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"And All Were Welcome": An Analysis of the Transgender Child in Contemporary Picture Books

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Pomona College

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“And All Were Welcome”:

An Analysis of the Transgender Child in Contemporary Picture Books

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Gender and Women’s Studies Program

Pomona College

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

By Isaac Atkinson Prestwich

May 2020

Under the Supervision of

Dr. Aimee Bahng, Ph.D.

Dr. Jessica Martinez-Tebbel, Ph.D.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been writing about picture books for transgender children since the Spring of 2019. The first iteration of this project took shape in a class I took with Professor Amanda Apgar called “Queering Childhood,” in which we were encouraged to design our own final project. Professor Apgar guided me throughout the semester and helped me produce a solid final product that ultimately expanded to become this thesis. For her guidance and patience as I grappled with the complexities of this project, I wish to firstly thank Professor Apgar from the bottom of my heart. Of course, this project also would not have come to fruition without the support of all faculty members at Pomona College who have supported my research and encouraged me to ask difficult questions.

When I began writing this thesis, I felt utterly lost. I had no idea how to even begin working on a project of this magnitude. It was Professor Aimee Bahng, however, who stood by me throughout this process and helped me make sense of the jumbled mess of half-formed ideas and ambiguous tangents that filled my brain. I am immeasurably grateful for Professor Bahng’s support and guidance throughout the course of this project. I additionally want to thank Professor Jessica Martinez-Tebbel and Professor Zayn Kassam for their comments on my writing and their words of encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

“. . . Course, you boys can't wear dressies”

“We can't?”

“No! Boys wear pants and girls wear dressies.”

“But why do we gotta wear different stuff?”

“Cause girls are good and boys are bad, naughty babies!”

— “Angelica's Last Stand/Clan of the Duck,” *Rugrats*

In my early childhood, I often clung to my mother's side—everywhere she went, I went. As a result, my mother did not get much time to herself. She often recalls that the only moments of successful separation came when she would leave the house or take a shower. In the latter scenario, she would typically set me in front of the bulky CRT TV in her bedroom while she crept off to shower or take some time for herself. As a child, I spent hours in front of that buzzing television screen, watching countless VHS tapes of recorded children's programming including *Hey Arnold!*, *Doug*, and *CatDog*. My favorite show, however, was always Nickelodeon's *Rugrats*. Running from 1991 to 2004, *Rugrats* ultimately amassed 172 episodes over 9 seasons, resulting in many hours of uninterrupted solitude for the mother of a young Isaac Prestwich.

Created by Arlene Klasky, Gábor Csupó, and Paul Germain, *Rugrats* is an animated children's television program that follows the lives of toddlers and the adventures that unfold in their imaginations and in real life. Throughout the series, Tommy, Chuckie, Angelica, and twins Phil and Lil navigate their existence as curious and imaginative tots living in a world that sees them as merely—in the words of the older and meaner Angelica—dumb babies. Episode after episode, the toddlers in the show are faced with a challenge or event that launches them into imaginative worlds where they learn valuable lessons in empathy, friendship, grief, and jealousy. For me, however, as an effeminate young boy who never fit in with the kids I went to school

with, I was always particularly moved by the episodes of *Rugrats* that explored themes of gender, identity, and belonging. Despite the fact that *Rugrats* was produced as a mainstream children's TV show during a political climate that was generally hostile to gender and sexual non-conformity, Klasky, Csupó, and Germain's *rugrats* are faced with real life situations that require them to question not only the wisdom of their parents, but also their own learned biases, which have only just begun to take root.

I want to reflect, in particular, on an episode of the show that has remained in my memory for years. In "Angelica's Last Stand/Clan of the Duck," Lil informs Chuckie and Phil that girls wear dresses and boys wear pants because "girls are good and boys are bad, naughty babies," an idea she claims to have learned in her mother-daughter female empowerment class (Bugental and Duffy 1997).¹ Chuckie and Phil, frustrated by these seemingly arbitrary restrictions upon their clothing choices, decide that they want to wear "dressies" too (Bugental and Duffy).² It isn't until later in the episode, however, when the tots are bullied by two older boys in the park that they come up against the homophobia and trans-antagonism that is emblematic of hegemonic gender norms writ-large. Ultimately, however, Chuckie and Phil learn to take pride in their non-conformity and experimentation when they encounter a group of Scottish babies in kilts who teach them that it is okay to express themselves in any way they want. In this moment, the toddlers unmask the constructed nature of gender interpellation and, in the delightful act of making kin with a clan of Scottish babies in kilts, reject the roles they may be confined to due to the genders they have been assigned. The implication that the Scottish

¹ Rick Bugental and Jim Duffy, "Angelica's Last Stand & Clan of The Duck," *Rugrats* (Nickelodeon, October 4, 1997), <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6rcmo6>.

² Ibid.

babies may continue to wear their kilts into adulthood is additionally reassuring, as it presents gender fluidity as more than simply a phase that is to be grown out of.

Overall, the show's subversive storyline and unique animation style, with its squiggly, shifting lines, flat color palettes, and forced perspective seem to reproduce the toddlers' subjectivities for the audience and insist that the boundaries between things, including moral and societal imperatives, might not be as secure as they have been taught to believe. *Rugrats* taps into the uniquely imaginative and magical affect of childhood in order to fundamentally complicate the viewer's perception of the world. For me, as a young, gender non-conforming kid who felt alienated by the boundaries set upon me by my gender and hegemonic masculine doctrines, *Rugrats* reminded me that "a baby's gotta do what a baby's gotta do" to feel at home in the world, thus encouraging me to think beyond the limits that I was encouraged to conform to and make my own way as a queer kid.

What follows is an interrogation of children's picture books that feature trans and gender non-conforming child protagonists. When I was a child in the late 90's and early aughts, the picture books I was consuming at school and at home generally did not reflect an image of how I was coming to understand my own gender. *Rugrats* was one avenue through which I was exposed to the idea of gender as a social construct contingent upon cultural norms. While my own exposure to gender non-conformity came from a television show, I want to pay specific attention to a particular moment in the contemporary economy of children's book publishing, wherein transness and gender non-conformity are appearing more and more in books for young learners. In these books, the audience, presumed to be a child, whose experience of the narrative is mediated through the adult or older figure reading the picture book, is brought to empathize and identify with the book's characters, whether they be the protagonist themselves, or those

auxiliary figures who surround the main character. In this project, my goal is to identify consistent themes across the genre, as well as within the field of critical childhood studies, particularly as they pertain to the rhetorical value of the Child, the representational politics of children's literature, and the epistemological project of picture books. I ultimately ground my analysis in an intersectional framework that considers gender as inextricably linked to race, ability, and class as they co-constitutively mark certain bodies abject. This intersectional analysis, in turn, demands a move away from universalism and abstraction in favor of specificity. Importantly, this project also considers the following provocations: what constitutes the field of literature for young transgender and gender-non-conforming children? What are the dominant themes and narratives prevalent within these books? What is the affective purchase of these books, particularly when it comes to the normalization and affirmation of difference produced through childhood gender deviance? Considering insights from scholars engaged in the critical study of childhood and children's literature, what work do these narratives do to explore gender variance in childhood and how might these narratives be complicated by critiques of neoliberalism and a push towards utopian ideas of futurity?

