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Called into the World by All of Us: An Interview with *Masculine Birth Ritual* Podcast Creator and Host Grover Wehman-Brown

Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz and Grover Wehman-Brown

Birthing beyond the binary is a radical act. There are few contexts in which gender binaries remain more stubborn than in the realm of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting; if anything, the gendering of pregnancy and childbirth has escalated in the last few decades. It is a trend consonant with the intensified scrutiny of pregnancy and reproduction in general—take, for example, mythic norms of the “perfect pregnancy” that render pregnant individuals simultaneously responsible and powerless, the increasing surveillance and punishment of pregnant people by the state (in particular immigrant mothers and mothers of color), and the acute medicalization of childbirth that has exacerbated obstetric violence against Black, Latinx, and Indigenous birthers.¹ And as pregnancy and parenting are intensely policed, so too is the performativity of white cis/femme reproductivity culturally lauded across a range of settings, celebrated and even cachet when attached to whiteness, wealth, and heteronuclear family formation. Here, the articulation between gender and sex assignment persists as robust. Resolute. Intractable. Reinscribed daily.

Still, pregnancy and childbirth are not—and have not been—the exclusive purview of cisgender women. There is a necessary and lively conversation unfolding in reproductive health-care and justice settings over *how gender matters* in

reproduction—and how we might build more inclusive and culturally competent modes of advocacy and care.² Queer, trans, and nonbinary birth workers are growing in ranks and visibility—organizing collectives, educating other birth workers, and creating gender-affirming spaces for conception, pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care. Trans, queer, and nonbinary-identified parents are raising their voices as well—writing for public audiences about chest feeding, gamete banking, vexed interactions with care providers and family members, and sharing their experiences in the parenting blogosphere.³ And mainstream reproductive rights advocacy organizations are following suit—grappling with how to expand their message in the spirit of gender inclusivity—evidenced, for example, in an early 2020 NARAL Pro-Choice America campaign titled *Freedom is for Every Body*.

Grover Wehman-Brown is a leading voice in this vital and vibrant conversation. This interview is an excerpt of a conversation between Grover, creator and host of the ground-breaking podcast *Masculine Birth Ritual*, and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz, associate professor of communication studies and gender, women's, and sexuality studies at the University of Iowa. For over fifteen years, Natalie's scholarly and activist work have centered on reproductive justice—the capacity to determine when, whether, and with whom one creates family, in safety and free from violence.⁴ These commitments have only deepened alongside her more recent experience as a queer femme parent of two delightful human beings.

))) Interview

NATALIE FIXMER-ORAIZ (NFO): Grover, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I love *Masculine Birth Ritual*—it is a project of profound importance and I want to thank you for creating a space for conversation, resource exchange, and community building around trans and nonbinary pregnancy, birth, and parenting. It is a formidable task to condense the complexity you grapple with on the podcast into a single interview, but I am hoping you can offer some highlights grounded in your experience and expertise as a self-identified masculine-of-center radical queer writer-organizer-podcaster attending to reproductive and birth justice. Would you start by telling us a bit about yourself?

GROVER WEHMAN-BROWN (GWB): Wow. Thank you for expressing that gratitude for the project. I am so glad it's meeting the needs of community. I'm a white transmasculine Butch. I have two children—one I grew in my body and one my wife grew in her body. My kids call me Baba. I live in the U.S. on Ohlone territory which is now usually called the East Bay of California.

I'm formerly homeless and working-class raised, recently middle class. Pronouns people should call me with are she/her or they/them.

NFO: Why did you create this podcast?

GWB: I created this podcast because I needed more stories and reflective conversation about queer and trans Masculine of Center (MoC)⁵ pregnancy and birth when I was pregnant and birthing. I had an unexpectedly difficult and gender-isolating pregnancy, then a very complicated, long, life-threatening birth. I had peripartum cardiomyopathy (pregnancy induced heart failure) and hemorrhage during C-section. I experienced transphobic harm from a nurse when I was in ICU. I write more about race, disability, the health impacts of discrimination, and the complexity of this condition and my survival more in my *Autostraddle* piece.⁶ But, I lived. I regained most of my heart functioning. And as I was healing physically and healing from the most acute trauma, I kept thinking "What the fuck are you going to do with your survival?" I wanted to create access to the stories I needed but there were very few readily accessible when I was pregnant in 2014. I wanted to create the project so that MoC pregnancy and birth was understood by listeners—especially white MoC listeners like myself—as part of wider Birth Justice movements led by Black, Brown, and Indigenous women and nonbinary and trans leaders.

