Introduction

People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what they do does.
—Michel Foucault

February 17, 1962: Toronto, Ontario. In the hospital, the doctor, in the usual way, tells my unwed mother, “It’s a girl.” Fifty-five years later, I bear both the psychological scars of the effects of the branding of me as a girl and eventual woman and the wrenching separation from my birth mother. In the story I tell about myself, I am unable to separate the sex assignment imposed on me from the sexism and misogyny that were my due as a girl or from the gender policing and homo-hatred I received for not being very good at it. Nor, for that matter, can I untangle the privilege of my whiteness and relative wealth from the patriarchal burden of shame imposed on unwed mothers and their offspring and my own bad luck in the adoption game. I come from all these things. These social forces are real; they shape opportunities unequally. I am all these things and more.

My daughter and I recently discussed the lack of agency that children typically experience: most kids do not have much say in many things, and all have absolutely no control over how they come into this world (out of whose body, in what place and time) or typically who raises them and how. We are all born into systems of power and privilege, and this concept of the “sociological imagination,” as C. Wright Mills famously coined it, has a significant impact on our life chances and choices. Our biographies are shaped by our lived experience in specific geopolitical and historical moments. Context is not everything, but it certainly counts for a lot.

Being called a “boy” or a “girl” and assigned correspondingly gendered names and pronouns are two of the many dimensions of power
that adults exercise over children and that shape how they experience the world. For the most part, this power is taken for granted—so much so that in 2011, a Toronto couple’s decision to keep the specifics of their child’s genitals private, coupled with a gender-neutral name, Storm, generated heated media and online commentary that signaled a deeply rooted belief in the appropriateness of adults imposing sex categories on children.¹ Parents are expected to do gender work with their children properly. Some, such as Storm’s parents, Rogue Witterick and David Stocker, make efforts to resist sex stereotyping by choosing gender-neutral names and resisting the efforts of others to assign gendered clothing, characteristics, and activities to their children on the basis of their assigned birth sex; but the binary sex system is so pervasive that most children succumb, and those who do not typically struggle for support.

I define “transgender” in a broad and historical sense to include people who “defy societal expectations regarding gender.” Trans activist Julia Serano notes that “not everyone who falls under this umbrella will self identify as ‘transgender,’ but all are viewed by society as defying gender norms in some significant way.”² While Serano and others distinguish between those who are transsexual—individuals who transition from their assigned sex to their affirmed sex—and those who are transgender, the issue of terminology is complicated because individuals understandably have very strong feelings about how they identify. I use the term “transgender” and its shorthand, “trans,” interchangeably to speak in very general terms about kids who defy gender norms, but I choose each person’s own language to describe them specifically.

I have been traveling in ethnographically rich circles, both socially and as a researcher, offline and online, formal and informal, with transgender kids and their families for over seven years. This book is fairly unique in that I rely on the direct reports of trans kids and their parents to map in time and space the ways in which they are disabled³ by environments that rely on naturalized binary gender systems. Relying on parents to report the experiences of children and young people is inherently problematic,⁴ and I address this limitation by including the voices of a number of trans kids themselves, who describe their experiences in their own words. Doing this is particularly important because, as critical childhood studies scholar James Marten observes, “children
may be among the least articulate of all members of society. By the time they are fully literate and aware of the possibilities and challenges posed by their surroundings, they are hardly children at all. And they are, it goes without saying, literally without political power. As a result, it is very difficult to get at their point of view, and most treatments examine institutions, ideas, or policies that shape the lives of children rather than flesh-and-blood youngsters.\(^5\)

Children do have strong feelings about their gender identities, so I draw on the embodied experience—"the suffering"\(^6\)—of my participants in navigating the gendered spaces that disable them as well as the pleasure and empowerment they experience in resisting the dominant narratives that restrict their sex/gender identities and expression. But the perspectives of parents, while not synonymous with those of their children, are very important because they are typically their children's primary adult attachment, and it is parents who most often advocate on their behalf.

For the purposes of this book, "childhood" is defined as an institutionalized stage of life from birth to the "age of majority" (which varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction across Canada and the United States from 18 to 21 years of age). In discussing the experiences of specific young people, this text uses the term "children" to refer to those 15 years of age and younger, "youth" to refer to those between the ages of 16 and 21, and "kids" to speak more generally about people 18 and under.

My research confirms that trans kids resist the very names and pronouns associated with the sex category that has been assigned to them at birth, which puts them in potential conflict with families, peers, school and sports/recreational institutions and programs, healthcare systems, juvenile justice systems, organizations that provide social support, and work environments. All children do gender work, but the gender work that trans kids do to resist the sex/gender identity assigned to them is particularly powerful in its ability to make the social construction and imposition of binary sex and gender systems more visible. The experiences of trans kids also throw into sharp relief the extensive labor that the people in their environments engage in to impose and naturalize cisgender binary categorization.

