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Trans children and the necessity to complicate gender in primary schools

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ABSTRACT

Trans children have become more visible in primary schools in recent years. Arising from a qualitative study with twelve parents of trans children (aged 5–13) and six primary school educators in Ireland, this paper explores how trans children experience two very different forms of celebratory rituals that are entangled with life in primary schools: birthday celebrations and religious rituals. These rituals are experienced as moments of affectively intense rupture for trans children, moments that shunt the violence of the disciplinary framework of gender into view. Informed by theorizing on gender norms and affect, this paper makes visible the cruel conundrum of navigating a gender frame that acts violently but at the same provides the very terms through which trans identities can be asserted and apprehended. Ultimately, this paper provides an empirical illustration of the messiness of gender and argues for the necessity to complicate the framework of gender in primary schools.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in the visibility of young trans¹ children in the public sphere (Minter 2012). There is a fast-growing body of work focused on the experiences of trans young people in post-primary school contexts (See, for example: McBride and Neary 2021; Sinclair-Palm and Gilbert 2018; Ferfolja and Ullman 2020; Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airtton 2016; Miller 2016; Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Jones et al. 2016). However, there continues to be a dearth of research focused specifically on the lives of trans children in primary school contexts. The emergent research in this field focuses predominantly on how primary school educators are grappling with gender identity diversity and attempting to support trans children. Primary school educators display a particular comfort in dealing with transphobia as part of bullying frameworks but demonstrate discomfort, reluctance and fear in relation to the project of educating about gender identity diversity (Neary, Irwin-Gowran, and McEvoy 2016; Neary and Rasmussen 2020) and supporting trans children (Payne and Smith 2014). Echoing much research on the politics of gender and sexuality in early childhood and primary school contexts (Robinson 2013, 2014; Robinson and Davies 2017; Osgood and Robinson 2017, 2019; Renold

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2005; Neary and Rasmussen 2020), efforts to educate about gender identity and support trans children in primary schools are continuously constrained by the protection of a heteronormative/cisnormative understanding of 'childhood innocence' and gender (Payne and Smith 2014; DePalma 2013), a lack of teacher education and an associated discomfort surrounding the topic of gender identity (Bartholomaeus, Riggs, and Andrew 2017).

Some research focused on primary schools points to the hopeful ways that school leaders and educators respond to the presence of trans children in their schools and classrooms and are changing the shape of gender at school. Discourses of 'professional responsibility' steer some educators towards 'accommodating' trans children (Payne and Smith 2014) albeit with an emphasis on individualized and procedural solutions for trans children and a resistance to changing gender normative/gender restrictive cultures of schools (Smith and Payne 2016). Other school leaders demonstrate more transgressive and transformative approaches in their attempts to make their primary schools more inclusive (Leonardi and Staley 2018). While careful to underline how teacher subjectivities, knowledges and positionalities are key mediating factors, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) highlight the productive effects of using queer- and transgender-themed texts for attending to transgender materialities. Countering claims that children 'are not ready' for such knowledge, Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) demonstrate how children productively learn to question restrictive social systems and think more inclusively in general. Importantly, Horton (2020) has pointed to the necessity to raise ambitions beyond discussions of gender stereotypes in primary schools. Luecke (2011) explicates the approach of one school in supporting a child's transition in primary school, teasing out how establishing strong networks of support for the child and their peers brought favorable outcomes whilst opportunities were missed in communications with staff and families as well as in establishing stronger messages regarding pronoun use. In my own work, I have explored how trans children's relations with their teachers are stretching and changing the terms of gender as their visibility increases in primary schools (Neary 2018).

The 'arrival' of trans children in the public sphere has the potential to disrupt 'not only the meaning of the gendered body but our understandings of time, development, and order itself' (Halberstam 2018a, 62). At the same time, trans children and their families consider gender as 'deeply valued cultural material ... [that is] at once proliferating and becoming more particular' (Meadow 2018, 224). In a recent special issue entitled *Investigating Transgender and Gender Expansive Education Research, Policy and Practice*, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2018) raise these very tensions and their implications for education contexts. Within this special issue, Leonardi and Staley (2018) build on the work of Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016, 810) to explain that while some trans children 'might benefit from a queer focus on disruption, there are also students who "want to fit or belong" by embodying and living gender according to the determination of gender norms' (Leonardi and Staley 2018, 769). I take these tensions as the point of departure for this paper, exploring the everyday experiences of trans children, as described by their parents, bringing rich and textured insight into the messy entanglements of gender in primary schools.

