

From the Monster to the Kid Next Door: Transgender Children, Cisgender Parents, and the Management of Difference on TV

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Abstract

This article explores the recent surge in television representations of transgender children. In particular, it analyzes episodes of *The Tyra Show*, *Anderson, 20/20*, *Dr. Phil*, and *The Passionate Eye*, arguing that these shows exploit the cultural symbolism of childhood to defuse the political challenge posed by trans subjectivity.
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Résumé

Cet article explore l'augmentation récente de représentations d'enfants transgenres à la télévision. Plus particulièrement, il analyse des épisodes des émissions *The Tyra Show*, *Anderson, 20/20*, *Dr. Phil* et *The Passionate Eye*, faisant valoir que ces émissions exploitent le symbolisme culturel de l'enfance pour neutraliser le défi politique posé par la transsubjectivité.
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As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be... Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist.

-Susan Stryker (2006b, 248)

I was pretty impressed with the level of sophistication with which they manipulated me on the talk show. But still, though, at least what I would hope... is that there would be things that would slip out of my mouth, you know, that would come through the cracks somehow that would give the audience... some glimmer of radical difference. I want to be the monster who's speaking. I want to be the monster that is able to speak, you know, and articulate its monstrosity.

-Susan Stryker (quoted in Gamson 1998, 165)

Trans Kids on TV and the Projections of Symbolic Childhood

Although transphobic culture often demeans gender-crossing subjects as monstrous (Stryker 2006b, 245), trans academic and activist Susan Stryker (2006b) draws attention to monstrosity's resistive power: its ability to expose "the constructedness of the natural order" (254) and offer "a means for disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions" (253). Stryker disputes the medico-scientific establishment's self-positioning as the author of transsexuality—the parent, as it were, to "naturalistically" reconstructed men and women—and celebrates the monster's rebellion against its self-professed father. "In birthing my rage, / my rage has rebirthed me," she writes (247), assuming responsibility for the genesis of her own subjectivity and rebuffing gender-normative culture's appropriative parental claim. Whereas mainstream society often assumes that transgender subjects are uniquely constructed, uniquely the sons and daughters of gendered social technologies, Stryker insists that "the same anarchic Womb has birthed us [all]" (247). Thus, she posits a horizontal—albeit far from equitable—sibling relationship between trans and non-trans individuals, contesting the pater-

nalism with which gender-normative culture typically regards transgender subjects.

When featured as a guest on several mid-nineties talk shows about transsexuality, Stryker aimed to work around the programs' structural constraints to convey self-possessed, self-articulating monstrosity. In this paper, I argue that a recent TV programming trend has further reduced opportunities for trans subjects to embody the challenge of the "monster who's speaking": talk shows and current affairs programs that increasingly feature young children as their primary transgender spokespeople. Since 2007, a multitude of American shows including *20/20* ("My Secret Self" 2007), *Dr. Phil* ("Gender Confused Kids" 2008), *The Tyra Show* ("We're Seven and Eight" 2010), *The Rosie Show* ("Season 1 Episode 26" 2011), *Our America with Lisa Ling* ("Transgender Lives" 2011), and *Anderson* ("Children and Teens Caught" 2011) have covered childhood gender transitions. In Canada, too, CBC's *The Passionate Eye* recently aired a documentary that "follows the lives of four transgender children and the parents who have chosen to support them as they transition to the opposite sex" ("Transgender Kids" 2012). Many of these programs are not overtly hostile to trans children; if anything, they usually express concern for the well-being of their young subjects. Yet, as I will argue, the shows' paternalistic benevolence tends to undermine trans agency and political power, or at least make these harder to recognize.

Because the figure of the child is invested with multi-layered cultural meaning, the young trans subjects profiled on TV easily become vehicles for the circulation of ideas about power, naturalness, authenticity, and appropriate human development. To be sure, post-2007 North American talk shows, current affairs programs, and TV documentaries often ascribe quite non-conventional meanings to trans bodies; their adorable child guests bear little resemblance to the transsexual monsters of the mainstream pop cultural imagination. Yet, these shows' superficially positive portrayals of transgender people are underpinned by a deep valorization of gender conformity and constitute only a subtler, gentler variation on the transphobic theme. For example, the programs that openly advocate for trans acceptance tend to argue that cross-gender identification is an unavoidable and regrettable accident of birth. They do so largely by invoking ideals of innocence and naturalness—two hallmarks of Western symbolic child-

hood that descend from Rousseau (with his famous pronouncement that "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains") and from the Romantic poetry of Blake and Wordsworth (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, 13). Innocence is tightly intertwined with helplessness, both in the tradition of idealized Romantic childhood and in these shows' treatment of trans issues. The children often appear to steal the show with their cuteness; however, as Lori Merish (1996) points out, "cuteness always to some extent aestheticizes powerlessness" and "stages ... a need for adult care" (187). Thus, television's turn to younger and cuter trans subjects may be a strategy for domesticating transgender difference.