I wanted to provide some opening to talk (in the broadest sense possible) about ritual, spirituality, and collective practices. I think some segments of the MoC community build this in because their cultural or spiritual traditions and communities already build it in. But for people like myself, getting these valuable survival tools has required pushing against cultural notions that ritual, spirituality, and collectivity are nonmasculine. That's a very white, but not entirely white experience. In Episode 7, Sara Flores-Boudreaux and I talk about this more in depth.⁷ But, I wanted to create a place where these conversations about ritual, spiritual, and collective resources happened in ways that I hoped helped normalize them within masculine queer and trans culture.

Oh! And I wanted it to be as close as free as possible and to come out quickly—I considered writing a book, but decided the process to get a wide, affordable distribution would take too long. So, that's why it's in a podcast format.

NFO: You have spoken with so many different people—birth workers, healers, spiritual leaders, scholars, and everyday folk getting pregnant and birthing beyond the gender binary. You have delved fearlessly into issues ranging from pregnancy/birth-linked gender dysphoria to overlooked histories of TNB folks birthing and decolonial consent-based models of care. What has surprised,

alarmed, and/or delighted you in this experience? Can you share a stand-out “aha” moment of clarity in doing this work?

GWB: Mmmmm. Great question. I think my initial answer to this is that what has come up again and again and alarmed me but also is entirely predictable is the consistent realization that “it” is constantly happening all around us, we just aren’t yet close enough or resourced enough to save each other all the time.

I’ll give two examples. The first time was when I interviewed Ryan in Episode 4.⁸ Ryan was talking about feeling so disconnected from community when he was pregnant, and how calling around to birth workers was such a limiting process—so few were open to providing quality, culturally appropriate care to a transmasculine pregnant person—and how afterward he felt so isolated from new parent community and didn’t have other transmasculine people to heal and learn to parent alongside. So much of what he said resonated with my own experience, but the sticker was that at the time he was experiencing it I was literally moving through his town every day, living twenty minutes away in the same community. We didn’t know each other. I had kids who were older so I was at a different life phase—I couldn’t have sat around at the park with babies. But at the same time, we were so close! And so far. And there was a person experiencing something that I thought of literally every day and I didn’t have the connection or resources to help him lessen the isolation of that experience.

The second time was in the middle of interviewing Takeya for Episode 10.⁹ I scheduled the interview to talk with Takeya about her amazing, powerful, groundbreaking work as an artist, particularly the series of paintings she did after the birth of her first son.¹⁰ She was telling me about her birth and parenting story as a single mom, and she begins to tell me about how she and her two sons experienced homelessness when they were very young. I have every reason to know, intellectually, that single moms of babies experience homelessness. I have every reason to know that gender-nonconforming people experience homelessness at higher rates than gender-normative people. I know that Black people experience housing insecurity at higher rates than white people. I was homeless for four years in young adulthood. I then went on to study homelessness for the seven years I was getting my master’s and PhD. I KNOW. And yet, I was surprised, and that surprise funneled into that deep well of knowing that I try to keep access to. Checking in with it is what keeps me grounded and focused on long-haul social justice movement work.

So that is to say—the surprise was that what we know about how the world operates on the bodies of our people is true. It was more just the surprise that the stories for this podcast would consistently unearth the magnitude of the

transformation that is required—housing and economic justice, transphobia in medical care, westernized medical systems that are the antitheses of informed consent, white supremacy in the way white clients interact with birth workers of color¹¹ (and white supremacy everywhere).

