



Fighting for Trans* Kids: Academic Parent Activism in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT *In this article we explore some of the affective and ethical dimensions that we have faced as parent academic-activists seeking to understand and undo some of the structural transphobia that currently exists in Canadian society. Informed by critical feminist, critical race and black feminist thought, trans* scholarship, queer theory, and anti-oppression analysis, we discuss how our academic-activism assumes complex configurations of privilege and vulnerability.*

KEYWORDS transgender; children and youth; autoethnography; parental activism; academic activism; social action

When we apply the insights of queer and feminist theory to the work of raising children, we become invested in providing *all children* – not just those who show the signs of gender non-conformity – with the social, cultural and political tools they can use to simultaneously work with and against the gender binary. (Ward, 2013, p. 47)

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Introduction

Gender expression and gender identity, understood as binary concepts, that is, *either* male or female, are vivid examples of the very structure of domination upheld in Western society. As academic-activists we have allied with our children and with many others to better understand, explain, and undo structural transphobia within broader contexts of ageism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and the ever-increasing criminalization of poverty (Hodgson, 2013; Kumashiro, 2002; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013). In this article we explore some of the affective and ethical dimensions we have faced as parent academic-activists fighting for our trans* children.¹

Many academic parents are familiar with the competing demands of parenting children while trying to complete book chapters, course lectures, and grant applications. It is almost an understatement to say that these demands are stressful, if not at times totally overwhelming.² As the primary caregivers of transgender children, our academic work has, however, taken on a whole new layer of meaning that we could never have imagined prior to becoming parents. The allyship we undertake in relation to our children does not comprise a form of “courtesy stigma” (Goffman, 1990, pp. 41-45), or the allyship of sympathetic individuals who become “courtesy members” of a marginalized group, as has recently been suggested of parents who publicly support their adult gay and lesbian children (Johnson & Best, 2012). Rather, we occupy a position of liminality; most of us are not trans* but given our desire to ensure the well-being of our children, and the discrimination we face advocating for and with them, we live a commitment to our children that cannot be picked up or put down as we like.³ At the same time, our struggles are also shaped by our commitment to finding ways for our children and other children to safely speak their truth and self-advocate at a moment when they are perceived to lack the capacity for self-determination.

Informed by critical feminist, critical race and black feminist thought, trans* scholarship, queer theory, and anti-oppression analysis, we explore some of the anxieties and privileges that give rise to and shape our allyship. In particular, we consider how the economic, cultural, and social capital

¹ Transgender or trans* is an umbrella term that describes a wide range of people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from what they were assigned at birth. It may include those who identify as transsexual, Two-Spirit, transitioned, bigender, genderqueer, cross-dressers, gender variant, gender fluid, or simply man or woman (Grant et al., 2011; FORGE, 2012). In some contexts, an asterisk is used (trans*) to actively include non-binary and/or non-static gender identities. ‘Gender creative’ is one of many terms that describe “children whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what others expect of their assigned (natal) sex. Others include ‘gender independent’, ‘gender non-conforming’, ‘gender variant’, ‘transgender’, and in the case of Aboriginal children, ‘two-spirited’” (Pyne, 2013, n.p.).

² See Castañeda & Isgro (2013); Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden (2013); and O’Brien Hallstein & O’Reilly (2012) for three thoughtful recent explorations of gender and family in academia.

³ Our reference to liminal allyship draws upon the work of Ryan & Runswick-Cole (2008), who are academic parents of disabled children.

inherent in our academic positions enables us to support trans*-positive scholarship about gender independent children both within and outside of our university contexts. Yet, even as we maximize these relations of power, we also recognize their limits; our power is conditional on secure academic appointments and tenure (circumstances disproportionately associated with whiteness and class privilege), on activist-positive and parent-positive academic cultures, and on our own finite energies to manage the many demands of teaching, research, parenting, and activism as they blur together, sometimes productively and sometimes problematically. As white scholars and teachers we also recognize our power to silence non-academic communities and epistemologies and thus work to build anti-racist strategies into our activism and scholarship.

