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The Performance of Personhood in Gender Reveal Parties

Carla Neuss

Abstract. This essay considers the viral phenomenon of gender reveal parties as a form of ritualized performance that deploys gender to inscribe personhood. While most critiques of gender reveal parties approach them as a form of regressive backlash against trans rights, I consider how these parties deploy the gender binary to instantiate concepts of personhood onto the unborn. By analyzing gender reveal parties as performance, contextualized within a historiographic account of the imbrication of gender and notions of personhood, I argue that the gender binary functions with gender reveal parties to perform a speech act that inscribes personhood within the fraught landscape of a post-Roe United States.

In 2008, blogger Jenna Karvunidis was pregnant. Though not her first pregnancy, all her previous pregnancies had ended in miscarriage. Against this backdrop of loss and grief, Karvunidis's ultrasound appointment held particular significance. By 2008, not only was the mid-pregnancy ultrasound a long-established milestone for viability, but it also provided the opportunity to learn the biological sex of the fetus through the imaging of fetal genitals. However, Karvunidis decided to abstain from learning the sex of the fetus during her ultrasound appointment in order to reveal it collectively to family and friends. She asked for the results in a sealed envelope, then went home and baked two cakes: one with a blue interior, the other with pink. Later, when gathered with friends and family, she handed the sealed envelope to her sister-in-law and asked her to bring out the cake with the corresponding gendered color. Karvunidis cut the cake, revealing to both her family and friends—as well as herself and her partner—that the baby they were expecting was biologically female. She documented the party and its significance to her in the wake of her earlier miscarriages on her blog: The post went viral, kickstarting gender reveal parties as a global phenomenon. Ten years later, Karvunidis publicly renounced the phenomenon she had established; her now 10-year-old daughter Bianca had come out as nonbinary and Karvunidis expressed remorse through multiple outlets for her part in establishing a viral ritual that reduced gender to a binary:

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Who cares what gender the baby is? I did at the time because we didn't live in 2019 and didn't know what we know now—that assigning focus on gender at birth leaves out so much of their potential and talents that have nothing to do with what's between their legs.¹

Despite Karvunidis's renunciation, gender reveal parties show no sign of abating; a search for the term on Google in July 2024 yielded approximately 340 billion hits and the phenomenon has spread globally beyond the US—from Canada to South Africa, Australia to Indonesia.

With their rise in popularity over the last seventeen years, gender reveal parties have drawn ridicule and critique in both popular and scholarly discourse. Reveals gone wrong have resulted in several deaths, multiple wildfires, and millions of dollars in property damage. Headlines from multiple media outlets, ranging from CNN to *Vogue*, have labeled gender reveal parties “problematic,” “destructive,” and psychologically dangerous.² Critics of gender reveal parties fault the practice for reinforcing gender essentialism just as key advances in gender ideology, gender fluidity, and trans rights are being attained. Performance studies scholar Carly Gieseler, who has written extensively on the phenomenon, argues that in reiterating “the rigid gender binary of decades past . . . [the gender reveal party] covertly continues building a cultural wall against the tides of progress.”³ Gieseler and other scholars view gender reveal parties as the result of an antiprogressive backlash against the gains made by noncishetero-normative positionalities within the public sphere:

In an era of greater progressive thought surrounding gender fluidity, multiplicities of identity, or wholesale rejection of the gender binary, a trend that rearticulates binary roles and stereotypes disregards the possibilities finally realized in the past few decades . . . [and] rewinds progressive ideology. . . . Not far from the seemingly innocuous cultural trends of the moment are legislative, judicial, and punitive measures that find footing precisely because of a pause in progressive awakenings.⁴

In this way, gender reveal parties have been frequently read as implicitly supporting hegemonic and oppressive ideologies of gender essentialism as well as reinforcing the marginalization of nonbinary identities. Studies emerging from the social sciences reinforce this concern, with a paper by psychologist Flora Oswald providing data that demonstrates correlation between transphobic attitudes and those who participate in gender reveal parties.⁵

¹ Jenna Karvunidis (@HighGlossSauce), “A weird thing came up on Twitter, so I figured I’d share here,” Facebook, July 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/HighGlossSauce/photos/rpp.108648052486945/2571530012865391>. See also Jenna Karvunidis, as told to Molly Langmuir, “I Started the ‘Gender Reveal Party’ Trend. And I Regret It,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jun/29/jenna-karvunidis-i-started-gender-reveal-party-trend-regret>.

² Raven Smith, “The Growing Horror of the Gender Reveal Party,” *Vogue*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-growing-horror-of-the-gender-reveal-party>; Regiane Folter, “Why Gender Reveal Parties Are Problematic,” Women’s Media Center, April 4, 2024, <https://womensmediacenter.com/fbomb/why-gender-reveal-parties-are-problematic>; Allison Hope, “Gender Reveal Parties Are Destructive from Top to Bottom,” CNN, September 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/08/opinions/gender-reveal-party-california-fire-destruction-hope/index.html>; Rosie Blunt, “The Danger—Physical and Psychological—of Gender Reveal Parties,” *BBC News*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50207452>.

³ Carly Gieseler, *Milestone Celebrations in the Age of Social Media: Performativity, Ritual, and Representation* (Lexington Books, 2022), 21–22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ See Flora Oswald, Amanda Champion, Kailie Brown, Kari Walton, and Cory L. Pedersen, “Revealing More Than Gender: Rigid Gender-Role Beliefs and Transphobia Are Related to Engagement with Fetal Sex Celebrations,” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 10, no. 2 (2023): 304–10.

