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Transgender Embodiment as an Appeal to Thought: A Psychoanalytic Critique of “Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria”

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we offer a psychoanalytic reading of controversies over “rapid onset gender dysphoria” (popularly known as ROGD), defined as a sudden expression of gender dysphoria in late adolescence and young adulthood where there had not purportedly been evidence of childhood dysphoric experience. We begin by tracing the emergence of the term in relation to contemporary debates about gender, free speech, and academic freedom. Turning to the psychoanalytic concept of free association, we reframe speech as bound to the unconscious and theorize the ethical qualities of animating this linkage in relation to discussions of gender diversity and ROGD in particular. Our discussion supports theorists, clinicians, parents, teachers, and other caring adults who encounter the term to distinguish between collective anxiety and the labor of thought that involves working through feelings of coming undone in the undoing of cisgender.

In this article, we offer a psychoanalytic reading of controversies over “rapid onset gender dysphoria” (popularly known as ROGD): loosely defined as a sudden expression of “gender dysphoria” in late adolescence and young adulthood where there had not allegedly been evidence in childhood of cisgender unhappiness or a desire to transition (Littman, 2018; Marchiano, 2017). The term ROGD can be tied to Lisa Littman’s (2018) controversial paper, published in the online journal *PLoS/ONE*, in which she gathers parent reports about adolescents’ purported experiences of “sudden or rapid onset of gender dysphoria, appearing for the first time during puberty or even after its completion” (p. 1).¹ Originally published in August 2018, in March 2019 Littman’s article underwent a “post-publication reassessment” involving “senior members of the journal’s editorial team, two academic editors, a statistics reviewer, and an external expert reviewer” (Littman, 2019, p. 1). The decision to reassess the work came after a storm of debate on social media and in the comments section of the article itself. As a result of that review, the journal posted a notice of correction in which Littman contextualizes the study design, methods, participant recruitment, and the limits of the research. The editor-in-chief also issued an apology to “the trans and gender variant community” (Heber, 2019, para. 9). The most important revision, in our view, clarifies that the study relies exclusively on “parental observations” and not those of adolescents or clinicians (Littman, 2019, p. 1). Still, the main conclusions of the study remain unchanged: that there may be “new etiologies leading to gender dysphoria” and that these include “social influences, parent–child conflict, and maladaptive coping mechanisms for some individuals” (Littman, 2019, pp. 1–2).

Following the initial publication of Littman’s paper, the Global Board of Directors of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) released a statement. In it, the association clarifies that ROGD is “not a medical entity recognized by any major professional association” and

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¹For a fulsome genealogy of the construction of ROGD and its rapid online proliferation, see Julia Serano (2019).

therefore “constitutes nothing more than an acronym to describe a *proposed* clinical phenomenon that may or may not warrant further peer-reviewed scientific investigation” (2018, para. 1, original emphasis). While acknowledging that “knowledge of the factors contributing to gender identity development in adolescence is still evolving and not yet fully understood” (para. 2), as well as the importance of “continued scientific exploration within a culture of academic freedom” (para. 3), WPATH (2018) cautions against the use of “official-sounding labels” that it describes as both “premature” and “inappropriate” (para. 2). WPATH (2018) also notes the way such labels can be used to negatively influence the treatment of transgender young people. In this context, WPATH “urges restraint from the use of any term—whether or not formally recognized as a medical entity—to instill fear about the possibility that an adolescent may or may not be transgender with the a priori goal of limiting consideration of all appropriate treatment options” (para. 4). Arjee Javellana Restar (2020) articulates a number of similar concerns in an article published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. In addition to critiquing the study’s methodological and technical flaws, Restar (2019) lays bare the “pathology framework” at the heart of the study that casts transgender in terms of illness (p. 1): an assumption that she notes is not backed by the American Psychiatric Association (2013), WPATH (2012), or the World Health Organization (2018). Littman (2020) has since responded to Restar’s critique in a paper that self-assesses her own methodology as consistent with existing studies of gender dysphoria.

We weigh into this context by tracing the emergence of ROGD in relation to contemporary debates about gender, free speech, and academic freedom, with a focus on how this highly contestable term became connected to claims about the truth or falsity of transgender experience. Turning to the psychoanalytic concept of free association, we reframe speech as bound to the unconscious and theorize the ethical qualities of animating this linkage in discussions of gender diversity and ROGD in particular. We further speculate that claims about the suppression of free speech may be a defense mechanism, at the level of the social, to get a handle on out-of-control affects relating to gender diversity. Borrowing from Patricia Elliot and Lawrence Lyons (2017), we offer a “symptomatic reading” (p. 358) of the term ROGD as a projection of adult anxieties that can emerge, particularly in the context of a group, when young people transgress conventional notions of gender as “fixed” or “natural categories of sexual difference” (p. 362). Our paper offers a distinction between collective anxiety and the labor of thought that can meet with “creative regard” young people’s uses of signifiers in a changing social world (Britzman, 2006a, p. 117), or what Lee Airton (2018) calls “the new gender culture” (p. 113). Our discussion is intended to support theorists, clinicians, parents, teachers, and other caring adults account for their own anxieties in the face of gender diversity and to risk thinking with and about young people amid uncertainty.

Free speech and free association

The term ROGD appears to have first surfaced in July 2016 in a notice of a “Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria Research Study” on the three websites where Littman recruited her participants: all of them alleged to promote anti-transgender views (*4thWaveNow*, *TransgenderTrend*, and *YouthTransCriticalProfessionals*). As Littman (2018) points out, the notice also ended up on a fourth Facebook page known to have more affirming views, although not by her own solicitation. A preliminary report was then published by Littman as a brief poster abstract in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in February 2017 (Littman, 2017), followed by the publication of the full article in *PLoS/ONE* in August 2018. However, the term also appeared in a journal 1 year before the publication of Littman’s full study, in Lisa Marchiano’s (2017) psychoanalytic paper “Outbreak: On Transgender Teens and Psychic Epidemics.” In this paper, Marchiano (2017) refers to “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” as a “new presentation” that she admits “has not been well studied” (p. 346). Her citation (p. 354) of the existence of this purported new presentation is a weblink to the recruitment notice for Littman’s at that point unpublished study on *TransgenderTrend*. Picked up by bloggers, clinicians, and media outlets, ROGD quickly became a sensational flash point both inside and outside the doors of

academia for anxieties and debates about the meaning of what Katy Steinmetz (2014) of *Time Magazine* boldly called “The Transgender Tipping Point.” While Marchiano’s article never became as publicly scrutinized as Littman’s, perhaps due to its Jungian audience, her argument is essentially the same: that increasing numbers of teens and tweens are experiencing sudden dysphoria and that this rise is correlated with social influences such as Internet use and trans friendships (p. 355).² We return to these claims in the pages to come, but suffice it to say for now that Marchiano (2017) draws from Carl Jung to argue that ROGD is a “psychic epidemic that is manifesting as children and young people coming to believe they are the opposite sex” and is linked to the social contagion of unconscious affects circulating within a group (p. 346).

