

## CHAPTER ONE

# Studying Each Other

I heard Rafe before I saw him. His lilting voice cut through the din of animated chatter in the crowded sitting area of a large hotel suite. Around him, a group of thirty-five teenagers lounged trading magazines and junk food. Even among the dizzying movement of denim-clad legs, brightly colored sneakers, and sweatshirts, I picked him out immediately. He was positioned in front of a cluster of seated kids around his age, gyrating his hips with his hands crossed over his chest. He spun around several times and abruptly stopped, planting his feet with improbable force. I later learned he was demonstrating a move from a recent Britney Spears video. I remember I was struck at the time by the intense hot pink of his skinny-legged jeans, how they set off tiny flecks of bright neon colors in his otherwise muted black T-shirt. Rafe was very stylish.

He wore slouchy boots and an artfully arranged scarf. His deliberately coiffed brown hair was streaked with highlights, cut in a jagged, punky, feminine style. It fell in front of his eyes, which he accentuated with smoky shadow. He shook it from his face with a toss of his head. His comportment suggested dance training. Much about his presentation of self, his dramatic vocal inflections, artful makeup, fluid graceful body movements, reminded me of the gay men of musical theater I met

when I first moved to New York City as a teenager. Yet Rafe confounded easy interpretation. I caught myself looking at him intently. While some may have read his posture and campy humor as classically “gay,” it was also evident that what was on display was far more than a performance of sexuality; some core part of the being that was Rafe was deeply and essentially feminine. He drew me in from the start, and I found myself gravitating over to his group, where I attempted to perch myself on the edge of a sofa to watch him command the attention of his peers. He immediately paused, jutted a hip in my direction, pointed his finger, and loudly challenged, “And *who* are *YOU*?”

*In that moment, Rafe was asking me the very question that was so often, and by so many adults, directed at him.*

Rafe was sixteen years old and lived with his parents, Claudia and Rick, in a middle-class mid-Atlantic suburb. We met at a weekend conference for transgender and gender nonconforming teenagers, children and their families. Claudia explained that she and Rick were engaged in a process of supporting Rafe in his ongoing efforts to understand his own identity. The onset of puberty had been an excruciating time emotionally for Rafe. He was devastated by the idea that his body would masculinize, that his voice would deepen, and that he would begin to sprout facial hair. He said it felt like a betrayal. With the support of his parents, he elected to go on a newly available hormone regimen that suspended his male puberty. Two years later, Rafe was still actively considering whether he wished to make a social transition, to live in the world and be recognized as female. His parents told me they discussed these issues often.

They are not alone.

Doctors, psychiatrists, politicians, parents, and journalists are all talking about transgender children. From medical journals to neuro-anatomy labs, from mainstream magazines to personal parenting websites, from churches to college classrooms, people are puzzling out what makes some small minority of very young boys and girls depart, sometimes radically, from the type of gender behavior other children appear

to enact naturally and automatically. Is it something intrinsic to their physiological makeup? Is it something in the wiring of their brains? Is it the product of poor, deficient, or absent parenting? Or is it simply benign human variation? Should boys be allowed to wear dresses? To use girls' restrooms? Or should we, instead, be encouraging these children to acclimate to their socially assigned genders? Why do we see so many transgender children today when in previous generations they were all but absent from public sight?

We have reached what some cultural commentators are calling a "transgender tipping point."<sup>1</sup> From Caitlyn Jenner to Chaz Bono, images of adults who elect to change their social gender categories are now a mainstay of media discourse. Concomitant with the increasing visibility of transgender adults, a new vocabulary for understanding childhood gender nonconformity as incipient transgenderism has changed the way parents think about gender.

This transformation in cultural understandings of gender has led parents and some medical professionals to argue for significant changes to institutional practices around gender categorization. And they have been remarkably successful. Gender is no longer simply sutured to biology; many people now understand it to be a constitutive feature of the psyche that is fundamental, immutable, and not tied to the materiality of the body. While psychologists have been thinking this way since the late 1950s,<sup>2</sup> it is only in the last decade or so that this sex/gender split has affected the administrative and institutional categorization of children.

