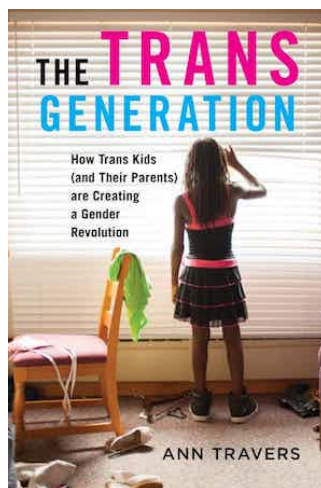
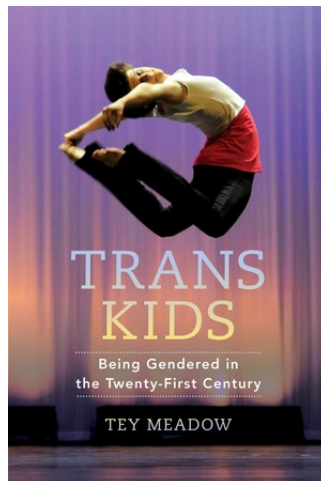


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A Year of Trans Childhood

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By Paula Martin



[Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century](#)

[Tey Meadow](#)

University of California Press, 2018. 320 pages.

[The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids \(and Their Parents\) are Creating a Gender Revolution](#)

[Ann Travers](#)

NYU Press, 2018. 288 pages.

Trans young people are a matter of vital attention in the United States. Recently, trans-identified youth have figured in arguments about [healthcare](#), [homelessness](#), and [whether or not a court in British Columbia can compel a parent to refer to their child by his affirmed pronouns](#), to mention just a few popular publications. It is into this environment that the last few years saw the welcome publication of Tey Meadow's *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* (2018) and Ann Travers's *The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) are Creating a Gender Revolution* (2018).

These two sociological texts are timely interventions into scholarly as well as political debates over the role of gender in the social organization of spaces and activities – and over how young trans people rattle (or re-stabilize) the very notion of gender itself. Meadow (she/her/hers) and Travers (they/them/their/s) both take contemporary gender expansive youth as a relatively new phenomenon of interest, invoking contemporary framings of the “transgender tipping point” (Meadow, 2018: 3) and pointing to an increased visibility that “both reflects and contributes to a cultural shift towards advocacy and greater gender openness.” (Travers, 2018: 5). While another recent text, Julian Gil-Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018), carefully argues against interpreting trans children and trans childhood as “new” phenomena, both Travers and Meadow importantly offer contemporary qualitative data on the experiences of trans children and their parents. Additionally, *Being Gendered* and *Generation* provide important analytic framings and policy suggestions useful for scholars of gender and those invested in creating safer, more just social worlds for trans children to live in.

Notably, while *Being Gendered* and *Generation* utilized similar approaches

to data collection, the texts diverge significantly in methodological choices about who, specifically, to talk to about the gender experiences of youth. Both texts draw upon extensive interviews, as well as qualitative data collected through participation in conferences and other networks of trans advocates and families. Meadow's text in particular utilizes data drawn from extensive fieldwork following two parent-run organizations, as well as attending conferences and professional association meetings specifically for parents (activities Travers also describes, but with a different emphasis). And indeed, both texts feel deeply indebted to the individuals who provide insight into their lives through interviews. However, Meadow interviews parents of trans kids, while Travers draws their narrative around commentary from youth themselves.

Meadow explains her decision to not interview youth as one which shifts the focus from the youth themselves to "social responses" to childhood gender nonconformity (237). In an appendix to *Being Gendered*, Meadow explains that she came to this decision after an early interview with a young person raised concerns about possibly reproducing an "othering psychiatric gaze" through her own research, with undefinable impacts on a youths' future self-image (237). Travers interviews both parents and children, writing "I rely on the direct reports of trans kids and their parents to map in time and space the ways in which they are disabled by environments that rely on naturalized binary gender systems" (2). In articulating this choice, Travers makes clear their own personal, ethical, and scholarly commitment to unpacking how the binary itself is sustained through social structures, structures which marginalize youth who transgress expected norms of gender.