My paper performs a close reading of three television programs—*20/20*, *Anderson*, and *The Tyra Show*—all of which superficially endorse transgender acceptance, but only by working to shrink the assertive trans monster into an innocuous child. As counterexamples, I also explore two TV shows—*Dr. Phil* and *The Passionate Eye*—which dramatize trans acceptance as a controversy, rather than a liberal-humanist imperative for compassionate cis adults. Although these shows vary in the level of trans acceptance they promote, they all imply that the only acceptable transgender child is one who is reliant on cis adults' compassion and unthreatening to their hegemony. In closing, I discuss the overwhelmingly hostile TV coverage of trans man Thomas Beatie's pregnancy, suggesting that because transgender parents pose a potential challenge to cisgender dominance, they are likely to face much harsher treatment in the media than either trans kids or cis parents.

Before I elaborate this analysis, I would like to offer a few words of explanation about my project's aims and my own position as researcher. While I often criticize television's near-exclusive focus on very conventionally gendered trans girls and boys, my critique is directed at the shows' packaging of their guests' experiences, not at those experiences themselves. Although talk shows and current affairs programs "invite people to speak for themselves" (Gamson 1998, 17), there is no guarantee that the depictions emerging from the production process will be congruent with interviewees' self-understandings or intended messages. Like Joshua Gamson (1998), then, I want to ask, "How do the medium and the genre structure the 'voices' that come out? What sorts of speaking voices are available, and in what ways are they distorted?" (17). I have absolutely no in-

tention of disparaging the children themselves for being too normative in their gender expression, whatever that might mean. Numerous scholars, including Jay Prosser (1998), Henry Rubin (1998), Viviane Namaste (2005), and Patricia Elliot (2010), have refuted the assumption that trans individuals are under some special obligation to demolish the gender binary. This demand has often been articulated (implicitly, at least) by non-trans commentators who have appropriated transgender as a theoretically handy abstraction rather than recognizing it as a complex set of lived experiences. It is precisely this complexity that I hope to honour by exposing television's simplification of transgender experience through the figure of the natural, uncomplicated child.

Further, my aim is to shift the analytic emphasis away from trans subjects themselves—too often the objects of outsider scrutiny and theorization—and towards “the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood, and eliminate others” (Stryker 2006a, 3). I am aware of the pitfalls of writing about trans issues from my privileged cisgender¹ standpoint, and I agree wholeheartedly with Stryker (2006a) that “no voice in the dialog [of transgender studies] should have the privilege of masking the particularities and specificities of its own speaking position, through which it may claim a universality or authority” (12). I acknowledge, then, that I was drawn to this topic because of my overwhelming emotional response to these shows: “These parents love their kids *so much*,” I gushed inwardly, touched by the display of unconditional love. The fact that the cis parents initially impressed me more than their trans kids bears out my contention that these programs exploit the symbolism of childhood to spotlight cis adults' moral virtue. Having grown up experiencing a lot of bullying (though none that overtly targeted my gender identity or expression), I felt I could relate to the children on the screen, but if anything, this sense of identification only intensified my appreciation of the protective parent figures. Moreover, the fact that I would equate transphobia—a systemic form of oppression—with the fairly random cruelties of my elementary school's social universe seems consistent with the shows' liberal-humanist take on gender variance: something along the lines of “We're all different from one another—and transgender is just one more type of difference—so fundamentally we're all the same.” The trouble with this formulation

is that it overlooks systemic power differences, defines transphobia as an individual rather than a political and structural matter, and advances only an assimilationist model of trans acceptance.