That change has been sweeping. On June 13, 2010, the U.S. Department of State issued a new passport policy, in effect allowing parents to change the legal gender of their minor children.<sup>3</sup> Because passports are "breeder documents,"<sup>4</sup> they can be used to change state identification, school records, health records and more. Parent activism is similarly changing the medical management of transgender youth; endocrinologists now widely recommend the use of puberty-inhibiting hormone therapies for transgender adolescents.<sup>5</sup> Medicare lifted its ban on coverage for

transgender health care, making such treatments more widely available to families.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, the 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* debuted a new version of its clinical diagnostic criteria for “gender dysphoria,” which limited the diagnosis to individuals experiencing “clinically significant distress” about their gender (rather than applying the diagnosis to all transpeople) and separated gender into a category wholly apart from sexuality. Finally, in late 2017, the Endocrine Society updated their initial guidelines, urging research into the biological underpinnings of gender identity and installing a multidisciplinary, team approach to gender management in children, consisting of psychological and endocrinological care, administered in concert.<sup>7</sup>

Some local administrative practices around the country are changing dramatically as well. By 2017, thirteen states had enacted laws prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity or expression in schools that are enforced by the state or human rights agencies, and hundreds of school districts around the country have instituted similar policies on a local level.<sup>8</sup> High school students have successfully lobbied for genderless bathrooms and locker rooms in schools across the country. Some worry that the election of President Donald Trump will erode some of the laws protecting trans youth, and indeed, since 2016, North Carolina and Texas both introduced so-called bathroom bills, laws that specifically require transpeople to use public restrooms associated with the gender they were assigned at birth.<sup>9</sup> The federal government rescinded a directive mandating the provision of transgender students with gender-appropriate bathrooms in schools.<sup>10</sup> Bathrooms are a locus for cultural disagreements about trans inclusion;<sup>11</sup> and trans youth in other states continue to lobby successfully for gender-neutral facilities or use of those consistent with their identities.<sup>12</sup>

Transgender children are popular subjects of reality television shows, the news media, documentary films, and children’s books. National Geographic released a documentary called *The Gender Revolution* in 2017, along with a print edition of the magazine that depicted the first transgender person ever featured on its cover; that person was a nine-year-old child.<sup>13</sup>

This followed on the heels of similar documentaries by independent filmmakers,<sup>14</sup> as well as large-scale investigations by the BBC, PBS, and others.<sup>15</sup> There are children's books about children who identify as members of the other gender<sup>16</sup> or who enjoy dressing or playing in gender-diverse ways.<sup>17</sup> There are guides for parents on raising a gender nonconforming child<sup>18</sup> and a rapidly expanding literature for the clinicians who serve them.<sup>19</sup> There are dozens of personal stories by parents and young people themselves.<sup>20</sup> There are self-help books for teens and parents.<sup>21</sup> In short, "trans" is not just an identity; it's an industry.

It appears we are "surrounded by evolving notions of what it means to be a woman or a man."<sup>22</sup> Facebook now offers some fifty custom gender options to its users who eschew male and female labels. The dating app Tinder lists thirty-seven.<sup>23</sup> Oregon offers a third gender category on driver's licenses, and there is political momentum for such a policy in California.<sup>24</sup> Some expect that other state agencies may soon follow suit. Is this, as some commentators have opined, "the beginning of the end of the gender binary?"<sup>25</sup> Or are we heading into a new era where proliferating gender categories supplement existing notions of male/female complementarity?

Some conservatives worry that we are eroding gender distinctions altogether. Erin Brown, writing for the Culture and Media Institute, lamented that "propaganda pushing the celebration of gender-confused boys wanting to dress and act like girls is a growing trend, seeping into mainstream culture."<sup>26</sup> Fox News psychologist Dr. Keith Ablow declared that "this is a dramatic example of the way our culture is being encouraged to abandon all trappings of gender identity—homogenizing males and females, when the outcome of such 'psychological sterilization' ... is not known."<sup>27</sup> He warned other would-be gender-lenient parents that supporting deviant behavior in children poses serious danger, not merely for them, but for the larger culture that relies on adherence to ideas of sexual difference.

On the other side of the debate, facilitative clinicians dismiss the connections between social supports for gender nonconforming behavior

and the active encouragement of adult LGBT identities. What's notable is not that they do this, but *how* they do this. Gay psychiatrist Jack Drescher notes, "I can say with 100% certainty that a mother painting her son's toenails pink does not cause transgenderism or homosexuality or anything else that people who are social conservatives would worry about." Indeed, he continued, feminist notions that gender is culturally determined are themselves erroneous. "Most studies show that if boys were given Barbie dolls, they would pick them up and use them as if they were guns."<sup>28</sup> In Drescher's estimation, most children are gender typical, and socialization is unlikely to turn them into trans kids; by the same token, some kids are trans, and no amount of social engineering will change their innate identities.

