As categories of gender and sexuality are opened up as possibilities for children's identities, new opportunities for anticipation and anticipation work are created, as "there is opportunity now for what was previously impossible" (Adams, Murphy and Clarke, 257). It is now possible for a child to *be* transgender, or to *be* gay. And there is a "sense that things could be (all) right if only we anticipate them properly" (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 258). There is pressure to anticipate correctly a child's future identity, by understanding their current behavior and possible identities, in order to either best serve the child or support them, or, as is the case for those who see being gay or transgender as undesirable outcomes, prevent the child from becoming gay or transgender.

While I would argue that anticipation is part of parenting in general, the stakes are even higher when parenting a child whose gender and/or sexuality is atypical given societal concerns about deviance and desire. Parents worry about what others' will say, and whether they need to "do something" as their children appear to be growing up differently than other children. Through the blogs readers are immersed in these families' experiences and witness the unfolding of the children's lives, experiencing a part of what the parents' experience: worrying as the kid goes into kindergarten and starts self-policing, smiling at the latest Halloween costume, feeling affection for the best friend who is a champion for trans kids, and wondering who these children will be in the future.

One of the early posts on *Raising My Rainbow* points to the affective state of

anticipation, as Lori Duron opens up questions about what particular identities might mean in relationship to her child. Writing a reflection for the blog's anniversary, Duron discusses the process of blogging and explains her views on parenting: "Two years ago I started Raising My Rainbow because I had a two-(almost three)-year-old boy who liked "girl toys" and "girl clothes." I was full of questions and anxiety. I didn't know what was going on with my son and his preferences." For Duron, and for other parents, "the unknown...plays an integral role in producing action" (Adams et al). Her anxiety about what she didn't know prompts her to reach out to others to try and find out what might be going on with her son's behavior. In a society where it is important to anticipate a child's gender correctly and where there is a preference for particular outcomes over others (Byrant 2008) it is difficult to sit with the not knowing. She continues,

"Things got emotional as my readers educated me and I realized that the simple act of my son playing with a doll could be a signal of much bigger things to come. Was our son a girl born into the body of a boy? Was he transgender, transsexual, effeminate, gay, gender queer, gender fluid, gender creative, gender nonconforming, something else? What do those terms really mean anyway?" (RMR Turns Two 2013).

Again the consideration of different possibilities is an affective, "emotional" one, and there is the sense of being unprepared for what is going to happen. Ultimately, Duron states that she and her husband realized that the answers to these questions didn't matter, that whatever happened, they would be able to deal with it by loving and supporting CJ no matter what. However, this process of becoming okay with ambiguity is one that unfolds over a couple of years of writing and many questions. It is through connecting with others, and by learning about research that supports this parenting approach that she is able to settle into "not knowing." This

not-knowing does not mean that the questions end, just that she does not need to know the answer right now, and it is okay if the answer changes over time.

This sense of the unknown, of questioning what path your child might take, or how to support them, is something that the *Labels Are For Jars* author<sup>74</sup> also captures in this entry where she writes, “What do we do when...there are so few models for what it means to grow up genderqueer? Why is it so hard for young people to chart new pathways in the world? [what do we do when]...there are more questions than answers?” (LabelsAreForJars, 2011). Notably she is one of the few bloggers who I have seen use the word genderqueer for her child, Q who was assigned male at birth. He was four when she began writing, and was eight or nine at the time of her question above. Her use of this term may be due to her family’s place within the larger LGBTQ community, as she is married to a woman. Even as a member of the LGBTQ community, she has struggled with knowing how to best support her son and she has dealt with others making assumptions that her kid expresses himself in a feminine way because he has two moms.

Marlo Mack also reflects on how anxious and scared she was when first dealing with her child’s gender expression, posting a letter that she sent to loved ones asking for support when M. was 4. She says that it is clear to her now that she was trying to give more weight to every possibility besides the one that turns out to be true, that M. is a transgender girl. At that age M. was already making statements about there being a mistake when she was in her mommy’s belly and was asking Mack to “make me a real girl.” In her letter, Mack writes that developmentally she

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<sup>74</sup> This blog author posts under “labelsareforjars” and has not given any other name or identifying information.

doesn't think that M. has a sense yet of the differences of boys and girls, and explains that

“It’s possible (though statistically unlikely, I gather) that X is transgender. It’s possible that he’s gay – but he’s WAY too young to think about that. It’s possible that he’s simply a guy with a very well-developed feminine side and phenomenal fashion sense. Only one thing is for sure: X doesn’t seem to be on course to be a stereotypical, run-of-the-mill boy. He’s going to march to a slightly (or VERY) different drum, and that is not always going to be easy.” (“Letter” 2014).

While it may seem that the options are open here, given Mack’s reflection on the letter, we can also see a kind of not wanting to know, a refusal to anticipate a future gay or trans identity, and instead an emphasis on the present, and the need for love and support.

#### **What Do These Terms Mean Anyway?**

For each of these families learning terminology like “gender non-conforming” “gender-creative,” and “transgender” has been key to their own acceptance of their children, and has been important to the children themselves, especially in regard to their ability to explain to others who they are. For some families, the existing words have not been helpful, and they and their children have created new vocabulary to identify themselves like “pink boy” or “tomgirl” and “half-half.” As they write their family stories using these terms, the bloggers are shaping the current social discourse around what it means to be a gay, trans, or gender-non-conforming child.<sup>75</sup> And yet, these terms are continually under revision, they are not stable, and are ever-shifting, particularly as knowledge about children’s gender and sexuality continues to change

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<sup>75</sup> It is notable that most of the new words coined by families are for boy children with feminine gender expressions, which reflects the lack of positive mainstream words for feminine boys, who do not have a term equivalent to tomboy.

and grow. On *Raising My Rainbow* Duron moves from describing CJ as effeminate, to gender-non-conforming, to gender-creative, and discusses how language that creates a binary between cisgender and transgender is not helpful for her family. What terms will be salient in CJ's future; we don't yet know. Acknowledging the shifting, changing nature of the terms, in the following section I outline how these blogs *currently* define "transgender" or "gender-creative" or "gay" in regards to their children, and their explorations of gender and sexuality.

While both Lori Duron and Marlo Mack had children assigned male at birth who were very effeminate and gravitated towards things that we would stereotypically associate with girls' things, their children are now on different trajectories. CJ has continued to identify as a boy who likes girls' things even after a trial period of using girl pronouns and a girl name when he was six, and watching two of his fellow gender-creative friends transition to live as girls. Marlo Mack originally tried to create a space for her child to be a boy who likes girls' things, but M. continually stated that she was a girl, and since transition remains adamant about being a "girl with a penis."

For CJ, being gender-creative/gender non-conforming is about "gender expression:" he is a "boy who likes 'girl' things." As shown through the codes that were used most frequently on *Raising My Rainbow*, gender creativity, as CJ enacts it, is about clothing, toys, fashion, hair, and navigating school as someone who doesn't fit into our expectations of what a boy should look like. It is also about expanding the definition of what it means to be a boy, and it is evidence that being extremely gender non-conforming does not always lead to a gender transition. In one of her most recent



posts Lori Duron talks about how CJ has never fit into the binary of “boy” and “girl” as society understands these terms, but that he also doesn’t fit in the new binary of “cisgender” and “transgender” when cisgender is understood to be conforming to gender norms and transgender indicates a transition to a different gender than assigned at birth (“New Gender Binary,” 2016). As Bedford Hope of *Accepting Dad* writes, sometimes “the girliest of girls grow up to be men” (“Where We Are Now” 2014). His son (assigned male at birth) was extremely “girly” like CJ, but has now gone through male puberty. While many readers have commented over the years that they think CJ is transgender, he continues to identify as a boy, and it remains to be seen what will happen when he hits puberty.

In contrast, for M. being transgender means being a “girl with a penis” and is less about expression than identity. I argue that Marlo Mack’s blog posts create a narrative of “transgender” as being about the body and identity, and the emotional stress that can come while navigating the world knowing that you are a different kind of girl. M. proves that girls, both cisgender and transgender, have a variety of gender expressions; in fact, M. happens to be a tomboy trans girl, and this blog expands ideas of what it means to be a girl both in regards to the body and gendered interests. Both CJ and M. push back against the narratives that are found in the media where trans girls are all ultra-princess, pink-loving kids. Within this framework, CJ would be transgender, and M., who loves ninjas, Xena Warrior Princess, and who has started to wear pants again after a few years of dresses, might not fit within this category at all.

Finally, Amelia’s blog teaches readers that gender and sexuality are different. Her now eleven year-old boy-child is gender-typical (a fact which often surprises

people who expect a gay child to be a gender non-conforming child) and continues to identify as gay, as he has since he was seven. Although people often assume that sexuality equals sex, it is more than that. For her eldest kid being gay means “he likes boys, thinks they're pretty, and romanticizes them... he knows that boys who want to kiss boys and want to marry boys are gay" (“Talking to Other Parents,” 2012).

While there is starting to be more room for kids like CJ and M., and we are coming to a better understanding about gender identity and expression, there are still a lot of questions about children identifying as transgender or being gender non-conforming, let alone a child self-identifying as gay. For example, there are those who think that it is not possible for a child to be trans or gay, and who have concerns that parents are putting these labels onto their children, as this comment on the About page of *Raising My Rainbow* shows:

Shmita says:

June 7, 2011 at 11:41 am

I do not think it appropriate to label your child as gay, bi, trans or anything else, because that is CJ's choice and because, well, he is 4 years old... LGBT people are diverse and have many different tastes and interests and range in their gender expression and level of masculinity/femininity. While I would love to welcome babies and toddlers into the LGBT community, it just isn't appropriate.

While I agree with Shmita's point that the LGBTQ community is diverse and that we should be wary of singular narratives linking gender expression and sexuality, I question the way in which the use of the word “appropriate” works to name gender and sexuality as adult subjectivities. Kathryn Bond Stockton, author of *The Queer Child*, writes that during the 20th century the queer child “whatever its conscious grasp of itself, has not been able to present itself according to the category "gay" or "homosexual"--categories culturally deemed too adult, since they are sexual, though

we do presume every child to be straight" (2009, 6). Kids like Amelia's show that a new generation is learning words for their feelings and applying them to themselves. The queer child is beginning to have the language to grasp itself.

Shmita, whose comment I shared above, argues that it should be CJ's choice how he identifies but, as Amelia has found, even when it is the child himself who chooses the label people often continue to find it inappropriate for a child to be considered gay. In a blog post entitled "Stop Waiting For My Son To Change" Amelia argues, "My son has the vocabulary and knows that it is totally OK, so he uses the word that describes him: gay" (2013). Still, what about the babies and toddlers? Schmita argues that it is inappropriate to bring them into the LGBTQ community. It may be true that a baby, who has not mastered language, is too young. We often don't know anything about a baby's gender (though people make assumptions based on genitals), let alone their sexuality. But how young is too young? What about toddlers, or three and four year-olds? Both CJ and M. showed evidence of their gender expression by age two, and by age three, M. was starting to verbalize her identity as a girl. No one thinks it is strange to label a newborn a "girl" based on her genitals, but if a two or three year-old declares a gender identity that doesn't match their anatomy, we question their ability to know this about themselves.

Marlo Mack addresses this question of being too young by pointing out the double-standard for cisgender versus transgender children:

"So, here's the deal: If my five-year-old child had a vagina, would anyone be giving me shit for letting her wear dresses and call herself a girl? Would anyone be telling me that "five years old is awfully young to be assigning labels, dear."'" ("How Old" 2014).

Amelia writes that "for every comment I've read saying my son is too young, I have

received multiple messages from adults saying "I knew when I was little, too."" ("Lessons from Sharing" 2011). To be fair, Amelia herself was surprised that her son declared a gay identity at only seven, assuming she had until he hit puberty before he would connect his crush on the TV character, Blaine, to an identity, but she never doubts him the way that others do, and argues, similarly to what I wrote above, at what age do we draw a line?

"In any case, the he's-too-young-to-know argument is a slippery slope. If 7 is too young, then how old is old enough? Is 10 old enough? Does he have to be in puberty? If so, then what stage of puberty?[...] The reality is that kids are coming out younger and younger. And while some people casually dismiss the thoughts and feelings of children, I don't. He knows what he feels, and he expresses it. ("My Son Doesn't Need to Prove Anything" 2012)

Amelia's response also points to the ways that children's feelings are not considered valid in the way that adults' feelings are, which is something that each of these parents have pushed back against. Inherent in a lot of the comments about children being too young is the idea that they will change their minds or that they do not have the agency or autonomy to declare something like this about themselves.

All of these parents have emphasized the importance of acknowledging their children as they are in the present in order to create a better future for them; however, they also acknowledge the ambiguity that comes with parenting. Marlo Mack writes that it is difficult to contemplate her child de-transitioning, not only because of the work required to change legal names but also because she doesn't want to lose her daughter ("Warrior Princess" 2014). Yet she also writes about the importance of keeping the options open. Here we see her self-awareness of change and temporality, the unknown nature of the future before her, and how she has shifted from feeling

loss about her idea of a “son,” to anticipating the loss she would feel if her child changed her current identity. She isn’t trying to fix her child, or control the outcome, but rather is acknowledging the complexity of emotions that come with parenting a transgender child, the necessity of sitting with the not-knowing.

For the other two bloggers there is a similar acceptance of their children no matter what the future brings. Although Amelia does not think that her kid will stop identifying as gay, she writes that she would love him the same if he was straight. CJ’s mom is pretty certain that he is not transgender, but writes, “Eight years into parenting a differently gendered child, have I totally and completely ruled out that my child is transgender? Absolutely not. C.J. has taught me to get comfortable living in uncertainty” (“Trust” 2015).

While recognizing that their children’s identities might change, these parents also write about the importance of labels as a way for these children to understand their current identities and their connection to others. Often their considerations about words have intersected with attention to age and development. For example, in one blog post Marlo Mack writes about the word “transgender:”

“I only recently introduced M. to the word “transgender.” It seemed like a really big word for a little girl of four or five years old. Too formal, too political. Up to now, we’ve relied instead on simple and concrete language: “girls with penises” and “boys with vaginas.” This has worked well, but the kid is growing up...She hears the word “transgender” drift around her in conversations, and she’s going to put it together soon. She needs to know more about this. (“Laverne!” 2014)

That entry was written when M. was five. She is now seven, and is able to connect her experiences to other transgender people, including other children and grown-ups, and feels like she is part of a community. Mack has written a wonderful account

about M's experience meeting Laverne Cox ("My Daughter" 2015). M. walked right up to the *Orange is the New Black* actress and said, "My name is M. and I am trans." When they hugged Laverne Cox said, "Remember, honey, transgender is beautiful." The post got a lot of publicity and was even posted on mainstream sites like people.com and mtv.com (Mack, "Meeting Laverne" 2015). This is something that is rarely seen in television documentaries—connections between trans kids and the larger adult trans community.

CJ's mom also writes about how valuable it is to have language and to be able to name a behavior or identity. This is particularly helpful for her other son, Chase, who has dealt with a lot of bullying due to his brother's feminine gender expression. In this moment when a friend asks about CJ playing with a girl toy, for example, Chase is able to respond in a matter of fact way:

"Yeah, I know, he's gender nonconforming," C.J.'s Brother said, stating the facts and moving on up the ladder to the tallest slide.

"Oh," Kyle said following C.J.'s Brother up the ladder. He obviously didn't understand what the term "gender nonconforming" meant, but it apparently explained why C.J. was playing with a My Little Pony and, so, Kyle moved on. That was that. ("Owning It" 2012)

Ultimately, these parents show the value in having access to language to describe the self and, in turn, their blogs help shape our understanding of what it means to be gender-non-conforming, gender-creative, transgender or gay, as they discuss gender expression, toy preferences, bodies, crushes, romantic ideas, and questions of agency and age.

### **LGBTQ Community**

While Shmita and others who have commented on the blog have pushed against the idea of accepting children into the larger LGBTQ community, it is clear

that all of these mothers consider their children to be a part of that community, and their writing addresses not only their own personal stories but also those of other kids and adults. Amelia writes:

“Our kids are different "Gender-conforming" does not equal "straight," and "gender-nonconforming" does not equal "gay." But I stand strong with the moms who post about their gender-nonconforming children. We are sisters in the same fight. We are standing up and fighting for our children's right to be who they are. And we are fighting homophobia, because -- let's be honest -- that's really what this is all about.” (“Don’t Be” 2013)

It is also about transphobia. In fact, CJ -- who is not transgender -- has dealt with similar problems in regards to the bathrooms in school that many trans kids experience. He identifies as a boy, and uses the boys’ bathroom, but has dealt with bullying and harassment by children trying to see if he has a penis or a vagina because his gender expression is feminine.

Amelia often uses her son’s experiences as a way to write about larger gay politics, around homophobic bullying for example, the risk of suicide for LGBTQ youth, and same-sex marriage. Duron also posts news articles about trans kids and gender non-conforming kids, and has several posts memorializing trans and gay kids/teens lost to suicide. While Marlo Mack writes less often about the LGBTQ community at large, she does talk to M. about homophobia, and the fact that girls can marry girls and boys can marry boys (“My Homophobic Trans Child” 2013). She also frequently addresses the experiences of adult trans people, the work of early trans activists, and considers herself and M. to be a part of a larger trans community. Marlo Mack refers to Gender Odyssey, a conference for trans people and families of trans kids as a “family reunion” of sorts, and emphasizes the important to M. of being able

to connect with other trans girls (“Family Reunion” 2014).

Community and friendship with other kids like them has been important to Amelia’s son and CJ as well. These inter-blog connections and conferences give families a chance to learn from each other about how to parent their kids and an opportunity to access the latest resources and research. Again, this is something that is different from the documentaries on trans kids, where kids are usually shown in isolation with their families, separated from other trans kids or a larger LGBTQ community.<sup>76</sup> These connections to larger communities show the way that anticipation for these parents is not only about the futures of their children, but also the collective communities that they are a part of, as they write about larger social-justice issues and work towards a better future for the LGBTQ community as a whole.

Just as these bloggers are invested in the LGBTQ community, there are also many LGBTQ adults who are invested in the lives of these children as seen through the comments written on the blogs. Stockton writes that “For these adults, talk of a gay child may trip a tenderness...One may be pricked by, pained by, feelings--about one's childhood—[...] One can remember desperately feeling there was simply nowhere to grow” (2009, 3). CJ’s mom, when she first started writing, explicitly asks “the gays” for advice about her son, and she often gets comments like these two:

*“heellygirl says:*

September 20, 2012 at 11:35 pm

First off I would like to say that you are great parents and a great family. As a Rainbow child myself I grew up in another environment all together. My

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<sup>76</sup> Again, *Becoming Me* is different; they show clips from support groups that parents attend and the Gender Spectrum conference. Recently there was also a British special on Channel 4 called “My Transgender Camp” which highlighted “Camp You are You,” a camp for parents of gender-creative boys and trans girls.



father treated me like an object to step on.”

*“Matt Harwood says:*

January 31, 2011 at 1:06 pm

Hi – I also just linked to your site off the Queerty Gay blog. I’m a licensed clinical social worker working in a mental health clinic that treats predominately Gay men (and am one myself!) Kids who have the kind of unconditional love and support that CJ has (no matter what his sexuality is) will never need my profession. Who’s the best mommy in the world? You are, Sister!”

Likewise, Marlo Mack gets comments from trans adults who write that it makes them happy that M. will have a different childhood than they did. She also received a comment by someone who said that she is painting too happy a picture and that life is not that easy for other trans people who transition late, to which this commenter wrote:

AMM October 13, 2015 at 2:55 pm

Well, I’m one of those “late transitioners,” and it does my heart good to hear that at least some children nowadays won’t have to go through what we went through...I’ve had and still have enough pain and despair in my life, it’s not like I’ll forget that they’re there. What I need is hope — if not for me, then at least for the children. (Comment on “Your Questions Answered” 2015)

Returning to the Douglas quote from earlier, about the ways that children’s lives are seen “as valuable for what they can tell us about adult lives,” it becomes clear that part of the success of these blogs is the way that they tap into LGBTQ adults connections to their own childhoods.