We begin with a brief discussion of some of the collective work by academics, practitioners, and community activists underway to create a more gender-expansive society. After an introduction to research methods, the main section of the article will focus on five short analytic autoethnographies. Cindy explores the interplay between lived experience, queer and feminist community work, and the analyses of critical trans* academic-activists, and how these various facets shape her parenting, activism, and research; Annie discusses how her background in ethics deeply informed her decision to accept her transgender daughter; Kimberley reflects on how the intersecting processes of grant preparation, research, and writing propelled her into activism and provided her with new tools to understand and engage in social movement activism; Julia uses insights from black feminist theorists to explore the pressures of silence and disclosure when parenting, activism, and academics overlap; and Ann draws on her own scholarship in critical race theory and necropolitics to discuss the raced and classed dimensions of supporting a transgender child. As will be evident in the following discussion, academic work, activism, and parenting have become intensely ‘blurred’ in our lives. While the theoretical frameworks that have guided our scholarship have helped us navigate parenting our trans* children and provided us with resources and platforms from which to advocate for change, we all struggle with the costs of advocating for our children.

Background

Over the last five years, a small number of Canadian educators, lawyers, academics, community activists, physicians, and youth have sought to educate the public about childhood gender diversity and to create new gender expansive possibilities in educational, social, and medical support and care for children and youth. Disregarding theories that childhood gender non-conformity could be ‘fixed’ by altering parental behaviour, these individuals sought to challenge the systems of gender normativity not only affecting trans* children, but all children and youth; an approach that Travers (2014,

pp. 54-68) calls a “transformative gender justice perspective.” It was not until the national conference on Gender Creative Kids held in October 2012, however, that some of us met together for the first time (Manning, Pullen Sansfaçon & Meyer, 2014; Annie, Ann and Kimberley attended the conference). Spurred on by that gathering, and a subsequent workshop held by Rainbow Health Ontario a year later,⁴ many new academic collectivities have taken shape in the country, including the preparation of several large team grant applications.

At the same time that all five of us have been involved in drafting grant applications, publication projects, and presentations focused on transgender children and their families, we have simultaneously become increasingly involved in public activism beyond the academy. In 2014, we participated in various forms of activism: Annie filed a human rights complaint in Quebec in the hope that her child might change her gender identification documents; Ann and Cindy worked hard with others to apply anti-racist ethics to found the British Columbia Safer Schools Coalition in support of the Vancouver School Board’s trans*-positive update to their gender and sexual diversity policy (see BC Safer Schools Coalition, n.d.); Julia began to offer training in children’s gender diversity to professionals who work with young children and founded both a local support group for parents of gender diverse children, as well as a national social media-based support group that now has nearly 300 members; and Kimberley, as a founding member of Gender Creative Kids Canada, co-facilitated workshops on gender identity and expression at the English Montreal School Board.

Given our strong on-going commitments, all five of us have member research status in communities and projects supporting transgender children and their families. These experiences have provided us with a basic starting point for employing analytic autoethnography, the methodology we have adopted in writing this article. The value of analytic autoethnography is that it attends to narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, and incorporates a strong commitment to theoretical analysis and thereby engages in a larger enterprise of social science debate (Anderson 2006, p. 378). The following five autoethnographies were written by each author and are based, in part, on semi-structured interviews – conducted in person or via skype – that Kimberley undertook with Annie (May 9, 2013), Julia (November 21, 2014), Ann (November 25, 2014), and Cindy (January 12, 2015), and that Annie undertook with Kimberley (January 5, 2015). Ann decided not to reflect on her interview per se, but rather to focus her autoethnography on a family crisis that emerged after the interview had already taken place.

⁴ Rainbow Health Ontario “works to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ people in Ontario, and to increase access to competent and LGBTQ friendly health care services across the province” (Rainbow Health Ontario, n.d.).

**Cindy – Interdisciplinary Studies (Sociology, Social Work, Geography):
“Not a problem of identity, but of discrimination.”**

My activism and scholarship about gender and sexual diversity and the marginalization of trans* and gender non-conforming people was already part of my life before I became a parent, with connections to my own lived experiences of hetero/cisnormativity and sexism as a queer femme partner of a masculine woman, combined with my community work in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer (LGBT2SQ) feminist, and other social justice movements. I became politically active in the late 1980s when I got involved in feminist activism on my university campus and worked as a front-line advocate in community-based feminist anti-violence organizations. Through intensive dialogue with other activists (many of whom were lesbian feminists of colour and Indigenous women) I was introduced to the writings of academic-activists Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1989), Chrystos (1988), Leslie Feinberg (1993, 1996), Kate Bornstein (1994), and others. I began to develop a critical analysis of the harmful interlocking effects of sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, racism, and classism in society, which in turn became the focus of my community-based and academic work. I worked with feminist nonprofit organizations and social justice movements addressing social and health inequalities and my subsequent academic research, which focused on colonial violence and violence in the lives of LGBT2SQ people, grew directly out of these experiences.

