

## Boyhood Femininity, Gender Identity Disorder, Masculine Presuppositions, and the Anxiety of Regulation

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This paper details the diagnostic discourse that has accumulated around feminine boys, including the traditional presuppositions of Gender Identity Disorder (GID). The GID discourse is examined for the ways in which it is built upon unquestioned beliefs about masculinity. Distinct from most modern considerations of gender, no effort has been made to critically theorize gender when thinking about feminine boys; masculinity is as masculinity was. Consequently, we are left with modes of diagnosis and treatment that are out of synch with modern social life, and a set of ideas that do not proceed from an adequate understanding of the range that is masculinity. New sustaining ideals are in play, and in accord with these ideals an argument is made for a new mode of psychotherapeutic address. The traditional individual trauma explanation for GID is questioned. Particular emphasis is given to the ways in which this traditional GID discourse fails to reckon with how masculinity is held in place by the strong arm of regulatory anxiety. A new position that incorporates a greater appreciation for the role of social trauma and melancholia is offered. It is argued that a theory that offers insight into the workings of melancholia as it builds the feminine boy affords a more robust set of ideas through which to contemplate the boy. In turn, we come upon a better avenue of psychotherapeutic action—one that does not employ behavioral strategies that reinforce social exclusion.

During the first week of what was to become a 6-year analysis, Jesse, then 22, described his experience as a feminine boy as follows: “There was this sense of otherness. You know, not being the norm, not the normal boy. But I don’t know, I feel like civilization has robbed me of the words to describe this.” Following on Jesse’s sentiment, I turn in this paper to boys who struggle to lay claim to cross-gendered experiences that are at odds with what is considered normal masculinity, boys who regularly feel unnamed or without claim to the gender name they desire, and without standing as intelligible humans.

A discourse has accumulated around feminine boys, constructing them as nonconforming, extreme, and disordered. This diagnostic discourse provides a particularly interesting opening to examine regulatory force, and how that force relies on (a) unquestioned presuppositions not only about that which constitutes masculinity, but also (b) that which constitutes gendered coherence and (c) the relationship of said coherence to psychological well-being.

Descriptions of feminine boys unfold almost exclusively within discussions of Gender Identity Disorder (GID). These descriptions take different forms and follow upon differing motivations—from the claims of empirical neutrality within the epistemological traditions of developmental psychiatry and psychoanalysis (Coates, 1990, 1992, 1994; Coates, Friedman, & Wolfe, 1991; Coates & Wolfe, 1995; Friedman, 1988; Green, 1987, 2008; Stoller, 1968, 1985; Zucker, 1990, 2008; Zucker & Bradley, 1995; Zucker & Green, 1989) to the theological claims and explicit activism of Christian psychology (Nicolosi, 1993; Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002; Rekers, 1995). Whether the focus is on psychic trauma or the perils of sin, the presuppositions of masculinity remain the same. Unquestioned.

### REGULATORY ANXIETY

Distinct from most modern considerations of gender, no effort is made critically to theorize gender when thinking about feminine boys. As such, this body of work bears the mark of a kind of generation gap—sage experts tuning out the queer rap of postmodernism, feminism, and queer theory. Consequently, we are left with modes of diagnosis and treatment that are out of synch with modern social life; modes of care that do not proceed from an adequate understanding of the range that is masculinity, and the mutability that is gender; modes of care that cannot see beyond normative presumption to the possibility of mobility and transformation.

Consider how Zucker and Bradley (1995) swat at considerations of “social oppression” as put forth by “social constructivists” whom they summarily write off as the “contemporary gadflies of psychiatry” (p. 55). And again, how Zucker (2008) registered his annoyance as he speaks about feminism and the modern social life of gender: “Linked to the so-called ‘second wave’ feminist revolution of the 1960s, many writers began to challenge the ‘straightjacket’ of traditional sex-typed child-rearing practices” (p. 30). Might we not reasonably agree that feminism has moved at this juncture beyond an *alleged* social movement? Might we not also agree that feminism has contributed to a vital reconsideration of child-rearing practices, however successful? Might we not agree that the feminist challenge to the constricting force of the gender binary has entered our social life beyond questionable assertion? Feminism has demonstrated, *powerfully demonstrated*, among other things, that genders are open to rearticulation. In the spirit of argument, one might wish to challenge the knowledge and power that guides feminism’s reach, but backhanded disavowal does not well serve either clinical practice or gender theory.

The kind of rift that emerges in turning away from modern social transformations can be noted in the concern that has surfaced recently regarding the planned revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, and Zucker’s prominent appointment as chair of the workgroup overseeing the section on Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders. In a 21st-century variant on “Off of the couches and into the streets!” we are witnessing a move to the new Web-street where there has been a flurry of accusation, much of which bears the understandable anxiety of the nonnormative subject faced with the authority of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. Zucker and the American Psychological Association have responded to these concerns (reframed as “confusion”) by appealing to their dedication to ending discrimination, by explaining that their task force includes a diverse group of scholars, and by repeatedly invoking their commitment to empirical science as the route to a fair and balanced review.

Indeed, Zucker is noted for his persistent and extensive empirical address of cross-gendered phenomenon, with the significant exception of treatment effectiveness studies. Nevertheless, his data serve to distinguish him from many of his clinical colleagues, who offer a different perspective on cross-gendered life and whose work is less often represented in empirical terms and more often recorded through the rhetorical strategies of the case report. Difficult though it may be to square these differing modes of data collection, it seems to me that the dominance of empirical data (data that are most often reduced to behavioral terms, that in turn reflect the behavioral dictates of the treatment strategies employed by Zucker and his colleagues) has skewed our vision, and may not afford the kind of complexity that is necessary to understand cross-gendered phenomena.

But more important, in my view, are the ways in which these empirical findings are configured on numerous unquestioned presuppositions and claims about gender. This matter seems especially important when taking up pleas for social change made by nonnormative subjects—subjects who are rarely supported by empirical findings. In this light, are empirical findings those to which we should be looking? At this juncture, might we not benefit from a departure, a deconstruction, and then move from there?