Many of the trans kids in my study regularly experience crisis as a result of the restrictive ways in which sex categories regulate their daily
lives and put pressure on them to deny their internal sense of who they are in gendered terms. Critical trans activist and legal scholar Dean Spade identifies government identity documents, bathrooms, and sex-segregated facilities as key points of vulnerability and insecurity for trans people, but relationships with sex-defined peers, sex-segregated/sex-differentiated activities and spaces, gender-coded clothing and hairstyles, pronouns and names, access to healthcare, and gender policing by adults and peers also play a significant role. This perspective is reflected in the experiences of many of the kids and parents I spoke with.

In my own life, when I have called sexist assumptions about fundamental male-female difference into question or attempted to interrupt them, as my three children and I navigate the everyday spaces of the daycare, the birthday party, the playground, the classroom, sports and recreation, and so on, I have often been made to feel like a deluded heretic. Parents and caregivers routinely present me with “evidence” that their children’s cisgender conformity is fundamental to their nature rather than environmentally mediated. My efforts to provide more, rather than less, gender-neutral space for all kids is intended to redistribute power: to open up options for kids’ own gender self-determination, to reverse the privilege that masculinity and male bodies enjoy over femininity and female bodies, and to influence the circulation of cultural and material resources in more equitable ways.

As educational scholar Mark Hellen observes, the majority of trans-gender children and youth are “non-apparent”; the lack of acceptance of gender diversity in their environments leads many to keep themselves hidden. Most trans kids who lack parental acceptance and support and/or appropriate healthcare either adapt to pressure or are driven underground. This is the self-perpetuating logic of “the Thomas Theorem,” whereby “situations that are defined as real become real in their consequences.” On the other hand, however, visible trans kids are at higher risk of discrimination and violence. Ultimately, both those who are visible and those who are invisible are vulnerable to high-risk behavior, self-harm, and suicide.

There have always been children who refuse their gender designation—and, truth be told, I was one of them—although most do so in silence. Since the mid-1990s, however, an increasing number of kids are finding it possible to openly resist the sex category assigned
to them at birth and to identify themselves in unexpected ways. This agency has become possible as a result of adult transgender activism, the availability of information about LGBT people and identities via the Internet, and emerging social movements on behalf of transgender kids consisting of parents, therapeutic/medical providers, and trans people of all ages.¹¹ We now see trans kids circulating on TV talk shows, in social media posts, and in mainstream news headlines. This visibility both reflects and contributes to a cultural shift toward advocacy for greater gender openness in Canada and the United States. But cultural spaces of acceptance and support remain few and hard to come by. Trans kids need us to fight for them and along with them, whether they make themselves known to us or not.

In the past five years, some positive changes have come about in law and policy in various jurisdictions in Canada and the United States. In 2014, the province of British Columbia was the first in Canada to allow transgender people, including children, to change the gender marker on their birth certificates without having to undergo sex reassignment surgery. This development was a result of a case brought to the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal on behalf of Harriette Cunningham, who was 11 years old at the time. “In 2013, with the help of her grandmother and human rights lawyer Barbara Findlay,¹² Harriette began petitioning local representatives to overturn legislation that required trans people to undergo reassignment surgery before changing the gender on their birth certificates. When Bill 17 passed in 2014, Harriette was the youngest of 30 British Columbians to receive their newly accurate identification.”¹³ Harriette subsequently appeared before the tribunal to argue for the elimination of gender markers on birth certificates altogether. This goal has yet to be achieved, although as of 2017, BC Care cards for provincial health insurance can now be obtained without a gender marker. In 2014, transgender 11-year-old Tru Wilson’s parents launched a human rights complaint on her behalf against the Vancouver Area Catholic Diocese and achieved, via an out-of-court settlement, the desired policy change to recognize transgender girls and boys as their affirmed sex.¹⁴ In March 2016, a human rights complaint between the parents of eight-year-old Bella Burgos and the River East Transcona School Division in Manitoba was resolved in favor of affirming transgender students, including access to washrooms and changing facilities according
to their affirmed sex.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, Maine’s highest court ruled in 2014 that a transgender student’s rights were violated when her school forced her to use a staff bathroom rather than the girl’s bathroom.\textsuperscript{16} The passage of AB 1266 into law in California, signed by the governor on August 12, 2013, allows children “to participate in sex-segregated programs, activities and facilities,” including on the basis of their affirmed gender rather than their birth sex.\textsuperscript{17} Since 2004, many school boards on both sides of the border have adopted trans-inclusive policies.\textsuperscript{18}