From a different vantage point, ritual studies scholars have sought to understand the phenomenon of gender reveal parties as a form of “ritual performance.”⁶ Religious studies scholar Florence Pasche Guignard attributes the surge in gender reveal parties to the “current under-ritualization of pregnancy” that exists in tension with the radical advances in obstetric technology over the last century.⁷ With the advancement of ultrasound scans in the 1970s, a biomedical “technocratic paradigm” has arisen to document and manage human gestation, providing unprecedented visibility into the biological processes of pregnancy.⁸ Guignard argues that both religious institutions and modern medicine have failed to proffer modes of meaning-making in the face of this new wave of prenatal knowledge, resulting in the emergence of the gender reveal party as a “mediatized ritual” to fill the “void” left by both medicine and religion.⁹

In this essay, I hope to contribute to the discourse on gender reveal parties as a form of ritual that performs gender but read the meaning of such performances beyond the reification of the gender binary. Through close readings of gender reveal parties in the US and a historiographic analysis of the concept of “fetal personhood,” I argue that the performance of interpellating a fetus into the gender binary ultimately deploys gender in service of ascribing personhood. In this way, the gender reveal party functions as a performative speech act, imbuing subjectivity onto a fetus as an act of parental agency. This is not to say these parties don’t function to reinforce traditional concepts of gender—they patently do. But, as I will argue, the use of gender in gender reveal parties enacts an efficacy larger than “merely gender”; rather, the gender binary functions in gender reveal parties to perform notions of personhood, inscribing “humanity” onto the unborn. In a post-Roe United States that lacks a cultural, political, or legal consensus on when “life” begins, gender reveal parties operate as embodied speech acts that bequeath personhood through the apparatus of the gender binary. To establish this claim, I will consider, in turn: the semiotics of the gender reveal party as a ritualized performance, the logic of consent underpinning both critiques of the practice and its transgender reclamations, and the historiography of the imbrication of gender and personhood with a turn to postcolonial considerations of gender as a form of humanization for racialized subjects.

The Reveal as Ritualized Performance

Gender reveals have been variously described as ceremonies, invented traditions, celebrations, and rituals. As a form of efficacious performance, gender reveal parties fall within Richard Schechner’s iteration—drawing on Victor Turner—of ritual. However, I wish to qualify my use of ritual as a lens in light of certain critiques of Turnerian ritual theory from other scholars of ritual studies. Ronald Grimes, a preeminent scholar of contemporary ritual studies, has observed that Turner’s “liminality-saturated model of initiation” borne out of his ethnographic research in Africa has struggled to aptly describe rites of passage within Western, industrial society.¹⁰ Feminist scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum have advanced incisive critiques of the androcentrism of Turner’s articulation of ritual, arguing that liminality is not a meaningful cat-

⁶ Florence Pasche Guignard, “A Gendered Bun in the Oven: The Gender-Reveal Party as a New Ritualization During Pregnancy,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44, no. 4 (2015): 479.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 480.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 481.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 495.

¹⁰ Ronald L. Grimes, “Ritual,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (Cassell, 2000), 265.

egory for women, as they are always already positioned outside of Turner's notion of "structure."¹¹ While Turner's argument for the transformative capacity of ritual within "social creation" aligns with my approach to the question of the efficacy of gender reveal parties, his formulation of ritual as progressing from "separation" to "liminality" as characterized by "communitas," resulting in "aggregation," does not aptly describe the phenomenon of gender reveals.¹² Unlike the rites of passage analyzed by Turner, the subject of the gender reveal ritual (the fetus) exists already separated and liminal—that is, outside of social structures prior to birth, and can only be aggregated into society through language rather than participation or agency. In lieu of Turner, I turn to ritual studies scholar Stanley Tambiah, who articulates ritual as a form of performance through the lens of J. L. Austin's speech act theory:

Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the third sense of indexical values—I derive this concept from [Charles Sanders] Peirce—being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance.¹³

Tambiah's definition of ritual speaks to key aspects of the gender reveal party as performance; in the first instance, which he labels "the Austinian sense of performative," gender reveals enact the performative efficacy of language through the speech act that functions as the climax of a gender reveal: "It's a boy / girl!" In "Critically Queer," Judith Butler labels the utterance "It's a girl!" an "initiatory performative"—a performative in the Austinian sense that ascribes the gendering it simultaneously seeks to describe.¹⁴ Once an exclamation that accompanied birth itself, today this phrase is now more likely to be declared before birth, typically at the mid-pregnancy ultrasound where the majority of US Americans opt to learn the sex of their fetus. Gender reveal parties stage this moment through the performance of what I call the "reveal gesture." The staging of reveal gestures exemplifies Tambiah's second characteristic of ritual performance: the use of "multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively." This applies not only to the visual aesthetics of gender reveal parties, which will be discussed below, but also includes use of social media to broadcast and transmit the event of the reveal gesture to audiences beyond those physically present. Finally, Tambiah's third characteristic of ritual action speaks to the indexical values described by semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce; the semiotics of the reveal gesture demonstrate how gendered meaning is enacted and ascribed by the actors (in this case the parents) within the ritual performance.

Enclosed in the maternal body, the fetus is in a processual state of becoming—not yet alive, not yet human, but not *not*. The gender reveal party as performance unfolds

¹¹ "Turner's notion of liminality, in the expanded, 'metaphorical' sense which he has used for nonprimitive societies, is applicable only to men. Only men's stories are full social dramas; only men's symbols are full reversals. . . . The problem seems rather to be that the dichotomy of structure and chaos, from which liminality or *communitas* is a release, is a special issue for elites, for those who in a special sense are the structures." Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Prentice Hall, 1996), 81.

¹² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; De Gruyter, 1995).

¹³ Stanley J. Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual," in Grimes, *Readings in Ritual Studies*, 497.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 22.

around the invisible presence of the fetus as rendered to the ocularity of the gaze through the technology of the ultrasound. An ultrasound produces the first imaging of the fetus in recognizably human form and offers the opportunity to discern the fetal sex at twelve weeks with 98.7% accuracy.¹⁵ For those who plan to throw a gender reveal party, the technician produces the ultrasound results in a sealed envelope so the expectant parents can use the hidden information to stage their own reveal gesture.

Semiotically Staging “Protobirth”

As with traditional baby showers, friends and families are in attendance at gender reveal parties; however, instead of only women being invited, both genders are included. Attendees are often asked to wear pink or blue in accordance with their prediction of the fetal sex; bets may be taken, adding a ludic element to the festivities based on folkloric predictors of fetal sex such as specific food cravings, the position of the baby bump, the Chinese calendar, or dangling a pendulum over the mother’s belly. The artifice and aesthetics of gender reveal parties explicitly embrace stereotypes for gender normativity, including cakes and decorations that are often themed in gendered binaries such as “glitter or guns,” “touchdowns or tutus,” or “lures or lace” (fig. 1).