#### PERFECT GENDER

Transgender children "throw into sharp relief"<sup>29</sup> the social process of gendering to which all children are subject, as well as the important ways in which that process has shifted in recent decades. There is a long and studied tradition within ethnomethodology of using gender transitions to illuminate the underlying, often obscured, social processes that consolidate social gender relations. Rather than "inverting" gender, transpeople "elaborate the particular configurations of sexuality, gender and sex that undergird and give meaning to [the concepts] man and woman."<sup>30</sup> Anthropologist Don Kulick, in his study of Brazilian *travesti*, suggested that transpeople "perfect" gender expectations, that their mobilization of ideas, representations, and practices associated with maleness and femaleness "clarify and distill them, draw them to a logical conclusion, purify them to an extent that it becomes possible to see in them central elements of [culture]."<sup>31</sup>

Like Kulick, I draw on ethnomethodology in an attempt to situate the families I study within the context of contemporary American culture. "Doing gender," being a man or a woman in a social sense, is not an ontological position. Instead, as sociologists Candace West and Don

Zimmerman tell us, it is something we “do” because our very “competence as members of society is hostage to its production.” Gender is a “routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment.”<sup>32</sup> Individuals organize interactions and engage in social activities to reflect or express our gender, and we interpret the behavior of others as expressions of the same. This is not unlike Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, typically understood<sup>33</sup> as a poststructuralist and psychoanalytically informed correlate of symbolic interactionism. Gender is culturally “citational,” always in a state of being iterated or reproduced. As Butler says, “We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.”<sup>34</sup> The ways individuals signal gender, and the ways those signals are received, interpreted and integrated are the material of this book.

Postmodern gender theory and symbolic interactionism share an approach to understanding the social reproduction of gender. Our individual selves are forged through interaction.<sup>35</sup> We assume social roles, with an eye to how they are received by the audiences with whom we interact.<sup>36</sup> In “Doing Gender,” West and Zimmerman separate out sex, sex category, and gender. While “sex” is determined by normative biological standards, our “sex category” is a social assignation based on sex but established and sustained by the “socially required identificatory displays” that accompany maleness and femaleness. “Gender,” in contrast, is the “activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative expectations of masculinity and femininity.”<sup>37</sup>

The interactional work of “being” a man or a woman in society requires that there be a relationship among these three elements. We are assigned a sex category based on our biology, which we must then maintain with our quotidian behavior. Gender performances are structured to appear as if they are naturally occurring;<sup>38</sup> thus it is the reiterative power of the social that produces the very forms of gender it then constrains and regulates. Gender is an achievement, rather than an attribute, one that is aimed at significant others assumed to be oriented to its production.<sup>39</sup> We do gender with others to establish

ourselves as fluent actualizers of our bodies, and always “at the risk of assessment” by others.<sup>40</sup> Negative assessments of gender performance can result in stigmatization and loss of social and material capital.<sup>41</sup>

This is a paradigmatic example of interpellation, though sociologists don't typically think of gender in this way.<sup>42</sup> In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser described the ways that the State—by which he meant the duality of the actual regulatory, repressive state apparatus and the invisible ideological schemas through which it executes control—calls upon each individual to become a subject, to participate in the community as a particular type of person and to accept the overall ideological structure.<sup>43</sup> This process happens entirely outside our awareness, one might even say prior to it, relying on our psychological need for recognition in order to develop a psychic life.<sup>44</sup> There are both ideological and material manifestations of this process, the sense of “being” and of “doing” through which we experience and execute gender. So when a baby is born and the pronouncement is made, “It's a boy!” the baby is both hailed into gendered subjectivity, and simultaneously becomes accountable to maintain that subjectivity. Both the child and the adult experience this hailing as a benign statement of fact; indeed, most people would resist the notion that this is a moment of ideology. To paraphrase Althusser, one of the practical effects of ideology is the denigration of the ideological character of ideology.<sup>45</sup>

This concept of assessment yokes it to normative gender. We are beholden to reproduce normative masculinity or femininity, and failure to do so results in failed social integration. But what if assessment is no longer merely the process through which hegemonic gender reproduces itself through threat of sanction? What if it is now a moment where the hegemony might, in some cases, also re-sort individuals into new gender categories that may or may not adhere to their bodies? Our symbolic understandings of gender are multiple and emergent, and have concretized into a social classification system that encompasses new forms of gender.