The “Innocence” and “Naturalness” of Trans Children, as Proclaimed by Cis Adults

In order to build *any* case for trans acceptance—even a highly conditional one—television shows must counter mainstream culture's conviction that transgender people are “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers,” to borrow from the title of an article by Talia Mae Bettcher (2007). “Suspicion,” Prosser (1998) argues, is widely assumed to be “the way to approach the transsexual text” (112), both in clinical settings and in popular culture. Not surprisingly, then, these shows are at pains to establish trans kids' gender identification as natural, innocent, permanent, and unavoidable. The figure of the child is often mobilized to this end. As Kathryn Bond Stockton (2004) suggests, the child signifies “who we were when there was nothing yet behind us” (296); therefore, *nothing*—not bad socialization, not neurosis, not misguided gender-smashing politics—will appear to taint the spontaneous and adamant gender identification of the very young. On *The Tyra Show*, for instance, sex reassignment surgeon Dr. Marci Bowers rebuts the claim of a fellow expert guest (Dr. Michael Brown, “Professor and Minister”) that compassionate adults should heal children's gender identity disorder “from the inside out” and refrain from medical intervention: “Listen to the children, listen to the children,” she urges, grabbing his hand, “Children aren't crazy. Children don't start off crazy” (Figure 1). Dr. Brown—evidently aware that he will never score rhetorical points by positioning himself against children, the issue that is “only *permitted* one side” (Edelman 2004, 2)—strategically plays up the children-as-vulnerable-and-needy angle: “Well, we're both here because we love kids and we care about them, our hearts go out to them” (“We're Seven and Eight” 2010).

Because the trans acceptance debate staged by these shows pivots around how children “start out”—as uncorrupted and utterly sane, according to Dr. Bowers—they tend to emphasize that cross-gender identification begins at the very start of life. *The Tyra Show*, *Anderson*, and *20/20* all stress that their subjects began to assert their genders at extremely young ages—often in infancy or toddlerhood.



Figure 1: Dr. Marci Bowers reaches for the hand of Dr. Michael Brown and exhorts him to “Listen to the children.”
Source: “We’re Seven and Eight” 2010

Of course, trans identification does occur at all stages of the lifespan, including early childhood; the stories of the families profiled on the shows are by no means fabricated. They are, however, recounted with a distinct emphasis on the precocity of gendered self-knowledge. Interviewers and audience members provide astonished reactions to enliven parents’ narratives of early-in-life gender dissatisfaction. “He wanted to wear a dress, he wanted to be pretty like his sister,” recalls one mother interviewed on *20/20*, prompting Barbara Walters to exclaim: “At *two!*” (“My Secret Self” 2007). On *Anderson*, a mother describes her trans daughter’s first time dressing up as a princess and appearing truly happy: “like you know, ‘Ah, this is me!’” Probably for the benefit of viewers, host Anderson Cooper inquires, “And how old was she then?” “She was about two and a half,” the mother replies, a fact Anderson deems “amazing” (“Children and Teens Caught” 2011). Even more amazing, it seems, are the details of babyhood deployed to bolster claims that trans kids have been unequivocally gendered since Day One. Narrating the life history of one child over home video footage, Barbara Walters informs us that “at only fifteen months, he would unsnap his onesies to make them look like a dress” (“My Secret Self” 2007). Probably not coincidentally, the edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders which was current at the time this *20/20* episode aired (the DSM-4) lists a “preference for cross-dressing or simulating female attire” (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 581) as a diagnostic criterion for gender identity disorder in children assigned male at birth.²

Hence, the behaviour reported by Walters figures as part of a medicalized “history of collected and shared observations; someone has seen boys doing this, and reported it, and others have done the same” (Butler 2004, 96). Concerned parents can turn to this ready-made “mill of speech, speculation and diagnosis to feed their children’s gender through should it cross the line” (Spade 2006, 320)—“a grid of observation” (Butler 2004, 96) through which an unsnapped baby outfit acquires deep significance.

By retrospectively detailing the cross-gender behaviours of the preschool-and-under set, TV shows about trans kids seem to emphasize the originary and enduring nature of gender identity. In so doing, they may allay viewers’ fears that masculinity and femininity are other than hardwired and permanent—and that the gender system as we know it could be subject to change. As Prosser (1998) argues, biographical retrospection “allows the transsexual to appear to have been there all along” (103), patching over a culturally unintelligible and threatening split in gendered subjectivity. Narrating the earliest beginnings of trans identification also tends to neutralize the transphobic belief that cross-gender identification is unnatural or wrong, since children are cultural paragons of naturalness and innocence. But these ideals slide easily into helplessness: children guilelessly living out their true natures are the only way they *can* be, which means that they cannot help being as they are and that they require the help of compassionate cis adults to navigate the world. As one mom remarks on *20/20*, “I want to pave the way for a better life for [my daughter] and any trans kids. They didn’t ask to be born this way” (“My Secret Self” 2007). Even as this mother articulates some level of commitment to trans liberation, she resorts to the theory that cross-gender identification is an inescapable accident of birth in order to justify her vision of “a better life” for transgender people.