Other potential watershed cases were until recently before the courts, the most high profile being the American Civil Liberties Union’s legal challenge on behalf of transgender boy Gavin Grimm’s right to use the boys’ washroom at his high school. When a lower court upheld Grimm’s right to use the boys’ washroom, the school district appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Many trans people and supporters hoped that this judicial body would establish a federal precedent in support of transgender rights. But a change in the political landscape from an Obama White House that voiced its intention to support transgender students to a Trump administration that included transgender students among its vulnerable targets sent the case back to the lower court, which, in light of the new administration in Washington, subsequently overturned its original decision and ruled against Grimm. A subsequent appeal of that decision appears to have been stalled by Grimm’s June 2017 graduation from high school and, hence, his legal standing in the matter before the courts. Trans-oppressive attitudes are persistent in U.S. and Canadian culture and policy, and the increasingly sinister efforts by the Trump administration and many U.S. state governments to resist or roll back legal and policy gains on behalf of trans people indicate the extent to which trans kids remain marginalized and at risk.

As trans kids are a very vulnerable population, I have taken great pains to ensure their anonymity. For this reason, I locate them nationally only and provide very general markers related to their racialization. While this forecloses more nuanced analysis of individual cases with regard to the impact of specific forms of racialization and specific geographical contexts, it is a necessary measure. The threshold of anonymity I provide is such that individual transgender kids and/or their parents are not identifiable. However, communities consisting of transgender
children and youth and/or their parents are often closely knit, and some of the stories I report on may be familiar to members of these networks.

Every region of the mainland United States and all regions of Canada with the exception of the Yukon and Nunavut are represented in my research. A greater number of voices participated in this study than are represented here. In two cases, as children aged from the time of the initial interview to a publication date three years later, parents withdrew their participation in order to let their children decide if and when to tell their own stories and out of the increased concern about their children’s safety following the election of Donald Trump.

I interviewed 19 transgender kids and 23 parents of transgender kids in Canada and the United States between 2012 and 2017. My overall sample consists of the experiences (some told to me directly and some by their parents) of 36 kids. These kids live in various regions across Canada and the United States and range in age from four to 20. Most of the kids in my study come from middle-class families, but at least five are working class or living in poverty. Of these kids, 15 are Euro-Canadian or Euro-American, meaning they are racialized as white, while the remainder are racialized to some degree as nonwhite, 13 of them visibly so. Of the kids in my study who are racialized as nonwhite, five identify as Asian Canadian or Asian American, six as Black Canadian or Black American, six as Indigenous or Native American to varying degrees, and one as Latinx. I know of four of the kids who are adopted. Three kids live in nonurban areas. The gender identities that these kids affirm put them at odds with traditional notions of binary gender. These identities include gender nonconforming, transgender, trans nonbinary, male, female, boy, girl, trans boy, trans girl, gender neutral, and agender, and several kids require more than a few words to sum up their identities. Wren (11, Black Canadian), for example, described herself this way: “I was born a boy, but I like being a girl.”

Most of the trans kids and parents of trans kids whom I interviewed for this book were met through family gender conferences, Facebook networks for parents of transgender kids who are active in supporting their children, and chain referral sampling. Of the parents I interviewed, 19 were mothers (two of whom were partnered with women and five of whom were single parents), and four were fathers (one of whom was...
partnered with a man). In spite of active support by many of the fathers of trans children, emotional and support work on behalf of trans kids, like other familial emotional and support labor, remains highly feminized. Fathers are often deeply engaged with their kids in general and around their difficulties with trans oppression, but more often mothers negotiate daily challenges and are the spokespeople for the family. In many cases, in two-parent families, queer or straight, both parents attended meetings with school officials to seek accommodation for their kids. Because most of the parents interviewed were located via networks or organizations that support trans kids, the dominant narrative was one of revelation, adjustment, acceptance, and support through advocacy or activism.

I identify my participants by pseudonyms, age, racialization, and nation of residence. After serious deliberation, I decided not to indicate whether a particular participant was “designated male at birth” or “designated female at birth.” Identifying my participants by the sex they were assigned at birth is an important way to render visible the power relations at play as sex/gender categories are imposed and the consequences for kids who resist. This analysis does emerge in many of the stories I share, but in describing my participants, I honor their self-definitions. I do so for two reasons: first, because of the way sex markers have been imposed on the kids in my study and how hard they, and often their parents, have had to work to resist this imposed marker; and second, because information about assigned sex satisfies a cis-sexist need to “know” who everyone “really is.” In many ways, I think it is valuable to exclude this information entirely. The social disruption I am advocating for in this book can therefore be more fully experienced in the reading.

