

## Challenging the Binary: The Politics of Parenting and the Power of Fiction

The question of why parenthood needs a gender touches on deep-rooted political, societal, biological, and cultural hegemonic assumptions about family and kinship structures that shape our understanding of caregiving roles and chains of care. In cisheteropatriarchal societies like the United States (US) and Austria, parenthood is consistently framed through a binarily gendered lens, with women and men assigned distinct caretaking roles. Over the past few decades, Motherhood Studies has paid particular attention to the conceptualization of motherhood, aiming to deconstruct rigidly gendered scripts and conceptualize mothering, parenting and caregiving as practices. Shifts in societal norms, advancements in assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), and the increasing recognition of diverse families as well as parenting and caregiving constellations, challenge the notion that parenthood, and motherhood specifically, is inherently tied to the gender assigned at birth. Works of contemporary fiction also contribute to critical thinking about and dislodge further rigid family and parenting structures, allowing some readers to engage with gender-diverse forms of parenting and caregiving while reflecting on the lived experiences of others.

At the same time, traditional societal parenting norms and the associated binarily gendered parenthood scripts, continue to influence politics, society, and challenge cultural and literary representations of gender diversity in the US and Western Europe. In this article, I suggest that conservative and right-wing political parties in the US, Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia are forcefully resisting evolving gender and parenting roles. In an effort to re-traditionalize our understanding of family, parenthood, and motherhood, fictional representations of gender diversity and gender-diverse parenting have also come under scrutiny. I propose that asking whether parenthood needs a gender is just as important as questioning why institutions of power maintain a vested interest in insisting that it does. Accordingly, I will argue that the current discriminatory policies regarding gender identities and efforts to deny the existence of gender-diverse families and parenting practices—particularly in the second Trump administration—make fictional representations of diverse characters who parent even more crucial.

# 1 The (De-)Gendering of Parenting and Childcare

Western capitalist and neoliberal societies continue to rely on structural conditions rooted in white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy. These conditions propagate pronatalist ideals, conflate womanhood with motherhood, and reinforce the notion that reproduction and caregiving are inherently gendered activities. Judith Butler's "forcible citation of a norm"<sup>1</sup> aptly describes this phenomenon, wherein the association of parenthood, specifically motherhood, with gender is not a naturalized premise but an institutionally enforced expectation that dictates who a parent or mother 'should' be. Scholars in Motherhood Studies crucially contribute to dismantling ideas of women's 'natural' predisposition for the domestic realm and role as mothers with 'innate' maternal instincts. Adrienne Rich points out that motherhood as a patriarchal institution "aims at ensuring that [...] all women [...] shall remain under male control."<sup>2</sup> Tatjana Takševa appends that there is political utility in 'naturalized' gender and parenting norms because it helps to uphold a cisheteropatriarchal social order.<sup>3</sup> The essentialist yet pervasive notion, that maternity and caretaking are biologically predetermined, obfuscates that gender roles are socially constructed. It also points to the persistence of what Nancy Felipe Russo calls "the motherhood mandate"<sup>4</sup>, which encapsulates the societal assumption that becoming and being a mother "is a woman's *raison d'être*"<sup>5</sup>.

Contemporary works of literary (non-)fiction also grapple with the notion that becoming a mother is a woman's destiny. In *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018), Jacqueline Rose, seemingly expanding on Rich's idea that "all human life on the planet is born of woman,"<sup>6</sup> recognizes that "by refusing to be mothers, women have the power to bring the world to its end."<sup>7</sup> She argues that political efforts to infringe on bodily autonomy should be understood as deliberate attempts to maintain cisheteropatriarchal control by enforcing motherhood. In her 2018 autofictional novel *Motherhood*, Sheila Heti expands on the potential for resistance in remaining voluntarily childfree, albeit from a white, middle-class perspective:

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1 | Butler, 2014, 232.

2 | Rich, 1995, 13.

3 | Cf. Takševa, 2019, 27-44.

4 | Russo, 1976, 144.

5 | Ibid.

6 | Rich, 1995, 11.

7 | Rose, 2018, 48.