After Littman published her study, Brown University, where she holds a professorship, published a press release about the new work on its website, but then removed it following outcry about the paper’s shortcomings and the decision of *PLoS/ONE* to engage a post-publication reassessment of the work. Amid critiques of Littman’s methodology and the negative impact of her claims on trans people, there also emerged debates about free speech in which challenges to Littman’s article were read as an attack on both freedom and science. For instance, the former Dean of Harvard Medical School presents Brown’s decision to remove the press release to Littman’s article as a “cautionary tale” about how social responses to research “can pressure school administrators to subvert established norms regarding the protection of free academic inquiry” (Flier, 2018, para. 4). Put more starkly, one blogger describes Brown’s decision as “capitulating to bullies” and compromising science for “the Transgender Lobby” (Vigo, 2018). Related headlines abound in blog and online articles that repeat the coupling of science with neutrality, a coupling that detracts from the question of how scientific pursuits are always already culturally situated (Harding, 1993). “How have we let scientific study become hate speech?” reads one headline (Murphy, 2018). Another frames the decision of *PLoS/ONE* to publish a revision of Littman’s article as victorious over a presumed threat of censorship: “Trans activists fail to block research suggesting gender dysphoria is ‘contagious’” (Tominey, 2018).

In their appeal to the neutrality of science, however, the aforementioned headlines leave unquestioned the contested histories on which science is carried out, particularly in the fraught field of sexology with its troubling inheritances (Downing, Morland, and Sullivan, 2015; Gill-Peterson, 2018). Such sensational headlines also reenact a now-routine irony: namely, that free speech advocates often disavow the very principle of open debate they rely on. Critiques of Littman’s paper are read as calls for censorship, rather than as informed disagreements or appeals to reflect on the ethical underpinnings of what research questions get produced as “problems” worth studying and with what effects. As Jasmine Zine (2017) notes, efforts to highlight the consequences of certain kinds of speech and research are frequently cast as criminalizing free speech, rather than “preserving human rights” (para. 7; see also Khandaker, 2016). The trouble is that claims of neutrality work to individualize freedom and disavow the responsibilities bestowed upon us in the name of both sociality and science (Brown, 2019). Not only is scientific knowledge vetted through disciplinary standards and respective dialogue; it is affected by the cultural contexts in which its questions are formed and practices carried

²Clara Schaertl Short (2019) responds to Marchiano by questioning a number of her article’s assumptions, claims, and emphases, most notably on the negative impact of social transitioning and affirming care (including puberty suppression). Short’s critique names three mistaken claims in Marchiano’s article: (i) that interventions are both “invasive and permanent,” (ii) that there is “scant evidence of their efficacy,” and (iii) that they are “easy to access” (p. 286). With reference to much of the same literature cited by Marchiano (2017), Short (2019) offers three contrary claims: that there is a “broad spectrum of interventions, many of which are entirely non-medical”; that those interventions lead to positive outcomes in the youth who seek them out; and that there continue to be “systemic barriers to care that make allegations of too-easy access especially—and cruelly—ironic” (Short, 2019, p. 287). Short also questions whether cases of dysphoria that parents describe as “rapid” are more of an effect of adolescents concealing trans desires from parents “until their dysphoria becomes intolerable” (p. 285). Marchiano (2019) responds to Short (2019) in the same journal issue. Her main point of contention is that Short (2019) constructs transgender “as a medical condition” which means that she fails to distinguish “among types of gender dysphoria” (p. 290), including ROGD. Marchiano also takes issue with Short’s citation of research that documents the positive aspects of transitioning on the ground that at least one of those studies refers to the experiences of children who “had suffered from life-long gender dysphoria,” and so who are not, in Marchiano’s view, ROGD kids (p. 292).

out. The study of how cultural—and we would argue *psychical*—contexts affect knowledge and research is not antithetical to science. It may well be “better science” (Harding, 1993, p. 2).

Wading into this debate, both Shannon Dea (2019a) and Joan W. Scott (2019) underscore an oft-cited distinction between free speech, which refers to the democratic right to freely express opinions and ideas, and academic freedom, which refers specifically to the freedom but also the *responsibilities* of teachers and researchers in relation to “the knowledge they produce and convey” (Scott, 2019, p. 114). Academic freedom imposes limits in the name of the rigorous pursuit of knowledge and sound pedagogy: limits that bind us to the duty to uphold the public good, disciplinary standards, and practices that value human and nonhuman life. In the context of debates over transgender identity, Dea (2019a) frames the “broad strokes” of the arguments as follows: On the one hand, there is the argument that researchers “have experienced inappropriate limitations on their academic and expressive freedom because they have run afoul of a now dominant orthodoxy about gender and gender identity” (para. 11). On the other hand, there is the argument that some researchers “have not exercised the scholarly responsibility that forms a crucial part of academic freedom” (para. 11). In relationship to the latter argument, Zine (2017) points out that “promoting free speech as a democratic ideal without respecting its limits and taking responsibility for its consequences is antithetical to the greater good of a just and inclusive society” (para. 18). Further elaborating this point, Eve Haque (2016) underscores that when academic freedom is constructed as superordinate to other freedoms, such as the right to be free from racial discrimination, then its impact is impoverished.

It isn’t that we shouldn’t engage in debate or confront divergent views. As Dea (2018) argues, “We debate controversial topics because debates over some controversial topics have led to new discoveries and innovations” (p. 7). However, she adds that airing opposing perspectives “for the mere sake of having debates” does not necessarily secure more fulsome knowledge and elides the problem of power (Dea, 2018, p. 7). We know, for instance, that dominant perspectives have long been granted more worth than others, including the perspectives of clinicians over those of children and young people (Gill-Peterson, 2018). If we take academic freedom seriously, then language cannot be read as free (Dea, 2019b), just as socially rooted critiques of speech are not opposed to freedom. Free speech is bound by the responsibility of scholarly communities to call into account the limits of research, its fallibility, and its potentially harmful effects—as have the critics of Littman’s study. After all, if, following Littman’s study, ROGD is left as an uncontested phenomenon, then it may be too easily used as justification for clinicians, parents, and other concerned adults to withhold access to trans-competent therapies, including puberty-blocking treatment, which is the established standard of care in North America (WPATH, 2012). From whatever side, the debate over ROGD, and Littman’s paper, serves to underscore one of the key points of our article: ROGD says less about the experiences of young people and more about the concerns of adults regarding the fraught meanings of gender, language, freedom, and truth itself.

Amid tensions about the social influences of knowledge, Littman’s (2019) revision addresses many of the critiques of the original paper: most notably, that ROGD refers to *parent* perceptions and is not a clinical diagnosis. However, it also is notable that while Lisa Marchiano is included in the “acknowledgments” of Littman’s paper, the psychoanalytic influence of Marchiano’s article is not itself acknowledged or elaborated by Littman. This omission is curious, but perhaps understandable, particularly because of the scientific tone taken in Littman’s paper. After all, psychoanalysis continues to be rendered suspect at best and charlatan at worst within discourses of positivism. As Britzman (2010) reminds us, Freud constructed psychoanalysis as a science concerned with “nocturnal affairs” not easily verifiable by empirical reality (p. 26). In attending to the unconscious, Britzman (2010) further notes that Freud unmoored science from the positivism that was his own training, bringing it “closer to the problems that literature calls to mind” (pp. 3–4). The elusive and at times incredible quality of Freud’s discoveries does not make his theories any less real. Freud found that while psychical reality is affected by, produced through, and linked to material reality, the two do not exactly overlap and more often come into conflict. This means that a person’s experience of reality need not reflect existing social categories in order to be valid. Psychoanalytically, human existence is *defined* by our

efforts to create meaning from the gap between internal experiences—made from the drives, unconscious fantasy, desire, and anxiety—and the social contexts that frame and sometimes limit their expression, and that include the symbolization of gender (Gozlan, 2015).