The shows’ spotlighting of cis parents bravely “pav[ing] the way” for trans kids allows the challenge of transgender difference to be more or less dissolved within the traditional nuclear family structure. Isolated yet supported within their cisgender families, these trans kids have little opportunity or cause to form alliances and affective connections with other trans people. While I would never discount the profound benefits of being accepted by one’s family of origin, I am

concerned that TV shows about transgender children erase the deep non-biological ties and support networks that are vital to many trans people—and that often give rise to trans political organizing. The depoliticization of trans identity is further facilitated by the construction of children as carefree, apolitical beings; as one mother asserts on *The Tyra Show*, “I just want [my trans daughter] to have the normal joys of childhood. I don’t want her to be burdened by the other things” (“We’re Seven and Eight” 2010). But if some of “the other things” are political things—awareness of injustice and struggle for social transformation—then who *will* assume those burdens? Few trans adults appear on the shows, and those who do get little airtime, much of it absorbed by inane queries relating to genitalia and sex reassignment surgery. As a result, cis parents are positioned as the main champions of trans rights and well-being—a major distortion of reality.

Few of the parents featured on these shows dispute the assumption that it would be preferable to not be trans. In fact, they frequently refer to cross-gender identification as a congenital flaw: “Yeah, she has a physical deformity, she has a birth defect. We call it that. I can’t think of a worse birth defect to have as a woman than to have a penis,” declares one mother interviewed on *20/20* (“My Secret Self” 2007). Such comments are often positioned prominently within the programs’ exposition of trans experience. In the opening segment of this same program, a teen boy—the first trans person to speak in the episode—remarks, “It seemed that nature had played a cruel joke on me. Of all the horrible things that could have happened to me, why this one?” (“My Secret Self” 2007). While “horrible things” do happen disproportionately to trans people of all ages, these shows offer barely a hint that society’s coercive gender norms are what is really “cruel.” In the absence of any in-depth analysis of transphobia—or even any mention of this word—these programs implicitly paint transgender identity itself as tragic. More often than not, the shows ascribe trans children’s unhappiness to biological dysfunction. On *20/20*, for instance, Barbara Walters explains that “[s]ome scientists suggest that a hormone imbalance in the womb gives these children’s brains the wrong gender imprint” (“My Secret Self” 2007; Figure 2). Such biological determinism fortifies the shows’ rhetoric of childhood by casting trans people as natural (driven by their innate wiring), helpless (powerless to

escape their birth defects), and apolitical (victimized by nature’s cruelty, not by society’s oppression).



Figure 2: “Some scientists suggest that a hormone imbalance in the womb gives these children’s brains the wrong gender imprint.” Source: “My Secret Self” 2007

Reinforcing the notion that gender non-conformity in children is an unhappy occurrence, television shows depict responsible, loving parents who resist their children’s gender-atypical behaviour until resistance proves heartbreakingly futile. “I was actually pulling him back all the time and it didn’t work,” recounts a mom on *The Tyra Show*, echoing virtually every other parent interviewed (“We’re Seven and Eight” 2010). Since the shows work so hard to establish that these parents did not impose or desire their children’s gender non-conformity, the logical conclusion is that socialization has little to do with gender identity: these kids are innocently acting out their inborn natures and should be accepted, “birth defects” and all. The shows’ rhetorical appeal to innocence is often intensified by their narration of suffering which runs counter to ideals of carefree childhood. On *Anderson*, one mother relates how “At the age of four, [her daughter] started talking about cutting off her penis, she tried, she started hurting herself.” As Anderson’s exclaims, “At the age of *four!*,” the camera cuts to audience members shaking their heads in shock and consternation (“Children and Teens Caught” 2011). While the thought of anyone contemplating self-harm is upsetting, Anderson’s emphatic repetition of the child’s age frames the audience’s head-shaking as a reaction to the *youthfulness* of the person in distress. Stories about self-mutilation and suicide threats lend urgency to these shows’ pleas to allow each trans child “just...to live as a normal boy” or girl, as one father featured on *The Tyra*

Show puts it (“We’re Seven and Eight” 2010). While I would never dispute the absolute necessity of care and support for struggling children, I worry that the shows’ celebration of cis adults’ moral response to trans children’s suffering eclipses the systemic social conditions that give rise to that suffering. And while these particular parents accept their kids’ gender identification on the grounds that children can only do what comes naturally, the shows do little to challenge cis people’s authority to judge trans authenticity—much less to interrogate the validity of “trans authenticity” as a concept.