Transgender children, hailed into an originary gender category, actually seek to incite that very accountability process, using it to make



claims on otherwise prohibited forms of action and identity. Through a sociological examination of their interactions with parents and social institutions, we can see that accountability is constitutive of gender, even in its nonnormative forms. Accountability processes function not only to restrict, but also to elaborate rapidly proliferating forms of gender. Gender is a process of interpellation. We are hailed into maleness or femaleness by others. Once hailed, we are accountable to maintain the boundaries of that category with our quotidian gender behavior. Small infractions, of course, trigger precisely the kinds of sanction West and Zimmerman outlined. But there is a certain threshold beyond which transgression can change the very category into which one is interpellated. Parents, doctors, psychologists, teachers, can move an individual child from one category to another, and the entire apparatus, all the social processes previously employed to shore up an individual child as male, then shift to consolidate the very same person as female. In this way, gender is fundamentally relational, though paradoxically, many of us also believe it to be immutable. And while gender assessments are routine parts of social interaction, assessments of non-normativity incite a range of social processes, from sanction to celebration. As gendered subjectivity is relieved from a rigid and dependent relationship to the body, our lexicon for communicating the subtleties of gender in all its varied configurations is expanding exponentially. And individuals, for their part, are examining one another with ever greater attention to detail.

#### BEING GENDERED

It is rare to have an opportunity to watch an emergent social category in formation. Transgender children provide us with precisely this opportunity. Yet the contemporary struggles to understand and define the category itself inflect ethnographic encounters with a sense of urgency for the research subjects themselves. The desire for epistemological clarity led parents, physicians, and children to investigate the

gender of those around them with incredible nuance. Gender assessments bled from their original objects (in this case, kids) to those who surrounded them. I found this gaze impossible to escape. As I scrutinized people whose precise predicament was that they were being scrutinized, they turned their gaze back on me. It was a perfect reciprocity, a projection of precisely the social process at play, and my first lesson about the implications of these new social gender processes.

Early on in my fieldwork, I spent several hours in the empty mezzanine lobby of a conference hotel interviewing Dr. Kenneth J. Zucker, a world-renowned but increasingly controversial psychologist who ran an outpatient gender identity clinic housed in a major teaching hospital in Toronto. I was initially surprised by his willingness to speak with me. During the months prior to beginning my fieldwork, I read dozens of his articles, as well as an equal number of fierce critiques of his methods by transgender activists and some other clinicians. I expected him to be defensive, or at the very least self-protective. He wasn't. He agreed immediately to be interviewed, and even suggested I visit his clinic to form my own impressions of his work. Of all the medical professionals I met during my fieldwork, he was the only one to extend such an offer unsolicited. I went to the interview with great anticipation.

During the three hours we spent together, the first of many such conversations, we discussed his views on the difficult process of differentiating gender nonconforming behavior that signals emergent transgender identity from that which signposts emergent homosexuality. We also discussed his concern with misdiagnosis and the pervasive, and in his opinion erroneous, conflation of his treatment methods with "reparative therapy." Midway through our conversation, he presented a digital camera with an image of a young adult formerly in his care for severe gender dysphoria. A soft and somber face gazed into the camera, and as Ken proceeded to describe his gender trajectory, I struggled to discern the work this image was supposed to do. Was I supposed to see femininity in the gentle contours of his face? Was I to focus on the male insignia he wore? Was there something about the solemnity of the

image that should communicate the gravity of the choices he faced at the threshold of adulthood? What was Ken expecting me to see? To him, the image, the person in the image, was an object with its own communicative value. The gender inhered in the person, in the materiality of his body, the fabric of his psyche, in how he inhabited both of those things. To comment on what I saw would be to collude with him in evacuating gender into the image. What I was coming to understand in my own work, however, was that this person's gender, this person's gender category, resided more in us than it did in him. It wasn't that I didn't see gender in the image; it was that I was discovering that the gender I did see was alloyed, more a projection of my own subjectivity and cultural frames than something innate to that individual person. Were I to collude with Dr. Zucker in making a gender attribution, I would, in effect, be arguing that gender is a static property, about which evidence can be procured. Gender is, instead, an iterative, interactive process, constantly in negotiation among individuals. The anxiety I saw in this stranger's face was as much my own anxiety as Ken's. We met his image with our own unanswered questions.

As we concluded the formal part of our conversation and I switched off my recording device, Ken presented the camera again and showed me several more photographs. He then asked me if he could take my picture. I asked him why he wished to do that, and he responded, "I just like taking pictures," and proceeded to pull up several others, one of his own child smiling into the screen. I felt immediately uncomfortable, found out, at issue. I imagined myself among the faces arranged in his album of gender variants. I took a mental inventory of my own gender transgressions that day. I had gotten a haircut earlier that week, and it was quite short. I wore no makeup. My button-down shirt was boxy, but open at the throat. I felt acutely aware of the contours of my body, of the way I was holding myself. I had to remind myself that my gender presentation was cultivated with great care. That I was comfortable with it and felt entitled to it. That I was an adult, a professional. I would not be conscripted into the role of gender deviant. I wondered if the

young person in the initial photo felt similarly exposed when faced with his camera. I wondered if he, like me, found it easier to relent than to manage the discomfort of noncompliance. Ken seemed oblivious to my discomfort, which somehow made it worse. Although I acquiesced, I wondered what I would become an example of for his next interlocutor. Only at that moment did I register that of all my subjects, only he asked if he too could record our discussion, and his tape recorder sat on the table beside mine. It was then that I realized I was not just studying him; *we were studying each other*.

