

THE SERIOUS WORLD OF CIS: REFLECTIONS ON TRANS ANTAGONISMS, CHILDHOOD, AND GENDER FREEDOM

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I. THE SERIOUS WORLD

On February 22, 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbott confirmed Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's Opinion No. KP-0401, which authorizes the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to investigate parents who allow their transgender children to utilize gender affirmative medical care (Abbott 2022). Central to the opinion was the labeling of standard affirmative care as "child abuse," which came from Texas DFPS Commissioner Jaime Masters in August 2021. At that time, Master's (2021) wrote the following to Abbott in an official statement: "Genital mutilation of a child through reassignment surgery is child abuse, subject to all rules and procedures pertaining to child abuse . . . Generally, children in the care and custody of a parent lack the legal capacity to consent to surgical treatments, making them more vulnerable." Abbott's authorization of Paxton's opinion also imposed reporting requirements on all licensed professionals who have direct contact with children *and* the general public, in effect turning the entire state of Texas into a mandated reporter of adults who affirm trans kids. A second consequence of Abbott's move is that all parents who support the transitions of and affirmative care for their trans children are framed as "child abusers."

Since 2015, there has been a drastic increase in anti-trans legislation in the United States, much of which specifically targets affirmative care for trans kids. Arkansas's House Bill (HB) 1570, named the Save Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act, which passed in July 2021 and is currently tied up in legal challenges from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was the first law in the nation to criminalize physicians for administering gender-affirming hormones or puberty blockers to trans people under the age of eighteen, that is, to trans kids. The 2022 Texas opinion is, in one respect, just another iteration of HB1570. Yet, in targeting parents and the general public, the Texas opinion throws into relief the social conditions of *cis gender* and so, too, the way it is legislated not just by governments, but by people in our everyday lives. This everyday legislation of cis gender is perhaps nowhere more visible than it is in Abigail Shrier's (2020) *Irreversible*

Damage: a trans-hostile book that works to prevent trans identification among kids.¹ Like the Texas opinion, Shrier insists that affirming trans kids irreversibly damages their existence and encourages parents to prevent their children, particularly their trans sons, from transitioning.² While Shrier’s work may be an extreme manifestation of the everyday authorization of cis gender, one need only look at persistent articles in the *New York Times* preoccupied with questioning to what extent trans kids should have authority over their own lives. A January 2023 article titled “When Students Change Gender Identity, and Parents Don’t Know” is perhaps most explicit about the “problems” of the authorial voice of trans kids, suggesting that when formal policy respects the wishes of trans kids without having to consult a child’s parents, it is parents who suffer. Such policy, the article highlights, “violates their [the parents] own decision-making authority” (Baker 2023). The *Times* article insists that when the interests of parents and those of their kid do not align regarding gender and desire for and practices of transition, the parents should have more say than they currently do. Ultimately, consistent across these various forms of anti-trans legislation is the denial of trans kids’ wishes and unwavering support for adults who are “frustrated” by trans-affirmative enthusiasm. This resolute support of such parents is central to the authorization of cis gender.

Writing some seventy years earlier, Simone de Beauvoir’s existential phenomenological considerations of childhood bring to light how a child’s subjectivity becomes normative through the imposition of values by adults. More specifically, in the second section of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir (1948), citing Descartes, states: “Man’s unhappiness . . . is due to his having first been a child.” This unhappiness, she suggests, is a result of the fact that the child finds himself enveloped in “a serious world,” “the characteristics of the spirit of seriousness,” she writes, “is to consider values as ready-made things.” In this serious world, the child lives, learns, and plays under the authority of adults. “The real world is that of adults where he [the child] is allowed only to respect and obey” (35). At this point in the text, Beauvoir considers how childhood sets one up to eschew moral freedom as an adult. She argues that the child is apprenticed into the serious world, and so rewarded, punished, and praised on the basis of how he acts “beneath the sovereign eyes of grown-up persons” (36). Beauvoir takes issue with this adult world, the serious world, and suggests that it undermines the possibility of the realization of moral freedom, a distinct form of freedom through which, according to Beauvoir, we will ourselves and others free. Later, drawing on Rousseau, she insists that “the child has a right to his freedom and must be respected as a person” (141).

Beauvoir’s (2010) consideration of childhood and adolescence at the beginning of Volume II of *The Second Sex* offers a feminist account of the serious world, highlighting how the spirit of seriousness is central to the institution of patriarchal gender and the affective attachments that prescribe an existentially destitute and materially exploited existence to

¹ Elsewhere I consider the everyday legislation of cis gender through a phenomenological consideration of the habit of assigning gender (Burke 2022).

² It is important to note that Shrier refuses to name the children in her book as trans sons, or trans boys, and instead relies on the socially and parentally conferred gender assignment, i.e., “girls,” taking such an assignment to be “healthy,” “non-damaging,” and “natural.”

those raised to become women. The serious world, neutered of its gendered dimensions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, becomes the patriarchal world in *The Second Sex*. The patriarchal world, as a serious one, is the world of adults that children must obey and submit to. This submission is not insignificant. Beauvoir opens “The Girl” chapter with the claim, “[t]hroughout her childhood, the little girl was bullied and mutilated” (Beauvoir 2010, 341).