Trans Kids Are Just Like Everybody Else: “Normality” and the Child’s Reproduction of the Gendered Social Order

TV episodes about transgender children often implore viewers to “open [their] hearts and [their] minds” to families with transgender children, as Barbara Walters puts it on *20/20* (“My Secret Self” 2007)—but only to open them on certain conditions. Most of the shows’ tales of “extraordinary and very intimate struggle” revolve around “a typical American family. They could be your neighbours” (“My Secret Self” 2007). Judging by the selection of families featured on these shows, “typical” equates roughly to white, middle-class, dual-parent, and heterosexual. Transgender children are thus positioned as embraceable largely insofar as they embody and promise to replicate normative ideals about family structure, class, race, sexuality, and—yes—even gender; by the shows’ logic, transgender is an individual biological error, not a threatening departure from a binary gender system.

Typically, programs about trans children depict their young guests as hyperbolically feminine or masculine. *The Tyra Show*, *Anderson*, and *20/20* all use grainy home videos to introduce their subjects, who are shown engaging in some gender-stereotyped activity: pounding away on a Gameboy and play-punching dad, or picking pink nail polish out of a make-up box. The parent-videographers also offer their own voiceover commentary highlighting what they perceive as classic boy or girl behaviours: “Oh yeah, I know you like guns” or “You always choose pink” (“We’re Seven and Eight” 2010; Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Home video footage of Kennedy in his room with his boyish playthings; his mother comments, “Oh yeah, I know you like guns.”

Source: “We’re Seven and Eight” 2010



Figure 4: We first meet Josie as she picks out nail polish. Her mother remarks, “You always choose pink.”

Source: “We’re Seven and Eight” 2010

The use of home video footage seems to borrow from the conventions of the reality TV genre, in which the surveillance of private life “provides a certain guarantee of authenticity, and...authenticity becomes a process of self-expression, self-realization and self-validation,” according to Mark Andrejevic (2002, 265). In the context of TV shows about trans kids, the drive to authenticate identities through surveillance dovetails with the normative belief that every individual has one true gender—which, if that individual happens to be trans, must be brought to light and validated by cisgender observers. One means of validation deployed on practical-

ly all of these shows is the intimate glimpse inside the child's heavily gender-coded bedroom. On *20/20*, one father plainly states that he and his wife decided to allow TV cameras into their daughter's room (Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8) in the hopes of rendering her gender identity "much more believable" ("My Secret Self" 2007). By displaying private video documentation to ensure that trans kids' gender identities come across as "believable" (read: conventional), these shows both dispute the transphobic notion that trans genders are inauthentic *and* buy into the logic of gender authenticity that fuels transphobia in the first place.



Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8: Barbara Walters interviews Jazz in her bedroom, with plenty of supporting close-ups of the child's feminine possessions.
Source: "My Secret Self" 2007



Depicting trans children as normatively gendered often necessitates downplaying the complexity of the gendered interests and personality traits they express. Despite television's attempts to slot trans kids into a compliant juvenile role, the shows' guests are not so easily contained by that script. *The Tyra Show's* host, in particular, struggles rather obviously to cast her young interviewees in the Barbie and G.I. Joe molds. For instance, when Tyra asks eight-year-old Josie what she likes to do for fun, the child replies, "I like to play with my sister, to play dolls, and I like to go biking, and I did a triathlon." Josie lists dolls alongside other less stereotypically girly interests and doesn't appear especially concerned about formulating an answer that will make her look authentically feminine (although, of course, it's impossible to infer what her concerns may in fact be). Tyra then banters awkwardly with Josie about the triathlon, appearing frenetically overenthusiastic as she scrambles to salvage the image of Josie as hyper-girly:

Tyra: Wow, are you just a little ironlady? Did you win?

Josie: No.

Tyra: Oh my god, your hair looks lovely though! [A snapshot of Josie running across a finish line with her hair in a ponytail is projected in the studio.] Oh my god, I said you were an ironlady, I was kidding though! You were an ironkid! Very nice!

Tyra skirts the term “ironman” with what feels like excessive fervor and nervous energy—hence, perhaps, the repetition of “oh my god”—and bizarrely compliments Josie on her ordinary hairdo in a finish line photo which is far from a glamour shot (Figure 9). When bidding goodbye to Josie and her sister, Tyra tries again to bring out the little lady in Josie: she shakes both girls’ hands and coos, “And a lady shake, thank you very much darling” (“We’re Seven and Eight” 2010).