Although adult LGBTQ people have historically been kept away from children, and are seen as potentially damaging to them (Levine 2002; Rivers 2010), LGBTQ commenters and readers are welcomed because of the insights that they can give parents of LGBTQ and gender-creative children. In her “Open Letter to Parents of Gay Kids,” Amelia writes about the fact that many parents of these kids are not

LGBTQ themselves, and thus they have the important task of learning about the LGBTQ community:

“When your child is LGBT they are part of a minority. If you are like most parents and heterosexual, this is a minority that does not include you. Most of the time that's not the case. Most minorities are based on race and religion -- things that tend to run in families. History and stories are told from generation to generation. Politics are discussed over the kitchen table where everyone has the same stake. This is different. You may not be LGBT, but it is now your job to become an expert in this minority. You need to learn LGBT history, LGBT current political issues and LGBT controversies. Because you need to know your child's history, your child's issues, your child's reality. This might feel uncomfortable to you, maybe even a little alien, but this is not about you. This is about your child.” (2015)

In *Far From the Tree*, Andrew Solomon writes about the difficulties that parents face when they are raising children who have what he calls “horizontal identities;” that is, where the identities of the children and the parents are different (2012). The isolation that he and others have felt as a gay people being raised by straight parents is now being mitigated by parents like Amelia who may not share their children’s identities but who work to connect with the communities, histories, and stories that their children belong to.

### Conclusion

Even with the guidance of LGBTQ adults, and other parents, it can feel lonely to be the parent of a trans, gender-creative, and/or gay kid, and there is an element of experimentation and improvisation. Marlo Mack writes, “In nearly every area of my life as a parent to a transgender kid, I’m making this up as I go along.” Her child is the first transgender child in her school, their new pediatrician needed Mack to define “transgender” and when she legally changed M.’s name, “the judge signed the paper and then shook her head and wished [Mack] luck with these “uncharted waters.””

(“Seven Years Old” 2015). While conferences, connections across the internet, and within support groups are helpful, in the end there is still a lot that is unknown. She writes,

...even the most seasoned parents of transgender kids have just a few more years in this game than I do. At best, we have maybe a decade of data, all of it anecdotal, all of it passed among us like rare gems mined at great effort out of an alien landscape no one told us even existed.

And there is no inter-generational knowledge base. I can't ask my mom or my aunts how they dealt with this issue when they were young mothers thirty years ago. They can't pat me on the hand and say, “Don't worry, honey. Here's how I handled your cousin Billy and look how well he's doing now.” (“Seven Years Old” 2015)

Parents, bloggers, researchers, blog readers, and medical professionals who care about and love transgender, gender-creative, and gay children are all exploring “uncharted waters,” watching these children's lives unfold. While there is more research being done, valuable longitudinal data being collected, and connections that can be made with the wider LGBTQ community, these parents are still some of the first parents raising very young, openly trans, gender-creative, and gay children. There is a specific temporal experience of parenting—one that does not connect into the usual inter-generational networks and connections with family members who have had similar experiences.

Bedford Hope of *Accepting Dad*, writes that,

"As some parents ease up on the suppression, we're seeing new childhoods. New normal childhoods. And though it is too early to say for us specifically, we can say definitely, as a group, we are beginning to see gay childhoods of a new type. Less unhappy, less closeted, less contentious, less stressful, less destructive. Honest childhoods for a population which has, until now, been forced to live a kind of lie...."

We are also seeing new kinds of parenting—recognition of new realities for

childhood, new identities, and new concepts of gender. Bedford Hope has been writing about his son Oscar for almost ten years. At one point, he thought that his child might transition to be a girl, but Oscar has now gone through male puberty and will soon be graduating high-school. Similarly to Julie Levinson of *George.Jessie.Love*, Hope talks about the importance of recognizing ambiguity and the complexity of identities, and like Duron advocates for the visibility of not only trans children but also gender non-conforming children. It is not always clear what a boy in a tutu means, and he argues parents should keep options open.

Bedford Hope, Lori Duron, Julie Levinson, Amelia, Marlo Mack, the author of *Labels Are for Jars*, and many other bloggers and parents writing stories about their children are shaping the discourse of what it means to be a transgender, gender-creative, and gay child in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is the first generation of children who are able to live openly in regards to their gender identity and sexuality, and while their lives and their parents' lives are still shaped by homophobia, transphobia, and the haunting presence of violence, they are also experiencing a new kind of childhood--a more open, and honest childhood--than generations who have come before them. They are learning language to describe themselves and their identities from an early age and are connected to the larger LGBTQ community through networks that their parents are creating, through Pride events, or through family gender conferences. And these families are complicating the narratives of what it means to be a boy or a girl, or something in between, showing that it does not depend on your sex assigned at birth or the body. Nor is gender only linked to gender expression. As Bedford Hope writes, sometimes the girliest of girls, like his son,

grow up to be men. Sometimes trans girls are tomboy ninja warrior princesses like Marlo Mack's daughter M. Sometimes, girls are not just tomboys but are in fact trans boys, as in the case of the children from the blogs *Rainbow Brick Road* and *Raising Orlando*. And sometimes kids are simply fabulous, adventurous, and fashion-forward like CJ. No matter where these children's lives take them, their current identities and expressions are valuable, and worth nurturing and supporting. Their parents are there, every step of the way, watching their lives unfold.

## Chapter 4: Complex Realities: The Stories Families Tell

*Your child is not broken, your child does not need to be fixed. It is the world that is broken.* –speaker at a workshop for parents at a family gender conference

*"On its best day, parenting is a form of improvisation."* - Lisa Kenney<sup>77</sup>

### Introduction

Swinging their hips enthusiastically the four children on stage sing along to Katy Perry's "Fireworks" as parents and other children dance in the rest of the darkened room. "You just got to ignite the light and let it shine, cause baby you are a firework..." One mother watching her daughter Alex comments tearfully to me that she hasn't seen her 9-year-old this comfortable and confident in years. I am at Gender Spectrum, a conference for families with gender-creative and transgender children, and watching the kids' uninhibited joy is a perfect end to a long day. Given the fact that many of these kids are not able to express themselves so freely back home, the lyrics of Katy Perry's song seem particularly resonant.

"You don't have to feel like a wasted space  
You're original, cannot be replaced  
If you only knew what the future holds  
After a hurricane comes a rainbow."

The last few days have been full of kids' camps and adult workshops teaching everyone about the diversity of gender and the value of expressing our authentic<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> (Crowder 2016)

<sup>78</sup> Diane Ehrensaft talks about "authentic" gender selves and "false" gender selves in her book *Gender Born, Gender Made* (2011). The authentic gender self is one's internal sense of gender identity and expression, which is different than a false gender self that may be constructed due to the social pressures around a person. This concept of "authenticity" came up in various conference workshops and conversations with parents. It is also the a key concept within the latest advice book for parents of trans kids by Darlene Tando, *The Conscious Parent's Guide to Gender Identity: A Mindful Approach to Embracing Your Child's Authentic Self* (2016). Marieke's work (2014) on gender clinics is useful for those looking for more on how narratives of "authenticity" are constructed within the trans healthcare system.

gender-selves. For many parents, the conference space is a refuge after a storm, a place where their anxiety, fears, and discomfort about their children's atypical identities and expression is soothed. The question of "what the future holds" is on everyone's mind as they parent kids that are following a different path than their cisgender, gender-conforming peers and this place is unique because it allows parents to find others who have had a similar journey.

I use these metaphors of "paths" and "journeys" intentionally, as they are often used by parents describing their experiences with their children. For some, having a trans or gender-creative child has meant literal journeys: moving across state lines, flying across the country or driving hours to conferences and support groups, and/or making long road trips to meet with knowledgeable medical providers. The path towards acceptance -- another phrase frequently used -- is not always straightforward, as parents have grappled with societal expectations, their own understandings of gender, and their confusion over what their children's gendered behavior might mean. "Journey" seems to indicate a straight line between point A and point B--from misunderstanding to acceptance—but as I show here, the experiences of children and families is messier, more complex, and non-linear than what this word encapsulates. While these families may be traveling closer to the "paths" and footsteps of other parents with trans kids,<sup>79</sup> as compared to parents who have cisgender kids, the way is not always straightforward. The knowledge around these children's gender and sexualities is still in flux, and the cartographers—parents,

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<sup>79</sup> And perhaps closer to the footsteps of parents with special needs/disabled kids. Some of the parents I talked to said that raising a trans kid is like having a child with special needs, a sentiment echoed by Lori Duron of *Raising My Rainbow*—as I pointed out in Chapter Three.

children, medical professionals, researchers like myself—are still drawing the map,<sup>80</sup> trying to figure out exactly which direction to go. There is no path that will work for everyone.

Still, at the conferences, along with connecting with each other, parents are able to talk to mental health and medical professionals, educators, and legal experts who can help them navigate the social, educational, medical and legal aspects of raising their children. As more than one parent said to me, “There is no *What To Expect When You Are Expecting a Transgender Child* book given out during pregnancy!” Even if there was such a book, it wouldn’t be helpful anyway because there is not a singular experience of raising a trans child. As I have found, what we know about transgender and gender-creative children is still in process -- unfolding, multidimensional, multi-temporal and complex -- and while there are now several parenting advice books (Ehrensaft 2011, 2016, Brill and Pepper 2008, Tando 2016), they all emphasize the uniqueness of each child, and the particular social, cultural, and historical context that they live in.

Gender Spectrum (in 2014) was one of several conferences, including Philadelphia Trans Health (2014, 2015, 2016), Gender Conference East (2014), Gender Odyssey (2015) and the Transgender Information and Empowerment Summit (TIES) (2015), that I attended over the last years as part of my ethnographic inquiry into the experiences and lives of families with trans, gender-creative, and gay

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<sup>80</sup> *The Gender Book* (Hills and Mays 2013) includes a map of “guy land” and “lady land” with non-binary seas and different islands in between. Within “guy land” and “lady land” there are different countries, cities and towns. They argue that a map is a good way to think about gender—as we are all born in one place, but do not always stay there. We cross borders, visit other lands, and move around as we grow and change. Borders, national ones, and gendered ones, can also shift and change over time.



children. I also interviewed 28 families about their experiences parenting, in order to gain insight into how they understand their children's gender and sexuality, and to hear their stories about how they have navigated their children's atypical gender expression and/or transition within their family and out in public spaces. This ethnographic research has given me an intimate look into the lives and experiences of families and their children.

These interviews, like narratives in the media and on blogs, show the anticipation work that is required when you are parenting against the norm, as parents work to understand their kids, learn about what it means to be gender non-conforming or transgender, and try to support their children. As we saw in the last chapter with *Raising My Rainbow*, many parents with a child who is expressing gender non-conforming behavior think that their child will grow up to be gay, and I argue that gender non-conformity continues to be understood as a sign of queer sexuality. This is important to consider in regard to the possible identities that these children may hold now and in the future, especially as children are often denied the ability to self-identify as gay. I also argue that parents' reactions to their children, along with their anticipation of the future, is based on anxiety about negative reactions and outcomes and concerns about the happiness of their children. Parents' feelings about their child's gender are complex, and while grief/loss are part of many parents' stories, I have found that it is not universal. When loss is a part of the narrative, it is not necessarily about the loss of their child, but rather their loss of an ideal future. Finally, I examine three case studies where a child's gender is ambiguous and argue that parents are creating a space for "not knowing," and, similar to some of the

bloggers we met in the last chapter, are refusing to anticipate a particular future for their children.

### Background

#### **Methodology**

There have been few sociological or anthropological studies about these pioneering families, and -- as I have written in earlier chapters -- most of the research has been within the field of psychology which has focused on creating a proper “diagnosis” and treatment model for children and youth (Green 1987; Zucker 2008; Cohen-Kettenis 2008, 2015; Hill and Menvielle 2010; Ehrensaft 2008, 2016). There has been some qualitative work within psychology that examines family practices (Malpas 2011) including a study that was just published this summer on the experiences of 11 parents raising gender-creative and trans kids (Gray, Sweeney, Randazzo and Levitt 2016), but the majority of research has sought to determine mental health measures for these groups of kids and devise treatment plans.

The study of trans and gender-creative youth is a rapidly changing field, both within psychology, and outside of it. Karl Byrant has applied a sociological lens to examining the diagnosis of “gender identity disorder in children,” critiquing the DSM and other psychological texts for what they tell us about the construction of deviant categories of gender and sexuality (2006, 2008) and other researchers have recently used an ethical lens to analyze a variety of therapeutic practices aimed at youth (Vrouenraets 2015). Tey Meadow (2008, 2013) was one of the first researchers to take an ethnographic approach to examine the first generation of families supporting their trans and gender-non-conforming kids, and her book *Raising The Transgender Child* is forthcoming. My research joins hers, as well as Elizabeth Rahilly’s research

(2013, 2015), in taking a feminist and/or sociological approach to the question of how parents raise transgender or gender creative children, challenging pathologizing and medical narratives about these children's lives.

It is clear, given the complexity of these families' experiences, that interdisciplinary work is crucial to understanding this current moment. Individual work within specific fields is important, but -- as I show in my introductory chapter -- bringing together the knowledge from various fields gives us valuable insight into children's gender and sexuality, especially in regard to the "queer" child. Part of my work with this dissertation is to create connections across different sites of analysis and research and to show the shifting, multi-dimensional, and multi-temporal knowledge fields that children, parents, mental health professionals, medical experts, and academic researchers are navigating.

While I would have loved to interview children themselves, and conduct an ethnography like Barrie Thorne's *Gender Play* (1993), I had ethical concerns about what it would mean for a trans or gender non-conforming child to have a researcher ask them about gender and identity, given that many of these children are frequently called upon to defend themselves and who they are within a heteronormative society. There were also institutional concerns to consider, because the IRB classifies both children and LGBT people as "vulnerable populations." At the core of the IRB is a commitment to ethical treatment of human subjects, and yet marking populations as vulnerable can make it difficult to do research that serves particular groups of people and can also contribute to the construction of specific topics as "sensitive," "taboo," or "deviant"(Corsaro 1997; Mustanski 2011; Irvine 2012). Ultimately, in all research,

scholars must balance the risks not only in terms of institutional regulations, but also the actual consequences of studying people. Weighing the needs of children, and the type of research and information that I was hoping to gather at this point in my work, I decided that interviewing parents and conducting an ethnography online and at conferences was the best way to explore transgender, gender-creative, and gay children's lives.

While talking to parents has certain limitations—as it does not allow us to fully access the child's perspective and centers instead the adults' perspective — through the parents I was able to get a sense of how a transgender, gender-creative, or gay child is conceptualized within these families and wider society. These interviews also allowed me to access points of view, statements, and feelings that the children have articulated to their parents, and by attending conferences and meeting families in their homes, I was able to observe children as they interacted with parents, hung out with friends, played hide-and-seek in conference rooms, and went about their usual lives. Ultimately though, this project focuses on adult, specifically parent, reactions and understandings of children's gender and sexuality.

### **Ethnography**

My previous experience with ethnography was fieldwork in Zinacantán, an indigenous village in Mexico where I lived for four-and-a-half months in 2010-2011, conducting informal interviews about finances and identity with Mayan women who sold their woven and embroidered handicrafts to tourists (Vooris 2012). It was a very different kind of ethnography than this current research, as I was fully immersed within a new community and culture for those months. This research with families of trans/gender-creative kids was different; I did not have the same traditional "site" but

rather several sites, including conference spaces and family homes, and my interviews were not always in person, but often through Skype. Still, through the last two years, I have become a part of a community of sorts, as I have developed relationships with parents and advocates that I have met multiple times at conferences, sharing workshop experiences, family updates in the hallways, and conversations over coffee or lunch.

While in Zinacantán, I was clearly an outsider, whereas at these conferences I held an interesting outsider-insider perspective (Anderson 2006). As a socially and politically-active queer woman and former gender-non-conforming child, I have a lot of experience within LGBTQ-focused spaces, and I felt an affinity to the children and youth in these spaces. Although I am of a different generation and don't know what it is like to be transgender, my queer identity created some interesting dynamics as I interacted with the mostly straight, cisgender parents, and there were moments when I needed to remember to take a step back and separate my personal identity from the work that I was engaging in.

This was especially acute in relation to conversations about children's sexuality, as some parents were averse to talking about the subject, perhaps due in part to parents' learning at the conferences that "sex" and "gender" and "sexuality" are different, which meant that they wanted to emphasize that their transgender child's identity was about gender, not sexuality. However, I felt that there was also a refusal to think about children as sexual beings, as parents often were emphatic that children were too young to have a sexuality. This, combined with an emphasis on

heteronormative narratives,<sup>81</sup> as well as comments by well-meaning, but uninformed, parents made it a difficult space to navigate at times. I had to remember, as one conference organizer advised in his Welcome speech, to meet the parents where they were, to recognize that everyone was on a different journey, and to remember that they were here because they loved their children.

At each of the conferences, I was a participant-observer: attending workshops (parent, professional, and community tracks), eating lunch with other attendees, dancing at the end of conference party, and hanging out at the family pool party. I took copious hand-written notes at each of the workshops (except for instances where presenters or attendees requested anonymity), writing down not only what was said by presenters and audience members, but also my observations with regard to who was attending, what sorts of interactions I observed between people, and how the conference was organized. These turned into typed up field-notes, which I would complete a few days after the conference.

These conferences provided me with the opportunity to meet parents and family members of trans/gender-creative/gay children, as well as professional providers who work with this population, and several of my interviews with parents came from connections I made in these conference spaces. At the first few conferences I attended, I would give people my information and ask them to contact me if they were interested; however, I found it was more fruitful to actually take down their contact information if they were willing to give it to me, as I had a greater

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<sup>81</sup> Parents sometimes emphasized that their child was just a typical girl or a typical boy, referring to gendered expressions and behaviors that fit gender binary norms of what it means to be a boy or a girl. I understand this to be due to their need to explain why their child is transgender, and to have their child recognized as a boy or a girl, as I explored in Chapter Two. Still, it was nonetheless tiring at times to hear this “girls wear dresses” narrative over and over.

chance of them responding to an email from me, rather than depending on them to take the initiative directly. Crucially, at some of the conferences, I met key people within the community, including the founders of a private Facebook group, *Parents of Transgender Children*. These individuals posted my research in the group, providing me with at least five of my first interviews, and at various times my participants reposted my request, which garnered additional interviews.

I told people that I was conducting qualitative research on the experience of parenting transgender, gender-creative, and gay children. As my call for participants stated, “This includes but is not limited to children who have been identified as transgender, gay, gender-creative, pink boys, gender-non-conforming, tomgirls, tomboys, gender-variant, gender-bending, and/or princess boys before the age of 12.” Following each cluster of interviews, I would ask my participants to send my information along to other families they knew, and as I said above, it was posted several times on the *Parents of Transgender Children* Facebook group.

This group was not only a key site for finding participants, but also gives a sense of how rapidly things are changing within this field. When I started this research in 2014, the Facebook group had 700 members, as reported by one of the co-founders Mary Moss at a conference I attended. In an interview from April 2015 a mom said it had grown to over 1800, with a huge influx of members occurring after the suicide of Leelah Alcorn in December 2014 (Interview 25). Then, in June 2015, at another conference, Mary Moss made an announcement during a panel session I attended and said it now had 2500 members. A search for the group on Facebook in June 2016 shows that in a year it has gained another thousand members, and now has

over 3,600 members. I bring these numbers to the readers' attention because it shows how rapidly the community is growing and expanding, which I would argue is due in part to the attention that transgender people -- and transgender children specifically -- are getting in the media and online. This also shows the size of the sample of parents (700-1500) that I was accessing in 2014-2015 when my call for participants was posted, which yielded about 10-15 of my interviews.

From one of my contacts at a conference, I was also able to attend a local parent support group meeting in the larger DMV<sup>82</sup> region, which provided me with a couple more interviews. I do not know exactly how many parents I ultimately gave my info to or emailed, but through these various postings on Facebook groups, list-servs, and snow-ball sampling I was able to conduct 28 interviews with 32 parents from across the U.S. These were done in person when possible (five interviews) either at a public location (like a library or coffee shop) or at the family home, and, in cases where we were too far apart geographically, we used Skype or the phone (23 interviews).<sup>83</sup> All but one of the interviews was recorded, the exception being a mother who last minute decided she wanted to use the phone instead of Skype (Interview 4). As I was unable to record the conversation on my phone, I typed notes as we talked, filling in pieces from memory directly afterward. While I created an outline of questions to use for each interview, I used these mostly as a guide, and my

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<sup>82</sup> DMV refers to DC, MD and Virginia

<sup>83</sup> It is unfortunate that I was not able to do all of my interviews in person, as there were slight differences in the interviews in person versus through Skype. It would have been ideal to be able to interview every family in person in their homes as I was able to capture more details about these families. I was surrounded by family photos, sometimes met the children themselves, and got a clearer picture of who my participants were. Likewise, Skype interviews with video allowed me to gain more non-verbal information—through facial expressions for example—than the two phone interviews that I did. These differences are important to note, but I do not think that they significantly impacted my ability to compare across interviews.



interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and informal. I tried to follow the parents' lead in terms of where the conversation went and what we focused on, giving them space to address the complexities and specificity of their own story.<sup>84</sup>

The process of determining the most salient themes and topics within my data (both field-notes and interviews) was ongoing. After each conference, as I wrote down my field-notes, I would pull out key concepts. Periodically I wrote memos for myself, summarizing my notes and interviews thus far, to help me organize the massive amount of information that I was collecting. Transcription, while tedious and time-consuming, gave me another chance to review the data, and as I transcribed, I also noted major themes and collected key quotations that I would be able to use in my analysis. As all of my participants had given me permission to be in touch about any follow-up questions, in places where there was missing data or I had an additional question, I contacted them through email. I also sent a copy of each transcription to my participants and asked if they had any corrections, changes, or concerns about how I had masked their identity.