II. TRANS ANTAGONISMS AND COERCIVE BECOMING

One way to read the emergence of trans antagonisms that target childhoods is as a new iteration of the classic moral panic targeting “deviant” populations for the sake of securing the white, heteropatriarchal nuclear family. The “moral panic reading” is instructive, but it does not get at how these new trans antagonisms are structuring subjectivity. That is, what is this gendered panic doing to kids exactly? Or, more specifically, *how* exactly is it securing the norm in their lives? The purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to these questions. More specifically, I understand the moral panic over trans childhoods to be reinstating and securing a pedagogy of cis gender, or a coercive method of gender rooted in an assignment, conferred first by adults onto children, that anchors gender to physiological difference and orients individuals toward specific desires and habits. This pedagogy underlies and institutes the serious world of cis.

To account for what the serious world of cis is and does, I turn to Beauvoir. I first draw attention to what she shows us about how adults impose the serious world onto children and what this does to them. For Beauvoir, seriousness not only leads children to become serious themselves, but it forecloses the possibility of moral freedom. Then, I highlight how seriousness underlies Beauvoir’s account of becoming in *The Second Sex*. In contrast to the more common reading of becoming that emphasizes its denaturalizing gesture, I read Beauvoir’s account of becoming as a claim about how the serious world works. I argue that her description of becoming in Volume II of *The Second Sex* shows us how gender is fastened to and enforced in lived experience by adults to produce and maintain an unethical social order, that is, the serious world. In my view, Beauvoir’s account shows how the institution and maintenance of normative gender is predicated on the authorial power of adults to gender children. Accordingly, I suggest that we understand the institution of cis gender—a particular socially constituted, historical arrangement, and lived institution of gender—to rely on the spirit of seriousness, which is maintained by and sanctions the authorial power of adults.³ Following Beauvoir’s critique of the serious world, it is possible to grasp the moral injury of becoming and enforcing cis gender.

³ This notion of “cis gender” resonates with Jules Gill-Peterson’s (2021) account of the cis state wherein “cis” is not an identity category, but an operation of power.

This reading of Beauvoir is a trans reading of her work. It builds on her work yet centers the reality of trans experience in ways she did not.⁴ Whereas in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir is concerned with what happens to the girl whose social destiny is to become a woman in the serious world, my interest is in the event of this child's gendered assignation. In other words, I am interested in the authorial structure of her gendered becoming. It is, to take a cue from Marquis Bey's (2022) critique of cis-ness in *Cistem Failure*, to which I will return, to read Beauvoir's account of becoming as a key dimension of cis sociality. On such a reading of Beauvoir, it is possible to see that her account of becoming is not merely a denaturalized account of gender. It is, rather, an account of how normative gender comes to take a hold of and generate subjectivity. The becoming she describes is a coercive method of gendered subjectification. Importantly, this coercive gendering is not just rooted in patriarchal norms as Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* highlights. As Bey details, coercive gendering is a white norm of gender that animates realities of expropriation and the use of white gender as a means of eliminating "deviant" and "ungovernable" racialized others. It is thus important to keep in mind that securing the authorial power of adults to gender children is also always a technique central to various legacies of power.

Given that age is a legal, social, historical, and political phenomenon that structures lived experience in different ways, a note about my focus on trans children is needed. Like Beauvoir, I understand childhood to be a situation with both developmental and sociopolitical contours. Who counts as a kid, who is treated as a kid, and who gets the safety of childhood, is dependent on a variety of factors. Trans kids, because they defy social expectations of gender, live in a particular situation that raises important questions about when and to what extent kids more generally should have authority over their (gendered) lives. While sociologists Tey Meadow (2018) and Ann Travers (2018) discuss the recent emergence of the category of "trans kids" as produced by a variety of social, individual, institutional, political, and clinical forces, Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) shows that trans childhood is not a new phenomenon. In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Gill-Peterson details how the archive of trans childhoods has been obscured, erased, and the possibilities for trans kids regulated and institutionalized in ways that render their histories invisible. What today's trans kids share with the trans kids of the past is that they are "left to fend for themselves in a culture that suffers from being unable to imagine children with a richly expressive sense of who they are" (viii). Insofar as trans childhoods undermine and resist this power, they challenge the serious world of cis. Their challenge to seriousness is one reason trans childhoods are under attack. For this reason, it is important to articulate the conditions of possibility and forms of sociality that allow children to accomplish themselves

⁴ I do not take trans existence to be a reality Beauvoir demonstrates concern about. In "Who is the Subject of the Second Sex?", A. Alexander Antonopoulos (2017) sees it differently. He argues for a reading of Beauvoir as aware of trans experience and further argues that transmasculine experience of embodiment haunts Beauvoir's account of sex difference in *The Second Sex*. In my view, it is true that Beauvoir references trans phenomena in *The Second Sex*, as well as in other texts, but I do not think these references suggest her focus, philosophically or politically, is trans experience. I make this point not as a criticism of her work, but as an acknowledgement of what her project in *The Second Sex* is and what it is not.

as they imagine, that allow them to live gender in ways that cultivate freedom.⁵ Accordingly, I conclude with a brief consideration of gender freedom.