In one of the earliest YouTube videos documenting a gender reveal party in 2010, the expectant parents Nicole and Chico gather around a professionally made cake. The kitchen counter physically separates them from their spectator-guests, creating a proscenium-like setting to give maximal visibility of the reveal gesture to all in attendance.¹⁶ Together, the couple cut the cake in a distinct echo of the ritualistic cutting of the cake at most US weddings, an act that has routinely been associated with coitus and fertility.¹⁷ When the slice of cake is placed on a plate, the interior is revealed to be dyed baby blue. Nicole, the expectant mother, lifts the cake up for all to see, exclaiming “I told you! I told you!,” to the cheers of her audience of family and friends. Within the cacophony of exclamations and cheers from the attendees, one can hear in the background, “It’s blue! It’s a boy!,” interpellating the fetus into the language of gender. Most interestingly, as the forty-eight second clip concludes, Nicole repeatedly states to the camera, “It’s Roman,” declaring the chosen name for her unborn child. Though not all gender reveals involve naming, it is striking that even early in the history of this viral ritual, the act of naming and the personification it imbues are immediately imbricated with the discovery of the fetus’s biological sex. The cake’s blue interior confers gender and a gendered name onto the unborn in a contemporary echo of naming ceremonies that historically conferred personhood. As Grimes argues in *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*, social recognition of personhood has been “conferred by naming or initiation ceremonies rather than by birth rites” across diverse societies.¹⁸ Rites ranging from Christian baptism and Jewish circumcision to the Aqiqah ceremony in Islam (along with other naming ceremonies in Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, and Native American traditions) function as the final stage of birth in which

¹⁵ “What to Know About Ultrasound to Learn Baby’s Sex,” WebMD, July 17, 2023, <https://www.webmd.com/baby/what-to-know-ultrasound-babys-sex>.

¹⁶ “Nicole and Chico’s Gender Reveal Party Cake Cutting . . . IT’S A BOY!!!!!!!,” posted April 24, 2010, by nipolloc, YouTube, 48 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaIG7Z2CCp4>.

¹⁷ D. Paul Sullins, “‘No Wedding’s a Wedding Without a Cake’: The History and Significance of the Wedding Cake,” draft, October 24, 2017, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3081990>.

¹⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (University of California Press, 2000), 19.



Figure 1. A gender reveal cake. (@blondiescakesandsweets, “Gender reveal cake!,” Instagram, January 13, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bd4SEAgHRBu>)

personhood is ascribed through the giving of the name days or weeks after the child is physically born.¹⁹ As Grimes observes, historically in most societies “a newborn is not regarded as a person. People are made, not born—constructed by social recognition rather than by biological gestation alone.”²⁰ In Nicole’s gender reveal, this logic is demonstrated prebirth via the apparatus of gender, which, once revealed, allows the unborn to be named.

The climax of the gender reveal performance—the reveal gesture—has evolved since 2008 proliferating new forms of semiotic meaning. From its inception, however, such gestures have always functioned by exposing a hidden interior that signifies gender through color via an action that visually suggests the rupture of birth. Gender reveal cakes quickly evolved from a simple, traditionally round shape to overt symbols of the female body, such as the popular “baby bump” cake shaped as a pregnant torso, sometimes with the outline of fetal feet protruding from the center (fig. 2).

¹⁹ Mandy Ross, *Naming Ceremonies* (Heinemann Library, 2004).

²⁰ Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 19.



Figure 2. A “belly” cake, featuring fetal footprints protruding from the center. (Roxy’s Kitchen, April 9, 2013, <https://i0.wp.com/roxyskitchen.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Pregnanat-Belly-Cake-64.jpg>)

When the cake is cut, the cake knife functions as a surgical instrument performing an incision in an uncanny imitation of a C-section, exposing the gendered contents inside the womb.²¹ Some gender reveal cakes have taken this logic to its inevitable conclusion, depicting a baby’s head emerging from a vulva.²² The incision executed by a cake knife in a vulva-shaped cake poses a squeamish echo of an episiotomy or the tearing of the vagina that accompanies vaginal delivery for nine out of ten women.²³ The visual politics behind these cake-centered reveals semiotically stage what I call a “protobirth” enacted on a material representation of the maternal body.

More recently, many gender reveal performances have moved beyond the cake as the dominant reveal gesture. Increasingly, the ruptures staged by reveal gestures enact some form of violence: puncturing balloons filled with colored confetti with firearms, exploding colored chalk into the air, or even using alligators or other predatory animals to eviscerate dyed melons to reveal a pink or blue interior. What all these gestures have in common is a hidden interior being made visible through some sort of violent action: cutting, ripping, popping, exploding. These gestures mimic the violence of birth, enacting destructive energy on whatever container stands in for the woman’s body that encloses the “secret” of the baby’s gender. This shift to violent gestures has coincided with the growing role for men in the gender reveal ritual. While previously the expectant mother was the central agent of gender reveals, culminating with her

²¹ As one father observed in a 2012 *New York Times* article, “the whole connection of cutting into the cake to find out, like it’s a stand-in for the uterus, is sort of sickening.” Greg Allen, quoted in Alex Williams and Kate Murphy, “A Boy or Girl? Cut the Cake,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/fashion/at-parties-revealing-a-babys-gender.html>.

²² Olivia Hayes, “Vagina Baby Cakes Are a Thing and We’re Rightly Freaked Out,” *her*, August 14, 2017, <https://her.ie/life/vagina-baby-cakes-back-still-dont-get-2-360788>.

²³ “Vaginal Tears During Childbirth,” Cleveland Clinic, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/21212-vaginal-tears-during-childbirth>.

cutting the dyed cake, these increasingly elaborate—and often dangerous—gestures center the expectant father instead of the mother.

