Children as Commodity and Changeling: Gender Disappointments and Gender Disappointment

1. Children as Property and Gender Disappointment

What is it to say, “they are my child?” The semantics of possessives such as ‘my’ are intriguing for a number of reasons, but here I wish to pick up on a particular ambiguity present in many uses of possessives. That is, an ambiguity between the sense of a possessive that merely indicates that the subject of an utterance stands in some relationship to the object of the utterance, and the sense of a possessive that indicates that the subject of the utterance *owns* the object of the utterance: that the object is the property of the subject. Call the former sense of such possessives the *relational* sense, and the latter the *propertarian* sense. This ambiguity is noted by Peters and Westerståhl, who write that in fact many possessive utterances actually have very little to do with ‘real’ possession or ownership (Peters and Westerståhl 2013 715). To give a couple of examples, take the following possessive utterances, which on their most natural reading are relational possessives:

“My first time reading the book.”

“Matilda’s friend.”

“That is my great great great grandfather.”

“The man’s thoughts turned to other matters.”

Meanwhile, take the following utterances, which on their most natural reading are propertarian possessive utterances:

“My house is large.”

“Molly’s business is growing quickly.”

“Get off my land!”

“The woman’s car was parked on the road.”

This latter, propertarian sense of possessives, implies the stronger claim that the object is property that belongs to the subject of the sentence. It specifies not only the type of relation that the subject has to the object, but also that the object has a particular kind of property (in the metaphysical sense of ‘property’) – that it has a value. Importantly, it also specifies the rights of the subject over the object by entailing *ownership*. Ownership implies the right to do what one wants with that object which one owns. One may modify, damage, destroy, or do whatever one wishes to that which one owns – at least in the absence of laws specifying that this or that particular category of property is singled out for restrictions on modification or destruction.

I want to suggest that, in the context of parental relationships with their children, there is often a slide between these two senses of ‘my’. Thus, when a parent says, “That’s my child,” this utterance, whilst generally taken to feature a relational sense of ‘my’, in fact expresses a propertarian sense of ‘my’ instead. Tom Whyman begins his book with a description of viewing an ultrasound of his child, writing that “Nothing, however, could prepare me for what it feels like when those blurs are yours” (Whyman 2021 1 emphasis in original). The emphasis that Whyman places on the term ‘yours’ here asks us to attend closely precisely to this relation: should we read this as merely a relational possessive, or should we understand it as a propertarian possessive, that indicates a parent’s ownership of their child?

I have no doubt that many parents would reject any description of their language as propertarian out of hand, insisting that their usage of ‘my’ in ‘my child’ is relational. However, I nonetheless suspect a slippage between the relational and propertarian senses of ‘my’ in many discourses surrounding parenthood and suggest that many, at some level at least, treat theirrelational children as theirpropertarian children. If I am right about this, then we should see at least some aspects of contemporary parent-child relations as underwritten by the commodity form: that is, the capitalist mode of production encourages parents to see their children as just one more commodity.

One of the clearest expressions of this propertarian approach to parent-child relationships is *gender disappointment*, the emotional consequences of a desire for a particular gender in one’s child being frustrated. Finding out that one is going to have a boy when one wanted a girl, or a girl when one wanted a boy, is for many parents, a mild disappointment. However, for some, this disappointment extends to symptoms of grief and depression, with some parents seeking out treatment via antidepressants and therapy. Indeed, some have even suggested that gender disappointment is a distinct mental illness (see Hendl and Browne 2020 284). For such parents, narratives of alienation and loss are common (see Groenewald 2016). To them, a future life plan is lost, with an envisaged future with a child of a particular gender being extinguished, given that the child has the wrong genitals, along with a sense of grief at having failed to provide a ‘perfect’ family (that is, one featuring both boys and girls).

I should note here that, for the most part, those experiencing ‘gender disappointment’ tend to fail to distinguish between gender and sex. Indeed, most tend to assume a direct link between the genitals of the child and the social life that the child will live. For such parents, the presence of a penis in an ultrasound scan rules out the possibility of taking that child shopping for dresses, or giving them ballet lessons, just as the presence of a vagina rules out the possibility of that child playing sports with their father. Any possibility of gender nonconformity or trans life is excluded from the start. Cissexist gender essentialism is both assumed and reproduced throughout.