III. CHILDHOOD AND THE SERIOUS WORLD

In her pivotal article, “Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship,” Margaret Simons (1986) underscores that Beauvoir’s existentialism is characterized by her “commitment to understanding the individual within the context of their childhood experiences” (176). This commitment holds true for Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom. In contrast to ontological freedom, Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom underscores that genuine freedom is a matter of how we assume our existence in relation to others (Arp 2001). For Beauvoir, it is not just that we are freedom; rather, we must will freedom. Moral freedom is not, however, an egoistic orientation; willing freedom must prioritize the intersubjective bond. We are free when we cultivate self-other relations that hold open a future of possibilities for all existents. In other words, authentic freedom relies on the pursuit and realization of ethical bonds with others. Beauvoir understands the lived realization of moral freedom as the benchmark of an ethical existence, thus underscoring that how we engage others in the pursuit of our existence is of the utmost importance.

Notably, in both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1948, 2010) stresses the importance of childhood on one’s ability to assume one’s moral freedom as an adult and she insists it is the responsibility of adults to affirm the freedom of children. She understands moral freedom to be an achievement dependent on one’s concrete situation, social-psychological development, and a relationship with adults that secures for the child an open future. In other words, an individual’s realization of moral freedom is, in large part, dependent on one’s childhood (Busch 2005).

The primary discussion of the intersubjective conditions of freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* prioritizes the situation of childhood. In Part II, “Personal Freedom and Others,” Beauvoir (1948) begins by highlighting that childhood plays a primary role in the moral attitude we take up and the choices we make later in life. The character types she outlines in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*— the sub-man, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer, the passionate man, and even the free man— are adults with a childhood past that “left ineffaceable imprints” (40). That is, one would not become a sub-man had his childhood not, in some way, prepared him to assume such an existence. In other words, it is in childhood that one’s future moral disposition is cultivated. Accordingly, Beauvoir understands the situation of a child as morally distinct from that of adults. Children’s

⁵ In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes: “How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women’s freedom and can she overcome them?” (2010, 17). Following Beauvoir’s line of thinking about women’s relation to freedom, in this paper I am motivated by similar, but distinct questions about lived possibilities of (gendered) freedom: How can trans kids accomplish themselves? What paths are open to them? How can trans kids assume their independence within dependence? What circumstances limit their freedom?

freedom is cultivated in the moral world of adults wherein children learn how they should behave and who they should become, while being able to grow up without the burdens of responsibility.

What is striking about her account is that she describes how childhood sets one up to eschew moral freedom as an adult because of the child's position in "the serious world" or the "real world" of adults. The child, she writes, "feels himself happily irresponsible. The real world is that of adults where he is allowed only to respect and obey" (Beauvoir 1948, 35). Living under the serious world, the child is sheltered from responsibility, and thereby escapes the anguish of freedom, living in what Beauvoir calls "a state of security" (37). According to Beauvoir, it is only through the developmental achievement of adolescence that a child sees the artifice of the serious world; its values are not objective facts but are human-made. The anguish of freedom now becomes a burden for the adolescent child. "What will he do in the face of this new situation?" Beauvoir asks (39).

One may be prompted, as Lior Levy does (2016), to read Beauvoir as suggesting that children not only lack but are also incapable of moral agency insofar as she positions moral consciousness as a developmental achievement. In my reading, however, Beauvoir offers us an account of the pitfalls of adults who act as gatekeepers of the moral realm. Beauvoir never claims the "serious world" is an ethical world. It is a world full of moral values that children are expected to abide by. Her concern with this expectation is clarified later when she writes, "in practice raising a child as one cultivates a plant which one does not consult about its need is very different from considering it as a freedom to whom the future must be opened" (1948, 142). In not consulting a child about their needs, in enveloping them, smothering them with ready-made values and images of who they become, Beauvoir insists that most children become adults who do not realize moral freedom. In doing so, she thus recognizes the moral standing of children, but still puts the responsibility on adults for creating the conditions in which children can assume their freedom. The developmental achievement of moral freedom is, then, about ensuring that children do not bear the burdens of responsibility generated by the adult world. The problem, however, is that the serious world in which she seems to claim most adults live is not an ethical world, hence the adolescent rebellion. It is on this front that Beauvoir moves from a description of the serious world to a prescriptive claim: what adults must do is secure an open future for children while respecting their freedom. The kind of "safe shelter" adults should create is not one in which children are suffocated by the values of the adult world; it is one in which children have a future of indeterminate possibilities.

On this point, Sally Scholz's (2010) reading of Beauvoir's account of childhood in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is instructive. Scholz, tracking Rousseau's influence on Beauvoir, draws our attention to the normative dimension of the adult-child relationship, arguing that for Beauvoir this relationship is often paternalistic but should be an opening up of freedom. Scholz makes the distinction between childhood as an "apprenticeship to the serious" or as an "apprenticeship to freedom" under the tutelage of adults (402). As Scholz explains, a child is apprenticed to the serious world when they are trained to be what they are labeled by adults. For Beauvoir, Scholz argues, this apprenticeship involves adults working to fix a child in the desire to be, as opposed to the desire to disclose being—a key distinction

in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This amounts to a kind of affective orientation through which the subject either eschews ambiguity or assumes it— such that a child learns to abdicate freedom for a static identity (Scholz 2010, 402).⁶ The serious world is thus not the kind of world that apprentices children (or adults) to the freedom of becoming, that is, to the desire to disclose being. They learn to submit to being through an apprenticeship into the desire to be, an orientation in the world rooted in fixed meanings. Such an apprenticeship may not allow for moral freedom, but it does allow for the maintenance of a social world in which values are predetermined, allowing adults to continue to flee freedom and live in modes of bad faith. An apprenticeship to freedom would, in contrast, hold open possibilities for a child; it would not limit a child to the games, images, or scripts of the serious world.