To this end, this paper focuses specifically on how trans children experience two types of celebratory ritual that are inextricable from everyday life in primary schools: birthday celebrations and religious rituals. While primary schools have different approaches to and practices around how/whether individual children's birthdays and religious rituals

are acknowledged and celebrated at school, these milestones in children's lives are inevitably present in some shape or form. Birthdays celebrations are universal phenomena that are negotiated in primary schools the world over. The presence of religion in primary schools differs considerably across contexts and Ireland is somewhat unique in how prominent religion is in everyday primary school life. About 91% of primary schools in Ireland are under Catholic patronage and there are deep and lasting intertwined relations between the Catholic Church and state in the Irish education system. For example, the Catholic Church owns the land and property of the vast majority of primary schools in Ireland while the running costs and teacher salaries are entirely funded by the state. While the scale of these entanglements in Ireland is certainly unique internationally, children across the globe have identifications and relationships with religion and faith and these aspects of children's lives are not separate from their everyday negotiations of their primary schools (Hickey-Moody 2017). Close attention to the affective dimensions of how trans children negotiate these intersecting secular and religious rituals and life-moments at school is a task of international significance in the field of gender and education. These celebratory rituals display a particular intensification and magnification of gender that surfaces and produces affectively intense responses from trans children. This paper's examination of these moments of rupture in the ordinary, familiar politics of gender at school provides unique insight into the messy entanglements of gender in primary schools. It demonstrates the ambivalences of navigating a gender frame that acts violently upon trans children but at the same provides the very terms through which their identities can be asserted and apprehended. Ultimately, this paper provides an empirical argument against hasty orientations to 'fix' gender problems (Rasmussen 2009) and for the necessity to complicate the framework of gender in primary schools.

Theorizing the ambivalences of gender norms in primary schools

Historically, debates and contestations about gender have taken place along bio-essentialist versus social constructionist lines. But, Rubin's (1984) notion of a sex/gender system and Haraway's (1985/2011) early new materialist explications of human/non-human entanglements inspired messier accounts of gender beyond nature/culture divide. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, as outlined in *Gender Trouble*, is one such theory that emerged. This theory of gender has since come to be understood as a seminal text in the origination of queer theory. The theory of performativity posits gender as a series of continuously repeated acts, gestures, and desires that produce the effect of an internal core or substance (Butler 1990).

As I have written about elsewhere (Neary 2018), Butler's theory of performativity drew some acute criticism, specifically regarding questions of trans embodiment. For example, scholars such as Namaste (2000) and Prosser (1998), interpret the argument put forward in *Gender Trouble* as a voluntarist account of gender that assumes that 'transgender = gender performativity = queer = subversive' and points out the limits of queer theory in accounting for 'reconciliation between sexed materiality and gender identification ... assimilation, belonging in the body and in the world ...'. More recently, trans activists such as Serano (2016) critique Butler for downplaying the significance of embodiment and over-emphasizing the social aspects of gender. Though, in response, Butler (2015)

explains: 'I do know that some people believe that I see gender as a 'choice' rather than as an essential and firmly fixed sense of self. My view is actually not that. No matter whether one feels one's gendered and sexed reality to be firmly fixed or less so, every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives'.

In many ways, trans advocacy across the globe has chartered a similar trajectory to lesbian, gay, feminist and antiracist politics of equality and recognition. Spade (2015, 119) takes issue with this kind of politics, explaining how trans people are 'continually invited in building and growing systems of control that shorten trans lives'. Spade argues for a critical trans politics that transforms current logics of state, civil society and equality through productive alliances. In this vein, Halberstam (2018a, 2018b, 2) too sets out 'to steer clear of the identitarian traps presented by political strategies that center on recognition or respectability' and continues to employ *queer* to focus on the important subversive and transgressive ways that trans bodies disrupt the entire disciplinary architecture of gender.

Undeniably, the fields of gender studies and trans advocacy comprise a tension-filled mix of anti-normative, transgressive, bio-essentializing and cishnormative ontological and epistemological frameworks for understanding gender. And, increasingly, in recent times and in various contexts, these frameworks have been mobilized in some quarters in transphobic and gravely de-humanizing ways against trans people. Certain versions of *queer* have been co-opted and mobilized towards exclusionary and even de-legitimizing ends (Ahmed 2016, 490). Furthermore, some research has illustrated the 'epistemological violence' in bringing a kind of cishgendered queer theory to bear on trans lives (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018, 690). Acutely mindful of the pervasive nature of cishnormativity and how it moves around and within me in ways that can be impermeable to the most in-depth forms of reflexivity, I proceed in this paper with the idea that queer theoretical work on gender norms continues to facilitate necessary interrogation of the terms of the disciplinary framework of gender. Following Jagose (2015), this paper attempts to step outside of binaries of normativity versus anti-normativity. Nor does it build from the notion that gender has no essence or core. Rather, it employs queer theoretical work as a frame for inquiring into the grid of intelligibility by which 'humanness is both questioned and asserted' (Butler 2001, 629/624) and the ways that 'the very terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human' (Butler 2004, 2). This grid of intelligibility has an undeniably cishnormative and cishgendered character and the experiences, lives and bodies of trans people signpost the necessary but complex task of unbuilding and complicating gender (Halberstam 2018a; Halberstam 2018b).