The desire to control the gender of one’s child thus expresses a perceived entitlement over that child: not only the bodily makeup of the child, but the kind of social life they will have access to. Moreover, it demonstrates an underlying view of one’s child as something that ought to be malleable to one’s desires, a commodity at one’s disposal.

*It expresses ownership.*

Gender disappointment marks the frustration of this desire for control. Of particular note is that Groenewald found, in her 2015 study of mothers gender disappointed by having a boy, that narratives of commodification were extremely common. Such mothers sometimes equated having a girl to purchasing a house or car, and viewed their relationships to their children as transactional, openly considering the economic costs of purchasing a girl via adoption (Groenewald 2016 89-100). Here, parents are considering the *exchange value* of children. This means that we can make a stronger claim than merely that contemporary capitalism encourages parents to think of children as merely property. We can claim that parents treating children as something to be bought on the market means that contemporary capitalism is encouraging parents to treat children as *commodities*.[[1]](#footnote-1) In treating the child as a commodity, the gender disappointed parent considers it as featuring a dual character, at once featuring a use-value and an exchange value.

Gender disappointment is, therefore, often a case where the mask slips: where, amidst the frustration of desire, the child is openly considered a commodity by parents, where the possessives are propertarian. At the heart of gender disappointment is a cissexist gender essentialism, underwritten by a capitalist economic system that encourages parents to think of their children as commodities. Gender disappointment is, however, generally taken to be a phenomenon that occurs during and shortly after pregnancy, when, due to the random chance of one sperm rather than another fertilising an egg, the child fails to have the correct genitalia to satisfy the desires of parents. But there are other ways to disappoint, other ways to frustrate the gender desires of one’s parents.

2. On Being a Gender Disappointment

We trans people disappoint our parents. We are gender disappointments. We frustrate the desires our parents had for their lives going forward. We frustrate the desires they had for us and our bodies. Sure, there are exceptions – those parents who embrace their children coming out as something other than the gender they were assigned at birth – but even here there’s a sense in which disappointment occurs, disappointment at the loss of the life that had been imagined with one’s child. The welcoming parent might now imagine a new life, and perhaps value this vision even more than the old one, but a loss is a loss, and it is reasonable to expect at least some disappointment (see Norwood 2013 38-40). Norwood, for instance, interviews a father of a F2M trans person who felt loss at the (false) idea that he would no longer be able to walk his child down the aisle, and have a life with grandchildren. This aspect of being a gender disappointment is hauntological, in Mark Fisher’s sense: the imagined and lost future of the person one was supposed to be is mourned in the present (see Fisher 2014). Elizabeth Sandifer may be right to claim that we trans people, being ‘fucked’, and in the absence of any political hope must haunt the future (Sandifer 2017); but our lost futures already haunt us in the present.

Other parents of trans people note feelings of loss towards the past – that the child’s transition has spoiled their memories of the past. What once were cherished memories of a father being protective towards a young girl have to be reconsidered and reconceptualised if they are to make sense in the light of that child becoming or having been a boy/man (Norwood 2013 39). The disappointment at the loss of imagined future life, and the reconceptualization of a once-stable past are perhaps understandable. Of course, we must continue to insist that it’s more important to recognise the personhood and agency of the trans person in accepting them as the gender they claim to be than to hang on to imagined futures and particular conceptions of the past, but nonetheless we might think it is reasonable to have a degree of disappointment at the loss of those things, even if one values new imagined futures and new conceptualisations of one’s memories.

For those who less easily embrace their child’s ‘new’ gender, the feeling of loss can be extreme. Talk about mourning the death of the child that they had imagined is common – many describe a grief for a child that was snatched away from them. For such parents, it is not just the loss of memories, or the loss of an imagined future that is at issue: it is also the child itself that has been lost. What was once their kid is dead, gone, replaced with a new person.[[2]](#footnote-2) This sort of assumption is apparent even in the putatively supportive phrase that is common amongst the parents of transgender people, that they ‘lost a son but gained a daughter’ – as if the person they once thought of as their son had died or disappeared in the night, replaced in the morning by a daughter. In line with the long tradition of thinking of trans people as storybook monsters (see e.g., Stryker 2006, Koch-Rein 2014, Ortberg 2020 8, and X59B5 2022), the ideology that produces this sort of phrase frames the transgender person as a changeling of European folklore: the fae folk sneak into the child’s bedroom, steal away the child, and replace it with a monstrous doppelganger that gradually becomes more ill-tempered and malformed over time.

