

They would have transitioned me: third conditional TERF grammar of trans childhood

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journals.sagepub.com/home/fty**Jacob Breslow** 

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Abstract

Some of the most virulent public trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) discourse in the UK follows the grammatical form of the third conditional: *if I had grown up now, I would have been persuaded to transition*. This articulation of the hypothetical threat of a transition that did not happen but is imagined, in retrospect, to be not just possible but forcibly enacted plays an important role, both politically and psychically, in a contemporary political landscape that is threatening the livelihoods of trans children. Interrogating this discourse via an analysis of an open letter by J.K. Rowling, and a documentary by Stella O'Malley, this article asks: what might we learn about contemporary transphobia in the UK if we took seriously the grammar of TERF discourse animated by trans childhood? It argues that while the third conditional grammar of TERF discourse could articulate a politics of solidarity between cis and trans positionalities and politics, its potential for a shared political standpoint is routinely interrupted by the defence mechanisms that are oriented by the psychic life of the child. Interrogating these defence mechanisms at the level of the cultural, the article traces out paranoia (as reading practice and psychic state) as well as projection, as two main modes of TERF engagement with trans childhood. The article thus engages with the range of real and fantasmatic impossibilities that haunt the trans child both in the present and the past, and it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on trans childhoods. In doing so, it makes the case that public discourse on trans children should desist from hypothetical third conditional claims, and instead find ways of embracing trans childhoods unconditionally.

Keywords

Paranoid reading, projection, TERF, transfeminism, transgender children, transphobia

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I've wondered whether, if I'd been born 30 years later, I too might have tried to transition. ... If I'd found community and sympathy online that I couldn't find in my immediate environment, I believe I could have been persuaded to turn myself into the son my father had openly said he'd have preferred (Rowling, 2020a).

When I was a child, I was convinced that I should be a boy. I lived like a boy, everybody treated me like a boy, and I was accepted as a boy. And that brings me to a puzzling question: If I'd been a child today, I'm absolutely certain that I would have transitioned. And where would that have left *me*? (*Trans Kids*, 2018).

What might we learn about contemporary transphobia in the UK if we took seriously the grammar of trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF)¹ discourse animated by trans childhood? As indicated by both J.K. Rowling and Stella O'Malley in the two passages above, some of the most virulent public TERF discourse operates through the third conditional: *if* I had grown up now, these two declare with striking certainty, *I would have been* persuaded to transition. This articulation of the hypothetical threat of a transition that did not happen but is imagined, in retrospect, to be not just possible but forcibly enacted, plays an important role, both politically and psychically, in a contemporary political landscape that is threatening the livelihoods of trans children (Stonewall, 2018; Bauer, 2020; Diamond, 2020). For those unfamiliar with this discourse, let me make it clear that neither Rowling nor O'Malley are expressing disappointment that their childhoods were unsupported by trans-affirmative individuals and organisations. This proclamation of 'if I were growing up now, I would have been transitioned' is an articulation of a threat: a present warning, rather than a nostalgic longing (as is perhaps most clearly indicated by the implicit framing of transition as something that happens *to* an imagined childhood by an unnamed 'them', rather than something desired). And yet, rather than dismiss this fantasmatic revisionist narrative as fabricated straw man animus, I work to unpack its implications for contemporary gendered subjectivities and transfeminist politics. Doing so, I argue that while the third conditional grammar of TERF discourse *could* articulate a politics of solidarity between cis and trans positionalities and politics – one that embraced all children struggling with the myriad difficulties of growing up in societies adamantly dedicated to essentialist and binary notions of gender – its potential for a shared political standpoint is routinely interrupted by the defence mechanisms that are oriented by what I have elsewhere called the 'psychic life of the child' (Breslow, 2021). Here, the child refers to actual living children, both cis and trans (although these categories' boundaries become rendered unfixed and unhelpful upon reflection). But more trenchantly it names the mobilised fantasy life of childhood: the memory of one's own childhood, both as it was lived, and as one believes it could have been lived, were it to be lived differently.² It is this fantasy life of the child, animated by paranoia and projection, that I argue interrupts the perhaps radical implications of third conditional trans childhood. Interrupted, this grammar gives unnerving texture to contemporary debates about trans life in the UK.

I write this article at a time when open letters like Rowling's 'J.K. Rowling Writes About Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues' (2020a) and