A social or developmental lag has opened between the formal empirically based discourse and the day-to-day clinical work that is undertaken with feminine boys. Within my professional and supervising experience there is a greater appreciation for variety, and even something of a clinical grassroots movement that promotes the possibilities and potentialities of childhood gender variance (see Rottnek, 1999, or Ehrensaft, 2007). A particularly interesting example of this movement is the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, DC, a national outreach group that began in 1998 for parents of gender-variant children. Summarizing the overriding ethic of the Center, Edgardo Menvielle, a child psychiatrist, recently stated that "the goal is for the child to be well adjusted, healthy and have good self-esteem. What's not important is molding their gender" (Brown, 2006, p. 1).

This modern shift in the clinical approach to boyhood femininity has been largely under-theorized. This gap may not signify much beyond the time that lies between the forces of social change, clinical redress, and our reflections on such change. Time ticks, though, with a relative tock, and given the remarkable advances of feminist theory and the impact of such theorizing on psychology in general, one is once again reminded of the strong arm of regulatory anxiety in the construction of masculinity as unquestioned.

## BINARY FORCE

Masculinity advances largely by appeal to the necessary reproduction of discreet and complementary genders: masculinity and femininity. The claim of this binary precedes any boy: Boys will be boys by not being girls. As Stoller (1985) put it, "The first order of business in being a man is don't be a woman" (p. 183).

The claims of the binary are so powerfully culturally compelled that they are unthought as natural and essential. Gender is routinely conflated with anatomy, and gender is routinely conflated with that which produces our desires and personality traits. Male traits are linked with the desire for female traits, in keeping with the model of heterosexual complementarity, and so it goes. Social order, it is claimed, rests on the reproduction of this masculine-feminine gender comple-

mentarity. Boys become boys through the reproduction of fathering, which is presumed to follow on heterosexual desire.

The punishments for not heeding the demands of this normative compact also compel our belief in the binary's necessity and natural authority/order. The strong arm of the binary continues to muscle our gendered lives, maintained as it is through punishment, impressed as it is by outside force, burned in, as it were, and thereby constituting the conditions by which genders are formed.

Retribution for gender crossing can be extreme, even deadly. Recently, in a case that garnered national attention, 14-year-old Lawrence King, a boy who wore makeup and fingernail polish, was shot and murdered, allegedly by another 14-year-old boy whom Lawrence had asked to be his Valentine. Taunting, abuse, and disruption had it seems become a way of life for Lawrence, who at the time of his death was living in a group home and treatment center for "crisis" kids. It seems his alleged murderer also had his share of troubles, including a history of family violence. Taunting and abuse can be a daily feature of adolescent life: Homophobia and misogyny run school halls. Clearly, though, something went awry in this case. And one is left to ask why was there no one, why was there no social system to do a better job of helping Lawrence and his alleged murderer?

I am reminded here of Mitchell, a boy I saw after his kindergarten teacher told his parents during a midyear parent-teacher conference that she didn't think Mitchell, ("this *kind* of boy") fit in the private prep school he was attending. It seemed he was "too pudgy," "too colorful," had "too much to say," often in a "most animated" way, and that above all, he felt too much—"sometimes he even cries." Mitchell's parents brought him to see me as they considered moving him to a different school, and because they were concerned about the lingering effects of the teacher's disdain. As Mitchell's father put it in our first meeting, "How much of her hate did he take in?"

The parents spoke directly about their son's femininity, and while they were concerned about his welfare, they were not especially troubled by his gender variance. They were quite clear that they were not seeking a consult to correct his gender; instead, they wanted to know how to help him feel less injured by how others experienced him.

They found him to be a "sweet loving boy," who they understood to be "overly sensitive." His mother spoke at length about how Mitchell had been a child who was always very sensitive to noise, color, smells. She said, "It's like he is a sensation magnet." He could in fact become easily overwhelmed, though this was abating somewhat as he got older. They wondered about how his increased sensitivity may have influenced his gender experience. For example, they thought that Mitchell might move toward girls as playmates because they were less rough and more accepting of and interested in his sensitivities.

In my first consult with Mitchell, after we spoke about his school ("It's so strict"; "The toys are so boring"; "Music is so good; do you know Bach?"), he set out to draw a cake. He "decorated" it with bright pink frosting and "orange sprinkles." I commented that it seemed quite the opposite of how he was talking about his school. He replied, "Oh no, Mrs. R. [his teacher] wouldn't like it. Anyhow, cake makes you fat." He then drew a series of blue stripes, as though the cake were leaking. Or was it imprisoned? I said that it looked like the cake was crying. He replied, "No, cakes don't cry." I then asked if the cake was in jail. He looked at me curiously and said, "Cakes don't go to jail!" I said in fact that was true. But that sometimes, pink boys did get in trouble. And that sometimes, boys who are in trouble, cry.

Another curious look. Another drawing. This one in pencil: a rather well-rendered metronome, accompanied by a rambling story about Bach. As I listened, I began to wonder if he thought his music teacher *was* Bach, but no matter, he was quite taken with the idea of music making. I asked

him if he knew the word “Baroque.” He did not. I explained that Bach lived during a time when people liked a lot of color and were extravagant with their sprinkles. He allowed that would be “nice.”

I saw Mitchell for three more sessions. During those visits Mitchell played with a range of toys, including toys that many boys would have disregarded or shunned, like the dolls and the dollhouse, which he enjoyed rearranging. He drew miniature pictures that he carefully taped to the dollhouse walls. The play was quite creative, and involved many elements, and story lines that primarily involved domestic plots and aesthetic concerns—narratives one might normatively link with femininity. But interestingly, Mitchell never “named” his gender. He did not refer to himself as either a boy or a girl; did this unnamng follow on avoidance, or did it “speak” to how gender was undone through his identity, leaving him without designation?

