CHAPTER 3

"their mothers, and their fathers, and everyone in between": Queering Motherhood in Trans Parent Memoirs by Jennifer Finney Boylan and Trystan Reese

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Introduction

In *Stuck in the Middle with You: A Memoir of Parenting in Three Genders*, Jennifer Finney Boylan (2013) muses, "There was a time once when motherhood and fatherhood were states as simple to define as *woman* and *man*. But as the meanings of *male* and *female* have shifted from something

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firm and unwavering into something more versatile and inconstant, so too have the terms *mother* and *father* become more permeable and open-ended" (204). Urging us "to accept the wondrous scope of gender," she queries, "How many different kinds of fathers and mothers are there?" (205). In this chapter, I explore how Boylan's comments are addressed by Boylan herself, as well as by Trystan Reese (2021) in *How We Do Family: From Adoption to Trans Pregnancy, What We Learned About Love and LGBTQ Parenthood*. Boylan, a university professor then at Colby College in Maine[1] and best-selling author, reveals that she is a transgender woman who was a husband in a long-term marriage to Deirdre (Deedie) Finney Boylan, and father of their two children, Sean and (now) Zai.[2] Boylan writes from her position as a second mother and as the still-married "partner" of Deirdre Boylan (274). Reese, a social justice advocate, is a transgender man who not only adopted two children, Hailey and Lucas, with his husband, Biff Chaplow, but who also gave birth to their biological baby, Leo. In detailing their lives as transgender parents, Boylan and Reese illuminate how *mother* and *father* are concepts that are varied, mutable, and fluid, in narratives that are themselves structurally hybrid and innovative.

Both authors, married with children, operate within the framework of the white, middle-class nuclear family, advantaged by race, class, and sociocultural status. In my analysis herein, I argue that through narratives that conflate the conventional and the radical, Boylan and Reese normalize trans parenthood while queering normativity. Drawing on scholarship from queer, maternal, and life writing studies, and foregrounding the themes of transitioning, reproduction, and childrearing, I showcase how Boylan and Reese use their memoirs to document, probe, and celebrate what it means to queer motherhood. I contend that Boylan and Reese establish themselves as role models supporting and inspiring present and future generations of transgender parents. Pushing their private stories into the public realm, they make the personal both political and communal; in so doing, they participate in and yet problematize the nuclear family, opening up vital spaces for new and inclusive notions of family.

[1] Boylan is now Professor and Anna Quindlen Writer in Residence at Barnard College of Columbia University ("About").

[2] Within the 2013 memoir, Boylan refers to her two children as sons. Boylan now notes on her website that she and "her wife, Deedie" are parents of "a son, Sean and a daughter, Zai" ("About"). In "Jennifer Finney Boylan: Love Prevails, Mostly" (*The New York Times*, June 16, 2019), Boylan explains, "Two years ago, in fact, my child sat next to me on the couch and told me she, too, was transgender." Within my chapter, I refer to Zai.

Before proceeding, I want to define some terminology, drawing on Susan Stryker's (2017) *Transgender History*. *Transgender* refers to "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans*-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" (1). Transgender has largely replaced *transsexuality* as "a one-way, one-time, medicalized transition across the gender binary" (38). *Cisgender* (*cis*, "on the same side as") means "non-transgender" (13). Relatedly, *queer*, "often used as a synonym for gay or lesbian," can be considered more of a political rather than a sexual orientation; *queer* also points to "the importance of transgender and gender-nonconforming practices for queer politics" (30–31).

Gender issues like these raise the question of pronouns. Gender-neutral pronouns can counter sexism and assumptions about one's gender identity. However, some trans people may prefer "appropriately gendered ones" in recognition of their hard-won attainment of their gender status (Stryker 2017, 24), as is the case with Boylan and Reese. Boylan (2013) tells us, "I'm transgender. I used to be a man, but I've been a woman for ten years now" (6–7), and describes being "someone who was a father" and is now "a mother" (225). In like manner, Reese (2021) acknowledges that despite being assigned female at birth, "I was clear about my gender identity"—"I was a boy who liked other boys, which made me gay" (3), and announces, "I came out as transgender at age nineteen" (2). As a parent, Reese is "Daddy" (Chaplow is "Dada"). As per their stated identities, I refer to Boylan and Reese respectively as she and he, mother and father. Below, I offer a close reading of their memoirs, which I first contextualize in theoretical, critical, and historical terms in the sections "Queering Mothers and Fathers" and "Trans Life Writing Traditions."

Queering Mothers and Fathers

In considering what is at stake in merging the interests of queer and maternal theory, I look to *Queering Motherhood*, wherein editor Margaret F. Gibson (2014) states, "Queering makes the things we otherwise take for granted suddenly unpredictable, uncooperative, and unexpected" (1). In particular, she wonders what it would mean to queer motherhood (1–2). She attests that such an agenda has the potential to destabilize our previously held assumptions about "Reproduction, sexuality, culture, kinship, race, [and] embodiment," given their "intimate and expected connections to motherhood" (1–2). Insisting that queer perspectives be

foregrounded in creative, sociocultural, and academic projects alike, Gibson calls on parents identifying as queer to articulate "stories and insights that might otherwise be drowned out by the din of cisnormative and heteronormative 'tradition'" (5), points that have particular relevance for my analysis of trans parent memoirs.