I also left many conversations with joy and hope, because people are building new resources and people are doing it while being whole, complex people. For example, in my interview with Miriam Zoila Pérez¹² (for which I was totally fan-butched out about beforehand), I expected our conversation to be very serious and straight to the point. We ended up talking about the work of adrienne maree brown,¹³ worldmaking, house plants, and kid joy. Which is not to diminish the very intense research and reporting and tools that Pérez has done to reduce the impact of racism on Black and Latinx birthing people. But it is to share with the world that both of us, gender-non-conforming writers that work toward racial and gender justice, are figuring out how to balance that intense work with practicing joy in the lives we have.

My conversation with Rabbi Elliot Kukla¹⁴ involved a lot of laughter, and I left the conversation knowing a lot more about his specific contributions to supporting queer and trans people within Judaism. And that conversation left me hopeful, even as we know and talked about how the world is burning.

So this very long answer is to say: I was surprised at how these conversations highlighted what I know to be true, and what seems the truest in my life: we need to transform our world, and there is great hope and tenderness and joy to be had with the other people working on those transformations.

NFO: How has the podcast impacted your own journey/path postpregnancy and birth?

GWB: Well, in many ways it brought me the community contact I needed during birth. It brought me into contact with projects and representations of MoC/trans/genderqueer parents that I didn't realize were doing different but still powerful and representative work. Like, I knew Ignacio G. Rivera¹⁵ did powerful work to transform and prevent childhood sexual abuse, but I didn't realize they were a parent until I was doing this work. The social media affiliations of *Masculine Birth Ritual* pulled me into new networks with really amazing projects of birth justice, queer liberation, trans rights, transformative justice, and racial justice—projects that I hadn't encountered through my own private social media algorithms and atmosphere.

It also enabled me to literally do the work—the editing, the calling, the emailing, the writing—to know that I am doing what needs to be done to fulfill my own ask of myself—that I leave the realm of pregnancy and birth and babies a

better place for someone like myself to be. Those tangible acts are often what I need for healing.

NFO: For those trans/queer/nonbinary folx out there imagining, planning, or actively pursuing pregnancy, do you have any words of elder wisdom? The podcast itself is chock full of resources and ways to plug in to community, but are there additional thoughts you might offer? Perhaps people, publications, collectives, resources, etc. that did not make it into the podcast?

GWB: Hmmm. . . . Well, I will reiterate some that got a mention on the podcast and put some new ones out there with the knowledge that some of these resources might not be available when people read this article even. We are all moving fast. But here goes:

1. Trystan Reese and his partner became somewhat gay famous for a podcast episode of the Longest Shortest Time about how they became parents. They eventually made a baby that Trystan carried, and his Instagram and social media is direct and reflective and vulnerable, as are the Longest Shortest Time episodes about his pregnancy and conception journey. He is also the director of Family Formation at the Family Equality Council, which might be a useful resource.¹⁶ That organization has a podcast on queer parenting as well that people might find valuable called “Outspoken Voices.”
2. There are a number of really great Instagram accounts I was able to connect with because they followed and started sharing *Masculine Birth Ritual* content—these accounts would have been so useful when I was pregnant (in a time when I didn’t have Insta) and a couple of those include: @restore_midwifery, @refugemidwifery, and just for general reflective masculine and non-binary embodiment, following the work of somatic wellness bodyworker king yaa at @mxkingyaa & @queerbirthworker.
3. I participated in a research study on the experience and care needs of trans-masculine people in pregnancy—I believe they’re starting to share their findings, and I find that makes me feel hopeful.¹⁷

I’m sure there’s a bunch more I’m missing or not getting because I’m not pregnant looking around for resources and haven’t been producing the podcast for a year. Our people are really innovative so by the time this publishes, I’m hopeful more resources will be in the world.