The explosive powder Tannerite, originally invented as a shot indicator for target practice, has become a hugely popular method for staging gender reveals. Tannerite gender reveals perform distinctly for the masculine gaze, with thousands of “how to” videos produced by gun enthusiasts posted on YouTube. Videos like that produced by an influencer who goes by the handle Remnant Outdoors walk viewers through the steps to execute a Tannerite gender reveal, including setting up target practice, being proficient in handling the correct weapon (to successfully explode, Tannerite requires a minimum .23 caliber rifle fired at a minimum distance of one hundred yards), and assembling the correct ratios of the explosive to colored chalk in order to achieve the effect. In another video, YouTube user PilotPatriot addresses the camera stating, “We decided that there’s no better way to find out if it’s gonna be a boy or a girl than to blow somethin’ up.”²⁴ In both videos, the expectant father is the executor of the gesture, handling a firearm that is typically propped up on a shooting rest in the style of a sniper rifle. Once the weapon is fired and hits the target, an ejaculative spray of pink or blue chalk explodes, declaring the fetal sex. The explosion is replayed several times in the video, often in slow motion, heightening the sense that the gender reveal party is a sporting event. The colored explosion, coupled with the phallic use of the rifle and the penetrative efficacy of the bullet, semiotically reenact copulation and the inseminating role of the father-to-be, with gender-coded chalk dis-seminating to encompass the entire event space (fig. 3). Sonically, these videos are set to soundtracks that affectively evoke heroic masculine tropes. Remnant Outdoors’ video begins with triumphal orchestration that is reminiscent of Hans Zimmer’s score to the 2000 film *Gladiator*; it then shifts to a rhythmic, percussive track à la the *Mission Impossible* theme to build anticipation leading up to the reveal itself.²⁵ PilotPatriot’s video is accompanied by a hard rock rendition of “Your Love” by the ‘80s band The Outfield, replete with showy electric guitar solos that lend a “hardcore” aura to what would otherwise be a feminized ritual.²⁶ By incorporating guns, explosives, and masculinized soundscapes, these types of reveal gestures perform hypermasculinity at an event that originally was centered on the maternal body.

Though ever proliferating into new forms—with detrimental consequences including California’s 2020 El Dorado fire, which burned over 22,000 acres as the result of a Tannerite gender reveal—the reveal gesture hinges on staging the shift from invisible to visible through a rupture of physical violence, placing the reveal gesture at a semiotic nexus of staging a protobirth. Across all these examples, Butler’s initiatory performative is uttered at the moment of the reveal: “It’s a girl/boy!” Thus, the semiotic protobirth inscribes the unborn fetus into gender via language, months before physical birth.

In staging a semiotic protobirth and bringing the fetus into gendered language, gender reveal parties center on the knowledge of fetal sex; but, as I will demonstrate,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Gender Reveal with Tannerite - How to Guide,” posted December 23, 2021, by Remnant Outdoors, YouTube, 7 min., 55 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZApK2Ae3PQ>.

²⁶ “Best Baby Gender Reveal Ever/Tannerite Explosion!,” posted January 4, 2017, by PilotPatriot, YouTube, 6 min., 7 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISLtLvU33ZQ>.



Figure 3. Screenshot from “Best Baby Gender Reveal/Tannerite Explosion!”

their performative efficacy extends beyond gender to perform personhood *through* the apparatus of gender. Studies on pregnant women’s self-perception show that women who choose not to learn the sex of their fetus report experiencing pregnancy as a strictly physiological state and anticipate motherhood as a *future* state. In contrast, women who do choose to learn the sex of their fetus during pregnancy are demonstrably more preoccupied with the fetus as a person and often *already* consider themselves mothers while the fetus is in utero.²⁷ The gender reveal party turns this private perception public. By interpellating a fetus into the gender binary, gender reveal parties transmute a collection of cells into a human being, one equipped with genitals and the accompanying pronouns, and, even at times, names. The performative utterance “It’s a boy/girl!” interpellates the fetus out of the state of ambiguity that has hitherto defined it—not merely the ambiguity of male or female, but the ambiguity of human or not-quite human. As historian of religion Anne Stensvold argues,

Ambiguity also dictates the way we speak about the fetus. It is hard to talk about because it surpasses the distinction that we normally rely on: It is not a human being, and nor is it *not* human. . . . Both options rely on a false assumption that we can speak with certainty about something which remains unclear. A fetus is in the process of *becoming* a human being—or not.²⁸

The critiques lobbed at gender reveals concerning consent perhaps illustrate this paradox most of all. Critics of gender reveal parties argue that the act of reveal robs the unborn of their autonomy by “nonconsensually disclosing” their biological sex in a public, communal forum, denying the now-fetus/future-child the opportunity to articulate their own gender identity and thereby “suturing” a “cisheterosexist map of meaning on to a fetus.”²⁹ Ironically, the logic behind this critique reifies the efficacy

²⁷ Astri Jack, “The Gender Reveal Party: A New Means of Performing Parenthood and Reifying Gender Under Capitalism,” *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 88.

²⁸ Anne Stensvold, *A History of Pregnancy in Christianity: From Original Sin to Contemporary Abortion Debates* (Routledge, 2015), 10.

²⁹ Lore/tta LeMaster, “‘It’s a . . . [inaudible blood-curling screams, chaos]!’: Gender Reveal Party Fails as Ideological Rupture,” *Peitho* 22, no. 4 (2020), <https://cfshrc.org/article/its-a-inaudible-blood-curling-screams-chaos-gender-reveal-party-fails-as-ideological-rupture>.

of the gender reveal in ascribing personhood as betrayed by the rhetoric of consent used by critics; in decrying the removal of consensual agency of an unborn fetus, such critiques assume the personhood to the unborn, even if relegated to a state of futurity, thereby seeking to protect the rights of fetal cells to have future agency and consent. In plain terms, consent assumes that the unborn is already a person with the capacity to consent, or at the very least, that a nascent consensual/agential being should have its right to consent preserved in utero. This logic contradicts parallel discourses on women's autonomy and bodily freedom during pregnancy: Although the mother who stages a gender reveal is enacting her agency, the fetus's lack of choice in the matter is leveraged by critics to problematize the practice. Paradoxically, to merely invoke the question of fetal consent fundamentally frames the fetus as more than an extension of the pregnant person's body: It casts the unborn as an agent robbed of consent, one whose agency to determine their own gender identity is undermined by the initiatory performative of the gender reveal performed by its parents.