The Transgender Child and Picture Books

Let us strive, in particular, for a sublime realism of subjectivity—the kind of life-affirming, child-affirming psychosocial realism that not only recognizes, but celebrates, diversities of gender, sexuality, race, and culture on the multiple intersecting planes of the polymorphous carnival of wonders we call childhood.

—Jody Norton, “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children’s Literature”

“Abuela, did you see the mermaids?”

“I saw them, mijo.”

“Abuela, I am also a mermaid.”

—Jessica Love, *Julián is a Mermaid*

Jessica Loves’ picture book *Julián Is a Mermaid* introduces Julián, a young Dominican boy in Coney Island, New York as he transforms himself into a mermaid with the help of his *abuela*. Donning a headdress, makeup, a flowing tail, and his *abuela*’s pearls, Julián owns his aquatic fantasy and marches alongside other high-femme “mermaids” in the Coney Island Mermaid Parade. Through marvelously colorful images that emulate Julián’s imagination as he transforms into a mermaid, Julián’s story is told with very little narration, forgoing overly didactic text in favor of fantastical illustration. Through their brightness and joyfulness, these illustrations celebrate gender non-conformity and cross-dressing in childhood as they depict Julián floating weightless in water with a long flowing tail and wavy hair carried every which way by the ocean current.

Recalling Jody Norton’s call to action above, *Julián Is a Mermaid* is indicative of a larger moment within the field of children’s literature that seeks to affirm and normalize the diversity of childhood. This trend, however, leads me to consider: what does it look like to effectively affirm and normalize difference? Informed by a critical feminist framework wary of processes of difference-making and normativity, might we be skeptical of this project taking a universalizing turn? I return to this provocation, as well as Norton’s call to action in my second chapter and conclusion.

In the case of picture books for transgender and gender non-conforming children that rely on and reinscribe liberal feminist logics of inclusion and resolution, the socio-political status-quo is ultimately upheld, rather than critically reimagined, as transgender and gender non-conforming children are depicted as passive subjects reliant upon the kindness of those around them,

powerless to the tides of social discourse that precede their very existence. One way in which these texts do this is through the uncritical deployment of analogy and abstraction, which I explore in my second chapter. The flattening of difference that is enacted through the use of analogy obfuscates power relations between social actors and obscures the intersectional nature of violence as it is perpetuated by cis-heteropatriarchy. What's more, analogical depictions of transness through the deployment of animal narratives produce a universalizing discourse, which I complicate as a regressive epistemological project. Ultimately, I argue for the production of picture books for transgender and gender non-conforming children that refigure transgender and gender non-conforming children as agential world-shapers. These books, I continue, must commit to an affirmative, speculative, and hopeful vision of the future, thus cultivating childhood subjectivities attuned to all of the queer potentialities of the not-yet-here and not-yet-now.

This project constitutes an admittedly limited review of the critical discourse that currently surrounds the field of trans children's literature and its accompanying disciplines. As it stands, the scholarship I have considered serves primarily to bring to light the Child as a specific ontological figure that operates as a technology of power, producing difference across the inseparable categories of race, ability, and gender. Additionally, the authors I engage in conversation with, including Norton, emphasize the importance of gender-affirming narratives, while articulating the danger of narratives that uphold cis-normative conceptions of gender that maintain the status-quo. What's more, I extend these considerations and interrogate the use of gendered analogy in picture books, as it serves to obfuscate difference through a naturalizing discourse. Once I have moved through these discussions, however, I look to a selection of books that effectively represent what I consider to be a radical politics of imaginative futurity,

questioning the teleological dead-end of transgender childhood. In this final move, I push towards a substantive reimagining of what it might look like in children's literature to not only respond to transgender childhood as a reality, but to imagine worlds of possibility opened up by the celebration of transgender existence on a larger scale.

Ultimately, my commitment to this project is founded upon a core belief that the lives of trans and gender-non-conforming children matter. Their sense of validity and self-love is, in part, informed and disciplined by books that either facilitate or limit the proliferation of childhood gender variance. Thus, while I lend a critical eye to trans children's literature, I do so in the hopes of deepening and enriching the critical considerations of these potentially life-affirming and sorely-needed texts. It is through a commitment to speculative worldmaking that I hope authors of books for transgender and gender non-conforming children might allow their audiences to imagine a world wherein, to quote Julian Gill-Peterson, trans childhoods are viewed not simply as "a means to another end or as an explanation for transness," but rather as a beautiful possibility of becoming (Gill-Peterson 2018, 206).³ What does it look like to not only anticipate trans childhoods, but actively "wish that there be trans children" and to affirm "that to grow trans and live trans childhood is not merely a possibility but a happy and desirable one" (Gill-Peterson 207)?⁴

A Note on Terminology: Queer, Transgender, and Gender Non-Conforming

³ Julian Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) 206.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

At this point, I want to pause and consider the terminology that this project employs throughout the coming chapters.⁵ Recognizing this project's deep investment in language and the ways in which the slipperiness of language necessarily produces different meanings depending on the context through which they are deployed, I want to explore my use of certain terms and key phrases. Specifically, in the following pages, I make use of the terms *queer*, *transgender*, and *gender non-conforming*.

I use the term *queer* in reference to not only gayness or same-sex attraction, but also other non-normative modes of existence in a white cis-heteropatriarchal society. In Judith Butler's "Critically Queer," she explores the performativity of language, specifically looking to how the term "queer" has changed from implying "the shaming of the subject it names" to signifying a new and affirmative identificatory category (Butler 1993, 18).⁶ Building upon J.L. Austin's speech act theory, Butler argues that speech acts, such as "I pronounce you..." and the taunting "queer!" are performative in that, within the realm of discourse, they "perform a certain action and exercise a binding power...on the action performed" (Butler 17).⁷ To Butler, this discourse precedes the subject, *I*, who is always constructed *by* the discourse, as opposed to producing discourse itself. Thus, applying this analysis to *queerness*, Butler then expands this concept to the question of whether the re-appropriation of certain acts or terms might hold some liberatory potential. Moreover, the term *queer* changes as different groups of people re-appropriate it for different purposes; therefore, the term and its meanings are never stable, "but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent

⁵ This section on terminology was inspired by a section in the introduction to Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined*, in which she defines her key terms *bodyminds* and *(dis)ability*.

⁶ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

and expanding political purposes” (Butler 19).⁸ It is this instability, while restricting in the act of naming and categorizing, that allows for new possibilities and changes to emerge through the reclamation of the term. Thus, as I engage with queer as a key term, I embrace its expansiveness, accepting the ambiguity of its deployment as a means of recognizing the co-constitutive nature of abjection as it is produced through discourses attuned to racist, ableist, sexist, and transphobic figurations of normativity.