After completing the transcription of several interviews, I would write memos to gather together my thoughts and the common threads that I was noticing. I also used Dedoose, the mixed-methods online analytical tool, which I mentioned in Chapter Three for analysis of the demographic information about my sample. Finally,

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<sup>84</sup> In Appendix Three, I have included my Interview Protocol. The questions were not always asked in the exact order/structure given there as I wanted to give parents the space to tell their stories in their own form. However, I always started with the same initial questions, “How many children do you have and how old are they?” and “How would you describe their gender?” and each family was asked every question by the end of the interview. Sometimes I did not directly ask a question but the parents’ recounting of their experience would answer it—for example, in discussing a transition they might describe in detail their experiences with school, in which case I would not need to directly ask how their child expressed themselves at school.

I would spend time writing up summaries of each interview, as this gave me a complete picture of each family, and was helpful in thinking through what was most salient and important to their specific story.

**The Conferences:**

Now that I have explained about my approach in regards to the wider ethnography, and my methodology in regards to data gathering and analysis, I want to explore in greater detail the conferences that were the main sites of research, as well as the demographics of my participants and general findings of the interviews.

First, the conferences: both Gender Odyssey and the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference (PTHC) are in their 15<sup>th</sup> year and are conferences dedicated to serving the transgender and gender non-conforming community. In 2015, the PTHC had about 5000 attendees, and Gender Odyssey<sup>85</sup> had about 1000 attendees, according to conference organizers who commented on these numbers (based on registration data) during their welcome speeches. Both of these conferences have grown from being mostly for the adult trans community to include family and youth programming, as parents seeking information about their children began attending and connecting with each other. At the welcome to Gender Odyssey (2015), founder Aidan Key spoke about the first time he met a parent who had brought her 18 year old trans son to the conference; he was shocked that she was supportive, and that she had such a *young* kid. Now, several years later, there are hundreds of families attending, some with trans kids as young as three and four.

Gender Spectrum, in its eighth year, is an organization specifically geared to

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<sup>85</sup> Gender Odyssey is organized by Gender Diversity, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of trans folks in Seattle.

supporting parents and families of trans or “gender expansive” youth. They have a professional track and a family track, attended by over 1000 people the summer I went in July 2014. Gender Spectrum also co-sponsors Gender Conference East, the first conference specifically for families on the east coast, which will celebrate its third year in November 2016. Every time I attended a conference, the organizers remarked on how much it had grown since it began, from small gatherings of people who could fit in one room, to hundreds, or even thousands, of participants. As I show throughout the dissertation, there is evidence from multiple sites (media/blogs/conferences) that this is a rapidly changing field, with increasing numbers of children coming out, and knowledge from the medical and mental health fields continually shifting and changing with more information.

These conferences provide 101 and beginner workshops for families who are just learning about gender, along with workshops about transitioning in school, how to navigate difficult conversations with family, puberty blockers and medical transition, sibling relationships, surgery, and disclosure. Disclosure is particularly salient for families who have children who socially transition and/or medically transition, who are not easily read as transgender, and are entering a new school or meeting other children/people who do not know. Disclosure refers to the choice to be “out” and visible as transgender or not, replacing the term “stealth,” which can have the negative connotation of keeping a secret. People can choose to be disclosed (letting people know that they are trans), undisclosed (generally keep their trans history/identity private) or low disclosure (tell some, but not others). Concerns about disclosure reflect some of the larger concerns that parents brought up around their

children’s identities—fear for their safety—as well as concerns that their child might change their mind about being out or not as they get older. Once you are disclosed, generally you can’t go back to being undisclosed. In talking to children about disclosure, many people at these conferences, both parents and professionals, emphasized the importance of talking to children about the difference between secrecy, which can create feelings of shame, and privacy, which is something that we all navigate in regard to what we choose to share with others about ourselves and our lives.

There were also conversations at conferences about non-binary identities, an issue being discussed with increasing frequency, especially in connection to how endocrinologists can treat non-binary individuals who want to transition medically and how parents can support their kids who are gender-fluid or gender-creative. While “transgender” has primarily been seen as a binary identity in recent years (especially in the media, as I discuss in Chapter Two), I also saw “transgender” being used as an umbrella term at conferences, an umbrella that includes non-binary, genderfluid, agender, bigender, and other terms for youth who feel outside of the binary of male/female, girl/boy. One conference workshop organizer pointed out that “non-binary expression can be transitional or a landing space,” as some youth will explore a gender-creative/non-binary identity before a binary transition, and other youth will identify as non-binary and not change.

The family conferences are primarily focused on youth and create space for parents to process their feelings about the large amount of information that they are presented with. I personally preferred the community conferences, and I know some

parents who did as well. These are places where parents could meet older trans people, get their perspectives, and be a part of community activism. However, it's true that the conferences focusing exclusively on parents and youth can be smaller, easier to navigate, and thus preferable to parents who are new to the world of gender.

These conferences spaces are vital in providing the most-up-to-date information on transgender and gender-expansive children, and offer access to medical and mental health professionals' workshops. They also show the uneven distribution of knowledge and experiences—some parents have years of experience under their belt, and look forward to the conferences as “family reunions.” Others are showing up, looking a bit shell-shocked, only a couple of weeks after their kid has come out to them. If their kid is entering puberty, there is an added urgency, as they try to get a handle on new concepts of gender, and understand the possible medical options and decisions to be made about blockers, hormones, and surgery.

While the basics—affirming children's identities has the best mental health outcomes, and gender is a “spectrum,” not a binary—often stay the same (at least in the few years I attended), the medical research in particular is a rapidly changing field. Johanna Olson and her co-authors write in a recent study from the LA Gender Clinic,

“The lexicon of gender is constantly evolving, requiring academicians, advocates, and community members who wish to practice cultural sensitivity to find words that most accurately represent cohorts in any given moment.” (J. Olson et al 2015)

In her presentation on puberty blockers at Gender Odyssey, Dr. J. Olson commented that she has one slide—with photos of the human body and the reproductive organs—that she changes pretty much every single conference, updating

the language as it shifts. For example, in regards to puberty, she has moved from saying “boy puberty” to “male-bodied puberty” to the specific “testicular puberty.”<sup>86</sup> Language shapes assumptions about what is possible, natural and biological. Guidelines and protocols for blockers and hormone treatment are also shifting along with the language used to describe the body, as endocrinologists and mental health professionals learn from the children they work with and connect with other medical providers to develop best standards of care.

For me, along with providing a solid foundation on the kind of conversations that were happening around trans and gender-creative children, conferences were vital for the connections that they provided me for the interview section of this research, which I explore in more detail below.<sup>87</sup>

### **The Interviews**

Between July 2014 and June 2015, I conducted 28 interviews with 32 parents, consisting mostly of mothers and a few couples. As three of the families had more than one child who fit my criteria, I ended up with a sample of 31 children. Of this sample, 23 were assigned male at birth, and eight of them were assigned female at birth.<sup>88</sup> Of the children male-assigned at birth (MAAB),<sup>89</sup> 15 of those identified as

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<sup>86</sup> See Dean Spade’s “Purportedly Gendered Body Parts” for a clear explanation of the value in moving away from gendered language like “male” and “female” reproductive organs, and suggestions for words and phrases that medical providers can use instead (Spade 2011).

<sup>87</sup> Talking to some researchers about their unsuccessful attempts to find parents willing to be interviewed reaffirmed the value of meeting people face to face at these conferences. As Fetterman, Fretz and Shaw write in *A Handbook to Ethnography*, “An introduction by a member is the ethnographer’s best ticket into the community” (36). Going to conferences allowed me to avoid being a “faceless researcher” and I was able to build key relationships and networks. (personal email, Madisson Whitman).

<sup>88</sup> In my original proposal, I had hoped for a more even gender distribution, especially since recent numbers from gender clinics show that the ratio of female-assigned children to male-assigned children has evened out (Aitken et al 2015). Anecdotally, parents said that the Facebook group had more male-assigned children than female-assigned children, which may have contributed to the skew. It also

girls at the time of the interview, and four of them were identified as a gender-creative boy or a “pink boy.” There was one child who identified as gender-fluid, and as neither boy nor girl, although the family still used male pronouns. Finally, there were three kids whose identities weren’t clear at the time of the interview, but in the 18 months to two years since then, they have settled into various identities. Two of these “unclear” children have transitioned to live as girls, and one of them identifies as a gay (male) teenager.

Of the eight children assigned female at birth, seven of them identify as boys, and one of them is a masculine-presenting girl. Of the entire sample, 74% of the children were white (23), and the others were black (2), Asian-American (3), or multi-racial (3). In comparison, of the 32 parents that I interviewed,<sup>90</sup> almost all of them (94%) were white (30). Of the white parents, there were some who were parenting adopted children of color (4), and a few parents were parenting bi-racial children (2). There were also two mothers of color (Asian-American and Black-American), parenting children of color (black and multi-racial). These demographics reflect the larger demographics of the conference attendees, who were also mostly white and middle-class, which is probably due in part to the cost of the conference fees,<sup>91</sup> plus lodging and travel.

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remains the case that in regards to gender-creative/gender nonconforming children (as compared to trans kids), tomboys do not get as much attention as princess boys / pink boys / gender-creative boys.

<sup>89</sup> MAAB, or AMAB, male assigned at birth/assigned male at birth, and FAAB, or AFAB, female-assigned at birth/assigned female at birth, is the terminology I use to indicate how these children were identified in regards to sex at birth, as determined by a child’s genitals. This avoids referring to natal “gender” or creating a narrative about “boys becoming girls” or “girls who become boys.”

<sup>90</sup> Three of the interviews included both the mom and dad, and one of them included the mom and step-dad

<sup>91</sup> Although the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference is free, families still have to pay for lodging. As

It is important to note that my sample is not a representative sample of parents across the United States, nor of all parents with transgender/gender-creative children. While my call for participants did not stipulate that parents needed to be supportive, given the conference spaces, support groups, and Facebook groups that I used to find participants, it is not surprising that all of the parents were supportive of their children's identity. Furthermore, it was clear that these were all parents who were invested in research that will help other families accept their trans children.<sup>92</sup> As such, their stories do not reflect the experiences of families who have greatly struggled with their children's identity, or who have rejected them completely.

Additionally, as stated above, the majority of the parents in my sample were white, middle-class, and highly educated, which meant that they may have had an easier time accessing information than other parents. Several of the parents have post-graduate degrees, including PhDs,<sup>93</sup> and commented that they were skilled at doing research and that this helped them find information. Being connected with a

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one mother pointed out this came to \$500 for her and her daughter for the couple of nights they were there (interview 21). The other conferences had \$100-400 registration fees, which increased based on number of family members, and whether you attended the professional track and/or family track. Organizations like Gender Spectrum have scholarships, and student rates, which I and some of the families I interviewed used.

One moment which made it clear the wealth and class privilege assumed at the conferences was during a panel led by medical providers, where a doctor commented that the cost of blockers is not that much. He said, that if you break down \$18,000 (the average annual cost without insurance) per day, it is only about \$3 a day, which is nothing. There was a collective gasp from the audience at that comment, and I whispered to the woman next to me, a parent who I had become acquainted with the day before, that to many people \$3 a day is a lot of money!

<sup>92</sup> Indeed many of these families were participants in multiple studies. At one conference when I approached a mother I had interviewed through Skype and mentioned our interview, she said "which study are you conducting? I have done several, and can't remember them all. In another instance a parent responded to a follow-up email inquiring about my baby—and I said she must have mistaken me with another researcher.

<sup>93</sup> Although I did not collect education demographic information, I noted that the number of PhDs or graduate students working on PhDs was certainly higher than what one might expect in the general population.



university meant that some of the parents also had access to research articles that are not available to the general public via university libraries and journal subscriptions. Their high level of education also may have made them more likely to participate in a study, given their familiarity with the research process.

There are some generalizations that I can make about my sample.<sup>94</sup> All of the parents are supportive of their children's gender identity and sexuality, although some had a more difficult time understanding what was going on, something that especially varied in relation to how old their children are and what region of the country they are living in. Those parents with older teenagers (who were born in the 1990s and early 2000s) had a much harder time finding information when their children were four and five than those who have young children right now, and those living in New England and West Coast states had an easier time in regards to schools and community acceptance compared to those in the South or Midwest.

### Anticipation Work

#### **Recognizing a Child as Transgender/Gender-Creative/Gay**

In this next section, I explore in more detail how parents came to understand their child to be transgender, gender-creative, and/or gay. I argue first, that given the way that all of the parents in my study thought they had a gay child, gender non-conformity in childhood is still thought to be an indication of a queer sexuality. This connection between gender-non-conformity and sexuality is important to consider, because of the way that psychologists historically sought to correct gender non-conforming behavior in order to prevent queer sexualities and transgender identities

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<sup>94</sup> For a list of the interviews—see Appendix 4

(Byrant 2006). Furthermore, even though many parents said they thought they might have a child who would become gay, as I explored in Chapter Three, adults often do not grant children the ability to self-identify as gay.

I also argue---as I do throughout the dissertation, that parents' narratives reflect anticipation work—that is an investment in being able to properly understand the present (in this case, children's most current identities) in an attempt to manage the unknowable future. My interviews show the unfolding, complex, and shifting realities that children and parents are navigating as they try to access different resources and information in a field that is rapidly changing. Parents' anticipation work includes navigating their anxiety around the right decisions for their children as they deal with judgement and blame from others, dealing with grief over the loss of an idealized future, and witnessing the joy and excitement of their children as they are allowed to express themselves.

Each of the families had a different experience in regards to recognizing their child as transgender or gender-creative, and/or gay, an experience which was influenced by their own beliefs around gender norms, their extended family's reaction, and the region that they lived in. However, in general, these families shared concerns about their children's early gendered behavior, which was markedly different than their peers starting around age two or three, as they tended to gravitate towards toys, and clothes of the "opposite" gender.<sup>95</sup> For toddlers, there was a bit

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<sup>95</sup> This was not true across the entire sample. For example, one of the trans boys (Interview 27) in my study went through a princess dress phase, and was pretty girly as a child, though the mom commented that this coincided with kindergarten and was probably due in part to peer pressure. Another mother (Interview 25) said of her trans boy's gender expression, "It is funny, he always wore swirly dresses, and I cut his hair once, but then he got upset when people misgendered him as a—well at that time we thought was misgendering him—as a boy, so he was pretty girly. At that time. But he had a big sister who was extremely girly. My youngest ran around in his sister's dresses. We don't really care, we

more leeway in regards to their interests and “dressing up;” however, as the kids got older, especially for the children assigned male at birth, this gendered behavior was judged more harshly, and parents had to navigate public social situations more carefully due to criticism of their kids’ behavior. Social pressure and disapproval from others increased parents’ anxiety about this gendered behavior, especially in relation to what it might mean for their future identities.

For many of the children assigned female at birth, there was considerably less anxiety from the parents, who thought that their child was a tomboy, which did not raise concerns. However, several of the parents of trans boys also talked about conflict around clothing, especially during formal occasions when their child was expected to wear a dress. All of the children who were assigned female at birth in my sample were 11 and older. One trans boy, 11 year old Kai,<sup>96</sup> transitioned before puberty when he was nine, but the other six had already gone through puberty by the time they transitioned. This confirms other studies that show that many trans boys do not recognize their identity until puberty, as they are able to find a place as a tomboy until their changing body produces anxiety and discomfort (Beemy and Rankin 2011, Gender Odyssey TYFA study fieldnotes). In contrast, my sample of trans girls ranged

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didn’t care what they wore. There wasn’t much stigma involved in wearing particular clothing or not.” Her trans son identifies as gay, as does the trans boy from Interview 27. If we consider that their gender identity is male, their “girly” behavior as kids can perhaps be read as evidence of a queer/gay sexuality, in a similar way that cis boys who act in girly ways are assumed to be gay. Again, I think that there is much more to explore in regards to the links between gender non-conformity and queer sexuality. Furthermore, Interview 27 points out that children may express themselves in a diverse array of clothes if there is not stigma or gendered associations to particular articles of clothing over others.

Given that my call for participants stated I was looking for parents who had known something was different in regards to gender before 12, as I am interested in pre-puberty gender and sexuality, it makes sense that there were few parents in my study who had a child transition after no indication of gender non-conformity in childhood, though this does happen, and came up during workshops/conversations at conferences.

<sup>96</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

from 4-20, with 50% being 11 years old and under. Their atypical gendered behavior was identified much earlier on. The youngest child in my sample, a four year old, was a trans girl who transitioned at three years of age.

All of the parents commented that they or others thought that their child was gay, based on their atypical gender expression as a toddler or pre-k child, although, again, families with tomboys were less concerned with their children's gender, which is also remarked upon in the psychology literature starting in the 1960s (Green 1967, Byrant 2008). "How is gender-bending related to a child's and others' perceptions of its ghostly gayness? Isn't bent gender a primary way through which such haunting, lurking possibility is perceived by others, whether or not their perceptions are 'right'?" (2009, 8). This question by Kathryn Bond Stockton points out that whether children are gay or not, it is gender expression which often brings up the possibility of queerness, and the haunting possibility that this child might be different than expected.

There has been a lot of academic work done to differentiate gender and sexuality. Yet I feel it is too simple to merely consider them separate categories in part because of the way that "bent gender" has been a signal for parents of their children's potential gayness, and also because of the role of gender for many queer people. Gender non-conformity has been part of many gay and lesbian individuals' understanding of their own queer childhood, as seen through retrospective studies (Bailey and Zucker 1995) and the blog, "Born This Way, Born Gay" which collects childhood photos (age 2-12) of LGBTQ people alongside a narrative about the time

they first knew they were gay.<sup>97</sup>

While many parents said that they have since learned that gender and sexuality are different, and that they want to make sure others understand this difference, too, it was nonetheless the ghostly possibility of having a gay child that sent many of them on the path of looking for more information in order to learn about how to respond and how to parent outside the norm. One parent wrote of the process of doing research and learning the difference between gender and sexuality, “I had no idea until I started doing the research and then, oh, okay. We are not in sexuality land, we are in gender identity land, okay, alright, so how do we navigate this particular landscape?” (Interview 23).

Prior to 2006, most of the information available online, through database searches and in bookstores, confirmed to parents that they probably had a child who would grow up to be an adult gay man or lesbian and reassured them that only a tiny percentage of children would become transsexuals. Then, as one parent said, “the literature began changing” as mental health professionals began to differentiate between gender non-conforming kids and possibly transgender kids (Interview 6). Parents mentioned media as being crucial to their understanding of their children, referring to the 20/20 special featuring six year-old Jazz or news articles like the one about the Maines family (Interview 1). One family said it was an episode of *Ugly Betty* featuring a transgender character that let her 11 year-old know that being

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<sup>97</sup> On a personal note, I am unable to separate my tomboy childhood of running around shirtless on a friend’s farm from my understanding of my queer identity, even as I know that gender and sexuality are not necessarily correlated. My sister, who was even more of a tomboy than me, is now a straight, femme woman. I am not trying to argue that there is an essential, biological connection between gender non-conformity and sexuality, but to point out the ways that social ideas around gender non-conformity still connect it with sexuality. And that an individual’s lived experience of their gender and sexuality can be more complex than a separate model of gender and sexuality is able to address.

transgender was a possibility, although it was an adult character, which led her daughter to believe it was something she could only do as an adult (Interview 2). *The Transgender Child* (Brill and Pepper 2008) was also cited by many families as being crucial to their understanding of their child.

The families who had young children around seven and under had the easiest time finding information about their children (examples: Interview 10, 11, 15, 17, 19).<sup>98</sup> They quickly found information searching on Google with phrases such as “boy wants to wear a dress” or “girl wants to be a boy” or “son wants to cut off his penis” which led them to pages of information on transgender children. This access to information online means that there were at least a couple of families with young children who socially transitioned their kids using the information they found online (for example Interview 15) without taking their child to see a therapist. Guided by their children’s happiness, they felt that they were making the right decisions, and given that their children were no longer struggling, felt that there was no need to consult mental health professionals. This is different than the typical media story where children are diagnosed with gender identity disorder or gender dysphoria and need a medical expert to verify their identities.<sup>99</sup>

All of the parents in my interview sample talked about doing research to find information. Even those folks who had links (through their own identities, or friends

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<sup>98</sup> Lili’s mom (interview 9) commented that even for her it was difficult to find information. Her child was 11 at the time of our interview, and she said when she had first looked for information 5-6 years earlier it had been hard to find, compared to the wealth of information available to kids now.