In its attention to the nocturnal, literary, and otherwise “discarded content” of the mind (Britzman, 2003, p. 95), psychoanalysis is also concerned with both freedom and censorship: the very dynamics that also concern free speech debates. Freud was interested in forms of representation, such as dreams and word play, that he believed could liberate thought from internal and external censors, whether a punishing super-ego or limiting social norms. Conceptualized by Freud (1912) as “the fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis, free association gives a simple directive to the analysand: Speak whatever comes to mind (cited in Britzman, 2006b, p. 25). Free association is the very thing that makes “psychoanalysis psychoanalytic” (Britzman, 2006b, p. 25), in large part because of this invitation to freedom. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1973) further describe free association as “a method according to which voice must be given to all thoughts without exception” (p. 169). Free association unmoors “meaning from the speaker’s intention” and welcomes us into an unprecedented train of thought (Britzman, 2006b, p. 25). Through free association, we can get lost in words, refuse words, and follow words into unimagined corners of our minds. Provided we do not get overly anxious about the ambiguities here implied, language can become, in Jonathan Lear’s (2017) words, “a membrane across which unconscious meanings can flow” (p. 7). In the space between intended meaning and the fissures of our associations lies the possibility of thinking in the “interpretation of that gap as expressing unconscious meaning” (Britzman, 2006b, p. 25).

Unlike the discourse that positions the individual right to speak as an unbridled and conscious act, free association is a “preliminary labor” (Britzman, 2006b, p. 38) that puts the speaker in touch with hidden aspects of the self that are revealed through its unguided foray into language. However, despite free association’s invitation to freedom, something internal to the psyche presents an obstacle. As Lear (2017) writes, “There is something internal to the spontaneous unfolding of self-consciousness that opposes it” (p. 7). Ironically, we sometimes resist the invitation to speak freely because it exposes us to our desire, which renders us “both powerful and vulnerable” (Gentile, 2016, p. 218). As much as desire is empowering, it also means confronting what we have to lose. Of this conundrum, Jill Gentile (2016) writes, “We tend to mind the vulnerability more than we enjoy the power; therefore we hide our desire even from ourselves” (p. 218). The “freedom” of free association is difficult because while it can “release our voice from repressive constraints,” it also means encountering what is difficult to know in the self (Gentile, 2016, p. 218). Its method is a matter of encountering what “cannot be spoken in what is actually being said,” as well as resistances to this knowledge (Rose, 1992, p. 16). Whether vulnerability, or anxiety, or aggression, free association is a commitment to “truthfulness” that offers a way to encounter and narrate the implications of these unthought dynamics on the self and others, including times when we find it difficult to admit their effects (Lear, 2017, p. 8).

While it is a study of interiority, psychoanalysis also begins with the assumption that neither freedom nor speech is an individual accomplishment. Both are psychological events made from and embodied in relationships (Winnicott, 1969). Words are populated by the narratives of others, histories of affect, dynamics of power, and ambiguities emerging from the “dynamic relation between the thing and that to which it refers” (Britzman, 2003, p. 87). But as much as language is steeped in histories of attachment, it is also enacted in *present* relationships that matter to how we make sense of our words. In her study of free speech and free association, Gentile (2016) reminds us that “we cannot by ourselves truly ‘think’; we cannot free associate alone” (p. 160). To this, she adds that precisely because speech is enacted in relationships, any pursuit of freedom is necessarily an encounter with limits, whether in the context of the analytic dyad or democratic dialogue (Gentile, 2016). Unlike some proponents of free speech, Gentile (2016) reads limits not as an attack on freedom, but rather its very condition. While we may rightfully “mistrust restraints imposed from above,” Gentile (2016) argues that even (or especially) if left entirely to our own devices, we can become trapped in unconscious patterns that are difficult to break (p. 120). As she writes, “*not* setting boundaries is as likely as setting them to leave us hostage to forces that have nothing to do

with freedom” (Gentile, 2016, p. 120, emphasis added). Important to our discussion of free speech, Gentile (2016) is not calling for censorship; by “boundaries,” she means the relational conditions that can support the symbolic labor of representing a relationship to the unconscious meanings of language that if left unexamined would nonetheless be acted out, or blurted out, often with devastating effects.

Because language telegraphs unconscious affect and is fundamentally relational, no speech can be free; it is rather hooked into “peculiar principles” of mental activity that affect both the speaker and the lives of others (Lear, 2017, p. 9). From a psychoanalytic point of view, free speech would have to facilitate a certain curiosity and responsibility to take into account how these principles—whether repression, or splitting, or projection—shape the truths we assert and those we disavow. It would mean noticing how these affective states orient both individuals and groups. But as much as the unconscious constructs and can obstruct our perceptions of the world, these defenses can also be worked through, provided there is a language to represent a speaker’s implication in histories of affect and power for the way they structure and defend against knowledge. Free association humbles the claims we make in the name of free speech insofar as we are all susceptible to unconscious processes that stifle words, mix up meanings, contradict intention, and transport us back to an anxious time before language. This is why, for Lear (2017), the labor of free association is also an ethical labor, for to live truthfully requires an “integrated psyche” that can bear to connect with the power and vulnerability of our own desire (p. 8). The ethics of free association means reckoning with a twin paradox: (i) Our pursuits of knowledge are bound by what we do not want to know, and (ii) speech carries meanings that exceed and can contradict what we consciously say. Both conflicts charge us to think about all we do not want to know in our efforts to understand and to analyze the unintended implications of what we say.

Precisely because language acts as a membrane across which the unconscious travels, it is always at risk of toppling into the unsymbolized affects that underlie it. Read as a membrane, the language of ROGD and its effort to give a name to the complexities of gender are never far away from collapse into the anxieties that gender also poses. Such a collapse can accelerate in the context of the group, where the anxiety of uncertainty as the condition of being can crumple into affective certainties that seem more reasonable than the doubts set into motion by the work of thought. As Freud (1921) himself notes, the interests of any individual member of a group, described in his words as “one element in an assemblage,” very often change, leaving them to lose touch with their own mind based on the shifts, sways, and slides of the mass (p. 18). Interestingly, Freud (1921/2004), citing the work of Gustave Le Bon (1895), describes the affective quality of such group influence as “contagion” (pp. 23, 34).

While proponents of ROGD have used the metaphor of contagion to explain young people’s transgender embodiment as an effect of peer influence, we suggest that this same metaphor may help us think about unconscious affects circulating among adults as well. The question of our paper is not therefore about what young people know about gender or whether they can make decisions about transitioning, but what happens when adults are confronted by all they do not and cannot know, and how, in this uncertain context, children and young people may “become both triggers of and receptacles for caregivers’ gender anxieties” (Hansbury, 2017, p. 399). In particular, we speculate that ROGD may be a trigger for caregivers’ gender anxieties that at the same time provides containment for these very anxieties by offering the promise of an explanation amid feelings of uncertainty. Complicating the picture further is the age of consent that nonetheless puts parents in a position of legal responsibility for final decisions involving medical interventions, until their child reaches their jurisdiction’s age of majority. In what follows, we offer a symptomatic reading of ROGD to speculate about meanings that are “not consciously or intentionally expressed” in spoken concerns about this so-called new presentation of gender dysphoria (Elliot and Lyons, 2017, p. 359). Our discussion probes not only the status of anxiety, but the untold dynamic of aggression as a feature of adult efforts to get a handle on the complexities that gender presents.