When I think of all the people who want to forbid abortions, it seems it can only mean one thing—not that they want this new person in the world, but that they want that woman to be doing the work of childrearing [...] There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?<sup>8</sup>

Of course, in Congressman John Robert Lewis' sense, women and individuals capable of childbirth can create "good trouble, necessary trouble"<sup>9,10</sup> whether they have children or not. Black and Indigenous women and Women of Color have been at the forefront of making "necessary trouble" by promoting more intersectional and critical understandings of reproductive issues and caregiving practices. A key example of such efforts is the founding of the Reproductive Justice movement in 1994, when a group of Black women, including Loretta J. Ross, developed a framework that conceptualized reproductive rights as human rights, inextricably linked to other intersecting structures of oppression. Their approach stands in contrast to the more narrowly defined, predominantly white women-oriented "pro-choice" movement and "is based on three interconnected sets of human rights: (1) the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing; (2) the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state."<sup>11</sup> The reproductive justice framework further acknowledges that "systemic inequality has always shaped people's decision-making around childbearing and parenting"<sup>12</sup> and that the essentialist and binary gendering of parenting and childcare is a specific form of reproductive oppression.<sup>13</sup>

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8 | Heti, 2019, 47-48.

9 | Hayden, 2020, n. p.

10 | Lewis, Carla Hayden writes, was a prominent civil rights activist and politician who died in 2020. During the opening of the Library of Congress exhibition "Rosa Parks: In Her Own Words" in December 2019, he famously said "Rosa Parks inspired us to get in trouble [...] She inspired us to find a way, to get in the way, to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble."

11 | Ross, 2017, 290.

12 | Ibid. 291.

13 | Cf. Ibid. 291.

## 1.1 Gender Diversity and Parenting

Restricting access to reproductive health care services and efforts to deny the existence of gender-diverse identities obstruct social and reproductive justice and negatively impact the mental and physical health of women, individuals capable of childbirth, and gender-diverse families, particularly those from underserved and marginalized communities. The current right-wing-leaning political climate in the US and Europe and legislative changes pertinently affect mothering and parenting experiences. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, abortion bans, clinic closures, and the creation of reproductive healthcare deserts that followed are frightening examples of the effects a conservative crackdown on reproductive rights can have. It is crucial to understand that curtailing these rights and criminalizing abortion has harmful impacts on health, economic stability, workforce participation, social and political equity, families, and democracy. Patricia Hill Collins and Shameka Thomas also show that a cisheteropatriarchal society (de)values individuals' reproduction, parenting, and mothering based on their social identities and concomitant positioning.<sup>14</sup>

Promoting very narrow ideals of mothering and parenting limits societal perceptions of who can be a mother or a parent. Black and Indigenous women and Women of Color frequently face vastly different and contradictory pronatalist and antinatalist societal pressures, maternal expectations, and forms of detrimental governmental and institutional control. At the same time, nonbinary, trans, poor, neurodivergent, and differently abled individuals, who may also encounter similar challenges, are frequently excluded from discussions about parenting. Writing for *Xtra Magazine* in 2019, andrea bennett (they/she) asserts that there “still isn’t space”<sup>15</sup> for them as a nonbinary parent. bennett describes how parenting with their partner is “remarkably banal” and that “the experience of being a non-binary parent is worlds apart from their interactions as a parent.”<sup>16</sup> These interactions include filling out forms that require the fields for “mother” and “father” to be completed, or bennett receiving wishes for a happy Mother’s Day from family and friends. Remaining a “label-less”<sup>17</sup> parent, bennett explains, is not an issue at home but becomes more complicated when strangers refer to them as “Mom,” a label they do

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14 | Cf. Collins, 2007, 171. Cf. Thomas, 2022, 18-20.

15 | Bennett, 2019, n.p.

16 | Ibid.

17 | Ibid.

not identify with.<sup>18</sup> The masculine-presenting bennet concludes that becoming a parent brought with it the reinscription of “a womanhood that doesn’t suit [them], as well as the corresponding binary ideas we hold about parenting,”<sup>19</sup> caregiving, and domestic labor.

Bennett is not alone in addressing ingrained gendered essentialisms surrounding pregnancy and parenting. In *The Natural Mother of the Child* (2021), Krys Malcolm Belc, a transmasculine person, discusses how rigidly institutionalized ideas of parenthood—especially motherhood—exclude nonbinary and trans experiences of reproduction, birthing, and parenting. The author recalls that his transition after giving birth required him to adopt his son, which led people to question their family relationship. The fact that official forms always wanted to ascertain who “the natural mother of the child”<sup>20</sup> was, also shows how institutionalized gender and parenting norms do not reflect the lived reality of gender-diverse families. Similarly, Braiden Schirtzinger, who identifies as nonbinary, also felt pressure from societal expectations of motherhood during their pregnancy in 2019.<sup>21</sup> Talking to Samantha Schmidt (*The Washington Post*), Schirtzinger describes how their masculine presentation leads others to question their motherhood and challenge their identification with the term “mother.”<sup>22</sup>