<sup>99</sup> Some families (Interview 9 and 11) commented that they were required to get a diagnosis of gender dysphoria their child in order to move forward with school transitions, to have access to bathrooms, etc. This shows how children are also affected by the medicalization of trans stories and the medical gatekeeping that adult trans folks deal with (Spade 2006)

and family members) with the larger LGBTQ community talked about the need to search out studies and resources directed specifically at children. Mothers usually led the way with research and then shared the information with their husbands, something that Gray, Sweeney, Randazzo and Levitt (2016) also found in their interviews with 11 parents of trans kids. Gray et al also point out the way that parents become experts, and then often advocates, on the subject, a finding that was also confirmed by my study. For example, one of the mothers I interviewed kept a binder of articles and news stories (Interview 18), another said she was up all night for three weeks doing research (Interview 16), while another commented on how she is a big nerd and into the sciences, and so she devoured all the information she could find on transgender children (Interview 10). Another mother talked about how she felt like she was doing a separate PhD on trans kids alongside her actual PhD (Interview 19), and another talked about how hard it was to sift through the research to find valid studies (Interview 23). Again, the academic inclinations of my sample are probably not representatives of parents as a whole, but are rather a particular cohort of well-educated parents. Still, this type of research reflects the type of preparation that parents engage in when they anticipate that their child might not be typical, and are concerned about their behavior and future. My study participants who did not have the same level of academic education as others, described a similar search for information—initially talking to friends and family, and then looking online for more specific advice and groups (for example Interview 26 and 28).

Families with kids who were very insistent in their identity, with statements such as “I am a boy” or “I am a girl,” had an easier time understanding that their child

was trans, although, again, this depended on the year that their kid was born.

Courtney, who transitioned as a teenager, had declared at three that she was a girl, but her mom didn't know how to respond, and when she searched for information (in the late 1990s/early 2000s), everything she found discussed adult trans people and adult transition (Interview 2). For many of the younger children, their parents found information more readily available and/or had seen a television special about trans kids, and therefore could connect their children's words with an identity and possible transition.

Some of the trans kids in the sample were described by their parents as having severe gender dysphoria—including three of the young trans girls (Interviews 10, 12, 26). As I have discussed in previous chapters, gender dysphoria refers to the discomfort and distress that trans people experience in relation to their physical body and their internal sense of gender and self, and it is also the name for the official diagnosis in the DSM. For these three children, gender dysphoria meant an intense dislike of their sexual anatomy, efforts to hide their body, and desire for surgery as soon as possible. While these kids also expressed their gender as very feminine from a young age, it was the extreme nature of their statements about their body that led their parents to search for information to help them. For parents with kids who didn't seem to be uncomfortable with their body, it was a bit harder to know if their child was transgender or not, especially given the fact that discomfort with the body was part of the gender identity disorder diagnosis, continues to be part of the gender dysphoria diagnosis, and is ultimately seen as a marker of a transgender kid. However, it is important to note that not all adult trans people choose surgery, and not



all trans kids are unhappy with their body.

In contrast to those kids who said “*I am* a boy” or “*I am* a girl,” many of the gender-creative boys said “*I want* to be a girl.” For some of these parents, a conversation about gender or why they wanted to be a girl showed that the statement was indicative of a desire to wear dresses and play with feminine things without negative scrutiny, rather than being from an internal desire to be a girl (Interview 9). However, the line between gender-creative and transgender is not always easy to discern. Sometimes a child who ultimately identifies as transgender will have used the language “I want to be a girl” because they did not have other words to describe their feelings, and were taught that they *were* a boy based on anatomy.

The parent of the one gender-nonconforming child assigned female at birth said that, as a kid, E. told teachers to call her “he” and wanted a penis. However, she never stated “I am a boy,” and has now grown up into a teenager who expresses herself in an extremely masculine way (with short hair, baggy clothes, and suits for formal occasions), but uses female pronouns and doesn’t appear to want to transition. A bit later in this chapter, I discuss in more detail how parents’ navigate gender when their children’s path is unclear and transition is a possibility but not a certainty.

### **Mother-blaming, Anxious Anticipation and Fabulous Futures**

While parents’ internal reactions to their children’s gendered behavior varied—depending on their own investments in creating more gender-neutral or gender-diverse spaces—all of them were concerned about community and public responses to their children’s behavior. Some parents talked about the negative reactions--stares, expressions of disgust, and snide comments--they received while walking in public with a child who appeared to be a boy wearing a princess dress

(Interview 23, 11). Mothers often dealt with questions about what they had done to cause their child to act that way. One mother had to fight for several years to gain custody of her child after her ex-husband claimed she was abusing her child and “making” “him” wear dresses (Interview 21), and another family almost lost custody of their child after they were reported to Child Protective Services (Interview 15).

In quite a few of the interviews, the moms talked about feeling the need to prove that they had not made their child behave or be this way. For example, Alice said she always put out boys’ clothing as an option for her kid to show that it was Ryan’s choice and not hers, even though she knew that her five year-old would choose the girls’ clothes every single time (Interview 12). Angelica, the mother of an 11 year-old trans girl, said it was hard dealing with all of the blame that was directed at her for Lilli’s behavior and identity, mostly from religious members of her extended family, and that “people made me feel like a crazy person, like it was my fault that she was transgender” (Interview 9).

The anticipation of disapproval and blame means that parents have to be ready to explain who their children are—and spend energy trying to create space for their kid to freely express themselves. Alex’s mom, who readers met in the introduction to this chapter, talked about the exhausting emotional labor of preparing for playdates and navigating school, trying to get people to understand her (at the time) gender-nonconforming kid (Interview 18). Another mother of a four year-old trans girl summarizes succinctly the pressure to explain to others,

“Part of what parents’ experience, and this is true for me, is that you spend a lot of time constructing a narrative that you can give to another person that makes sense. There is this pressure to prove it, that

your kid really is trans and that you didn't make it happen, you didn't foist it on them or something.” (Interview 17)

Feeling under scrutiny while out in public, parents were often anticipating a reaction and felt that they had to put their “mama bear” guard up to defend their child (Interviews 23 and 9). For one family, it took a while for them to feel comfortable taking their guard down after moving to a more accepting state. The mom recounts an outing to a pool where someone was staring at her 9 year-old gender-creative son,

“I am thinking, okay, she is either, [noticing his medical condition] or she is looking at his long hair and trying to figure out if he is a boy or a girl? [...] so I am staring her down, as she is staring at him and I am totally ready to be like “yeah, what are you going to say about my kid,” you know. and she is like, “uh, how do you, can I ask you a question?” and I am like yeah, and she says “how do you [deal with his hair] being long. I mean I love it, but how do you keep it out of his face when he is, you know reading.” and he usually has a head-band, so I said, “well he usually has a head-band” but it was just funny, all the anger drained out of me, and I was assuming she was coming from this bad place because that had been my experience in [mid-atlantic state] and she was just like, “my son is trying to grow out his hair and it has gotten to this length and I am just trying to figure out how to, just because it drives me crazy when it gets in his face,” and I am like cracking up, I am like, oh my god, I have been recognizing that in myself that I have this mama-bear, hyper-vigilant dynamic that I am trying to let go of and kind of come to a place where people aren't coming from a place of judgment or a place of ready to say something rude, that they are actually, they are either going to say it, or they are going to come from a good place [...] I have that piece of myself that I am trying to unlayer and try to come from a place where I am assuming that everyone is coming from a good place.” (Interview 7)

It can be hard for parents to relax when out with their children in public, especially when kids are visibly gender non-conforming. Often, kids who transition and fit within the gender binary experience fewer problems in public than those who are gender-creative or are in the middle of transition. As I note in various places

throughout the dissertation and explore in Chapter Three, ambiguity around gender is hard to navigate, and can be subject to policing by people in public.

Another big concern that comes with the realization of having a gay, gender-creative or transgender child is the fear that they will be unhappy, or that they will suffer from discrimination and even violence. Parents' fear should not be taken lightly, as violence is all too often a reality for trans and gender non-conforming people. There were families who lost their entire friend circle and social community (Interview 10), moved to protect their child (Interview 7, 15), or had to switch schools to find a safe environment for their child (Interview 9, 13, 18). Additionally, several of my families had heartbreaking stories about their children's depression, anxiety, and extreme discomfort with their body. These interviews were often highly emotional for both the participant and myself, as they detailed experiences with very young children threatening suicide. One family had the scary experience of having their four year-old unbuckle her seat belt and try to jump out of the car while they were on the highway (Interview 10). Another family, the parents of 10 year-old Ryan, spoke of the "quiet desperation" that they see in their daughter, as she anxiously awaits the time when she can start blockers, and worries about whether puberty has started or not (Interview 12). Her parents talked about the work of holding space and comforting her while she waits for the body that she wants.

These stories are important, and for some of these children, transition is literally a matter of life or death. Even if their child had not shown signs of being depressed, all the parents spoke about the fear of suicide, and many quoted the statistic that 41% trans people attempt suicide (Grant, Mottet and Tanis 2013). As I

discuss in Chapter Three on the blogs, the threat of violence, the fear of harassment, and the narrative of death haunts many of the narratives of parenting these kids.

In a couple of the interviews that were conducted after the death of Leelah Alcorn in December 2014,<sup>100</sup> parents mentioned Leelah either in reference to the rate of trans suicide, and/or to emphasize that the parent does not want to make the same mistake that Leelah Alcorn's parents made by not accepting their daughter (Interview 16, 25):

“With the Leelah Alcorn suicide over Christmas, that has made people realize that I can't just ignore the fact that my kid doesn't conform, I have to address it and support them... The statistics say that 40% of our kids will attempt suicide before they are young adults, and that is just a nightmare, it is horrible, you can't just sit there now and say, well I did my best to make my kid fit in or whatever, these kids are dying!”  
(Interview 25)

In the year after Leelah Alcorn died, there were several more suicides of trans teenagers, including 4 in San Diego alone (Abeni 2015). That young people are dying, and that children as young as 4 are suicidal, is horrible. And yet, as I have argued in Chapter Two, we need to be wary about the suicide narrative being the only one that is told. Ethnographer David Valentine writes in his chapter “The Calculus of Pain” that we must be critical about the way that violence is experienced, what it means to different people, and how it is “mounted as a claim” (2007, 205). He understands “violence as a series of discourses which are being used to help constitute transgender experience, to make it something that people should care about, write books about, legislate about” (211) and argues that violence thus becomes a way through which the category transgender is constituted. We should

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<sup>100</sup> I discuss in more detail the media attention to Leelah Alcorn's death in Chapter Two.

absolutely care about the stories of pain, hurt, and trauma, but I argue that it should not be the only reason that we care about gender-creative and transgender children or allow them to freely express themselves.

Furthermore, stories that only revolve around trauma and suicide make other possibilities invisible. While many of the families had difficult stories to tell, the majority had relatively easy experiences in terms of their children's expression and/or transition. While parents who were in New England and West Coast states had an easier time because of living in more liberal, LGBTQ-aware communities, quite a few families were in rural communities, where they expected to have conflict, and did not (e.g Interview 1, 3 and 13). One mom of a 9 year-old trans girl who transitioned in second grade in a rural area remarked on her surprise at the level of acceptance they experienced, especially given where they live.

“When I look back, I am like, holy crap, we did that. We did that as a family, even bigger--as a community--we didn't have to move, we didn't have like hate mail, or anything, you know what I mean? You hear horror stories and think, well, that is going to happen to us, and it didn't, and it blows my mind really.” (Interview 3)

All of my participants, even the ones who had children who still struggled with anxiety and dysphoria, commented on how their children have blossomed since transitioning or being allowed to express themselves freely. One mother with a gender-creative son said that she immediately saw an “energetic shift” in him as soon as he was allowed to wear dresses (Interview 7). Another mom commented on the fact that her child started humming again after she was allowed to express herself freely (Interview 18). Humming, skipping, singing, flitting around, being loud, energetic, dancing: these were all descriptors of how children's behavior changed

once they were allowed to transition and/or wear the clothing/hair styles that they wanted.

These images of content children are starkly contrasted to the image that is common in the media and general literature on transgender children: grieving parents. Almost every television special includes a clip of a mother or father crying about the loss of their “daughter” or “son.” Even media coverage of Jazz, who is usually held up as the example of a happy trans child (Tourjee 2016), often includes moments with her mom crying about missing her “little boy” (ABC *My Secret Self*, OWN *I am Jazz*). Feelings of grief/loss were reflected in some of the interviews that I did as well, although parents made it clear that this is not something they want to share with their kids. The mother of Michael, a 13 year-old trans boy, said she is still mourning her daughter but that she doesn’t want him to feel that he is putting her through something, so she keeps the sadness to herself. She talked about how PFLAG<sup>101</sup> has been a great place for her to be able to process her feelings with other parents who know what she is going through, while protecting her child from her feelings. When these narratives become accessible to children, they can have negative effects on their sense of self and can contribute to feelings of shame.

In one of my interviews, the mom talked about a session with a therapist, where her four year-old was asked about pronouns. The therapist said (paraphrased), “you say a girl, but your parents still call you “he,” why is that?” Bailey responded that her parents’ are accustomed to “he” and she knows it would be hard for them to

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<sup>101</sup> PFLAG (originally Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is a national organization which connects LGBTQ people with family, friends, and allies. They have regional and local chapters across the US, and volunteers host support groups for parents and friends, as well as LGBTQ people and youth.

switch. This was an intense emotional moment for Bailey’s mom, as she saw her four year old trying to protect them, and felt that she was failing in her parental responsibility to protect her child. Immediately after that session, Bailey fully transitioned to living as a girl, with “she” pronouns being used by her parents and brother.

Martin et al’s study of advice books for parents of gay and lesbian children note the prevalence of a grief narrative in regards to parents’ reactions to a child coming out. When I was a young teen, I read one such advice book for parents of gay children (it was the only LGBTQ-related book available in my local library), which emphasized that having a gay child can feel like the worst thing in the world to a parent and described the grieving process. I am glad that I read this after I told my parents (who were accepting), or I would not have had the courage to do so and “ruin their lives.” Again, while I want to acknowledge and validate parents’ feelings, it is important to think about the places that these narratives travel and the larger implications in regards to what they are claiming about gender and sexual identities.

Mental health professionals in workshops I attended at conferences advised their colleagues to create space for parents’ feelings of grief/feelings of loss, but emphasized that they should help clients be clear about what they are grieving. They are grieving the loss of an idea of who their child was, not the actual child. It seemed that a narrative of loss was present more often for the parents in my study who were able to name clearly what they felt they were losing—the image of their child getting married and giving birth to a child, for example (Interview 8), or the sadness of having to put photos away of their baby girl because their trans son doesn’t want to



see them anymore (Interview 28). For some, the grief/sadness is because they didn't know that their child was hurting and didn't have sufficient information on gender, thus their grief reflects their wish to change the past (Interview 2, Interview 13).

It is important to note that this narrative of loss/grief was not universal. Thirteen year-old Emily's mom said she has not felt any sense of loss, she has always let Emily lead them and make her own choices, and she didn't grieve her "son" as she has a very happy Emily (Interview 1). Similarly, ten-year old Ryan's mom commented that while some folks have had a sense of loss, she did not, because "this kid is amazing." Ryan's family also already had three boys, so she commented that they may not have been as invested with Ryan's gender as parents with only one or two kids might be. By the time Ryan transitioned at five, she had always been a sparkly, feminine, fairy-loving kid, so it didn't feel like a huge change (Interview 12). During a parent panel where the topic of grief came up, an audience member, an older white man, said that there are other possibilities than loss:

When my 17 year old grandkid came out, I had a visceral reaction—a bolt of energy running through me. There were no words. And the feeling was, of course I loved her, and that her gender was only important to me in so much that it was important to her. I also had this incredible desire to defend her. (conference notes, Gender Odyssey 2015)

One mom of a 15 year-old trans boy, also commented that she didn't feel a loss; she had never assumed to know what the future looked like for her child. However, her husband struggled quite a bit with feelings of grief, as he clearly had invested a lot in those future ideas. She said, thinking about the loss of a future,

"You aren't losing something that wasn't there. Why would you even plan on that, that isn't the way the future works." (Interview 27)

In response to my question about what she imagines for the future, which is what prompted our discussion of loss, she said,

“I guess I would say that the closest thing that I have [to thinking about the future]...is that when I watch videos or read things by adult trans men I just feel happy and positive because I feel that they are out there living their lives you know, jobs, relationships, families, happy, and so even though I am not specifically visualizing what Greg will be doing, I can imagine him as an adult, male, living in the world, happily. I guess that isn't an exact answer to your question but that the closest I can come up with.” (Interview 27)

Even for those who felt grief, the fact that their child was happy was important, and some talked about the excitement of realizing that the future was open. For example, one mother talked about the loss she felt when her trans son came out to her, because he was not a heterosexual girl, and wouldn't be getting married (as a bride) and giving birth to children (Interview 8). This is a notably heteronormative future, based on the assumption that happiness comes from a heteronormative family, per Sara Ahmed's work. And yet, as this mother found, happiness does not depend on heterosexuality or being cisgender. Indeed, when I asked her about what she imagines in the future now, she said, “my vision of the future is kind of open. I don't know what is going to happen, it is kind of exciting, you know...it is new and exciting, my child is happy” (Interview 8).

At many of the conferences there were youth (teen) panels, panels of trans adults, and panels of parents of trans kids. These were always packed, often by parents of younger trans kids who were interested in hearing stories from older trans folks and other parents who had, as they described it “already traveled this path.” It seemed from comments that parents made to me, as well as the questions in the Q and A session, that parents were looking for information about the possible future of their child, from people who were a few years, or even decades, older than their child. As I have said throughout the dissertation, given the lack

of research, parents search for information in as many forms as they can find it. Indeed, there is something powerful from listening to others' stories that cannot be captured through studies and online research.

I want to talk about two panels in particular that address issues of gender expression, the use of particular language, and the fear of regret. One was a teen panel, and the other an adult panel. First, I will discuss the teen panel which included four teenagers—two who were male-assigned at birth and two who were female assigned at birth. The panel focused on these young people's experiences in childhood, plans for the future (one of the guys was headed for college in the fall), and advice they had for parents. All of the panel participants identified as either trans women or trans men. Two of them had fairly binary identities, and made comments about being a typical guy and girl. In contrast, the other two had genderqueer identities, and throughout their narration of their transition story commented on the social construction of gender and complicated notions of what it means to be “gender non-conforming” or to be a girl or boy. The trans girl who had a binary identity was the youngest on the panel at age 15, and had recently transitioned. She was also the only non-white person, identifying as Puerto Rican. Notably, in describing herself, she used the word “transsexual” instead of transgender, calling herself a “transsexual girl.”

Later that evening, as I was socializing with some of the parents, a discussion arose about this young woman's use of the word “transsexual.” One parent said that it was clear that the girl had only just come out, and didn't yet know the correct terminology. In the course of the conversation, it was clear that parents were upset about the way that the term “transsexual” makes people think about sex and thus think that being trans it is about sexuality, rather than being about gender identity. They absolutely do not want their children

to be considered transsexual. Here we see how members of particular communities shape and police words and language. Implicit with parents' insistence that their children were not transsexual was the idea that this is an adult term that is associated with sexuality and deviance, in contrast to the word "transgender" which is seen as innocent and more fitting for kids. Furthermore, these (cisgender) adults' were sure that the girl's use of transsexual was from ignorance, rather than self-naming, which points to the ways that children and youth are often denied agency in describing or understanding themselves. Ethnographer David Valentine analyzes the way that "transgender" has been institutionalized, and shows that individuals' use of other terms like "queen" or "gay" are often understood to be signs of mis-education, rather than being related to intersections of race, class and gender, and alternate understandings of gender and sexuality. It is notable that this 15 year old transsexual girl was the only non-white person on the teen panel, the youngest, and the one with the least support from her family, which points to ways that she may be accessing language and communities that are different than the typical transgender, white, middle-class child/youth.

At a different conference I attended a panel of trans adults: a couple trans men, a trans woman, a non-binary identified individual, and a woman who had transitioned but then returned to live as a woman. The panel was a part of the "Family Track" and was organized with an audience of parents in mind. Of particular interest was the woman who detailed her experience of transition and then "de-transition"—a term which refers to returning to live/identify as the gender that one is assigned at birth. For this particular individual this meant stopping testosterone treatments, using "she" pronouns again, and returning to a female name.