Gibson (2014) elaborates: "As a foundational social construct, 'motherhood' is invoked whenever we take parenting and reproduction seriously, regardless of whether or not the individuals involved are seen as, or believe themselves to be, 'mothers.' Even when we consider the practices and perspectives of queer fathers, transgender and transsexual parents, genderqueer parents, intersex parents, or even of queer people who did not ultimately become parents, we grapple with the institution of motherhood" (6). These issues resonate for Boylan, who became a mother only after being a father; and for Reese, a father who gave birth but was never a mother. On the one hand, Gibson posits that while maternal theory critiques the dominating ideologies of patriarchal institutional motherhood, it has not paid substantive attention to LGBTQ+ realities (10). On the other hand, "the classic canon of queer theory […] has largely operated outside of the realm of the parental" (11). Like the contributors to her book, in my study of Boylan's and Reese's parenting memoirs I participate in a broader conversation that considers "what it might mean to re-think, re-shape, and re-establish notions and practices of motherhood from queer perspectives" (12).

Examining similar themes, Shelley M. Park (2020) details how queer theory "focuses on non-normative (i.e., non-procreative) forms of sexuality" concurrent with problematizing "the very gender binaries that seem to be pre-supposed by terms such as 'mother' and 'father'" (70). She highlights how some strands of feminism share with queer theory a rejection of patriarchal family structures predicated on women's domestication and procreation, and how these strands operate in tension with "another strand of feminism that celebrates the nurturing work of mothers and others and that views motherhood as empowering" (70). These tensions inform *Maternal Thinking* by Sara Ruddick (2002), who theorizes mothering as constitutive of a practice or work, which involves "preservative love, nurturance, and training" (17), and can therefore be performed by women and men alike (xii). Boylan (2013) refers to this treatise in her memoir: "According to Ruddick, men, too, are capable of 'mothering,'" yet Boylan confesses, "if someone had shared this theory with me when I was a father—and I identified as a feminist even then—it would surely

have hurt my feelings. At the heart of this theory seems to be an assumption that caring for children is something women do. If you're a man and you're trying to nurture and protect your kids, it seems to me as if you're being called an honorary woman" (30). Boylan opposes, "There are lots of men who don't feel that expressing love makes them honorary women. One would think it makes them fathers" (30).

Boylan's comments speak to Reese, who identifies as a father. Damien Riggs (2013) helps us to appreciate Reese's paternity. Riggs states that depictions of trans men in social science literature and the media illuminate "a competition between transgender men's masculinity, and their undertaking of a role historically undertaken by people who identify as women (i.e., child bearing)" (62). Research reveals, however, that "pregnancy allowed transgender men to view their bodies as having a purpose" (68), and that "rather than making them feel *less* like men, instead vindicates for them that they *are* men precisely because they don't feel like a woman carrying a child" (69). With attention to Andrea Doucet's *Do Men Mother?* Riggs summarizes that Doucet's study of cisgendered men also applies to trans men, specifically, that neither can be considered mothers given how "tightly regulated" the term *mother* is "in relation to gender norms" (70). Riggs affirms that we need to distinguish birthing trans men "*as men*," and "not default to norms for pregnancy defined historically by the experiences of women" (70). Ruddick's book was first published in 1989. Reassessing her arguments in the preface to the 1995 edition, Ruddick (2002) qualifies, "All mothering, whether done by men or women, depends on some particular woman's labor," that is, "still and only" by a woman's pregnant body (xiii). She also notes, "Even men who have been primarily responsible for mothering their children insist they are not mothers" (xiii). Ruddick thus denies birthing agency to trans men like Reese while supporting the findings of Riggs—that men self-identify "*as men*" (70).

Drawing on Ruddick's notion of maternal practice, Andrea O'Reilly (2021) theorizes what she calls a mother-focused or matricentric feminism. Such a feminism is required to counter the untenable patriarchal legitimation of so-called normative maternity, a discourse that constructs, promotes, and regulates "good mothers" as being women in nuclear families who are white, heterosexual, married, and economically dependent on their provider-husbands. In contrast, non-normative mothers—who are categorized as "de facto bad mothers"—may be "young, queer, single, racialized, trans, or nonbinary" (10–11). These "mother outlaws," as

O'Reilly calls them, "counter and correct as well as destabilize and disrupt normative motherhood" (11)—just as Boylan and Reese do in their memoirs.

