

INTRODUCTION

One thing they never tell you about child raising is that for the rest of your life, at the drop of a hat, you are expected to know your child's name and how old he or she is.

—Erma Bombeck

Even when freshly washed and relieved of all obvious confections, children tend to be sticky.

—Fran Lebowitz

Excuse me, sir, but you're sitting on my body, which is also my face.

—SpongeBob SquarePants

I have a couple of kids in my life, my partner's children, and they were quite young when I met them—three and five years old. Both were at an age when gender is not so fixed, and so, upon meeting them for the first time, I got what was for me a very predictable question from them both: “Are you a boy or a girl?” When I did not give a definitive answer, they came up with a category that worked for them—boy/girl. They said it just like that, “boygirl,” as if it were one word, and, moreover, as if it were already a well-known term and obvious at that. Since naming has been an issue my whole life (as a young person I was constantly mistaken for a boy; as an adult, my gender regularly confuses strangers), this simple resolution of my gender ambiguity within a term that stitches boy and girl together was liberating to say the least. Boygirl I am and boygirl I will remain.

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Of course, as time has passed, both kids, a boy and a girl, have recognized that the world sees me a little differently than they do. When people ask if I am their "mum," they look baffled; when people call me "sir," they seem comfortable; when a teacher refers to me as "she," they roll with it but they persist in calling me "he" and their "stepdad." The little girl happily told one of her friends that she had a dad and a stepdad, at which point she gestured proudly toward me. The little friend seemed slightly confused, but then she also rolled with it: "cool," she said and turned to her mom: "That's her stepdad," she explained. The mom looked at me, I looked at her and shrugged. Life is complicated, genders are complicated, families are complicated, and yet we have so few words for these new and often quite welcome complications that accompany massive social shifts. And so we make do. We let kids who have not yet learned the appropriate languages for indeterminate identities name what escapes adult comprehension.

Children nowadays actually have a fantastically rich archive of wacky representations from which to draw as they make sense of their worlds. If SpongeBob SquarePants is anything to go by, and I believe he is, then children can find all kinds of examples of ambiguous embodiment in the materials that TV and cinema market to them. SpongeBob SquarePants and his crew of spongy life forms all experience a soft relation to reality, and while life in Bikini Bottom bears some resemblance to life above the water, it also operates according to its own set of rules, code violations, morality, and propriety. The villain of the piece is the money-grabbing Mr. Krabs, but SpongeBob and his best friend Patrick also often square off against a mean-spirited octopus named Squidward. The significance of SpongeBob SquarePants to contemporary gender norms, I believe, cannot be overstated; while earlier generations of boys and girls were raised on cartoon worlds populated by cats and mice, dogs and rabbits

chasing each other across various domestic landscapes, this generation has come of age to an animated mythological universe populated by characters with eccentric and often simply weird relations to gender. And so we take SpongeBob SquarePants as our guide, following the hedonistic and cheerful sponge whose body, as he reminds one chap who sits on him, is also his face, in looking for fun, in mistrusting people who only want to make money, and in tracking down treats made with peanut butter.

SpongeBob aside, this book tries to grapple with the shifts and changes that have transformed the way we live our genders and sexualities over the last twenty years. While in universities, philosophers and queer theorists, including myself, have for years pondered the meaning of gender norms and studied the development of sexuality within matrices of normativity and perversity. We scholars don't always explicate clearly or accessibly. And that is unfortunate, because the fact is, this world within which we live, work, and love has changed dramatically since our parents raised us, and we all need a guide to the new social and emotional structures that support these changes. Just to name a few of the most obvious changes that have impacted our daily experiences of sex and gender, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, we have seen a massive decline in the prevalence and dominance of monogamous marriage and a huge rise in divorce and diverse households. In the United States, we have also witnessed a new and startling visibility of transgender communities and individuals as well as new levels of acceptance for normative gays and lesbians. Gay marriage is on the horizon and the homo-hetero binary seems less definitive of sexual orientation than it did at the turn of the last century.