When I brought his lack of gender naming to his attention, he said that sometimes kids made fun of him and called him names. He reported these interpersonal experiences as though he was somewhat confused by how he was perceived. But curiously, he still did not name himself “boy” or “girl.” And I found myself wondering if he might feel himself to be “mixed” versus binary, and why was there not a way to be seen as such? He said that kids could be “rigid”—a word that I was sure was not his own, perhaps one he got from his parents. I allowed that it was hard to feel judged, and that sometimes a person did not always feel like they fit with the rules. I suggested that sometimes creativity even led some people to change the rules, and linked this thought to an art book in my office about which he had shown interest—a book that illustrated the progression in painting from realism to impressionism to modern nonfigurative painting and minimalism (one of his paintings for the dollhouse was Pollock-esque, another mimicked Agnes Martin’s signature lines).

When I met with his parents after these consults, I concurred with the decision to move Mitchell to a different school. I gave them some information about support groups for parents of gender variant children. We talked at length about how to hold open a space for Mitchell to reflect on his experience of difference. I suggested that they might want to be especially keen to take note of those times when Mitchell might feel shame. Mostly, though, I listened to them and felt assured that Mitchell was protected and loved, and that their reflective capacities were good enough to help this boy. Further, they seemed able to read the social life of gender and to look for those moments of social transformation and malleability that would allow this boy to find his variant subjectivity.

Though, I kept coming back to the metronome. I even went to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where I found that metronome derives from the Greek “metron”/to measure and “nomos”/law. To be measured by the law; was that what Mitchell was trying to tell me? How the tick of the law had entered him? And the question that followed for me was, how do we help children grasp the contrapuntal (as Bach might have it) discourse of law?

Here I feel most fortunate to have had my clinical thinking influenced by the postmodern critique of the will to power. Yes, the social order of the binary rules; it is the law that ticks loudest. But modern reconsiderations and shifting social forces have ticked in return. Reckoning with variance and the impress of social contingencies has led to the reconceptualization of gender as more malleable, more chaotic (Harris, 2005). Gender identity—the internal conviction regarding one’s gender classification—is no longer positioned as a fixed identity or essence at the core of a person. This turn toward the chaotic complexity of gender speaks to the productive possibilities of gender variance, to the place within masculinity for feminine masculinity, and the place within boyhood for feminine boys. This contemplation of chaotic complexity also invites the reconsideration of

the supposed link between gender coherence and well-being; there is much more latitude than has been previously presumed, and surely more latitude than that which directs the diagnosis of GID.

Still, modernity's march in the name of difference and variation has been, at best, inconsistently successful. Boys and men blurring the binary continue to stick like a fishbone in our psychological throat. We cough in accord with the structural dictates of the binary. We struggle still to clear our throats of a legacy of exclusion and grievance, despite what is by now 75 years of feminist critique of the masculine/feminine divide and almost 25 years of the queer deconstruction of gender.

A striking example along these lines can be taken from the literature on feminine boys, and the language used to describe/diagnose them. Consider how Friedman (1988) identified a group of boys whom he described as suffering within the "syndrome" of "juvenile un-masculinity" (p. 199). He described these boys as feminine but not so feminine as to qualify for a GID diagnosis. Rekers (1995) also employed this descriptor, providing an intriguing example of the discursive intersection between the traditions of developmental psychiatry and Christian psychology. This "syndrome" of "juvenile un-masculinity" corresponds as well to what Zucker and Bradley (1995) coined a "sub-clinical manifestation" of gender identity disorder (p. 25). Variance becomes "subclinical" via ex officio medical rhetoric. Gender is fixed as a binary system of conformity, variance is erased, and the marginal, even the *marginal* marginal boy is deemed pathological.

All genders are plagued by anxiety. All genders lack coherence. All genders are colored by defensive operations and fictive performance. But the regulatory regime moves with particular vigilance and diagnostic overdrive in the face of masculine femininity. Throughout the discourse on feminine boys, masculinity is not queried; *masculinity is, and is therefore diagnostic*. Justice and expert judgment do not proceed through an account of masculinity's social and historical construction. Variance is read as disturbance or illness; rarely is variance recognized for the ways in which it speaks to the range of that which is normal, and never is it read for its potential, or relished for its ideality.

### FEMININITY AS SYMPTOM

The diagnostic rhetoric that corrals feminine boys propagates and perpetuates the anxious assessment of a boy's identificatory bonds with his parents. Is the boy properly aligned? Has he identified with his father? Is that identification robust and competitive? Has he separated from his mother? Is that separation secured through the proper degree of disidentification from that which is maternal and feminine?

For the feminine boy this separation is disrupted by the boy's continued attachment to and identification with his mother. Traditionally, this maternal/feminine identification has been read as a symptom (Friedman, 1988; Green, 1987; Stoller, 1968, 1985). The dis-eased transfer of femininity to a boy has most often been depicted as coming from an arresting mother. As Green (1987) advised, "You've got to get these mothers out of the way. Feminine kids don't need their mothers around" (p. 275). Green's blunt advice follows on the ways in which psychologists have repeatedly posited a course of development that presumes early trauma and forecasts maturational difficulties for boys who identify with their mothers. The idea of development is incongruous with this model of arrest.

The arresting mother from which a feminine boy is said to hail remains remarkably constant given the ideological differences that separate the various theorists who have constructed the tradi-



tional discourse on feminine boys, as well as the differing modes of therapeutic address that characterize their diagnostic and treatment approaches. Differing and even contradictory dynamic explanations are offered for this psychogenic mother, and yet she remains on the whole very similar, whether she is depicted as lacking proper maternal empathy (Lothstein, 1988), or as excessively symbiotic (Stoller, 1968, 1985), whether she is overgratifying, and thereby intensifying separation anxiety (Greenson, 1968), or overbearing resulting in poor social conditioning (Nicolosi & Nicolosi, 2002; Rekers, 1995), whether she traumatically transfers unresolved trauma catalyzing separation anxiety and aggression (Coates et al., 1991; Coates & Wolfe, 1995) or lacks social proficiency and adequate affect regulation fostering an insecure mother–child bond (Zucker & Bradley, 1995).