O'Reilly (2021) takes up the contentious issue of terminology within matricentric feminism, in response to charges that "the term still excludes trans and non-binary folks" (12). However, the potential solution of employing the inclusive term *parent* might be "disingenuous if not dangerous because it deflects, disguises, and denies the very real and prevalent gendered oppressions of motherwork" (12). The challenge becomes "how do we include trans and nonbinary practices of parenting without excluding those of mothers" (29). Acknowledging these challenges, in my chapter I refer to parenting as a general, gender-inclusive practice, but I build my discussion specifically around shifting concepts of mother, mothering, and motherhood.[3] I take my cue from Gibson, for whom "Parenthood, fatherhood, family, and other social constructs may very well be simultaneously queered as we 'queer motherhood'" (6). I contextualize both Boylan's status as a former father and now mother and Reese's status as a birthing father within a framework that queers motherhood.

Scholars like Gibson (2014), Park (2020), and O'Reilly (2021) illuminate how trans parenting necessarily undermines normative patriarchal motherhood. Concurrently, Park, for example, introduces the term "homonormativity" (as coined by Lisa Duggan) to signal "the politics of respectability ushered in by (largely middle-class, white) gays and lesbians seeking state recognition of their relationships" (71). Here, "heteronormative forms of life (marriage, children, a home, a car, a pet, family vacations, wills, insurance, etc.)" indicate how "Homonormativity rewards lesbians and gays who mimic heteronormative standards," including those of parenting (71). In her study of twenty-first-century Swedish narratives, Jenny Björklund (2021) observes, "Queer readings of literature are typically focused on analyzing how heteronormativity is constructed and undermined in literary texts" (23). Yet, she cites scholarship by Ulrika Dahl and Rikke Andreassen positing that "non-heterosexual family formations have not really challenged traditional family models, especially the ideals of coupledom and the nuclear family" (6). Both Dahl and Andreassen ponder if queer kinship has in fact failed to be queer (6). These issues are taken up by Rachel Epstein (2009), who asks of queer families, "How do our families challenge, and how do they recreate, the conventional model

[3] By these terms, I mean respectively the person, the practice, and the institution.

of the heteronormative nuclear family and traditional notions of family, biology, blood, and kinship?" (22). She responds, "It is clear to me that we do both. We cannot parent outside of the cultural norms and discourses that shape our lives; and at the same time the existence of queer families, in all our diversity, cannot help but disrupt the heterosexual matrix" (22). Relatedly, Fiona Joy Green and May Friedman (2013) showcase stories that open "a lens on the messy and convoluted ways that querying parents approach parenting their children in gender aware and gender fluid ways" (2). Boylan and Reese likewise inscribe conventional and unconventional familial forms and practices as they normalize trans parenthood while queering normativity.

Trans Life Writing Traditions

The bourgeoning dialogue between queer and maternal scholars has led to unprecedented attention to trans parenthood. This attention has been made possible by, and is a reflection of, the increasing number of representations of trans mothers and fathers in twenty-first-century culture. Examples include the film *Transamerica*, Caitlyn Jenner's "Call me Caitlyn" *Vanity Fair* cover, the Amazon series *Transparent*, Sarah Savage's picture book *She's My Dad: A Story for Children Who Have a Transgender Parent or Relative*, Torrey Peters' novel *Detransition*, *Baby*, and online groups and resources like *transfertility.co* ("Everything you ever wanted to know about transgender fertility") and *milkjunkies.net* ("Breastfeeding and parenting from a transgender perspective"), founded respectively by Reese and by Trevor MacDonald. Perhaps the most groundbreaking intervention of trans parenthood within mainstream culture is the arrival of two new emojis. As announced by *Today's Parent* magazine on February 7, 2022, "One features a pregnant man and the other features a pregnant person, both created to recognize that not all people who get pregnant are women—some are trans men and non-binary folk" ("A pregnant man").

Trans subjectivity has especially been registered in trans autobiography and memoir.[4] Texts about transitioning began appearing in the early to mid-twentieth century, in tandem with medico-technological advancements involving hormone therapies and gender-affirming surgeries, and as a means by which trans individuals could assume authority over their

[4] Autobiography tends to focus on an entire life, whereas memoir treats a more limited period or thematic—as in parenthood.

stories, wresting control from the media which was intent on sensationalizing them. Lili Elbe's *Man into Woman* (1933) is considered the first book of its kind, [5] followed by Hedy Jo Star's *My Unique Change* (1965), Christine Jorgensen's *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (1967), Jan Morris' *Conundrum* (1974), Renée Richards' *Second Serve* (1983), Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing: A Memoir* (1999), and Boylan's *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003), among many others.

It is only in the last fifteen years or so that memoirs foregrounding trans parenthood have appeared. This genre was launched with Thomas Beatie's *Labor of Love: The Story of One Man's Extraordinary Pregnancy* (2008b), and further includes Boylan's *Stuck in the Middle with You* (2013), Trevor MacDonald's *Where's the Mother? Stories from a Transgender Dad* (2016), and Reese's *How We Do Family* (2021).[6] Just as trans life writing emerged out of historical western traditions of autobiography, so trans parent memoirs are a crucial extension of largely heteronormative motherhood and fatherhood memoirs appearing, respectively, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[7]

Life writing scholars highlight that many twentieth-century autobiographies about transitioning—those now deemed canonical—established and adhere to a formulaic structure replete with clichéd themes. For example, in *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser (1998) contends that "archetypal" trans identity is shaped by "suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation/conversion; and finally the arrival 'home'—the reassignment" (101). Jonathan Ames (2005) traces a similar narrative arc in his anthology of trans memoirs, *Sexual Metamorphosis*. Plots like these are, to be sure, reductive.