Since welcoming our child into the world twelve years ago, my partner and I have consciously tried to bring a critical social justice approach to our parenting and family life. We embraced queer and anti-racist feminist politics; my partner expressed her masculine parenting identity as a ‘lesbian dad’ (Fleming, 2011; Holmes & Fleming, 2009). Our queer feminist values meant that we changed the words and colours for our child, avoided referring to ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ clothes, and in so many other ways tried to resist the gender binary by challenging sexist, racist, and heterosexist assumptions about what it means to be a girl/boy. But when our child began to experience discrimination based on their gender expression at age four and five, I developed a deeper understanding of the regulation of gender and the impact of gender-based violence and discrimination on gender non-conforming children’s health and well-being.

[our child’s] gender non-conformity was not... something where I turned to anyone or anything about...until [child’s name] began to encounter discrimination from the outside world....But when they started to experience discrimination and harassment....I guess we started to really have problems at school when [child’s name] was in kindergarten because they were having problems accessing bathrooms and being harassed in the bathroom and being told they were in the wrong bathroom, being harassed on the playground... (Cindy, individual interview, January 12, 2015)

My partner and I had numerous meetings with the teacher, the vice-principal, and the counselor at our child's school. Although they were caring, they did not know what to do beyond assigning a bathroom buddy (which was not enough). On the whole, we felt that the seriousness of gender-based violence in the lives of young gender non-conforming children was not understood and that the school lacked training and policies to create safe learning environments for gender diverse kids. I turned to support from transgender activist Aiden Key, who founded the Gender Odyssey Family Conference in Seattle Washington in 2007 for families of trans* and gender non-conforming children. Here, I found the validation and concrete support I was looking for from someone with a critical analysis of the impact of gender-based and transphobic harassment and discrimination on the lives of young children like my own.

I also turned to handbooks for families and professionals that address the experiences and needs of transgender and gender creative kids (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011). However, I found it necessary to ground my understanding of my child's experiences of discrimination and threat of violence in the work of critical trans* academic-activists (Bauer et al., 2009; Namaste, 2000; Spade, 2011) and grassroots trans* community groups (e.g. FORGE, 2012; Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2012). The theorizing and organizing by these critical trans* scholars and grassroots trans* community activists offers an intersectional framework to understand the broader cultural and political contexts of *erasure* that structure gender non-conforming and trans* children's lives. Namaste's analysis of erasure has been critically important for theorizing and documenting the way trans* people *are made invisible*—through discourse and institutionalized practices—and *excluded* from health care, social services, and anti-violence organizing (see, for example, Bauer et al., 2009). This work can help us more deeply understand the intersecting systemic and structural relations of power that marginalize trans* and gender non-conforming children.

Through my experiences as a parent I entered into new forms of advocacy and activism, including building a coalition to mobilize support for policies to support gender non-conforming and trans* children and youth in schools and developing new relationships with other parent activists of trans* and gender creative children. These forms of activism overlap with, and blur the boundaries between, my past and present academic research about violence in the lives of queer and trans* adults. They have also led to new research trajectories and academic collaborations centered on the health of trans* children and youth. This work, as a cisgender queer parent academic-activist, has been transformative on many levels.

I had academic knowledge, I had community social work experience, I had my partner's experience. But this is a...deeper level of understanding in seeing how my child navigates the world. I understand the policing of gender and its impact on their body on such a deep, deep level. (Cindy, individual interview, January 12, 2015)

As a parent academic-activist of a gender creative child I am always learning. My learning is shaped by the complex intersections between our lived experiences (as a queer parent, my child and partner's experiences), my past and present community work, critical scholarship and trans* activism, and the way my fear for my child's safety and my fierce love for their happiness and well-being propels me toward further activism and research.