Gender anxiety and group psychology

Marchiano (2017) begins her article “Outbreak: On Transgender Teens and Psychic Epidemics” with a brief account of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” which she reads as an “apt metaphor” for the “social contagion” affecting, in her words, “teens and tweens suddenly coming out as transgender without a prior history of discomfort with their sex” (pp. 345–346). Grimm’s fairy tale, she tells us, describes an “archetypal situation in which adults have allowed children to be seduced away into peril” (p. 345). Rather than contemplate that adolescents might “anticipate their parents’ negative reaction” and so “avoid showing any signs of being transgender until their dysphoria becomes intolerable” (Short, 2019, p. 285), Marchiano speculates that young people “rapidly” identifying as transgender can be traced to two psychic events: symbolic collapse and social contagion. In terms of the first event, ROGD is framed as a failure of symbolization, or what Marchiano (2017) calls “the dangerous psychological sin of concretization” (p. 348). The logic of this argument is that a child’s transgender embodiment marks an over-literalization of the qualities the child associates with their felt gender, rather than, for instance, modifying the meaning of their birth-assigned gender to encompass a broader range of characteristics. Marchiano (2017) links the experience of symbolic collapse to a second event of social contagion manifesting in teens “coming out as trans in peer clusters” and that is likened to other “outbreaks” such as “suicide and eating disorder contagion” (p. 346). Added up, the “psychic epidemic” of ROGD is a collapse of “the full multidimensionality of symbolic understanding” that congeals interpretive meanings into hardened certainties that then infiltrate the social world, “giving rise to destructive contagions” (Marchiano, 2017, p. 348).

Within this framework of collapse and contagion, Marchiano (2017) further proposes that ROGD is a placeholder, where a young person’s transgender is a conduit for “teen girls to express feelings of discomfort with their bodies” (p. 348). This idea of transgender as symptomatic of another kind of problem is raised also in Littman’s (2018) study when she speculates that dysphoria may be one of other “maladaptive coping mechanisms” for deeper issues (p. 40). In both Marchiano’s (2017) and Littman’s (2018) articles, ROGD is read as possibly a symptom of ordinary discomfort with the body, family conflict, and psychiatric experiences such as “anxiety, depression, social isolation, loss, or trauma” (Marchiano, 2017, p. 354). Echoing Littman, Marchiano (2017) cites “social media use” and “having peers who also identify as trans” as “correlative” with ROGD (p. 355). What may be for some a hopeful observation that “there is an incredibly positive climate around being trans in many places on the Internet” is read as “in-group validation” (Marchiano, 2017, p. 355).

The concern that transgender people are “collapsing . . . psychic experience too quickly into concrete form” (Marchiano, 2017, p. 346) is not new within psychoanalysis and has come under critique by theorists who are pushing back against the pathologizing assumptions of their own field (Cavanagh, 2018; Corbett, 2009, 2015; Ehrensaft, 2012, 2016; Elliot, 2010; Farley and Kennedy, 2016; Gherovici, 2010, 2017, 2018; Goldner, 2011; Gozlan, 2011, 2015, 2018; Hansbury, 2017; Posadas, 2018; Saketopoulou, 2014; Salamon, 2014; Wallerstein, 2017). Taking a range of perspectives, contemporary analysts share in common a commitment to emphasizing the symbolic and creative qualities of transgender embodiment.³ Thinking with D. W. Winnicott, Diane Ehrensaft (2012) offers the metaphor of a gender web to highlight its creative and complexly relational qualities:

A little child is drawn to make something of gender that is not based just on the inside (the child’s body, the child’s thoughts and feelings), nor just the outside (the family, culture’s expectations), but a weaving together of the two, with the child in charge of the thread that spins the web. Every child’s gender creativity will be unique. (p. 343)

³This idea of gender touches on earlier psychoanalytic works of Virginia Goldner (1991) and Adrienne Harris (2009). For instance, Goldner (1991) emphasizes “the symbolic” meanings we make from gender “over the generic givens of biology” (p. 250). Harris, too, posits gender as an assembly that we make “soft” or “rigid” based on complex histories of psychical attachments (cited in Corbett, Dimen, Goldner, and Harris, 2014, p. 296). Uprooted from biology, social norms nonetheless press down on gender creativity. In this context of constraint, the issue for Goldner (2003) is “the extent to which the subject experiences herself as personally investing gender with meaning, or whether gender is a ‘meaning happening to her’” (p. 135).

Webbing, we think, is an apt metaphor, for it reminds us that gender—both cis and trans—is at once porous and potent: a strong net full of holes. For Lacanian analysts, too, gender is a “tenuous achievement” that is “linked to the real of sexual difference,” which tears into the fabric of certainty with lack (Gozlan, 2015, p. 25). As Oren Gozlan (2015) argues, gender is a transitional *process* of “engenderment” that “involves a re-invention of the body as a fragmentary, limited, finite object” (p. 25, original emphasis). While it can be “enjoyed as an object of certainty,” gender resides in the mismatch between psychic life and the body—together with the often restrictive norms that prescribe what this relationship should mean (Gozlan, 2015, p. 25; see also Corbett, 2009). Neither a harmonious nor universal state, gender should be a process through which one resignifies the sexed meanings of the body in ways that refuse an illusion of wholeness (Gozlan 2011, 2015) while contributing to an integrated sense of self (Farley and Kennedy, 2016): what Ehrensaft (2012) calls “the true gender self” (p. 340).

Contemporary psychoanalytic efforts also open questions about how trans experience may bring into view the conflicted qualities of gender itself. On this point, Patricia Gherovici (2018) argues that “the so-called ‘gender trouble’ of those who identify as trans is in fact a universal phenomenon” (p. 75). At once socially constructed and “deeply real” (A. Harris, as cited in Corbett et al., 2014, p. 296), gender is lived, for us all, in the tension between the mind and “the materiality of the flesh,” even while the body is not “the bedrock” of gender (Saketopoulou, 2014, p. 782; see also Dimen, 2014). “An admixture of origin and potential,” Brtizman (2006a) adds, gender is a creative response to the conflicted ground of our existence, captured in the form of a question: “What can I make from how I was made” (p. 116)? However, precisely because gender unnerves, its complexities can be difficult to face. “We do not always feel *in* gender,” Muriel Dimen (1991) writes, “and when we do not, we feel anxiety, which makes us less likely to remember that sometimes one’s gender resembles an ill-fitting garment” (p. 338, emphasis added). Thinking with Dimen, Griffin Hansbury (2017) argues that trans people in particular are the objects of *other people’s* projected gender anxieties, particularly insofar as “gender nonconformity has the potential to terrify in its power to unmoor us from known locations of body and psyche” (p. 399).

We bring Hansbury’s observation to our critique of ROGD, which we suggest may be a projection of adult anxiety that collapses the thinking space in which to make sense of the complexities of gender. While a good number of scholars already have critiqued ROGD by deconstructing the assumptions, terms, and methods of Littman’s study (Ashley and Baril, 2018; Restar, 2020; Serano, 2018, 2019; Short, 2019), we add to the discussion our speculations about the unconscious aspects of ROGD’s construction and use. Specifically, we suggest that ROGD might materialize what Hansbury (2017) calls “transphobic countertransference” that can be felt as “unthinkable anxiety” leading to the breakdown of thought in the face of gender diversity (p. 388). Here, we are also thinking with Sandra Silverman (2015), who, reflecting on her clinical practice, shows how anxieties arising in relation to a child’s gender can lead to the adult’s failure to mentalize the child’s experience and instead “to invade, inhabit, and alter” the space between them with their own “evacuated fears” (p. 53). Where mentalization involves “creating room for thought and reflection,” the failure of this key process involves “crowding another’s mind with the unprocessed contents of one’s own mind” (Silverman, 2015, p. 53).