However this pathogenic mother is configured—through lack or profusion—she arrests, consumes, and disorients. Traditional developmental theory does not afford the possibility that a boy could construct a feminine identity *along with* his mother (and others). Rather he is seen as *stopped and subsumed within* his mother’s troubled subjectivity (her traumas, her anxiety, her depression), and his femininity is interpreted as a snared regressive lack of separation.

There is no consideration given to relational transfers that are not the result of dominating or traumatic intromissions. There is no consideration given to the possibility that a boy could identify with his mother, and through processes of internalization and gender mobility constitute his own feminine subjectivity. There is no consideration given to relational exchange or intersubjective transfers that are founded in mutual recognition.

The ways in which a feminine boy exceeds the norm is not approached as the possibility of transformation but rather as symptomatic of underlying pathology. For example, the possibility of a mother–son (feminine to feminine) bond that disrupts the symbolic order (of feminine to masculine) is only read as a sign of danger not as a site of possible social transformation. To wit, Chassegeut-Smirgel’s (1976) prognostication that too much access to femininity can lead to “psychic death” for a boy (p. 349).

Traditionally, one would be led toward the presumption that boyhood femininity is deadly because it represents a defense against separation from the mother, and anxiety about assuming a boy’s proper place alongside his father within the symbolic order. I do not necessarily disagree with these traditional descriptions at least as they configure a feminine boy in relation to the prevailing symbolic. I do think feminine boys experience difficulty in separating from their mothers and attaching to their fathers. I do not, however, agree with the presumption that this mother–son father–son configuration is necessarily pathological, or that these marginal boys are on the margin only as the consequence of trauma or relational insufficiency.

Trauma in the normative subject’s eyes may be the transformative undoing of normative order in the variant subject’s quest to resist assimilation. As Judith Butler (2004) so eloquently put it, “There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human” (p. 4). The departure of the feminine boy is routinely taken for trauma, but trauma for whom, him or the normative order?

## PAIN’S REGISTRATION

The urgency of a clinical discourse that theorizes norms beyond the impress of punishment, and the social beyond the reductive rhetoric of social roles, is perhaps best illustrated in discussions of pain as advanced by traditional theorists of boyhood femininity. Pain as described by Nicolosi

(1993, 2002), Rekers (1995), and Green (1987) is the pain of punishment, humiliation, and shame, pain that is seen as coming from outside social forces. And although they do not theorize the internalization of such pain, they do warn of the pain of difference, the pain and shame felt by the feminine boy in the face of social force.

Pain as it is described and theorized by Zucker and Bradley (1995), and most comprehensively by Coates et al. (1991; Coates & Wolfe, 1995), includes the pain of social punishment as well as the pain of difference. But it also includes trauma that is transferred intergenerationally from mother to son, pain that is relationally introjected, pain that is configured as the catalyst of boyhood femininity. Coates and her colleagues claim that GID follows on the manner in which a boy's mind is ensnared by a traumatized mother. The boy is thereby robbed of his sovereignty and his own autonomy.

Pain in one instance is seen to reach socially from outside in, and in another to reach psychologically from inside out. In one case, gender results in pain, the pain of difference that follows on normative injunction. In the other, gender is the result of pain, the pain of the interned. At stake here, as Butler (2004) pointed out, are considerations of the feminine boy's mental freedom. On one hand, mental freedom—the expression of gender difference—garners pain (the pathologization that greets the feminine boy). On the other hand, mental freedom is curbed or disturbed by pain (the recruited mind).

Surely we should, and we must remain open to the recognition of pain in another. Yet the medico-theological terms of the traditional discourse—and the failure of that discourse to more fully reckon with the social—collapse the perception of pain into the anxiety of normative regulation. How the feminine boy challenges social order is too easily mistaken for pain. The resistance and play of the nonnormative are too easily categorized as lacking in freedom, as opposed to granting more autonomy to the categories we employ toward understanding the human. The fantasy play that colors nonnormative social structures, and the closets within which nonnormative bonds are forged are disavowed, and not affirmed as legitimate ways to imagine (boys fantasize *this way* not *that way*).

The clinical risk of pathologization calls for a more perplexed and humble approach, one that does not mistake social consensus for well-being, and one that is not so assured in its attribution of pain. If one follows basic psychoanalytic presuppositions as to the ways in which fantasy is interimplicated with embodiment, and if it is also accepted that genders evolve and become embodied in a relational world, then one would have to be open to considering the ways in which embodiment and gendered states are open to a range of fantastic expressions and relational dynamics. Including traumatic intromissions, as well as nonnormative openings. Further, if one accepts that relational dynamics create varying intersubjective spaces, spaces from and through which genders emerge, spaces that are more or less coherent and more or less organizing and loving, spaces that inflect the manner of the transfer of gendered fantasies and attributes, then one also has to be open to considering the ways in which the construction of gender is open to a range of organizations and coherence.

Yet if one accepts that the human is never outside social regulation (even before birth, even in resistance), and if it is further accepted that genders are formed and constituted by cultural norms, then one is left to question the attribution of ordinary pain. There is no pure psychology of the protagonists (mother and feminine son). There is no pure authority of the past. Intromissions, both traumatic and nurturing, are always and already socially and historically constituted, open to a variety of nuance and complication (even contradiction). We cannot speak, as do the traditional theorists, of boyhood femininity, with such psychic specificity.



Pain for the nonnormative subject is always and already multiply inflected. So too is the perception of that pain. Without a theory that locates such perception and assessment within the constituting frame of the social, we are left with no social demarcation for this clinical scene. The ethical insufficiency that issues from this lack is that it leaves the therapist inadequately prepared to address countertransference, and to recognize if counterresistance or counteranxiety is being repeated through normative presumption, and reactive pathologization.

### PARADOX, NORMS, AND VARIANT POSSIBILITY

Our readings of pain must be examined for the ways in which they are contingent upon and consistent with the normative presuppositions that direct their reach. Here, it is imperative to reflect on the fact that there can be no empirical norm without variance. Norms have morphed into that which is considered essential and essentially coherent, ignoring the tempering work of variance and the possibilities of cultural expansion. Shadowed as well are our abilities to appreciate variance, to reflect justly, to respond with empathy, and even to respond within the pleasure of play.