One of the experiences I have enjoyed the most in the work of this book has been the extent to which I often “forget” the sex category to which my participants were originally assigned: indeed, I rarely think of them in terms of genital variation at all. I find myself unable to remember who anyone “really is,” in that trans-oppressive cultural way of needing to know the nature of a person’s genitals in order to take them seriously as the gender they affirm. Far from experiencing this “forgetting” as problematic, I find it incredibly freeing, and it actually reflects my vision of a more gender-just future based on the trans-positive perspective that “gender is not genitals.” In writing this way, I have
endeavored to model a much more open and less biologically deterministic way of enabling and respecting each person’s right to determine their own gender. This is a transformative experience that I would like to see generalized. I acknowledge that the reader may find my failure to identify the assigned sex of my participants frustrating at times, and I hope it comes to be appreciated as a valuable aspect of the experience of reading the book.

An important dimension of gender self-determination involves the creation of new language to allow for a greater range of identities. The English language is less thoroughly gendered than are French and Spanish, for example, whereby objects and not just people have a gender, but English features explicitly gendered pronouns. In addition to emerging terminology to describe gender identities beyond the binary, new gender-neutral pronouns are being used by trans people of all ages, perhaps the most common being the replacement of “he/him/his” and “she/her/hers” with “they/them/their.” This is a challenging adjustment for adults, although, as some of my research indicates, young children not only seem to be more adaptable in this regard but often invent new language for themselves as needed. Stacey, mother of four-year-old Cassandra (Euro-Canadian), for example, described how children in one of her older daughter’s classes asked after Cassandra by saying, “Where’s your brother/sister?” In spite of my own increasing preference to be addressed using “they/them/their” pronouns, I struggle to get this right on behalf of others. Gendered pronouns are such an ingrained habit. To avoid misgendering people as much as possible, I do a lot of background work: there are signs up in my office that say “they/them/their,” and I have asked my family to refer to me with these pronouns, partly to explore adopting them myself but also to aid me in internalizing them.

I have been deeply affected by my interviews with trans kids and their parents. I intentionally conducted each interview as an act of emotionally invested social action research in support of gender self-determination and reduced vulnerability for trans kids. My heart needed to be open, and I needed to be fully present to do this. As Stef (17, Euro-Asian Canadian) talked about what they had experienced in school (as a transgender girl starting at age five and as a gender-neutral person starting at age 14), for example, I responded by saying, “You have put up with a lot of shit!” To this, I received an emphatic “Yes!” Feeling
deeply understood by a compassionate adult is important to children and youth and feeds their resilience. I remain aware of this need in all my interactions with the trans kids with whom I work. Supporting the authority of my participants with regard to their own gender identities is as important to me as it is to learn about who they are and how they are navigating their lives. Unlike traditional, and inaccurate, portrayals of science and academic research as being characterized by so-called objectivity and lack of invested interest, the social action model of research is explicitly designed to develop knowledge that can be used to fight oppression.

There are difficulties involved in writing about vulnerable populations for diverse audiences, and I have encountered these at several stages. There are considerable tensions and debates within trans communities about what is necessary for recognition, equality, and safety. It is a challenge to generate space for this critical analysis while keeping in mind the potential consequences for transgender kids.

The overall purpose of *The Trans Generation* is to make life better for transgender kids in particular and for all kids in general. My general argument in the book is that trans kids are incredibly vulnerable because of the way in which gender identities are imposed on children in general, with particularly negative consequences for trans kids. I document the ways in which unsupportive families, schools, healthcare programs and delivery mechanisms, bathroom facilities, and sports and physical recreation programs harm trans kids and the positive results that come with acceptance and support. A central piece of the book, a chapter titled “Parenting,” documents the incredible time, energy, love, intelligence, and courage that supportive parents of trans kids devote to making it possible for their children—and trans kids in general—to show up as who they really are. A key argument of the book relates to how resources for this kind of support are unevenly distributed, particularly with regard to race and class. The theoretical framework I draw on for the book is based on the activism and scholarship of queer and trans scholars of color as it enables a more critical discussion of the lives of transgender kids.

I end the book by applying debates within queer and trans communities about reformist versus more radical social change programs and strategies to the matter of how best to empower transgender kids. I cen-
ter the most precarious trans kids to argue against an either/or approach to these debates, insisting on the power and value of carefully leveraging rights discourse to achieve measures of immediate harm reduction within the context of a broader anti-oppression framework. The book concludes with the outline of a more comprehensive program for social change. As this book is intended for a mixed audience of academics, students, trans people of all ages, family members and friends of trans kids, and those who care for and work with kids, I provide a brief list of recommendations in Appendix A.

C. Wright Mills once said, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both.”26 I hope that this book will contribute to an understanding of how oppressive contexts shape the lives of trans kids and how we can work together both to foster individual resilience and to generate widespread social change.