Figure 9: A photo of Josie completing her triathlon, which prompts Tyra to gush, “Oh my god, your hair looks lovely though!”
Source: “We’re Seven and Eight” 2010

On the rare occasions when these shows permit any acknowledgement of trans children’s non-stereotypical gendered interests, they do so only after bombarding viewers with cues to read the children as normatively gendered. So, for instance, *20/20* reveals that one trans girl owns a four-foot pet snake only *after* establishing that she is “gentle,” “pretty,” and “meek,” and that she has “gravitated to pink, not blue” since toddlerhood (“My Secret Self” 2007). Cross-gender identification is presented as legitimate, then, only on the condition that trans children reflect and validate the gender polarization at the heart of cissexist adult culture.

Yet, as much as these shows stress trans youngsters’ gendered normality—indeed, hyper-normality—the difference of transgender is never completely erased. While explicitly claiming that trans kids are no different from anybody else, these shows indulge the classic talk show preoccupation with “telling the difference” between ordinary people and those who only look ordinary (Gamson 1998, 25) by displaying pre- and post-transition photographs at every opportunity, and thereby inviting audiences to scrutinize the children’s bodies for any sign of their difference (Figures 10 and 11). The shows’ fixation on physical appearance draws attention to the close-but-imperfect resemblance between trans and cis people. Just as children are regarded as not-quite-complete people whose development will culminate in the universal goal of adulthood, trans people are portrayed as falling just short of cis standards of gendered embodiment and as striving to get there—but unlike children, they can *never* attain the supposed pinnacle of existence when this is defined in fundamentally cissexist terms.



Figures 10 and 11: Pre- and post-transition shots.
Source: “Children and Teens Caught” 2011

Kids Running Amok: The Symbolic Production of the Trans-Acceptance Controversy

In stark contrast to *The Tyra Show*, *Anderson*, and *20/20*, which portray their young subjects as almost normal and therefore deserving of tolerance, the raucous talk show *Dr. Phil* (“Gender Confused Kids” 2008) whips its audience into an uproar by playing up the culturally jarring, paradigm-threatening side of gender variance. For instance, in the opening sequence of the episode, a mother audaciously mixes pronouns and proclaims the existence of a gender identification other than girl or boy: “My son who’s eight years old believes that she is half male and half female. At age three, he started stating that he was a she,” she recounts. Parental remarks along these lines frequently elicit stern lecturing from the host: “Are you aware that less than twenty percent of ‘transgender children’”—and here he inserts air quotes, as though his suspicion of trans identification were not already unmistakable—“grow up to be transgender adults? How do you feel about that?”; “Are you concerned that an eight-year-old child doesn’t know, and that you’re turning the reins, you’re turning the steering wheel over to an eight-year-old child?” (ibid.) By *Dr. Phil*’s logic, when parents abdicate their responsibility and let their children get behind that steering wheel to determine their own gendered destination, “gender confusion” is the inevitable (and shocking, and disgraceful) result. Trans identification is implicitly attributed to a disturbance—or even an inversion—of the normative parent-child relationship.

Although *Dr. Phil* features one expert guest, psychologist Dan Siegel, who affirms that gender diversity is healthy and should be supported by parents, Siegel and his allies are pitted against advocates of the more common-sense perspective that cross-gender identification is “the parents’ fault not just responsibility, [and] that they need to step up and do their job”—an idea that draws applause and cheering on the many occasions when it is expressed. The expert guest representing this position is Glenn Stanton, a research fellow with Focus on the Family, whose crowd-pleasing sound bites include the following: “Those children will tend to say, ‘You were the parent, you were the one on the scene who was supposed to guide me where I needed to go’”; “I’m wondering, you know, who’s leading and who’s following?”; “You know, when I was that age, I wanted to be a horse” (“Gender Confused Kids” 2008). *Dr. Phil* cloaks

its transphobia in the received wisdom about parenting wherein children’s autonomy must be limited by firm mothers and fathers. While the more liberal-humanist television programs deem gender variance to be acceptable when expressed by a “good” child—one who is vulnerable, passive, and harmless to cis hegemony—*Dr. Phil* rouses cis viewers’ transphobic anxieties by invoking the undermanaged wild child and then eases those anxieties by calling for the child to be brought back into line.