In contrast, Chiara Pellegrini (2019) explores how twenty-first-century trans life writers like Kate Bornstein and Juliet Jacques resist "transnormative" expectation, evidencing "growth and change and presenting challenges to normative gender beyond the supposed end of transition" (48). In like manner, Boylan (2013) and Reese (2021) decenter transitioning as they chronicle the ceaseless trials, responsibilities, and rewards attendant

[5] Ames suggests that Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 *Psychopathia Sexualis* is "a pioneering collection of 237 case studies in sexual pathology," and constituting perhaps the earliest first-person accounts of transgender identity (1).

[6] Bryant's *My Trans Parent: A User Guide for When Your Parent Transitions* is predicated on first-person narratives of children of trans parents, generated through interviews, but also includes several autobiographical pieces by trans parents, who were also interviewed.

[7] See O'Reilly (2010), Dymond and Willey (2013), and Podnieks (2016).

on parenthood. Relatedly, Sarah Ray Rondot (2016) finds the genre being advanced by contemporary trans autobiographers like Boylan as well as Alex Drummond.[8] According to Rondot, these writers “resituate themselves as active subjects rather than consumable objects, and envision gender as a fluid and diverse spectrum” (527). Consequently, they “reclaim agency by identifying in ways that depathologize trans* identity,” and “expand what it means to narrate a trans* life by referencing yet resisting the traditional tropes associated with medical legitimation and dysphoria” (535). These points equally resonate with the strategies of Boylan in *Stuck in the Middle with You*, and Reese in *How We Do Family*, in terms of how they reference yet resist not only conventional medical narratives but also normative biological motherhood scripts.

Stuck in the Middle with You

Boylan (2013) opens her narrative in the medias res of trans mothering, as she watches her teenage child, Zai, compete in a fencing tournament. She introduces herself to us accordingly: “I was a father for six years, a mother for ten, and for a time in between I was both, or neither, like some parental version of the schnoodle, or the cockapoo” (9). Emphasizing that she is “a parent who subverts a lot of expectations about gender” (9), she foregrounds that she is a queer mother who queers motherhood.

In a series of flashbacks early on, she outlines how she had identified as trans since childhood, but after falling in love with Deirdre, a social worker, in college, the two were married in 1988, with Boylan keeping her trans selfhood a secret. Describing the birth of their first child, Zai, Boylan (2013) addresses her readers: “Was I jealous, you ask, of Deedie’s superhuman powers, now that she was a mother?” and “did I feel left out, now that my love had experienced what may well be the defining moment in a woman’s life?” (27). Boylan insists that she felt only lucky to have such a family, and then expands: “it wasn’t maternity that I had yearned for. It was a sense of womanhood. Does that make me a hypocrite or a halfwit, to admit that I had dreamed of a woman’s body, and a woman’s life, and even the incredible gift of parenthood, without having any particular desire for pregnancy and menstrual cycles and breast-feeding?” (28).

[8] Rondot examines Boylan’s second book of life writing, *I’m Looking Through You: Growing Up Haunted: A Memoir*, as well as Drummond’s *Grrl Alex: A Personal Journey to a Transgender Identity*.

Boylan justifies that “surely a woman cannot be defined solely as a person who has borne children, or who has a menstrual cycle, or who has nursed a child” (28). In extricating mothering from biology and womanhood from maternity, Boylan creates space for her non-normative motherhood.

Zai was born in 1994; Sean, in 1996. By 1998, Boylan (2013) had “finally come out to [her] wife” (91), and by the summer of 2000 “was taking hormones and going through electrolysis” (107). Park (2020) notes, “When a person changes their public gender identity after a parental identity (as mother or father) has been previously established, this change will require negotiation within one’s circles of intimacy” (66). Negotiating, “Either I stay with you, and lose the man I love most in the world, or I leave you, and I turn my back on the person I love right at the moment she most needs me,” Deirdre Boylan chose to remain with Boylan (107). Deirdre Boylan further comments that the children were not significantly impacted because they were so young at the time of transitioning, and that they “continue to see Jenny as the parent that they’ve always loved” (268). When Boylan begins to transition, Zai observes, “We can’t keep calling you ‘Daddy’”—“If you’re going to be a girl. It’s too weird” (113). Zai proposes “Maddy”—“That’s like, half Mommy, and half Daddy” (113), a term the family embraces as it participates in negotiating and queering motherhood.