Gendered codes, behaviors, and traits circulate and transform through mini-social intrusions within modern social life, a life that is ordinarily ordered by the binary system of gender, but a life that is also open to moments of nonnormative play and malleability. This social life in turn encapsulates the family. The family is less a fortress, more a clearinghouse, open to the currency of social forces (both majority and minority); the “outside” society is indelibly “inside” the family.

The “outside,” though, has remained largely outside the attachment theory and the social learning theory that underscore the traditional psychological discourse on boyhood femininity. While “social” does indeed qualify the learning in social learning theory, the society that appears is whittled down to normative order. Consider, for example, how Zucker and Bradley (1995) telescoped the social into “social reinforcement,” concentrating on “parental gender socialization,” and a parent’s ability to encourage “psychosocially appropriate gender identification” (pp. 223–224). Through this manner of behavioral reduction—which is amply reflected in the works of Nicolosi and Rekers—social and normative forces are uncritically reduced to one and the same. There is no complex social field. There is no complex-ed family. There is no variance. There is no resistance (only impropriety). There is no paradox (only pathology).

Perhaps, even more troubling, though, is the absence of the “outside” in attachment theory, as it has been applied toward the construction of the feminine boy (arguably the most influential epistemology employed to understand feminine boys, and children in general). Attachment inflected relational theories coupled with feminist theory and critical theory (hence, the social) have been employed with considerable élan toward our modern understanding of femininity (Benjamin, 1988), maternity (Chodorow, 1978), and gender development in general (Harris, 2005).

Theorizing about feminine boys has yet to take such a turn. Attachment as a discourse and research tradition has, remarkably, not considered gender as an identity category. Gender is most often collapsed into sex assignment and sex role adaptation. Attachment inflected developmental theories more often than not move in step with normative gender presumptions. The family in these attachment-inflected theories is the traditional family that has always held center stage in psychology. The social world, the wealth of representational and signifying processes through which any family is constituted is largely overlooked, once again in keeping with psychology’s

tradition of splitting the psyche and the social. (Tronick's, 2007, recent work is a promising shift, as he begins at least to examine attachment as shaped by culture.)

Relational-attachment patterns and styles are gendered: Boys separate, girls attach. And they do so via affect states and relational bids that mimic traditional presumptions regarding masculinity and femininity: Girls cling via hysteria and brightly colored sentiments (sugar, and spice, and all things nice). These feminine "symptoms" are often read as indicative of relational breakdown and distress, and in turn they are routinely linked with disorders of separation and regulation. Boys bolt via obsessional control, aggression, and muted emotions (snakes, and snails, and puppy dog tails). These "behaviors" are less often read as indicative of relational trouble, but, when they are, they are linked with disorders of attention and attachment.

### MASCULINITY AS MANTLE

If, as Riviere (1929) suggested, femininity is a masquerade, one that is ingenuously carried forth with a bright mask of emotion, and rests on the repression of aggression, then masculinity might be looked upon as a mantle, worn with the appropriate expression of aggression abetted by emotional/sentimental restraint.

Depictions of feminine boys rest in large measure on accounts of their conflicts with aggression and what is seen as their countering emotional sensitivity. They tumble too little. They feel too much. Feminine boys' reluctance to fight, to tussle, to risk injury is seen as a diagnostic sign, which in turn is read as a harbinger of a compromised masculine identity, impotence, and failed phallic heterosexual adulthood. Consider Rekers' (1995) depiction of Craig, a 4-year-old boy, who "displayed high rates of pronounced feminine mannerisms, gestures, and gait," "was dominated by feminine topics," and "avoided boyish play, being both unable and unwilling to participate in rough-and-tumble games of other boys his age." Craig "declined to defend himself when with his peers, and he expressed fears of getting hurt" (p. 257). Craig's disinclination to play with other boys is characterized by Rekers as compulsive and rigid. One could wonder if Craig might have suggested the opposite, were he able to, that boys' persistent pursuit of rough-and-tumble play was compulsive and rigid, and moreover open to escalation that often culminates in violence. What, too, Craig might have asked about the gripping expectation that boys endure pain while not expressing it as part of play (Manninen, 1992)? Zucker and Bradley (1995), in their overview of the phenomenology of GID, spoke of the ways in which feminine boys "appear to have trouble distinguishing between rough-and-tumble play and intent to hurt" (p. 19). A curious assertion given that hurt does often occur in rough play and is often the intention (however unconscious). Might they be confusing "trouble distinguishing" from *trouble dissociating*, trouble keeping quiet, not naming the hurt, and enduring pain (Manninen, 1992; Pollock, 1998)?

Aggression must be displayed, activity must be maintained, and passivity must be repudiated. These lessons have traditionally been situated between father and son; masculinity follows on the transfer of aggression between father and son, and the dissolution of sexual desire (the taboo of homosexuality) as it leads into Oedipal structuring. From there, the dilemma further plays out between boys and boys. Sadism and mastery (threads of the mantle) are often relational gambits. In this way, boys wrangle toward their proper phallic stance: aggressive, active, heterosexual, not receptive, not passive, not homosexual.

Nicolosi & Nicolosi (2002), for example, pointedly tell parents of feminine boys of the “statistical probabilities that their son would eventually involve himself in homosexual behavior” (p. 34). They then make a direct link to the necessity of an active father–son bond as a means of preventing homosexuality. This bond is given limited illustration beyond what could be called paternal behaviorism (the modeling and reinforcement of traditionally masculine activities). Further, while the active and aggressive bond of fathers and sons is put forward as a means of working-through, the dicey terrain of such effort is never actually described in the traditional discourse on feminine boys. Aggressive prescription, dire warnings, and punishments are detailed, but no working-through. Belying the role of unmetabolized aggression and sadism in the construction of normative masculinity.