Annie – Social Work: “Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk.”

Values of social justice, self-determination, and human dignity, understood through anti-oppressive and critical lenses, have always been pivotal to my articulation of professional ethics in teaching, research, and professional practice in social work. From an early stage of my career, I have been driven by a desire to develop a deeper understanding of, and develop tools to facilitate, ethical practice and conduct in professional social work. To do so, a virtue ethics framework (MacIntyre, 1985; 1999) has led me to argue that ethical practice can be achieved through the development of character traits anchored in collectively agreed upon professional values that would lead a person to act ethically in any given moral situation, and to display those traits in every sphere of his or her life. Virtue ethics is a form of moral philosophy proposed by Aristotle that challenges the use of moral principles for ethical life and, instead, claims that one needs to develop character or personality traits that, once acquired, will always influence the person to act rightly. Those traits, which are developed through habituation by drawing on practical reasoning abilities, have to strike a balance between vice and excess, and promote human flourishing of self and others. Courage, which is neither recklessness nor cowardice, is often cited as a virtue (see Pullen Sansfaçon and Cowden 2012 for further discussion). When I found myself parenting a trans* child, applying an analysis of gender and age discrimination⁵ with regard to broader social justice issues similarly helped me to accept my daughter as a transgender person who deserves my respect and support. Furthermore, a virtue ethics framework has helped me in my journey to become an academic-activist, and to reflect on the way forward for us as a family when we moved to a new neighbourhood in 2009. At that time, my child was seven and increasingly persistent about her gender identity. As her mother, I had always been supportive of her true self, but perhaps because of worries about her security and what others might think of her, I was still a little reluctant to allow her to display her gender non-conforming behaviour outside of our home. I was also finalizing a book on social work ethics (Pullen Sansfaçon & Cowden, 2012) that stresses the importance of critical

⁵ In the province of Quebec only adults can change their gender marker on official documents (e.g. birth certificate, health card, driver's license). Because transgender children and youth cannot obtain a civil status that matches their gender identity, many experience discrimination in their day-to-day lives.

and ethical reasoning during deliberations about ethical issues and dilemmas. I vividly remember writing a case study about a gender non-conforming child, and thinking “my gosh, I have been off the track the whole time with my child!” Accepting your child, despite his/her differences with others is fundamental to the value of human dignity and self-determination, but mobilizing oneself to challenge constraining environments is also essential to confronting oppression, furthering human rights, and defending the concept of social justice. Integrating virtue ethics into my reflection on parenting therefore brought my understanding of gender identity and expression to a new level.

My scholarly work has, in this sense, contributed to my reflection on, and understanding of, ethical approaches to parenting. However, embedding this theoretical framework into every sphere of my life has also led me to realize that ‘talking the talk’ was not sufficient: I needed to ‘walk the walk’ and to begin to challenge those inequalities and experiences of oppression in the life of my family. To do so, I needed to develop and draw on important character traits, such as critical thinking, courage, and righteous indignation. It is from this moment that I started working more proactively to make my daughter’s environment a safer place by challenging oppressive structures of our environment, rather than only trying to keep her safe inside the home.

My position as a faculty member was definitely helpful in the process as it enabled me to network with other academic parents. Indeed, being a professor played a key role in building my confidence and allowed me to move from advocate (supporting and defending my daughter’s needs in her social environments such as school, health centre, etc.) to activist by attempting to challenge broader injustice through political and social action.⁶ It also gave me direct access to current scholarship, which I slowly began to draw upon to assert myself. To this end, being a scholar provided me with the legitimacy to take positions on the care of transgender children.

Yeah, so I think people around me are okay [with her being gender non-conforming]. I had some people who were not so keen on us facilitating [child’s name]’s transition, but then again it comes back to values and virtues. For me you know if I want to be coherent with who I am, then I’m not going to say - ah yeah you know of course I understand what they’re saying, I understand its destabilizing, but it’s ... In the end I always say it’s my way or the highway, for that [supporting my child] is non-negotiable. (Annie, individual interview, May 9, 2013)

Also, as an academic, I could begin to engage in research and contribute to knowledge production on the topic of transgender children. However, I had to re-orient my research career and enter the field of gender studies with a PhD in Ethics. Furthermore, the decision to engage in knowledge generation

⁶ According to Piven (2010) and Flood, Martin & Dreher (2013), generating supportive networks of like-minded scholars is an essential component of undertaking academic activism.

about transgender children and families also created new challenges, such as being a parent and a researcher engaged in the same issues that I experienced at home as a parent, in a world that seems to mostly value research production that is disinterested. I moved into a perplexing phase of my academic career when I first started to speak out as an activist.