Boylan (2013) generally refuses the transnormative narrative. She remarks: “I have written elsewhere [in *She’s Not There*] about the details of the transition from male to female,” and while she is “truly sorry to disappoint readers who are hoping to hear about all of those thrilling details one more time,” she is “weary of stories of transsexuals always being stories about a trip to a hospital” (109). Boylan thus widens “what it means to narrate a trans* life by referencing yet resisting the traditional tropes associated with medical legitimation and dysphoria” (Rondot 2016, 535). Referring to surgery, Boylan contends, “That’s not what being trans is all about. Being trans—and sustaining a family—is about everything that comes before that moment, and everything after. That’s where the story lies” (109). Just as Rondot illuminates how innovative trans life writers “articulate a continuous subject rather than one split between pre- and post-transition” (527), and Pellegrini (2019) illuminates how they offer “challenges to normative gender beyond the supposed end of transition” (48), so Boylan’s agenda is to focus on the more expansive “story”—here, that of “sustaining a family” as a parent.

On the one hand, Boylan (2013) presents her trans mothering as rebellious, replete with inevitable dangers. She wonders, what kind of adults "would my children become [...] having been raised by a father who became a woman?" (114). She confides, "I'd hear a voice in my heart demanding an answer to the same question my harshest critics had asked of me: What about the children?" (114). She "suspected that for the rest of their lives," she would be "waiting to see just how much damage" she had caused (163), but is relieved that to date her kids exhibit no "signs of trauma" (117). That said, Boylan appreciates their privileged status: "I'd heard stories first-hand from other trans people who, in nearly identical circumstances, had found only cruelty and rejection. Some had found violence" (165). Although Boylan herself did not experience such harm, she is candid about being transgender: "I knew better than anybody what a hard life it was" (179).

On the other hand, Boylan embraces homonormativity. She relays, "In the fall we picked apples. In the winter we skied and sat around the fireplace in our living room afterward, drinking hot chocolate. In summer we fished on Long Pond. [...]. Most of the time we forgot that there was anything extraordinary about our family. Were we really so strange?" (114). She remarks, "The thought of going through transition and coming out, and launching into some sort of subversive identity—well, let's just say it didn't appeal to me. I didn't want to be a revolutionary. A lot of the time, more than anything, I just wanted to be like everybody else" (20). This sentiment echoes Dahl and Andreassen's question about whether queer kinship is really all that queer (Björklund 2021, 6). Boylan admits, "I've been protested four or five times over the years. And about half of those times when I've been protested, it's been by transgender people," those "Disappointed that I'm not more radical" (275).

If Boylan (2013) is not as radical as some had hoped, she nonetheless underscores that the family as institution has long been subject to queering: "Only 7 percent of American households, according to the Population Reference Bureau, now consist of married couples with children in which only the father works. As it turns out, the biggest outlier in our culture is not same-sex couples, or transgender people, or adoptive parents, or single fathers, but the so-called traditional American family itself" (205–06). She surmises, "Every single family in the world is a nontraditional family" (206), thus queering all familial forms. Attending Zai's senior-year production of *Our Town*, Boylan describes the audience clapping loudly, while the student-actors "stood there, bowing and grinning, as they basked in

the applause of their mothers, and their fathers, and everyone in between" (218). By dismantling what constitutes "traditional," Boylan democratizes kinship structures for conforming and non-conforming parents alike.

Boylan's (2013) queering of the family is paralleled by her queering of narrative form. Pellegrini (2019) highlights how contemporary trans life writers frustrate chronology with interludes and other interruptions to the narrative flow, effectively "pausing and denaturalizing" the main storyline (57). For example, the experiments of Bornstein and Jacques, who "mix their personal stories with gender theory and cultural analysis," draw attention to "the role of autobiographical narration in constructing identity in accordance with or in defiance of" transnormative models (46). Boylan is likewise innovative. Her text is organized around three main segments of autobiography, corresponding to her parental identities: "Daddy," "Maddy," and "Mommy." She inserts a "Time Out" section between each chapter, constituting a series of "Conversations" with multiple figures including authors, scholars, and activists like Richard Russo, Trey Ellis, Edward Albee, Barbara Spiegel, Dr. Christine McGinn, and Susan Minot, among others. They engage in discussion with Boylan about topics like gay parenting, trans conception, parenting an autistic child, parental mourning, adoption, African-American single fatherhood, parental ambivalence, and being childfree by choice. Boylan thus broadens the scope of the material and perspectives, offering a crucial intervention in her singular story as she moves from the personal to the communal. These "Time Out" breaks contribute to Boylan's "denaturalizing" not only of the chronology of memoir but also of normative motherhood *and* fatherhood.

In the afterword, Deirdre Boylan sums up her experiences with Boylan's transition: "I think the thing that is most surprising is perhaps how little has really changed, in the foundation of our relationship, in the foundation of our family and the way we operate" (Boylan 2013, 269). She thus contributes to the homonormative script of their lives while simultaneously queering normativity. Ultimately, as Boylan muses, happiness for herself obtains in the absence of gender: "freedom from gender means waking up in the morning and not having to think about it. I just kind of put my blue jeans on and go downstairs and feed the dogs. I don't really want to fight the gender fight every day. I don't have anything more to prove. And also, that there are as many ways of being trans as there are of being gay, or lesbian, or straight, or Irish, or anything else" (276).