What has brought so many changes on and so quickly? The answer is: everything! In other words, change has occurred on account of the boom/bust economy; advances in computer

technology; new medical research; increased mobility; new forms of social contact and social networking; new modes of media including Twitter feeds; new levels of media surveillance and intrusion and new forms of social control; etc., etc. Obviously, there is no need to pinpoint one singular narrative to account for the massive changes that we have experienced in our lifetimes; and in many ways, it would be weirder if our ideas of family, desire, the normal, the ordinary, the extraordinary did *not* change as everything else around us shifted, evolved, developed, and collapsed. That things change should neither surprise nor alarm us; it should *interest* us, however, and should engage us enough to spur a reconsideration of the terms, the names, the categories we use to understand our bodies, our relationships, our bonds with others, our connections to strangers, our intimacies within and beyond biological relation, and our imagination about the future. Change, indeed, is the air that children breathe, which may be why they are more flexible than adults.

But before I launch into a child-centric account of new genders, let me acknowledge that the child has all too often served as a justification for the most wretched forms of social and political conservatism in the United States since at least the mid-nineteenth century. A lesbian couple I know who live in San Francisco, just to give one example, became alarmed, after the birth of their daughter, about the amount of sexually explicit material in the shop windows in their very gay neighborhood, the Castro. Suddenly, the same environment that had made them feel excited about living in the city became the source of discomfort and concern. They quickly pulled up stakes and moved out to a suburb where the child would, according to them, be safe from the impact of openly displayed sexual materials. This is a couple that for years had engaged in a polyamorous relationship and had incorporated all kinds of sex toys into their sex

life. Suddenly, however, on behalf of their infant daughter, they rushed to avoid the very materials that had nurtured their own very queer desires. We all know of the “protect the children” ruses that religious Americans have used to censor all kinds of materials that feature any kind of open discussion of sexuality—remember that in the 1970s Anita Bryant created a “Save Our Children” campaign that was designed to counteract a pro-gay rights initiative in Florida, and this was followed in 1978 by the Briggs Initiative in California, which sought to ban gays and lesbians from the classroom. Now that California has passed a resolution requiring that gay and lesbian history be taught in the schools, we can tell ourselves that we have traveled far from these paternalistic measures; and of course we have, but the problem is that the exact sex-negative attitudes that fueled antigay sentiment three decades ago now sneak new forms of sex negativity back into dynamic social systems—but this time via gays and lesbians themselves!

While we currently train teenagers to think of sex in terms of all the bad things (pregnancy, sexual diseases) that could happen to them if they actually “get lucky,” many children are more wily and more canny than their parents think, and it is this generation of kids—kids growing up in the age of divorce, queer parenting, and economic collapse—who will probably recognize, name, and embrace new modes of gender and sexuality within a social environment that has changed their meaning forever.

Along these lines, let me give another illustration of the inventiveness of the child mind in relation to new material. My partner's son surprised me the other day. He caught me off guard. The conversation began as many others have, with him asking: “Jack, can I ask you a question?” The first time he used this approach, I was sure that some big life question would follow; or something about queerness, or sex, or something messy and

unanswerable. But actually, the first few times that he used this lead-in, the question turned out to be about turtles, his favorite topic at that time (now it is octopuses; octopi?). "Jack, can I ask you a question?" such conversations typically go. "Sure, shoot." "Well, ah, hmm. How long do you think a turtle can live?" OK, so on this day, I expected another turtle question and tried to line up some turtle facts. In fact, I had been reading up so as not to be caught off guard again: turtles have been on earth for about 200 million years. Turtles cannot leave their shells. Turtles can sometimes outrun humans (helpful to know!) . . . or stick their tongues out (less helpful) . . . they can, however, climb well (who knew?). Groups of turtles are called "bales." That should cover it!