In the frame of Ken Zucker's camera lens, I felt as if I had moved from the space of colleague, interlocutor, or even just researcher and into the realm of study object, of case example: a gender variant in my own right. My image, the contours of my face, my clothing and hairstyle, were worth adding to the anthology he drew from to make intellectual arguments about the line between typical and atypical gender. I fell on the atypical side, I was noteworthy, a specimen worth collecting. In some ways, this taste of objectification offered me the closest approximation of what I imagine the children parented by my research subjects experience: objectification in the service of affirmation. My decision to relent to the lens offered me continued access to this clinician, and it was a deliberate methodological choice. But it was one that left an emotional residue of shame.

This interaction provided me with a deep, affective, and embodied comprehension of the experience of being observed. I allowed Ken Zucker to take my picture that day. I focused on squelching the sting of abjection, smothering the unease I felt under a false bravado. I thought to myself, and then repeated silently, "I am comfortable enough with myself to do this." What I really meant was, "You are an expert and I want something from you. I will put myself, my body, on the line to get those things that I want." This places me akin to so many transgender people who, like Ken's young patient, submit to scientific objectification in an instrumental way, to get something we need. For me, it was data; for them, it was perhaps life-saving medical care. It is precisely

that clinical gaze, that has for decades positioned gender-nonnormative people as psychiatric subjects, which is resisted in the new gender stories we are telling about children in the twenty-first century. In its place is a proliferating lexicon for experiencing, communicating, and interpreting the gender signals that float all around us.

### EMBODIED ETHNOGRAPHY

This is a book about the social process of gendering. It is about the way we have come to scrutinize the gender displays of others, to make meaning of those displays, to interpret, identify, classify, catalogue, and critique the behaviors, statements, and affiliations of others. It is also about the ways the genders of others come to influence our own sense of self, and the possibilities we believe exist for the children in our lives. It outlines the new sets of choices emerging in the early twenty-first century, and the kinds of excitements, fears, and frustrations they elicit. In the contemporary moment, one cannot study gender without being a subject of study. One cannot be an analyst without also being data for someone else's identity project. In this research, I was both.

Gender hovered ambiently around each interaction I had in the process of researching this book. My gender could render me suspect, it could make me into an ally or even data, depending on who was on the other side of my table. Sometimes this reading of me was made explicit; often it took the form of veiled questions about the origins of the project, my interest, or aspects of my appearance. Indeed, it became clear to me that, much like the child subjects of my research, I too lacked control over the meanings made by others of my body and my identity. It seemed to matter greatly to my research subjects just who and what I was. They labored to decipher my identity, my relationship to communities with which they identified, and my political perspective. In short, they returned my gaze, and the ways they did so were themselves valuable data on how individuals make sense of gender in others, and how that sense-making affects interactions and relationships.

My own gender presentation structured my experience of my research subjects in important and occasionally conflicting ways.<sup>46</sup> My life and my gender were frequent topics of commentary and speculation, from the parents who alternately endeavored to expose or remove their children from my presence, to the children themselves who often asked questions or made comments about my body or my clothing. The subjects of my research—parents, doctors, and psychologists—were actively seeking to understand the very same phenomenon I was, yet with vastly different epistemological orientations and for different sets of reasons. We were participants in what Judith Stacey called a “collaborative, reciprocal quest for understanding.”<sup>47</sup> We were co-creating the very questions we sought to resolve. And what we each saw in the “material” of gender was ordered by who we ourselves were.

Parents struggled with whether to identify or reject the meanings of transgender created by previous generations. For many of those parents, gender nonconforming adults, myself included, were deeply symbolic in a variety of conflicting ways. We functioned as floating signifiers for the hopes and fears they attached to their children’s uncertain futures. For some parents, the deep pain and pervasive discrimination experienced by transgender adults was too much to bear emotionally; for others, it was the notion that their child might cultivate an oppositional identity, one that radically departs from social norms, that was of primary concern. These parents attempted to disassociate their child from dominant cultural images of transgender adults. For still others, constructing taxonomies of different forms of adult gender allowed them to exert more careful control over precisely what *sort* of influence connections to the adult transgender community might have on their child’s evolving self-understandings. It was around these issues of identification and disidentification that I felt my own gender presentation become most salient for my interview respondents. Navigating those moments proved treacherous, both methodologically and emotionally.