Despite the trans-competent interventions of an emergent group of child analysts,⁴ clinical psychoanalytic practices with transgender and gender-nonconforming children and adolescents

⁴Ken Corbett, Diane Ehrensaft, and Avgi Saketopoulou are at the forefront of these efforts. The question for these analysts is how to provide a therapeutic environment in which the many meanings of gender can be represented. For instance, Corbett (2009) understands his work to be about establishing “a reliable holding environment” in which children can work through the impacts of normative contexts and categories, with a view to embodying the gender of their desire, whatever it might be, with a greater sense of autonomy and freedom (p. 159). Turning to D. W. Winnicott, Ehrensaft (2016) views her role as one of facilitating children’s development of a true gender self that can mediate “their gender as they know and want it to be” and “the world around them” (p. 29). Ehrensaft (2016) further describes the role of the analyst as “mirroring the children’s creations—their gender self—back to them, rather than controlling the motion of the threads” (p. 29). Saketopoulou (2014), too, describes her role as one of supporting children’s efforts to create “a viable subjective reality” in gender amid internal and external conflict (p. 776, original emphasis). Saketopoulou (2014) theorizes this process as one of mourning “the body one was born into” (p. 782) as part and parcel of gender

tend to take a pathologizing stance (Barkai, 2017). In her review of clinical cases involving children diagnosed with “gender identity disorder,” Ayelet Barkai (2017) notes the failure of analysts to make space in which to mentalize transgender as a viable existence. She surfaces in the analytic interpretations of these cases a profound bias toward cisgender outcomes, despite the standard that the analyst hold a stance of openness. In his work with analysts, Marco Posadas (2018), too, notes a predominant narrative of “protecting children who wish to transition” on the assumption that they are under the sway of a delusion that collapses the meanings of gender with the materiality of the body (p. 96): what Marchiano in the preceding names concretization. In making these observations, the issue for Posadas (2018) is not necessarily the patient’s collapse of meaning, but the analyst’s “resistance to the realization that gender may not be encompassed in a binary system” (p. 97).⁵ In agreement with Hansbury, Posadas (2018) proposes that transgender patients, including young patients, confront the analyst “with the anxiety of not being able to grasp what we read as ambiguous,” which can lead to a collapse of “the thinking space” in which to represent the myriad meanings of gender (p. 96). At issue for Barkai, Posadas, and Hansbury is the *analyst’s* unanalyzed countertransference. Immersed in a “whirlpool” of meanings unanchored from fixed certitudes (Hansbury, 2017, p. 400), what emerges instead can be a defensive impulse to act: “to stop it, censor it, clarify it, and fix it” (Posadas, 2018, p. 97).

While these analysts remind us of the transphobic clinical contexts that trans people face, the issue for Marchiano is that trans-competent climates risk supporting outbreaks of transgenderism that would otherwise desist, or that were never trans in the first place.⁶ She is also concerned that support for social transition puts pressure on a child to stay the course, framed in the form of a question: “Once one has made the investment of coming out to friends and family, having teachers refer to you by a new name and pronoun, will it really be so easy to change back” (p. 351)? Marchiano’s (2016) reference to “chang[ing] back” conjures studies of “desistance” that purport to measure rates of children who seemingly “outgrow” transgender as they move into adolescence. Because, as Jack Drescher (2013) writes, “experts can’t tell apart kids who outgrow gender dysphoria (desisters) from those who don’t (persisters)” (para. 4), it is also not possible to know which children may, using Marchiano’s language, “change back” (p. 351). Eighty percent is the frequently cited rate of desistance

embodiment, including the experience of transitioning. As Saketopoulou (2014) writes, “the body one has needs to be known to the patient so that, *when necessary, it may eventually be given up*” (p. 782, original emphasis). In each case, the analyst is interested in making room for children and young people to symbolize gender in ways that feel meaningful and viable, rather than rigid and compliant.

⁵In noting the ambiguity of gender beyond the binary, we are not suggesting that the desire to situate oneself within a coherent gender position is necessarily a collapse of thought. We elaborate this point in our paper “A Sex of One’s Own: Childhood and the Embodiment of (Trans)gender” (Farley and Kennedy, 2016), in which we draw from Winnicott to rethink the meaning of truth in children’s diverse embodiments of transgender, including a child’s desire for a closer alignment between gender and the body. No matter what position one occupies in relation to the gender binary, we suggest that “truth” refers to the psychological processes through which one represents “a sense of self that contributes to a feeling of being alive in relationship to others” (p. 171). Hannah Wallerstein (2017) takes a similar view in theorizing the “translational process” needed for “any gender identity to become subjectively true,” and where truth refers to the creative work of “establish[ing] . . . a personal relation to one’s own materiality that renders the space between representation and reality both bearable and generative” (p. 427). Both articles pose a challenge to the construction of truth as authenticity insofar as doing so repeats the assumption of a pre-given reality to uncover, which can detract from thinking about the ongoing psychological processes we use to work through objects and symbols in the making of gender. For us, and for Wallerstein, the creative process of symbolization (or translation) establishes subjective truth for all subjects, including those who desire to live inside a consolidated gender.

⁶While it is impossible to know for sure what transition will come to mean for any given youth (just as any future is impossible to predict), and while there is a possibility that some will experience regret, Illana Sherer (2016) suggests that social and medical transitioning, such as puberty suppression, lessens anxiety and contributes to positive outcomes (see also de Vires, McGuire, Steensma, Wagenaar, Doreleijers, and Cohen-Kettenis, 2014). While acknowledging the need for more research, Sherer (2016) notes that the opposite is a *known* risk: Children and youth who do not have access to social and/or medical transitioning are at greater risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Writing from an adolescent perspective, Eli Erlick (2017) gives weight to Sherer’s views in an essay describing her experiences of bullying and misgendering, including by adults who had read Kenneth Zucker’s argument that transgender often desists. Against fears that kids have too easy access to irreversible interventions, Short (2019) reminds us that there is “a broad spectrum of interventions, many of which are entirely non-medical” (p. 287).

within these clinical studies, which have been subject to critiques for methodological and ethical flaws (Temple Newhook, Pyne, Winters, et al., 2018).⁷

Notwithstanding the limits of desistance studies, from a psychoanalytic point of view, Ken Corbett (2009) questions the use of quantitative research to make sense of something as complex as gender. As he writes, the “dominance of empirical data . . . may not afford the kind of complexity that is necessary to understand cross-gendered phenomenon” (p. 89). For Corbett (2009), psychoanalysis is concerned with qualities of gendered existence “less often represented in empirical terms and more often recorded through the rhetorical strategies of the case report” (p. 89). Unlike its “sister discipline” of psychology (Forrester, 2017, p. 4), psychoanalysis involves *thinking in cases*: an idea that John Forrester (2017) wraps around the cover of his book of this title to denote its commitment “to give an account of the divergences, the detours, the idiosyncrasies” of psychical life (p. 11). Thinking in cases attends to the unique, circuitous, and conflictive ways we construct a sense of self, including a gendered sense of self, from our earliest, erotic attachments. And never is this story the same for all, even if we all have libidinal bonds (Corbett, 2009). Playing with Freud’s nonpathological view that sexuality can take many forms, Posadas (2018) applies the term “polymorphism” to the winding pathways of gender, which he describes as a “complex set of conscious and unconscious lived and fantasied experiences that may or may not be comprehensible” (p. 97). Polymorphism also exposes a conundrum of care, in that one is called to a position of trying to understand, while still needing to recognize the impossibility of knowing. The middle ground of this tension between understanding and not knowing Britzman (2006a) names “curiosity” (p. 117). Gayle Salamon (2014) calls this possibility “*the dignity of belief*” that means regarding a person’s “felt sense” of gender as real and true and, as she writes, “irresistible,” even if what is meant by it may be “ambiguous” (p. 116, original emphasis).