### BEHAVIORAL PATERNALISM AND MELANCHOLY CONSEQUENCE

One such consequence or legacy is well illustrated in the treatment of men who suffer through the internalized normalizing consequences of behavioral paternalism. I have had the opportunity to treat many young men, who often come into treatment in conflict over their jobs. They are typically in high-paying traditionally patriarchal jobs, in which they enact a false-self competency, sometimes with spectacular results, but fall simultaneously into a dulling dysthymia that over time, like a slow-moving arthritis, can have crippling effects. Analysis almost always reveals that they forswore more creative and less traditional career routes that they felt to be inadequately masculine.

In this regard, my patients mirror Stoller’s (1968) assertion regarding feminine boys, when he described them as having, “precocious ability with paints and other coloring materials, not only in the flamboyant use of colors but also in imaginative, well-formed objects expansively placed on paper and telling an understandable story” (p. 127). Then, without adequate explanation, he denounces such creativity and flamboyance as a “lovely sign of nonetheless psychopathology,” which he believes either time or treatment will remove (p. 128).

Might we read in Stoller’s quick denouncement the anxiety of regulation cloaked in diagnosis? Was Stoller reacting to the artistic product, or process? Was he reacting to a process that is often colored by hysterical affect states, broad strokes, colorful embellishments, and swirling narratives—as is often the case in artistic production? In other words, might we note something in the manner of a phobic counter-transference reaction in Stoller’s unexplained denouncement? Or might we see here how Stoller may have underappreciated the ways in which marginal subjects employ creative means to reach toward cultural malleability? Is it not through the creative rupture of cultural barriers that new social forms are born? And isn’t it the case that such rupture has often been policed as mad? And how exactly does time operate within Stoller’s estimation? Who winds the clock? As in, the clock is ticking, when are you going to get a regular job and lead a regular life?

Consider in this regard my patient Ted who entered treatment just as he became a partner in a prestigious architecture firm. He presented a litany of physical complaints, most prominent among them headaches, back pain, insomnia, and impotence. Soon into the analysis a full-blown clinical depression surfaced. Much could be said about this treatment and how we came to untangle Ted’s despair, but of particular note in this context were our efforts to sort through how he found himself in a realm of work that he described as “old-boy-boxed-in.”

Ted had a degree in art history from a well-known liberal arts college, and had been encouraged by several of his professors to pursue a career in art. In addition to studying history, he also painted. His understandable anxiety about whether he could make a living as an artist or an academic was compounded by the unexpected death of his father shortly after Ted finished college. In what we came to understand as one of the consequences of Ted's melancholic incorporation of his father, he quickly applied and was accepted at an architecture school, which happened to be the same school where his father had studied law. More precisely, we came to understand that long before his father's death, Ted had effected this melancholic incorporation. Early on, he had rejected his father but simultaneously incorporated him as a kind of never-possible perfection. His father was imposing, handsome, authoritarian, and accomplished. He found Ted's femininity troubling, and often "coached" him in more normative boyhood activities. Ted often came up against the shadow of this object, at once desiring it and rejecting it. He felt in turn rejected by his father, who appeared to favor Ted's older brothers, who were more accomplished at traditionally masculine activities, such as sports. In keeping with Isay's (1989) analysis of father-son dynamics for homosexual men, it seemed likely to me that the rejection that colored this father-son relationship had been mutually constructed and was colored by the father and son's efforts not only to manage their anxiety about the son's gender difference but also to manage their anxiety regarding the sexual desire that inflected their relationship.

It was of course important to analyze how this melancholic incorporation colored and constricted Ted's relationships. But it was equally important to understand how this paternal incorporation operated to constrain Ted's creativity and daring. Repeatedly, Ted found himself working on large-scale corporate projects, office buildings principally, and working in turn with the corporate clients who retained his services. While he found the scale of these projects exciting, he tired of them as formulaic. Similarly, while he often envied the slick command of his clients, he also tired of their focus on the "bottom line" as opposed to the line of the design.

Slowly, we began to make links with the ways in which Ted was living through his incorporation of his father, and how that incorporation shadowed his work life. Slowly as well, he began to shift his focus. He joined forces with a new female associate at his firm, and together they won a competition to design a theatre. That partnership blossomed, and one day as he was recounting the pleasure of a project on which they were working, he recalled his efforts at rebuilding a playhouse on his family's property that had been used for many years by his older brothers. When his brothers moved on to other interests, the house fell into his hands. Laying claim to the house, Ted set about redecorating, as he described it, "a la 'Bewitched,' an homage to Samantha, very 60s housewife." He made curtains, he painted, he applied appliquéd daisies to the walls, and his crowning achievement was wall-to-wall shag carpeting made from remnants he procured from the trash. He undertook this project in secret, wishing to unveil it to his family upon completion. Unveil it he did, and Ted laughed as he said, "Can you imagine? They were horrified, amused, but horrified."

As we spoke about this project, Ted insinuated that domestic creations were evidence of a faulty boy, who was weak and mediocre. But his childhood projects, such as the clubhouse, hardly struck me as mediocre or weak. As I pointed out, such projects, and the manner in which he conveyed them, seemed to be fueled by complete seriousness and passion. One does not stitch wall-to-wall carpeting without drive. Eventually we began to see Ted's wish to demean his visions as a defense against his love of extravagance and flamboyance. As Ted put it, "You notice, I wasn't interested in June Cleaver, it was Samantha who did it for me."

It became important to understand that Ted's visions were not solely domestic. In fact, he often set out to undomesticate the domestic. Along these lines, Ted and his partner took on a pro-bono job creating the set for a charity drag ball. He brought in pictures to show me what they had created. He had never done this before, and I was mindful of the unveiling of the clubhouse. As I looked at the photos, I laughed over their outlandish aspect and the zany enthusiasm they seemed to convey.