The two texts also diverge in their approach to the problem of "environment" and how environment relates to identity. While environment is key to how both Meadow and Travers understand what creates tensions or problems around gender expression and identity, *Generation* often emphasizes how physical spaces and gendered separations – in school, in bathrooms, or in sport – impact the experience of gender. In particular, Travers's attention to the political and economic conditions of both the US and Canada means their texts touches on border crossings, racial formations and effects, and the Trump administration's impact on health care access and legal protections for trans youth (and trans people more broadly). Taking a somewhat different approach in *Being Gendered*, Meadow considers the problem of environment by focusing on how social narratives around gender are taken up and utilized, drawing readers' attention to the role that parents take as they mediate risks and smooth social transitions for their gender expansive children.

The difference in how Travers and Meadow approach their objects allow

both texts to exhibit complementary strengths while rarely existing in tension with each other; rather, reading both together provides a richer, more nuanced view of the many difficulties facing trans children and their families today. The data that Travers utilizes illustrates, with good effect, the structural ways youths' gender explorations are policed and marginalized, and the effects of that marginalization on their ability to survive and thrive. Meadow's attention to the parent movement does much to describe the labor and care that has gone into creating space for the proliferation of gender identities, and demonstrates how, in those efforts, gender itself becomes more, rather than less, important. However, despite my admiration for Meadow's reflexive honesty in examining the problems of conducting research with trans young people, I nonetheless struggled with the absence of youth voice in *Being Gendered*. Relying on the reports of families, rather than youth themselves, means that the reader gets a better sense of the conditions structuring the youth experience rather than that experience itself. In other words, we learn more about the forces that make space for articulations of gender diversity as "form" instead of "failure" (Chapter 7), rather than how youth themselves are interacting with those forces (including parents and health care providers). That said, it is notable that the book starts and ends with an ethnographic depiction of a young person, which seems to both acknowledge its own representational limitations while still attempting to place youth experiences at the center.

Being Gendered and *Generation* each dedicate a distinct chapter to the medical treatment of gender, both drawing special attention to the now-closed Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto, Ontario. Founded by preeminent psychiatrist Ken Zucker, GIC's reliance on and advocacy of a reparative or "corrective" model of gender care led to its demise in 2015. Before GIC's closure, Meadow spent a week there, interviewing parents and participating in clinic life (Chapter 3, "The Gender Clinic"), while Travers opens "Supportive Healthcare" (Chapter 5) by examining a petition circulated in support of Zucker, and discusses their own participation in counter-petitioning in support of the closure of the clinic. Neither Meadow or Travers support the reparative model; however they each offer a somewhat different engagement with the problems raised by the GIC. For example, Travers emphasizes the racial and class-based inequities in accessing gender affirming care, even within socialized Canadian medical systems, while Meadow focuses on psychiatric diagnoses and the rhetoric of regret, persistence, and desistance.

Meadow's discussion of the medical treatment of gender identifies the problem of "regulatory anxiety," or the notion that medical experts should reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, as driving the surge of interest in the stories of trans "regret" (77). Meadow demonstrates how

clinicians and parents alike seek some semblance of certainty, and argues that both “facilitative” and “classical” clinicians need to understand the epistemological grounds for gender identity especially when considering how to help children through the inevitable bodily gendering of puberty (even if that puberty is due to hormones provided exogenously rather than endogenously) (59). She understands “classical” clinicians as those who would first hope that youth might reconcile themselves to living as the gender they were assigned at birth, inherently biasing cisgender life as the preferred outcomes. “Facilitative” clinicians, on the other hand, more readily express the view that a transgender future is just as desirable as a cisgender one, and often argue that providers should not try to hinder any gender expression, play, or transition. I questioned Meadow’s decision to cite Michelle Cretella, president of the American College of Pediatricians (a group the Southern Poverty Law Center classifies as a [hate group](#)) as indicative of a type of care, especially in light of the American Academy of Pediatrics [open support of affirmative care](#), but nonetheless find Meadow’s use of regulatory anxiety a useful concept (one that appears often in my own fieldwork at a gender specialty clinic).