Because moral freedom is an intersubjective condition, it is adults, particularly those directly responsible for a child, who largely determine what training a child will receive. Beauvoir suggests that most children are apprenticed to the serious world. In childhood, they play the “game of being serious” with such importance that they “actually become serious” (1948, 36). When the serious world begins to crumble in adolescence, when a child begins to challenge the values of the serious world and is faced with moral choices, it is still “always on the basis of what he has been that a man decides upon what he wants to be” (40). Ultimately, for Beauvoir, the lived orientation of the serious world is likely the world an adolescent has recourse to.

It is in *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir (2010) offers a more concrete account of how adults intervene in and thwart children’s moral freedom through apprenticeship in a gendered assignation.⁷ Her descriptions of childhood show how the affectations of adults, and parents in particular, are central to gendering of children as boys and girls. She notes time and time again in the “Childhood” chapter that both boys and girls are alienated from their freedom by what is assigned to them. They go along with expectations they regret (and Beauvoir insists this is especially the case for girls) because it is what gets children approval and flattery from adults. In the “Childhood” chapter, in particular, Beauvoir makes clear that, even in the face of children’s resistance and negotiation, adults nonetheless win out.⁸ The almost originary intervention of others that inaugurates children’s social destiny as a gendered subject is, then, a matter of how adults apprentice children into gender.⁹

More specifically, Beauvoir shows how a boy’s training orients him toward freedom while a girl’s training positions her as a doll in the serious world. The girl is cultivated

⁶ Elsewhere I consider the distinction between the desire to be and the desire to disclose being in relation to trans subjectivity (Burke 2020).

⁷ On this point, I agree with Levy’s (2016) reading of Beauvoir’s account of childhood.

⁸ It is not the case that adults *always* win out. My point here is not that trans kids have not and do not establish gendered possibilities for themselves, merely succumbing to adults. Rather, as I discuss in the next section, I wish to highlight that the serious world *intends* to be enveloping and suffocating to the extent that it is likely to win out.

⁹ In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler develops their theory of performativity that both builds on and criticizes Beauvoir’s notion of “becoming a woman.” Yet, Beauvoir’s phenomenological account of the engendering of childhood resonates with Butler’s account of normative constraint. Beauvoir’s phenomenological account underscores in ways that Butler’s does not how norms come to be lived and how they are experientially constituted.

like a plant without needs and she comes to live in an oppressive infantile world where a ceiling of possibility hovers over her, limiting her horizon of possibility. In a passage that echoes *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir (2010) writes: “The sphere she belongs to is closed everywhere, limited . . . as high as she climbs, as far as she dares to go, there will always be a ceiling over her head” (311). This closure is one instituted by adults through the conferral of ready-made gendered meanings and values that deliver children into a gendered subjectivity that forecloses freedom.

Even as Beauvoir recognizes children’s ontological and moral freedom more concretely in *The Second Sex*, she still asserts a moral difference between adults and children. She writes: “The burden of freedom is not heavy for children, because it does not involve responsibility; they know they are safe in the shelter of adults” (2010, 308). Still here, for Beauvoir, the adult world should shelter children from full responsibility for their actions, allowing them the freedom to play, in order to, as she says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “expend . . . existence freely” (1948, 35). Adults, then, do have a moral status that children do not, but this does not make adults morally superior. Rather, according to Beauvoir, the moral difference is that adults are responsible for making possible the child’s relation to moral freedom. The problem is that adults tend to enforce the serious world.

IV. BECOMING AND THE MUTILATION OF FREEDOM

In the first chapter of *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*, Bey (2022) draws attention to the significance of childhood in preempting trans possibilities. For Bey, childhood is a time of indeterminacy and experimentation, a “rich site of how stuff gets worked out,” and a rich site for the working out of one’s gendered subjectivity (1). For Bey, this indeterminacy is a condition for the possibility of gendered experimentation. Except, as Bey writes of their own experience, this indeterminacy can be violently targeted. Any indeterminacy was “terroristically, pummeled away from emerging” (2). “I was made cis” (16). They continue, “I surely was not born this way, which is to say on this side, cis, etymologically. I was very deliberately, very meticulously, crafted through violent means to remain on this side” (18).

It is this point that leads Bey to conceptualize cis not as an identity, but as a violent architecture through which we become gendered subjects. They write, “we are all, because we have been, at every turn, coaxed and goaded and pummeled and threatened and required to erect a very constructed architecture” (18). In contrast, and in response, transness is posited as anarchitectural, a “project of dismantling and remaking” (4). Transness “offers an extensive vocabulary for expressing *unbecoming*” (4; emphasis added). One of Bey’s most important claims about the operation and institution of cis emerges from this claim about transness. As a vocabulary for unbecoming, transness reworks the becoming of cis.