Now, while my use of *queer* has been indicative of an intentional engagement with the exciting and precarious elusiveness of language, the terms *transgender* and *gender non-confirming* have come to me from the picture books that I consider in this thesis. I do not wish to use these terms interchangeably or to assume that one necessarily includes the other: indeed, my own retroactive identification as a gender non-conforming child does not mean that I was/am transgender. These terms hold weight and that specificity must be accounted for, especially in the realm of academia wherein terminology can often depart from the lived, embodied experiences through which they emerge.

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a community organization in New York City that provides free and low-cost social, health, and legal services to low income transgender and gender non-conforming people, defines *transgender* and *gender non-confirming* as follows. *Transgender* refers to “a general term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.”⁹ *Gender non-confirming* “refers to people who do not follow other people’s ideas or stereotypes about how they should look or act based on the female

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ “Fact Sheet: Transgender & Gender Non-conforming Youth In School,” Resources, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, accessed November 23, 2019, <https://srlp.org/resources/fact-sheet-transgender-gender-non-conforming-youth-school/>.

or male sex they were assigned at birth.”¹⁰ Importantly, however, SRLP clarifies that, while both terms may be general, they vary in use from person to person. As alluded to earlier, the use of terminology is a deeply personal decision and labels should not be assigned to those who do not express identification with those terms. Ironically, I will be doing just that, due to the limited language provided by children’s books that feature children with non-normative gender expressions or those who are transgender. I do so, however, to highlight the specificity of these narratives and name the socio-political factors that are at play in the stories of trans and gender non-conforming youth. In other words, I wish to name that which, for the most part, is left unnamed in these stories.

Carnival of Wonders

In chapter 1, I engage with critical childhood studies, queer theory, and comparative literary studies, in order to interrogate the figuration of the Child through medical, political, and social discourses. I demonstrate how mainstream perceptions of child development are coded by racist and ableist notions of success and failure. Through a critical analysis of discourses surrounding growing up and what it means to be a child or child-like, I argue that these narratives, which privilege a normative teleology of child development that ascend the fully realized, white, cisgender, able-bodied, male subject, are inherently dangerous and further marginalize children who are queered by race, gender, ability, or socioeconomic class. Borrowing from David Eng’s critique of Sigmund Freud, Claudia Castañeda’s critique of racialized temporal distancing, and Julian Gill-Peterson’s excavation of the transgender child in

¹⁰ Ibid.

medical discourses of the 20th century, I trace the child historically through social, anthropological, and medical discourses of development, elucidating the ways in which the child is bound up with racist histories of developmental taxonomies. At stake here is thus the figuration of the child as a technology of power. With this in mind, I then turn to an analysis Jazz Jennings' *I Am Jazz*, which I argue reinforces these narratives in the context of gender identity. My goal is thus to critically reconsider the repercussions of this discourse. This book and others like it, I argue, consequently does little to unsettle the problematic baggage of childhood as it has been bound up with developmental and scientific discourse, thus reinforcing the position of the developing trans child body as a site of medical analysis. The consequences of this medicalizing framework that seeks to make sense of the transgender child in the context of normative scientific discourses demand a reconsideration of the ways in which stories of queer and trans childhoods might be told so as to disrupt these narratives and produce liberatory, life-affirming alternatives not reliant upon institutional sites of power. This provocation is again taken up in my conclusion.

It is my main intervention here that if knowledge about children, gender, and development is a cultural production, as I argue it is in chapter 1, then the picture books I interrogate through this framework allow me to investigate how that culture is reproduced; however, considering the troubled figure of the child, I continue on to suggest that it is not enough to simply abandon the child altogether, replacing it in picture books with animals or other analogous figures. Chapter 2 takes on this provocation, interrogating the use of analogy and abstraction in picture books for transgender and gender non-conforming children. In a number of books, including Airlie Anderson's *Neither* and Andrea J. Loney's *Bunnybear*, transness and gender non-conformity are analogized through animal characters that supposedly transition

between species or embody a non-normative amalgamation of species characteristics. At stake here is the flattening of difference that is enacted through this use of analogy. Necessarily, analogy obfuscates power relations between social actors and obscures the intersectional nature of violence as it is perpetuated by white cis-heteropatriarchy. Thus, while the child may not be present in these stories, the uncritical replacement of the child with analogous figures across species and living/non-living classifications simply veils the epistemological project of picture books and introduces new questions of abstraction. In other words, let us not assume that simply because the child has been replaced by a bear/bunny/bird that these stories are rendered harmless.

In my conclusion I consider picture books for transgender and gender non-conforming children as loci of liberatory potential. Considering José Muñoz's provocation that "the future is only the stuff of *some* kids," I highlight Lourdes Rivas' *They Call Me Mix* and Kyle Lukoff's *When Aidan Became a Brother* as picture books that refuse to romanticize the imagined innocence of childhood, effectively disrupting the hegemonic epistemological force of the child (Muñoz 95, emphasis my own).¹¹ What's more, I argue that these books take up Muñoz's provocation, refiguring futurity as the realm of all children, not just those whose futurity is presupposed along racial, gendered, or classed lines. Further, by drawing out the radical potential of imagining otherwise for trans, queer, and racialized children, I set forth a reconsideration of picture books as social texts that hold immense world-shaping capabilities. In pursuit of this intervention, I encourage other feminist scholars to simultaneously turn to childhood and futurity as sites through which radical political work may be done. Most importantly, however, I argue that we must uncover new ways of speaking about trans childhoods that do not subtend colonial

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 95.

logics of development, biology, and knowledge production. Recalling my earlier invocation of Gill-Peterson, it is necessary that we reconsider what it looks like to actively “wish that there be trans children” and to affirm “that to grow trans and live trans childhood is not merely a possibility but a happy and desirable one” (Gill-Peterson 207).¹²

¹² Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 207.

CHAPTER 1

QUEERING CHILDHOOD: PROGRESS, DEVELOPMENT, AND NOSTALGIC FIGURATIONS OF THE CHILD IN THE 20-21ST CENTURY UNITED STATES

I am Jazz! / . . .

I have a girl brain but a boy body.

This is called transgender.

I was born this way!

—Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, *I Am Jazz*

As a powerful emblem of futurity, the iconic white, middle-class trans child of contemporary figurations laminates racial innocence onto the history of deeply coercive and violent exploitation of children's bodies.

—Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Rebekah Sheldon, *The Rambling*,
November 26, 2019

Waking the Sleeping Child

The primary purpose of this chapter is to initiate an engagement with the figure of the Child as it is invoked through scientific, political, and social discourses. I elucidate the ways in which mainstream depictions of childhood are coded through racist and ableist notions of success, failure, and development. Through a critical interrogation of discourses surrounding growing up and childishness, I argue that these narratives privilege a normative teleology of child development that is inherently exclusionary and further marginalizes children who are queered by race, gender, ability, or socioeconomic class. This exclusionary, progress-oriented framework draws upon normative ideals of childhood innocence and psycho-social development that, as I demonstrate, have historically been weaponized against people of color, disabled folks, the poor, and anyone else rendered abject. What's more, as I reference Jazz Jennings and Jessica

Herthel's *I Am Jazz* as a book that reinforces these narratives in the context of gender identity-formation, I argue that well-intentioned books that fail to critique normative developmental teleologies or upset the sleeping figure of the innocent transgender child who is beholden to the discerning gaze of medical professionals end up buying in to problematic presuppositions of childhood innocence and biological essentialism that reinforce racialized gender norms as aspirational and desirable. It thus becomes apparent that normative theories of child development and the tendency toward nostalgic depictions of childhood innocence ultimately presuppose the figure of an impossibly universal Child who is rendered white, middle-class, able-bodied, and capable of successfully achieving gender normativity.¹³

I am invested in unpacking picture books that feature trans and gender non-conforming children for two reasons. First, I believe that the picture book as a medium operates as a unique epistemological project wherein knowledge is produced about the world by adults and is subsequently internalized by the child consumer as a demarcation of what is possible. Thus, these books undoubtedly play an important part in figuring the potentialities for the future of trans and gender non-conforming liberation politics. Such a political project must be necessarily challenged and critiqued through a critical feminist lens. Second, I place my discussion in the context of 21st century political and economic discourse in order to understand the ways in which major publishing conglomerates have taken to producing books with progressive social messages. It appears that this emergence of progressive children's literature has stemmed from a political economy wherein neoliberal figureheads pay lip-service to issues of social justice

¹³ For more on successful gender performance, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). In this book, Butler proposes her theory of gender performativity, or the idea that gender, as it is understood in the U.S., is socially constructed and constantly reinforced through performative acts that imbue it with meaning. To Butler, this discourse of gender and successful performance precedes the subject, "I," who is always constructed *by* the discourse, as opposed to the subject producing gender discourse itself.

through a politics of inclusion and the commodification of these discourses without any real commitment to recognizing the violence of being legible by the state in the first place.

In her essay “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children’s Literature,” Jody Norton considers the lack of representation of trans narratives in children’s literature, ultimately drawing upon scholars of child psychology to promote the cultivation of a sublime realism in children’s literature that might represent a wider range of gender expressions and experiences. Looking first to the figure of the trans child, Norton argues that narratives that ascend normative gender performance and cissexist notions of gender identity work to discipline trans children, as their developing subjectivities are denied by figures of authority. Seeking a potential for change, however, Norton highlights the liberatory potential of children’s literature, as she cites the role it “can play in creating interpretative strategies, curricular revisions, and pedagogical interventions” that might mitigate the disastrous effects of the “neglect” trans children have experienced as their realities have been denied (Norton 2011, 294).¹⁴ Children’s literature that commits to unsettling the status-quo, Norton argues, can produce change not only in the experiences of individual children, but also in the systems which might otherwise further discipline those children for their non-normative gender identities. Lastly, Norton advocates for a necessary shift in the field of children’s literature to “make possible an aesthetic transumption of romantic and realist impulses in children’s literature” that would include both the rereading of existent texts and the creation of new ones (294).¹⁵ Ultimately, she urges authors of children’s literature to commit to “an unabashed romanticism of imagination...redefined to include a range

¹⁴ Jody Norton, “Transchildren and the Discipline of Children’s Literature,” in *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth B. Kidd (University of Michigan Press, 2011), 294.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of child subjectivities,” so “as to constitute...a sublime realism” (309).¹⁶ Norton’s work thus hints at the fraught nature of childhood subject formation and how this vital process is informed and disciplined by literature that limits the proliferation of childhood gender variance.

Indeed, as Norton notes, if a child is not able to see themselves in the media they consume, they encounter a distinct cognitive dissonance that informs them of their abject status and also limits the potentials of their embodiment. This much is argued by Shelby Anne Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath in “Living in a World of Words” when they argue that children use literature to “interpret literature” through their own “belief systems,” thus bringing “literature’s scenes, beliefs, and rules for behaving into daily negotiations of time, space, and privilege” (Wolf and Heath 1998, 407).¹⁷ Therefore, it becomes clear that for non-normative children, representations through literature have very real implications for their existence in everyday life. That being said, it might prove fruitful to further consider the implications of Norton’s argument that we must privilege sublime realism within childhood subject formation through books. In essence, this critique comes back to a basic trepidation surrounding representational politics. For, if it is taken for granted that a child must have their identity affirmed by the authority figures around them, what is to be said for the unsettling of power structures that lies at the heart of feminist and queer critical analysis? In other words, as Alex Verman argues, individual recognition may not be enough to upset the status-quo. Indeed, “what’s the use of gender-neutral clothing without the money to buy it? Why worry about a landlord respecting your pronouns if you can’t afford rent? The truth is, fighting systemic injustice with individual recognition is like bringing a knife to a

¹⁶ Ibid., 309.

¹⁷ Shelby Anne Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath, “Living in a World of Words,” in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (NYU Press, 1998), 407.

gunfight” (Verman).¹⁸ While it may not be addressed by Norton, Wolf, or Heath, it seems crucial to hold two truths at the same time: the first being that representation is important, as Norton has shown, since the worldmaking potentials of children’s literature has life-informing consequences that can either enrich or limit a gender non-conforming child’s feeling of belonging in the world; the second, however, being a recognition that neoliberal market logics that govern publishing practices are always already limiting the very same representational politics that trans and gender non-conforming children’s literature may depend on. In the markets of picture book publishing, the child, particularly the queer and trans child, is commodified through neoliberal politics of inclusion discourses of social justice that turn a huge profit for major publishing conglomerates. Thus, the Child appears here as a commodified version of itself—yet another figuration of childhood distinct from the Child itself.

Thus, it seems necessary to perhaps trouble the limits of representational politics, as Verman does, that focus on the diversity of characters and storylines as opposed to the purposeful cultivation of children’s abilities to critically appreciate and interrogate the creation of difference through systems of power.

In many picture books made for transgender and gender non-conforming children, the transgender child protagonist is rendered passive; any agency afforded this child through the act of proclaiming a non-normative gender identity is effectively neutralized as they are depicted as helpless to the tides of social discourse that inform their lived experience and seemingly inevitable abjection.

¹⁸ Alex Verman, “Trans Visibility Won’t Save Us,” *BuzzFeed News*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alexverman/trans-visibility-wont-save-us>.

While this trope may certainly reflect the experiences of some genderqueer children¹⁹, I hope to unpack these narratives as they are proliferated through these texts. It is through this interrogation that I hope to articulate the ways in which assumed childhood normativity, as it is produced through/by the aspirational teleological development of the Universal Child, manifests in stories written for transgender children.

Progress and Development

In *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, Claudia Castañeda interrogates the figure of the Child in the 18-20th centuries as it has come to embody, through imperialist literary traditions and processes of colonial knowledge-production, a site at which racial difference is mapped through perceived behaviors and normative developmental milestones. In her pursuit of the underpinnings of childhood and childishness as developmental categories, Castañeda offers the anthropological language of temporal distancing²⁰ as one specific lens through which the white male child can be seen to demarcate and reinforce racialized theories of human progress. Originally theorized by Johannes Fabian and recapitulated here by Castañeda, temporal distancing is an anthropological framework popular throughout the early 20th century that orders all peoples of the earth along a developmental spectrum. This process of ordering “involves placing chronologically contemporary and spatially distant peoples along a temporal trajectory, such that the record of humanity across the globe is progressively ordered in historical time”

¹⁹ For more on this, see the Human Rights Campaign’s *2018 LGBTQ Youth Report*, wherein high suicide and depression rates amongst transgender and gender non-conforming youth demonstrate the very real effects of marginalization on trans youth. Ellen Kahn et al., “2018 LGBTQ Youth Report” (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, University of Connecticut, 2018).