Trans Reclamations: "The One Good Type of Gender Reveal"

The recent reclamation of gender reveal parties by trans activists also reinforces the role of gender in enacting personhood. In contrast to traditional gender reveals, trans gender reveals have been lauded as celebrations of consent and agency for the child or person in question. Gieseler praises them as sharing "the communal spirit of the traditional gender-reveal . . . while reaffirming personal recognition and embrace of identity as a powerful path for joy, connection, and love."³⁰ Trans influencer Jamie Raines produced a video review of trans gender reveals in 2021, beginning the video by stating: "I bring you the one good type of gender reveal in this world: trans gender reveals . . . correcting the original gender reveal."³¹ Over the course of the video, Raines spotlights one of the first viral trans gender reveal parties, thrown in 2018 by Heather Lundberg Green for her trans son, Adrian Brown. On Adrian's twentieth birthday, Green donned a prosthetic pregnant belly and posed in a series of pictures with blue balloons and "It's a boy" signs. Adrian was then photographed in a series of typical gender reveal gestures, including coming out of a box filled with blue balloons (fig. 4).³² This box imagery recurs across many trans gender reveals, with the trans-identifying person emerging from a box, festooned in the colors associated with their chosen gender identity (see figs. 4 and 6). In his YouTube review of trans gender reveals, Raines mused over the imagery of the trans person "erupting" from a box, stating it was "almost like a rebirth from a box, like a metaphor"—an observation that echoes the semiotic gestures of traditional gender reveals, recapitulating the logic of exposing a gendered hidden interior.³³ In another image from Green's photoshoot, Adrian pops a pink balloon filled with blue confetti, spraying himself with sparkly blue tinsel. Recalling Remnant Outdoors' and PilotPatriot's use of Tannerite, the explosion of the pink balloon to reveal the blue confetti contained inside enacts Adrian's transition from his external female

³⁰ Gieseler, *Milestones*, 34–35.

³¹ "(Trans) Gender Reveals," posted January 13, 2021, by Jammidodger, YouTube, 8 min., 24 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdAhDjPj99k>.

³² Shirley Donlon, "It's a Boy! Mother Stages a 'Gender Reveal' Photoshoot for Her 20-Year-Old Son, Celebrating His Transition from Female to Male," *Daily Mail*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-6691681/Mother-stages-gender-reveal-shoot-son-celebrate-transitioning-female-male.html>.

³³ "(Trans) Gender Reveals."



Figure 4. Adrian Brown at his gender reveal party in 2019. (Photo: Kara Davis; Heather Lundberg Green, “When your child comes out as trans,” Facebook, January 29, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/HeatherLundbergBrown/posts/10216955536577167>)

biological sex to his internal male gender identity. Adrian's gender reveal performs a reenactment of pregnancy (in the photos of his mother with the prosthetic belly) and the semiotics of birth by surrogating the trappings of a traditional gender reveal in service of his gender self-determination as a 20-year-old adult.³⁴

The recent rise in transgender reclamations of the gender reveal party has been extolled across various media outlets; a *Mashable* article with the headline "Gender Reveals Are Awful. (Trans)gender Reveals Are a Different Story" describes trans gender reveal parties as positively "celebrat[ing] sex and gender self-determination" in ways that are viewed as "subversive, celebratory, affirming, and fun. They communicate humor and, by extension, safety. These emotions are key to . . . acceptance."³⁵ Interestingly, the majority of the trans gender reveal parties that receive viral media attention are not initiated by trans people themselves but rather by their parents. Adrian Brown's gender reveal thrown by his mother received coverage by CNN, ABC, NBC, *The Washington Post*, *People Magazine*, and *Out Magazine*, among dozens of additional outlets that produced special features covering Green's viral post. A trans gender reveal party thrown by Love and Brandon Gwaltney for their son Grey Schoolcraft similarly went viral in 2020 and received significant attention from the press, as did mothers Zoe Lynn Pettitt and Julie Hindsley, who respectively staged gender reveal photo shoots for their trans daughters, Avery and Ella. While the declared purpose of such trans gender reveals is to celebrate and affirm the self-determination of the trans individual, the imagery of the reveal gestures themselves frequently centers the mother of the trans individual. Green's prosthetic pregnant belly (fig. 5), Pettitt's action of opening the box containing her daughter Avery, and Love Gwaltney's combination of both (she is pictured in figure 6 opening the box with her husband and was also nineteen weeks pregnant with her fourth child at the time of the reveal for her daughter Ella)—all three reveals center the maternal body in an event that is intended to reclaim agency for their trans children. Green even admitted in an interview that the gender reveal photoshoot was her, not her trans son's, idea, which he initially expressed skepticism about: "He was like, 'You're crazy.'"³⁶

In this way, trans gender reveals thrown by parents stage and perform *parental acceptance* of their child's trans identity just as much as they celebrate the self-determined identity itself. While trans gender reveal parties are intended to celebrate the self-identification of trans people and refute the deprivation of consent problematized within traditional gender reveals, the growing trend of trans gender reveals staged by mothers recapitulates the agential role of the parents in performing their acceptance of their trans children by acknowledging their gendered personhood. While obviously well-meaning, trans gender reveals in this sense function based on the same logic of the traditional gender reveal parties that have been problematized as regressive: By sharing a child's gender with a community through a visualized reveal, both types of gender reveal serve as an performative speech act that reifies personhood through

³⁴ Ali Gostanian, "A Transgender-Reveal Photoshoot Goes Viral," *NBC News*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/transgender-reveal-photoshoot-goes-viral-n968526>.

³⁵ Heather Dockray, "Gender Reveals Are Awful. (Trans)gender Reveals Are a Different Story," *Mashable*, April 6, 2019, <https://mashable.com/article/transgender-reveal-party>.

³⁶ "Gender Reveal Photo Shoot Celebrates KY Son Coming Out as Transgender," *WAVE 3*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.wave3.com/video/2019/02/07/gender-reveal-photo-shoot-celebrates-ky-son-coming-out-transgender-4>.



Figure 5. Heather Lundberg Green posing with a prosthetic baby bump at her son Adrian Brown’s trans gender reveal. (Photo: Kara Davis; Heather Lundberg Green, “When your child comes out as trans,” Facebook, January 29, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/HeatherLundbergBrown/posts/10216955536577167>)



Figure 6. The Gwaltney family's reveal for their nonbinary son, Grey Schoolcraft. (Love Gwaltney, "Boy or girl?," Facebook, July 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/love.schoolcraft.9/posts/2974350792693099>)

the interpellation of the child into the language of gender, further reinforcing the link between gender and personhood as a fundamentally humanizing connection.