documentaries like O'Malley's *Trans Kids: It's Time to Talk* (2018) are not just random outbursts of individuals' publicly voiced transphobic viewpoints, but are rather constitutive of a wider political landscape (Hines, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020). In the UK in 2018, the Conservative Government undertook a lengthy public consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act (2004), which regulates the acquisition of a Gender Recognition Certificate.³ Submitting the reform of the GRA to public consultation meant that trans life was put up for debate on a national stage in a way that it had not been before. A cadre of op-eds, think pieces, campaign letters and documentaries have created a fervour around debating trans life, giving space for hostile transphobia to be reiterated and legitimated on high-profile national platforms (Baker, 2019; Mermaids, 2019; Horbury and Yao, 2020).⁴ Much of this debate, as indicated by the recent inconsistent statements made by Liz Truss, the Minister for Women and Equalities, centred around the figure of the trans child. In April 2020, Truss suggested that the Government would enforce barriers for children seeking hormones and gender-affirmative care. Truss (2020), speaking to the Women and Equalities Select Committee, said that she would 'make sure that the under 18s are protected from decisions that they could make, that are irreversible in the future'. While she has since backtracked from this statement (UK Parliament, 2020), it has been reinforced by the High Court of Justice in the 2020 *Bell v Tavistock* decision, in which the court determined that children under sixteen were incapable of understanding and consenting to the use of puberty blockers.⁵ I thus take these public articulations as symptomatic of a broader array of threats against trans children. The effect of these statements, which are mirrored and reflected in the concerns voiced by Rowling and O'Malley, would render trans childhoods an impossibility (Breslow, 2020). In only 'supporting' trans adults, and delaying support for trans children until they are no longer children, one can only *have been* a trans child, one can never actually simply *be* a trans child. To be a trans child in this context is to be a child awaiting late adolescence, desperately longing for the end of childhood, and the beginning of transition.⁶

This suspension of trans childhood shares a history, and a grammar, with what Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) has described as the 'ghostly gay child'. Stockton argues that twentieth-century homophobia rendered gay childhood an impossibility such that the gay child was 'a child remarkably, intensely unavailable to itself in the present tense' (2009: 6). It was only in adolescence or young adulthood, Stockton argues, that the recognition of a gay childhood once lived was retrospectively applied. This backward-looking presence of the gay child had its own particular syntax: 'I was a gay child'. It was this articulation by gay adults, Stockton argues, that was 'the only grammatical formulation allowed to gay childhood' (2009: 7). For Stockton, this 'backwards birth' of the gay child can, and must, be read queerly. Here, the retrospective grammar of gay childhood, Stockton argues, enables 'sideways growth', 'lateral relations' and a productive delaying of adulthood that opens up possibilities of resisting heteronormative temporalities. From the ghostly gay child, then, emerges the queer child, the child estranged from what it has yet to become.

What, then, might the retrospective grammar of trans childhoods enable? And what is authorised or prohibited when the grammar of retrospective trans childhood is being articulated by someone vehemently opposed to trans life? For while there are many

trans adults who speak of their ghostly trans childhoods that were, this particular articulation that I am interrogating here is being mobilised within TERF discourse as a lived truth (if taken seriously), and hypothetical concern from a transphobic cis adult standpoint. The phobic mobilisation of the third conditional is thus particular to the ghostly trans child, as the ghostly gay child was never proffered by homophobic people against gay childhoods. This articulation, as Judith Butler's (1997: 136) 'Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification' might suggest, would have been culturally unintelligible, as it would have 'panicked' gender within the heterosexual matrix. One of the founding conditions of heterosexuality, Butler (1997: 140) argues, is the repudiation of prior homoerotic attachments. In this vein, homophobic discourse never sought to delegitimize gay subjectivity through a third conditional claim to a gay childhood that could have been but luckily was not. The transphobic articulation of a third conditional trans childhood, then, is its own peculiar formation, one which requires careful thinking through.

In this article I work to uncover, through an analysis of Rowling's open letter and O'Malley's documentary, the political and psychic landscape that constitutes the third conditional grammar of hypothetical trans childhoods. Doing so, I trace out paranoia (as reading practice and psychic state) as well as projection, as two main modes of TERF engagement with trans childhood. My attempt at reading for paranoia and projection is not to engage in a discourse of pathologisation, as I reiterate throughout the article. I am not, in other words, seeking to diagnose O'Malley and Rowling as pathologically afflicted. Rather, I utilise the frameworks of investigation that emerge within Freudian psychoanalysis to help think through how the psychic life of the child animates TERF discourse. Following Butler, I am seeking to engage with TERF grammar at the level of the cultural, and I frame Rowling and O'Malley as exemplary of the cultural repudiation of trans childhoods. My article thus engages with the range of real and fantasmatic impossibilities that haunt the trans child both in the present and the past, and seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on trans childhoods (Farley, 2018; Gill-Peterson, 2018; Meadow, 2018; Salamon, 2018). Doing so, I argue that it is imperative that public discourse on trans children desist from hypothetical third conditional claims, and instead find ways of embracing trans childhoods unconditionally.

Third conditional grammar

In 2018, Stella O'Malley, a psychotherapist and author, released *Trans Kids: It's Time to Talk*, a Channel 4 documentary that she also wrote, directed and starred in. The documentary follows O'Malley as she distresses over the 'staggering' increase in children being referred to the Tavistock Clinic (which houses the Gender Identity Development Service and is the largest provider of trans-affirmative services in the UK), and as she reflects on how to make sense of her own gendering, as both a child and an adult. In the opening scene, O'Malley is joined by a few friends at a pub where she reminisces over their childhood together, and she intermixes voice-over narration with snippets of dialogue from their conversation. 'From as early back as I can remember, I genuinely thought I should be a boy', O'Malley narrates, 'I believe that these days, this would be called "gender dysphoria", but back then, as far as I was concerned, people had to

accept me as a boy' (*Trans Kids*, 2018). To give a sense of what she means by this, O'Malley shows a series of photographs of herself from her childhood to her friends, including one of her and another boy swimming topless in a lake ('If you look at the two of them, could you even tell the difference?'), and another of her standing in a mixed-sex group of other children. Looking at this latter photograph, her friends find amusement and amazement at the disjuncture between O'Malley then and now:

'Look at that photo. Can you even pick out which one is Stella?'