Although Boylan has nothing "more to prove," with her memoir she proves that there are "many ways" of being a mother.

How We Do Family

Reese (2021) foregrounds fatherhood in his memoir's first line: "Becoming a parent after only a year of dating was never the plan" (1). Living in Hollywood, and serving at the National LGBTQ Task Force as a senior organizer, Reese and his partner, Biff Chaplow, a social worker, "had celebrated our first anniversary as boyfriends and had just moved in together" when they were propelled into parenting (1). In 2011, Hailey and Lucas, Chaplow's niece and nephew, were at risk of being removed from their maternal home by Children's Protection Services, and so Chaplow and Reese took in the toddlers. While relaying this backstory, Reese introduces himself as having transitioned via hormone therapy as a young man. Refusing the transnormative narrative that builds toward transition, Reese gets these details out of the way so that he can privilege the story of his fathering.

This paternal narrative is, in many ways, homonormative. Reese and Chaplow formalized their nuclear family by legally adopting the children, after getting married in the summer of 2012.[9] The storyline of adoption is, however, only part of their parenting journey. The memoir shifts to a concentration on how Reese queers motherhood when he becomes a birthing father. Early in his relationship with Chaplow, Reese (2021) "had occasional dreams of a baby. She had dark, liquid eyes and long eyelashes, and when I saw her in these dreams, I felt the deepest longing I had ever experienced" (15). As the adoption becomes settled, Reese "again felt the pull of a baby" (93). Where Rondot (2016) argues that subversive trans memoirists advance the genre by "referencing yet resisting the traditional tropes associated with medical legitimation" (535), Reese adapts these strategies for his narrative of conception, pregnancy, and parturition.

For instance, Reese (2021) elucidates of his transition: "My ovulatory and menstrual processes were put on hold by the hormone shifts" and he was wrongly informed that testosterone would render him infertile (4). Years later, after much research, he learns that trans pregnancy is in fact

[9] Reese qualifies that gay marriage was not legal at the time; "It was really just the ceremony and party we were interested in" (57). Gay marriage became legal across the U.S. on June 26, 2015.

feasible. A trans friend recommends a fertility clinic: “He said they’d had a good experience at the Providence Maternal Care Clinic. I knew that most trans guys would bristle at the name (‘maternal’ is quite the gendered word, after all) but figured I couldn’t be picky, or I might end up with no medical support at all” (99). Here, Reese must negotiate his needs for health care with a system that regards gestation as the sole province of women. Reese stops taking hormones, describing how his masculinization (facial hair and lower voice) due to transitioning would remain largely unchanged, but “a menstrual cycle and rapid mood swings were about to begin” (100). His path to becoming pregnant is therefore one of queering the medical establishment concomitant with queering the maternal body.

After an initial miscarriage, Reese again becomes pregnant (via “scheduled sex” with Chaplow (Reese 2021, 131)). He relays that “Hailey and Lucas both recognized that this would be a unique situation in their school community. None of their school friends’ parents were transgender; there weren’t any other gay dads at their school either” (138). He contemplates how “So many of the trans men I’d connected with online had shared stories of their kids being tormented by peers and even school staff when stories of their pregnancies had surfaced” (138–39), and he soon has to contend with Hailey being accused of lying by classmates, whose parents told them men can’t have babies. Reese becomes driven to publicize their personal story. He thinks of “Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Carmen Carrera … all of these amazing trans women of color, working tirelessly to push the culture forward by telling their stories and putting themselves out there again and again” (142). He determines to use “the ‘hook’ of a pregnant man to start a larger conversation about trans rights and families” (143–44).

Reese (2021) reaches out to the podcast *The Longest Shortest Time* to announce his pregnancy, gaining recognition as “the pregnant man” (144). According to Park (2020), “While transwomen have captured the public imagination as they become mothers to the children whom they previously fathered, transmen—such as Thomas Beatie who created a media sensation in 2008—have captured public attention in their role as birthgiving fathers” (66).[10] Indeed, Boylan (2013) recounts how, as a

[10] Ryan emphasizes that Beatie “was not the first trans man to become pregnant and he was certainly not the first trans man to be a father. Although medical advancements that allow for physical transition are relatively new, trans-identified people have always raised children” (140).

trans woman, she had "written a best-selling book [*She's Not There*], been a guest of Oprah Winfrey, even been imitated on *Saturday Night Live* by Will Forte" (9). Reese follows the cultural narrative of Beatie, who after transitioning gave birth to three children, in 2008, 2009, and 2010. On March 14, 2008, Beatie was featured on *Advocate.com* in the story "Labor of Love" with the caption, "Is society ready for this pregnant husband?" *People* magazine's July 3, 2008, issue then announced, "The Pregnant Man Gives Birth" (Beatie 2008a). That same year, Beatie published his memoir *Labor of Love*, the first trans memoir dedicated to the topic of parenthood and an obvious precursor to Reese's text.