These experiences illustrate the persistence of cisheteropatriarchal pressure on parenting trans and nonbinary individuals while highlighting structural obstacles in everyday caregiving practices. Yet, Western societies remain deeply entrenched in a socialization process that primarily envisions mothers as cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class, non-disabled women and primary caregivers. This essentialist image is coercive and damaging for women, who still handle the majority of childcare and household labor<sup>23</sup>. It also overlooks that mothering or parenting can take many forms and be reconceptualized as a practice of care, regardless of gender identity. Following Sara Ruddick, who argues that childcare demands a commitment to a child’s “preservative love, nurturance, and training”<sup>24</sup>, Andrea O’Reilly suggests

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18 | Cf. *Ibid.*

19 | *Ibid.*

20 | Belc, 2021, 216.

21 | Cf. Schmidt, 2019, n.p.

22 | *Ibid.*

23 | A Pew Research study by Richard Fry, Carolina Aragão, and Kim Parker found that although financial contributions in U.S. marriages have become more equal, women still take on more household and caregiving duties, while men spend more time on work and leisure. Similarly, Sophie Achleitner notes that in Austria, the “gender care gap” persists, with women spending an average of 151 minutes per day on childcare and 201 minutes on housework, compared to men’s 98 minutes on childcare and 148 minutes on housework.

24 | Ruddick, 2002, 17.

that “mothering may be performed by anyone who commits themselves to the demands of maternal practice”<sup>25</sup>. Concurring, Sarah LaChance Adams writes that “it is the practice of mothering that makes one a mother, not a biological or social imperative [which is why, ST] the title of ‘mother’ is not strictly limited to biological mothers or even women.”<sup>26</sup> These scholarly approaches create a pathway to think of motherhood and parenthood not as a binarily gendered duty but as a practice shaped by commitment, support, and nurturance. Community-based models that emphasize collective ethics of care and decentralize biological ties are also helpful in prioritizing caregiving as a social responsibility, ideally shared across genders.

## 2 Right-Wing Politics and the Erasure of Gender-Diverse Parenting

The decentralization of gender in mothering and parenting practices proposed in scholarship and the parenting experiences described by Bennett, Belc, and Schirtzinger, illustrate that gender-diverse parenting could be and is already an everyday practice. However, these experiences stand in stark contrast to conservative rhetoric and ever more influential right-wing political parties, who frequently use binary assumptions of gender and parenting to delegitimize Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, plus (LGBTQIA+) and nonbinary lives while also denouncing gender-diverse family structures and parenting practices. In Europe, we need not look further than Austria, where the Freedom Party (FPÖ) won the National Council election in September 2024 with 28.8%.<sup>27</sup> After the preceding three-party coalition negotiations excluding the FPÖ failed, the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) unexpectedly agreed to enter coalition talks with the FPÖ, which have since failed. Nevertheless, the FPÖ, known for its xenophobic stances, problematic ties to radical right-wing factions, association with neo-fascist ideologies, and reactionary views on gender and gender identity, received the most votes in the election, and the coalition talks made their agenda explicit. For example, the FPÖ promised to enforce a constitutional provision asserting the existence of only two biological

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25 | O’Reilly, 2020, 22.

26 | Adams, 2010, 727.

27 | Cf. Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2024, n.p.

sexes,<sup>28</sup> “do away with the rainbow cult, gender, and woke madness,”<sup>29,30</sup> and “ban gender-equitable language in the public sphere”<sup>31</sup> on a national level. In 2023, the state government of Lower Austria—under FPÖ and ÖVP leadership—had notably already prohibited using all orthographic markers that hold space for individuals who do not identify with the feminine or masculine forms in official documents.<sup>32</sup>

The potential national erasure of linguistic gender diversity is only one of the many steps the FPÖ could take to reverse gender equity, diversity, and inclusion policies. In an interview with Beate Hausbichler (*Der Standard*), Judith Götz expresses concern that an FPÖ-led administration will reinforce “traditional conceptualizations of gender and family” and “anti-feminist policies [that, ST] are not only directed against women but also against people who do not conform to binarily gendered and heterosexual norms.”<sup>33</sup> Götz says that the FPÖ is primed to restrict Gender Studies, affirmative action programs, sex education, and access to reproductive health care and childcare services, thus enforcing cisheteropatriarchy while infringing on bodily autonomy and women’s economic independence.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the party’s claims that gender diversity supposedly “destroys [...] social foundations” and causes “the dissolution of the social and legal order based on binarity”<sup>35</sup> suggest its preparedness to make incisive policy changes. Regarding family politics, the FPÖ already suggests that “the traditional family with a father and mother is undisputedly the best framework for growing up in a secure environment.”<sup>36</sup> Under the guise of providing “real freedom of choice for families”<sup>37</sup> regarding childcare, their election program suggests that families—implicitly referring to women—who choose to care for their children at home until they reach compulsory school age would be financially credited.<sup>38</sup>

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28 | FPÖ, 2024a, n.p.