One of the biggest fears that parents have is that their children will change their mind, a situation that is seen as particularly fraught in regards to irreversible medical treatments. This woman said to the parents, “I am your worst nightmare, and I am okay. I don’t have regrets and I am happy.” She had socially and medically transitioned, and lived for over a decade as a trans man, losing contact with her family in the process. She said that she eventually came to understand better how histories of trauma had affected her experience of her body and her feelings about gender. She decided to stop testosterone, and to transition back to living as a woman. However, she does not regret the decisions she made, and is still active within the trans community. While she spoke about the importance of exploring the reasons behind dysphoria before choosing transition, she also presents the possibility that one might live life in a variety of genders and that our identities might shift over time.

The narrative of de-transition is not one that is frequently found within the media, or even within conference spaces, and unfortunately the few stories of de-transition that are available in the media often make universal claims about how this proves that trans identities are a delusion and that no one should transition (Heyer 2015). This is one area that needs to be explored more, an understanding of various experiences with gender and a variety of transition narratives is essential. Knowing the stories of people who have decided that medical transition, and/or living as a gender different than they were assigned at birth no longer fits their identity can enrich our understanding of how people know themselves and make decisions about their bodies. Again, the perspective of this woman on the panel was significant because of the fact that she was speaking to parents who are worried about the regret narrative or the idea that their children might change their minds. Her message to them, was so what? “I am okay.” Parents are always anticipating the future, but the future is

not always predictable. This woman emphasized the importance of supporting their children in the now, rather than being concerned about a linear path and a possible transition that goes from point A to point B.

### **Navigating Uncertainty**

This focus on the now is a crucial point that I explore in the next section.

While many of the families in my study had reached a clear understanding of their children's identities and it didn't seem like their children would be changing, there were three families in the sample who were still trying to figure out what might happen as their children continued to grow and learn about themselves and about gender (Interview 5, 6 and 19). All of these children were assigned male at birth, and were at varying ages and points of development at the time of the interviews.<sup>102</sup> Their stories, particularly from the specific moment in time that I captured them, are useful for understanding how parents navigate ambiguity and uncertainty. As an audience member stated during a non-binary workshop at Gender Odyssey, "as a culture we are uncomfortable with ambiguity," and it can be one of the hardest things that parents of trans/gender-creative child deal with. A therapist at another conference workshop I attended said in regards to helping parents, "The three hardest things to deal with are anxiety, ambiguity, ambivalence" (PTHC, field notes June 4th 2015). These three case studies that I will focus on here, show in particular the work that is required of parents in order to be comfortable with "not knowing." They also show-case the value in keeping space open for children as children attempt to understand their identities.

The first case study focuses on an interview (# 6) with a mother about her 15

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<sup>102</sup> I wrote their case studies based on the information I had at the time of the interviews, although, as noted above, since then two of the kids have since transitioned to living as girls, and one has declared a gay male identity.

year-old child, whom she adopted from Eastern Europe when he was a baby. Timothy was very feminine from the beginning, and has always been a very friendly, social, and expressive person. Around four or five, he started saying that he wished he was a girl. The therapist they were seeing for his brother's psychiatric conditions told the family to force Timothy to accept that he was a boy and to play with boy things, so they did that for a time, but finally allowed him to play more with dolls and with girls in the neighborhood. The research that Rebecca, Timothy's mother, looked at suggested that most boys who like feminine things would grow up to be gay, and friends suggested she connect him with gay mentors. Although she didn't directly pursue this, the family is part of a larger dance community where Timothy had role-models and was supported in his gender expression.

As he got older, Rebecca said she realized that the "literature was changing, it was saying that if they expressed this need from an early age, and it was persistent, then it could be something different, and maybe he should explore whether he wanted to be a girl." Unfortunately, her now ex-husband was not in agreement with allowing Timothy to explore a feminine self-expression. At age 11 Timothy had a girlfriend, and he said she was gay too; she identified as a lesbian and clearly saw him as a girl. He then began identifying more as a gay boy, but said that he wanted to change his body and asked how that could be done. At 13 he was connected with a therapist through a local gender clinic who has been helping him explore his options. Recently, he began taking Lupron to stop the effects of testosterone, though he has already gone through puberty and medically he cannot do anything else until he turns 18, as his dad will not consent to a medical transition. Some days, he says that he is a gay boy, other

times a trans girl, other days he thinks he may be a cross-dressing gay man. Rebecca allows him to express himself freely, and is trying to give him the time to figure it out for himself.

When I asked her what it was like to live with not knowing what his identity would be in the future, she said “It is weird, but you know, I have learned that life hands you things and you keep going. I am not concerned that I have to know. I am concerned that he knows what he wants to do eventually but I don’t have to know right now.” This emphasis on being okay with “not knowing” was evident in many of the interviews with parents. Timothy’s story also demonstrates the change in research available to parents, and how parents in my studies used the literature to guide them in their reactions to their children. As we will see in the third case-study, some parents of very young children today are more open to the possibility of transition in part because of the new information available to them which acknowledges the possibility of a childhood transition, rather than only theorizing about adult identities.

Next, we will consider the story of Malcolm and Phillip, 10 year-old gender-creative twins (Interview 5). While the twins had very similar gender expression from an early age, as they approach puberty their paths seem to be diverging, and they illustrate some of the complexities that parents navigate as they try to figure out who their children are. This interview also brought up a lot of questions for me about my role as a researcher, as I had to resist the urge to jump to conclusions about these children’s identities and my own judgments about what the parents should do based on my own knowledge. I had to remember that like each of these families, I am inhabiting a particular temporality, knowledge web and perspective, which may not



neatly match this family's reality.<sup>103</sup>

Malcolm and Phillip have loved all things sparkly and pink since they were two or three, used to put dish-towels on their head as hair, and used to make skirts out of blankets. If they had been allowed to they would have worn dresses every day to elementary school, but their mother, Anne, kept most of their dressing up at home out of concern for their safety. Creative, kind, and somewhat anxious kids, they have been growing in confidence in recent years about their love of dressing up and ballet, and at ten, they continue to dress in as much finery as possible in Anne's house, and sometimes in public, but must be in traditional boy mode at their dad's.

Anne suspects that both of them would have chosen to live as girls when they were younger, because it would be easier than being a boy who likes girl things, however, Phillip is now secure in his boy identity, and based on recent crushes seems to indicate a gay sexuality. He got into some conflict at school last year (at age nine), when he told a boy he wanted to marry him, and his mom talked to him about how not everyone is okay with boys loving boys, which was a shock to him, and came with a great deal of shame. She advised him that he was too young for relationships and romance, and should focus on friendship, and continues to explain to him what terms like "gay" and "gender-creative" mean in order to help him develop a positive self-identity. While Phillip's storyline seems to be clear—from gender-creative toddler to gay boy—his twin Malcolm's story shows the ambiguity that can often accompany parenting gender-creative children. Even though they both had similar

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<sup>103</sup> It turns out that my predictions were right, given what I currently know about Malcolm's gender identity and transition in spring 2016. However, there are multiple ways that this story could have ended.

gender expression as toddlers and young children, Malcolm's identity is still being determined.

Malcolm is, as his mother describes him, the more "flamboyant" twin and at age 4, said that he was a girl. He hasn't shown distress about his body, but in his writing refers to himself as "she." Anne has talked to Malcolm about puberty blockers, as he is nervous about puberty and doesn't want to become a man. It is still not clear to them though, what his path will be like, and Anne is hesitant to "expose him to the trans stuff" because she doesn't want to encourage him, she wants him to come to those conclusions himself. She has talked to him about going away on a day trip to a new place where he could try being a girl, but he hasn't pressed the issue, and they haven't had time yet.

She has been a part of a national parent list-serve through Hopkins for many years, and told me that recently there have been heated posts by parents of "pink boys" who are frustrated with the focus on transgender children. They want more support for "little gay children" and are concerned about the idea that if a boy wears a dress he must be transgender, arguing that it might be causing parents to rush the idea of transition at a time when the child's ideas of gender are still fluid.

Ultimately, Anne is open to the possibility that Malcolm might be transgender, and would support him in transition if that is what he decides to do, but it is clear that she would prefer to have two gay sons, rather than a transgender child. This was something reflected in the narratives of most of the parents in my sample who had gender-creative children: they were open to the possibility that their child might be transgender, but clearly viewed it as undesirable, sometimes because of

financial concerns about medical transition, sometimes because of not wanting their child to physically change their body, and most often because of concern about their child's safety. These were often concerns shared by parents of children who had transitioned, especially in regards to thinking about their children's physical safety and the money required for medical interventions.

On the other hand, parents whose children had transitioned to a binary gender commented that it was easier now because their child fits into the gender binary box, and has a place within the social landscape of their community and school. Especially in those instances where people do not know the child is trans, people do not take a second glance at their daughter in a dress the way that they did when she was assumed to be a boy. Many parents commented about how being in a grey, ambiguous, gender non-conforming space is harder than having a child who fits into the binary, even if that is through a transition.

A few of my families lived a double-life for a few years, where their child expressed one gender and identity at home, and another in public. One of these families has a six year-old trans daughter who, prior to transition, was wearing girl clothes at home while identifying as a boy and wearing boy clothes in public for the most part. She once wore pink cleats while on a co-ed soccer team, which garnered some negative comments. Her mom commented on this time of in-between being the hardest part:

“I think it was the uncertainty. The not-knowing. Now she looks like a girl. You would never know. But before she looked like a boy wearing girls' clothes, so when we would go out people would look at us, people would say things to her, people would say things to us, and it was the uncertainty. The stress of having to keep up two different identities, two different identities in different places, she would throw

a lot of tantrums, and people would ask a lot of uncomfortable questions.” (Interview 11)

Part of the stress was due to not knowing what Amy wanted, and how she identified, especially as they didn’t want to push her a particular way. One of the other families had a different experience: they said it was tricky logistically when their kid was Emily at home and a boy in public, especially in regards to clothes shopping, but overall it was not stressful. Emily, aged 13, was present at this interview (because she wanted to be, and her mom gave her permission to be), and she commented on that time as being “fun” (Interview 1).

Both groups of parents--those with trans kids and those with gender-creative children--work to affirm normative gender narratives in their own way, and the idea of “happiness” is often referenced in regards to their decisions. As queer theorist Sara Ahmed points out, happiness can be used as a way of disciplining and enforcing heteronormativity. Of course, it is completely valid for parents to seek happiness for their children; most people want to be happy. However, Ahmed argues that we must be careful that in our pursuit of happiness, and in our construction of what happiness looks like, that we do not presume that happiness comes from heterosexuality and gender normativity. Malcolm’s mom worries that if he transitions he will be unhappy because he will not fit into society, the assumption here seems to be that you can’t be happy and trans,<sup>104</sup> which is a narrative which many trans folks are trying to disavow.

When I asked Anne what it was like to parent while unsure of what Malcolm’s identity would be, she said:

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<sup>104</sup> This is part of the despair that Leelah Alcorn felt, as detailed in her suicide note; the idea that since she couldn’t transition pre-puberty, she could never be happy.

“It is just trying to be comfortable with the unknown. Everyone in our society tries to box you into something, pin-point you, define you, see how they can make sense of you... We went to the gender conference last year, and that was interesting and the emphasis was on being comfortable with the unknown and the nebulous aspect of it, taking the lead from the kids.”

This idea of taking the lead from the children was something that was echoed in many of my interviews, and while it is clear that sometimes children do not always have the space to make free choices (for example, in 15 year-old Timothy’s case, where his dad would not allow a medical transition), in general, these families reflect parenting philosophies that focus on the autonomy of children to define themselves. Catherine Hyde, regional director of PFLAG, commented in one of her conference workshops that at this particular social moment we are seeing a cultural shift, not only in reference to information about trans identities, but also in the way that parents interact with their children compared to generations past. It is no longer expected that children will be seen and not heard; parents engage in deeper conversations with children than they used to. She said, “We are changing our ideas about what they [children] know, and how they come into the world.” This is an argument that I also want to make in relationship to my research on trans children: the increasing numbers of transgender children are not only expanding notions of who can be transgender, but also are shifting ideas about children’s ability to understand themselves and their gender from an early age.

To return to these particular case studies, this theme—of allowing a child the autonomy of identity—is one that was present in my third case study (Interview 19). Heather had one of the youngest kids in my sample, 4.5 year old Russell, and was also raising his younger baby brother, ten-month old Arthur. A few months before the

interview, Russell, who has always gravitated towards girls' toys and pink clothes told Heather and her husband, "you guys want me to be a boy, but I want to be a girl." Since then they had begun allowing him to express himself more as a girl, but he said he would not *become* a girl until his hair grew out, and wanted to still be called "Russell" and for his parents to use male pronouns. Since his announcement, Heather has been doing a lot of research on gender expression, and while she initially only found information on conversion therapy,<sup>105</sup> she eventually found books like *The Transgender Child* and *Gender Born, Gender Made* which discuss the possibility of childhood transition and emphasize following a child's lead. Until Russell made his statement about wanting to be a girl, she assumed he was going to grow up to be gay, not transgender, as all the studies she had read up to that point emphasized that only a minuscule number of children are actually transgender.

It was clear that while I was interviewing her, she was also interviewing me, asking me about what I had found in my study, and if I had read the various articles and books that she had. The dynamic between us is illustrated in Tey Meadow's work, where she argues that parents of gender-variant children are engaged in ethnographic work with each other, trying to figure out where their children fit on the gender spectrum. Although Heather was fairly confident that Russell would transition that upcoming summer, she was clearly trying to think about all the different possibilities, and I was another source of information for her.

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<sup>105</sup> She was searching on psychological databases through her connection with a university, and initially found Kenneth Zucker's research. As I have mentioned elsewhere, Zucker argues that children's gender is malleable, and believes that being transgender is an undesirable outcome, and therefore he tells parents to encourage their children to conform to gender norms, and become comfortable with their body.

In particular, she felt uncertain about a future transition because he had *not* stated “I am a girl,” which is what many of the above mentioned books and the DSM-IV mark as sign of a transgender identity (Brill 2008; Ehrensaft 2011; American Psychiatric Society 2013), yet he had expressed distress with his body—something that *is* indicative of a trans identity, though she also noted that not all trans children are uncomfortable with their body. The gender therapist that they were seeing thought that developmentally he associates gender with hair, and that he isn’t comfortable coming out until he feels that he will be seen fully as a girl.

Ultimately, like the other two families, she is trying to follow his lead, saying, “I just need to let him guide me.” She said that if he does transition, they would also be open to the possibility that he might change his mind, and that there was no harm in a social transition as it is reversible. In fact, she said that while they were preparing for transition, and life with a little girl and a little boy (her baby), she wondered if she should also be thinking about a future with a child who felt like a girl some days, and felt like a boy other days.

Six months after my interview with Heather, I had a chance to talk with her husband at a gender conference, and he let me know that he now has a happy daughter, Ellie, who has been embraced by her school, extended family and community. From this perspective, Ellie’s narrative seems to be a clear trajectory towards a female identity and transition; however, Heather’s interview, conducted right before transition shows how many parents are working to hold multiple possibilities open and to create space for their children to be who they are.

What I find fascinating about these stories is that they show us that it is not

always clear where the child will land in regards to their gender identity, expression and/or sexuality. Although all of the children in these three studies showed similar behavior as young children, they have divergent identities and experiences. Timothy has shown a definite attraction and preference for men, but how he will identify himself is still up in the air. Philip is probably a gay boy. Malcolm may be a gay boy, or he may be transgender. And while Ellie seems to have had a pretty clear trajectory towards a girl identity, when she was young, it wasn't clear how to differentiate between gender expression and gender identity.<sup>106</sup>

Figuring out the different pathways is made harder by the lack of research, and the fact that early studies have lumped together all gender non-conforming children, which has made it difficult to assess the likelihood of “gender dysphoria” continuing at puberty, especially if a boy wearing a dress is seen as gender dysphoric (Tannehill 2016; Wallien and Cohen-Kettenis 2008). Heather, along with many other parents, mentioned the confusion over statistics in their interviews. For example, the mother of 14 year-old Aubrey said that she was already looking for information when Aubrey was three and four,

“at the time the statistics we were given from children's medical, was that 85% of these [gender-variant] kids will grow up to be gay, and 5% will call themselves straight but probably won't be, and 3% will be trans, and that is just so WRONG. It is probably more like 90% of these kids are trans.” (Interview 21)

Although only time will tell whether the more accurate statistic is “90%,” the importance here is the way that these statistics were relevant to those families,

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<sup>106</sup> Although Malcolm has now transitioned, and Phillip has claimed a gay male identity, the fact that they have stable identities now, does not negate the fact that it was a complex process, rather than a linear one as is often depicted in simplified narratives about transition or coming out as gay.



particularly those who had older children, as it was these numbers that made them think their child would be gay, and that no further intervention was needed. For many of these families transgender is an undesirable outcome, which means that the low percentage of “gender non-conforming” or “gender variant” kids who are transgender gives them hope. As one mother recounts about her early search for information, “I am really hoping that my kid is not transgender and it looks like he most likely is not, because it goes from point infinitesimal percentage to like 5 % [chance].” (Interview 2).

This uncertainty about children’s gender and sexuality is used by many as a way to discount transgender children’s identities and it might seem that these three case studies affirm that perspective—if it is not clear how a child might identify the argument made by some is that no child should transition because they may change their mind. I do not present these cases in order to affirm that perspective. As the woman from the adult panel shows, even if kids and people change their mind, it is not always the “worst nightmare” scenario that some imagine. Furthermore, it is clear to me through my review of studies published by gender clinics, along with my interviews and ethnographic participation at conferences, that for some children, gender identity is straightforward and that transition as early as possible is absolutely essential to their well-being.

And yet, the cases here show that it is not always simple, and they bring up questions about how to best understand children’s gender and sexuality. How do we best understand children’s “bent gender,” as Stockton would say? How do we open up space both for the possibility of children transitioning, as well as for more

complex gender identities, and queer sexualities? How do we become uncomfortable with the unknown and the nebulous? How do we juggle what we know in the present with what might come in the future?

### **Transgenerations: Just a Boy/Just a Girl**

For those children who do transition at an early age, there are also questions to ask with regard to the future—not only in relation to choices about medical transition at puberty, but also in relation to how early transition will shape children’s ideas of themselves as “transgender.” As children transition at earlier and earlier ages and have access to puberty blockers and hormones, they are able to avoid some of the physical effects of the “wrong” puberty and are less likely to be read in public as transgender or gender-non-conforming. Rikki Wilchins argues in an opinion piece in *The Advocate*, titled “Transgender Dinosaurs and the Rise of the Genderqueers,” that the use of puberty blockers means that “the entire *experience* we understand today as constituting transgender...may be vanishing right in front of us.” For her, the experience of being transgender includes rubbing up against gender lines, engaging in political activism, and being “publicly transsexual” (Wilchins 2012). She argues that as the numbers of “blocker babies” increase and trans children appear to be just like cisgender children, transgender will lose its radical potential, and that it is genderqueers who will continue the gender revolution. Her article does not address the fact that not all children have access to puberty blockers, nor the fact that for many trans women the ability to appear as cisgender is not just a privilege but is also about preventing violence and assault, something that Katherine Cross, addresses in her response to Wilchins (2012). In my own experiences with LGBTQ youth, through listening to conference panels and working with students on campus, access to

puberty blockers and hormones does not necessarily mean an adherence to gender norms/rules, and these kids are crossing gender lines, being politically active and out, and are often fighting to be part of a transgender community, even while some of them also claim genderqueer identities.

As I brought up in Chapter Three, for readers of parent blogs, gay and trans kids “may trip a tenderness... (Stockton 2009, 3) in LGBTQ adults, which also seemed evident at conferences in regards to trans adults’ reactions to kids. Often trans adults were vocal (in the Q and A of workshops, for example) about the fact that these kids are lucky, and I heard more than one adult say that these young kids are “heroes” to them. At one of the conferences I attended, an organizer said to a room of parents, “Your 9 year-old is healing my 9 year-old self.” He said that while he can’t go back and change his childhood, seeing other children being supported and loved has helped heal that part of him.

These kids are having very different childhoods than many other trans people have had, childhoods which in the past were often full of violence, repression, anxiety, and depression (Beemy and Rankin 2011). Indeed they are having childhoods that are different than many other children: they are being listened to, supported in regards to self-expression, and are being given the autonomy to define their identities. These children’s lives give us insight into the ways that childhood is changing, and that our concepts of children’s gender and sexuality are being opened as we begin to have an apparatus to understand differently.