“The Welsh fairies had good taste, and admired wholesome and handsome children. They stole such often, and left for substitute the plentyn-newid (the change-child) who at first was exactly like the absent nursling, but soon grew ugly, shrivelled, biting, wailing, cunning and ill-tempered. In the hope of proving whether it were a fairy-waif or not, people put the little creature to such hard tests, that sometimes it nearly died of acquaintance with a rod, or an oven, or a well.” (Guiney 1888 138).

That it is fairies who steal away children presents a cruel extension of the homophobic and transphobic narratives that suggest that gay and trans people are seducing children into their way of life: ‘fairy’ was of course a popular slur for queers throughout the 20th century.

The murder of trans people, especially trans women of colour, has at this point been widely documented (see especially Ritchie 2017), and there is a growing recognition of the childhood abuse faced by trans people (see, e.g. Nuttbrock et al 2010, Bandini et al 2011, Peng et al 2019, and Domínguez-Martínez et al 2020) along with the links between this abuse and suicide (see Narang et al 2018). Here again we see parallels to changelings. Historically, those that were taken to be changelings tended to be children with a variety of disabilities. The traditional treatment of such putative changelings was to torture the changeling, in the hope that the fae folk would, upon seeing the torture, hearing the screams of their doppelganger, return to switch back the child for the monster. Of course, in reality this amounted to nothing more than the torture of disabled children.[[3]](#footnote-3) Common forms of ableist child abuse prominently featured heat: placing the child into an oven, placing a hot shovel on the child’s face, or a “poker would be heated to mark the sign of the cross on his forehead” (Hartland 1891 120).[[4]](#footnote-4) Meanwhile, the murder of changelings was widely accepted, with figures such as Martin Luther endorsing the abuse and killing of children taken to be changelings:

“[Luther] sincerely believed that Satan was responsible for the malformed children known as changelings, and that such satanic child exchanges occurred frequently. In Luther's theological view, a changeling was a child of the devil without a human soul, "only a piece of flesh." This view made it easy to justify almost any abuse of an unfortunate child thought to be a changeling, including the ultimate mistreatment: infanticide. Luther himself had no reservations about putting such children to death.” (Ashliman 1997).

Luther’s apparent preferred method of ableist infanticide was not heat, but water, suggesting that if he were to be presented with a changeling, he would throw it into a river (Hartland 1891 124).[[5]](#footnote-5) Whilst the particular methods of child abuse have changed, I suggest that we can draw a line from this historical mistreatment of children who fall outside of the bounds of normalcy due to disability to the contemporary mistreatment of children who fall outside of the bounds of normalcy due to gender variance.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, as Karen J. Renner, in her analysis of contemporary changeling fiction, writes,

“The changeling temporarily calls into question the innocence, ignorance, and helplessness upon which our conception of The Child rests. Instead of confirming—as other evil children—that real children only break out of the category of The Child when something (family, education, society) goes wrong, the changeling momentarily allows for the possibility that children might be something other than what we wish to believe they are… the changeling myth allows adults to eschew responsibility for children who deviate from the definition of The Child and justifies treating them harshly as a result.” (Renner 2016 156).

The foul tempers, the malformation, the cunning and secrecy of the monster in the family: these are not the fault of the parents in the changeling narrative. No, these are the result of queer cuckoos planting their eggs in the nest. Who could blame a parent for ejecting such an evil creature from the house? The child that they had is gone, their imagined lives together annihilated, their dreams of a normal life ended.

Of course, we trans people, the changelings in this scenario, see our foul tempers as rational responses to a transphobic world that is consistently hostile to us, our ‘malformation’ as the medical transformation of our bodies into forms that we are more comfortable with, and our cunning and secrecy a necessary defence method against transphobia in the family. Yet this perspective is lost upon those parents who imagine that their child has been lost and replaced seemingly overnight.[[7]](#footnote-7) We display an interior life that is at odds with the cissexist world around us. We come out and assert self-determination over our genders and bodies in ways that stand at odds with the presumed control of our parents.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*We become quite the disappointment.*

In the eyes of a parent who sees themselves as having lost one child and gained another, the transgender child is a commodity whose ownership is vexed. It is clear who ‘owns’ the cisgender child: we can trace a straightforward line between conception, birth, gender assignment, through the raising of the child until their present existence.[[9]](#footnote-9) Things are different in the case of a transgender child however. Parents imagine that they have lost a child, and this presents this clear line of ownership with a challenge: one commodity has just vanished, and another has appeared apparently ex nihilo, a changeling perhaps spirited into existence by some queer power. The ‘sudden’ rupture of transition, with loss of one child and the emergence of a new one, a changeling, presents parents with a question: who owns this child/commodity?