My wise advice? Find each other—ask questions—give a damn—don’t isolate but have boundaries. Literally take care of your body and yourself and your community and expect them to care for you back. Don’t make babies with people you do not 100% trust and want to sit overnight with in a plastic emergency

room chair. Grieve the friends that faded when you got kids and then go make new ones. Eat the vegetables, go to therapy, touch earth dirt, move your body if you can, end white supremacy, stop fascism, take your kids to meetings, get a social safety net for all people, fight for informed consent in medical settings (and everywhere). Now I just sound like that grumpy butch on the porch with a broom and a vest overloaded with political buttons, but really. . . . We have so much work to do to keep and fix the world we are living in and we must stay together and tender to birth those babies and sit for hours underneath them and wipe their tears and share joy—find the joy while we also endure the banal, urgent hardness that parenting in current conditions is for a lot of us.

NFO: At this point I feel obligated to note, with incredible sadness, that there are no new *Masculine Birth Ritual* episodes on the horizon. Have you imagined a second season at some point down the road? If you could humor me for a moment, what might that look like in your mind? I keep thinking of how pregnancy and childbirth are, of course, their own thing, but also just the beginning of an incredible journey (parenting) that is accompanied by its own set of gendered weirdnesses. For example, what do you do with Mother's/Father's Day?! I mean, not necessarily what do *you* do with those holidays—although, by all means, feel free to weigh in on that—but that is only one of the many moments where heteronuclear family formation rears its ugly head in ways that can be incredibly challenging. Or, in the event that another season is not in the cards for you personally to take on, perhaps you've come across other resources in your journey that you'd like to recommend here.

GWB: It is true, it is true. I have not considered a second season because of capacity reasons and also because this work is intense, talking with people about pregnancy and birth. Certainly I was called to cultivate the stories and resources I needed when pregnant as a way to heal and close out my own gnarly experience, but also birth work and medical work is emotional work that many people are called to and I am not, not in the long run. You know I've been working for ten-plus years on ending homelessness work and am now back at it in a full-time capacity and I feel like I'm doing the work I need to be doing right now—like I've been training for decades for this work, which included MBR and the practice of visioning the world we are building.

So, no second season for me, but I will humor you. As you know, parenting really brings out the full extent of the anemic "*Gendered Lives*" of people (you see how I did that there?) and of course I, given a microphone and time, would have some things to say. Last year I published this article in response to how cis and het parents seem incapable of teaching their children about gender

variety, even when the tools are literally free and require only a bit of reflection and intention.¹⁸ The article is about changing up the pronouns and parental names in everyday children's books as a way to teach kids about the range of caregiver arrangements and parental names. About once a year I have an intense exchange with a three-, four-, five-, six-year-old child on the playground when they are interrogating me about my gender and I try to stay chill and clear, but then I take to social media to say "PSA: If you refuse to teach your children about the diversity of human gender experience I will teach them the word GENDERQUEER on the playground." For me it's important to model ease and chill in front of my child when this happens, because they're also asking her these questions when I'm not around—I don't want my gender to seem like a problem or something I'm stressed about. So I try to keep it matter of fact "Oh, I'm her Baba. A Baba is a parent. Oh, you think I'm a boy because I have short hair. Okay. No, you think I'm a girl because my voice. Okay. Well, I'm genderqueer. I'm like a little bit of both. I was a girl when I was a kid and now I'm an inbetweenier." You see, like that until we have a truce. And in response to your question—My family does the "Mother's Day" for my wife (and often it's my wife, her mom, my mom, so it's already a crowded day) and we celebrate "Baba's day" on the tie and sports-ball themed corporate holiday. But it's like, kid crafts and flowers. It's pretty chill, but involves constant awkward correction of other people's well-intentioned "Happy Mother's Day" and then their silence on Baba's day. Over time it stings less, though lately I've just been wondering what the ease of something like passing might feel like. Not that I want it, I just have curiosity about it.

If I was to extend the podcast it would be to interview people like Toshi Regon or Catherine Opie who birthed or adopted babies in the generation or two before this one. Those were conversations I really intended to have but didn't get to have but would find really valuable for our community and our archives.

NFO: I would like to borrow a version of a question you once asked of an interviewee, if you're game. You are sitting in a room thirty years from now, in the beloved company of your (now adult) children and their friends. One of them is pregnant and shares a gender expression with you. What do you hope is different about their world as they are about to become a parent?