²⁰ More on temporal distancing in Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

(Castañeda, 13).²¹ It was thus through temporal distancing that the term *savage* came to simultaneously refer to pre-modern Europeans, as well as all non-white peoples throughout time, figured as developmentally and morally atavistic, from across the globe. In other words, non-white people across the globe were considered to be halted in development, more or less failing to live up to the supposed potential of white European society. What's more, physiological, as well as cultural development emerged alongside temporal distancing as "a specific organic process, with its own progressive form of temporality" (Castañeda, 20).²² It was in this way that racial science and anthropological discourses colluded to materialize a historically contingent framework of development, wherein white European society represented the apex. What's more, through the discourse of development, temporal distancing was doubly materialized in the body of the child.

This specific child, symbolizing the essential image of the developing human body, operates within temporal distancing as "a bodily theater where human history could be observed to unfold in the compressed time-span of individual development" (Castañeda, 13).²³ In other words, through the epistemological framework of temporal distancing, as the white, able-bodied, male child develops into adulthood, he passes through different racialized categories of development, ultimately emerging into his fully realized form of the white male adult, thus reinforcing the widely-held anthropological belief that figured "'entire peoples and races . . . as part of the childhood of the human race'" (Steedman 1995, qtd. in Castañeda, 20).²⁴

This image of the soon-to-be normative child who emerges into white male adulthood through a recapitulation of the so-called history of human development had the disastrous effect

²¹ Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2002), 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

of reinforcing white supremacist and patriarchal orderings of the world. In other words, anyone who was not a white, able-bodied man was considered to be developmentally stunted, arrested in an atavistic formation of human existence. The figure of the Child and its developing body thus serves as a lynchpin for the supposed validity of these claims.

In his critique of Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, David Eng expertly demonstrates the ways in which harmful discourses of racialized development have entered the mainstream, particularly in the foundational texts of modern psychoanalysis.²⁵ In *Racial Castration*, Eng looks to Freud's speculative analysis of the sexual behaviors of non-white, non-European peoples, arguing that Freud's writings manage racial difference through "a discursive strategy configured as the teleological evolution of normative sexual practices and 'pathological' sexual perversions," thus practicing a type of temporal distancing as he places all peoples of the globe along a developmental temporal trajectory beginning with the sexual practices of so-called primitive man and ending with the developed sexual neuroses of 20th-century European society (Eng 2001, 6).²⁶ As Freud explicitly builds his argument around this framework, he notes the "savages and half-savages" who "stand very near to primitive man," despite the fact that they exist in precisely the same time as Freud (Freud 1913, qtd. in Eng, 6-7).²⁷ Temporal distancing is at play here, as racialized populations stand in for an anthropological myth of the development of humankind. What's more, Eng argues that, as Freud's analysis of so-called primitive man explicitly focuses on sex and sexual activity, he practices a kind of racialized fetishism that simultaneously marks his objects of analysis as infantile, less-developed, and atavistic in nature.

²⁵ David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381020>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Again, the child and developmentalism appear as haunting specters that render all non-white, non-European peoples childlike, having failed to develop into the ideal image of Western man.

However, while Freud's analysis may have an infantilizing effect, his reasoning continues that, "unlike children, who . . . naturally develop out of their narcissism during the process of psychic maturation, the primitive remains interminably trapped within a narcissistic loop, locked in an atavistic temporal prison" (Eng 11).²⁸ In this way, the figure of the Child serves to render non-white peoples both child-like and simultaneously without any meaningful childhood to speak of. With regard to the latter of these figurations, the child exists in contrast to the so-called primitive. Indeed, following Freud's logic, as the child may develop beyond the alleged primitive psyche of non-white man, the child emerges explicitly as a figure less wholly-encompassing than may have been previously imagined. The child, in Freud's imagining, exists in a singular manifestation: that of the white, male, middle-class child who holds the potential of embodying Western manhood. Thus, the category of the child cannot be said to speak for all peoples in their youngest years. The troublesome past and epistemological weight of the child renders the term problematic and unwieldy. Ultimately, the category of childhood cannot be deployed uncritically: the term *child* has, for a long time, been an imagined category tied up with problematic histories of Euro-American colonialism and imperial exploitation in the name of modernization and development.

Temporal distancing and the problematic history of childhood frame the non-white Other as proof of a Hegelian construct of white supremacy and developmental progression. Through an analysis of these discourses, I tease out the figure of the nascent child to gesture towards these discourses as indicative of the ways in which the Child has been mobilized as a technology of

²⁸ Ibid., 11.

power. At the heart of this discussion is the question of epistemology: how knowledge is produced and who recapitulates that knowledge as valid. Discourses surrounding the Child, its developing body, and the presupposed subject into whom that child is to someday become are rendered legitimate and mobilized to make claims about nature and the order of things.

Nostalgia

A central concern in the consideration of childhood as a specific epistemological tool is what it means to invoke childhood in the first place. As discussed earlier, an interrogation of childhood, as it is proliferated through academic rhetoric reveal the figure of the child as exactly that: a figure, a metaphor for the development of white man, not merely the literal body of the human as it exists in its earliest years. In the introduction to her book *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Boyd Stockton takes up the “ghostly” figure of the queer child as an “unreachable fantasy” formed by “the act of adults looking back” (Stockton 2009, 5).²⁹ The body of the child, Stockton notes, exists paradoxically within this figuration of the child, as “children don’t know this child, surely not as [adults] do,” thus rendering childhood a “membrane ... largely available to [only] adults as memory” (5).³⁰ Ghostly indeed, Stockton goes on to define the queer child as having experienced a death and subsequent “backwards birth”:

The protogay child has only appeared through an act of retrospection and after a death. For this queer child ... has not been able to present itself according to the category “gay” or “homosexual” ... [These] linguistic markers for its queerness arrive only after it exits

²⁹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

³⁰ Ibid.

its childhood, after it is shown not to be straight ... The phrase “gay child” is a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died. (6-7)³¹

She further notes that this “backward birthing mechanism” renders queer childhood “a retrospective search for amalgamated forms of feelings, desires, and physical needs that led to this death of one’s straight life” (7).³² Ultimately, as Stockton pulls apart the figure of the gay child, her provocation constitutes a poststructuralist unsettling of all nonnormative childhoods as they are constructed by language. In the context of trans childhoods, which are the chief concern of my project, Stockton’s figure of the ghostly queer child can be extended to complicate contemporary ideas of universal childhood experience. Indeed, if the queer child is a ghostly apparition, only defined through retroactive identification, then it becomes necessary to question: who defines the queer child in the social imaginary of a population? Surely, as a matter of personal experience, queer and trans childhoods differ; however, in social discourse, the transgender child is essentialized to typify a white, middle-class ideal. The critical implications of this argument can be more deeply seen in the work of Julian Gill-Peterson, who uncovers historical entanglements between transgender children and early 20th century medical development.