"Shoot, ask me anything you like," I said blithely. And he did: "Do you have a penis or . . ." While I tried to grapple with the first part of the question, he continued seriously, trying to come up with the female equivalent of penis . . . "or do you have, you know, a . . . well, the thing that girls have?" He scrunched up his eyes as if he had just asked a very serious and important question about planetary motion or turtle mating habits. OK. A penis question . . . "I have what girls have," I said quickly. Silence. And then: "Well, then Jack, I hate to tell you this but you are basically a girl!" True, I am basically a girl, how to respond to this while not giving up entirely on the truth of the "boygirl" moniker? Well, I didn't have to think too long. The little girl jumped in now, sensing that her older brother had reached the limits of his knowledge of such things. "Of course he has a girl thing, *he* is a girl!" Pause. "A boygirl." She said this while looking at her brother as though he had just failed a spelling test. "I know he is a girl," he answered quietly. "I am just saying, does he have a penis or . . ." I paused for a moment, wondering how to resolve this for him—the mixture of pronouns and gender categories probably needed to be sorted out. Was this the time for

a quick lesson on gender, anatomy, and social meanings? Should I try to address the elephant (or turtle) in the room by raising the topics of lesbianism, transgenderism, cross-gender identification? Should I use as my example the little girl in his class who played with the boys and had recently declared girls' games to be "dumb"? I began to answer the kids' questions, thoughtfully and slowly . . . but, as it turns out, too slowly. The little guy got there first: "Jack, can all turtles swim?" he asked with great import. And just like that, the gender crisis had been raised, addressed, and dispatched and we were back to the turtles.

Children are different from adults in all kinds of meaningful ways. They inhabit different understandings of time, and experience the passing of time differently. They also seamlessly transition between topics that adults would ordinarily not connect in polite conversation (turtles and sex, for example); and often, they place the emphasis differently than adults might by making questions about sex and gender as important or as inconsequential as questions about animals, vegetables, and minerals. The training of children is as much about teaching them where to place the emphasis as it is about giving them information. But the training of children would proceed much more smoothly if there were more exchange and if adults were willing, in the process, to be retrained themselves. The whole notion of a generational exchange as a one-way process informs our ideas of parenting, and it keeps us stuck in profoundly limited and conservative models of the family and childrearing. If postmodern theory has taught us anything, it should have impressed upon us the idea that time is not linear and therefore that generational differences are more loopy and complex than we imagine when we plot them out along the straight lines of chronological age. This book advocates for more twisty, curvy, more relative notions of time, age, and difference, and it does so on behalf of an adult-child dialogue that is not

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invested in a misguided and sentimental notion of childhood innocence nor on account of a naive investment in the idea of truth issuing from the mouths of babes . . . it is more a sense that the pre-socialized, pre-disciplined, pre-restrained anarchic child comes at the world a little differently than the post-shame, post-guilt, post-recognition, disciplined adult. And this anarchic sense of time and relation should be and easily could be a better model for change than the ones with which we currently live.

While the adult filters his or her responses to sex, love, emotions through the thick haze of training that has installed shame and guilt as appropriate barriers to unfettered and antisocial explorations of the body, in public, private, and everywhere else, until a certain age, the child does not yet know what the difference might be between appropriate and inappropriate, legitimate and illegitimate, important and silly. Not only do children not know the difference, but in fact the differences between these things register very differently for them. What the adult considers inappropriate (eating with an open mouth, farting, touching one's genitals in public, touching other people's genitals in public, telling someone their breath smells) may not be inappropriate for the child. And, as Freud pointed out long ago in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the fact that adults prohibit behavior that children want to indulge, creates a complex matrix of desire, taboo, repression, and expression out of which sexual personalities evolve. And as scholars like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have reminded us, the forbidding of certain activities endows them with more meaning, and actually makes them part of the child's sexual psyche rather than eliminating the desires altogether.

The topics that I will take up in this short book emerge as a series of "what if" questions, some of which have good and practical answers, some of which remain unanswerable at this time.

And so: "What if we actually let up on the training of children and allow ourselves, as adults, to be retrained instead?" If, for the child, "looks like a boy, walks like a boy, talks like a boy" equals "is a boy," then maybe this is as good a model of gender as any out there. And if, for the child, language is a playground where meaning is contingent, illusionary, motile, impermanent, and constantly shifting to keep up with the data flows that course across their inchoate consciousnesses, then maybe adults should improvise more, pick up terms, words, lexicons from children who, in many ways, live the world differently than we do, live it more closely, live it more intensely, and, sometimes, live it more critically. /