While I do not agree with Wilchins’ conclusions about a radical concept of transgender disappearing completely, and being replaced by “genderqueer,” I do think

that Wilchins brings up a very valid point about the fact that this generation is experiencing transition and identifying with the term “transgender” in different ways than older generations. Beyond even the question of puberty blockers, what does it mean to transition at three or four, a time when you are only just beginning to have memories? Trans people in this generation will no longer have a childhood and adolescence socialized as one gender, and then an adulthood lived in a different gender. Many of these kids will not come into their affirmed gender selves through political activism and LGBTQ community, but rather through the support of cisgender parents and/or affirming therapists. Some kids do not even identify with the term transgender—something that Wilchins expresses anxiety over—and consider themselves “just a boy” or “just a girl.” However, this does not mean that they are free from the gender binary or the stress that can come from living in a cissexist society.<sup>107</sup>

In this next section of my chapter, I discuss the phenomenon of kids identifying as “just a girl” or “just a boy” and distancing themselves from a transgender narrative. I draw mostly on my ethnographic observations at conferences here, but particularly on the workshop entitled “Just a boy/Just a girl,” as this phenomenon was not present in my interviews, although I did have parents comment that their kids were just like any other girl or boy.

The workshop, “Just a Boy/Just a Girl” was described in the conference book as a workshop that would help parents support their children in a transgender identity. Reading this I wondered about the implications of encouraging kids who identify as

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<sup>107</sup> See Julia Serano’s book *Whipping Girl* for more discussion of cissexism.

“just a boy” or “just a girl” to use the term transgender to describe themselves. I felt indignant on the behalf of these children, and their right to define themselves and the terms that they use to describe their experience. However, this workshop, as well as subsequent iterations of it, showed that it is more complex than just the terms that kids are choosing for themselves.

This is a workshop led by mental health professionals, including a trans man, who are encountering children with severe dysphoria and discomfort with their body. In their clinical experience, these kids’ declarations of being “just a boy” or “just a girl” are coming from a place of internalized transphobia. They discuss cases of children who won’t even take a bath without wearing a bathing suit, or who refuse to go to support groups because they don’t want to hang out with “those freaks.” In their experience, for these kids, it is not just about claiming a boyhood or girlhood, it is an attempt to ignore the reality of their body and to manage social reaction.

They conclude the workshop with a privilege exercise for the mostly cisgender audience, where we took steps forward if particular statements such as “my identity matches my gender assigned at birth” were relevant to our experience. The workshop leaders explain that this exercise helps parents think about the differences between their experiences as a cisgender person, versus the experiences of their transgender children. As Andrew Solomon points out in *Far From The Tree*, these kids are not growing up in a family where their family members share their identities—what he calls “vertical identities.” Rather, these kids and their parents have “horizontal identities” and it can be difficult for parents to understand their children’s different experiences and how to support them.

The speakers said, “You can’t get away from yourself. We aren’t saying, “you aren’t a boy, you are a trans boy.” We are saying, “You are a boy, AND you are a trans boy.” This statement is not only pointing out what some might see as an essential truth about the body, and our current social reality, but as Wilchins points out also has political implications related to children’s understanding of themselves as being connected to a larger trans community.

The speakers emphasize that is the role of parents to open up conversations about gender, bodies, and to prepare their kids for the experience of puberty. They also discuss the fact that these are kids who are transitioning at a young age, which means that they have no memory of being anything other than themselves. They were not socialized in a different gender, and thus for some of them it is hard to make a connection with the concept of “trans.” And while it is true that many children do not experience the same genital dysphoria of previous generations, in part because they have not been forced to learn that genitals = gender, they cannot escape the fact that when they hit puberty, they will have a different experience than their cisgender peers.

The workshop leaders argue that it is parents’ role to help them navigate the difficult medical and social situations they may find themselves in. For example, if a trans girl is not disclosed to her friends, how will she navigate expectations from friends that she will get a period? This workshop, along with many of the other conference workshops, emphasizes the importance of parents supporting, but not rescuing their children. Unlike people who transition as adults, these kids are still learning social skills, independence, and how to navigate tricky situations, and will

need guidance as they grow up as trans children.

I saw this presentation multiple times, and during the Q and A at a professional track presentation, one of the audience members said that many of the youth he works with say that they have a trans history, and they don't identify as transgender, and he wasn't sure that was a negative thing. One of the speakers responded that we haven't yet come to a place of trans celebration, transgender is still a bad thing to call someone.

Valentine's work (2007) on the category "transgender" is of value here, as he describes the limitations of using it to describe groups of people who may or may not identify with it. While it can be helpful as an umbrella term, especially in regards to institutional access to resources, it can unduly simplify the complex ways that people understand their gender and sexuality. This phenomenon of "just a boy" or "just a girl" will be important to study further. Is identifying as just a boy or just a girl always a result of transphobia? Or are we seeing different understandings of what it means to be a boy or a girl?

Diane Erhenshaft, author of *Gender Born, Gender Made* (2011) and *The Gender-Creative Child* (2016), also describes children in her clinic who identify as just a boy or just a girl,

"They hate, and I mean hate, the word *trans*. As far as I can tell, this is not internalized transphobia. It is a loud objection to a word that just doesn't feel like a fit--"Trans is not me." In other words, they were always the gender they know themselves to be; they were never anything else. They can no longer remember their youngest years living in another gender." (2016, 250)

Again, she emphasizes that these kids do not have memories from before transition, but she does not see their feelings as necessarily coming from distress or transphobia.

She affirms their feelings about being done with trans as a category, but also posits that the role of those who care for these children is to teach them resilience, and how to navigate a gendered world that will absolutely consider them “transgender.”

Whether these kids assertions of being “just a boy” or “just a girl” come from transphobia, or not, what is certain is that as more and more children start transitioning as pre-schoolers we are going to see shifting understandings of what it means to be transgender, as well as different meanings of what it means to be a girl and a boy.

### Conclusion

Temporalities surrounding gender-creative, transgender, and gay children are complex, tangled, and multiple. Children’s sense of time is different than adults, they are not ordered, and confined in the same way that adults are by social expectations and responsibilities. Parents have their own expectations of what childhood and growing up might look like; the proper stages of development, and the importance of weighing options before making decisions around transition. In contrast, children move on their own time-lines, sometimes wanting to rush ahead, pushing for more gender vibrancy, pushing for more flamboyance or gender defiance, pushing for transition NOW. This is especially true for kids who are hitting puberty, and are horrified by the physical changes. Sometimes, even when kids rationally knew that they would go through “boy” or “girl” puberty, they had somehow thought they would grow up to be the woman or man that would match their internal gender identity (Interview 2). Betrayed by their hormones, some of these kids go into a mental health tail-spin, and need help as soon as possible. Other times, a parent is



ready for the possibility of transition before a child is, as the child is still developing their framework for understanding how gender is defined in society—for example four year old Russell’s association of being a girl with having long hair—or the child is not sure exactly how they fit within the current gender system.

Researchers and clinicians are working in another temporality—gathering data on various cohorts and generations of children—trying to generalize and categorize who belongs in what particular box, watching as knowledge and terminology shifts and changes. Research time unfolds over years, as data is collected, analyzed, and published; two years have passed between my first interview and the concluding of this dissertation. Parents are often impatient about the lack of research, and the slow process of collecting longitudinal data, as they are living in a present where this information would be most helpful right now. Medical knowledge is also rapidly shifting, as endocrinologists are faced with increasing numbers of trans patients who are transitioning before puberty and have lived for *years* as the gender they identify. These kids do not want to have to wait till they are 16 or 18 to go through puberty, and so researchers are making their best guesses about appropriate time-lines for blockers and application of hormones, balancing ideas about cognitive development and children’s ability to make informed medical choices. These various, unfolding, multiple temporalities make it difficult at times to determine the best responses to children. Indeed, as the different interviews show, there is no one response to navigating a child’s atypical gender and sexuality, though affirmative responses are understood to have more positive outcomes than others.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, parents’ engage in anticipation work

by reading studies on transgender children, by attending conferences, by connecting with other families, and by navigating the complex emotions that come with raising kids whose futures are ambiguous and uncertain. As I have shown here, as parents deal with anxiety over how other people will react to their children and the threat of violence and self-harm, they become comfortable with not-knowing exactly what the future will bring, and they navigate the implication that they must have done something to cause their child to act this way. Some of them also deal with feelings of loss and grief, but unlike the narratives shown in the media, this grief is not universal. Along with the complex negative emotions that parents feel, there is also joy at their children's happiness, delight in their unique expressions of self, pride in their resilience, and admiration for all the lessons they have learned from their kids. "These kids are amazing," one mom told me (Interview 18), referencing not only her child, but other trans kids who are blazing new paths through childhood and adolescence. I hope that these diverse narratives of transgender, gender-creative, and gay children can become more widely known, as it may allow parents to look at their children's behavior and identity differently, and may allow more kids access to freedom of expression by not creating more boxes about what it means to be truly "transgender."

During a break between workshops at one of the conferences, I visit the vendor hall, and observe two young trans girls<sup>108</sup> at the book table, standing side by side, heads bent together over the book *I am Jazz*. This is the first children's book to use the word transgender, and while it notes some people didn't understand Jazz's transition, the focus is not on bullying or teasing but on Jazz's joy at being herself and

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<sup>108</sup> I know that they are trans because I met them earlier with their parents. Another observer who didn't have any connection to them would not be able to read them as "trans" just by looking.

the love and acceptance of her family. It makes me smile to see these two kids reading a book about a girl just like them, and I think about the significance of seeing themselves represented in the pages of a book. Kids are growing up into a different world than the one that I and many queer/trans people grew up in, a world where the word “transgender” is becoming known by an increasing number of people and there is more recognition of a diversity of sexualities and genders.

There is still much to be done, in regards to thinking about who can access particular identities, or have access to transition and medical care, and increased visibility often brings backlash, as I will explore in my conclusion. However, I still can't help but have hope watching these two reading: “I don't mind being different. Different is special! I think what matters most is what a person is like inside. And inside I am happy. I am having fun. I am proud.” (unpaginated, Herthel and Jennings 2014)

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Jacob, my love, it is *you* that have transitioned *us* to a life less ordinary”  
–Mimi Lemay, “A Letter to My Son”

### Introduction

Jacob was only four when he transitioned. Despite a gender therapist’s recommendation to “keep things fluid” because he was so young, after research and a stressful, unhappy period of time being a boy at home and a girl at school, his parents let him socially transition completely to living as a boy. His Dad says,

“We didn’t really have any role models to look to. I’m sure it’s been done before, but there seems to be no playbook at all for kids this young [...] we were observing Jacob and watching him get worse and worse [...] To have him transition and see how it goes felt like a low risk compared to forcing him to live in age four to five in a form of shame.” (Pohle 2016)

Almost immediately they watched him brighten, cracking jokes, laughing, hugging and kissing, being affectionate, wanting to learn the alphabet, creating collections of various treasures—“scraps, stones and screws” that he found around him (Lemay 2015). There was no more odd behavior and strange outbursts of anger. For his 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, 9 months after transition, his mother wrote a birthday letter that went viral and their family was featured on MSNBC.<sup>109</sup> This letter, and interviews with the family, show the anticipation work that Jacob’s parents engaged in, as they balanced therapist predictions with their own concerns about their child’s happiness. Their story highlights again the way that parents are moving in “uncharted waters”<sup>110</sup> and make their best guess in regard to how they respond.

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<sup>109</sup> As I note in Chapter Two

<sup>110</sup> I am referencing here the judge who told Marlo Mack of the blog *Gendermom*, “good luck in these uncharted waters.”

Recently, Boston.com did a follow-up interview with the family, including Jacob and his sister Ella, which is a delightful portrait of their relationships and their activism. One passage in particular struck me for the way that it reflects the different temporalities, multiple realities, and moments of forgetting and remembering that occur within family histories. Note that Joe is Jacob's father, Mimi is his mother, and Ella is his sister. In this segment, they are talking about how Jacob got his name.

**“Jacob:** Mommy “iggested” it and I said yes.

**Joe:** No, you came up with it all by yourself.

**Mimi:** I “iggested” the name Jonah. I think, buddy, that you told me

...

**Ella:** Your name was never going to be Jonah, don't worry, Jacob.

**Mimi:** Well, what Daddy and I remember is that, when we asked you later where you had heard it, you said a boy had come to your preschool class from another day, he had joined the camp and his name was Jacob and you liked the sound of it. But we don't always remember everything.” (Pohle 2016)

This part of the interview captures the voice of a young child and the multiple, overlapping voices of the different family members, including an interruption by Jacob's older sister soothing him, “don't worry.” It also acknowledges different temporalities and that “we don't always remember everything.” These slightly different memories and the multiple genealogies of naming connect to the various temporalities that exist within a family and within the larger communities that are living with, supporting, guiding, researching and working with transgender, gender-creative, and gay children.

Kath Weston opens her book *Gender In Real Time* by inviting the reader to “Turn the page and step into a time machine. Destination: Gender.” She further explains, “Gender not as a *thing* to be understood, or a *conceptual space* to be visited, but as a product of social relations imbued with *time*.” (iv). Drawing on years of

ethnography, as well as the mathematical concepts of relativity, and the number zero, Weston analyzes gender within different generations of lesbian communities and the salience of the image of the “Old Butch at the Bar” across time. Written when the focus within feminist theory was on the visual and performative aspects of gender, Weston brings together temporal and spatial aspects of gender and details how memory, nostalgia, and community histories shape identities. Her ideas of spacetime and remembering and forgetting are useful for thinking about the temporalities around trans and gender-creative kids. Time is a key part of anticipation; being in an anticipatory mode often means bringing the future into the present, as though it is something that can be managed and controlled right now, rather than something that has not yet occurred (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009). Likewise, gender, especially for children is not only about performance and the visual cues that we see, but about managing identities, community belonging and is experienced across time.

Ways of remembering and forgetting are particularly salient when we consider children like Jacob who are transitioning at three, four, and five, when memories are just beginning, and “we don’t always remember everything.” Within the interview, we see the different temporalities around his transition---the idea that one should keep gender fluid (research time), his desire to be recognized as a boy (child time), his parents trying to balance both boy and girl while also protecting his well-being (parent time). Again, we see that knowledge around trans children gathers in tangled, unfolding, twisting temporalities. As I have shown throughout the dissertation, these entanglements make it complicated to anticipate the future. In this case the parents decided to listen to Jacob with the understanding that it will be possible to return to

being a girl if his feelings change. Their family experience is another example of parents trying to address their children's needs in the present, while imagining the various possibilities that may unfold.

Different approaches to transition reflect these multiple anticipatory concerns and temporalities around children's expression and identities. Some mental health professionals caution parents not to rush into a transition and advocate "watchful waiting;" others express the urgency in affirming children in their identities. As I outlined at the end of Chapter Four, parents and children have their own ideas about transition. Some parents are willing to consider transition earlier than professionals recommend, others are cautious about the potential implications of social and/or medical transition. Children exist in multiple temporalities as well. Some are adamant about their identity when they are toddlers or pre-schoolers, others take a more meandering path in the process of figuring out themselves. As I have pointed out in many places in the dissertation, the time frames around these families, parents and children are not always linear. Children shift backward and forward and sideways. In relation to medical time, puberty blockers can buy time for children who aren't sure of their gender yet, putting a pause on physical changes, and can grant their parents' the emotional time to prepare themselves for a potential medical transition. However, youth can also be frustrated by the necessity of being on blockers for several years due to guidelines restricting access to hormones, which means they can feel stuck waiting while their cisgender peers develop secondary sex characteristics and move through puberty. All of these different temporalities and anticipatory investments

complicate the work of deciding the best course of action for each child, and can be stressful for both parents and children.

Jacob's parents recognize that he may feel differently about his gender in the future, "Changing his mind could be embarrassing for us and we might have to unravel and undo some of the things that we'd done, but it was worth it for us to take that risk." Unraveling and undoing some of the things that have been done—this is also anticipation work—as parents undo assumptions about who their child is, their child's gender assigned at birth, and ideas about how they (parents and children) should act. It is a process over time, which may be repeated, as Jacob's parents acknowledge here, if the child shifts their gender again.

One parent I interviewed talked about the emotional work of undoing her deep held notions of gender in the process of watching her son transition: "I have been constantly humbled and amazed and disgusted by how much bias I have deep within me, I call it like an excavation. I feel like with every step of this I have had to excavate the enculturation of a gender bias" (Interview 13). Although her 11 year-old son has now been living as a boy for two years and had a long history of masculine expression before that, the work to "excavate" her feelings around gender continues. Indeed, people negotiate gender and gender norms throughout their lifetimes, though they are not always conscious about it in the way that parents of trans and gender-creative children are.

It can be complicated for children to figure out their gender within a gender binary system, especially given expectations and anxiety placed on them from parents, extended family, peers and other social relationships. I talked with Kai's



mother about the complexity of understanding one's gender and the different factors that influence how we know ourselves:

“Her: what is this thing, gender? and how do we know it? How do I know myself, outside of the way that others have treated me? I hold that question all the time.

Me: I think about that a lot as well. That our gender is ours, but also the interaction with the world.

Her: yeah, we are constantly creating ourselves in that interaction, in that space. I am very interested in identity. I think about identity because I also think about racial identity and ethnic identity and how does my [Asian ethnicity] son identify. Because he has white parents, I know he identifies as white in many ways, even though the world will always know him as a person of color, as Asian, and he will always have to contend with that, and I know that he will also identify with his Asian-ness, and I am watching him go through phases of owning that identity, rejecting that identity, embracing, connecting, rejecting it, but it is all in this realm of how do people treat me because of this thing. I think gender is like that, we have this internal sense, and then we have this whole thing we get from the world and we are constantly navigating, how do we get from [here], how do we know ourselves in this context?” (Interview 13)

How do we know ourselves? And how parents do know their children? This same mother talked about her difficulty understanding her trans son's identity as he was growing up—wondering if he was just a masculine girl, navigating the time he identified as both boy and girl, and grappling with what it means to now parent a feminine boy.

In regards to my question about his sexuality she said that he might be gay, but it is hard to tell because “What is a stereotype and what is a clue? Only time will tell.”(Interview 13). Especially for young children it can be difficult to distinguish between gender expression and gender identity. Is the child wearing a dress because this child is a girl? Or does the child like feminine things? Or does the child just want

to wear a dress today? It is hard to say without knowing more about the child, the moment in time—not only in regards to historical context, but also in the child’s own personal time-line—and the social-cultural context. What is a dress?

As I have argued throughout the dissertation, the anticipation work these parents are engaging in, involves understanding “clues” that their child gives them and listening closely to what they say. “On its best day, parenting is a form of improvisation” writes Lisa Kenney, executive director of Gender Spectrum (as quoted by Crowder 2016), especially in relation to gender-creative kids. Guided by gender clues and in-depth conversations with their children, parents’ make their best guesses. Pressured by society to “prove” they are making ethical and appropriate decisions for their kids, and with their own concerns about their children’s well-being, they watch carefully, closely read research studies, connect with other families at conferences and online, and listen to the experiences of LGBTQ adults. As children are coming out as trans and/or expressing their flamboyant, fabulous, and tomboy selves, we are seeing a new type of childhood and a different kind of parenting.

In the interview with Jacob’s family, we also see a particular “time claim,” an understanding of a particular moment in time, (Weston 2002) that is made here and elsewhere in many accounts of trans kids lives: that these are the first children to transition at five or six. While it may be true that they are the first children to be showcased within the television media, this claim of being the first elides the fact that there have been trans children before whose stories have not been told. Some of these may not have transitioned pre-puberty and did not have access to the medical treatment that is available today, but they still transitioned as youth--as teenagers--and

have lived decades or more as trans people. In raising up trans children as “pioneers” it is possible to forget the ones who have come before.

A trans woman I saw speak at a conference, facilitating the "welcome" session for parents, said “I was a trans child” and emphasized that she was not making a retrospective reference. From an early age she knew she was a girl, and at 12, in the 1960s, she saw something in the paper about John Hopkins’ gender clinic which gave her the language to understand herself as transgender. She rushed to her local hospital and demanded hormones and surgery to a very confused staff in the ER.

Unfortunately, she then spent several years in and out of institutions because the doctors thought she was mentally ill. At age 17 she finally got out, and was able to transition. Her story reminds us that it is not just that children have begun to understand themselves or name themselves as transgender, but that adults around them are listening to what they are saying. Many trans children in decades past stayed silent, and others were silenced.

Recently, I read a news article about the WPATH conference in Amsterdam and was surprised when the author mentions “a young woman named Valentijn, who transitioned 21 years ago at age five” ((Beyer 2016). That would have been in 1995, twelve years before Jazz was featured on ABC’s *My Secret Self*. I realized that I have been taking for granted some of the claims that the media is making about the “first” trans kids. Even though I know that these are not the only stories told—I have met many, many parents and heard about their specific experiences which are not reflected in the media—I still made assumptions about the genealogies of time, and the time claims made about who was “first.” The phenomenon of trans youth is not

new even as transitioning at the age of five may be more common now and it is certainly being discussed more publicly.