Reese (2021) becomes, like Beatie and Boylan, a media sensation and is barraged by transphobia, "receiving hundreds of messages on social media every single day, telling me that I was going to give birth to a monster," and that "my body is disgusting" (145). Alisa Grigorovich (2014) posits that "Beatie's male identity is discredited through reference to his reproductive organs and his decision to become pregnant" (85). Moreover, "male pregnancy and the idea that one can be male and have a vagina disrupts the very contours of what is thought to be a (gendered) body, generating a repulsion of it" (89), reactions encountered by Reese. However, while Reese chronicles how the (cis-) public regards his pregnant body as "disgusting," by offering us his narrative on his own terms he claims authority and control over his image and recuperates legitimacy for the queer body.

We can see how he negotiates tensions like these as he documents how he progressively experiences pregnancy as physical distress. He is relieved to learn that the pain he senses is due to his very large fetus causing his ribs to separate: "It was nice to know that I hadn't been a weak man who couldn't handle the usual tortures of pregnancy. I had been a normal man who couldn't handle the particular torture of growing a baby that was too big for his body" (Reese 2021, 167-68). Reese invokes Riggs' (2013) research that pregnancy for trans men, "rather than making them feel *less* like men, instead vindicates for them that they *are* men precisely because they don't feel like a woman carrying a child" (69). As "a normal man" (Reese 2021, 168), Reese queers motherhood as he normalizes pregnancy from a male perspective.

Although Reese faced prejudice in the media, he was frequently treated with respect by the medical profession. For example, discussing his pending Caesarian delivery, his doctor informs Reese that he can choose to have a horizontal or vertical incision. While the former is "indicative of a

C-section," the latter could suggest numerous types of surgery; the doctor states, "I was simply considering that a vertical scar might be more affirming of your gender" (Reese 2021, 165–66). Reese is "blown away by this physician's attention to my gender identity" (166). Here, Reese counters what Paisley Currah (2008) finds to be the "larger story of discrimination in the health care industry" toward trans men like Beatie, as "ob-gyn offices or maternity wards" register a "stupefied resistance to bodies that confound gender expectations" (331). Grigorovich (2014) believes that, negativity notwithstanding, Beatie's story has "increased the visibility of transgender families in the mainstream" and led to positive "social change and activism" (93). To be sure, chronicling his own story, Reese highlights how ongoing trans advocacy and education have contributed to a medical queering of motherhood. That said, upon giving birth, "Hundreds of strangers on the internet asked me if I was going to breastfeed; so did journalists live on TV; so did every medical professional I encountered at every prenatal checkup I attended. I wanted to scream it from the mountaintops: STOP ASKING ABOUT MY BREASTS!!!" (181). He tells us, "I would not be bodyfeeding Leo" (180) because "I didn't want to use my body in that way" (182). While Riggs (2013) states that "pregnancy allowed transgender men to view their bodies as having a purpose" (68), Reese makes it clear that trans men, as much as women, have the right at all times to *choose* what those purposes will be. In claiming autonomy over how he feeds his child, Reese queers the normative scripts that seek to control and judge the reproductive body.

This medical queering is echoed in Reese's narrative structure, which is, like Boylan's, fragmented. Each of the nine chapter titles begin with "How," as in "How We Do Pregnancy" and "How We Do Parenting." The chronological sequence is interrupted by numerous interludes entitled "Notes from Life in Our Family," wherein Reese offers commentary on and practical information about issues discussed in the chapters, thereby "pausing and denaturalizing" the autobiography proper (Pellegrini 2019, 57). At the end of his narrative, Reese (2021) asks Hailey, "Do you ever wish you were in a different family? A more normal one?" She replies: "Never in a million, gajillion years" (193). Reese ponders, "'a gajillion' might be the exact right way to think about our family. Not in a gajillion years has there been a family like us, nor will there be in another gajillion. And that's true for every family that has ever been. Each is exquisitely unique and painstakingly ordinary" (194). Reese queers not only the transnormative plot but also normative constructions of family.

Conclusion

Gibson (2014) praises the contributors to her essay collection for the ways they have "considered what it might mean to re-think, re-shape, and re-establish notions and practices of motherhood from queer perspectives" (12), as do Boylan and Reese in their memoirs. Boylan and Reese participate in what Park (2020) calls the "denaturalization" of motherhood (73); Park asserts that there is "no 'natural' way of becoming a mother, and no 'natural' body that a mother has," the former claim proven by Boylan, the latter by Reese (74). Likewise, with gratitude toward her collaborators, Epstein (2009) reflects, "We need to turn away from romanticized depictions of our families that deny our pains and challenges and complexities and move toward deeper, fuller accounts of our families. When I read the pieces in this book I am moved by the risks the authors take to speak openly about their experiences of queer parenting" (30). As evidenced in my chapter, Boylan and Reese take similar risks, ones that clearly yield rewards.