I want to pay attention to Bey’s distinction between cis becoming and trans unbecoming. For Bey, being made cis is a mode of structural and rigid becoming, a life beholden to mandates of gender, mandates that begin, quite violently in childhood. It is a becoming of

“being a good and proper subject” (Bey 2022, 10). In Beauvoirian terms, it is a becoming of the desire to be, an existence rooted in static meaning and fixed values. Cis is becoming on the grounds that it forms the subject through an enclosure of possibility rooted in the logic of a “coercive assignation,” a “constructed declaration,” an assignation “imbued with a sovereign diving decree” (16). In contrast, as an unbecoming, transness is a rejection of the rules and grammar of gendered becoming, a moving elsewhere. For those who undertake this anarchitectural project, their unbecoming is, Bey posits, a not-becoming as transness is not rooted in the authorial power of others.

Beauvoir’s notion of becoming is often read as a claim about what gender is—an inessential, contingently made and lived phenomenon. Such a reading revolves around the born/becoming distinction advanced in the most famous sentence of *The Second Sex*, i.e., “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1949, 13). Far from an essential feature of human existence, Beauvoir’s born/becoming distinction posits that gender is not natural, but rather a making of the self. Bonnie Mann’s (2018) reading of Beauvoir suggests that Beauvoir does not give us an account of what gender is, but rather what it does. For Mann, Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenological account of becoming a woman is an exposition on how the structure of dominance and subordination inheres to norms of gendered existence such that one comes to live an existentially destitute and exploited existence. Although it certainly seems to be the case that Beauvoir says something about what gender is, Mann’s point is that Beauvoir is most interested in what becoming does to a subject. When read in this way, becoming is not only an ontological claim; it is also, and perhaps foremost, a political claim about the operation of becoming. To become a woman is to be bullied and mutilated into a ready-made value system, that is, to come into being through a coercive assignation.

Beauvoir’s remarks about the specification of children as girls (or boys) by adults, that is their becoming gendered, highlights the coercive mood of the becoming. In her discussion of the apprenticeship the little girl receives, Beauvoir (2010) writes,

women given the care of a little girl are bent on transforming her into women like themselves with zeal and arrogance mixed with resentment. And even the generous mother who sincerely wants the best for her child will, as a rule, think it wiser to make a “true woman” of her, as that is the way she will be best accepted by society. (295–96)

Given no choice, the little girl, reared by women, is made into a woman. She becomes a woman as a result of the intervention by others. For Beauvoir, the content of this intervention is characterized by its spirit of seriousness. The little girl is given orders to obey. Beauvoir describes it in this way:

she is given other little girls as friends . . . books and games are chosen for her that introduce her to her destiny, her ears are filled with the treasures of feminine wisdom, feminine virtues are presented to her, she is taught cooking, sewing, and housework as well as how to dress, how to take care of her personal appearance, charm, and modesty; she is dressed in

uncomfortable and fancy clothes that she has to take care of, her hair is done in complicated styles, posture is imposed on her: stand up straight, don't walk like a duck; to be graceful, she has to repress spontaneous movements, she is told not to look like a tomboy, strenuous exercise is banned, she is forbidden to fight; in short, she is committed to becoming, like her elders, a servant and an idol. (Beauvoir 2010, 296)

This intense mediation of a child's life by adults that Beauvoir draws attention to discloses the intentional mood of becoming. The horizon of becoming is not indeterminate but fixed. And it is fixed not by the girl herself, but by adults. Or, as Beauvoir puts it, the girl "is committed to becoming" (296).

Significantly, Beauvoir understands being committed to becoming as a form of violence; a mutilated self emerges from becoming. This mutilation colludes with the shelter of safety adults provide, operating to limit a child's agency such that the drama of "the eternal feminine" animates her life more and more the older she gets. Even if a girl rejects, despises, or protests who she is apprenticed to become, she often resigns herself to it because of the overwhelming pressure of those around her. Time and time again Beauvoir references that the girl protests who adults expect her to be. But her protests to it are routinely dismissed. So, Beauvoir insists, the girl resigns herself and assumes her existence as a woman. In other words, the girl gives herself over to a gendered project not because she is without the capacity to become otherwise, but because she is enveloped by the one breathed into her by others. Her capacity for self-authoring is already mutilated.

Accordingly, the girl's becoming is a making of subjectivity structured by coercive assignation, inaugurated by the imposition of gendered meaning by adults onto children that adults deem to be girls. This resignation is also rooted in seduction. For Beauvoir, the little girl is enticed by others, especially adults, to assume herself as a relative existence; it affords her recognition in the eyes of others. It is how she establishes her worth, as well as offers her a way to resolve her mutilated existence.