The Historical Imbrication of Gender and Personhood

To fully explicate this imbrication of “gender” and “personhood” as performed by both traditional and trans gender reveal parties demands investigation of the historiography behind the relationship between these concepts, which, prior to the secular turn, centered on the question of “ensoulment.” As Chris Fowler points out, beliefs about personhood are “fundamental features of religions.”³⁷ Each of the major religious traditions (including not only the Abrahamic religions, but also Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism) asserts the reality of the material body and some form of an immaterial spirit or soul. Ensoulment, defined as the moment when the material body receives a soul and thus becomes a “person,” historically functioned as the apparatus that ascribes personhood. Widespread belief in the existence of a soul continues to persist within contemporary US culture, despite the decline in adherence to organized religion; as of 2023, 83% of US Americans report believing in some form of a soul or spirit in addition to the physical body.³⁸

As far back as ancient Greece, there has been a marked investment in the question of ensouled personhood as tied to gender. Aristotle attributed the moment of ensoulment to the perception of “quickening,” referring to the first time a pregnant woman feels fetal movement in the womb. This moment of quickening was explicitly gendered: In *The History of Animals*, Aristotle states that quickening occurs at the fortieth day of gestation for boys, while for girls it occurs on the ninetieth day.³⁹ This discrepancy erroneously suggests that females become “human” later than males, which reinforces Aristotle’s misogynist contention that females were merely underdeveloped males. Aristotle’s errant assertions about the relationship between quickening and gender demonstrate that the ascription of personhood in utero was fundamentally tied to questions of gender. With the rise of Christianity, Augustine of Hippo approached this question of the personhood of the unborn by considering the issue of the spiritual fate of fetuses who die in utero. Asserting that both genders were formed in the image of God, Augustine concluded that if the unborn child was “fully formed” and thus had taken on the *Imago Dei*, they had attained personhood and could be resurrected.⁴⁰ Those fetuses who did not acquire a “human” physical form, however, were viewed as “seeds that did not germinate.”⁴¹

With the rediscovery of Aristotle during the Scholastic turn of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas took it upon himself to reconcile Aristotle’s biological theory with Augustine’s theology concerning fetal development and ensoulment.

³⁷ Chris Fowler, “Personhood and the Body,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, ed. Timothy Insoll (Oxford University Press, 2012), 146.

³⁸ “Spirituality Among Americans,” Pew Research Center, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans>. This persistence can be seen even in contemporary trans discourse: the “wrong body” narrative articulates trans experience as one in which an immaterial sense of self is gendered differently from the material, maintaining the notion of a body-soul dichotomy.

³⁹ Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 7.3.583b3–5.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Aquinas articulated a three-stage development of the human “soul” in utero (fig. 7): first, the vegetative or nutritive soul stage (drawing on the widespread classical belief that human procreation occurred when the male’s seed implanted in the soil of the female’s womb). The next stage was the animal or sentient/sensitive soul, in which the fetus is considered alive but not yet human. In the final stage, the animal soul is replaced by the intellective/rational or “human” soul, which made itself known through the movement of quickening in what was known as “delayed hominization.”⁴² For Aquinas, when the fetus moved, it was viewed as an exercise of free will and taken as a sign of its rationality, and thus humanity.⁴³ Despite its antiquated logic, this three-part account of embryonic development persists today in the medical delineations between zygote (the vegetative soul), embryo (the animal soul), and fetus (the human soul), which may explain the erroneous belief that pregnancy is neatly divided into three parts over nine months, despite the fact that human gestation actually lasts ten months.⁴⁴

More importantly, for my purposes, Aquinas’s developmental theory of the soul provided a clear epistemological distinction between “life” and “personhood” that has been obscured in secular postmodernity. Previously, the unborn were thought of as *alive*, but not human—not receiving personhood—until ensoulment, which was only perceived by the mother at the moment of quickening, giving pregnant people exclusive agency to ascribe personhood to the unborn. The Catholic Church formally adopted Aquinas’s model and adhered to it for several centuries; well into the twentieth century, canon law asserted that prior to quickening, the unborn fetus did not have a soul and thus was not human.⁴⁵ As a result, abortion prior to quickening was not considered an act of homicide. Only after quickening, when the fetus received its soul and thus personhood, were acts to terminate pregnancy considered homicidal within Catholic doctrine. Counterintuitively, this notion of quickening was deployed in the original legal argument *in support* of abortion rights in *Roe v. Wade*. By citing the historical distinction between life and personhood as evidenced by quickening, Roe’s representatives made the legal argument that pre-quickening abortion was traditionally permissible under common law as part of their overall strategy to attain abortion rights.⁴⁶

This distinction historically enabled significant nuance in doctrinal and legal judgments on abortion or miscarriage—nuance that is clearly absent from the current discussions in which the United States is embroiled in the aftermath of the 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. For example, the eighth-century English text *The Penitential Ascribed by Albers to Bede* states:

A mother who kills her child before the fortieth day [quickening] shall do penance for one year. If it is after the child has become alive [after quickening], [they shall do penance] as a murderess. But it makes a great difference whether a poor woman does it on account of the difficulty of supporting [the child] or a harlot does for the sake of concealing her wickedness.⁴⁷

⁴² D. A. Jones, “Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, and Aristotle on ‘Delayed Animation,’” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (2012): 2.

⁴³ Stensvold, *History of Pregnancy*, 44.

⁴⁴ Stensvold, *History of Pregnancy*, 45.

⁴⁵ Gary W. Kraus and Charles H. Hendricks, “Significance of the Quickening Date in Determining Duration of Pregnancy,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 24, no. 2 (1964): 178.

⁴⁶ Roe also details the ascription of gender in relationship to quickening as asserted by Aristotle. See *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/410/113>.

⁴⁷ John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal “libri Poenitentiales” and Selections from Related Documents* (Columbia University Press, 1990), 225.