Trans children display the very un-commodity-like property of having an interior life and making decisions for themselves about the physical form they will take and the social lives that they will lead. Commodities don’t make decisions, and they certainly don’t make decisions that are generally taken to be in the purview of their owners to make.[[10]](#footnote-10) As Marx puts it, “Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force” (Marx 1976 178). Yet, when not forced (back) into the closet via transphobic violence, trans people make decisions about their lives that, if the ideology of the family is to be believed, should lie within the realm of their parents’ authority – choosing their name, their gender, the way they relate to the social world and so on. There is much that one might say about this loss of control by parents over their children, but for present purposes it is enough to point out that it is deeply in conflict with the view of children as the property of their parents for those children to assert their agency in this way.

The hegemonic family-form, centred around a propertarian relationship between parents and their children, is therefore fundamentally challenged by the transgender child. Children aren’t supposed to exercise the kind of agency that trans people exhibit, and there are supposed to be clear owners of every child.[[11]](#footnote-11) Parents who have bought into this particular ideological vision of the family are often disappointed, confused, or outright violently angry at this development, sometimes expelling transgender children from the family, disowning them. Here, the vexed status of the transgender child/commodity’s ownership is not fixed, but rather answered with a defiant “Not us!” by their parent(s). In such cases, any claim to ownership of the child commodity is renounced, and along with it the child’s access to the family unit and home is rescinded. Being a commodity is, course, to be objectified, to be subject to the whims of others, and to be denied agency and control over much of one’s life. However, the child/commodity has access to the material and emotional support that comes from their family and home.[[12]](#footnote-12) The removal of this basis for survival in an epidemic of trans youth homelessness partly contributes to the low life expectancy of trans people.[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Being a disappointment can be life-threatening.*

3. Desire

One might react to the material dispossession of trans children disowned by their parents by arguing that the answer to the vexed status of the ownership of the trans child/commodity is for parents to claim their trans children in just the same way that they claim their cis children. Yet things are not quite so clear. Jules Gill-Peterson, for instance, argues that the response to trans children should not be parents claiming ownership of their new child, reproducing the propertarian relationship to their children:

“Whilst anti-trans forces mobilize and collude to enforce binary childhoods in schools, in gender-segregated organizations, in the normative family, and in public accommodations that make trans childhood a life-threatening place to be every day, trans-inclusive and trans-affirmative voices struggle to find a way to protect trans children that does not imagine them as deserving of protection because they are, finally, the property of adults, not people with the right to self-determination.” (Gill-Peterson 2018 vii-viii).

If we are to respect trans children as moral agents, then the proper response to the vexed status of the transgender child/commodity should be to reject a propertarian relationship to children in its entirety, and to develop ways of caring for and raising children that respect their personhood and their agency. To quote Gill-Peterson again, “We scarcely yet know what it would mean to care for trans children, and in that way, they are not ours.” (Gill-Peterson 2018 ix).

To allow for children to own themselves in this way is at odds with the propertarian desires of parents. Perhaps then, the question should be how to produce parental desires that do not impose control over the life of a child, even as we recognise that the commodity form affords parents the opportunity for such imposition. Most pertinently, the question becomes: how to change the desire one has for a particular gender in one’s child?

In both the phenomenon of being a gender disappointment (the trans experience of failing to meet the gendered desire of one’s parents in one’s youth and adult life) and the phenomenon of gender disappointment (having a child of the wrong sex) we see parents disappointed at the failure of children to meet to their desires regarding gender. Whilst the reported symptoms differ slightly (though both often feature anger, grief, and alienation from one’s child) it is clear that emotional distress at the inability to completely control the gendered life of one’s child is common to both phenomena. What should we make of this desire, for a particular gender in one’s child, whether that child is yet to be born, a youth, or fully an adult? Moreover, how should those critical of that desire respond? Must we acquiesce to the desires, which no matter how critical we are of them, are nonetheless beyond our control, or can we do something about them?