In the field of education, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2018, 689) argue that there is a need for both 'minoritizing' approaches that attend closely to questions of trans embodiment and 'universalizing' approaches that focus on interrogating cishgenderism and cishnormativity. The line of inquiry I'm pursuing in this paper does not grapple specifically with trans children's experiences of embodiment or personhood. It is not concerned with the diverging factors that have featured as children come to live or identify as trans, or indeed how they understand their gender identity development. In part, this is because the data drawn upon in this paper arise from the parents of trans children and not trans children themselves. What this paper *does* focus on is the affectively

violent shape and character of the cisnormative disciplinary framework of gender with its 'confining grammars of sense and security' (Halberstam 2018b, 2). A focus on celebratory rituals in primary schools facilitates grappling with the affective intensities of trans children and the cruel conundrum in navigating a frame that acts violently upon them but at the same time provides the very terms through which their identities can be asserted and apprehended. There is much generative potential in drawing on new materialist theories to think about gender in childhood (Osgood and Robinson 2019; Osgood and Robinson 2017). A new materialist understanding of affect is another theoretical layer in the backdrop of this paper. A new materialist ontology de-privileges and de-centers human agency and instead thinks the nature of reality in terms of affective flows in relational networks or assemblages of human and more-than-human matter. Thinking with this ontological lens shifts the focus of social inquiry from an approach predicated only on humans towards an attention to affect; 'examining instead how relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate affect and are affected' (Fox and Alldred 2015, 399). Thinking with the new materialist concept of 'intra-action' allows attention to the relational movement of affect; to how 'distinct agencies are only distinct in a relational rather than an absolute sense, that is agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements' (Barad 2010, 267). In this vein, I also borrow and think with Hook and Wolfe's (2018) feminist new materialist exploration of 'affective violence' and give prominence, as they do, to Massumi's (2011, 85) assertion that 'you have to be open to the possibility of rethinking the world as literally made of feelings, of prehensive events'.

Methodology

This paper draws on a qualitative study entitled 'Exploring Gender Identity and Gender Norms in Primary Schools' conducted in partnership with the Transgender Equality Network of Ireland (TENI) in 2017. TENI acted as gatekeeper and a letter of invitation, information sheet and consent form were sent via e-mail to the TENI database of parents and schools who had availed of their support services. A total of eighteen people volunteered to take part in the study: (a) Twelve parents of eleven trans children aged 5–13 and (b) six primary school educators. Table 1 summarizes the profiles of parents and children in their own words. These data were self-reported. All but one of the parents who participated was women. All parents identified as white, Irish, cisgender and all but one parent identified as heterosexual. The six educators in this study identified as white, Irish, heterosexual and cisgender. There were five women, two men; two worked in Catholic schools and five worked in multi-denominational schools.

Data collection comprised a semi-structured interview with each participant and each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes. Transcriptions were later sent back to participants for member checking and elaboration. Data were analyzed in the following way. First, I read and re-read the transcripts making notes in the margins as I read. I then thematically coded the individual transcripts and completed a vertical analysis, producing a document with a list of thematic codes under categories and page numbers referencing illustrative quotes. I then completed a horizontal analysis of all transcripts. I constructed horizontal categories and then themes encompassing commonalities as well as outlier codes from individual-level analyses. As part of this iterative, layered process, there was

Table 1. Profiles of parents and children (in their own words).