In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Julian Gill-Peterson condemns normative depictions of childhood that figure all children throughout history as cisgender and heterosexual. Central to this critique is the rejection that trans children can be simplistically understood as a new phenomenon within the 21st century. With this assumption, they conclude, comes inevitable violence and invalidation of the experiences of trans children. Setting their sights on racialized plasticity, or the idea that white children—figured here by 20th century logics as more capable of

³¹ Ibid., 6-7.

³² Ibid., 7.

gender normativity—are more susceptible to normative ideals of success in medical treatments that would allow them to become properly trans adults, Gill-Peterson highlights the damaging effects this outlook has, as white trans children are treated as “living laboratories” and trans children of color are conversely disqualified from “this medicalized framework” altogether, which “in many cases [intensifies] state systems of detention and incarceration that [take] hold of their lives instead” (Gill-Peterson 2018, 207).³³ Thus, the history of transgender childhood is a markedly racial one as well, which any intersectional analysis of medical discourse would surely predict. In this case, success, innocence, and gender are all necessarily racialized as normative mandates of successful gender performance are bound up with the ways in which racialized, particularly black bodies are denied access to the gender categories of sufficiently male and female altogether. Indeed, as Gill-Peterson argues through a medical history of transgender children, it becomes apparent that racialized child bodies are considered either too malleable or too rigid by the logics of racial plasticity, thus barring them access to normative gender writ-large. Thus, it is no surprise that “today, white trans kids are the public face of trans acceptance and advocacy” (Tremblay and Sheldon 2019).³⁴

Perhaps most emblematic of the whiteness of transgender childhood is Jazz Jennings, a transgender youth advocate who has found great success through her family’s openness about her identity at a time when the general public of the U.S. was either less aware of or openly hostile towards the existence of trans identifying people. In 2007, when Jennings was a child, her family participated in a short documentary hosted by Barbara Walters, wherein Walters sought to “move [viewers] to greater understanding” of what it means to be transgender (“20:20 My Secret

³³ Julian Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) 207.

³⁴ Rebekah Sheldon and Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Introduction,” *The Rambling*, November 26, 2019, <https://the-rambling.com/2019/11/26/issue6-tremblay-sheldon/>.

Self Complete Documentary”).³⁵ The documentary, as well as its 2011 follow-up, “Transgender at 11: Listening to Jazz Jennings,” is cringeworthy. Throughout both videos, Walters fixates on the fact that, “on the surface,” Jennings, her parents, and her siblings appear to be “a typical American family” (“Secret Self”).³⁶ According to Walters, however this family holds a “secret”: “[Jazz] was born a boy” (“Secret Self”).³⁷ As should be apparent, Walters clearly misunderstands trans identity, often falling back into familiar medical frameworks that center the genitalia of this puzzling child and the complacency of her too-lenient parents. While Walters misgenders Jennings and continually asks Jennings questions about her penis, I want to focus more on Jennings’ subsequent rise to fame as an openly transgender child—she is now 19 years old—as emblematic of the social cache of whiteness as it operates through neoliberal logics of political legibility. Indeed, while Jennings has certainly experienced abuse as a direct result of her transness, which she notes in Walter’s second interview with her, I argue that her whiteness and her family’s socio-economic status has granted her immense privilege that has granted her access to normative femininity in a way that many poor trans children and trans children of color do not have access to. For instance, Jennings’ parents have been able to provide her with access to hormone treatments from a young age in addition to lobbying for Jennings to have access to girls’ soccer teams and restrooms. Additionally, Walters continually plays up Jennings’ femininity, in an apparent good-faith attempt to legitimize Jazz to the viewing public. Commenting on her pink soccer cleats and love of ballet, Walters insists that Jennings’ gender dysphoria, or discomfort with her gender assigned at birth, is a result of a medical disorder; indeed, Walters argues, Jennings is simply a victim of circumstance, a child born in the wrong

³⁵ “20:20 My Secret Self Complete Documentary,” YouTube video, 42:06, posted by “Rikki Arundel,” March 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ_BHY5RoIA

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

body. Walter's insistence on pathologizing Jennings and individualizing her identity through medical discourses suggest a deep discomfort with the idea that transgender childhood might have its own history, as Gill-Peterson demonstrates. To Walters' viewing public, Jennings does not fit into the ideal of what a child is. While she might be barred from the category of Child, however, Walters seems to attempt to grant her access by cashing in on her whiteness and normative femininity. It is through her appeal to the racial innocence imbued in Jennings' whiteness and femininity that Walters has been able to render Jennings a social justice advocate, as opposed to a social outcast.

In 2014, Jennings co-authored an autobiographical picture book with Jessica Herthel called *I am Jazz*. Published by Dial Books for Young Readers, a subsidiary of the massive American multinational conglomerate Penguin Random House, *I am Jazz* has heralded glowing reviews from the likes of Jodi Picoult, Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, and Brad Meltzer for its portrayal of trans childhood. In the book, Jazz introduces herself, gushing about her love of mermaids, soccer, and the color pink. Several pages in, however, Jazz is shown drawing pictures of herself and her friends with markers. Scattered across the page, the series of illustrations seem to demonstrate the passage of time. On the far left, a child-like figure with short hair and blue clothes, presumably Jazz, is drawn on yellow paper. This child is shown crying. In the next few drawings this same character appears again and again, sometimes alone sometimes with friends, each time shedding tears or standing under a raincloud. Continuing across the spread of illustrations, however, this sad figure is nowhere to be seen, replaced, instead with a smiling, long-haired, dress-wearing character who dances on a grassy field and holds hands with friends. As the string of illustrations ends with the image of Jazz drawing a portrait of a mermaid, it becomes clear that this series of drawings demonstrates Jazz's desire to transition. Her smiling

face implies that she has achieved that goal and now lives happily. Above the illustration, Jazz explains, “I have a girl brain but a boy body. This is called transgender. I was born this way!” (Herthel and Jennings).³⁸ Throughout the book, Jazz emphasizes her own femininity, recalling that, as a child, she “hardly ever played with trucks or tools or superheroes. Only princesses and mermaid costumes” (Herthel and Jennings).³⁹ Thus, Jazz emphasizes her discomfort when she would have to “[pretend she] was a boy,” donning shorts and blue t-shirts (Herthel and Jennings).⁴⁰ Jazz is ultimately taken to a doctor who tells her parents that Jazz is transgender. Jazz’s experience is thus validated by a medical professional and her parents allow her to begin living her life as Jazz, as opposed to the boy who they thought that she was.

I am Jazz is a heartwarming story about a transgender child who is loved by her family and encouraged to live her life honestly and truthfully. It must be considered, however, whether Jazz’s story successfully critiques the systems of power that produce the subjugation of transness or whether it consequently ends up bolstering neoliberal logics of legibility that demand state recognition as a prerequisite to freedom. Indeed, it isn’t until Jazz goes to the doctor that she is granted the freedom to openly express her gender identity. Even then, I cannot help but wonder how this story would play out if Jazz was a black girl or simply didn’t have access to medical professionals that could performatively affirm her gender identity in an official capacity. While Jazz’s story is no doubt adorable and potentially affirming for some children, it is necessarily limited by its appeals to normative gender tropes and reliance on gender binaries.