It's about that balance between disclosing what I do for work and what I do for life. That's the main challenge for me. Because if I was not in my position, it's like a bit of a vicious circle, because my position gives me access to resources to be able to advance the cause but I think if I didn't have that position, I would be able to get out even more. It's constraining and enabling. (Annie, individual interview, May 9, 2013)

It took me a long time to come to terms with the idea that I could undertake research on a topic so close to my heart without being biased. With time, however, I came to accept that research can be situated and critical. Despite both its constraining and empowering possibilities, scholarship was central to my becoming an activist insofar as it provided me with access to knowledge and resources. If one is to integrate values into every sphere of one's life, one must start by reflecting on one's own possible relationship with the broader society, and how one would act if driven by social justice, human dignity, and self-determination. Adherence to these values, which came through critical reflection and scholarship, was central in the early years of supporting my child as she affirmed her gender non-conformity, and will continue to be central in my scholarly activism on transgender children in the future.

Kimberley – Political Science: “The Grant Proposal as Manifesto.”

But the activism for me is really thinking about the more global changes that need to happen. We need to change society, not the child, right, and so that's kind of been the approach since we prepared the first grant application. (Kimberley, individual interview, January 5, 2015)

For the past 20 years, I have focused much of my scholarship on the gender dynamics of social movements in the People's Republic of China. It thus came somewhat of a surprise to my tenure review committee in January 2011, when I submitted a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant application on the topic of the social and political worlds of gender non-conforming children and their families in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States.⁷ The decision to write this team grant had been last minute. Up until that point, I had struggled to see how my scholarship could be translated into an arena in

⁷ The SSHRC Insight Development Grant is designed to support scholars who are choosing to depart from their previous area(s) of expertise to pursue a new focus of research.

which I had carried out no previous work and about which I felt I understood so little. In part, my struggle can be attributed to the fact that I was still beholden to a view that the study of transgender children was the exclusive domain of physicians, psychologists, and educational specialists, not parents or political scientists.

Academic activism was not something unknown to me; in fact, my Master's thesis focused on the work of Chinese women academic-activists in the early 1990s. In the heady two years leading up to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (a moment when the term gender, *shehui xingbie*, was first being used in the People's Republic of China), I sought to understand how women intellectuals were striving to change conditions in China through their researching, speaking, and organizing efforts. But it was not until I realized that my child's gender expression was likely going to be a lightning rod for discrimination and violence that I felt propelled to resituate my own scholarship in more political terms. Writing the grant would play a key role in this process.

Over the course of three weeks of intensive research and writing, something quite unexpected happened: my fairly isolated journey as a parent advocate began to shift into being part of a larger community, and my own understanding of the issues affecting trans* children and their families began to politicize. On the one hand, colleagues immediately stepped forward to provide the ideas and research support necessary to craft a strong grant application. On the other hand, the process of reading and writing rapidly transformed my own consciousness, helping me to begin the hard work necessary to understand the intersecting origins of trans* oppression. In particular, I drew upon the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993) to make sense of the pathologizing literature that still dominated the North American study of childhood gender non-conformity and Viviane Namaste (2000) to understand the erasure of trans* lives in Canada. By the time my co-applicants and I finished and submitted the final draft of the proposal we not only had a template for a research project, but a powerful blueprint for social action. Although we did not understand it then, we helped lay the conditions for the emergence of our own activism.