Beginning with the dignity of belief means beginning with the assumption that gender means something to everybody, and that it signifies differently to each one of us. Belief dovetails with affirmative models of care that are oriented, in Ehrensaft’s (2012) words, “not to ward off a transgender outcome, but to facilitate the child’s authentic gender journey” (p. 339). But while supportive of transgender as a viable outcome, Ehrensaft (2012) adds that “this does not mean that gender can never be a symptom of another underlying disorder” (p. 339). In this context, Ehrensaft argues that “the most challenging task for the child clinician is to differentiate those symptomatic situations from the, albeit complicated but healthy, developmental journey of children who are reaching to establish their true and authentic gender expressions” (p. 339). It is on this point that Marchiano may agree; however, the psychoanalytic position of not-presuming-to-know means not already constructing transgender as an undesirable outcome and not constructing transitioning as viable only to the extent that it is “unavoidable” (Marchiano, 2019, p. 292).

Still other considerations complicate the clinical scene. Particularly relevant to the ROGD concern about online influence, Ehrensaft (2016) acknowledges the role of social media and the Internet in children’s gender expressions. However, she also notes that there are many important reasons why a child may “borrow the words of others” (p. 235), such as that

⁷Not only are desistance studies biased toward cisgender outcomes, they are based on samples of children diagnosed using criteria set out in the third and fourth versions of the *DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)* that did not require a child to self-identify as transgender in the first place. The implication of this last point, as Newhook et al. argue, is that the 80% statistic is inflated and invalid. That is, it does not necessarily measure desistance, but rather reflects the conflicts of gender queer or questioning kids, who may not have been trans at all. While this last claim might seem to lend weight to Littman and Marchiano’s concerns about ROGD, insofar as it refers to non-trans kids who are caught in an overly wide net of diagnosis, we underscore the significance of an unstated point: In desistance studies, some children may not have claimed a trans identity for themselves, but in studies of ROGD, *they do*.

We would add that the terms desistance and persistence should not be read as objective or neutral, despite their use in scientific studies. One of the key proponents of the 80% statistic, Kenneth Zucker (2018), writes that he “stumbled across the terms persistence and desistance” after reading a paper that used this language to describe children diagnosed with “oppositional defiant disorder” and “attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder” (p. 232). In Zucker’s words (2018), the terms “sounded pretty cool” and he decided to apply them in the clinical context of gender dysphoria (p. 232). This anecdote raises, for us, an issue of practical significance. While the scientific value of medicalized terms may well depend on their effects (their applicability), they may also depend on the context of their beginnings.

they fit perfectly and are articulated so much better than they could say themselves; they are still searching or perhaps floundering and, to right themselves, appropriate someone else's story as their own; they have an agenda in coming for a visit and use a set script to accomplish their goal (e.g. getting a letter of support for cross-sex hormones); it is safer to tell someone else's story than their own. (Ehrensaft, 2016, p. 235)

Once again, Marchiano (2017, 2019) may agree with Ehrensaft's account of social media influences in a young person's "borrowed" gender presentation; however, for Ehrensaft, social influences do not outright indicate a false presentation. A child can borrow language to express a true gender self that the child is not yet able to articulate on their own. Borrowing from Britzman (2006a), gendered existence is what we make from narratives of how we were made. Indeed, this is the storied condition of existence itself insofar as we all draw from narratives given to us by others to curate a meaningful sense of self. Like gender, language is, too, "both discovered and made" (Gentile, 2016, p. 9).

Such considerations might not seem like much help for clinicians and parents who may be seeking out bannisters to guide their decisions. However, the complexities they represent are precisely the point. Taken seriously, they pose a challenge for adults: namely, how to be curious about the meaning of young people's diverse embodiments of gender from a stance of not-presuming-to-know already, without also becoming overly anxious in ways that shut down thinking. Just as a young person's desire for intervention can feel too soon for adults facing difficult decisions about medical interventions, so too can those interventions feel too slow for the young person who seeks them out. In this collision of time, we suggest that ROGD may offer a tempting solution to the adult's discomfort of facing gender diversity in that it offers the certainty of an explanation and the promise of a young person's return to "the cis-temic order" (Posadas, 2018, p. 102). The sheer reach of ROGD is suggestive of precisely this promise, for the pseudo-diagnosis seems to have grabbed the attention of many parents, and not only the parents using the anti-transgender websites where Littman recruited the majority of her participants. There are affirming parents, too, who may be influenced by the ROGD discourse of "defend[ing] our children," as they grapple with their own uncertainty and the implications of their child growing up in a transphobic world (Ashley and Baril, 2018, para. 7). While we cannot know the extent of this influence for certain, it isn't difficult to imagine that supportive parents may be vulnerable to the sway of child-saving discourse that casts their gender-affirming efforts in a negative, and even unethical, light.

Thinking further with Freud (1921/2004), however, we know that the stakes of group membership are not simply about coming together around a conscious idea, reason, or concern, such as the named concern of ROGD. As Freud (1921/2004) reminds us, the group is rooted in an emotional structure of repression that splits off "destructive instincts" that get channeled into an ideal, whether this is an actual leader, a powerful belief, or the group itself (p. 26). Threats to the idealized continuity of the group can be triggered not only by the ideas of others, but by other people's lives that do not adhere to its expectations and norms. We speculate that the very idea of trans children and youth can pierce the fantasied continuity and familiarity of a normative future. In this way, a young person's transgender embodiment can provoke anxiety that feels "sudden" because it yanks to the fore an infantile terror that Hansbury (2017) describes as "being uncontained, without boundaries, without form, without legible and definable skin" (p. 388). Jacqueline Rose (2004) adds another point in her introduction to Freud's work when she writes that "hostility towards the other is integral to the very formation of the group" (p. xi). The group holds fast to the promise of "perfectly organized continuity" that at the same time carries an affective charge of hatred in relation to any imagined or perceived threat to this ideal (p. xii). Ironically, while the principle of freedom underlying both speech and research leans on "the prospect of discovering something new," Gentile (2016) further notes the tendency to "cling to what we know just as we cling to what we refuse to know" (p. 225). This means that "what looks like free speech sometimes forbids new interpretation and ideas" (p. 225).