Colten’s mom, Deirdre, told me her biggest fear was that Colten would spend a lifetime hiding the truth of his body from potential

intimate partners. Deirdre hoped that exposing Colten to genderqueer adults who live in intermediate gender spaces without making full medical and social transitions<sup>48</sup> might provide him with a sufficient model for how to articulate his own gender, thus alleviating his desire to make a full transition himself. I felt her eyes travel the planes of my body as we spoke. She commented on my earrings. She told me Colten had a jacket like mine. As we concluded our interview, she asked me if I would join them for lunch that afternoon. She told me she'd really like me to spend some time with Colten. When I asked her why, she replied,

My feeling is, the more varied kinds of people that Colten talks to, the better. I want him to see more and more of those people in the gray area. I want him to meet more people that are like him. I want him to meet more people that are female but not all the way at *that* end of female. In that way, it's kind of like when I discover somebody who speaks Italian, because my husband is Italian, it's like, *Ob, speak Italian to him, please. Speak French to him. He can do it.*

Deirdre read me as “like Colten,” fluent in a language of self-understanding that might offer him an alternative to gender transition. She paused, made direct eye contact, and said, slowly and thick with emotion, “*Please . . . Speak gender stuff to him in a way that I can't.*”

This was a peculiar kind of carnal sociology,<sup>49</sup> a learning of the other through the acquisition of a bodily disposition. My body became a screen for the projected gendered fantasies of others, and as a result, my attunement to the way my body was received heightened. Parents imagined my gender to be a finished product, one they could mobilize to assist them in uncovering a hidden truth about their own child. Deirdre imagined that Colten and I shared a fluency in a foreign language, a kind of bodily and psychic knowing that inhered in the particularity of our genders. An urgency attended that imagined connection, a need for a feeling of commonality, of being able to place Colten among like objects. Deirdre felt inarticulate in a language of gender she presumed both Colten and I spoke. She needed a translator, and she hoped Colten and I might be able to work out his grammar together.

The management of this and others' reactions to my gender, their assumptions, discomforts, and interests became an embodied ethnographic project. It was in those self-conscious moments that I believe I came closest to knowing the gender nonconforming child, by which I mean living the experience of having one's body and identity be the object of a particular type of searching gaze, one tinged with worry, fear, expectation, sometimes hope. This mirrors in some sense the kind of scrutiny politically inflected ethnographic research fixes on the lives of those we seek to understand, and it is a mistake to think that our subjects don't feel that gaze.

Because the gender categories and identities I studied were in a process of active iteration, they were exceedingly porous to the ethnographic encounter itself. This presented me with certain methodological challenges in the field that warrant examination. Would I participate in organizing activities for the children, knowing that it was in the context of their shared community that many of them labored to form coherent identities? Would my presence and participation ultimately overdetermine what I would find? Would an investigator with a different gender configuration draw forth different gendered messages in others? These very questions from my fieldwork with families and clinicians underscored how individuals engage in the process of making the new social categories into which they may then be hailed, and the many ways gender structures relationships in the ethnographic field. Perhaps, most importantly, they underscore the ways in which our genders are profoundly, inescapably both a deep subjective reality and a mode of relationality, always in the hands of others.

#### UNDOING GENDER?

Feminists did not invent the concept of gender, nor were we the first to separate cultural ideas of male-female difference from their biological or bodily origins. We inherited our contemporary concept of gender from scientists who worked on, and often pathologized, intersexuality



and transsexuality.<sup>50</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, most presumed that masculine and feminine mapped neatly onto male and female and came yoked to a sexuality aimed at those in the other category (heterosexuality). To psychologists of that era, being a man who desired other men sexually was like being a woman, and vice versa. There was little conceptual separation between male, masculine, and gynophilic.<sup>51</sup> What Margaret Mead labeled “sex roles,” the “culturally constructed behaviors expected of women and men,” were not indistinct from the biological functions of reproduction.<sup>52</sup> In fact, they were co-determinate. Yet, as Mead and others also began to chronicle the different ways in which sex roles manifested across cultures, they introduced into the anthropological imagination the concept of a socially learned, psychological component to sex. This set the stage for later notions of gender that emerged in the 1950s.<sup>53</sup>

In surveys of the introduction of the gender concept, historian Joanne Meyerowitz and Australian gender scholar Jennifer Germon traced its etiology to a series of articles written by Johns Hopkins psychologist John Money in the mid to late 1950s.<sup>54</sup> An expert on intersexuality in children, Money argued that it was not the anatomy or physiology of the body that determined a child’s internal sense of being a boy or a girl, but instead the sex assigned at birth and the way the child was subsequently raised.<sup>55</sup> In 1955, he employed the term *gender* for the first time to refer to “all those things a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman.”<sup>56</sup> He compared gender to a “native language” learned in childhood, and reasoned that while some piece of the capacity to learn language is biological, specific languages (and genders) are learned through a process of social engagement.<sup>57</sup>