Tom Whyman seems at points to plump for the former option to this final question, claiming that our desires for gender are rationally intractable. Detailing the experience of his and his partner Edie’s response to finding out that they were going to have a boy, and the disappointment that followed finding out that their child had been assigned male by an ultrasound professional, he writes,

“Obviously, there’s something irrational about this – and it might not seem progressive to place any particular emphasis on what gender your kid is going to be assigned at birth. But gender, and the socialisation that accompanies it, is – in our society as it is presently constituted – almost completely unavoidable. Perhaps one could very carefully arrange one’s own private home to avoid pink and blue and all the rest of it, but there would nevertheless remain the outside world (and the various teachers and grandparents and so forth who populate it) to consider. And so, I think, a preference for having a child of one sex over the other should be considered one of those irrational things of which some sense can be made – like aesthetic taste.” (Whyman 2021 113-114).

Here Whyman, concerned to defend his preferences for having a girl against the charge that they are not progressive, seems to be arguing that those preferences lie outside of the realm of political accountability: they are, like aesthetic judgments, just brute irrational features of our makeup. The desire for a gender in one’s child here is thus much like the desire for a gender in oneself according to Andrea Long Chu. It is outside of the realm of rationality, impinging on the agent as if from outside of that agent:

“Sissy porn did make me trans. At least it served as a nice allegory for my desire to be female–and increasingly, I thought, for all desire as such. Too often, feminists have imagined powerlessness as the suppression of desire by some external force, and they’ve forgotten that more often than not, desire *is* this external force. Most desire is nonconsensual; most desires aren’t desired. Wanting to be a woman was something that descended upon me, like a tongue of fire, or an infection (Chu 2019 79).

Moreover, Chu says, most of the time there’s nothing we can do about it. Desire just happens to us: “The political lesson of pornography is this: We mostly just like what we like, whether we like it or not” (Chu 2018 1). For both Chu and Whyman (at least in the passage above[[14]](#footnote-14)) desire seems to be a force that exceeds rational control, and whilst not actually a force from outside the self (for both it seems to come from within) desire certainly behaves as if it were an external force in virtue of our inability to subject our desires to the demands of our reason.[[15]](#footnote-15) The thought Whyman and Chu express in the above quotes is something like this: we can’t reason our way out of being hungry. A desire for food is an urge simply not susceptible to rational control. Similarly, the desire for a child of a particular gender, on this sort of account, is an irrational urge, not susceptible to change in the light of rational reflection.[[16]](#footnote-16) Those concerned to oppose the desire for a particular gender in one’s children cannot simply debate them away. Now, we might reject the rational intractability claim, and follow the likes of Joyce Trebilcot in suggesting that first order desires, even those seemingly as putatively central and ‘deep’ as sexual preference are tractable to rational reflection and deliberation (Trebilcot 2009). [[17]](#footnote-17) However, I think that we can provide an argument that will shift even those who buy the claim that desire exists outside of rational constraint.

Of course, for those immersed in the feminist literature on desires and preferences, Chu’s claim that desire *metaphorically* descends on the agent from outside is incomplete. The feminists that Chu dismisses rightly note that desire *actually* descends on us from the outside.[[18]](#footnote-18) Desire, many have noted, is deeply shaped by and given to us from the literal outside world: patriarchy, heteronomativity, racism, capitalism, ableism, cissexism and so on feature ideological formations that, via a variety of mechanisms, partly constitute and causally influence desire.[[19]](#footnote-19) Indeed, we might think that Chu’s famous provocation, that sissy porn made her trans, is precisely an example of desire being shaped by the outside world, rather than just an allegory for desire. That is, we have a particular set of cultural and economic formations that produced a particular form of media, which (if her provocation is to be believed) shaped her desire to be a woman.[[20]](#footnote-20) In such cases, pornography *produces* desires for its contents. In many cases, it is precisely the conditions under which one exists, and the range of options available to oneself that influence the desires we have. Whilst desires for the latest version of a mobile phone are common, those desires only exist because of a confluence of a number of factors – not least the invention of the mobile phone, and the marketing of such phones as desirable objects.

