In 2016 President Obama issued a statement of guidance that affirmed transgender students’ rights, under Title IX’s federal protections against gender discrimination, to use public school bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity and not the sex identity assigned to them at birth. Considered long overdue in many quarters, this mandate was welcome news. Predictably, conservatives and the religious right renounced the guidance and mounted a campaign of undoing. In 2017, Trump rescinded the order. Arguably, these highly contentious bathroom debates signal a society in transition as it grapples with gender uncertainty. It is not hyperbolic to say this is a watershed moment in contemporary gender understanding. As the transgender community continues to mobilize for greater rights of inclusion, recognition, and legal protection, buttressed by a developing scientific consensus regarding gender identity and the body, the public opinion dial moves with it. Against this fast-shifting backdrop, transgender and gender nonconforming children’s right to simply be their transgender selves emerges as a basic right of childhood.

Tey Meadow’s *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* wades into this complicated tangle and, with great social science aplomb, offers a collection of new gender stories that both confound and clarify what we thought we knew about gender. *Trans Kids* is beautifully written and expansive in its analysis. In the main, *Trans Kids* demonstrates that gender is not waning in importance, as some hopeful sociologists had once predicted. Quite the opposite. Gender is gaining new ground as members of the trans community press for an understanding of gender non-conformity “as a benign form of human variation” (p. 93) and lay the groundwork for “trans” to be socially recognized as a category of identity and experience. Focusing her inquiry on trans children and their parents, Meadow traces the social practices and institutional relations through which trans emerges as a new category of childhood gender. In this sense, *Trans Kids* is a book about gender and its rethinking and also about historical change in the institutions that broker gender meaning and regulate through gender categorization.

Meadow provides us with a carefully crafted account of how we arrived at this sea-change moment and the people who got us here. At the center of the book are the parents of trans and gender nonconforming children. Impelled by the deep ache of parental love as they witness their child’s cumulative distress, they demand change—in some cases, seismic change—from their communities, the cultural mindset, and public institutions. These parents, most cisgender, are unlikely transgender activists. They are brave as they square off against an unknown future, press for greater institutional support and protections at school, and seek the appropriate medical care to support their children in their expressions of an authentic gender self.

As is the case with many good ethnographies, Meadow came to the topic quite by accident. Lucky for us. The book is composed of seven highly readable chapters,
followed by three appendixes that bring into focus the methodological contours of doing embodied ethnography. Meadow began the project by interviewing trans kids but pivoted to parents, doctors, trans advocates, and psychologists as she became increasingly sensitive to the clinical gaze and the harm caused to children trapped by it. The first of the book’s substantive chapters documents parents’ growing recognition of gender troubles: their child’s anguish over a coveted frilly dress or a persistent preference for cross-gender fantasy play, for example. Parents pieced together these cumulative “gender fragments” that indicated that their child’s felt sense of gender subjectivity might be at odds with the body that housed it (p. 26). These are parents Meadow terms “facilitative parents.” Their recognition of their child’s increasing gender distress propels them to action.

Across the chapters, Meadow charts the assorted dilemmas that arise for these facilitative parents as they work to nurture their child and support their child’s emergent gender nonconforming identity. This often begins with seeking medical advice, and one place these parents turn is the Gender Identity Clinic housed at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto and led by Dr. Ken Zucker, once genially known as “THE Gender Identity Guy” (p. 55). The Gender Identity Clinic was eventually shuttered, but for a time it was recognized as a pioneer in adolescent trans medicine. Meadow’s third chapter documents the rise and eventual closure of the clinic amid a fast-changing trans landscape, where innovations for transition-related biomedical intervention quickly replace outdated treatment protocols and notions of clinical responsibility by medical professionals. New medical paradigms of care for trans youth and advocacy by parents have created space to problematize and correct psychiatry’s injurious pathologizing of transpeople as gender deviants.