For Beauvoir, a woman lives a mutilated existence because she is severed from her transcendence. As the description of childhood makes clear, this severance occurs in large part because of how she has been treated by adults in childhood. This is not to say the girl is a mere passivity. As Jen McWeeny's (2018) reading of *se faire objet* underscores, a girl's mutilation does not merely happen to her as if she is a passive object; rather, her mutilation is a matter of what the girl makes of herself. However, if the "Childhood" chapter is any indication of how *se faire objet* becomes one's lived experience, the intervention of adults is undoubtedly significant. As Beauvoir describes it, parents and adults apprentice the girl into her impending self-mutilation. The early years of her life are mediated by adults to the extent that she will come to live out the drama that has been laid out for her. Of course, on Beauvoir's account, by adolescence the girl still does not fully accept or submit to the "assigned destiny," but she does not actively refuse it either (2010, 300; emphasis added). She lives divided. What does not waiver, however, is the expectation by others, and adults in particular, that she will live out the meanings assigned to her. The expectation

is that she will become a woman.¹⁰ At least initially, it is not the girl who commits herself to the project of “woman”; rather, it is adults who commit her. The girl is seduced by adults into the desire to be, which roots her in the serious world through the project of becoming a woman. Because of the rewards that come with assuming herself as a woman, the seduction is successful. Her mutilation is, as Beauvoir puts it, “imperiously breathed into her [by others] from the first years of her life” (2010, 283).

The damage waged by this becoming is ontological and moral. That is, a child’s subjectivity is perversely structured in ways that rupture their capacity to assume the ambiguity of being human, which in turn, compromises living moral freedom. When narrating her childhood in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir (1959) accounts for her experience of agency as a girl and she underscores her childhood skepticism about the values of and meanings central to the adult world, even though she nevertheless accepted the rules of the adult world. She describes her experience of their “black and white” values, their “bony-structured concepts,” of how “myths and the stereotyped ideas prevailed over truth,” and how she was “encouraged in this misconception [of the adult world] by grown-ups” (17). As she describes the static values of her white, bourgeois, Catholic rearing, Beauvoir echoes the language of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She was encouraged to partake in the serious world and she admits that she came to accept “without question the values and the tenets of those around me” (14).

It is possible to understand the ethical significance of the impact of the serious world’s values through one of her early childhood memories. At five years old, on a walk with her Aunt Marguerite, Beauvoir is surprised that she is not being patronized. Aunt Marguerite “hadn’t the remotest idea how to talk to me,” she reports. This experience leaves an impression on young Beauvoir asserting, “I made up my mind that when I was older I would never forget that a five-year-old is a complete individual, a character in his own right.” We can understand what it means to recognize a child as “a complete individual” by paying attention to how Aunt Marguerite relates to Beauvoir. In the encounter, Aunt Marguerite does not presume to already know who five-year-old Beauvoir is. Thrilled by this, she writes, “I suddenly wondered: ‘How does she see me?’ and felt a sharp sense of superiority: for I knew what I was like inside, she didn’t” (13). This encounter with Aunt Marguerite exposes the artifice of the serious world and offers a different possibility of adult-child relationships for the young Beauvoir. It is not, however, the adult-child relationship that prevails in her childhood. Rather, like the children in *The Second Sex*, and the girl in particular, it is the serious world that offers shelter and conditions the possibility for becoming as a mode of subjectivity that works to fix her being. Becoming as a fixing of being is how the spirit of seriousness gets dialed into subjective life.

The connections between Beauvoir’s account of childhood and Bey’s are striking as both underscore the way adults assign (cis) gender to kids who are then left to negotiate those ready-made meanings and values. What Bey shows, however, is how a child may fail

¹⁰ There are certainly ways to become a woman that do not entail the closure of possibilities. The point here is that just because one has been assigned “girl” by adults does not mean that the negotiation of that closure of freedom *requires* the child to stay a girl and become a woman—that could be one option available, but it *should not* be the only option available.

to live up to the assignment, which often, Bey insists, has to do with one's racial positioning in the normative architecture of gender. Their childhood was one in which indeterminacy and experimentation were foreclosed through the gendering of racialized blackness, through the "rules, codes of conduct, expectations, and coercions" (2022, 3). That is, their existence was shaped by, practically fixed even, the white ideals of cis gender.¹¹ Accordingly, cis gender is a determination not just of gendered existence, but also always of racialized existence. Relatedly, in her account of the authorial power of medicine and gender clinics, Gill-Peterson argues that cis gender was birthed about seventy years ago, as a new form of racialized gender. Cis gender came into existence, she shows, through the disqualification of trans of color life. To highlight this racialized emergence, Gill-Peterson (2018) draws attention to the racialized medicalization of transness in general and trans childhoods in particular. She shows how "[m]edicine made of children's living bodies proxies for experimental alteration . . . not by listening to children's desires or demands for gender self-determination but by making them into the raw material of medical techniques" (28). The result was that the only children that were allowed to be trans in the gender clinic were white. Thus, only by the rules and values of the "adult world" were trans childhoods deemed possible, and even then, the gender clinics were rooted in the logics of value-extraction, acquisition, and forced disappearance central to multiple and overlapping histories of domination and subordination. In other words, the racialized medicalization of transness that made only some trans childhoods possible were still generated by white ideals of cis gender. What is consistent here across Bey and Gill-Peterson's work is that it is gender idealized by white people that becomes the (im)possibility for trans existence. Only insofar as "trans" can fit the white, cis schema, which is to say, only insofar as it can be contained as a becoming that fixes being, is it authorized. Accordingly, it is possible to view the serious world of cis as one that institutes a whole range of oppressive social practices and intersubjective conditions that mutilate freedom.