Jacob's family first became experts to help him, and have become advocates and educators—something that I also observed in my own interviews with parents.<sup>111</sup> Mimi, his mother, says that in response to her birthday letter, “I heard some scary things, some beautiful things. Enough to make me realize it wasn't enough to write my letter. We needed to do more work” (Pohle 2016). This desire to do more motivated them to do the MSNBC special, seen by over 20 million people. They also participated in Pride, marching with other families. From Jacob's perspective it was fun but tiring because of all the walking. His mother says, “it was a very nice day followed by some shock and grief after Orlando. It makes us determined to keep working, but it impacts us. It just adds an element of fear to everything we do.”

She is referencing here the Pulse Nightclub shooting this summer, in June 2016, where 49 people were killed and 53 others injured. While queer and trans people, especially queer and trans people of color, have few illusions about the possibly violent consequences of homophobia and transphobia, the Orlando shooting was a reminder that the US is not always a safe place to be LGBTQ, even in our own community spaces. While I have cautioned against narratives of the extreme throughout the dissertation, the story of Pulse Nightclub shooting—another narrative of the extreme—feels important to address here in the conclusion, given its salience within this particular moment in time. Furthermore, while stories of violence are often used to try and shock people into caring about a particular issue,

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<sup>111</sup> Again, the sample of parents in the media and in my interviews are not representative of all families—but may be a particular cohort of parents who become advocates, and thus want to share their story and educate others through television or through research.

this incident reminded me that these stories are also deeply felt by those who are a part of the communities affected. Parents often return to and re-tell stories of harm because of the importance of these moments in their own understanding and their own experiences. Feelings—especially those of fear and anxiety—are often a part of anticipation work.<sup>112</sup>

As it was for many, the week after the shootings was emotional for me. I felt shocked by the scale of what happened, devastated by the loss of life; outraged at those (both within and outside of the LGBTQ community) using this event as an excuse for Islamaphobia, and indignant at the politicians who passed or pushed for anti-LGBT laws this year, and yet were now "praying" for the victims (Mirkinson 2016). Online and across social media there was an outpouring of queer and trans writing, artwork, tweets, messages, and posts that captured the horror and sadness of this event, as well as the beauty, resilience, strength, and history of the queer and trans community. It was not only an LGBTQ club, it was Latin Night, and the majority of those who lost their lives were black and brown, and from Puerto Rico. These details matter.

The islamaphobia, queer erasure, and racism that was reflected in many news reports of the event showed the way that homophobic violence is often simplified within media narratives. And yet, the fact that this shooting garnered national attention is evidence of shifts in the last few decades around LGBTQ acceptance. For

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<sup>112</sup> In his chapter "The Calculus of Pain" David Valentine (2007) recounts the murder of one of his participants, and the complexity of this moment in his ethnography—how even as he critiques the way that violence is constituted within narratives of trans people's lives—he is also participating in such narratives by sharing the story of another trans murder and his own experience of grief and loss. Yet he feels compelled to share this story in order to highlight the violence that many trans folks do experience, and also to frame his own experience as an ethnographer in these communities. Similarly, I offer this story of Orlando because of its relevance to the current political moment in regards to LGBTQ lives, as well as the connections that parents of gender-creative and gay kids had to the event.

once the deaths of LGBTQ people were mourned by those outside of the community, mentioned on national news, and acknowledged by the president.

Among the folks who responded to the shootings were many parents calling for an end to homophobia and expressing their grief specifically as parents of people in the LGBTQ community (@Amelia 2016, Duron “He Just Needs” 2016, Sirios 2016). Two of the bloggers I wrote about in Chapter Two expressed their sentiments online. There is an extra poignancy to their stories when one realizes how young their children are—and reflects on what it must be like to navigate this event as a child or as the parent of a child. Amelia tweeted: “I had to explain to my 11 year-old-son that 50 people were killed for being like him.”

It is difficult to imagine telling a child about such violence, though of course many trans, gender-creative, and gay kids already know that people sometimes hurt each other because of differences in gender and sexuality. As Amelia writes in a longer blog post about Orlando, she has already had difficult conversations with her son about the fact that not everyone agrees with equal marriage protection, and that some religious people view homosexuality as a sin (Amelia “When I Told My Son” 2016). Not all children are granted the ability to have an innocent, worry-free childhood. Gender-creative children, gay children, transgender children, children of color, poor children, children refugees, and many other children navigate lives touched by harassment, violence, abuse, and/or poverty.

CJ’s Mom writes, “my son is not safe.” She recounts her first experience going to a gay club with her brother, and her sense of relief that he has found his people, and is safe. When CJ was gender non-conforming at three and identified as a

member of the LGBTQ community at eight, she thought that when he found his people, he would be safe too. After Orlando, she writes, “My brother is not safe. My son is not safe. Even if they find their people. Because monsters can find them there, too.” She continues by saying,

“The only thing that could make his life a little safer is being cisgender and straight. Being the complete opposite of who he naturally is would keep him safe. As a mother, I’d rather my son be his happy, rainbow self and be unsafe, than miserably pretend to be somebody he’s not and have a better chance of survival. It’s hard to admit that. “He just needs to find his people, then he’ll be safe,” I continue to think to myself. My worry remains, but so does my hope.”

Again, we see parents balancing anxiety and fear against their children’s autonomy and freedom of expression. There is concern and there is hope. Of course, the concept of safety itself is more complex and uneven than is presented here. Being heterosexual and cisgender does not automatically guarantee safety, just as not all LGBTQ people experience the same levels of homophobia and transphobia. So called “safe” spaces also make their own exclusions and violence.

Experiencing the aftermath of Orlando as a queer person for me meant being a part of collective grief and shock. It was a reminder of how stories of such violence can produce a very visceral emotional response and the ways that fear, anxiety, and experiences of violence can alter perceptions of safety. These emotions, and ideas about safety also shape the anticipation work that parents’ engage in. Thus, while I am wary of narratives of the extreme, because of how they simplify narratives, I understand how they are emotionally situated within people’s experiences and how they are often used to mobilize political action.

### *A Shifting Landscape*

This has been a busy year in regards to LGBTQ politics. There have been nearly 200 anti-gay/LGBTQ bills introduced in various states (Crilly 2016) and HB 2 was passed in North Carolina. Infamous as the “bathroom bill” this law also strikes down LGBTQ discrimination laws, protections against employer discrimination on the basis of identity, and requires all municipalities to follow the state minimum wage (Gordon, Price and Peralta 2016). In more positive news, Virginia courts have ruled that trans students have the right to use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity, thanks to the case of Gavin Grimm, a highschool trans boy who was blocked from using the boys’ restroom in his school (Farias 2016).

Kath Weston reminds us that when thinking about space we must think about time and histories as well:

"Spaces have their histories...Every identity-based social movement seems to have its bathroom story. Restrooms continue to be classed and raced, with relations of power embedded in location...When a flash of gendered uncertainty prompts onlookers to do whatever they can to set a person at odds with the call of her own body, she walks through history, not just a door." (Weston, 2002, 27).

While these bathroom debates center on a body supposedly out of place, they also draw on histories and narratives about violence against women, and the specter of the dangerous trans person. Most people just want to pee in peace, but bathrooms have frequently been places of violence, sex, and power relations, though this has not always played out in the ways highlighted in the media. Trans people are more likely to be harassed in the bathroom than cisgender people, and these bills often target gender non-conforming people, or those read as trans, despite an emphasis on making people use the bathroom that matches the sex on their birth certificate.



Yet, even as these anti-LGBTQ laws, and debates around bathrooms are part of the media narrative trans youth, so are more positive stories. Stories of trans youth continue to capture the public's attention; there have been several children's books with trans characters published this year, such as *Introducing Teddy* (Walton & McPherson 2016) and *Truly Willa* (Naylor 2016). Jazz Jennings, now a teenager, just published her memoir, was the youngest ever Marshall of the NYC Pride Parade, and stars in the TLC reality television show "I Am Jazz."

We are engaging in a very different social landscape today in 2016 than when I began this research six years ago. At that time, in 2010, there was a smattering of news articles, and although attention to trans children was on the rise it was not yet a widely-known topic. In 2007 there was the ABC 20/20 special, *My Secret Self*, and soon after, in 2011, there was a succeeding cluster of documentaries. Every week now there are news articles being published around the US and across the web. Since the early television specials media has shifted from focusing almost entirely on transgender girls, and a few teenage trans boys, to having a more equal representation of both girls and boys. Gender-queer or gender fluid kids continue to be afforded less attention, time, and research, though Lori Duron's *Raising My Rainbow* has pushed the dialogue around the importance of gender-creative children's rights to safely express themselves, especially in schools. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, gay and queer kids continue to be under-theorized and kids' access to sexuality is still limited.

When I first began exploring this research people often were perplexed by the idea of a trans child, and had many questions about what "transgender" meant and

whether it was possible for a child to even know their gender at such a young age. Family members and acquaintances were often horrified at the idea that parents were allowing children to have surgery at six! (I quickly corrected folks, explaining that pre-puberty there are no medical interventions. When we talk about a transgender five year old, it is a child who has socially, not medically, transitioned). Talking to parents of young kids, especially through child-care networks, I met people who knew families raising boys who liked Barbie Dolls and princess toys but few people knew an actual transgender child in 2010-2011.

Today, in 2016, when I talk about my research almost everyone has something to say on the subject. They have either seen a news article about an adult trans person—such as Caitlyn Jenner—or they have heard about a trans child in a local school. At a family gathering last summer when I struck up a conversation with a friend of my parents who is a high-school principal in Baltimore and told him about my research topic, he said that he had 6 trans students who had just come out in the last year. Some people I talk to directly know families who are raising trans kids. This is especially true in the DC area, but it is even the case back home on the rural eastern shore of Maryland. In fact, a family friend approached me recently about the fact that her sister's kid was considering transition, wondering if I had any advice for them. Again, increasing information and awareness has created more opportunities for anticipation, as parents become more aware of the possibilities of having a trans kid, and wider communities become informed about the existence of trans children.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now

This increase in attention has also caused some to fear social contagion, especially for teenagers searching for identity and community (Vrouenraets 2015). In 2015 *4th Wave Now* was created, "a blog by a mom of a would-be FTM" concerned about transgender children and the possibility that youth are being influenced by social media such as Tumblr. It has since become a "community of parents and friends critical of the transgender child/teen trend." This is the only blog that I have read by the mother of a gender-diverse kid who is not supportive. Interestingly, the author approaches the subject not from a conservative or religious perspective but instead from a "radical feminist" or "gender-critical feminist" perspective. Over-all, the site is against transition for children, but is supportive of gay identities and gender non-conforming behavior.

Unlike some radical feminists, for example, Sheila Jeffreys, the author of *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now* acknowledges that for some people transition may be necessary. Yet, from her perspective, transition must be decided as an adult, not as a child. She, along with many of the commenters and guest authors on her blog, believe that one cannot change biological sex, nor should engage in medical intervention except in extreme cases. Citing research on brain development, as well as a study that lesbians come out later than gay men (Martos, Nehzad, and Meyer 2015), the author extrapolates that medical transition should therefore not be considered until someone is in their mid-twenties when the brain has fully developed and sexual identity is settled (Mom Forces, 2016; The Surgical Suite, 2016). Critically engaging with much of the same literature that supportive families of trans youth examine, she comes to different

conclusion,<sup>113</sup> and relies heavily on the “desistence” statistics which show that the majority of gender non-conforming children will grow up to be gay or lesbian (Jeffreys 2012; 4thWaveNow, The Surgical Suite 2016). However, as I argued in Chapter One, many of these statistics are based on a particular grouping of transgender/gender dysphoric kids mixed in with gender-creative children.

While the author of *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now* critiques the use of anecdotal data, and often talks about the adult trans activists who are “pushing” this transition narrative onto trans kids (“Coming Soon” 2015), the website showcases the individual stories of some folks who identify as “de-transitioners” to support her position that gender dysphoria is not always cured through transition (To Crush Every Doubt 2016; In Praise of GateKeepers 2016; Shrinking 2016). Reading *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now*, I often find myself nodding my head—for example when Cari of the “In Praise of Gatekeeping” guest post argues for the importance of talking with gender therapists who inquire about trauma histories, and who explore with their clients the way that trauma may affect feelings about the body. Cari is part of a generation of trans kids who were able to find support through gender organizations and clinics set up specifically for youth—and she had a double mastectomy at age 16. Now aged 22, she has stopped testosterone and has returned a female identity. She regrets the medical decisions that she made, though she acknowledges that it is unlikely she could have been talked out of her choices. It is important to listen to her story and to acknowledge the possibility of regret.

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<sup>113</sup> Her site actually functions as a very useful database for finding studies on trans kids. One of these studies is from the Dutch clinic which shows that a cohort of 55 trans kids who got hormonal treatments in puberty and surgery, had the same or better mental health outcomes than their cisgender peers. She points out that this is not a longitudinal study, and that people sometimes live several years, even decades before de-transitioning. (Surgical Suite 2015; deVries et al 2015).

Yet, I do not agree with *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now* that the particular experiences of people de-transitioning should be generalized to mean that NO children should be allowed to transition, or to generalize that all gender therapists are untrustworthy and part of the “transition industrial complex.” We absolutely do need to look at the multiple complexities around children’s gender and sexuality as it is not always easy to recognize or determine what is most appropriate for a specific child. Many of the mental health professionals I met at conferences talked about therapists’ role in helping patients explore trauma and core social beliefs around gender, and how to do so in a way that did not make trans people feel that their access to care would be cut off if they shared trauma experiences or complex feelings around sexuality and gender expression.

On the other hand, I find myself agreeing with some of the other arguments that *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now* makes, particularly in regards to the suicide narrative and the focus on the gender binary. She writes, “I challenge anyone to find me a single account of a “transgender child” which does NOT resort to talking about toys, hairstyle, clothing, or play stereotypes to justify the diagnosis of “trans” in a young child” (“Parents Keep Listening” 2015). The simplified narrative of trans children showcased in the television media suggests inaccurately to people who are coming from a gender critical perspective that transition is due to rigid notions of the gender binary and that more acceptance of gender non-conformity would remove people’s need to transition. This assumes that children’s transgender identities are only related to gender expression, rather than being a deeper sense of the self.

As I pointed out in Chapter Two, representations in the media that do not rely on stereotyped notions of gender are few and far between and most narratives of trans kids enforces the gender binary. The author of *4th Wave Now* is absolutely correct here. However, as I have shown throughout the dissertation, the stories that parents, advocates and mental health professionals tell and live are much more complex than the narratives typically shown on television or in news articles. M. from Chapter Three shows what it means to be a tomboy trans girl—breaking assumptions about the body, gender identity, and gender expression. Other families in my ethnography talked about femme trans boys who wore swirly pink dresses as kids, and who are young teenage boys now; another family has a ninja, nerf-gun loving trans girl, and others had trans girls who absolutely did not identify as “girly girls.” Children may present in very stereotypical ways to get their parents to listen---being uber femme, princess-obsessed, and pink-loving in order to be recognized as a girl, for example—but their lived genders are much more complicated than stereotypical notions of girlhood or boyhood.

*4th Wave Now* also addresses the way that suicide is used as the reason for transition. Suicide and the threat of death is an effective policing tactic. For example, members of the WPATH<sup>114</sup> facebook group effectively shut down a conversation questioning the connection between hormone treatment and infertility by stating that

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<sup>114</sup> World Professional Association for Transgender Health, WPATH publishes the standards of care which is deemed the appropriate way to treat individuals with the diagnosis of “gender dysphoria.” They have an open facebook group which can be joined by anyone, and there are frequent discussion threads there about the guidelines for treating trans folks, especially youth. Clinicians sometimes post specific questions they have regarding issues that have come up in their practices and policy makers discuss implications of changing the Standards of Care.

if kids don't get blockers/hormones they will die. Fourth Wave<sup>115</sup> summarized the comments as "Better sterile than dead" and adds, "The adult trans activists have spoken. Other people's minor children are "trans people" who will absolutely choose suicide over their future fertility." ("Better Sterile than Dead" 2016). A key part of 4th Wave's statement here is her description of the youth in question as "other people's minor children" which she contrasts to the idea that these youth are "trans people." Thus she frames young people as belonging to other people, rather than autonomous individuals who could make decisions about their fertility and gender. Again, we see a difference in beliefs around children's ability to know themselves. Also, as I have argued elsewhere, suicide and self-harm are legitimate concerns for many families and yet the transition or suicide narrative is problematic when it justifies trans people's decisions only through reference to death. Not all trans kids are suicidal, and they might choose infertility and medical transition over experiencing puberty in their natal sex even without feeling their only other option is death.

Neither the WPATH thread about hormones, nor 4th Wave's interpretation is representative of wider conversations about medical transition and children's fertility. Questions around the consequences of hormone blockers were often part of the conversations at conferences as well as my interviews. It is true that many doctors emphasize the idea that it is better to have a child hormonally transition than commit suicide and sometimes make references to cancer treatment. No one questions whether a child with leukemia should be given chemotherapy even if it might make

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<sup>115</sup> I purposefully have not italicized 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now here, as I am referring to the author, rather than the blog.

them infertile. However, the discussion is much more nuanced than the hormones or death narrative that 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now is critiquing. Young children making decisions about adult fertility and whether they want to have children in their adult future is complex. There is no neutral ground— withholding hormones has particular consequences, and using them will have other consequences. Parents do the best that they can, balancing what they know about their child with the information that is currently available and managing their own complex emotions about it.

In an interview I conducted, one parent talked about her feelings around hormones for her trans son,

“It feels big. Even though it shouldn't be, and I keep telling myself, if I had a child who was diabetic, would I not give them insulin? No, so here is a child who needs testosterone to be themselves am I not going to give it to them? No. but...I am amazed at the emotional work that it takes to really feel safe with that. For me. Not him. He is ready, he would do it tomorrow if they would let him, but he doesn't need to start puberty quite yet.” (Interview 13)

Here we see the complexity of making medical decisions, and that it can be difficult for parents to feel safe about the options in front of them. Her comments are also indicative of different temporalities—parent time versus child time versus body time. While puberty blockers can buy time, at some point, a child needs to go through puberty, either by stopping the blockers and going through their endogenous puberty, or by taking cross-sex hormones.

Parents wouldn't be engaging in these types of conversations or considering medical intervention if it wasn't vital. This mother, who self-identified as a former Republican, talks about her misconceptions about parents of trans kids, before she went through the experience herself:



“[was watching a television show on trans kids] And I was just appalled, thinking, how irresponsible is that woman, how crazy is that woman, that she is telling a 9 or 10 year old, you get to have that kind of surgery, I can't believe it. I can't believe that she is a parent. And here, a month later, Bailey says to me, mom do you have the same kind of parts that I do. And I said, no, and she says, “how old do you have to be to have them cut off? Cause I want to get mine cut off.” And I was like, “um, you don't. Until you are bigger. And then maybe we can talk about it.” And I realized that I am having a conversation about genital surgery with a four year old, and it was not my idea. SHE brought the subject up, so how horrible of me to have judged that other mom, because you always think it is the crazy parent introducing these ideas and I thought that about her, and here it happened to me, so I can raise my hand now and tell everyone, it is not the parents who are coming up with this stuff. It really is the kids.” (Interview 10)

Because we think that topics such as genital surgery are “adult” topics, it is shocking to witness parents in the television media talking about such subjects with their children. And yet, Bailey’s mother finds out first-hand that parents are often guided to these topics by the children themselves.

Reading *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now* has often frustrated me because of the insistence that children cannot be transgender, and shouldn’t transition, yet the author also raises important questions about the narratives around trans kids that are being perpetuated in the media. And she challenges my assumptions about what the correct course of action is for children and youth who are not comfortable with their body—what is commonly called “gender dysphoria”—especially youth assigned female at birth. I agree with her that we should investigate why rising numbers of kids assigned female at birth are identifying as male, and questions around trauma, anxiety about puberty, and the experience of living as a girl in this sexist society are important.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Much of the reasoning of parents and commenters on this site is built on the assumption that kids assigned female at birth are transitioning in order to gain male power and due to dysphoria of having a female body in a sexist society (*4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now*, “Shrinking” 2016). They do not have much to say about children assigned male at birth, who do not fit into this particular framework.

I also think that it is critical that we talk more with people who decide to de-transition, and understand their experience more closely as well as how people inhabit their gender across time. However, I find it unacceptable when someone de-transitions and then uses their experience to generalize that NO ONE should transition and that transition for minors is child abuse. Walt Heyer, who lived as a trans woman for 12 years and then de-transitioned, is often used in conservative media to bolster the regret narrative (Heyer 2015). It can be true that some people do de-transition, and it can still be true that for other people transition is necessary, welcome, and positive.