'Well I know it's not this girl on the left, anyway'. [Laughter]

'No. It's not'.

'Why is it in the eighties everything is blurry?'. [Laughter]

'See at the back there? The boy in the back? That is Stella' (*Trans Kids*, 2018).

Integral to O'Malley's reading of her childhood, and its implications for contemporary trans childhoods, is that she is grateful that despite her 'trans' childhood, she grew up to be a cis-woman:

I'm so happy being a woman now, and I'm so *very much* accepting [pause] of who I am. But if I lived – I'm forty-three now – if I lived thirty-three, thirty-five years later, I think without a doubt I would've been that kid who would've been online, who would've got those hormone treatments, who would have transitioned. I think without a doubt I would've transitioned. (*Trans Kids*, 2018)

As this statement ends, and as the conversation between O'Malley and her friends is wrapped up for the documentary, a lone fragment of a sentence is uttered by one of her friends that is just barely audible beneath the documentary's music track fading in: 'It's that fear that children ...'.

It is extraordinarily difficult to seriously grapple with this conversation, and this line of thinking from O'Malley, because it holds together two truth claims which are temporally discontinuous, yet mutually informed. On one hand, O'Malley is describing the complexities of growing up in the 1970s and 1980s as a masculine-presenting child at a time when there were rather limited avenues for articulating gendered subjectivity outside of a rigid and hyperbolic binary. O'Malley's tomboy childhood is thus both a truth to her experience of boyhood, as well as a critique of the patriarchal and misogynistic frameworks of femininity that were demanded of girls, and punished in boys. To be a tomboy, at that time, was to challenge the gendered order and to find a modality of freedom from gender (which was coded as and mapped onto femininity). As scholars like Jones (1999) would argue, it is no surprise that O'Malley's challenge to patriarchal binary gender oriented her towards the claiming of boyhood.⁷ Boyhood was, and in many ways still is, conflated with freedom, agency, autonomy and liberal subjecthood.⁸ Boyhood, in other words, was not just one out of many equally positioned gendered categories that one could occupy; it was, and continues to be, the *privileged* position in relation to a hierarchy of power and agency. In contrast, occupying girlhood meant being subjugated to various forms of constriction as the 'second sex' (Beauvoir, [1949]

2010). O'Malley is thus giving an account of childhood freedom – under the sign of boyhood – that she is proud of and attached to, and this, too, should be no surprise. To manage to find avenues for resistance amidst the challenges of interpersonal and systemic sexism, particularly as a child, is an extraordinary feat. Taking O'Malley's boyhood seriously, then, suggests that she is articulating the need for a space within the highly gendered time of childhood in which children can seek out modes of freedom and autonomy through the limited and flawed avenues that gender makes available. What becomes tricky, however, is when O'Malley's attachment to this memory of her boyhood is mapped onto a different historical moment wherein it is no longer read as an enactment of her feminist resistance but is rather read through a contemporary lens of transness as a threat to feminism.

Here, on the other hand of this nostalgic narrative of a (tom)boy childhood, sits another truth claim, albeit one articulated in the third conditional. Jumping from a memory of the 1970s to a hypothetical narrative of the late-2010s, O'Malley argues that were she a child now, she would have transitioned without a doubt. While I, of course, cannot say if this statement is true, I want to make an argument about the slippage of signs that takes place within this narrative's jump in time. As I argued above, part of what O'Malley was identifying with during her tomboy phase was not boyhood itself as an ahistorical universal sexed position or embodiment, but rather the meanings that were attached to boyhood at the time.⁹ In the documentary, however, O'Malley does not grapple with this shift in time that she herself evokes. In moving between the 1970s and 2010s, O'Malley creates a hypothetical narrative that inconsistently frames gender, and the meanings attached to it, as universal and ahistorical. O'Malley's move from 'I thought I should be a boy' to her third conditional 'if I was a child now I would have transitioned' thus carries over the signifier 'boy' from one moment to another, without grappling with the change in what boy (or girl, or indeed childhood, agency, autonomy and subjecthood) signifies from then to now. In not grappling with this change in signification, O'Malley elides her desires for autonomy and for boyhood, equating them with an ahistorical desire for *transition*, rather than acknowledging them as historically situated desires for occupying different positions in relation to *power*.