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Pronouns
Parent 1	Joni	40	Female	She/her
Child 1	Petra with mother & siblings, Peter with father & at school	6	Female	She/her
Parent 2	Patricia	42	Female	She/her
Child 2	Daire	13	Female	She/her
Parent 3	Paula	38	Female	She/her
Child 3	Mostly Seán, sometimes Callie	10	Feels female	Mostly he/him, sometimes she/her
Parents 4.1 & 4.2	Geraldine and John	35	Female and Male	She/her He/him
Child 4	Tadhg	12	Male	He/him
Parent 5	Helen	46	Female	She/her
Child 5	Kevin	12	Male	He/him
Parent 6	Ailbhe	39	Female	She/her
Child 6	Darren	6	Identifies as male, presents as female	He/him
Parent 7	Siobhán		Female	She/her
Child 7	Wants to be called Jason, sometimes Jason with mother, sometimes Shauna. Shauna with father, Jason & Shauna at school	5	Male	He/him
Parent 8	Anna	32	Female	She/her
Child 8	Sometimes Phil, sometimes Harriet	8	Identifies as tomboy	Sometimes she/her Sometimes he/him
Parent 9	Jane	42	Female	She/her
Child 9	Justin	7	Male	He/Him
Parent 10	Sarah	44	Female	She/her
Child 10	Richie	9	Male	He/him
Parent 11	Eavan	44	Female	She/her
Child 11	Fred	8	Male	He/him

Note: The information in this table was articulated by parents themselves.

a ‘plugging in’ (Youngblood Jackson and Mazzei 2011) primarily of the work of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam to grapple with trans children’s encounters with the messy entanglements of human and non-human matter as birthdays and religious rituals flowed in and out of their primary schools. In thinking with these ideas, I seek to avoid the trap of neoliberal individualism and the politics of recognition that scholars such as Halberstam (2018a) and Spade (2015) caution against. At the same time, as I proceed, I remain cognizant of how an over-emphasis on and arguments related to the disciplinary framework of gender as ‘restrictive for all’ risk detracting from questions of trans embodiment (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018).

The entangled matter of birthdays and religious rituals at school

My first empirical step in this paper is to provide illustrative examples of the ways that heteromormative, cisgendered birthdays and religious rituals are part of the entangled matter of primary schools and even reach into the clinical and diagnostic frames through which trans children are apprehended and recognized.

As is typical, the children in this study had friends within their class groups, and birthday party invitations were sent to some or all of the children in their class. There was, however, awareness among some educators in this study that birthday parties can act as tools of exclusion and some attempted to manage this:

We don't allow kids to give out invitations in the school. Or parents. Because in the past it would be used as a weapon of exclusion ... Because you'd have a parent who would send in 28 invitations and there's 29 kids in the class ... They go around and give them all out on the day, that happens. That actually happens. So we don't allow them give out any invitations. If they agree, we give them a contact list with phone numbers on it and we say 'there that's as much as we're going to facilitate. Use that to contact parents if you want to invite their child but you can't send them in'. (Frances, Educator)

While Frances is clearly aware of the possibility for exclusion and isolation, her explanation of their school's procedure for keeping birthdays separate from everyday school life underscores the impossibility of this separation.

In Ireland, the temporal logics of primary schools are such that a kind of 'Catholic time' is embedded in the very fabric of primary schooling (Neary and Rasmussen 2020; Kitching 2020). As evidenced by the following quote from Patricia (Parent of Daire, Age 13), religion plays a role in the ordering and structuring of time in Irish primary schools:

I always hoped she'd grow out of it [being trans]. So I used to say 'it'll be fine when she goes to school [circa age 5], she'll grow out of it. It'll be fine when she makes her communion [Catholic sacrament, circa age 7], she'll definitely grow out of it by then'. Then the confirmation [Catholic sacrament, circa age 12] came and I was thinking 'oh my God what am I going to do now she has not grown out of it?'.

While Ireland is unique with regard to the formal presence of religion in the school day, these temporalities of religious ritual punctuate the lives of many children across the globe, and the two quotes above demonstrate the porous nature of primary schooling and the inevitable entanglement of celebratory ritual in the fabric of primary school life. In Ireland though, these rituals do not merely flow into the spaces of schools on certain days or times. They coalesce in the everyday order of school life and congeal within the disciplinary framework of gender. The extent to which such rituals are enmeshed in the cisnormative grid of gender intelligibility is borne out in the following quote from Paula (Parent of Seán, Age 10):

Sessions with a psychologist ... and it was all lovely and play therapy and everything and then she asked ... it was coming up to his Communion and she said "and would you like to wear a dress?" and he said "no". And then the psychologist said "I'm not sure about the transgender thing" and it was all about anger and all sorts of things. They're [the psychologists] looking for these very specific markers ...

We can see here the gender normative reach of celebratory rituals. Cultural and religious rituals – and the magnification of gender norms that they display – feature even in clinical assessments of gender identity and in this way play their part in determining the permissibility of trans children's bodies, lives and identities.