Four years and a conference, website, community-based organization, and several media events later, I have just finished writing a paper on the recent explosion of parental advocacy in Canada (Manning, 2015). Similar to Annie, I have abandoned the idea that my ability to contribute to new thinking in this arena requires me to work from a place of 'detached neutrality'. Instead, I have fully embraced analytic autoethnography as a central methodology in my work, a concept I was first introduced to in the context of collectively working on this article, "Fighting for Trans* Kids." At the same time, I have found my understanding of the gender dynamics of social movements immeasurably enriched by my academic parent activism. Indeed, even with an open academic culture, extensive social support, and a feminist partner, I have encountered tremendous challenges to 'undo gender'

as a parent activist – challenges that were not unfamiliar to many Chinese revolutionaries who struggled to juggle pregnancy and parenting with their activism. To cite just one example, my child ‘came out’ to her peers at school (an extremely emotional process that included a facilitated class discussion by a professional psychologist) just days after my family moved into a partially renovated house and the same day I opened the Gender Creative Kids Conference. On maternity leave and caring for an eight-month old baby, it is unsurprising that I collapsed with bronchitis less than two weeks later. For me, there is little question that the embodied and affective processes of ‘mother-as-activist’ have at times pushed me to the limits of my endurance and health, a critical struggle that continues to shape my understanding of social movements to this day.

Julia – Sociology: “Silence.”

Your silence will not protect you. (Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 41)

Fear can be silencing. For parents of transgender children, silence about our children’s gender diversity may also feel like the only protection we can offer from a world that poses significant dangers to their safety and well-being. At the same time, our silence serves to construct gender diverse children as an invisible population (Hellen, 2009), further contributing to their marginalization. As activists and academics we constantly have to weigh the risks and benefits of silence as we advocate for our children and seek to educate others about gender diversity.

While there were incredibly difficult personal moments when my child transitioned, I was fortunate that my academic background provided me with a framework to question the pathologization of children’s gender diversity and come to terms with my child’s identity. The work of Ann Fausto-Sterling (2000; 2012) made clear for me the complex inseparability of social and biological explanations of gender. My background in feminist theory, particularly black feminist and queer theories, helped me to understand how dominant discourse can silence the experiences of marginalized groups.

I’m a sociologist working in health. So [...] it’s not a big leap for me to see transgender people’s lives as being medicalized and how transgender people have been defined and continue to be defined by the medical system. It disturbs me sometimes how much, still, transgender people have to depend on the medical system for legitimacy. (Julia, individual interview, November 21, 2014)

In contrast, family, friends, educators, and health care providers were much less comfortable with the concept of gender diversity. Many reacted initially to our child’s identity with shock and confusion, and we experienced outright hostility and rejection from a close friend who viewed transgender children through the lens of pathology.

There's so much fear [...] there's so many myths and misunderstanding. I think unfortunately sometimes when people are driven by fear, that's when it gets the scariest. That's when people have these almost violent reactions [...]. (Julia, individual interview, November 21, 2014)

For a time I felt immobilized and silenced by the loss of my friend, by the reactions of disbelief and disgust we encountered, and by fear for my child's future. However, I came to realize that the only way I could cope with that fear was to fight to change this transphobic world that sees my child as a threat. Pain does not have to be stifling, but can be a catalyst for social change. Just as bell hooks (2010) writes about turning passion into action for political change, I realized that my love and desire to protect my child could be funneled into a powerful force for activism and advocacy. I also recognized that I could draw on my privilege as an academic health researcher in order to be seen as a legitimate advocate for the well-being of trans* children. Today, I regularly give training sessions on children's gender diversity, and my academic privilege provides a safe 'mask' from behind which I can educate and advocate while still protecting my child's privacy.

However, a recent experience made me realize that this mask of silence can also render me unexpectedly vulnerable to the emotional work (Hochschild, 2012) of advocacy. I was asked to give a workshop on children's gender diversity to the staff of a junior high school. The response to this presentation usually involves many questions and considerable skepticism, but in the end the experience has been almost entirely positive. However, on this day, just as I began, one of the educators in the audience stood up, banging the desk in front of him. He loudly identified himself as "conservative" and opposed to the "progressive agenda" that "these parents are trying to push." Throughout the presentation, he interrupted over and over again, ranting against transgender children and their parents with anger and derision. This individual confronted me as an academic; I believe he would not have spoken so aggressively had he realized he was attacking me personally. Externally, I remained calm, but internally I was shaking with the overwhelming fear and anger of a parent defending her child. It took immense emotional effort to maintain my professional academic mask. By the end of the workshop, I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