It might be too much to suggest that well-meaning parents or clinicians could hate a child. Indeed, hate may be too strong a word to describe the concerns of parents and clinicians who struggle to make good decisions in the face of uncertainty. However, psychoanalytically, we also know that hate is a fraught aspect of love that requires working through and that interrupts the split construction of

pure concern or corruption. Here, we are thinking of Winnicott's (1947) paper, "Hate in the Countertransference," in which he theorizes hate as a maternal feeling that arises in response to the nonreciprocal demands of the baby's near-constant needs. Winnicott (1947) invites us to think about how hate can emerge, even in love, in the face of experiences that disrupt the ego boundaries that otherwise allow for a sense a continuity of being. His paper mentalizes this unthinkable idea in a playful list of "reasons" why the mother must hate her baby, for instance, because "the baby is not her own (mental) conception," because "the baby is not magically produced," and because "he is suspicious, refuses her good food, and makes her doubt herself, but eats well with an aunt" (p. 201). The mother hates the baby because the baby is *other* to what she can imagine, because the baby comes by way of difficult labor, and because the baby may not want what the mother imagines the baby wants. The baby stirs in the mother feelings of hatred not only because her efforts go unnoticed, but because the baby shakes the foundation of what she imagines to be true about existence, including her own.

While hate can and does manifest socially as racism, sexism, and/or transphobia, thinking with Winnicott (1947), it may also be conducted in loving relationships that confront caregivers with real or imagined experiences of loss, or uncertainty, or fear: an idea glimpsed in the preceding as transphobic countertransference. A parent or clinician may not literally hate a child who "suddenly" comes out as trans; they may not necessarily be transphobic, and they may even be consciously supportive. But this same child may provoke a terror of not knowing and a surprise of existence that exceeds the parent's imagination, animating a hatred of this feeling. Projected onto the child, these feelings can set into motion an urgency to act: to identify a cause, locate a certainty, and settle on a solution that can reestablish some semblance of, returning to Rose (2004), "organized continuity" in the face of not knowing what to do (p. xi).

Repressed affects operating at the level of the group can be framed as a moral panic (Ailon, 2013). Here, processes such as regression, splitting, and projection work in the context of the group, as they do in the mind, to allay anxiety that is perceived to be coming from the outside world and that is felt to be a threat to its very existence (Bion, 1994). Moral panics "offer members collective reinforcement against and containment of intolerable anxiety" (Ailon, 2013, p. 42), which, in the context of ROGD, may defend against not only polymorphism as a quality of gender, but against the anxiety and aggression churned up amid uncertainty. The idea that there are "fixed gender categories" may "appease the anxiety triggered by the fragmentation of the gender binary scaffold" (Posadas, 2018, p. 103). Feeling right about one's own view, sometimes justified in the name of morality, animates this position. This may be why Freud (1921/2004) argued that "the core of what is called conscience is 'social anxiety'" (p. 23), adding that "the individual may even be said to be rendered moral by the mass" (p. 26). Returning to Lear, the morality of mass psychology replaces the ethical labor of integration, and here we would add thinking, that involves representing a relationship to all that is unwanted, not in the other, but inside the borders of the ego and the group.

Feminist scholarship has also examined the social and political impacts of moral panics, with a focus on how they tend to congeal around issues of sex. Four decades ago, Gayle Rubin (1984) theorized why this might be so. She identified how sex is imbued with the value systems of a given society, leading to a simple but significant thesis: "sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance" (p. 279). In Western contexts, Rubin (1984) argues that sex acts are overloaded with *moral* significance and placed within a hierarchy of valuation that promises to secure order through social norms of reproduction, monogamy, and something called normalcy. Within this system, sex acts that are considered "good" (by which is meant normative) are "accorded moral complexity" (p. 282), while acts falling outside of "the charmed circle" of normativity (p. 281) are emptied of such complexity.⁸ "Considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance," these acts become

⁸A related irony is that while transgender tends to be read as overly certain in its expression, gender certainties in cisgender children are rarely questioned. Barkai (2017) notes this imbalance in her discussion of psychic equivalence:

Both same- and cross-gender-identified children may function predominantly in psychic equivalence mode regarding gendered self-experience, as well as any domain of self-experience; however, cross-gender-identified children are more

subject to a “domino theory of sexual peril” (p. 282). As the term suggests, sexual peril has a cascading effect, setting into motion collective fears about the loss of social order. Caught in the glare of dystopia, it can be difficult to think the very thought of “benign sexual variation” as ground of gender for us all (p. 283).

More recently, Robyn Wiegman (2019) notes how sex panics continue to “operate by amplifying fear, spreading paranoia and suspicion, and inciting demands for ever greater forms of state regulation and ‘protection’” (p. 4). Leaning on “currencies of scandal, melodrama, and sensationalism,” sex panics shore up nostalgia about the “way things were” and stoke anxieties over the loss of ideals of innocence, purity, health, and simplicity (Wiegman, 2019, p. 4). While “routinely understood to be episodic inflammations caused by social transformations that disrupt the established order,” the contemporary sex panic of the religious Right, for Weigman (2019), presents as a newly insidious form:

Extensive in social scope and without discernible borders, the sex panic of the religious Right releases its anxieties about reproduction, homosexuality, sex trafficking, gay marriage, and diverse genders into the cultural bloodstream in a modality completely acclimated to daily routine. (p. 5)

The elemental everyday-ness of panic normalizes the affects that drive it. The borderless movement of panic casts about, attaching to objects, both ideas and others, that give it shape and that the ego rails against. But while promiscuous, moral panics are loyal to sex and gender as the ground zero of anxiety. As Jen Gilbert (2014) reminds us, the “disruptive nature” of sexuality “has an adhesive quality” (p. 81). Gozlan (2018) adds that gender, too, carries an ambivalent charge that “disrupts the social, and at the same time insists upon unity” (p. 7). Because gender disrupts, it animates anxious responses that seek out coherence in the form of an explanation. Rather than work through the feeling of coming undone in the undoing of cisgender, ROGD may allow adults to shift from a position of surprise to one of knowing better about a young person’s gender than the young person themselves.

Toward a “speech community” of thinkers

If ROGD gives us good reason to be concerned, it is not because there are swaths of young people who are suddenly “catching” transgender. Our concern is with the way ROGD may replace the adult’s capacity for curiosity, what Britzman (2006a) has called “creative regard,” with anxieties that shut down thinking (p. 117). When the possibility of transgender is constructed as a crisis of contagion, as in the case of ROGD, it can feel impossible to imagine a viable future. Moreover, since adolescence is already constructed as a time of change, adults may worry that a young person’s desire for transition may itself shift, leading to concerns about regret. Indeed, cases involving young people pose challenges because of the problem of development, requiring adults to hold in mind a tension between responding to gender’s nascent unfolding and the child’s here-and-now desire to be regarded in their gendered existence. In this context, adults may be variably anxious, supportive, fearful, confused, and uncertain about their role, particularly if they are without the resources to challenge transphobia.

Mirroring studies of desistance that claim to predict which kids will “change back” and which kids will persist in transgender, the idea of ROGD may promise to relieve adult anxieties by offering the promise of a distinction between real trans kids and those who hold the “false belief” they are transgender (Marchiano, 2019, p. 292). However, these efforts to settle the future of gender, articulated in the name of science, may repeat an old narrative that defends against its own affected history. In her discussion of scientific psychology, Britzman (2009) explains the logic of repetition as follows:

likely to attract undue attention given the social undesirability of their subjective gender identity. For cis- (or same-) gender-identified children similarly operating in a predominantly psychic equivalence mode, their gender performance is likely to be more socially accepted, although it poses other potential problems (e.g., hyper-feminine girls who are objectified and sexualized, such as those in child beauty pageants, or hyper-masculine boys with aggressive behavior). (p. 25)

The very certainties that adults tend to affirm in cisgender kids become justification for a psychiatric diagnosis when expressed by trans kids.