Having provided a picture of how celebratory rituals feature in everyday primary school life, I now turn to the main task of this paper: to explore and discuss how trans children experience these rituals at school.

Celebratory rituals: shunting the violence of gender norms into view

The children in this study experienced several aspects of birthday celebrations and religious rituals as distressing. In this section, I outline and discuss parents' descriptions of

the affective intensities experienced by their children in navigating gender normative decorations, gift-giving and clothing, and for some, exclusion from these rituals altogether.

The gender-stereotypical paraphernalia and trappings of birthday parties caused upset for some children. For example, Siobhán (Parent of Shauna, Age 5) described how her child's pre-school birthday celebration caused a deep emotional reaction:

Whenever there was a birthday, they would put bunting on the door and put the kids name on it. It was always pink or blue bunting. And I'd see this bunting going up – "Jesus Christ what am I going to do? I'm going to have to address it" ... I was trying to come up with something because I knew if they put the pink bunting up, Shauna would be very upset. Even back then, she was only very small so she wasn't as articulate ...

Several parents also described difficult and emotional negotiations for both them and their children around the gendered practice of gift-giving for birthday parties:

I remember one day we went to a party ... so the parents got trinkets for the children — the boys got swords or something and the girls got tiaras and little shoes. And Daire had a meltdown because she didn't get the tiara and shoes. All the other parents were like 'could you not put manners on the child?— that's terrible, I only bought six for the girls — there's only six girls here'. (Patricia, Parent of Daire, Age 13)

Both the example of birthday decorations and birthday gift-giving make visible the restrictive gendered practices embedded within the ordinariness of birthday celebrations. As these accounts illustrate, this gender restrictiveness – which begins so early in the child's life – is made visible by the visceral reactions of these trans children who long for affirmation by the gender normative signifiers on the other side of the binary. Their affective intensities shunt into view the restrictive gender dynamics that constantly order and direct the bodies of all children (Halberstam 2018a), dynamics that are inextricable from the politics of gender normativity that steer children and young people towards particular interests and pathways and restrict their horizons in all sorts of ways. The common sense, dismissive reactions of the other parents in Patricia's account also alert to the kind of parent labor required to predict, manage relations and protect their child, all the while being judged by others as 'indulging' their children and not parenting well enough (Neary 2019). Their reactions attempt to suppress and re-route the temporary rupture in the logics of gender caused by the intensity of the child's reaction.

The parents in this study described a plethora of affectively intense negotiations around gendered clothing, aspects that were felt all the more acutely in celebratory events. The conversations of Geraldine and John (Parents of Tadhg, Age 12) as they reflected on their son's 6th birthday, and then his Communion Day, provide an arresting glimpse into these negotiations:

Geraldine: I had war with him upstairs because it was his birthday party and I was saying 'you have to wear nice clothes, you have to!' And John came up the stairs and said: 'What are you doing? The child is upset, you're upset why are you making him wear clothes he doesn't want to wear?'

John: My thinking on it ... it was Tadhg's birthday and the two of them were up in the room crying over clothes. Let him put on what he wants and let him be happy.

...

Geraldine: the First Holy Communion ... the poor child was roaring crying ... at the dress and had the boxers [typical boys' underwear] underneath ... it was probably the worst day of our lives, mine anyway. Looking back ...

John: Yeah ... he had a choice of wearing a white robe or a white dress. And I wanted ... he wanted the robe and I wanted to have him in the robe because I knew he didn't want the dress. But ... Geraldine and her mam went with the dress. I think ... everyone was just looking at each other on the day going ... this isn't right.

Geraldine: I hate photographs of that day.

John: I was cross about it for a long time to be honest like. Because ... I just felt no one listened to me in it. Felt like everyone No one listened to me and no one listened to Tadhg in it. So it was hard like.

The images conjured here of Tadhg 'upset' as he cried with his mother over birthday party clothes and 'roaring crying' as he was pressured into parading in public in a dress he didn't want to wear are a powerfully stark illustration of the affective violence of gender norms (Hook and Wolfe 2018). Clothing practices, that appear as ordinary, familiar and even celebratory for so many were experienced as deeply injurious by many children like Tadhg in this study. We are also drawn to notice a kind of public shaming brought about by the symbol of the boy in a dress (Gerrard 2020) – a forced out-of-placeness in his own bodily display that left him distraught and his family regretful and reflecting on that day as 'the worst day of our lives' and a significant turning point in listening to Tadhg. Following Halberstam (2018b, 4), we might understand this violent moment of rupture as a 'fleshly blueprint' for the necessary unbuilding of cisnormative understandings of gender but also a moment that makes visible the everyday affective violence of gender that might otherwise go unnoticed (Hook and Wolfe 2018).