While I am wary of creating a progress narrative that falsely claims that boyhood and girlhood are now equally positioned in relation to freedom and agency, it is nonetheless important to recognise that, thanks to decades of queer and transfeminist activism, girls today have other avenues for articulating their desire for autonomy beyond stating an identification with masculinity.¹⁰ The desire to be 'accepted as a boy' now means something very different from what it meant in the 1970s and 1980s. But O'Malley and other TERF mobilisations of third conditional trans childhood refuse to grapple with this disjuncture. This refusal, however, is both strategic and unevenly deployed across the two temporalities of trans childhood that are being offered here. Implicit in O'Malley's third conditional grammar is that *her* desire for boyhood *then* was simply about 'wanting to be a boy', while trans children's *current* desires for boyhood are less innocent ('It's that fear that children ...'). Unlike her, O'Malley implies, these children (particularly those gendered as girls within TERF discourse) are the ones mistaking their desire for a world free of patriarchy for a desire to be a boy. This claim, indeed, is not

beholden to O'Malley: TERF discourses routinely argue that transness (understood as maleness) is being sold to girls as a quick-fix way out of misogyny (cf. Jeffreys, 2014; *4thWaveNow*, 2016).¹¹ In a cultural moment wherein, according to TERF discourse, trans activists are taking advantage of a culture of 'political correctness gone awry' to stifle any questioning of transition, trans children are allegedly being sold a lie that transition is the easy way out, and that girlhood, in particular, is something that needs to be escaped from in order for one to find freedom (Shrier, 2020). That many of these same people articulating this warning also discuss attaching to boyhood in their own childhoods for the very same reasons often goes unsaid within this part of their narrative.

In attending to this uneven application of cultural and historical explanation, I would suggest that something more manipulative is being undertaken within O'Malley's use of the third conditional in regards to agency. Returning to the opening scene of the documentary in the pub, O'Malley's third conditional trans childhood is narrated as a threat to her current, and proud, position as a woman. 'I'm so happy being a woman now', she says, 'and I'm so *very much* accepting [pause] of who I am'. While much could be said about what lingers unsaid in this pause, I am interested in how this sentence finds friction with her 'puzzling' question that opened this article: 'If I'd been a child today, I'm absolutely certain that I would have transitioned. And where would that have left *me*?' (emphasis mine). In framing her third conditional trans childhood in this way, O'Malley presents a hypothetical trans childhood as inherently posing an affront to her agential occupation of womanhood. While historical trans childhood (under the guise of boyhood) was a means of O'Malley accessing agency and self-determination *as a child*, contemporary third conditional trans childhood is thus a challenge to the agency and self-determination that O'Malley has cultivated *as an adult*. Childhood, that fantastic sense of adult interiority (Steedman, 1995), that impossible range of investments galvanised by adult desire for the child (Rose 1984), steps in here to do the labour of conflating time, subject, generation and self. It is not just O'Malley's third conditional childhood, then, that *could be* an affront to her sense of self as an adult woman; it is any and all trans childhoods taking place in the now that *are* undertaking this indignity. The grammar of the third conditional, and the queer temporalities of childhood, work together to condense the past with the fantasy present, and, in doing so, they imply that the threat posed by trans children to women like O'Malley is not just possible, but is actively taking place. The third conditional grammar of trans childhood, in other words, is extraordinarily effective in flattening out the different meanings of gender across time, as well as positioning any and all support for trans children as advocating the dissolution of adult women's agency. It is within this cultural configuration – in which the hypothetical threat of trans childhood becomes felt as a persistent threat to cis women – that paranoia and paranoid reading become default positions for TERF politics, and the radical implications of the third conditional get interrupted.

Paranoia as TERF reading practice

On 10 June 2020, J.K. Rowling (2020a) posted a long-form open letter to her personal website that publicly explained her reasoning behind taking on an anti-trans position. The

letter was prompted, in part, by reactions to a post of Rowling's (2020b) on Twitter four days earlier, in which she ridiculed the use of trans-inclusive language ('people who menstruate') in an article warning against rising global unequal access to menstrual materials and safe, private spaces for many people during lockdown (Sommer et al., 2020). After receiving push-back on her tweet, Rowling used her substantial international platform not only to defend herself against these comments but also to challenge trans activists and trans livelihoods. 'Huge numbers of women are justifiably terrified by the trans activists', Rowling (2020a) asserted, positioning herself as the legitimate representative of these women, before declaring: 'I refuse to bow down to a movement that I believe is doing demonstrable harm in seeking to erode "women" as a political and biological class and offering cover to predators like few before it'. The open letter, which has now been circulated globally, is replete with misinformation, references to flawed scholarship and scaremongering (Mermaids, 2020; Turban, 2020). It, and much of the TERF discourse that it parrots, is also perhaps best described as constituted by paranoid reading.

In her chapter 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You' from *Touching Feeling* (2003), Sedgwick (2003: 130) describes paranoid reading as anticipatory, reflexive, mimetic, a strong theory of negative affect and one highly invested in exposure. One could also describe it as stubbornly defensive. As a mode of engagement, paranoid reading assumes in advance that its motivating gut feeling is unquestionable (they really are out to get you), and that the implications of this gut feeling are straightforward (one can never be too paranoid). Within TERF discourse on trans childhood, a few of the main strands of paranoia are oriented around the fears that, first, trans activists are demanding that children have unfettered and immediate access to irreversible, life-altering hormones and surgeries whose effects have yet to be fully studied, and, second, 'gender critical' feminists (the identification preferred by many anti-trans activists) are being persecuted by trans activists. These fears, which have come to constitute the affective bearing of TERF politics, are articulated explicitly by Heather Brunskell-Evans, an independent feminist philosopher who has been working to challenge the very idea of the trans child. In an interview with O'Malley in *Trans Kids*, Brunskell-Evans declares:

We are carrying out an experimentation on children and their bodies which is not backed by evidence. We don't know what the consequences of this is going to be, because the experiment is happening as we speak. We have to have a public debate about some of the complexities about the medicalization of children, which are never allowed to be expressed because trans activists close that discussion down immediately. Immediately (Brunskell-Evans, cited in *Trans Kids*, 2018).