Robert Stoller, a psychiatrist working with transsexuals at UCLA, refined Money’s concept in 1964, introducing the term *gender identity*, which subsequently came to dominate the literature on transsexuality. He used it “much as others had used psychological sex, to refer to ‘one’s sense of being a member of a particular sex.’”<sup>58</sup> Stoller was the first

psychoanalyst to separate the concept of gender identity from sexual orientation; this separation allowed the critical disaggregation of the subjective or felt sense of self from the behaviors we associate with maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity.<sup>59</sup>

Since the 1960s, gender has come to mean two different sets of things. In one set of meanings, feminists describe a “sex/gender system,” by which we mean “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity.”<sup>60</sup> The social correlates of biological sexual difference operate as “a complex of socially-guided, perpetual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’”<sup>61</sup> Gender isn’t a form of personal property, but rather “an emergent feature of social situations,” “both an outcome and a justification for outcomes,” and at its center, a vehicle with which to “legitimate a fundamental social division” between men and women.<sup>62</sup> This concept of social gender persists as a useful analytic in much current feminist theory,<sup>63</sup> even as feminists trouble the sex/gender divide itself, pointing to the ways even our scientific understandings of biology are strained through the mesh of gender ideology.<sup>64</sup>

Alongside and occasionally in dialogue with feminist notions of gender, psychoanalytically-informed gender theories evolved dramatically in the ensuing half century as well. Some clinicians still espouse a “developmental, biopsychosocial” theory of gender acquisition,<sup>65</sup> a trinity of biological and genetic makeup, culture/environment/family composition, and child/caregiver interaction patterns.<sup>66</sup> Others, however, eschew traditional normative, developmental models in favor of viewing gender as a phenomenon idiosyncratically sutured together,<sup>67</sup> a complex assembly<sup>68</sup> of intrapsychic, relational, and cultural influences, always in a process of iteration.<sup>69</sup> Far from viewing trans and other forms of atypical gender as per se psychopathological, some have gone so far as to suggest that the repetitive misattribution of gender, or persistent failure of significant others to recognize the identities of transpeople, is “gender trauma,” which can itself cause significant

psychic debility, even mental illness.<sup>70</sup> Despite the plurality of etiological and clinical orientations, there is an emerging consensus that facilitating transition in trans-identified people is preferable to older models aimed at cure.

How might we understand the implications of the disaggregation of gender from biology, and the increasing conceptualization of psychological gender development as an assemblage of often divergent forces? To the extent that these evolutions in thinking create the condition for the emergence of the transgender child, one plausible conclusion we might draw is that these families are dismantling the sex/gender system as we know it. Perhaps we are headed into the “post-gender world” imagined by some feminist sociologists, one in which cultural ideas of gender are undone, disrupted and disestablished on both cultural and institutional levels. Perhaps, as Francine Deutsch argued, we should consider dispensing with the concept altogether.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps it’s time for the utopian context imagined by Judith Lorber, Barbara Risman, and Jessica Sherwood, where gender becomes increasingly irrelevant, where men and women will not be held accountable to gender norms, and where gender will cease to be a master status. Perhaps it is time, as they argue, to “undo gender.”<sup>72</sup> If gender was in a process of erosion, we would expect to see a relaxation of identity discourse, greater fluidity and flexibility in labeling behaviors, and greater demedicalization of care.

Or instead, as I will argue in this book, maybe gender is both proliferating and becoming ever more important. Parents are becoming ever more likely to fight for a child’s chosen identity, to contest the labeling practices of others, to engage in more directed interpersonal work to assist children in further articulating a discrete identity, to purchase clothing and toys that reinforce that identity, and to enlist social institutions in identity creation and maintenance. The notion that “gender identity,” or the felt sense of gender subjectivity, is fundamental, immutable, and not tied to the materiality of the body makes it possible for parents to begin to understand some children to be transgender and to alter their social environments to accommodate that subjectivity.

Atypical gender was once considered a form of psychopathology; it was a failure of gender. Now, for the first time, atypical gender is understood not as a failure of gender, but as *a form* of gender. Gender transgression marks the insufficiency of reified gender categories (male/female), and not of the individual who inhabits them. Gender nonconformity now constitutes social identity, rather than eroding it.