Several parents described how celebratory rituals functioned as mechanisms that marked out the boundaries of belonging, often with exclusionary and deeply isolating effects for their children. Trans children themselves were invested in being included in religious rituals, just like everyone else:

I know from the [parent] support groups, confirmation is an issue with some people and some people's children would say 'do I have to make my confirmation?' ... This time last year I was kind of thinking ... is confirmation going to happen and I said to Kevin 'well, we'll see about you making your confirmation', just in case it was an issue. Then we had drama. We had tears: 'what do you mean I mightn't make my confirmation?'. (Helen, Parent of Kevin, Age 12)

Siobhán's (Parent of Shauna, Age 5) description of her child's birthday is a striking example of the exclusionary effects of birthday party gender normativity:

Well, we had a birthday party ... and nobody came. (Silence for some time)

So, two children were sick ... but no, no one came. She wanted a 'boys only' party. Girls were not allowed. She agreed to allow me to invite these two girls we know so that Cara [sister] would have someone to play with. Thank God we did because they were the only ones who showed up ... Horrific. But Shauna just didn't really acknowledge it and just went along ... She's extremely resilient. Too much so ...

Now, it's a class of 23 [children] ... It's meant to be done 'on the QT'² by the parents ... Because they can't have kids left out. But now Shauna's never brought it up but it's the

end of the year ... there has to have been one kid with a birthday. She hasn't had one God damn invitation and that kills me ...

While Shauna has clearly developed a kind of resilience, the extent of child isolation described by Siobhán in this account is a devastating indictment of the exclusionary power of gendered celebratory rituals such as birthdays. The typically single-gender practice of birthday party invitations in operation saw Shauna commit to a 'boys only' party with the result that nobody turned up. This decision had the knock-on effect of later receiving just one out of 23 class birthday party invitations in a whole year, presumably because she has neither been accepted in the girl group nor the boy group. Furthermore, the notion that parents are instructed by the school to give out birthday party invites 'on the QT' so children are not 'left out' is dramatically ironic given the sense of isolation and exclusion experienced by Shauna and a further reminder of how these rituals – and the intensified politics of gender that they bring – inevitably permeate and entangle with everyday school life.

A final aspect signaled here by Shauna's insistence on a 'boys only' party is the question of trans children's own investments in the binary dynamics of gender in celebratory rituals. It is with this question in mind that I now turn to explore how while these cisgendered, cisnormative rituals clearly caused injury to the children in this study, they orientated towards the potential they held for gender identity affirmation. I then discuss this complex interplay between gender norms that are deeply injurious and, at the same time, part of the very terms through which gender identity is asserted and apprehended.

Celebratory rituals: frames for gender identity affirmation

As signaled by Shauna's wish for a 'boys only' party, celebratory rituals – and the visibility that they brought – proffered themselves as impactful gender identity affirming opportunities for the trans children in this study. This mirrors some children's negotiations of gender-segregated practices at school too. For instance, Sarah described the practice of re-entering the school after break time involving the children forming single-gender lines; boys' lines and girls' lines. In a supportive gesture, the teacher suggested that they would end this gendered practice but her son, Richie's, response was one of strong resistance to making this practice gender diverse:

'promise me you won't change the lines?! There has to be a boy line! I have to be in the boy line!' ... That was how he was going to ... get his message, this is how he was going to say you can't argue with this. This is the rules from above and ... changing the rules to muddy that water, he was absolutely ... I mean he was, in a way ... quite ... empowered. At the time, he was like 'don't you dare!' He was quite primal. I think we're very clear on where we stand with this!

As indicated here by Sarah's description of Richie's reaction, many trans children are heavily invested in and even reliant on the binary gendered nature of official practices to affirm and confirm their gender identity. For these children, it is not a simple case of diversifying gender at school because 'changing the rules to muddy that water' risks the legitimizing potential that public and visible gender affirmation brings. While this paper does not make claims about how children understand or embody their gender identity, Riche's account here is a powerful reminder that core issues of trans embodiment

and personhood are at stake as we consider and rethink how gender works at school (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018; Serano 2016).

The children in this study appeared to orientate towards and display investments in the gender identity affirming potential that birthday celebrations and religious life-moments offered. Jane described how her son, Justin, decided upon his birthday as a temporal marker to make his gender identity official at school:

So he himself had decided when he hit his 5th birthday he was going to get his hair cut. And he went and he got his hair cut and he decided he wanted to tell the class or get the teacher to tell the class. He was sick of battling with people to tell them he was a boy ... it's a constant ... just constant ... And so, when he was five, he got his hair cut and he went in and he asked the teacher to tell the class that ... "Justin is officially a boy, stop calling him a girl".