This points to an issue of hermeneutical lacunae: until we have a concept of something, we cannot desire that thing.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, it also points more broadly to issues of how desires are shaped by the availability of options: adaptive preferences. Jon Elster introduced this phenomenon by way of reference to La Fontaine’s fable of *The Fox and the Grapes* (see Elster 2016), but I think a passage from a more modern tale, *Detransition, Baby* more than adequately captures the phenomenon:

“…because in truth, quirks of dysphoria did not follow a Freudian pattern – no, they sequenced themselves according to an alchemist’s mixture of beauty standards, consumerism, and liberal doses of self-loathing. It took only a brief search of any transsexual forum to note, for instance, that a large percentage of trans women tend to focus dysphorically on the brow ridge, which thickens with exposure to testosterone during puberty and which avaricious facial feminization surgeons dubiously tout as an instant marker of a masculine face. More to the point, Reese maintained that foreheads drive trans women crazy precisely because there is a surgery to alter it. The surgery created the dysphoria even as the dysphoria created a need for surgery. To know that surgery is out there, but you can’t yet have it, even as you stare in the mirror and want to die, means the temptation of want will forever taunt you. Large hands, though? Yes, they suck, but short of lopping off your fingers, no surgeon has yet to devise a procedure to shrink them, so most of the women Reese knew just learned ways to minimize them and get over it, as Reese did herself. The instant that some surgeon invented a hand shrinking procedure though, Reese knew she would die rather than have that surgery denied to her.” (Peters 2020 197-198).

Reese, one of the central characters of Peters’ novel expresses the idea that it is not just access to the idea of something that the affects the gender desires that we have, but also the availability of that thing. Sometimes, the availability of some practice or object is enough to create or change a desire.

*Sometimes what we want comes from without.*

If I am right about this, then Chu’s pessimistic fatalism regarding the (un)changeability of desire is unwarranted: if desire is shaped and partly created by the social world, and we can change or remake the social world, then plausibly we can (indirectly) shape desire.[[22]](#footnote-22) Thus, even if we accept the claim that desire is not susceptible to direct rational revision, we are still in a position to change our desires, if we can only change the world around us. If our second order desires fail to match our first order desires, then, rather acquiescing to that first order desire’s apparent intractability, we should find ways to alter the social world such that it is shaped for the better. The desire for a child of a particular gender is, (a) morally troubling, and (b) partly the result of patriarchal and cissexist ideology and undergirded by particular social formations – the family and the commodity-form under capitalism.[[23]](#footnote-23) If (a) is correct, then we shouldn’t desire a child of a particular gender, and if (b) is correct, then if we change those conditions, so too, we might think, we can intentionally change the desires of ourselves and others to be in line with the moral claim that we should not desire a child of a particular gender.

This might be thought to point to a disciplining of desire – a puritanical and perhaps even authoritarian possibility. Chu, for instance, regards it as simply moralising (see Chu and Berg 2018). We see some troubling aspect of our psychology, and attempt to find ways of beating it back and repressing it by changing our social milieu. Yet this is to unwarrantedly naturalise the desires we already have as ‘authentic’, when in fact they are largely the products of a particular set of ideological formation. Writing about the desire for other kind of sex, Srinivasan puts it,

“Except, properly understood, the radical demand that we liberate sex from the distortions of oppression is not about disciplining desire at all. When I wrote that ‘desire can cut against what politics has chosen for us, and choose for itself’, I was not imagining a desire regulated by the demands of justice, but a desire set free from the binds of injustice. I am asking what might happen if we were to look at bodies, our own and others’ and allow ourselves to feel admiration, appreciation, want, where politics says we should not. There is a kind of discipline here, in that it requires us to quiet the voices that have always spoken to us since birth, the voices that tell us which bodies and ways of being in the world are worthy and which are unworthy. What is disciplined here isn’t desire itself, but the political forces that presume to instruct it.” (Srinivasan 2021 96).

The desire for gender in one’s children is precisely conditioned by the politics of the world as it currently exists. To seek to change that ideological landscape is to seek to change our desires, but that is no more to discipline our desires than they were already being disciplined by that landscape. Srinivasan continues by turning to Adrienne Rich’s work on the notion of compulsory heterosexuality to argue that it is a function of our situation that our desires often must be “imposed, managed, organised, propagandized, and maintained by force” by the oppressive structures we find ourselves in (Srinivasan 2021 98). Whilst it would be a mistake to think that removing oppressive social forces and forms would be to ‘liberate’ desire entirely – after all, they are to be replaced with new social forces and forms – we should nonetheless recognise that it is eminently preferable to attempt to control the forces shaping our desires and bend them towards the good.