29 | All translations from the German original are my own.

30 | FPÖ, 2024b, 58.

31 | *Ibid.*, 59.

32 | APA, red 2023, n.p.

33 | Hausbichler, 2025a, n.p.

34 | Cf. *Ibid.*

35 | *Ibid.*

36 | FPÖ, 2024b, 13.

37 | *Ibid.*, 69.

38 | Cf. *Ibid.*, 69. Hausbichler, 2025b, n.p.

## 2.1 The War on Gender

All over Europe, right-wing parties, including the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, Fidesz in Hungary, Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, and the Smer party in Slovakia, echo the FPÖ's positions on gender diversity, women, family, and parenting. Robert Fico, the current Prime Minister of Slovakia, recently announced his intention to establish a "constitutional barrier against progressivism"<sup>39</sup> and rely on "common sense"<sup>40</sup> in amending the constitution to assert that there are only "two sexes, male and female."<sup>41</sup> The Slovak constitution already states that marriage is "an exclusive community between a man and a woman,"<sup>42</sup> which limits the rights of LGBTQIA+ identified and nonbinary couples' family planning, as only married couples are legally permitted to adopt children. Fico was supposedly "inspired"<sup>43</sup> by Donald Trump. Trump's new administration wasted no time issuing a flurry of executive orders that specifically concerned gender and race-related issues and targeted Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) programs that the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has long opposed.

Firstly, it is crucial to understand that the Trump administration continues to embrace Christian fundamentalist ideas, which reinforce traditional gender roles and view motherhood as central to a woman's identity. Accordingly, Trump's second administration aggressively promotes pronatalism, devalues voluntarily childfree individuals, and reinforces conservative Christian family values. Vice President JD Vance sparked controversy when footage of his past speeches and interviews resurfaced. In a 2021 speech, delivered at a conservative educational nonprofit conference, Vance argued that parents should be able to vote for their children because they "should have more power [at the polls] than people who don't have kids."<sup>44,45</sup> On *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, also in 2021, Vance suggested that "a bunch of childless cat ladies," who "hate normal Americans for choosing family," govern

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39 | ORF.at, 2025, n.p.

40 | Ibid.

41 | Ibid.

42 | Ibid.

43 | Ibid.

44 | Jones, 2024, n.p.

45 | Vance's comments echo a proposal by Viktor Orbán to implement so-called Demeny voting. In his 1986 article, demographer Paul Demeny suggested several pronatalist policies to encourage reproduction in low-fertility countries. To "[s]trengthen the influence of families with children in the political system," Demeny revived the idea of family voting that would grant children the right to vote and "let custodial parents exercise the children's voting rights until they come of age" (354).

the US.<sup>46</sup> Vance further asserted that individuals without children have no “direct stake” in the country’s success and that “people who go home to see the face of a smiling kid are happier, healthier, and better prepared to lead this country.”<sup>47</sup> In his interview, Vance did not address that women still do a disproportionate amount of caring labor<sup>48</sup> and that childcare in the US is severely lacking and expensive.<sup>49</sup> On the campaign trail, Trump and Vance were asked about the childcare challenges for American parents. The former gave an incoherent response, indicating that childcare expenses were not that substantial, while Vance suggested that “maybe Grandma and Grandpa want to help out a little bit more.”<sup>50</sup>

These statements illustrate that Trump’s Republican party shows little concern for establishing (health)care structures—reproductive health care programs, paid parental leave or funded childcare facilities—that would assist families and women, in particular. However, just four days after the inauguration, Vance spoke at the March for Life in Washington, D.C., where he claimed that the “country faces the return of the most pro-family, most pro-life American president of our lifetimes”<sup>51</sup> and commended the crowd for “protest[ing, ST] on behalf of the most vulnerable.”<sup>52</sup> In a video message from Trump to the marchers, the president announced that he had signed pardons for anti-abortion activists who were, in his view, “unjustly”<sup>53</sup> imprisoned for violating the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE Act).<sup>54</sup> While many Republicans profess to be pro-life, George Lakoff argues that Christian fundamentalist ideals of “strict father morality”<sup>55</sup> strongly influence right-wing politics in the US today. Thus, conservative policies about reproductive rights and health are not primarily about preserving life but about asserting “moral authority over family life”.<sup>56</sup> To many right-wing Republicans, “the very idea that a woman

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46 | Carlson, 2021, n. p.