Sarah described how they, as a family, used the structure of a birthday party to affirm her son Richie's gender identity:

He had a coming out birthday party last year, his first as Richie. He got all the things he got for his first birthday as Beibhean, he got as Richie. So he got a little stool with his name on it and date of birth and got a placard for his bedroom door ... all these little things. So he is very clear in who he is right now.

In each of these examples, the milestone of the birthday celebration became a frame through which their gender identity was affirmed and legitimized by their school community and wider family. We might read such moments as an example of reverse-discourse (Butler 1991) wherein birthday parties – ordinarily and typically vehicles for the reproduction of gender normativity – served to affirm trans children's identities and at the same time disrupt the familiar logics of gender at school. In this way, we can see how trans children are stretching and proliferating the terms of gender (Bragg et al. 2018; Meadow 2018) and expanding, rebuilding and reimagining rituals that traditionally repeat and entrench gender as restrictive and prescriptive (Halberstam 2018a).

Similarly, Helen (Parent of Kevin, Age 12) described two transgressive moments within the ritual of Confirmation, wherein the actions taken by her son, Kevin, publicly affirmed his gender identity and at the same time queered the taken-for-granted nomenclature and body politics of gender in operation. First, Kevin decided that he would take his Confirmation name as John. At that time, he hadn't changed his name at school and so his full name to be announced from the altar would be 'Maeve Emma John'. His mother was worried about the potential reaction of the Bishop and prepared Kevin by saying:

'if the Monsignor questions the fact it's the name John just say it's my grandfather's name blah, blah, blah.' ... Turned out, the Monsignor knew my sister who was going up as one of the sponsors ... there's all these crowds and they're having a big chat on the altar and none of it is about 'John' (laughter)! So afterwards the Monsignor didn't ask any question at all and posed for loads of photos.

Later, helped by his mother and his teacher, Kevin occupied the restrictively gendered and cisnormative dynamics of Confirmation photos, taking the opportunity to affirm his gender identity:

Helen: The Confirmation: they go in for photos a day or two later and Kevin had been going 'well I don't want to do the girl poses'. Well I said 'you have to give your name when you go

up to the photographer'. And the photographer would have been a bit well 'then what do I do?' if they didn't give their name ...

Aoife: And what are the differences between the boy and girl poses?

Helen: I wouldn't have known except for the child – it's the little things that they notice ... the boys pose with their hands in their pockets and the girls pose maybe with their hands to the front (joined in prayer). Or the girls might sit to the ground like this (kneel sitting). He has three poses (for boys and girls). He takes three pictures and you choose between them. I wouldn't have noticed there were different poses. I said [to Kevin] ... 'well you just say "I want the boy poses and Mammy's fine with that"' ...

So that day I said "how did it go?" and he said "well, it got to my turn to go up and then I just saw Miss Delaney looking around and she comes flying up the hall with her clip board and just says [to him] 'a word?' and [the photographer followed instruction] ...".

Like the birthday moments above, Kevin's actions here can again be understood as a rupturing of the cisnormative, cisgendered politics of the Confirmation ritual. As trans children do the difficult everyday work to assert their gender identity and be included in restrictively gendered, cisnormative rituals, they stretch the very terms of gender intelligibility on which these rituals turn (Neary 2019). The accounts here beg us to pause; to avoid hasty orientations towards neutralizing gender and, at the same time, avoid the magnetic pull to individualizing solutions at school (Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020; Neary 2018).

Of acute significance in the accounts above too though, is the nature of the ordering, managing and directing of gender that is being done in the Confirmation photographs. The photographer choreographs the bodily actions of the children in accordance with their name and the clip-board gender identity confirmations of their teacher. Following Barad (2011, 123/124), we can see how the clip-board confirmation has literal, 'materializing effects' for the bodies and lives of these children. We can also see clearly here how gender is magnified and intensified in and through celebratory rituals; how gender is choreographed, fetishized, displayed and performed. Such moments are powerfully instructive in that they slow down and bring into sharp relief the frames of enacting gender – the ordinarily tacit and unnoticed nuts and bolts of how gender is at once performed and directed (Butler 1990). This analysis does not emphasize an understanding of gender as having no core or essence. Neither is it to suggest that children's embodied investments in gender norms are in some way limiting. Indeed, Bornstein (1994) has argued that such investments in gender norms do not necessarily stabilize or reproduce the gender binary or even stay within the frame of gender but instead signal and forefront the transformation process that is always involved in gender. Rather, the argument I am bringing to the fore here is that these trans children's negotiations of cisnormative rituals are a powerful example of how trans children are helping us to see gender anew, in all its messiness. They are providing 'the basis for very different ways of seeing the world' (Halberstam 2018a, 2018b, 87).