V. MORAL FREEDOM AS GENDER FREEDOM

I have argued that a key dimension of the mode of becoming Beauvoir (2010) describes in *The Second Sex* is its spirit of seriousness. My claim is that this becoming is a key characteristic of cis sociality, a particular materialization of the serious world. That is, the gendering of childhood that Beauvoir describes is inaugurated by the authorial power of (white) adults and perniciously maintained by apprenticing children into serious, ready-made genders. This power and the continuous intervention adults make in the gendered lives of children realizes a flawed moral relation between adults and children. It is not, however, that Beauvoir thinks children should bear the full burdens of freedom. Like her view in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she continues to commit that children should be able to expand

¹¹ As one of the anonymous reviewers aptly noted, normative gender is most often gender as it is idealized by white adults. These idealizations mark the genders of non-white people as inappropriate. Such demarcation is a condition of possibility for the criminalization of, violence against, and expunging of people of color.

freely—the capacity to do so is central to their relationship to moral freedom. What is distinct about the discussion of children’s moral standing in *The Second Sex*, however, is that it specifically discloses how the assignment of gender in childhood conditions the closure of moral freedom. Far from offering a safe shelter, becoming as a fixing of being makes moral freedom impossible. In effect, Beauvoir’s account insists that adults should take care not to condition a child’s life in a way that fixes their existence via the assignment of gender.

This reading of Beauvoir’s conception of the relation between the imposition of gender by adults onto children and its perversion of moral freedom stands in stark contrast to Shrier’s (2020) insistence that children are seduced into transgender identity by false narratives of freedom. In *Irreversible Damage*, Shrier accounts for the contemporary rise in trans boyhood among adolescents as, following physician-researcher Lisa Littman’s (2019) pseudo-scientific notion of Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD), a social contagion and craze. Although ROGD has no backing from reputable health organizations, Shrier, like Littman, is convinced of its existence just because more adolescents who had previously appeared to be girls, especially to their parents, are coming out as trans. In a panic, Shrier and Littman ask: Why is this the case? What has happened to the “girls”? Shrier’s answer is worth quoting at length:

[T]he phenomenon sweeping teenage girls is different. It originates not in traditional gender dysphoria but in videos found on the internet. It represents mimicry inspired by internet gurus, a pledge taken with girlfriends—hands and breath held, eyes squeezed shut. For these girls, trans identification offers freedom from anxiety’s relentless pursuit; it satisfies the deepest need for acceptance, the thrill of transgression, the seductive lilt of belonging. (2020, xxx)

Ultimately, for Shrier, the rise of trans boyhood among adolescents is a result of being seduced by trans people on social media, people she pejoratively dubs “trans influencers.” This seduction, Shrier insists, preys on the bodily and affective insecurities of teenage “girls,” offering access to a false world of freedom. In existentialist vernacular, it is to say that trans identification offers a way to escape the burdens of a “girl’s” adolescence. According to Shrier, this escape is a pathological and inauthentic flight. Often comparing transness to anorexia and cutting, she insists that these teenagers are not really trans. Rather, they are engaged in a kind of contagious self-harming as a result of being seduced by other, usually older, trans people. According to the social contagion theory of ROGD, these adolescents are exposed to trans masculine subjectivities and are tricked into believing they are trans as a result.

On Shrier’s account, the result of this “trickery” is “irreversible damage,” an explanatory and cautionary concept central to anti-trans views. Framing trans possibilities as damaging fuels resistance to therapeutic interventions for trans kids and encourages adults, from parents to care providers, to refuse to believe a kid is trans *just* if he says so. For Shrier, “unsuspecting parents” are up against the “monstrous ideology” of trans affirmation. In reality, she claims, parents are the ones who truly know who their kids really are (172). This sentiment is exemplified by the book’s opening epigraph, a Billy Joel

lyric from *She's Always a Woman*: “She hides like a child/But she’s always a woman to me.” At the end of the book, Shrier (2020) positions the “victimized” parents as the gatekeepers of freedom, insisting that they must work tirelessly to shelter their kids from the lure of trans identification. As she writes: “Girls who’ve been sold the promise of metamorphosis hold in their hands a bill of goods. But they retain one last redeemable asset: the parents who have never stopped worrying and still hope for a call” (220).

Cassius Adair and Aren Aizura offer an important critique of Shrier and ROGD, more generally, refusing to back away from the claim of seduction and reframing transness as a kind of contagious gendering (2022, 46). They write:

As hordes of anti-trans feminists yell about the “contagion” of rapid onset gender dysphoria (ROGD), it may feel difficult to admit that in fact, yes, many of us discovered we were trans through being seduced by a trans person . . . Or, at the very least, by finding a trans person unbearably hot.
(45)

At this political moment, centering contagion and seduction in a trans-affirmative account of subjectivity is a tricky line to walk; as Adair and Aizura point out, ROGD advocates and anti-trans feminists weaponize the seduction narrative. Yet, they also point out that it is not particularly radical to talk about desire as central to identity formation (47). As a result, they ask: so, what if transness is contagious? Their reading of trans identification shows that, like all gendered subjectification, desire is central—a point that Beauvoir’s account also underscores. As Adair and Aizura make clear, there is nothing inherently pathological about the desire to assume a trans existence; the pathology narrative is just that, a narrative used to propel trans hostility and delegitimize transness.