It is a well-known feminist saying that the personal is political and, equally, the political can be deeply personal. When your activism is connected to your parenting, and you bring your activism into your academic work, all three overlap until the boundaries are so blurred as to be almost non-existent. This blurring of boundaries creates a constant tension: Are my actions to try to change the world and to make it safer for my child simultaneously making her unsafe? When I give an academic presentation to fellow researchers or a training session to health care providers, I have to make a judgment about how much to reveal or hide about my child and our family. Will this information help create awareness and understanding? How safe is it for

these people to be aware that my child is transgender? Even my participation in this article, identifying myself as an academic parent of a transgender child, is a risk, and not one that I have taken lightly. I constantly second-guess myself on the risks and benefits of silence.

In the darker moments, when facing an audience who would see my child as aberrant or ill, and my support for her as misguided or even abusive, the mask of silence feels safer. But silence also creates shadows, creates fear, and creates shame. As Audre Lorde so wisely reminded us, silence may appear safe, but its protection can only ever be a precarious illusion.

Ann – Sociology: “That grinding feeling in my gut.”

I am a sociologist who works primarily on issues relating to sex and gender while working hard to integrate critical race and class analyses into my scholarship and activism. I am the leader of a research team that is working to develop a video game model of the life experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming children and youth in the Greater Vancouver area, and I engage in social action research and participate in local, national, and international initiatives on behalf of transgender and gender non-conforming children and young people. I am also queer and trans* myself and experienced a childhood of abuse, gender oppression, and self-hatred. I became as invisible as I could to survive adolescence, but university gave me a safe place to come out of hiding. Since coming out of that first closet, I keep striving for greater authenticity and accountability. My efforts are grounded in my own privilege as I enjoy a charmed life as a white, middle-class professor and habitually comport myself with a sense of polite entitlement and self-confidence.

I am the white trans/queer parent of two black children, one of whom is transgender and I am working out much of my and their lived reality through my academic work. The current manuscript I am working on situates transgender and gender non-conforming children in the radical critical race theory of necropolitics. As Mbembe (2003) defines in his groundbreaking piece on the subject, necropolitics represents state power over who lives and who dies. Some members of society are awarded with life and life-sustaining resources while others are not. Though Mbembe focuses explicitly on state atrocities on a large scale (e.g. colonialism, the Nazi concentration camp, apartheid, Gaza), queer and trans* necropolitical analyses (Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco, 2014; Puar, 2007; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013) identify systemic racism, classism, and the power of the state as axes of precarity that shape which categories of queer and transgender members of the social body live and which either die or suffer a ‘slow death’ (Berlant, 2007). My own trans/queer identity, the blackness of my children and the transgender being of my daughter means that I have ‘skin in the game’ and a

sense of urgency around the ways in which race and gender place my children at risk.

While I have been an anti-racist ally since childhood, I notice how easy it is, in some ways, to relax into the comfort of the whitestream (Denis, 1997; Krebs, 2012) as a shaping force of my world,⁸ or to expect to be congratulated for resisting racism. But, for the past 10 years, anti-black racism has been deeply personal to me. My 10-year-old child is a transracially adopted African-American,⁹ transgender citizen of Canada, with white queer parents, one of whom identifies as trans/non-binary (and both of whom have demanding full-time jobs), a white older sister, and a younger brother who is African-American but lighter in colour and for whom it seems everything comes easier. While I am currently on study leave with book project deadlines, my partner and I have made the difficult decision to remove our 10-year-old from the school she has known and loved since kindergarten, and where her transgender transition and status has been almost entirely non-traumatic.

I have worked so hard to find safe spaces for our black transgender daughter, including investigating various schools from the time she was three-and-a-half and wearing dresses 'as a boy'. Until recently, the school our daughter has attended has provided a warm climate. Since the fall of 2014, however, she has been explosive at home and talking about self-harm. She also became engaged in a hostile dynamic with a newly arrived child in her class who has experienced trauma of his own. The ongoing challenges resulting from our daughter's learning disabilities, combined with being targeted by this student (behaviour that has been stopped but that has had a residual effect on my daughter's sense of comfort), has pushed our vulnerable child over the edge. The solution for children like mine, recommended by the professionals we have consulted with (and paid for out of pocket), is some form of home schooling until an appropriate alternative school is found. I may just be the most reluctant home schooler in the world, but pulling her as closely into my orbit as I can right now while seeking out a range of professional and social support for her, feels like the only right thing I can do. And I am not sure it is right at all: our daughter is incredibly upset to be kept out of school. This, not my book project, has me up at five in the morning with that grinding feeling in my gut.