47 | Ibid.

48 | Schaeffer/Aragão, 2023, n. p.

49 | Cf. Leppert, 2024, n. p.

50 | Bender, 2024, n. p.

51 | LiveNOW, 2025, n. p.

52 | Ibid.

53 | The White House, 2025a, n. p.

54 | Christine Fernando reports that on January 23, 2025, Trump pardoned twenty-three anti-abortion activists, several of whom were serving sentences for blocking access to a Washington, D. C. -based reproductive health clinic in October 2020. The FACE Act, under which they were charged, was established in 1994 in response to rising protests and violence against abortion clinics.

55 | Lakoff, 2006, 192.

56 | Ibid. 193.

can make [...] a decision over her own reproduction, over her own body, and over a man's progeny [...] contradicts and represents a threat"<sup>57</sup> to the patriarchal order.

Far from acknowledging LGBTQIA+ and nonbinary individuals in conversations about the American family, one of the administration's executive orders claims to protect women—a promise that Trump vowed to fulfill “whether they like it or not”<sup>58</sup>—by forthwith only recognizing “two sexes, male and female.”<sup>59</sup> The order further states that “these sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality,”<sup>60</sup> which is an outright rejection of diverse gender identities and demands that all agencies withdraw any documents with non-compliant language. In another executive order, the administration labeled DEI initiatives, notably forgetting the “A” for accessibility in the title altogether, as “illegal,” “immoral,” and “wasteful.” It directed the termination of such programs in favor of rewarding “individual initiative, skills, performance, and hard work.”<sup>61</sup> The order will cause layoffs of federal workers, and the failure to acknowledge structural inequities will likely diminish diversity across various industries, roll back affirmative action programs, and escalate workplace discrimination. Two other executive orders target children and young adults. The first bans government support for gender-affirming care for those under nineteen and will harm already vulnerable trans youth and their families.<sup>62</sup> The second order restricts K-12 instruction on social inequities in the present and throughout US history<sup>63</sup> and will detrimentally impact students' education on gender and racially sensitive topics.

All these executive orders set the tone for the second Trump administration, showing its determination to re-traditionalize American life. The Trump administration's strategy of flooding the zone—a Stephen K. Bannon tactic that aims to implement numerous initiatives simultaneously to overwhelm both the opposition and the media, thereby diluting the response<sup>64</sup>—is exemplified by the issuance of 37 executive orders between January 20 and 27.<sup>65</sup> The administration's sweeping policy changes will significantly impact Americans, from efforts to end birthright

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57 | Ibid.

58 | Padilla, 2024, n.p.

59 | The White House, 2025b, n.p.

60 | Ibid.

61 | The White House, 2025c, n.p.

62 | Cf. The White House, 2025d, n.p.

63 | Cf. The White House, 2025e, n.p.

64 | Cf. Broadwater, 2025, n.p.

65 | NPR Staff, 2025, n.p.

citizenship for children of certain migrants<sup>66</sup>, to reinstating the global gag rule on abortion service information to receive US funding<sup>67</sup> and withdrawing from the UN Paris Agreement on Climate Change.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the newly imposed restrictions regarding LGBTQIA+ rights, gender, and gender identity will detrimentally affect individuals, families, and communities that were already marginalized before the second Trump administration took office. The exclusion and (linguistic) erasure of gender diversity from governmental structures and educational institutions, as well as the attacks on cultural institutions that support gender-diverse initiatives, will undoubtedly continue to be met with resistance from advocates and community activists. Nonetheless, it also makes the representation of LGBTQIA+ and nonbinary-identified persons, youth, couples, parents, and blended families even more crucial—and that is where fiction comes in.

### 3 Windows into Diverse Parenting Practices

Works of fiction provide vital spaces to counteract political attempts to render gender, gender identity, and gender-diverse parenting invisible. In his March 2025 Kreisel Lecture at the University of Alberta, David A. Robertson, an award-winning author and member of the Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba, talked about fiction's transformational power and that writing can be a form of social activism. Robertson primarily spoke about Indigenous storytelling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and emphasized that writing about "what really happened and is still happening on Turtle Island"<sup>69</sup> is "a call to action."<sup>70</sup> However, the author and activist also spoke more generally about how "stories ought to educate as much as they entertain" because they are the "keepers of heritage and history" and thereby "reveal the world around us and articulate our place in it."<sup>71</sup> In short, Robertson's lecture spoke to the power of storytelling, capable of reaching beyond its fictional realm, helping people to understand their own and others' experiences, and, not least, calling

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66 | Cf. The White House, 2025f, n.p.