GWB: MY OWN QUESTION! Okay. I'm game. You know I'm game.

I hope that they are about to have a pregnancy that is celebrated, and celebrated in a way that acknowledges their particular embodied gender—that it's not mom-celebration-lite. I hope we have developed a way of filling out the

content of gender that is widely available so that a person with a gender like mine can share a common language with a large number of other people; a common language and ways of celebrating their existence that is derived from our legacies. I hope they are about to have access to a safe, culturally rooted, holy birth no matter what kind of settings or interventions they might need to safely bring their baby into the world. I hope when they have a new baby their home is filled with just the perfectly right people and the right number of people that are supporting them, that speak to them using the names and words they use for themselves and their family members. I hope they get tremendous financial and childcare support from the collective (be that their close community plus a state or whatever administration we might achieve postcapitalist, poststate) so that they can find the right balance between being snuggled up feeding/raising their baby and pursuing whatever purposeful work they have besides childrearing. I hope they live in a world and a place where they have access to clean dirt and land and water and air and green things. I hope she lives in a world where reparations have been made for stolen land and labor. I hope she is not asked to harm or be indifferent to the pain of others in order to earn a living or be sheltered or have love. I hope she and her community have the tools to reckon and make amends and repair whenever they cause harm and to demand and receive it when they are harmed. I hope she has deep community that lives nearby and that they are in each other's houses. I hope she knows and feels connected to her queer, trans, lesbian, feminist, revolutionary lineage that made her possible—that she has rituals to honor that legacy and the legacies of her blood and raising culture. I hope she and her baby feel called into the world by all of us—that it rings in her and them as a reminder each day. I hope her freaking pregnancy clothes fit and are handsome as hell.

NFO: What might be the role of queer studies, cultural studies, and/or communication studies in making this world possible?

GWB: Lifting up the contributions of less visible birth-justice media makers. Denormalizing the current “normals” of birth culture—white, feminine, heterosexual, two-partnered, materialistic, “healthy baby” centered, always happy, hospitalized or white-woman-as-edgy home-birth, devoid of physical complicated bleeding oozing bodies, separated from abortion and miscarriage. TEACHING THE STUDENTS. Teaching the students to have a bullshit detector while also having joy and compassion is so deeply important. Teach them about Birth

Justice movements. Teach them how to be trans, nonbinary, and GNC affirming. Thank you all for doing this work.

NFO: Thank you, Grover.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Dána-Ain Davis, “Obstetric Racism: The Racial Politics of Pregnancy, Labor, and Birthing,” *Medical Anthropology* 38, no. 7 (2019): 560–73; Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz, *Homeland Maternity: U.S. Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Lara Freidenfelds, *The Myth of the Perfect Pregnancy: A History of Miscarriage in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Olivia Miltner, “‘It Felt Like I Had Been Violated’: How Obstetric Violence Can Traumatize Patients,” *Rewire.News*, January 23, 2019, <https://rewire.news/article/2019/01/23/it-felt-like-i-had-been-violated-how-obstetric-violence-can-traumatize-patients/>; Theresa Morris, *Cut It Out: The C-Section Epidemic in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Lynn Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin, “Arrests of and Forced Interventions on Pregnant Women in the United States (1973–2005): The Implications for Women’s Legal Status and Public Health,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 38, no. 2 (2013): 299–343; Mary Pember, “The Midwives’ Resistance: How Native Women Are Reclaiming Birth on Their Terms,” *Rewire.News*, January 5, 2018, <https://rewire.news/article/2018/01/05/midwives-resistance-native-women-reclaiming-birth-terms/>.
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Grover Wehman-Brown, PhD, is a writer, communication strategist, and producer and host of *Masculine Birth Ritual* Podcast. She is communications manager for a not-for-profit organization in Oakland, CA.

Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz, PhD, is an associate professor of communication studies and gender, women's and sexuality studies at the University of Iowa. She is the author of *Homeland Maternity: US Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime* (University of Illinois Press, 2019). Please direct any correspondence to Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz. Email: natalie-fixmer-oraiz@uiowa.edu.