The kind of support our daughter needs requires wealth and maternal resources and this rankles me. In addition to the personal wealth necessary to support her, it requires a bank of maternal caregiving (Messner, 2011). That

⁸ For example, I arrived at the U.S. border recently to realize that I had left my passport at home. Although I was worried, I knew my race and class privilege meant there was a good chance my drivers' license would be accepted as sufficient identification. As I expected, the whitestream operated as a magic carpet; I was allowed to proceed with a warning to "remember to bring my passport next time."

⁹ The term "transracially adopted" refers to circumstances where child and adoptive parents belong to different racialized groups.

grinding feeling in my gut is there because my partner and I, with all the cultural and material resources that we have and are able to muster, are unable to protect this child from harm. According to Dean Spade (2011), gender, race, class, and immigration status are vectors of vulnerability and security that impact life chances. Add systems of normative ability to that list. Parents of children who are made vulnerable by these vectors fear for their children's well-being in deep ways. I see our daughter's future as a black transgender woman or as an effeminate man (she is still deciding) and want her to excel in school as a way to limit her vulnerability, but this is not happening and I am extremely worried about her. When our daughter was a baby and I thought of her as a boy, I would resist comments from white people such as "Oh, I bet he's going to be a great football player," with "whatever he decides to do after medical school is up to him." This was an effective way of interrupting racist stereotypes of physicality and embodiment but it traded on wealth and cultural capital. That my partner and I may fail to protect our daughter from exposure to future 'risk' is behind that grinding feeling in my gut. How are we ever going to protect her and give her the resources she needs not just to survive but thrive? I would do almost anything.

Closing Thoughts

In an era of "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996, pp. 6-9) and in the face of the contradictory institutional pressures that comprise academia, our liminal allyship assumes affectively complex and, at times, contradictory configurations. Underlying all five narratives is our fierce desire, paraphrasing Cindy, to protect our children from harm and to give them the resources they need to survive and to thrive. Our need to protect our children is a strength, pushing us forward to actively fight for the rights of all trans* kids. But it is also what renders us vulnerable to the emotional strain of liminal allyship, no matter the resources we are able to access.

In the attempt to counter the gendered and racialized discrimination that our children and so many other children face, we have all deepened in our understanding of the queer, trans*, feminist, and anti-oppression scholarship that has so long stood as a basis for making sense of our own identities and for guiding our research. For the three of us who are tenured professors, the academy has provided more than theoretical resources; it has supported our professional decision to begin to research, write, publish, and speak publicly about the challenges facing trans* children in Canada today. The 2012 conference on Gender Creative Kids, and the website that was designed in its wake, for example, would never have transpired without the support of colleagues and funding from SSHRC. In a post-recession era of fiscal austerity, it is heartening that grant review boards have recognized this work as valuable and worthy of significant funding resources. For the two of us who hold postdoctoral fellowships and are currently seeking permanent

tenure track positions, the future is less certain. Without the institutional security that tenure affords, our capacity to continue to engage in academic activism remains in flux.

At the same time, we are also gendered as 'mothers' (although Ann's transgender non-conformity creates a queer fit for this category). More specifically, we are gendered as white, middle class, academic 'mothers'; a privileged site of economic, cultural, and social capital. Indeed, we are ethically accountable to our scholarly and activist communities, and to our children and families, in the context of this privilege. A central challenge to our liminal allyship thus not only entails interrogating the costs of silence versus speech and the deep imperative to protect our children, but also interrogating the limits of methodologies, including the autoethnographic method, in which speech itself is weighted with power and thus requires vigilant theoretical interrogation.¹⁰ We recognize that even as we advocate for our trans* children and for the realization of gender justice more broadly, we often find ourselves crashing ashore on the racialized, classed, and gendered landscape that is early 21st century academic motherhood.

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¹⁰ For a discussion of allyship in the context of decolonization and queer/trans loved ones, please see Hunt and Holmes (2015).

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