I noticed, though, that Ted seemed eager for me to hand the photos back, as though we should not linger over the images. I brought this to his attention, and with some reflection he thought that was correct. As we worked to understand his response, he revealed that he was concerned that I was too permissive. But in addition, he feared that my permissiveness would implode and I would pull away from my enjoyment of his creations. It was in this way that we began to understand an important family dynamic. It seems that his parents and his brothers, his father in particular, often appeared to take pleasure in Ted's capacity to create larger-than-life spectacles. But after a while, Ted felt them to grow self-conscious about such enjoyment, and pull away. In fact, I realized that what I was enjoying was the way in which the photographed images were extreme and irresponsible in their fantasy, and thereby more enjoyable than everyday fantasies. As Sontag (1964) has suggested, such visions are liberated from moral relevance, duty, and seriousness.

Vision that sees around everyday regulation is regularly met with regulatory anxiety. The moral commitment of what might be called regulatory rationalism is privileged. And normativity that is mistaken for cohesion is enforced and internalized. Repression and depression often follow. I have found it to be the case, as I described with Ted, that analysis of this depression frequently leads one toward the melancholic internalization of the paternal. This internalization need not be solely based on a boy's experience with his father. In fact, I think it more likely that this introject is a distillation and combination of many voices that speak and act through a kind of behavioral paternalism. In other words, this internalization that is distilled as paternal is a combined voice including father's, mother's, sibling's, teacher's, coach's, minister's, and so on. This social intromission voices a behavioral command, or demand for adaptation by which the boy must comply in order to avoid cruelty, condemnation, and pain. This voice is unconsciously reinforced as a never-possible perfection, one that is simultaneously desired (for its strength), admired (for its normative moral privilege), and grievously rejected as unloving.

With these ideas in mind, in the course of an analysis, one is then in the position of understanding the frequent and turbulent pattern of a men's quest to embody the paternal, to secure the paternal through desire, and to reject the paternal as unloving. The analysis of these paternal dynamics are often at the heart of our efforts to understand the difficulty men encounter in forming lasting attachments with other men, and as I have illustrated in my discussion of Ted, also aids in the understanding of men's ability to establish a satisfying work life.

The therapeutic work I described with Ted is to some degree a redress of the traditional presumption that masculinity is a site of emotional disavowal. Feminine boys present a challenge to that ideal, and certainly it is not without meaning that most often such boys come to the attention of mental health authorities because it is felt that they are too sensitive, they cry too easily, they are too flamboyant; in short, they are too expressive in a variety of ways. They upset what Davidson (2001) referred to as the "affective geography of gender" (p. 444). The colorful, sentimental, and hysterical themes that sometimes inform the play of feminine boys threaten the rugged, tight-lipped, stoic terrain of masculinity. Embarrassing excess looms. When emotion leaks, when tears fall, they are often seen as ill tempered, mocked as shrill, and diagnosed as feminine.

Psychologists routinely fault feminine boys for their emotional states. Feminine boys are described as “whiny,” “mincing,” “weak,” “just like a girl.” These modes of address not only signal the demeaned status of feminine boys (one is entitled to speak of them in such degrading ways, just as one is entitled to demean girls) but also illustrate how anguish as a bid toward social redress is shunned. And how spilled emotion as a call to social transformation is belittled.

The psychological discourse on feminine boys is a staging ground for the regimented regulation of masculine expressivity. In an intriguing collection of writings on narratives of masculinity and emotion, Shamir and Travis (2002) argued that this turn from masculine sentimental expression is in keeping with the work of separating genders “along the line of emotional expressivity: a feminine mode marked by effusion of sentiment and its representational conventions, in contrast to a masculine mode where affect is presented negatively, in terms of disavowal and repression” (p. 4).

One is left to question how the goals of adjustment that shape the traditional therapeutic techniques employed with feminine boys re-enact and reinstate disavowal and repression—techniques that rely on behavioral desensitization, and the gradual, though often coercive removal of toys and activities associated with femininity. This erasure of the feminine is coupled with coaching the boy in normative masculine play (employing behavioral reinforcement). But in so doing, have these therapists exercised adequate sensitivity to the pain and humiliation faced by feminine boys? Have they too quickly overlooked and failed to relish the particular idealities of feminine boys? Instead, can we create a holding environment for these boys? Can we dedicate ourselves to creating an ever larger and more variegated culture? Do our current theories even begin to approach the changes made within modern families, and the moments of cultural malleability that are open to the feminine boy?

### TRANSFORMING NEXUS

My clinical experience with what is by now scores of feminine boys and their families, along with men, such as Ted, who have a history of boyhood femininity, has afforded me the opportunity to consider how feminine boys and their parents create moments within which the social order of gender is challenged. Within such moments a transforming nexus of gender transfer and malleability is created. Gender is resignified through collective intersubjective fantasies and terms; bonds are forged. These bonds, this challenge to the prevailing order, can be created through a wide range of relational dynamics, fantasies, material conditions, and beliefs (as is true for any parent–child bond). Slipping the symbolic can happen through freedom as well as alienation. Moments of malleability open through loving protection, just as they open through malignant seduction. Speaking to power may follow on mental freedom or mental anguish. How, and if, a transforming nexus is created is as individual as any parent–son pair.

The creation of a transforming nexus is undertaken with both parents, but it may have a particular significance for mothers and their feminine sons. In direct contrast to Green’s suggestion that feminine boys do not need their mothers, it has been my overwhelming clinical experience that those boys who can, along with their mothers, create a holding environment fare much better as they move into the outside world. Across time, this mother–son dialogic is internalized and comes to serve as a voice that privileges the boy’s peculiar ideality, offers solace in the face of normative cruelty, and holds out the hope these boys need to imagine their selves otherwise. This internalization is not solely based on a boy’s experience with his mother. This introject is more likely to be a



distillation and combination of many parental voices, including grandmothers', aunts', sisters', teachers', father's, uncles', television characters', and so on.

Again, in contrast to Green's assertion regarding the need to separate feminine boys from their mothers, I have consistently found it to be the case that those boys who cannot establish this holding transforming nexus do not fare nearly as well as they move forward into the world of school and others outside their family. Many permutations of this parent-child breakdown can occur, and many psyches follow. But one pattern that I have had frequent opportunity to analyze is of abject young men caught in a web of loss; this melancholic condition is usually accompanied by a narcissistic presentation.