The next three chapters trace the emergence and workings of a parent-led youth movement helping to drive much of this change and parents’ institutional entanglements as they apply pressure on schools and other institutions to be more inclusive and hospitable. Meadow spotlights two grassroots, parent-led advocacy groups—Gender Spectrum and Trans Youth and Family Allies (TYFA)—as critical organizational actors who help to usher in a new gender lexicon, build gender literacy in schools and churches, and offer facilitative parents support as they navigate a thousand small acts where gender materializes. Parents learn to “edit” their child’s presentation of gender self depending on the situational and relational dynamics of the setting, bringing into focus the careful calculations parents make to affirm their child’s right to be and protect their child against irreparable assault on the self (p. 175).

For parents who see their child’s gender nonconformity as an inherent element of their core being, the path is hard, but the choice is much less so—you seek medical provisions and support your child unconditionally. Yet parents must contend with gender uncertainty. When is your child gender nonconforming and when is your child trans? Some children are adamant in their gender identification despite the incongruence between body and self. The course of action for these children involves facilitative medical services, including blockers to suppress the onset of puberty in an effort to buy enough time to determine whether a trans future in adulthood is likely. For others, the course of action is less clear because the incongruence between gender identity and body seems more temporally lodged. Predictably, gender patterns parental reaction and is a reminder of the hierarchy of value through which gender categories socially exist. Feminine boys face a stiffer parental response and delayed parental action relative to boyish girls. Feminine boys were nearly twice the age of masculine girls when parents came to acknowledge the need for redress.

The cisgender normativity of most social institutions imposes rigid gender assessments, which means these children’s very being is at odds with the institutions. Meadow attends to an especially tough road for some parents determined by where they live and who they are. The contradictory and unequal relationships families forge with the state provides an example. Resource-rich, heteronormative families are able to enlist the state to counter the
curtailment of rights within institutional settings like school. On the flipside, gay and lesbian parents were more likely to be saddled with state investigations by departments of children and family services and met with questions regarding their parental competence. Parents in rural communities and southern states encountered greater hostility and hurdles. One story Meadow features culminated in a mother and child fleeing for their lives.

Meadow also documents the fragile ties these parents forge to trans adults, an important group of adult allies. Trans adults are part of the trans imaginary, offering fragments of a future self that parents try to envision for their child. Yet for these parents, the ultimate goal is a fully assimilated child. Most hope to be parents not of a trans child, but a boy or girl. Meadow argues that transgender adults are a cultural resource for these parents as they navigate an uncertain gender future for their child, but the simultaneity of identification and disidentification with trans adults creates a tricky paradox for them.

These parents also find psychiatrists, psychologists, and pediatric endocrinologists unlikely allies, enabled by sweeping changes in the science of gender and the liberalization of psychiatry as trans advocates exercise greater control over the “regulatory apparatus of scientific medicine” (p. 59). In 2013, DSM-5 introduced “Gender Dysphoria,” a new diagnostic classification assigned only to someone experiencing serious clinical distress. The label, a welcome alternative to “Gender Identity Disorder,” introduced only a few decades earlier, cannot be assigned by virtue of being transgendered. In this new formulation, “atypical gender is understood not as a failure of gender but as a form of gender” (p. 20). Narratives in medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, all institutions whose regulatory weight and technologies of control are well documented, have undergone radical change and have helped to reposition “transgender” as a stable biomedical category and not a breakdown of the social. The Endocrine Society’s position statement is unequivocal. There is a stable biological element of gender. Transgender is not a mental health disorder. Medical intervention in the form of hormone therapy is regarded as safe and effective to address gender dysphoria.