Like most public declarations about being denied a platform on which to speak, this paranoid statement about the silencing effect of trans activism carries its own dissonance. Brunskell-Evans, despite her claim that trans activists immediately shut down any discussion about trans life, has published three books decrying trans childhoods (Brunskell-Evans, 2018, 2019, 2020), and she made this statement as one of seven key interview subjects for O'Malley's Channel 4 documentary. Paranoia, in this sense, is both a fear that her critique

is being shut down and a conviction in her assertion of a new grandiose plot of unregulated experimentation on children.¹²

Exemplifying this paranoid stance, Rowling tweeted a link to a paper by Marcus Evans (2020) titled 'Freedom to Think: The Need for Thorough Assessment and Treatment of Gender Dysphoric Children', along with a thread of tweets. In her posting of this article, Rowling wrote: 'Some may dismiss this paper by experienced psychoanalyst [Evans], but they do so at their own peril. It feels as though we're on the brink of a medical scandal' (Rowling, 2020c). The paper, it should be said, is a five-page commentary that primarily cites non-peer-reviewed articles, and the research it does cite generally only advocates for more complex analyses of young people's experiences of gender dysphoria. Despite this, these articles are framed by Evans and Rowling as a scandalous exposé of the harm of trans affirmation within clinical psychology. Eschewing a genuine assessment of Evans' citational and rhetorical practice, Rowling amplified her paranoid position by citing an anonymous open letter posted to Transgender Trend, an anti-trans activist website, by 'two former GIDS clinicians' from the Tavistock Centre (Transgender Trend, 2019). Linking this anonymous letter to Evans' analysis, she worked to establish a broader conspiracy: 'The writers of this letter are just two of a growing number of whistleblowers. The bleak truth is that if and when the scandal does erupt, nobody currently cheering this movement on will be able to credibly claim "we couldn't have known"' (Rowling, 2020c). Here, Rowling works to expose the alleged harms that are being done to children under the guise of trans affirmation. Using language like 'scandal', 'bleak truth' and 'at their own peril', TERF paranoia infuses the act of exposure with the intensity of negative affect. Once combined, it does not really matter that these claims have no basis in reality, or that they render the complexity of gender and transition into hyperbolic dystopian fantasy, as the force of paranoia grants these claims a seriousness that must be responded to with urgency.¹³

Important to Sedgwick's analysis is that paranoia is no longer just one of many modes of reading within cultures of critique; instead, it has become almost obligatory. 'To theorise out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance', she writes, 'has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant' (Sedgwick, 2003: 126). Paranoia thus grants momentousness to a range of critiques almost without regard for their substance. Evoking it situates TERF discourse within a more proximate relation to the truth, and to the political, precisely when its claims to the truth are dubious or manipulative. Moreover, mobilising a paranoid stance is also a way of marking the cultural value of the paranoid subject, and the import of resisting that subject's alleged marginality. This production of marginality characterises TERF discourse in as much as it often frames 'gender critical' feminism as vigorously under attack from a misaligned movement of 'virtue-signalling' (Bartholomew, 2015) young people who are more concerned with appearing to be 'woke' by advocating for trans inclusion on Twitter than they are with fighting the 'real' issues of patriarchy and violence against women.¹⁴ To be paranoid in this context is thus to be understood as inculcating a reasonable defence against a populace that, in a gender critical mindset, yet again unsurprisingly refuses to listen to women.¹⁵

Paranoia, however, is not just a stance to take in relation to critical suspicion. It is also a defence mechanism that couples with projection to protect the ego from acknowledging unpleasurable aspects of itself (both real and fantasmatic). I want to

spend some time thinking through this psychic register of paranoia, as I argue that doing so enables a more complex account of the desire to render trans childhood impossible. However, like Sedgwick, I too ‘have no wish to return to the use of “paranoid” as a pathologizing diagnosis’ (2003: 126), and I recognise that this is difficult to sustain while simultaneously turning to Sigmund Freud’s explications of paranoia and projection. As Sedgwick writes, ‘The traditional, homophobic psychoanalytic use that has generally been made of Freud’s association [of paranoia with homosexuality] has been to pathologise homosexuals as paranoid or to consider paranoia a distinctively homosexual disease’ (2003: 126). And yet, Sedgwick argues that this is a somewhat limited reading of the usefulness of Freud’s thinking: ‘paranoia is a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, as in the Freudian tradition, but rather precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it’ (2003: 126). In part, the concerns about Freud’s homophobic articulation of paranoia stem from the fact that Freud himself initially discusses paranoia and projection together via an example of a man’s distress over what would now be understood as internalised homophobia. Analysing the paranoid homosexual man’s fear that he is being persecuted by another man, Freud argues that this anxiety emerges from ‘a certain degree of distortion’ ([1911] 1958: 66) of an unpleasant moment of recognition. Here, the notion ‘*I (a man) love him (a man)*’, becomes ‘*I do not love him – I hate him*’, followed by ‘*He hates (persecutes) me, which will justify me in hating him*’ (Freud, [1911] 1958: 63, emphasis). Paranoia, in this account, emerges from a culturally mandated repudiation that, in Butler’s words, one ever sustained homosexual attachments. Cultural and systemic homophobia, in other words, distorts disavowed attachment and identification into an external threat.