The law here takes intentional care distinguishing between three types of women: the mother, who is fully responsible for her actions; the poor woman who is in a desperate situation; and finally the “harlot,” who has engaged in illicit sexual congress. While this distinction obviously condemns extramarital sex and female pleasure, it is striking that medieval thought considered the financial status of women when considering the permissibility of ending a pregnancy—something that contemporary anti-abortion discourses often do not consider. Furthermore, due to the lack of precise biological knowledge surrounding menstruation, this medieval doctrine allowed for what historian of medicine John Riddle calls “an indefinite but fairly certain time, a window of opportunity as it were, during which a woman could end what we call a pregnancy, and neither she nor her contemporaries regarded the act as an abortion. Taking a drug for delayed menstruation was just that and nothing more.”⁴⁸ There is ample evidence across Western and non-Western cultures for practices of “bringing down the menses” that functionally ended an early pregnancy but were framed as invoking a late period. The Catholic Church maintained this distinction between homicide and early abortion up until 1917, when the traditional doctrine of delayed hominization—or ensoulment after quickening—was discarded in light of scientific advances in understanding the female reproductive cycle; the discovery of the human ovum in 1827 by Karl Ernst von Baer finally (though notably quite gradually) overturned the belief that only sperm carried the capacity for life.⁴⁹ Once the egg was discovered to be an equal contributor to the generation of life, the doctrine of delayed hominization was eventually replaced by “immediate ensoulment,” or what we know it as today: “life from conception.”

This brief historiography of the notion of personhood through the concept of “ensoulment” serves two purposes for my argument. The first illustrates that personhood—or more broadly, humanity—was fundamentally linked to gender as far back as ancient Greece. It also reveals how we are currently situated at only the most recent of a series of attempts to define the status of the unborn with regard to its humanity. Fetal movement as equated with free will, the soul, and thus “personhood” functioned as a proprioceptive means of viewing the invisible fetus, through movement felt only by the mother. In this regard, ensoulment was exclusively testified by the embodied experience of the pregnant person. Today, quickening has been replaced by the ultrasound in terms of its epistemological significance in assigning personhood, though today we have abandoned the language of ensoulment for the vaguer notion of “life.” Mid-pregnancy ultrasound imaging allows us to peer inside the womb and see the unborn, genitals and all. Interestingly, ultrasound images that gender a fetus are typically produced after the first trimester, when 80% of miscarriages occur. So quickening to the ancients and ultrasounds to us moderns both occur after the highest risk of miscarriage declined and the rate of fetal viability has significantly increased: Humanness, personhood, and “the soul” all come after this moment when it is more likely that the fetus will make it to birth. Unlike quickening, however, the ultrasound image can be collectively experienced and shared, allowing for the ritual of the gender reveal party to emerge, centered around the fetal image and the accompanying information about biological sex. Gender reveals perhaps now function as quickening once did: establishing the personhood of a fetus not through felt movement by the mother, but through the visualization of its sex via the biomedical apparatus of the ultrasound.

⁴⁸ John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 27–28.

⁴⁹ Stensvold, *History of Pregnancy*, 125.

Gendering the Marginalized

If the ascription of gender is a key means of socially constructing and ascribing personhood, then logically the denial of personhood would be accompanied by the absence of gender. Scholars such as Hortense Spillers and María Lugones argue this point in their work on marginalized groups within the history of Western colonialism, demonstrating that the connection between gender and personhood within Western thought has also been deployed toward dehumanization through the denial of gender. Spillers's canonical essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" argues that gender, specifically for African American women, is "an *outcome* of a certain political, socio-cultural empowerment," defining the dispossession of marginalized subjects in terms of the "loss of gender."⁵⁰ Postcolonial studies scholar Lugones has built on Spillers's work through her concept of the "coloniality of gender." In "Gender and Universality in Colonial Methodology," Lugones argues that gender was deployed as a tool of domination within colonialism.⁵¹ Colonial powers denied subjugated peoples gender as a method of dehumanization: "Neither male nor female Indigenous people nor people kidnapped from the African continent and enslaved were considered and treated as gendered. . . . [G]ender became one of the marks of the human."⁵² Her analysis demonstrates that subjugated peoples were not considered men or women; rather, they were "classified as male and female" only based on their sexual organs in the same way as animal livestock:

The gender system introduced by the colonizers only constituted European bourgeois men and women as gendered. . . . The sexual difference of the colonized . . . was understood as raw, animal biology, outside civil society. . . . [Gender] does not apply to the colonized because they are not human.⁵³

Lugones goes on to define gender as a way of controlling the humanity of others by either granting or withholding it from subjects existing in a space of liminal humanity ascribed by those in power. Ultimately, she concludes that the concept of gender itself is complicit with "whiteness, capitalism, and neoliberalism" to the extent that it is deployed in service of ignoring the "conditions of subordination and oppression of non-white women and . . . fails to offer another humanity."⁵⁴ Yet in its current iteration within Western hegemony, Lugones's notion of the "coloniality of gender" reiterates the connection between "gender" and "personhood."

The denial of gender to people of color as part of colonial subjugation can be productively brought to bear on the question of racialized practice in contemporary gender reveal parties. While originally gaining traction within the white middle-class "mommy blog" sphere, gender reveals have become increasingly popular in communities of color in the United States. A TikTok search for #genderreveal and #blackgirlmagic yields thousands of videos featuring Black parents staging gender reveals. These videos deploy many of the usual visual tropes and reveal gestures used by white par-

⁵⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 77.

⁵¹ María Lugones, "Gender and Universality in Colonial Methodology," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 8, nos. 1–2 (2020): 25–47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33, 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

ents. However, many Black gender reveals deploy one of two soundtracks: either OD Quake's "Gender Reveal Song" (2020) or NLE Choppa's "The Gender Reveal Song" (2022). Both songs are raps and feature the use of samples, autotune, and other musical modes characteristic of contemporary hip hop. OD Quake's song opens with a spoken sample saying, "I'm at the right place, right? This a gender reveal? OK, let's turn this up a little bit!," then begins the rap with the question "Is it a he or is it a she?," before later stating, "Whether it's pink or it's blue I promise I'll still be excited."⁵⁵ Billboard Top 40 acclaimed artist NLE Choppa's "The Gender Reveal Song" offers lyrics that recapitulate normative gender roles:

Ayy, if it's a girl, get ready for the tea parties
 A girl, get ready for the pink barbies
 A girl, make sure that her heart is guarded
 'Cause a girl sometimes can become a target
 If it's a boy, make sure you and him play catch
 If it's a boy, make sure y'all have a talk about sex
 If it's a boy, make sure you treat a woman with respect
 Forgive, forget, never regret and protect.⁵⁶