67 | Cf. The White House, 2025g, n.p.

68 | Cf. The White House, 2025h, n.p.

69 | The name, Turtle Island, stems from Indigenous creation stories and continues to be used in lieu of North America, a colonial designation.

70 | Ibid.

71 | Robertson, 2025, n.p.

people to action against racial, ethnic, classed, gendered, ableist, and many other persistent inequities.

Pointing to the continued inequities and persistent violence experienced by Indigenous communities, Robertson explained that attempts to disregard and suppress Indigenous stories are harmful and by no means a thing of the past. While the author recalled that the only book he read by and about Indigenous persons as a high schooler was a classroom-redacted version of Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), Robertson has had some of his books for and about children and young adults challenged and (temporarily) removed from school libraries and classrooms. In 2018, for example, an Edmonton Library Website suggested that schools "weed out" several books, many by Indigenous authors, that were listed as "not recommended."<sup>72</sup> Robertson's graphic novel series *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga* (2012) was among them, as it addresses a "sensitive subject matter and visual inferencing of abuse regarding residential schools."<sup>73</sup> Reviewers further asserted that the books were "not independent reads as they require pre- and post-conversation with students regarding the legacy of residential schools"<sup>74</sup>—a fact that Robertson agrees with while contending in his lecture that one of the very purposes of receiving an education in Canadian schools must be to teach students about the country's grave and ongoing colonial history.<sup>75</sup>

The lagging integration of Indigenous stories into school curricula and the backlash against it notably also marginalize gender-diverse experiences and representations, which have always been part of Indigenous life. Margaret Robinson notes that "precolonial Indigenous gender systems"<sup>76</sup> did not rely on binaries, and two-spirit<sup>77</sup> identities were entirely accepted. Leslie Feinberg asserts that settler governments believed Indigenous peoples' acceptance of more genders to be a sign of inferiority and justification for colonialization.<sup>78</sup> In truth, heteronormativity, as well as homo- and transphobia, are colonial paradigms that continue to wreak havoc and put the ongoing sociocultural debates and conservative, right-wing political efforts to erase fictional and lived gender-diverse experiences into a historical

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72 | Robertson, 2020, n.p.

73 | Ibid.

74 | Ibid.

75 | Cf. Robertson, 2025, n.p.

76 | Robinson, 2020, 1676.

77 | According to Robinson, the term two-spirit is a neologism, coined at the Third Annual Intertribal Native American/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg in 1990 in an effort to reclaim "traditional Indigenous gender terms such as *nádleehí* or *agokwe*."

78 | Cf. Feinberg, 1996, 22

context. While book challenges and bans are a rarer occurrence in Canada, its southern neighbor has recently seen an immense surge in book bans. In recent years, parents, religious groups, parental rights advocates, private companies and corporations, and local and state politicians have increasingly challenged the availability of certain books in classrooms and libraries. A 2024 report by Kasey Meehan, Sabrina Baêta, Tasslyn Magnusson, and Madison Markham found that the 2023-24 school year saw a record-high in book bans, which disproportionately targeted works featuring characters of color, LGBTQIA+ identities, and sexual content.<sup>79</sup> Book bans are a tangible illustration of conservative efforts to erase gender-diverse experiences by censoring reading and limiting representation.

Accordingly, in addressing whether parenthood needs a gender or why gender is still imposed on parenthood, we must examine traditional assumptions about parenthood and gender and explore their historical, cultural, and feminist constructions. We should also consider how reading about alternative models of care and family might incite critical thinking about entrenched gendered parenting norms and that fiction can play a crucial role in providing these impulses. Rudine Sims Bishop dedicated her career to highlighting the importance of more inclusive and diverse (children's) literature, famously stating that fiction could offer readers "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors".<sup>80</sup> She noted that

[b]ooks are sometimes windows, offering views of the world that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. There windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created [...] When the lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.<sup>81</sup>

Bishop's essay, primarily written to advocate for more representation of Black, Indigenous, and Characters of Color in children's books, resonates with reading experiences across all ages. The representations of LGBTQIA+ identified and

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79 | Cf. Meehan/Baêta/Magnusson/Markham, 2024, n. p.

80 | Bishop, 2015, 1.

81 | Ibid.

nonbinary characters in fiction offer crucial self-affirming reflections for some readers and serve as entry points into experiences beyond the gender binary for others. Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley even argue that fiction can facilitate “the understanding of others” and “augment our capacity for empathy and social inference”<sup>82</sup>. Accordingly, fictional works invite readers to look into mirrors, open windows, and walk through sliding glass doors, thus empowering them to critically question gender and parenting norms.