Meadow’s ethnographic sensibilities, combined with an expansive conceptual armature, guide her analysis. Meadow weaves several threads into a coherent whole, balancing broad theoretical questions regarding gender, its changing ontology and bodily expressions, recognition of new medical technologies, expanding facilitative transition services, and the formation of a parent-led movement for gender change. She also captures the daily struggles of parents to trans and gender nonconforming children as they scale numerous bureaucratic hurdles and offer their children affective and relational support. Her writerly posture elicits empathetic understanding toward this group of parents and their trans and gender nonconforming children, offering a complex portrait of the organizational landscape these parents must traverse and bringing to life the institutions that fail them and also the ones that buoy them. Along the way, we witness a new social form take shape through their institutional encounters and gain appreciation of the institutional practices that solidify gender as an enduring, changing, and proliferating social form.

At the book’s beginning, Meadow depicts an emerging world where biological sex and gender exist largely apart from each other. Meadow moves quickly to separate sex from gender and clarifies that trans issues are about gender and not sexuality. No longer does the expectation hold that gender and sex necessarily and automatically correspond. “Gender is no longer merely the cultural overlay of biological sex” (p. 52). The idea that sex, as determined by secondary sex characteristics, also determines gender identity was summarily challenged by social scientists decades ago. The uncoupling of sex and gender opened up a rich and expansive body of gender theorizing across disciplines. For most gender scholars, gender’s break with the body is neatly encapsulated in the idea of gender as a social construction. The prevailing view of gender as a construct inspired decades of writing that detailed gender as a social institution, a structure, an interactional accomplishment, and an iterative performance. Most
scholars operating within this prevailing framework acknowledge that gender may be written onto the body, but gender does not derive from the body. This is where things get complicated. 

Trans Kids extends the conceptual schema of gender as a social construct while also acknowledging a re-articulation of the body necessitated by transgender subjectivity and transgender childhood. Meadow defines gender identity as the “felt sense of gender subjectivity” (p. 19) and uses the term “social gender” in recognition of gender’s contemporary uncertainty as “nature and culture have both been invested with an increase in significance” (p. 224). Transgender childhood and its developmental trajectories force a revisit of gender and the body. Sex and gender may be unhinged, but gender and the body are not. Mounting scientific evidence from a new type of gender expert, the pediatric endocrinologist, is resolute that gender has a stable biological element. Large gaps in understanding remain, of course, yet the emerging scientific consensus is that the felt sense of gender subjectivity inheres somewhere deep within, “deep down where the music plays” (p. 207), as one trans child Meadow came to know so prophetically and poetically describes it.

The best ethnographies help to answer broad questions while also attending to the realm of practical human activity where meaning and motive reside. This is a consequential book, one that explicates the changing ground upon which gender is apprehended, categorized, felt, and embodied. Trans Kids documents a new form of subjectivity made meaningful through the incongruence of body and self. Meadow captures the rapidly changing and charged social landscape of trans and transitions. Whereas trans belonged to an overly pathologized category in the not-so-distant past, today trans childhood represents one iteration by which gender is done.

The idea that gender is located in action and not in some essential being is the legacy of ethnomethodology in sociology and its poststructural variant, performativity, first advanced by Judith Butler. Meadow is in conversation with these two gender frameworks throughout Trans Kids. Without abandoning an ethnomethodological focus on gender as interactional accomplishment or gender as a system of assessment and accountability, Meadow also suggests that the trans landscape shifts thinking about gender as an immutable feature of the self. This will be a tough spot for some gender scholars to inhabit. Gender scholars took great pains to disentangle sex and gender, upending essentialist notions of gender. Trans Kids raises new questions about this tidy schema. Spiritual, biological, and psychological explanations are marshalled as parents and trans youth construct new gender stories that demand social recognition.

The implication for sociology extends beyond gender to include greater thinking about childhoods and the continuity of an enduring self. There is something very hopeful in this book. Perhaps it is the sense that as Meadow’s words are put to page, the very ground on which gender is placed radically shifts and resettles. Even as I write this review the faint outline of a new world where a patchwork of gender possibilities—feminine boyhood, masculine girls, boys who like girls’ things, girls who deep down are boys—comes into focus, and we move, once and for all, beyond a gender binary that reins us all in.