One of the most striking moments of O’Malley’s documentary is structured by a similar scenario in which a moment of unpleasant recognition gets articulated as an external threat. Stood in her home reading letters from trans organisations which detail their resistance to participate in her documentary, knowing all too well that she will put trans life up for debate, O’Malley turns to the camera in defensive frustration: ‘Fundamentally you can’t help but think that they don’t like the fact that *I* exist. They don’t like the fact that *I* had gender dysphoria. *I* was that kid. And I’ve grown up to be this woman. And on some level that’s threatening as far as I can see’ (*Trans Kids*, 2018). In this monologue, O’Malley re-stages Freud’s analysis through the following chain of statements: ‘*I (a cis woman) identified with him (a boy) as a child*’, ‘*I (an adult cis woman) do not identify with him (an adult man, or a trans woman) – I am opposed to him*’, ‘*He opposes me, which justifies me in opposing him*’.

One of the difficulties of using this logic of Freud’s to diagnose O’Malley’s fears is that it can lead to the assumption that anyone who voices transphobic (or homophobic) fear of the other is secretly trans (or gay). And I should be clear that it is not my intention to argue that all TERFs are ‘really’ trans. But part of what is so interesting and complicated about paranoid TERF articulations of third conditional trans childhoods is that they simultaneously disavow *and* avow trans identification (in the past and the hypothetical present), while remaining insistent on a present cis subjectivity and the formidable external threat of contemporary trans activists. While I am not suggesting that all TERFs are

‘trans’, then, I am arguing, following the opening analysis of this article, that third conditional TERF discourse emerges from a range of experiences of subjective dissonance from gender in the past (‘I had gender dysphoria. I was that kid’), ones that are mistaken for trans experiences in the present and which are rendered both lived and impossible. The grammar of the third conditional, we remember, offers the *possibility* of one’s own trans childhood while simultaneously marking that hypothetical scenario an *impossibility*. It is this series of gendered impossibilities – the impossibility of occupying autonomy and freedom outside the contours of boyhood; the impossibility of reconciling one’s past boyhood with one’s current womanhood; and the impossibility of not experiencing the demands for affirming trans childhoods in the present to ‘really’ be demands that you identify as trans too – that we might understand as a product of the cultural prohibitions and repudiations which structure TERF paranoia and projection. Paranoia and projection, as Sedgwick might argue in relation to this scenario, are not evidence of transness, but are rather evidence of the transphobic and transmisogynist enforcements against transness. In other words, it is not that TERFs are ‘really’ trans; it is that their paranoid grammar exposes that culturally mandated and historically shifting prohibitions against experiencing a dissonance with gender have extraordinarily complicated political and psychic consequences.

Unconditional trans childhoods

One of the most disquieting effects of this psychic landscape is that TERF paranoia has gained cultural traction outside of explicitly identified TERF or ‘gender critical’ circles. For many concerned parents who are hoping to do right by their trans children, TERF paranoia has become particularly arresting. The first interview in O’Malley’s documentary brings this into stark relief. O’Malley interviews Rachel and Peter, parents of Matt, a thirteen-year-old trans boy, at their home in South Wales. Upon arriving at their home, O’Malley is shrugged off by Matt, who ‘cannot be bothered’ to leave his room and discuss his transition with O’Malley. In his place, his mother and O’Malley have a conversation about the complexities of raising a trans son. Rachel tells O’Malley that she brought Matt to the Tavistock Centre, where, after much deliberation and consultation, she decided to let Matt take puberty blockers in the hope it would give him time to assess if transitioning was something he really wanted. The interview then cuts to O’Malley, who casts doubt on Rachel’s narrative of support by raising the spectre of her own third conditional trans childhood. ‘For me, I would have been very much like Matt when I was a kid’, O’Malley tells Rachel, ‘I went into puberty and it was *awful*. But ultimately, it was the solution for me. I felt: nature’s so much bigger. I think I’m strong? Nature’s so much bigger than me’ (*Trans Kids*, 2018). Using the now familiar phrasing ‘when I was a kid’ and ‘I would have been’, O’Malley holds together her own actual and hypothetical childhoods, and positions them against Rachel’s support of Matt. Doing so causes Rachel to re-think and re-question her decision. Taking a deep sigh, Rachel delves into a tense introspective dialogue with herself that wavers between first and third person: ‘If I was looking from the outside in, I would’ve said: “Why is that woman allowing her eleven-year-old child to have blockers? Because that child thinks they’re male instead of female!?”’. And I can’t help thinking that ...’