We can appreciate these optimistic outcomes through Riggs et al. (2021), who maintain that the study of trans parenting helps us to recognize not only "the agency enacted by trans parents but also to understand the positive experiences of parenting that trans people have" (812). Such is the overarching position waged by Boylan and Reese. Boylan (2013) contends, "I think I'm a loving person, and that I bring that to people. And that our family is better for having me around" (280). Reese (2021) describes Hailey and Lucas as constituting "the center" of his and Chaplow's world (79), and that being a father to Leo "was the only thing" he, Reese, has "ever been perfect at" (184). Reese further attests, "I am rebuilding the world around me with love" (188). Nurturing affirmations like these support Epstein's (2009) observation that "Recent years have seen an upsurge of trans activism and visibility, including an insistence on the right to parent" (20). As we have seen, Boylan and Reese use their memoirs to these urgent ends.

Rondot (2016) finds that for trans authors, autobiography serves as a site of rebellion and subversion, but such potential may be reserved only for people privileged as "white, middle-class, partnered, and able-bodied" (547). Park (2020) insists that studies of queer motherhood must transcend markers of mainstream status, especially via representations moving beyond the Global North (73). Jan E. Estrellado and Alanna Aiko Moore (2021) signal new directions in their interventional essay "Towards a

Queer and Trans Model for Families of Colour." Parents of two children, they introduce themselves accordingly: "Alanna is a mixed-race Asian queer femme (she/her/hers) married to Jan, a Pilipinx, queer, transmasculine, and non-binary person (who responds to all pronouns)" (137). Testifying from their personal perspectives that they "have limited access to a diversity of family models" (146), they assert: "Our family, who are in many ways just trying to exist the way most families do, offers one example of the added complexities related to feminism, race, queerness, and transness" (151).

Estrellado and Moore (2021) help us to appreciate how the field of trans life writing—radically advanced by Boylan (2013) and Reese (2021), both white and middle class—must continue to push forward by encouraging more diverse trans populations to tell their stories, and that these populations must be ensured access to resources enabling the production and publication of their narratives. Reese is eager to facilitate such developments. His appendix, "How We Do Activism," elucidates his and Chaplow's "lifelong commitment to anti-racism, and [their] inherited beliefs around justice" (195). Similarly, at the back of her text, Boylan provides a list of resources for and about trans families. Gibson (2014) observes that many of the recent books "about queer pregnancy, adoption, and parenting" have "crossed genre divides between academic, activist, literary, how-to, and humour writing" (5). Through their resources and their hybrid structures of storytelling, Boylan and Reese punctuate their personal narratives with ongoing attention to communal perspectives and calls for social justice.

Evan Vipond (2019)—like Rondot (2016) and Park (2020)—argues that the cultural intelligibility of memoirs by canonical authors like Jorgensen and Morris is predicated on their "proximity to whiteness" (21) and that such texts are "marketed to the general (read: cisgender) public" (20). Boylan and Reese, while writing through their white privilege, aim to disseminate their stories and attendant calls for action to a broad audience. They consistently address their readers as "you," employing the pronoun at times to distinguish, at other times to conflate, cisgender and trans perspectives. For instance, following her gender affirmation surgery, Boylan reports, "I was a forty-four-year-old woman who'd never had sex with a man," adding "I was curious about men, though. Wouldn't you be?" (181). In another reference to her surgery, she provides a list of resources "For the curious—as well as to serve as a guide for others with the same condition" (109). Reese similarly speaks to those like

himself—"If you're a transgender person" (147)—while concurrently instructing a cis-audience: "Listen to the stories you hear from trans people" (197). Boylan's and Reese's fluid invocations to "you" bring their cis- and trans-readers together in a community of intersecting interests and values, and produce their own iterations of what Vipond calls "counternarratives that speak back" (21) to mainstream assumptions that the general reader is necessarily, or only, cisgender.

Boylan's (2013) and Reese's (2021) memoirs are part of what Stryker (2017) describes as "a rapidly growing body of fiction and nonfiction literature, academic writing, documentary films, television shows, movies, blogs, YouTube channels, and other forms of DIY cultural production by and about trans people that places us in cultural and historical context and imagines us as part of communities and social movements" (2). Rondot (2016) emphasizes that trans life writings can be "liberatory because they contribute to a multivocal conversation about gender, expand cultural knowledge, and offer new and different ways to narrate and understand diverse trans* lives" (547). Boylan and Reese are in the vanguard as they chronicle their trans mothering and fathering, respectively. My analysis of *Stuck in the Middle with You* and *How We Do Family* signals how queer, motherhood, and life writing studies gain increasing relevance and vitality when their praxes intersect and expand in relation to each other. Boylan's and Reese's narratives exemplify possibilities for familial restructuring that critique, resist, and transcend cisgendered patterns and assumptions about embodiment, reproduction, and caregiving. While the memoirs embrace homonormativity, they concurrently stage dramatic interventions in heteronormative paradigms, and in so doing, they normalize trans parenthood while queering motherhood.

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