One of the other bloggers I follow who writes about parenting a young trans boy (*Raising Orlando*), also frequents *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now*. She has engaged in long conversations with the author and other commenters, complicating their conclusions by detailing her own emotional journey with her child. Yet, this has often been a frustrating process as they tend to dismiss her perspective. She writes,

“I think that what frustrates me is that our similarities are so much bigger than our differences. Nearly everyone who comments there is a feminist. Most are parents and most are left wing. Most are worried about the gender expression of their children.” (Curious and Curiouser, “Thoughts” 2016)

Ultimately the parents on *4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now*, parents like the author of *Raising Orlando*, and the parents in my interview sample, are all engaging in anticipation work, although they come to different conclusions about what the proper parental response is, and what it means to predict a child’s gender trajectory or to guide them in decisions around expression and the body.

There are many similarities between 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now's concerns and those from the affirming narratives of trans kids. There is the focus on protecting children, the idea of innocence, concern about adults who may influence them and harm them (though what influence and harm looks like differs depending on who you talk to), and the idea that parents know their kids best. In fact, *Raising My Rainbow* and 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now both have posts talking about how mothers should trust their "mama gut," and both authors argue that their child is NOT transgender (Duron "Trust" 2015; 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now "Listen" 2015). However, while some parents are open to the possibility of their kid being trans, parents (the original blogger and commenters) on 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now are trying to avoid a transition outcome before adulthood at all costs. Both sets of parents are trying to do the best for their children; to listen to them, and their own ideas of who the child is, and what they need. If 4<sup>th</sup> Wave's kid was truly going through a phase and just needed to get the "trans" thing out of her system, then I am glad that she has found a place in the world as a gender non-conforming girl. However, I worry that this blog will encourage parents to ignore the needs of kids who would benefit from transition.

I have brought up this blog in the conclusion because as more and more children come out as transgender and gender-creative, we are going to have more complex, nuanced, and contradictory conversations about the right approach to their lives. There will be increasing numbers of people like 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now who are approaching childhood transition from a gender-critical, academic perspective which questions whether children are being unduly influenced. These are all part of the entanglements surrounding these children's lives, and part of the work in

understanding and supporting these children will require following many different threads.

Conclusion: Baby Storm

Finally, I want to return to the story of Storm, the baby at the center of the international media frenzy. At age three, in 2013, Storm's parents refer to Storm by the pronoun "they" and "sometimes Storm says 'I'm a girl,' and sometimes Storm says 'I'm a boy'" (Poisson 2013). At the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference in 2014, I am excited to meet the family, and strike up a conversation with them about *Chasing Rainbows: Gender Fluid Parenting Practices*, as both Kathy Witterick and I had a chapter published in the anthology. I am struck by the normalcy of hearing and referring to Storm as "they"—though I can't help wondering, is Storm a boy or a girl?

<sup>117</sup> Or will Storm identify as neither?

Returning to the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference in 2015, Kathy Witterick, along with her 9 year old trans daughter Jazz, give a presentation on their experience with the media and the concept of gender engaged parenting. They remark that Storm is now using "she" pronouns. When I hear this I think, aha, Storm was a girl! And then I realize that all I know now is that Storm currently identifies as a girl, and uses "she" pronouns. It doesn't tell me anything about baby Storm's genitals, or assigned sex, and in fact there is no reason for me to know what Storm's genitals look like! Again, this family's story and my reaction makes clear how much we invest in baby and young children's gender, and the assumptions that are made based on their bodies. In *Gender In Real Time*, Kath Weston introduces the concept "unsexed."

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<sup>117</sup> My ease with this pronoun may be due to having friends who identify as genderqueer, using "they" or "ze" as pronouns.

"Unsexed is what you become in the moment of doubt before reclassification. Unsexed is what you become in a flash of discomfort before "oh I get it" sets you back on familiar terrain...unsexed never lasts. Ambiguity resolves back into certainty, doubt into gendered absolutes." (28)

People have been trying to guess Storm's gender since the first *Toronto Star* article—and many concluded from the initial baby photos that Storm was a boy. Discomfort with ambiguity means that folks immediately try to fix a "gendered absolute" onto Storm's body. And yet, in Storm's case, the moment of unsexed has lasted for more than a flash. What would it be like if "unsexed" was the norm, if children were not assigned a gender but instead were given the time to figure it out themselves? Is it possible for ambiguity to remain, and not dissolve into gendered absolutes? How might this change how parents engage in anticipate work around their children's gender? Ultimately Storm, and the children in this dissertation challenge our assumptions about children's bodies—both in regards to the way that we assign sex at birth based on genitals, as well as our discomfort when a baby is not easily categorized as a "boy" or a "girl." Many of the stories in this dissertation also offer alternative ways of engaging with the present, the past, and the future in regards to gender expression and identities, and what it means to anticipate children's gendered trajectories to adulthood.

In their presentation at the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference, Jazz and Kathy discuss the fact that journalists erroneously claimed that Witterick and Stocker were raising a "genderless baby," when instead they wanted to open up possibilities for self-identity. With a focus too tightly converging on gender, the media missed the bigger picture in regard to their ideas around democratic parenting, and the

importance of giving children a vote in family decisions and the agency to identify their gender for themselves. In a recent interview, David Stocker reflects on how things have shifted in society towards more fluidity and openness around gender, though he feels that few parents would make the decisions that they did. Furthermore, he says that “The core issues of democratic parenting and how much we fail to share power with young people (in society)...are still really entrenched and draw fire,” (quoted in Ostroff 2016). Children’s agency and autonomy are embedded within narratives of transgender, gender-creative, and gay children, and are a significant part of discussions around children’s gender and sexuality. Witterick and Stocker’s faith in children’s ability to know themselves is in stark contrast to 4<sup>th</sup> Wave Now who argues against any type of transition until one’s mid-twenties.

As I was finishing this chapter—a google search for Storm revealed that *The Star* had just published an update: “Baby Storm: Five Years Later A Preschooler on Top of the World” (Botelho-Urbanski 2016). Storm now sports a bright pink pixie cut, which matches her father’s pink dyed hair. She is still going by “she” and happily clambers to the top of a lamp-post in the park as her family talk with the reporter about the experience of going public with their story. They hope that it has helped to spark a larger conversation about not only gender, but also children’s rights. What sex was assigned to Storm at birth, the public still does not know, but it is clear that she is loved, supported, and accepted, no matter what genders she may express over the course of her childhood and lifetime.

## Appendices

### Appendix One: Blog List

*Accepting Dad.* <http://acceptingdad.com>

*Amelia's Huffington Post Queer Voices Blog*

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Amelia/>.

*Because I am Fabulous.* <https://secretlyfabulous.wordpress.com/>

*Cammie's Song.* <http://cameronsong.blogspot.com/>.

*Catching Our Rainbows.* <http://catchingourrainbows.blogspot.com/>

*Dangling Possibilities.* <http://danglingpossibilities.blogspot.com/>

*GenderMom.* <http://gendermom.wordpress.com/>

*GirlyBoy Mama's Open Salon Blog.* <http://open.salon.com/blog/girlyboymama>

*George. Jessie. Love. Parenting and Loving a Transgender Kid.*

<http://georgejessielove.wordpress.com>.

*Helping Her Find Her Way.* <http://dstevens11.wordpress.com/>

*He Has Always Been My Son.* <http://www.hesalwaysbeenmyson.com/>

*HE SPARKLES.* <http://hesparkles.wordpress.com/>.

*It's A Bold Life.* <http://designisgood.blogspot.com>.

*It's a dot, dot, dot.* <http://itsadotdotdot.blogspot.mx/>

*It's Hard to Be Me: Parenting and Loving Our Gender Fluid Child.*

<http://genderfluidkid.blogspot.com/>.

*Labels Are For Jars.* <https://labelsareforjars.wordpress.com/>.

*Life Uncharted.* <http://lifeuncharted5.wordpress.com>.

*My Beautiful Little Boy.* <http://mybeautifullittleboy.wordpress.com>

*My Kennedy's Story.* <http://mykennedysstory.blogspot.com/>.

*My Migraine Family.* <http://migrainefamily.com/>

*My Purple Umbrella.* <http://mypurpleumbrella.wordpress.com>

*Nonconforming Mom.* <http://www.nonconformingmom.com/>

*Not Just a Tomboy.* <http://notjustatomboy.wordpress.com/>

*Parenting the Transgender Teen.* <http://transitioningfamily.blogspot.com/>

*Pasupatidasi's Blog.* <http://pasupatidasi.wordpress.com/>

*Pink is For Boys.* <http://pinkisforboys.com/>

*Pink is For Boys.* <http://pinkisforboys.wordpress.com/>

*Pink is my Favourite Colour.* <http://pinkismyfavourite.blogspot.com/>

*Pink is the New Blue.* <http://pinkisthenewblue.blogspot.com/>

*Progressive Dad.* <http://dadprogressive.blogspot.com/>

*Rainbow Brick Road.* <http://rainbowbrickroad.com/>

*Raising My Rainbow.* <http://raisingmyrainbow.com/>

*Raising Orlando.* <http://raisingorlando.wordpress.com>

*Raising Queer Kids.* <http://raisingqueerkids.wordpress.com/>

*Sarah Hoffman: On Parenting A Boy Who is Different.*  
<http://www.sarahandianhoffman.com/>

*Savage Mama.* <http://jennifer-savage.com/category/savagemama/>

*Trains and Dresses.* <http://trainsanddresses.blogspot.com/>

*Transcendent: Reflections on Raising A Transgender Child.*  
<http://transcendenttransgender.blogspot.com>.

*Trans\*Forming Family.* <http://transformingfamily.net>.

*Transparenthood: Experiences Raising a Transgender Child.*  
<http://transparenthood.net/>.

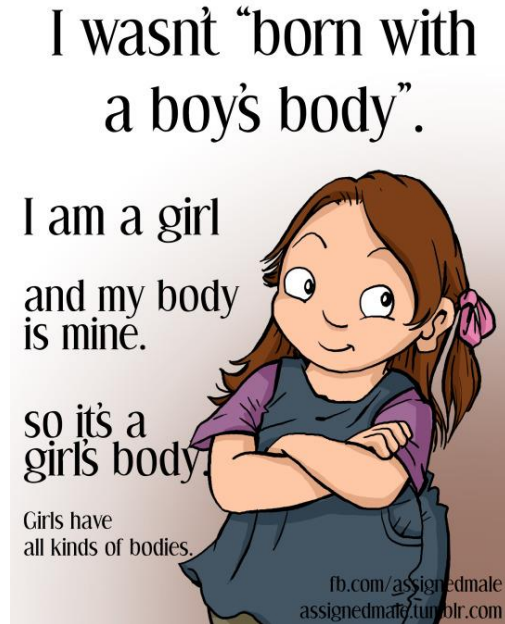
*Transforming Love: Support for Mothers of Transgender Children.*  
<http://mothersoftransgenderchildren.wordpress.com/>

*Wayne Maine's Huffington Post Blog.* <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wayne-maines/>



## Appendix Two: Figures

Figure 1.



Credit: Sophie Labelle (Assigned Male Comics), Used with Permission.

Figure 2.

Figure 3

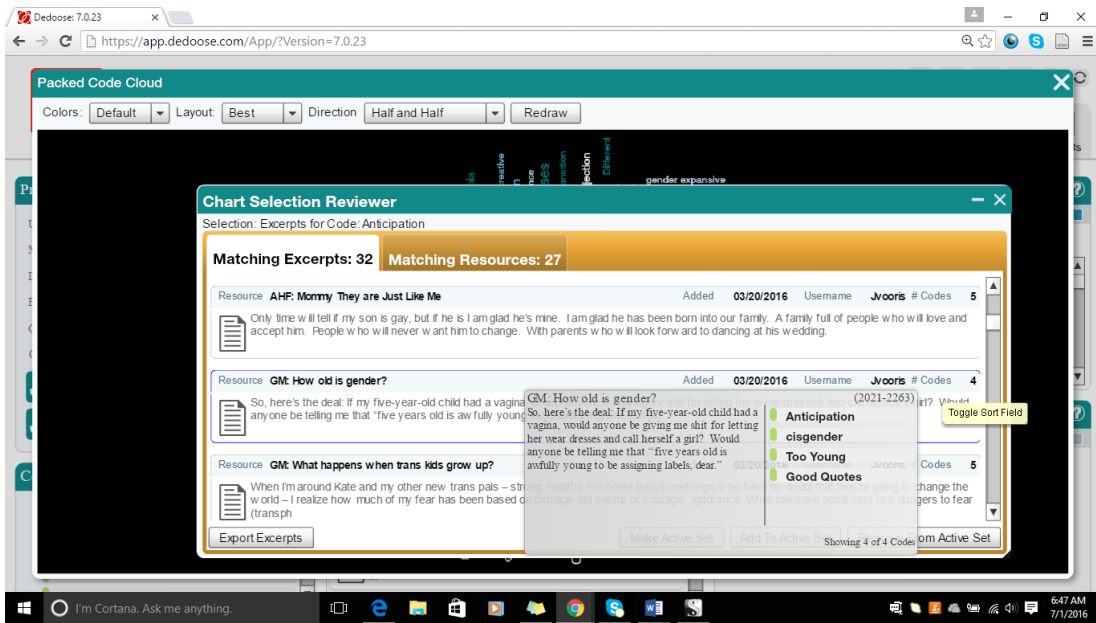
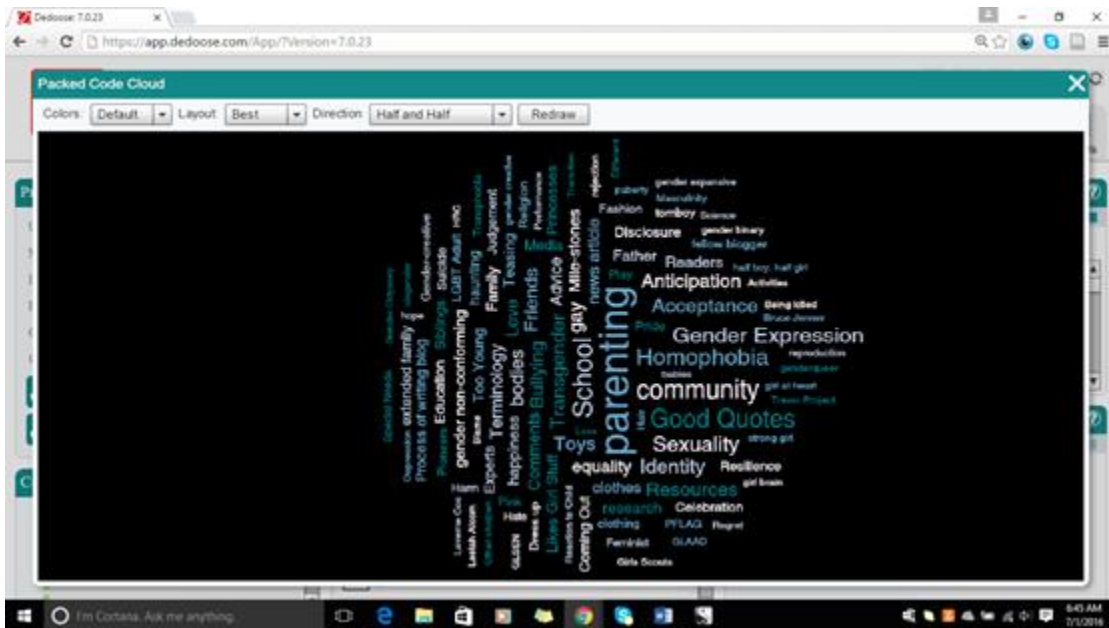


Figure 4:



## Appendix Three: Interview Protocol

Thank-you for agreeing to participate in my study, which as you know is about parenting transgender, gender-creative, and gay children. As I mentioned in our initial contact, this interview will be a part of my doctoral research in the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland. I am interesting in finding out how parents understand their children's gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexuality. This project is conducted with the supervision of Dr. Seung-kyung, a member of my dissertation committee. While this project may not have a direct benefit to you, I hope that it will help contribute to better understanding of parenting practices and knowledge about gender-creative, transgender, and gay children. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time. You also may choose not to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

The interview will last 60-90 minutes and will focus on your experiences with your child, and how you understand their gender and/or sexuality. For example, "How would you describe your child's gender?" "Do you know what your child's sexuality is or may be?" And "how did you first become aware that they were [gender-creative], [gay], [transgender], or [insert identifying term here]?"

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized through securely storing data on a password protected computer, and your name will not be identified or linked to data at any time unless you give your express permission for your identity to be revealed. This data will not be shared with anyone, and only the student investigator and project adviser will have access to the participants' names.

If you decide to stop taking part in the study, have questions, concerns, or complaints, or need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the project advisor, Dr. Seung-kyung Kim, by telephone (301-405-6877) or e-mail ([skim2@umd.edu](mailto:skim2@umd.edu)). If you have questions about your rights, please contact the Institutional Review Board Office at the University of Maryland, by email ([irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu)) or telephone (301-405-0678). This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

### **Do you agree to participate? [If yes, continue. If no, stop.]**

The interview will last about 60 minutes, and I would like to ask your permission to record this interview for accuracy. The recording will be available only to me and my advisor, and your identity will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any report. If your words are included in the results, any identifying information will be removed.

### **Do you agree for me to record this interview? [If yes, turn on the recorder]**

### **RQ: How do parents explain their children's gender/sexuality?**

1. How many children do you have?
  - a. How old are they?

- b. How would you describe them?
  - c. How would you describe their gender? Do you have any sense of how they identify in regards to sexuality?
  - d. How would you describe them at five years old? Ten years old? 15?
2. How did you first become aware of your child's atypical gender expression/identity/sexuality?
3. Has their gender expression or identity changed over the last few years?
4. Do you allow them to express themselves freely in both private and public? What was that process like for you as a parent?
5. How did you learn about the term [whatever parent uses to describe child, ie, gender-creative, pink boy, gender non-conforming, transgender]?
6. How do you define sex? gender? sexuality?
7. How has the rest of your family reacted to your child's gender identity and/or sexuality?
  - a. extended family?
  - b. friends?
  - c. community?
  - d. the child's school?
8. What do you imagine in regards to your child's future?

### **Conclusion**

1. These are all of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add your child or experiences parenting?
2. Before we close, I have some general demographic questions for you:
  - a. What is your age?
  - b. How do you identify in terms of race?
2. Lastly, if I have any further questions regarding your answers, could I contact you in the future?

Thank you again for sharing your time with me. I greatly appreciate your help.

## **Appendix Four: Interview List**

- Interview One: 13 year old trans girl, Emily. New England.
- Interview Two: 18 year old trans girl, Courtney. New England.
- Interview Three: 9 year old trans girl, Evelyn. Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Four: 15 year old trans girl, Tiffany. South.
- Interview Five: 10 year old gender-creative twins. Malcolm, Phillip. New England.
- Interview Six: 15 year old MAAB teen, (unclear, now gay). Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Seven: 9 year old gender-creative boy, Adam. West Coast.
- Interview Eight: 18 year old trans boy, Sean. Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Nine: 11 year old trans girl, Lilli. Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Ten: 7.5 year old trans girl, Bailey. Mid-West.
- Interview Eleven: 6 year old trans girl, Amy. Mid-West.
- Interview Twelve: 10 year old trans girl, Ryan. South.
- Interview Thirteen: 11 year old trans boy, Kai. New-England.
- Interview Fourteen: 18 year old trans boy, Martin. New England.
- Interview Fifteen: 7 year old trans girl, Joselyn. New England.
- Interview Sixteen: 20 yr old trans girl, 10 yr old gender-creative boy, Alison & Danny. South.
- Interview Seventeen: 4 year old trans girl, Robyn. New England.
- Interview Eighteen: 10 year old trans girl, Alex. South.
- Interview Nineteen: 4 year old MAAB child (trans girl), Russell/Ellie. South.
- Interview Twenty: 14 year old gender non-conforming FAAB child, E. Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Twenty-One: 14 year old trans girl, Aubrey. Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Twenty-Two: 13 year old gay-identified “pink boy”, Jasper. New England.
- Interview Twenty-Three: 8 year old trans girl, Charlotte. South.
- Interview Twenty-Four: 16 year old trans boy, Nick. New England.
- Interview Twenty-Five: 14 yr old trans boy, 12 yr old gender-fluid kid. Mid-West.
- Interview Twenty-Six: 12 year old trans girl, Heaven. South.
- Interview Twenty-Seven: 15 year old trans boy, Greg. Mid-Atlantic.
- Interview Twenty-Eight: 13 year old trans boy, Michael. Mid-Atlantic.

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