In “Telling Gender Stories” (Chapter 6), Meadow goes on to narrate how parents pull together logics from diverse fields to make sense of the ways their child is expressing their own identity, and to situate such individual expression within the larger context of gender expression and gender as identity. At the same time, as Meadow describes in “Anxiety and Gender Regulation,” (Chapter 5) parents must also manage the very palpable risks of raising a gender expansive child in often unsafe spaces, and even parents who affirm their child’s identity must constantly assess and regulate gender expression in order to prevent social repercussions. Meadow’s emphasis on how largely cisgender parents create livable worlds for their children is complemented by the arguments Travers makes in “Parents” (Chapter 3). Travers directly addresses the disproportionate ability of families with social and material privilege to affirm and advocate for their trans children, writing about the hope that they have for privileged parents of trans children to be engaged with “anti-oppression social change movements more broadly” (195). Taken together, the texts make exceptionally clear the important role that parents play as well as the possible ways parents might either reinforce or combat social (and personal) expectations about their child’s gender.

It would be difficult to imagine, in this moment, any book about trans children which did not address the threat or experience of suicide. In both *Being Gendered* and *Generation*, the narrative of suicide provides the evidence for the importance of affirmative care by exemplifying a worst-case scenario that cannot be argued against. While not all social scientific accounts of youth suicide understand it as such (see, for example, [Stevenson, 2014](#)), in *Being Gendered* and *Generation* suicide

functions as it does in the narratives of parent groups and advocates; by illuminating the stakes of supporting youth in the midst of cisnormativity, racism, and a neoliberal medical model of care that often disenfranchises youth. In *Generation*, Travers includes a conversation with a parent who lost a child (35), to illustrate the hopelessness that may characterize how youth see their future when faced with un-affirming environment and roadblocks to care. Yet, Travers also discusses the role that suicide attempts and self-harm rates often play in youths “coming out” stories (125-126). Their description allows for reading suicidality as both an extreme and an everyday, providing an understanding of how such an experience can figure into trans youth stories as both preventable outcome and a normalized response.

The texts end on markedly different notes, shaped again by their different approach to examining the relationships between youth and the environments they exist within. Meadow’s focus on facilitative families and advocacy networks ground the main argument in *Being Gendered*: that gender is becoming more central to contemporary life exactly because of how gender can encompass meaning in new and ever-more specific articulations. Travers concludes with four social and political “tasks”: 1) pressuring institutions to permit self-identification and gender expression; 2) expanding access to gender affirming healthcare; 3) undoing gender systems (while remaining supportive of those for whom a binary gender fits) and; 4) prioritizing the “most vulnerable” trans kids, which is a high-stakes task that includes a “redistribution of cultural and material resources and the abolition of incarceration as a system of social control” (201).

Being Gendered and *Kids* are both incredibly thoughtful, deeply researched, and compassionately written accounts that are necessary at this critical juncture in the worlds of trans studies and trans care. Taken together, these texts show a world of gender expansion and creativity, which is nevertheless shaped by settler-colonialism, heteropatriarchy, racism, and a historical mistrust of youth as arbiters of their own experience. Debates on the best way to support gender expansive youth only continue to grow – recently, the Daily Mail published a sensationalized piece on a new movement to support “de-transitioners,” while a piece on the potential side effects of the puberty blocking medication Lupron was recently [debunked by NBC](#). In this era of sensational fearmongering around trans childhood, then, approachable scholarly works like these offer critical insight into the challenges around, and the promise of, gender expansive youth.

Both texts would work well in gender studies and youth studies classes, with Travers’ text suiting reading lists that emphasize institutions while Meadow’s would complement other social science work that examines

changing social narratives and processes of meaning-making (such as Valentine, 2007). Sociology of gender and health classes would find the chapters on medical care especially helpful for understanding the changes in the gender clinic, though the rapid pace of change in medicine means that current models of practice have already started to look different than the ones described by Meadow and Travers. I highly recommend both texts for anyone looking to increase their understanding of how gender expansive youth are shaping the world, as well as making their way in it.

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