Epistemologically, Jazz’s story also falls victim to a medicalizing framework. In the book, Jazz is only allowed to live as Jazz when her body is pathologized: she is a girl living in a boy’s body.

³⁸ Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, *I Am Jazz* (New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2014).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Essentially, although Jazz's life is changed for the better, little has changed in the world that she inhabits. Doctors and grown-ups still define the limits of the life that she is allowed to live. Jazz is merely a passive subject—her connection to the social category of the child, though intact, necessarily limits her agency. Reading her story, I cannot help but wonder: who is this book for? Is it a means through which children might see themselves living in the world? Or is it instead a neoliberal turn, a call for recognition to the very institutions that have, for so long, policed and punished trans bodies for merely existing. Jazz's whiteness and access to appropriately feminine clothing render her just another little girl, but other than offering a very specific form of representation, Jazz's story unfortunately plays into medicalizing and pathological discourses that materially and symbolically harm other trans children.

I am Jazz is only one example of what trans childhood looks like. Her story serves as a limited representation of the myriad forms of beauty and creative ways of making space in the world for trans children. While it seems to end on a happy note, *I am Jazz* represents transness as a burden, something that families must deal with as opposed to celebrate and encourage.

Thus, recalling Stockton's complication of the figure of the child, this chapter serves to unsettle the underlying epistemological construction of childhood gender identity, which consequently projects an aspirational normativity onto the bodies of all children and marginalized populations writ-large. In the context of children's literature, this assumed childhood normativity manifests in an aspirational teleological development of a transgender child who experiences adversity due to gender expression or identity but is saved through recognition and affirmation by the state or other authoritative figures. The consequences of this perceived normative child development and the tendency toward nostalgic imaginations of what an impossibly universal childhood actually *is* demands a reconsideration of the ways in which

stories of queer and trans childhoods might be told so as to disrupt these narratives and produce liberatory, life-affirming alternatives.

CHAPTER 2

BEARS, BIRDS, BUNNIES, AND MERMAIDS: REPRESENTATION, UNIVERSALISM, AND ALLEGORY IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSGENDER PICTURE BOOKS

All alone and covered with dirt, Bunnybear curled up against a tree and sighed. He didn't feel like a bear. He didn't look like a bunny. What was Bunnybear to do?

—Andrea J. Loney, *BunnyBear*

I'm from the Land of This and That, but I'm Neither. So, I'm looking for Somewhere Else to fit in. . . . Well, this isn't Somewhere Else. This is the Land of All. And everyone fits in here.

—Airlie Anderson, *Neither*

Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Traditionally, the act of consuming media representation has been understood to provide the consumer with a visceral experience of either identification or empathy. In her essay “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop argues this much, using the metaphors of windows, sliding glass doors, and mirrors to emphasize the role that literature plays in the lives of readers. Literature, she argues, may serve as a window, “offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange,” a sliding glass door, allowing readers “to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author,” or a mirror, “transform[ing] human experience and reflecting it back” in the context of

“the larger human experience” (Bishop ix).⁴¹ In the context of children’s books, however, Bishop argues that a lack of representation of minoritized identities in the genre has detrimental effects on the children who read these books searching for themselves and come up empty-handed. What’s more, “when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read,” Bishop maintains, “they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part (Bishop x).⁴² Bishop’s argument, written in the early 1990’s, relies on a central promise of representational politics: that “when there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human” (Bishop x).⁴³ In the end, Bishop’s argument strives toward a vision of universal personhood achieved through equal access to representation in literature.

However, is the uncritical representation of minoritized children in the books they read truly enough for an effective vision of liberation? Likewise, what are the promises of this representation for readers? If children are to read a book that includes trans characters, thus resolving Bishop’s concern that they might otherwise learn that they are devalued in society, how have they been prepared to in turn imagine a world wherein they might find community beyond the neoliberal state and dismantle the systems that maintain that abject positionality? While it raises many questions, the representation of minoritized subjectivities as an epistemological project may still hold the key to answering the questions it poses.

⁴¹ Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, vol. 6 (Christopher-Gordon, 1990): ix.

⁴² *Ibid.*, x.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Feminism has long held that identity, or the personal, is political.⁴⁴ Thinking with Bishop, representation and visibility emerge as identity being seen and acknowledged. Thus, the project of representation, even at the level of children's picture books, remains a distinctly political one. In this chapter, I consider varying definitions and manifestations of representation. Through a discussion of how other minoritized groups have dealt with this question of representation, I turn my gaze toward the political project of picture books for transgender children and their numerous manifestations in order to determine the limits of representation for these children. In addition to the aforementioned questions, I consider: how is trans childhood represented through allegory in picture books? What seems to be the underlying promise of these kinds of representations of trans childhood? What existing representations of trans childhood currently reside in our cultural lexicon? When does representation provide a door to new ways of becoming and when does it produce a calcifying effect contrary to the goals of trans liberation?

For queer of color critique, which provides the framework through which I make my argument, representation cannot be simply understood as purely good, bad, benign, or damaging. Representation presents multiple possibilities. It is a platform for the stories of queer and trans people to be held, embraced, and critiqued. It is a portal, allowing the ideas of queer and trans people to be studied and considered of value to be studied. It is a stepping stone for more work to come forth and enter debates. It is a vexed and contradictory terrain of consumption and commodification that can sometimes leave far too many behind. The primary focus of this project is to understand the promises and problems of the representation of trans children in picture books, which has, admittedly, barely entered the discourse of representational politics. As

⁴⁴ Here, I refer to Carol Hanisch's 1970 essay, "The Personal is Political," which was published in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. The phrase emerged from the ongoing women's rights movements of the 1960's and 1970's.

Rudine Sims Bishop argues, the representation of any minoritized group of children in literature is beneficial, as it presents both an affirmative and reflective presentation of a child's own growing subjectivity. However, in order to further flesh out the specifics of this project, the limits of representation and how this question has been addressed by other minoritized groups must be considered.

“Y’all Better Quiet Down!”: Representation and Resisting Resolution

At the start of Gay Pride, looking to the pioneers of the Street Transvestite Action Revolution house and the work of founding mothers Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, there was a dire urgency to remember that resolution is actually quite dangerous and requires compromise, often falling short of what is needed to foster truly revolutionary, radical, transformational life. Let us recall the 1973 Gay Pride rally in New York City—the beginnings of the infamous and non-political iterations that have come to follow—during which Rivera broke out on stage to remind people about the queer and trans people who were still in jail despite the supposed progress achieved in the wake of Stonewall. After struggling to take the stage during the generally celebratory rally, Rivera chastised the audience for booing her, shouting, “Y’all better quiet down. I’ve been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and sisters in jail.”⁴⁵ Throughout her passionate speech, Rivera reminded the audience of predominantly white, middle class gay men and lesbian women that, as they all took to the streets in celebration of gay pride, “I have been to jail. I have been raped. And beaten. Many

⁴⁵ L020A Sylvia Rivera, “Y’all Better Quiet Down” Original Authorized Video, 1973 Gay Pride Rally NYC, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb-JIOWUw1o>.

times! . . . But do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all?”⁴⁶ Ultimately, Rivera speaks directly to the issues of representational politics, power, and resolution. She reminds her audience that the resolution that they have fought for and continue to push for is not enough, as it leaves behind far too many trans women of color and low-income queer and trans people. Thus, from Rivera and the founding mothers of STAR, we learn that representation cannot simply entail entering the fold of the status quo.