Representations of LGBTQIA+ identified, nonbinary, and genderfluid characters who are also racially diverse, neurodivergent, or living with disabilities and are written by authors from marginalized communities are gradually increasing. Notable examples include Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Adult Onset* (2014), Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (2015), Jia Qing Wilson-Yang’s *Small Beauty* (2016), Andrea Lawlor’s *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (2017), Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). These works all portray LGBTQIA+ identified and nonbinary characters. However, novels about gender-diverse parenting are still less common. Accordingly, it is even more critical that Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), Jane Eaton Hamilton’s *Weekend* (2016), Nicole Dennis-Benn’s *Patsy* (2019), and Torrey Peters’ *Detransition, Baby* (2021) explore gender-diverse parenting and reflect the impact of cisheteropatriarchal parenting expectations.

Torrey Peters’ 2021 novel, *Detransition, Baby*, can be read as a contemporary comedy of manners that explores the intersections of gender identity, family formation, and caregiving. It follows Reese, a white trans woman longing to be a mother; Ames, a white detransitioned trans woman, thinking himself sterile due to hormone replacement therapy; and Katrina, a Chinese American Jewish woman, who is in a relationship with Ames and only finds out he used to live as a trans woman when she becomes pregnant unexpectedly. Katrina, who craves a stable family but understands that Ames struggles with the idea of fatherhood, considers having an abortion. Still, Ames instead suggests a queer co-parenting triad, prompting Katrina and Reese to consider their views on motherhood and family.

In the novel, dominant conceptualizations of motherhood and fatherhood linked to cisnormativity, whiteness, and the nuclear family unit weigh on all three characters, albeit in different ways. The presumption that the gender assigned at birth will lead a person to become a mother or father affects Reese and Ames

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82 | Mar/Oatley, 2008, 173.

during Katrina's pregnancy. Amy B. Frieder argues that such assumptions exclude alternative family structures and frequently result in cisheteronormative challenges to trans persons' legitimacy as mothers, fathers, parents, and caregivers.<sup>83</sup> When Ames facilitates a meeting, Reese and Katrina discuss co-parenting and explore their thoughts about motherhood, reproductive rights, and the impact of gender identity and race. In discussing why Reese wants to be a mother, she argues that only trans women have to prove that they deserve to be mothers.<sup>84</sup> Her reflections reveal that motherhood remains associated with biological reproduction and, thus, excludes her. Susie Bower-Brown supports the view that sociocultural norms continue to frame motherhood as an essential and exclusionary role perceived as reserved for birth parents and cis women.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, Reese feels barred from accessing motherhood and claiming the role of a mother in the same way a cis woman, like Katrina, can.

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that as a Chinese American cis woman, Katrina has reservations about becoming a mother and sharing parenting duties with Reese and Ames. Having previously miscarried, she worries about not being able to carry the pregnancy to term. Moreover, Katrina discusses her experience of pronatalist pressure to become a mother during her previous marriage while simultaneously facing anti-natalist rhetoric because of her ethnicity, recalling how her mother was made to feel like "her mothering of [Katrina, ST] wasn't legitimate."<sup>86</sup> Katrina concludes by saying that Reese, because of her trans identity, and herself, because of her Chinese and Jewish heritage, have reasons to believe that being a mother is "hard"<sup>87</sup>. In this passage, Katrina highlights how distinct but intersecting forms of structural oppression influence her and Reese's potential (in-)ability to claim motherhood. Reese agrees that marginalized women are often told that "they shouldn't have children"<sup>88</sup> but also asserts that her identity as a trans woman is exploited by society to suggest that she "shouldn't want children"<sup>89</sup> and that her desire for children stems from perversion. Ultimately, Reese concludes that "everyone acts like moms are real women and real women become

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83 | Cf. Frieder, 2021, 160-61.

84 | Cf. Peters, 2021, 175-76.

85 | Cf. Bower-Brown, 2022, 282.

86 | Peters, 2021, 178.

87 | Ibid.

88 | Ibid.

89 | Ibid.

moms”<sup>90</sup>, pointing out how, in the eyes of society, her gender identity undermines and delegitimizes her potential motherhood. The entire exchange is a learning experience for Reese and Katrina but also offers readers mirrors and windows into different experiences with structural oppression.