Consider Kyle, a young man who came into treatment following a string of affairs with mostly older men that had all ended in turmoil. Kyle felt undervalued, the men overburdened. These affairs were often fueled by the use of various intoxicants, principally amphetamines and euphorics, leading to periods of orgiastic abandon and a fleeting sense of richness and expansion. These affairs ended as Kyle, fearful of an encroaching separation and state of dissolution, sought more and more attention and care, presumably overwhelming the object. Enraged and unable to link his anxieties with his own state of genuine abjection and internal emptiness, he focused on insuring and enhancing his exterior desirability.

Kyle was a traditionally handsome young man, and with the effort of exercise, diet, and the equipoise of the unfashionable fashionable, he garnered a great deal of attention. However, I was immediately struck by the ways in which this attractive surface seemed forced and perhaps supercilious. These were not welcome countertransference responses. I questioned my own experience of envy. I questioned my own vulnerability to encroaching age, mortality, and waning desirability. Yet, over and over again as Kyle's efforts to garner attention did not hold, we began to understand that there was something about this narcissistic surface that in fact was not born out of desire, but rather lack. This was not an embodiment made in or played in the presence of another. The fantasies that might come into play in the stylization of embodiment were surprisingly shallow. Indeed, Kyle's gender experience was rather empty, only spoken of as purchased, and dictated by the hierarchy of designer cache. Similarly, outside of the sexual abandon of euphoric merger, he preferred the quick release of masturbation that was achieved while watching pornography and seemed indiscriminate and largely void of underlying fantasy.

Through many years of what was at times a remarkably turbulent analysis, marked by periods of rage in the face of felt neglect, and anxious demands for more and yet more, I began through my countertransference experience of Kyle's efforts to dissolve any boundary there may have been between us, to grasp how there had been no truly maternal space for Kyle as a child. Key here was my feeling of near-constant intrusion. At times, it seemed Kyle was everywhere: at the theater, the gym, the pharmacy, the restaurant, the lecture, the museum. He avidly followed the public career of my partner, eager to discuss dimensions of my personal life seemingly before I had had time to experience them. This feeling state was encapsulated in a dream I had in which Kyle peered through the glass doors that open into the lobby of the apartment building where I live. My associations to the permeability of glass, the wish not only to see in but the desperate and fantastic effort to get in, reinforced my growing feeling of what Žižek (1992) might have called "the object that came too close," an ominous seductive object that suffocates (p. 8). This association helped me to understand, in accord with some of what Kyle had begun to describe about his early life, how he had had both too much and too little of his mother, who seemed enshrined in her own melancholia.

Kyle's mother was a young South American woman who married a somewhat older English man. Soon after their marriage, they immigrated to America. She seemed always to be in mourning for her past, her country of origin, and a life that was consistently held forward as better, more cultured, and more civilized. She lived in a cloud of neurasthenic illness: headaches, vertigo, palpitations, and tremors. Kyle's father was positioned as a failure and a boor, and together mother and son in something of a narcissistic merger ruled the father insignificant. This merger, however, was not an opening, but rather a depressive melancholic withdrawal.

The transferential pull toward this melancholic position was palpable and powerful throughout much of Kyle's analysis. There were moments when I questioned my ability to go forward, to continue in the face of his pressing despair and desire. The pull and suck of a merged collapse was truly overwhelming. The emergence and reoccurrence of periods of abject dissolution, only reinforced my doubt, as Kyle faced what Grosz (1993) has called "the absolute mortality and vulnerability of the subject's relation to and dependence on the object" (p. 198). Time and again we were pulled into a vortex of fragility, as Kyle's narcissistic defenses gave way to his experiential emptiness and into a space of nothingness.

Key to allowing this melancholic position to emerge in the treatment, but not give in to its darker pull, were our efforts also to grasp the sensual and generative desire for another; this is the progressive push of melancholia. Our work in this regard accrued, and over time we were able to productively move from this progressive wish to better understand Kyle's abjection and narcissistic defenses. Our analysis of this maternal melancholia gradually afforded Kyle the opportunity to imagine, approach, and to some extent begin to construct an encounter with innerness that he could bring to another, an innerness that spoke of possibility as opposed to abjection.

Similar to my experience with other young men like Kyle, the analysis of these maternal dynamics afforded the opportunity to grasp how genders and desires are a mode of becoming, a constitutive possibility, and outside a maternal/parental space within which a boy may become, he is left to construct a narcissistic approximation, caught as he is in the poignant pain of that lost space. For the marginal boy, he is left with very little in the way of a safe return. While he may be able to turn toward a shadowed melancholic retreat from the world, he is given little in the way of a progressive push, or the license of a nonnormative imagination through which he might hope and work toward securing more productive attachments.

In contrast, my clinical experience with feminine boys and their parents who can establish a holding transformative nexus fare much better as they move into the world. Key here is helping parents to allow and reflect upon their child's needs for gender practice, gender construction, the performative play of gender theatre, and the concomitant normative counterreactions cross-gender play evokes. Parents who can keep one foot in the play and one eye toward normative counterreaction allow their child to bring into this nexus his experience of reactive shame and/or hate. He then has an opportunity to reflect on normative force, its anxious regulatory push, and gather strength in order to push back.

In contrast to the various prognostications regarding a feminine boy's difficulty in separating from the family, my clinical experience with feminine boys, especially those who have been able to form a transforming nexus with their parents, suggests that far more often than not separation does take place, and with the same degree of success and failure that one notes for most everyone. As is the case with all children, the feminine boy leaves home, is met with regulatory practice as meted out by his peers, and more often than not is motivated to make some accommodations to sustain peer relations. This is not to say that these accommodations do not lead to ways in which

these boys subordinate their feminine subjectivity to avoid cruelty and pain. This is not to say that regulatory rationalism does not animate the pain of depression, and create a legacy of shame. But accommodation does not stop with a one-way adjustment. There are also ways in which these boys seek to preserve their feminine identifications, to seize moments of mobility, to join forces within minority communities, and to imagine their ways into a world where the social life of gender is more malleable.

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