And we will see that the material of gender is being used in a multitude of ways, that gender identities are replicating, not dissolving, and that they are deeply held and increasingly institutionally embedded. Gender, in its institutionalized forms, accumulates various feeling states, relationships, medical and scientific apparatuses, and cultural forms. All of these constitute social gender. As transpeople and their parents assert their identities in increasing numbers to medical professionals, they become installed as legitimate categories of being, analysis, and study. As they assert these identities to schools, churches, and communities, they change the architectures of those institutions, becoming embedded in the very ways they function. These families may be doing gender at the risk of assessment, but they are also demonstrating the ways gender requires assessment, even in its most nonnormative forms.

#### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2, “Gender Troubles,” introduces the families in the study and the diverse ways they came to understand that their child had a gender issue that penetrated to the level of core identity. While many children engage in atypical forms of play, certain types of gendered statements and behaviors led these parents to decide that their child had a problem significant enough to seek support from an outside expert or advocate. Some also came, in time, to understand that their child had a gender identity that conflicted with their social assignment. The processes through which parents generated these understandings differed significantly for male and female children, reflecting how we valorize normative masculinity while simultaneously treating the category “male” as

exquisitely fragile. Parents then shift their behavior, “giving gender” differently to their children, revealing the ways our identities come into being in interaction with significant others.

In previous generations, families with significantly gender-transgressive children with sufficient financial means would almost uniformly bring their child for corrective psychiatric treatment. Today, they are doing something different. Chapter 3, “The Gender Clinic,” follows families through the arduous process of medical decision-making for transgender-identified adolescents. The anxiety generated by the gravity of social and medical decisions underwrites a rapidly expanding research agenda by clinicians seeking stable predictors for adult transgenderism. Chief among its architects was Dr. Ken Zucker, who once ran the world’s most respected clinic treating transgender youth. We enter his clinic and meet some of the families who utilized its services, and then accompany Dr. Zucker as he faces his dismissal and the subsequent closure of his clinic. The complexity of these medical decisions, and the rapid decline of Zucker’s clinic from the very vanguard of childhood gender to a relic of an outmoded and largely abandoned clinical practice, tell the story of larger cultural shifts in the science of gender.

Chapter 4, “Building a Parent Movement,” introduces the two organizations responsible for the bulk of family advocacy work done during my research period. Begun by parents of transgender children, these organizations employed vastly different rhetorics in their education efforts and cultivated distinct presentations of self. Despite these often conflicting efforts at impression management, they aligned in certain key ways to create a movement distinct from earlier attempts by adult transgender people to secure social acceptance. Today’s parent movement is fundamentally a movement by cisgender people for transgender people, and it suggests that today’s trans children will look vastly different than those who came before them.

Chapter 5, “Anxiety and Gender Regulation,” returns to the concept of gender assessments, this time examining how they work after a parent has determined their child is transgender. While many parents

perceived themselves to be acutely vulnerable to state regulation, families with sexual-minority parents or racial-minority children were much more likely to have interventions into their lives by the state. When the state actually did intervene, however, it was with great consequence, and those interventions intensified the inequalities those families already suffered. Families with the greatest emotional and material resources, however, could marshal the state to assist them in problem-solving, demonstrating the double life of the state as enforcer and as resource provider, and the ways in which it functions as its own, important locus of recognition.

Chapter 6, “Telling Gender Stories,” outlines a new set of narratives parents consolidate to make sense of their child’s gender. While we typically think of medical and psychiatric discourses as inherently normative, these families appear to repurpose them, along with biomedical discourses, to fashion a more mutable construct of gender than they once held. Families used rhetorics from biomedicine, psychiatry, and even religion to imagine worlds in which their child’s self-understandings were inevitable, intrinsic, and immutable, the sorts of justifications demanded by the institutions from which they sought social support.

Finally, in the conclusion, we return to Rafe, now a young adult, on the other side of puberty and living in the world. Returning to the questions that animated the initial study, I draw conclusions from Rafe’s story about the significance of childhood transgenderism for understanding the ways we all gender one another in the contemporary moment. Gender is, at once, a deeply personal, subjective identity and a way of anchoring social relationships. We are interpellated into gender categories, and in the moments we contest them, rather than evacuating them of their meaning, we draw them more fully into our subjectivities and intimate, relational lives.

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Perhaps while reading this chapter, you turned the book over in your hands, searching for an author photo. Perhaps you wondered if, in fact, I am transgender, what I look like, what, were we to sit across from one another, you might discern in the contours of my face. If so, *you are like many of us*, on a distinctly contemporary quest to understand the complexities of gender, to position others in the cultural folds of masculinity and femininity, to grapple with the increasing presence among us of people who deliberately violate gender's mandates. The people in this book share your questions.