In a more insidious way, the “Transgender Kids” (2012) episode of the CBC documentary series *The Passionate Eye* also frames the controversy over trans acceptance in terms of parental responsibility and foregrounds its subjects’ departures from sex-gender norms, as though these might cast doubt on their gender identification. Most glaringly, by refusing to adopt its subjects’ preferred pronouns, “Transgender Kids” maximizes gendered dissonance and marks a skeptical distance from trans children’s self-identifications. At the beginning of the program, the narrator announces, “In this documentary we will be referring to all children by their biological sex, but this is not how their family and friends see them. Or how they see themselves” (“Transgender Kids” 2012). Immediately, then, the documentary sets up a two-sided controversy: “how [trans children] see themselves” versus how gender-normative observers see them, the latter being the unnamed default position with which the program aligns itself.

Whereas *Anderson*, *The Tyra Show*, and *20/20* insist that gender identification is permanent and binary, “Transgender Kids” unsettles these preconceptions. Like *Dr. Phil*, it does so in order to undercut the legitimacy of trans identification, rather than to challenge gender norms themselves. For example, when a trans boy named Bailey recalls that he was “girly as can be” until second grade, the narrator-interviewer seizes the opportunity to cast doubt on his transgender identification (rather than, say, acknowledging that gender expression can change over time): “What makes you so sure that it’s not a phase?” (“Transgender Kids” 2012). A similar rhetorical motive seems to underlie her observation that trans girl “Josie loves playing with dolls and painting his nails, [yet] he hasn’t let go of his boys’ toys” (Figure 12); earlier in the program, she pointedly asks Josie’s mother whether an eight-year-old might be “too young to know” that she is trans (“Transgender Kids” 2012).



Figure 12: Josie shows off her glowing dinosaur as the narrator remarks, “[H]e hasn’t let go of his boys’ toys.”
Source: “Transgender Kids” 2012

In suggesting that children are *too young* to make decisions about their own genders, *The Passionate Eye* and *Dr. Phil* deploy symbolic childhood very differently from the more liberal-humanist shows. Whereas *Anderson, 20/20*, and *The Tyra Show* maintain that children’s cross-gender identification *must* be authentic given that they express it at such an early age, *The Passionate Eye* and *Dr. Phil* argue that youngsters lack the competency to make profound decisions about their identity. Significantly, though, both approaches presume that the ideal child is passive: yielding either to parental authority or to biological forces beyond anyone’s control. When children do not submit to external authority—or when parents fail to provide that authority—early-in-life gender nonconformity is deemed objectionable and even dangerous.

Indeed, *The Passionate Eye* subtly condemns parents for their perceived failure to “be the parents, to step into the scene” (as Glenn Stanton puts it on *Dr. Phil*). The program frames childhood gender transition as a dilemma of parental authority by addressing viewers as hypothetical moms and dads at the start of the episode: “What would you do if your little boy was desperate to become a girl? Or if your daughter wanted to become your son?” It later casts doubt on certain parents’ decisions to let their children transition; for example, the mother of a trans boy named Chris acknowledges that her child started identifying as a boy at around the same time his father left the family and that she has wondered whether this traumatic circumstance contributed to

Chris’s transition. Chris’s aunt Kathleen is even more convinced that her nephew’s transgender identification is a consequence of less-than-ideal parenting: “I thought my sister acted too soon.” Not only does “Transgender Kids” frequently blame parents for their children’s gender transitions, but it also holds them responsible for hypothetical harms to other people’s children—and presumes that any unsettling of prevailing heterosexual and cissexist assumptions must be inherently harmful. As the interviewer inquires of one mother of a trans teen boy, “If your daughter was dating and she was kissing someone she thought was a boy, and then she found out, how would you feel as a parent?” *The Passionate Eye* calls on cis adults to serve as guardians of the gendered social order—and if that order appears threatened, the program would rather hold cis adults responsible than raise the terrifying possibility that they are not in full control.

Parents, Children, Gender, and Responsibility in Popular Culture

As I have argued throughout this paper, television’s recent infatuation with transgender children may have a lot to do with their symbolic usefulness for managing the challenge to the status quo represented by gender variance. The innocuous child figure may reassure what is largely assumed to be a gender-normative viewership that transgender existence can be subsumed non-disruptively under a cissexist model of the family. Or, the unruly child figure may provide an alibi for the retrenchment of transphobic norms via the exercise of appropriate parental authority.