(cited in *Trans Kids*, 2018). For Rachel, concern for her child is paired with and complicated by a fear of being seen by others to be doing harm to her child. Her twinned concern, which is amplified by O'Malley's line of questioning, places her into a loop of tentative support for her son, coupled with reiterated and intense doubt. 'I don't think Matt will ever go back', she says to O'Malley, qualifying this statement with: 'But I have to ask these questions. For me, once we stop asking questions or if we don't ask any questions: *dangerous*' (Rachel, cited in *Trans Kids*, 2018).

At the end of the interview, Matt begrudgingly joins his parents to say bye to O'Malley. Right as she's about to leave, however, O'Malley turns to Matt and tells him that they were discussing 'the issues', as well as her own experience 'as a kid, where I [O'Malley] was a boy for a time'. As he turns to O'Malley in what might be understood as a glance of hopeful recognition, O'Malley continues by saying that she wanted to point out to him and his parents that 'the door's always open to go in different directions'. Disappointed, Matt turns from O'Malley to his mother. Attempting to demonstrate both her support of her child and her eagerness to not make the mistake of supporting something that he might later regret, Rachel asks Matt if he would ever de-transition. Interrupted with a hard and fast 'No' before she can even finish the question, Rachel attempts to comfort herself – or perhaps O'Malley – as she says, 'But I do ask you, though ...'. Interrupting, again, with a wary sigh, Matt responds: 'You ask me *all the time*'. In this moment, Matt reveals that the anxiety about transitioning is of course not his own. His exasperation, as well as his initial refusal to speak with O'Malley, demonstrates that the question is not one he is asking of himself. Naming it as his mother's question, as one she, O'Malley and others ask again and again, Matt's refusal to engage demands in this moment that the anxieties which propel the asking of the question are others' to deal with, not his. What Matt needs, rather, are modes of living genders of all kinds in ways that are free from prohibition, constriction and repudiation. What is needed is a shift from the impossibilities of the third conditional to the possibilities of the unconditional.

Expressing this need returns me to the founding claim of this article, that there could be space within the third conditional to forge solidarities across 'cis' and 'trans' childhoods, were this grammar not interrupted by cultural prohibitions. In my opening exploration of O'Malley's boyhood, I argued that taking her account seriously meant acknowledging that she was articulating the need for a space within childhood in which children can experiment with embodying and enacting freedom and agency through gender. Describing her own resilience in childhood, O'Malley mirrors Matt's strategy of refusal: 'People had to accept me as a boy and god help anybody who didn't. I remember it haunted me as a question, and it annoyed me. Because I knew I had to come out strong. I knew that' (*Trans Kids*, 2018). While we are only granted one short moment in which Matt, like O'Malley, has to 'come out strong', we can speculate – with all we know about the extraordinary resilience of trans children (Gill-Peterson, 2018), and through Matt's own insistence that he interrupts those questioning his gender 'all the time' – that this scene of refusal is also one of many in Matt's childhood. Acknowledging this shared strategy of refusal and insistence between Matt and O'Malley is vital, as it shifts the terms of what is at stake in the debate over trans childhoods away from whether or not a child (or adult) is *really*

trans, and instead towards what Jules Gill-Peterson calls an ‘ethical relation’ (2018: 33) between children and adults. What is at stake here in these parallel scenes of childhood resilience, then, is less their claims to cis/trans positionings (as ‘natural’, intelligible or oppositional), and more the shared intergenerational impact of living childhoods outside of gender’s cultural limitations. Unconditionally affirming trans childhoods and enabling the third conditional to shift from the hypothetical to the possible are thus bridged acts of pushing back against the prohibitions that have curtailed childhood gendering for decades. Demanding unconditional support for Matt is therefore not just an act of affirmation for trans children like him. It is an insistence that we urgently open up the arena of possibility for intergenerational transfeminist solidarity and care, and imagine childhoods and adulthoods otherwise.

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Notes

1. The nomenclature of ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’ (TERF) is contested and potentially problematic to use for the wide array of discourses I am unpacking in this article. As Pearce et al. (2020) argue, while some individuals and organisations seek to enforce the exclusion of trans women from ‘single-sex’ spaces like women’s changing rooms and refuges (as well as from feminism more broadly), these campaigners often decry ‘TERF’ as a misogynist slur. (The status of TERF as a slur is itself highly contested; see for example: Allen et al., 2018; McKinnon, 2018.) An additional pushback against the use of TERF comes from a concern that most trans-exclusionary campaigners (including O’Malley and Rowling) are not ‘feminist’ or at least not ‘radical’ feminists, although this assertion is also contested (cf. Pearce et al., 2020: 684), even by self-described ‘gender critical’ feminists (Allen et al., 2018). ‘Gender critical’ feminism is often the preferred term for anti-trans feminists who argue for ‘biological’ notions of ‘sex’ instead of ‘cultural’ notions of ‘gender’ which they allege as harmful to (cis) women’s ‘sex-based’ rights (Stock, 2019). (This, too, is contested, as gender critical understandings of biology are often indifferent to scientific accounts.) Despite these debates, I use TERF here for two reasons. First, it is clear that those espousing this discourse routinely evoke the figure of the ‘woman’ or ‘girl’ as victim in order to give credence to their transphobia. As such, merely describing this discourse as ‘anti-trans’ instead of ‘feminist’ removes the specificity of (white) womanhood to this political landscape (Bey et al., 2020). Second, while one could debate the merits of O’Malley’s or Rowling’s ‘feminist’ credentials, this act of parsing out the ‘good’ parts of