Ames’ position in the co-parenting triad is perhaps the most complicated to untangle as he struggles to conceive of his role. Ames’s detransition alienates him from his former community and ends his relationship with Reese. Despite presenting as a man and using his/him pronouns, he privately still identifies as a trans woman, which infuses the prospect of becoming a father, “the one affront to his gender that he still couldn’t stomach without a creeping sense of horror”<sup>91</sup>. Ames can see himself as a parent but not as a father or a mother, indicating that his identity cannot be mapped onto existing gender and parenting binaries. Ultimately, Ames wants to bring Reese into the evolving family constellation because he believes that it will help to challenge pervasive notions about the normative nuclear family, to which Katrina especially is initially very attached. Ames implicitly hopes there is a chance to “queer [...] heteronormative notions of kinship”<sup>92</sup>, as Shelley M. Park suggests. He feels “everyone would get what they wanted” in the parenting triad: “Katrina would have a commitment to family from her lover, Reese would get a baby, and he, well, he’d get to live up to what they both hoped he could be by being what he already was: a woman but not, a father but not.”<sup>93</sup> Ames’ desire to parent with Katrina and Reese seeks to defy the patriarchal concept of monomaternality, which Park defines as the assumption that a child can only have “one and only one mother”<sup>94</sup>. His proposal to create a polymaternal family also promises to transform traditional gendered conceptions of domestic space and familial intimacy for the three adults and the child they hope to welcome.

Ultimately, a plot twist near the end of *Detransition, Baby* disrupts the plan to have a baby within the parenting triad. The novel carefully illustrates that queerness, contrary to Katrina’s initial belief, is not the ultimate solution to all relationship and parenting challenges. However, at its end, the novel tentatively suggests that a co-parenting family formation is possible after all. In this article, I propose that whether Katrina, Reese, and Ames ultimately parent together is secondary. Peters

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90 | *Ibid.*, 179.

91 | *Ibid.*, 25.

92 | Park, 2013, 7.

93 | Peters, 2021, 35.

94 | Park, 2013, 8.

does something more essential by presenting readers with an alternative parenting model that supports the characters' needs and gender identities. *Detransition, Baby* performs crucial work in revealing the characters' thought processes, providing readers with ample representation and self-affirmation while inviting them to consider forms of parenting beyond the predominantly white, binary, and heteronormative models. Moreover, the novel demonstrates how ideals of motherhood can negatively impact lives outside of presumed norms and encourages discussions about transitioning and detransitioning. The three characters' perspectives ultimately allow Peters to critically examine how cisheteropatriarchal scripts continue to shape reproductive and parenting experiences while also envisioning gender-diverse practices that could transform mothering and parenting in the future and, more importantly, are already currently being practiced.

## 4 Conclusion

The question of why parenthood needs a gender prompts us to critically examine the cultural, institutional, political, and historical forces that have shaped caregiving practices. Insights from feminist theory, the reproductive justice framework, and literary representations like *Detransition, Baby* show that the gendering of parenthood and parenting is neither natural nor inevitable. Instead, it is a product of patriarchal systems that depend on rigid gender norms to maintain the status quo. Observing the conservative and far-right political parties gaining power in the US and several Western European countries, helps us understand how the gendering of parenting and childcare facilitates and perpetuates the structural oppression of women and individuals capable of childbirth, often excluding and erasing LGBTQIA+ and non-binary people from conversations about reproduction and parenting in the process. The actions undertaken by the Trump administration in its first weeks exemplify harmful efforts to restrict access to reproductive health care services and to deny the rights and existence of LGBTQIA+ and nonbinary individuals. At the time of writing, the new administration has already removed the government website [reproductiverights.gov](https://www.reproductiverights.gov). The State Department's website, in compliance with Trump's executive order, has replaced "gender" with "sex," eliminated the X gender marker, and the page with advice for LGBTQIA+ travelers has curtailed the acronym to

LBT travelers.<sup>95</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website has also taken down several resources, including those providing guidance on contraception, HIV, and trans and nonbinary identification.<sup>96</sup> These efforts are clear warning signs, indicating that bodily and sexual autonomy, reproductive justice, and gender identities are under threat, which endangers not only women and individuals capable of childbirth but also all people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and nonbinary and their parenting of gender-diverse families.

In light of this, fiction provides a space for imagining and preserving gender-diverse parenting models. As Bishop recognized early on, literary works are essential for offering us mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to see ourselves reflected and empathize with different perspectives. This exploration can inspire us to consider a collective ethics of care and promote more equitable practices of mothering and parenting that affirm the diverse experiences and possibilities of all individuals engaged in caring labor.

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95 | Cf. Cooper, 2025, n.p.

96 | Cf. Ibid.

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