Given Beauvoir’s (2010) claim about the mutilation of girls’ freedom in *The Second Sex*, which begins in childhood and manifests acutely in adolescence, some readers of Beauvoir may be inclined to think that the desire to become a boy is in truth, or at least could be, an effort to assume one’s transcendence in bad faith. Beauvoir herself even notes that there are various times in childhood when boys desire to be girls because boys are “frightened by the harsh independence they are condemned to,” and when girls desire to be boys because girls are dissatisfied with their integration into the feminine world (286). To read Beauvoir’s account of childhood as capable of suggesting the view that girls are likely to be seduced into a trans masculine subjectivity because it affords them freedom might not be wrong. I follow Adair and Aizura (2022) here insofar as I don’t see the desire to become trans as pathological or problematic. From a Beauvoirian framework, any becoming is an authentic pursuit of freedom only if it is the desire to disclose being, one that enables and cultivates the intersubjective condition of freedom. As I have argued elsewhere, from a Beauvoirian perspective, trans first-person authority is an ethical avowal not merely because it is a self-willed project, but because it is a self-authoring that is a condition of possibility for ethical self-other relationships (Burke 2020). While Shrier (2020) is emphatic that kids absolutely do not have the capacity for legitimate and thus ethical self-authoring, Beauvoir suggests it is adults who corrupt the possibility for children’s ethical self-authoring. The “irreversible damage” that Shrier claims to be realized through trans identification among adolescents

is, on Beauvoir's account, inaugurated by the imposition of gender by adults onto children they deem to be girls.

While it is not my intention to suggest that Beauvoir was explicitly working to make trans childhoods possible, her work does offer an important cautionary tale about how the serious world is instituted and reanimated through a particular structure of adult-child relationships, a structure that, in my view, is a key feature of the precarity and impossibility of trans childhoods. Abbott's (2022) formal authorization of KP-0401 and the views espoused by Shrier (2020) frame adults who affirm trans kids as "child abusers" not on the grounds that they merely let children play around with gender. Rather, it is adults who listen to and affirm a child's self-defined gender who are deemed abusive. For Abbott and Shrier, as well as their followers, good adults should not give in to a kid's demands for a new name, for different pronouns, for a chest binder, or any other therapeutic intervention that realizes a trans identification. In their view, good adults should anchor children into the serious world of gendered being. Their conception of gender subjectification relies on a structure in which, when it comes to gender, it is adults who know, while children are "allowed only to respect and obey" (Beauvoir 1948, 35).

This is not to say that trans children do not already exist, but rather that most children are still, often heavy-handedly, apprenticed into becoming cis. Securing this structure of adult-child relationality is a driving force behind contemporary trans antagonisms in the United States, which is, as Gill-Peterson (2021) argues in "The Cis State," a means to secure the gender of the white nationalist state. Gendering children in this way thus animates the serious world, and adults thwart if not entirely shut down that possibility of living moral freedom. This connection between gendered rearing and the (im)possibility of moral freedom makes clear the constitutive relation between moral freedom and gender freedom. The heavy ceiling of the serious world of cis is not a safe shelter for moral freedom.

By gender freedom I do not mean an individualistic, neoliberal conception of self-defined gender, wherein freedom is realized if one has the capacity to be the author of one's own gender. Rather, I am thinking about gender freedom as a condition to not be authored, to not have one's existence take root in a ready-made image. Without the social and interpersonal conditions in which kids can assume an existence in which their gendered future has indeterminate possibilities, children will have their moral freedom curtailed. Ultimately, reading Beauvoir with trans childhoods in mind makes clear that gender freedom is necessary to moral freedom, a claim I take to be particularly urgent in the face of ever-increasing trans antagonisms. A Beauvoirian ethics of gender freedom suggests adults should not impose gender onto children but should rather open a horizon of gender indeterminacy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Gender freedom can be understood as the social practice of un/gender self-determination, a practice that undoes the serious world—its static meanings, ready-made images, and

values. As Eric Stanley (2014) writes, a trans conception of gender self-determination is a matter of relationality: “it is not the individual but a collective self, an ontological position always in relation to others and dialectically forged in otherness, that is animated” (90). Gender freedom, then, is not an individual endeavor; it is a kind of sociality, an institution of new ways of being with, of un-becoming and re-becoming with one another. Trans visions of gender self-determination thus lay bare the ruse of liberal and neoliberal conceptions of self-determination and essentialist conceptions of gender.¹² Our gendered lives are reliant on our relations with others, including the very structure of those relations. As my reading of Beauvoir underscores, the cis-gendering of existence is dependent on a particular relational structure between adults and children wherein adults have authorial power over the gendering of existence. In the face of persistent anti-trans social and political efforts that legislate cis gender, it is imperative that a practice of gender freedom rooted in the refusal of this adult-child relationality thrives.

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¹² See also Dean Spade’s (2006) trans conception of gender self-determination in “Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Gender Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy.” In this work, Spade makes clear that gender self-determination is not a matter of affirming the liberal self-willing subject. Rather, Spade is clear that creating conditions in which self-determined gender is possible is a matter of examining “how the rigid regulation of binary gender is a core element of participation in our capitalist economy, how the hyperregulation of poor people’s gender and sexuality has propped up that system, and how this has resulted in disproportionate poverty and incarceration for poor, gender-transgressive people” (232).

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