Concluding discussion

The accounts in this paper show that celebratory rituals – so embedded in the familiar and experienced as joyful for many children and their parents – are experienced as affectively

intensive ruptures that are deeply upsetting for these trans children and their families. The magnification and fetishization of binary gender within these rituals make visible the restrictively gendered and cisnormative workings of gender that normally go unnoticed. The children's experiences of distress presented in this paper are not intended to sensationalize or victimize trans children or individualize the 'problem' of gender. Instead, following Barad's (2010) idea that subjecthood/subjectivity comes into being and is contingent upon emergent intra-actions, these moments of intense rupture experienced by trans children and their families shunt the violent, cisgendered, cisnormative terms of gender intelligibility into view. The risk in these moments of rupture is that the potential of these affective intensities is reduced and re-routed by neoliberal individualizing frameworks of 'protection' and recognition (Halberstam 2018a, 2018b; Spade 2015; Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic 2020). In this vein, I am arguing for close attention to trans children's visceral and affective negotiations of schools and how they afford new ways of seeing and reimagining violently cisgendered standards of gender (Halberstam 2018a).

The materializing effects of intra-actions that operate within the cisnormative framework of gender is undeniable. These cisgendered rituals form part of a determining framework of intelligibility. They impact the recognizability of humanness and inform 'the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves, at the level of feeling, desire, and the body, in the moments before the mirror' (Butler 2001, 622). At the same time, while trans children are undoubtedly constrained and injured by these cisgendered rituals, their accounts also demonstrate a vehement investment in this disciplinary framework of gender. These accounts are a powerful signal of the shape and intensity of trans embodiment and a necessary reminder that fundamental issues of personhood are at stake as we reimagine how gender might work at school (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2018; Serano 2016). Echoing Kitching's (2020, 208) explication of some of the 'ways that children experience joy or transmute pain into something unique and affirmative', we can also note the ways that these children's investments in and moves to be included by violently cisgendered systems of gender are potentially transformative. They remould the cisnormative terms of gender and can be understood as a component of the 'anarchitectural' work that Halberstam (2018b) envisions.

Payne and Smith (2014) note how school leaders and teachers orient towards the promise of procedural 'solutions' that support individual trans children but resist examination of the more systemic, embedded aspects of school culture. But as Kleinman (2012) says (Allen 2018, 24): 'There are no solutions, there is only the on-going practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly'. Avoiding the temptation to orient towards the promise of 'solutions' and stay with the unpredictable potential of indeterminacy, we must trace the ways that children – like all humans – are not actors endowed with agency in the liberal, humanist sense. They are caught up in the messy entanglements of gender, school and social life, always in a state of becoming (Barad 2011) and are themselves plural beings, 'growing sideways' (Kitching 2020; Bond Stockton 2009). The accounts in this paper illustrate gender norms that are at once violent and legitimizing, essentializing and transgressive for trans children. The children's everyday negotiations of cisnormative rituals in schools prop up and reproduce restrictively gendered cisnormativity but at the same

time refashion it and thus stretch the terms of gender. These messy negotiations of gender are hopeful in their unpredictability and there is comfort in the idea that 'things always seem to exceed our attempts to know them, to get them right, to bifurcate and pin them down as 'this' or 'that' (Taylor and Blaise 2014, 389). But, at the same time, these experiences are a continuous reminder of the potential for these rituals to be imagined otherwise, to be stretched and to stretch gender in ways that allow for the diversity of all bodies to find expression. Ultimately, following Halberstam (2018a, 2018b), the accounts of trans children's everyday lives as presented in this paper have provided a powerful empirical illustration of the messiness of gender, underlining the necessity to resist neat solutions and to stay with the indeterminate complexity of the architecture of gender in primary schools.

Notes

1. Remaining cognisant of the tensions associated with umbrella identity terms, I employ the term 'trans' in this paper to refer to a spectrum of gender identifications and expressions including but not limited to transgender, gender diverse, gender creative, gender fluid, gender queer, non-binary, two spirit, pangender, bigender, omnigender, third gender, MtF, FtM. Most children in this study didn't use identity terms but identified as a gender identity that they weren't assigned at birth. Some demonstrated a fluid relationship with gender.
2. Slang for silently, quietly

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