How might these dynamics of representation and reception change, I wonder, when transgender subjects are cast on TV in the agential role of parents? If the Thomas Beatie story is any indication, trans parents are likely to face far more overt hostility and censure than their littler, cuter counterparts. Beatie is a trans man who went public with his pregnancy on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2008 and instantly made worldwide headlines. He subsequently appeared on a *20/20* feature episode entitled “What Is a Man, What is a Woman? Journey of a Pregnant Man” (2008). In this special, the same Barbara Walters who comforts a crying trans child on *20/20*’s “My Secret Self” (2007) episode (“You’re a very pretty girl, you know that?”) interrogates Beatie in blatantly transphobic terms: “Here is a man with fa-

cial hair, with scars under his breasts—pregnant. It is a disturbing picture, Thomas”; “Aren’t you trying to have it both ways?”; “If you wanted to be a man, why didn’t you have your sexual reproductive organs removed?” Many of Walters’ questions zero in on Beatie’s responsibility towards his daughter: “What are you going to tell Susan—and when?”; “What happens when people make fun of her?” (“What Is a Man?” 2008). Evidently, the sight of an independent adult defying transphobic norms is hard to swallow, both for Walters and for the thousands of death-threat writers and defamatory commentators provoked by the story. Many have called Beatie and his children monstrous, including a host on Fox TV’s *Red Eye*: “This little Ewok she’s going to crap out might even have a third eye” (“What Is a Man” 2008). Does Beatie trigger anxiety because he exemplifies the self-possessed “monster who’s speaking” (Stryker quoted in Gamson 1998, 165)? Why does he, unlike the trans children profiled on *20/20*, prompt Walters to reflect that “traditional gender boundaries are dissolving all around us?”

Walter’s treatment of Beatie demonstrates that normative parent-child roles can be invoked on TV in order to position transgender parents, not just children, as objects of moral scrutiny. But while trans children may be framed either as innocent or menacing depending on how firmly the show’s rhetoric subordinates them to their cis parents, Beatie seems to have very little chance of coming off as an upstanding dad. Although the *20/20* special episode about Beatie features ample footage of him tenderly holding his infant daughter, he is never allowed to assume the benevolent protector role which is so often occupied by cisgender parents on comparable current affairs programs. This should not be surprising; when cisgender parents are portrayed on TV as virtuous defenders of their gender variant kids, they are simultaneously portrayed as defenders of the cissexist social order.

As Daniel Cook (2004) has argued, the figure of the child is often implicated in negotiating “the question of the locus of power and volition, of who has the wherewithal to make decisions” (14)—in this case, decisions about the maintenance or redefinition of gendered norms. Television shows about trans kids try to reserve decision-making authority for cis adults, largely by reinscribing trans bodies and lives as objects of scrutiny, supervision, and assessment. This is accomplished

all the more easily because the bodies and lives on display are very young and therefore already understood as subject to adult management. The more liberal-humanist TV episodes depict cisgender parents as supportive of their vulnerable transgender offspring. By persistently casting trans people in the needy role of children and non-trans people in the agential, responsible role of parents, these shows work to defuse the political challenge posed by trans subjectivity and to shore up cisgender authority. In contrast, the more overtly transphobic TV episodes depict the parents of gender non-conforming children as negligent and reckless, casting doubt on the legitimacy of childhood gender transition by implying that trans children are exercising inappropriate autonomy and need to be reined in by the cisgender adults in charge. In both representational patterns, cis people are called upon to manage transgender bodies and lives.

Television’s dramatic exhibition of transgender children often allows cisgender identity to fade from view, and it is precisely the invisibility of cisgender as a culturally produced ideal that enables its dominance. I would like to conclude, then, by returning to the dare articulated by Stryker’s transsexual monster: “You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine...Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself” (2006b, 247). By exposing some of “the seams and sutures” in trans-themed talk shows and current affairs programs—their selective packaging and structuring of family narratives about gender variance—I hope to have prompted some reflection about the pop cultural construction of *cisgender* identities as well. Although these TV shows overtly spotlight trans kids as their stars, the youngsters serve as foils for the cisgender adults in their life, who are held out as the rightful arbiters of gendered authenticity and defenders of gendered social norms.

Endnotes

¹ The terms “cisgender” and “cis” describe people who live and identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.

² In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association published the DSM-5, which replaces “gender identity disorder” with “gender dysphoria.” However, “a strong preference for cross-dressing or simulating female attire” (sec. 2) remains as a diagnostic criterion for the renamed condition.

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