The more the human's vulnerability and limitation becomes tied to the progress of science, the more science becomes silent about its own affected history. Another consequence follows: this silent history speaks, now from the vantage of what it does not say but nonetheless acts out. (p. 62)

Thinking with Britzman, we detect in claims about ROGD the return of a silent history of psychology that collapses development with normativity. Going deeper, the language of contagion and changing back may harbor a repressed history of eugenics underlying modern sexology: the logic being that if transgender is changeable and contagious, then so too should it be disappeared. Peeling the layers back even further, Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) shows how this medical history of normalizing gender has been, at its core, a racialized project, where, in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States, white children “became a central living laboratory” because their gender was constructed as malleable, while the gender diversity of racially minoritized children and youth was viewed as unchanging and criminalized (p. 36). Returning to Littman’s (2018) study, ROGD is also rooted in a research history involving “predominantly white” young people (p. 32). However, race is otherwise largely unnamed in discussions of ROGD, leading us to speculate about the repetition of an “abstract whiteness” that continues to center the experiences of presumed-to-be white parents and young people to the detriment of more diverse narratives of transgender experience (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p. 121).

Contemporary psychoanalysis gives us good reason to rethink narratives of gender development that are without recourse to linear measures of time marching toward normative futures.⁹ With Jules Gill-Peterson, Rabekah Sheldon, and Kathryn Bond Stockton (2016), we urge adults to cultivate “an interest in the historicity of the present” and so to interrogate the unspoken legacies of terms, concepts, and ideas we might otherwise accept as neutral or merely descriptive (p. 496). Amid efforts to settle the future of gender, the more interesting question is, for us, how to welcome the labor of thinking through the multiple meanings that gender sets into motion, leaving in their wake “*bends in the concept of futurity*” that refuse any known trajectory (Gill-Peterson, Sheldon, and Stockton, 2016, p. 500, original emphasis). Thinking humbles the claims we can make in the name of knowledge; it is a precarious position that bridges binary ideas and opens us to meanings not yet imagined. Thinking may be helpfully engaged in a community of thinkers who can support each other to work through times when the anxiety of not knowing rushes into a refusal of newness. Not only for adults, but for adolescents, too, thinking means representing a relationship to the conflictive meanings of gender. In a transphobic world that has mobilized both certainty and uncertainty to pathologize and deny trans existence, this call to think through conflict may feel like the adult’s stance of disbelief once again. And yet, we suggest that thinking through the multiple meanings of gender is a correlate of embodiment and transitioning, if and when that route is taken.

The capacity of adults and young people to come together as “a speech community” (Gentile, 2016, p. 121) will depend on the capacity to think together: that is, to work through affective responses to gender—including all that is felt to be fearful about its unknown elements—as a condition of humanity, and not a projection of another’s illness. All this returns us to the issue of free speech, in that the capacity for thought is contingent on how “language is used within groups” (Britzman, 2003, p. 100). As a form of thought, language slows down the impulse to act on the unsymbolized force of unconscious affects. In Britzman’s (2003) words, thinking together will depend on

⁹Here, psychoanalysis dovetails with Lee Edelman’s (2004) critique of the meaning and status of futurity in relation to childhood. While beyond the scope of our argument, Edelman’s thesis is that futurity is so thoroughly steeped in heteronormative discourses of both childhood and development that it is no longer a viable metaphor for radical queer politics. We certainly agree that futurity upholds normative logics. However, we also agree with Jose Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) critique of Edelman’s (2004) call to do away futurity in that this position once again presumes a privileged child that the public—and parents—have an interest in protecting. Simon D. Eilin Fisher, Rasheedah Phillips, and Ido H. Katari (2017) underscore the crux of Muñoz’s argument: “It is a (white) privilege to assume a future enough to reject it, because for many children of color, living into the future at all is not so assured” (p. 5). This is precisely why futurity remains a crucial site of creative resistance within the field of trans studies (Fisher, Phillips, and Katari, 2017; Gill-Peterson, 2018; Gill-Peterson, Sheldon, and Stockton, 2016; Pyne, 2017; Salah, 2017; Sunden, 2015).

whether the group uses language as a form of action that precludes awareness of the interpretive work that allows meaning to be meaningful, or whether the group can think of language as a form of thought and therefore as requiring thinkers who interpret. (p. 100)

When language is a form of thought, it mobilizes a “creative transformation of affect into symbolization” that can reconnect us to disavowed anxieties, uncertainties, and wishes underlying efforts to pin them down with a single diagnosis or label (Britzman, 2009, p. 14). But also, as a form of thought, language deconstructs the myth of its own neutrality. While in support of the right of all to speak freely, we also hold that speech, if it is to be thoughtful, must account for the unconscious dimensions of language that are steeped in dynamics of anxiety and aggression—and that can repeat old and forgotten dynamics of our own uncertainties in gender.

The difficult work of thinking means not splitting adult expertise from adolescent experience, even while accounting for power imbalances between them. It means not splitting knowledge into disparate pillars of scientific neutrality and affected activism. The work of thinking means engaging the “space between” seeming opposites, where new meanings may emerge on the horizon of possibility (Gentile, 2016, p. 164). In the context of ROGD, one key question may be how adults and young people can come together as a community of thinkers where language can be used to work through a fuller range of affects underlying the embodiment of gender, as well as our susceptibility to resistance, defense, and splitting in facing the conflicts it poses. It may also mean noticing how adult concerns about the future of gender can hook into old anxieties that fix meaning amid uncertainty. Loosened up from the future, more elbowroom may open to think *in the present* about “the conversation that parents *can* have with trans children” (Posada, 2018, p. 96, emphasis added). Thinking in groups may take the psychoanalytic approach that Forrester (2017) calls thinking in cases, where “the divergences, the detours, the idiosyncrasies” of existence can be symbolized with others, without being determined by their projection of past conflicts (p. 11). Insofar as gendered existence travels unexpected corridors, thinking about gender means taking account of the most anxious and unknown aspects of the self as one tries to care for others. Indeed, thinking means reckoning with the double standard that cisgender, too, turns on conflict, is not in charge of itself, and is wrought with uncertainty, while still considered “real.”

We also apply these conditions of thought to the community brought together under the sign of psychoanalysis. With contemporary analysts, we think there is much to be gained from recognizing the ways psychoanalysis has been a tool of harm, and to repurpose its meaning and use. When all goes well, psychoanalysis can help us identify times when language represses the unconscious affects that drive it, when it defends against thought, and when it can support the labor of representing a relationship to the multiple meanings of existence that implicate us in the lives of each other. As a form of thought, the language of psychoanalysis can help us think about the role of anxiety and aggression in adults’ responses to young people, and to take account of these turbulent aspects of ourselves as part and parcel not only of what Lear (2017) has called “truthfulness,” but also, the care of others (p. 8). Psychoanalysis, too, challenges us to think about the tension between the uncertainty of gender and the desire for intelligibility in gender, and to ask what it can mean for young people and caring adults to meet at this threshold (Gozlan, 2018). Only when we confront the anxiety that gender poses may we begin to respond to young people’s uses of a broadening range of signifiers as an invitation to think together and as itself a form of thought.

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