One might, upon reading the above, be struck by the worry that, in asking that we change the world in order to change our desires, I have committed us to a fatalism of a different kind: that it’s very difficult to change the world, to overthrow this or that system of oppression, and so, realistically, we’re stuck with the desires we have. Zheng puts the problem thus: “one might object on the basis of ‘ought implies can’: if a sexual preference (for race, gender, etc.) isn’t under a person’s control, how can it be morally objectionable?” (Zheng 2016 414). Whilst Zheng is, like Srinivasan, concerned with sexual desire and the moral objectionableness of such desires in particular, I want to suggest that there is an analogous problem for the critique of gender preferences for one’s children. If we reject, for the purposes of argument, the claim that first order desires are tractable by rational reflection, so we can’t just reason our way to bringing them into line with our second order desires, and moreover, we think that we need to bring down (say) heteropatriarchal capitalism in order to have any way of changing them, then the possibility of having changed first order desires seems rather unlikely in the near future at least.

‘Changing the world’, whilst a phrase that can be read in a very strong sense as *changing the whole world*, can also be read weakly. The weak reading of ‘change the world’ requires only a change in one’s local environment. I want to suggest that carefully done, small changes to one’s environment, and one’s habits in that environment, might suffice for changing one’s desires. In the case of sexual desire, Zheng brings up a couple of possibilities – that we might decrease levels of racial segregation, expand dating pools, change one’s media consumption, change marriage and other family law, and increase accommodations for disabled people – suggesting that these might encourage us to form different sexual desires: “By working collectively to bring about better social policy, individuals work to alter the structural conditions that serve to support or undermine their sexual preferences” (Zheng 2016 415). Similarly, in the case of gender preferences for one’s children, we might think that some of Zheng’s recommendations hold true – reducing one’s consumption of media that features and glorifies the ‘perfect’ family, and consuming more media that features gender nonconformity, transgender people and gender exploration,[[24]](#footnote-24) certainly seem like obvious candidates. If Zheng is right to look to these sorts of changes for a way of changing sexual desires, so too, we might think, we might look to such changes for a way of changing preferences for gender in one’s children. We might advocate for legal changes that recognise nonbinary genders and allow for more diverse forms of care network, beyond the one- or two-parent model. We might further call for the production of media that does not assume a strongly controlling relationship between parents and children; the strengthening of protections for children against abuse and the domination of their parents; and the development of exit pathways, such that children can securely exit families that they wish to leave.

To insist on the autonomy of the child, even as we recognise the labour that went into their construction, is to encourage acceptance of the child *as the child is and wants to be*. It is to suggest that when children frustrate their parents’ desires, whether in gender disappointment or as a gender disappointment, they should not be the subject of our critique, but rather, the subject of our critique should be the economic and ideological circumstances that shaped their parents’ frustrated desires.

*We should not disappoint.*

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1. This is perhaps the aspect of my argument I am least certain of, and have wavered over whether to push this line of thought. There are of course important ways that contemporary bourgeois ideology is incredibly hostile to assigning an exchange value to children: note the often-moralised opposition to for-profit surrogacy practices from some quarters. However, as is clear from the demand for such services, such opposition is hardly universal. Moreover, it’s unclear how this interacts with the common treatment of children as investments or stores of value that can be exploited when the parent retires. Nevertheless, I think much of what I say in the rest of this chapter holds even if children are merely property and not full commodities in contemporary bourgeois ideology. Thanks to Arianne Shahvisi, Alexis Davin, and Katharine Jenkins for discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A similarly morally troubling narrative emerges from some women whose partners have come out as trans. Such women often describe themselves as ‘trans widows’ even though their spouse (or ex-spouse) is in fact still alive. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. C.f. Klein 2023 203-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “And if it were not a changeling, how did those queer by-gone mammas know when to stop the broiling and baking?” (Guiney 1888 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, preventative methods were also employed. These included placing items supposedly hated by fairies, such as bread, iron, or a Bible in the bed with a birthing mother, so as to deter the theft of the child, or indeed the mother (Lang 1893/2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To be clear, this is not to equate disability and transness. Rather, it is to point to a commonality at the level of discourse between certain historical justifications for violence against disabled children and certain contemporary justifications for violence against trans children. A similar historical line can of course be drawn from historical ‘changeling’ cases to the abuse of contemporary children with disabilities. Naomi Klein, for instance, points out that many parental attempts to ‘cure’ their children’s autism look precisely like changeling narratives:

“This is the chilling consequence of so many parents, coached by con artists of various stripes, deciding that their child’s disability is not actually a part of them, but rather some malevolent force that invaded them. If disability is an invader, an outsider, a soul-stealer, then, as with a changeling, almost any cruelty can be justified to bring back the normal, perfect life they had pictured for themselves.” (Klein 2023 206). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Seemingly’ of course, because contrary to the parents of trans children whose testimony forms the evidential basis of so-called ‘rapid-onset gender dysphoria’, the children generally will have been thinking about and exploring their gender for years before they reveal anything to their parents (see Serano 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In some versions of the changeling myth, the child is stolen and replaced with a faggot (a bundle of sticks) bewitched to look like a child. Of course, the joke here is that the child was a faggot all along. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. At least in most cases. Things become tricky at the fringes of the heteropatriarchal capitalist family, not least in cases of surrogacy (see Lewis 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Moten 2003 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Trans children aren’t the only children who disrupt these assumptions of the hegemonic family, though I won’t explore (for example) the experiences of children in various kinds of state care here. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Of course, in many cases, the home is anything but a source of emotional and material support, but is rather a place of abuse and degradation. However, it *can* be a source of support, and especially in the case of younger children is often the *only* source of support. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One in four trans people in the UK have experienced homelessness in their lives (Bachmann and Gooch 2018), homeless trans people are especially vulnerable to not having access to shelters (Fraser et al. 2019), and homeless trans people face “extraordinary” rates of risk (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In correspondence, Whyman has stated that he thinks that reason can in fact be brought to bear on gender desires, via the process of learning to see one’s child as they are, rather than as one wants them to be. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note that this does not imply that action motivated by desire is rationally intractable. Even if one accepts that our desires exceed rational control, one can still think that we have the ability (in many cases at least) to refrain from acting upon those desires, or act contrary to those desires, in the light of rational reflection. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The model here may (though by no means necessarily) be thought of in Freudian terms: desires, especially sexual and gender desires, bubble up from the id, and whilst such desires can be repressed, satisfied, or sublimated, the desires themselves are nevertheless not rationally tractable. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. We find a similar claim in Simone de Beauvoir: “[man’s] passion is not inflicted upon him from without. He chooses it.” (Beauvoir 2018 10). However, in what follows I set aside such concerns, in order to show that even if one accepts Chu’s claim about the rational intractability of desire, one still ought to believe that we have the ability to change our desires in many cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Here Whyman departs from Chu: he thinks that, regardless of the direct rational tractability of desire, desires can be shaped by circumstance and cultivated through the manipulation of circumstance. However, in the particular case of the family and gender, Whyman’s attitude is broadly (small-c) conservative – he thinks that he cannot change the family and *he doesn’t want to* (Whyman 2021 105-106). Indeed, he explicitly takes gendered society as it is currently constituted as a given (Whyman 2021 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See, for instance, Zheng 2016, Srinivasan 2021, and many of the essays in Snitow, Stansell and Thompson 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It is deeply unclear how seriously to take Chu, especially on this point. Thus whilst I use it as an example for rhetorical effect, even if Chu is ‘only’ joking about sissy porn, and at some point ends her “commitment to the bit” (Chu 2019 18), it’s clear that there are plenty of other examples of what sometimes gets call ‘induced desires’. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On hermeneutical lacunae see Fricker 2007. Of course, we might have a yearning for *something* even if we don’t know what that thing is yet – I take it that this is a phenomenon familiar to many people who come to recognise that their sexuality and/or gender is not what they originally thought it was. Similarly, I often read a menu not knowing what I want (despite being hungry) and realise that a chocolate pudding would really hit the spot. However, one needs a concept of a thing in order to desire *that thing*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Note that this is not to say that desires are *completely* determined by environmental factors. Indeed, I suspect that the full story about desire is going to be a complex one featuring all sorts of ideological, biological, rational, evolutionary, economic, and other factors coming together and interacting. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. To be explicit, I do not think (a) holds for a desire for a particular gender for *oneself*. However, I suspect that (contingently, at least) (b) holds for many such desires. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Ashley 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)