- feminism from the ‘unwanted’ parts is often a revisionist move that seeks to disavow the ambivalence that is central to feminism (Hemmings, 2018).
2. For other scholars who articulate childhood as fantasy that condenses versions of the self across time, see: Rose (1984); Steedman (1995); Castañeda (2002); Treacher (2006).
 3. In its current form, the GRA requires those seeking to change their sex marker on their birth certificate to undergo an extensive, stigmatising process with multiple individuals and institutions acting as gatekeepers (Pearce, 2018; Stonewall, 2018). The GRA does not, however, govern changing one’s name on other official documentation.
 4. There were three times as many references to transgender people in the British print media in 2019 than in 2012, and much of this reporting ranges from being ‘openly hostile’ to taking a ‘carefully worded but still very negative stance’ (Baker, 2019). One of the prime examples of this media landscape was the ‘Genderquake’ (2018) debate staged by Channel 4, featuring Munroe Bergdorf, Caitlyn Jenner, Germaine Greer and Sarah Ditum, among others. The live debate was interrupted repeatedly by members of the audience who heckled Bergdorf, a black trans woman.
 5. *R (on the application of) Quincy Bell and A -v- Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and others* (2020), otherwise known as *Bell v Tavistock*, was a High Court of Justice case in which the question of whether puberty blockers could be prescribed to children under eighteen was debated. The court argued that ‘It is highly unlikely that a child aged 13 or under would be competent to give consent [and] It is doubtful that a child aged 14 or 15 could understand and weigh the long-term risks and consequences [of puberty blockers]’ (*Bell v Tavistock*, 2020). Immediately after the decision was published, the NHS cancelled practically all upcoming appointments for children at the Tavistock Clinic. The case was revisited in the Court of Appeal and overturned on 17 September, 2021.
 6. Even prior to the *Bell* decision, this longing was structurally built into the current healthcare system. In the UK, the waiting time for accessing services is between thirty-three and thirty-six months on average, meaning that in 2020 they are currently taking patients referred in 2017. Trans children must wait until they are eighteen years old in order to apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate.
 7. For other analyses of the tomboy, see: Halberstam (1998, 2004); Reay (2001); Paechter (2010).
 8. Equating boyhood to moving through the world with impunity is only the case for white boys, as whiteness structures childhood innocence. See, in this regard: Bernstein (2011); Meiners (2016); Breslow (2019).
 9. While I understand that this framing of transition might be misunderstood as de-legitimizing, I am following trans scholars who argue instead that one will never have a full account of transness (or gendering of any kind) without grappling with gender as an embodied series of attachments to the meanings it carries in particular moments (Snorton, 2009; Plemons, 2017; Tudor, 2017, 2019; Aizura, 2018; Chu, 2018). Acknowledging that trans, cis and non-binary identifications are historically contingent is not to render them meaningless; it is to situate them as *meaningful*.
 10. For just a few accounts of the shifts in the meanings attached to girlhood, see: Harris (2004); Renold (2008); Currie et al. (2009); Koffman and Gill (2013).
 11. Rowling uses similar frameworks to describe her third conditional childhood transness. On one hand, she describes a desire to escape gender: ‘The allure of escaping womanhood would have been huge... When I read about the theory of gender identity, I remember how mentally sexless I felt in youth’ (Rowling, 2020a). On the other hand, she describes her

desire for boyhood as not her own, but rather her father's: 'I believe I could have been persuaded to turn myself into the son my father had openly said he'd have preferred' (Rowling, 2020a). Both of these formulations map onto the structures of gendering I am describing here in regards to O'Malley: hypothetical transition as equated with escaping gender, and boyhood as privileged position within (patriarchal) power.

12. For a few longitudinal studies on early medical treatment for trans young people, see: Vries et al. (2011); Olson et al. (2014); Chen et al. (2018); Bernacki and Weimer (2019).
13. The research on trans-affirmative approaches to children and young people pushes back against the claim that trans children require more rigorous questioning (Breslow et al., 2015; Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; Rider et al., 2018).
14. The expansive scholarship on transfeminism would counter this argument. See, for example: Koyama (2003); Serano (2007); Stryker and Bettcher (2016).
15. It is important, then, to situate the affective bearing of paranoia within TERF discourse as located within a particular cultural moment, and as a legacy of broader cultural affects like 'white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2018) which saturate the contemporary political landscape. Indeed, as many have pointed out already, TERFism is in and of itself a defensive modality of whiteness and coloniality (Koyama, 2020; Tudor, 2021).

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