NLE Choppa's lyrics invoke the language of consumption with "pink barbies" and depict a cisheteronormative family structure that appeals to fathers' active roles in the raising of children in an inversion of the Black matriarchal family structure analyzed by Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Both songs also appeal to a sense of Black Christian faith, citing blessings on the unborn and, in NLE Choppa's version, the lines:

What it's gone be, a king or a queen?
 What it's gone be, blue or pink?
 Whatever you get, just know that it's a blessing
 God don't give us what we want, he gives needs
 Love her or love him
 Every decision is made for them
 God should be the only one you put above them
 When you hold them in your hand, I swear you can't unlove them.⁵⁷

In contrast to the soundscapes that accompanied the earlier discussion of predominantly white gender reveals, these Black gender reveals perform their own sense of Black futurity through a musical mode that originated within Black communities.

The spread of gender reveals throughout historically marginalized communities of color, including growing numbers of Latine gender reveals, can be read as appropriating a white middle-class performative ritual toward the enactment of personhood by communities historically denied humanization and recognition within white hegemonic society. Astri Jack observes that gender reveal parties may function for communities of color as a form of "inconspicuous consumption." Drawing on Thorstein Veblen's theory of "conspicuous consumption" as a way to signal class mobility, Jack argues that gender reveal parties

⁵⁵ "Gender Reveal," posted February 28, 2024, by OD Quake, YouTube, 1 min., 27 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg_7kJvm0.

⁵⁶ "NLE CHOPPA - The Gender Reveal Song (Official Audio)," posted March 15, 2022, by NLE Choppa, YouTube, 1 min., 32 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7rtN2b4ypc>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

may allow less wealthy parents to inconspicuously project affluence in a way that is socially acceptable, demonstrates “good” parenting, and does not entail ongoing financial commitments. . . . the evidence can be posted to social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram, which have become important venues for demonstrating “ideal motherhood” to others in one’s social circle.⁵⁸

Thus, the staging of gender reveal parties by racially minoritarian groups in the United States enacts a particular reclamation of personhood that was historically denied to people of color under the project of settler colonialism, demonstrating that the link between the performative act of gendering the unborn recapitulates logics of personhood that have been long established within Western hegemonic thought and that continue to be reified through the ritualized performance of gender reveal parties.

Conclusion

Ultimately, gender reveal parties as a whole function as a ritualized performance that deploys gender to socially construct personhood. In pronouncing a gender identity over an unborn fetus, parental agents deploy Butler’s initiatory performative to interpellate what is otherwise viewed as an amalgamation of fetal tissue and cells into a state of humanity. To return to Stensvold,

The uncertainty [of the human status of the fetus] is reflected in ordinary speech. If the pregnancy is desired, we speak about the fetus as if it were already a full-born child—thereby magically helping to bring it safely into the world. But if the pregnancy is unwanted, we use words which allow us to think of the fetus as something external, invading, and foreign—something which can be removed.⁵⁹

I would extend Stensvold’s observation about ambiguous language to the efficacy that lies behind the gender reveal as a performative speech act: The reveal transmutes the ocularcentrism of the ultrasound imagery of fetal genitals to stage a protobirth that culminates in the initiatory performative “It’s a boy / girl,” as witnessed in a ritualized setting by an assembled social community. The fetus is born into humanity by the volition and action of the parents through the reveal gesture, simultaneously entering the realm of language and the structure of society through the ritual event of the gender reveal. Counterintuitively, gender reveal parties privilege the agency of the mother/parent *over* that of the unborn, despite the conservative associations ascribed to those who celebrate fetal sex. It is in fact critics of gender reveals who articulate concern and a desire to protect fetal agency and defend the unborn against robbed consent. This reversal—of conservative parties advocating maternal over fetal agency and progressive voices championing fetal agency over maternal agency—speaks to the profound ambivalence that characterizes the status of the unborn within the matrix of societally recognized personhood. With the demise of protections for abortion in the US alongside continuing advances in medical technology that now allow fetal sex to be determined by blood tests even earlier in pregnancy, the imbrication of the knowledge of gender and the start of personhood continues to escalate tensions between the agency of parents and the rights of fetuses. It is perhaps no surprise that current conservative efforts are seeking to limit reproductive technology such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), citing the personhood of embryos. Embryos created by IVF are increasingly put through

⁵⁸ Jack, “Gender Reveal Party,” 87.

⁵⁹ Stensvold, *History of Pregnancy*, 10.

mandatory genetic testing as early as five days after fertilization, not only yielding information about genetic health risk factors but also determining biological sex. In other words, the long history of the imbrication of gender and personhood reinforces the notion that once an embryo can be gendered, it is counterintuitive to maintain a posture of nonpersonhood toward the unborn.

Personhood, like gender, is a social construct and one that must be recognized communally within society to have meaning. Gender reveal parties deploy the gender binary in order to construct and ascribe personhood and humanity itself through the performative of gender in front of an audience who functions to recognize and accept the transmutation of fetal cells into a gendered “person,” interpellating it into the realm of the “human.” It is through the collective recognition of gender, as trans gender reveal parties demonstrate, that the subject is communally accepted as a person and celebrated within the social structure. Without any alternative mode of societal consensus on how personhood is ascribed, earned, or performed, perhaps a gendered speech act on behalf of a child is truly the only means by which humanness is instantiated—whether before or after they are born.

Coda

To close, I leave you with the 2022 case of Brandy Bottone. Less than two weeks after the overturning of *Roe* by the Supreme Court, Bottone, who was in her third trimester of pregnancy, was pulled over by a police officer in Texas for driving solo in a carpool lane. Bottone countered his accusation by pointing at her belly and saying, “My baby girl is right here. She is a person.”⁶⁰ A judge ruled in her favor—and in favor of the gendered personhood of her fetus—and the ticket was dismissed.

⁶⁰ Kelly Rissman, “‘My Baby Girl Is Right Here, She Is a Person’: Pregnant Woman Pulled Over in Texas for Driving in HOV Lane,” *Vanity Fair*, July 9, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/07/pregnant-woman-texas-challenges-hov-regulations>.