Trap Doors: The Limits of Representation

There is no single definition of representation, but for the purposes of my project, I look to queer of color critique as an analytic that offers a means of talking about how discourses of race, gender, and sexuality collude through discourses of representation and abjection to produce subjects at the margins of mainstream critique. More generally, queer of color critique seeks to understand and unpack not only the material and symbolic violence experienced by queer and trans people of color, but also the ways of making life that are often gone unnoticed or overlooked by mainstream critique. Visibility and representation are two lynchpins of queer of color analysis that are theorized by the authors of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Visibility, according to the authors of the volume, presents a trap door, figured as the paradoxical yet “primary path through which trans people might have access to

⁴⁶ Ibid.

livable lives” (Gossett et al., xv).⁴⁷ According to Ellison, whose work is included in the volume, visibility also exists as “a flexible capacity whose motive potential is derived from the conjoining of subjection and subjectification” (Ellison, 4).⁴⁸ Thus, through a queer of color analytic, the paradoxical nature of visibility and representation emerge, as they can simultaneously lead to liberatory doorways but also easily commodifiable and hegemonic manifestations.

Representation and visibility ultimately manifest in queer of color critique as precarious modalities that are simultaneously indispensable and inherently exclusive. Moving forward, I consider the project of trans representation in picture books through this framework.

Representation has also been theorized by Dean Spade and Sara Ahmed as a distinctly political project in two fundamental ways. Through ethnographic research and her own analysis, Ahmed argues that racial diversity in large institutions, such as corporations or higher education, emerges not as a critically representational project that seeks to dismantle white supremacy in institutional life, but rather as a means for institutions to gain political clout in a neoliberal context wherein racial diversity morphs into a tokenizing process that objectifies people of color. Additionally, institutions are able to announce diversity initiatives to gain buy-in from stakeholders while the labor of diversity committees and supporting colleagues falls onto the shoulders of people of color.

Similarly, in *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*, Dean Spade questions the efficacy of representational politics, leaving behind rights-based LGBT+ activism in favor of a more liberatory critical trans politics located in the

⁴⁷ Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): xv.

⁴⁸ Treva Ellison, “The Labor of Werqing It: The Performance and Protest Strategies of Sir Lady Java,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 4.

simultaneous dismantling of harmful systems of marginalization, as well as the building up of those most impacted by the system's cruelty. Indeed, as Spade locates the distinctive marks of neoliberal institutions of government as "co-optation and incorporation," he questions how appeals to representation in these systems rooted in patriarchy, white supremacy, and trans/queer antagonism could ever compose a truly liberatory praxis of organizing.⁴⁹ Spade also takes on a radical re-defining of "power" and how power functions. In short, he argues that power is not simply enacted by a single person or a single institution, rather, it "manifests in interconnected, contradictory sites where regimes of knowledge and practice circulate and take hold."⁵⁰ This reimagining requires a shift in understanding of the formation of power: rather than a single arbiter of oppression, there exist many sites of practice and knowledge production that establish norms that render certain bodies more susceptible to subjection and dehumanization. With a newfound understanding of how power is formed and operates, Spade ultimately goes on to discuss government institutions, which indeed restrict the lives of vulnerable populations, and situate them within this equation, as he highlights the idea that "rather than understanding administrative systems merely as responsible for *sorting out* and *managing* what 'naturally' exists," it is perhaps more accurate to say that "administrative systems that classify people actually *invent* and *produce* meaning for the categories they administer, and that those categories manage both the population and the distribution of security and vulnerability."⁵¹ Thus, it becomes clear that fighting uncritically for the representation of minoritized people in powerful institutions in order to reach equality through a rights-based activist framework does little to

⁴⁹ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2011), 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32. Emphasis is mine.

mitigate the harm done by systems that serve as control mechanisms, and instead, perhaps “expands the reach of violent and harmful systems.”⁵²

Spade and Ahmed’s arguments indicate that those engaged in the work of trans studies and trans representation must resist the impulse of resolution or uncritical appeals to resolution-via-representation. Today, there are revolutionaries, trans people living their lives (which itself is a radical act given our current political context in the United States) who have been thrown in jail or murdered for *daring to live* openly. Certainly, any sort of liberal resolution is dangerous, if not short-sighted, if it fails the most vulnerable amongst us. As an example, the representation of trans people, particularly trans women of color, in mainstream media, such as in the TV shows *Pose* and *Orange is the New Black*, as well as through influential public figures like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, belies the material reality and social abjection experienced by trans people across the United States. Every day, trans people of color are murdered in the streets and in prisons, whether by interpersonal transphobic violence, or as a result of structural neglect at the hands of institutions of power. Thus, a paradox emerges, wherein representations of transness in media, our so-called “transgender tipping point,” proliferate precisely at the exact moment that trans women of color face unprecedented levels of violence in their own lives (Gossett et al., xvi).⁵³ Therefore, it is not enough to simply say that more representation leads to better material conditions for minoritized populations. The same must be considered for transgender children and the books that they read. Representation and liberal appeals to acceptance can only get us so far. As mentioned in the last chapter, “what’s the use of gender-neutral clothing without the money to buy it? Why worry about a landlord respecting your pronouns if you can’t afford rent?”

⁵² Spade, *Normal Life*, 29.

⁵³ Gossett et al., “Known Unknowns,” xvi.

The truth is, fighting systemic injustice with individual recognition is like bringing a knife to a gunfight” (Verman).⁵⁴

So, how do we hold this paradox? This impossibility? There is such a burden in sustaining survival amidst active subjection, but liberal moves to inclusion through representational politics have similarly been brought into question. Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade consider this when they argue: “Impossibility may very well be our only possibility. What would it mean to embrace, rather than shy away from the impossibility of our ways of living, as well as our political visions? What would it mean to desire a future that we can’t even imagine, but that we are told couldn’t ever exist?” (Bassichis et. al, 42).⁵⁵ Such impossibility, however, should not be seen as dire, nor as a state of crisis, but as a radical invitation to fantasize and to dream otherwise. So then, perhaps, our work is to point unflinchingly to the cultural context that has little use for the impossible but is forced to grapple with its existence and persistence. The impossibility of trans life, which somehow persists in the face of persecution, presents rich terrain for new ways of becoming and new representational lexicons that resist commiseration with capital.

Holding onto this impossibility, queer of color critique posits that abject populations, seemingly figured at the margins of capitalist society, hold the potential to fundamentally unsettle capitalist logics of gender and sexual normativity. What’s more, following Gossett, Stanley, and Burton’s provocation regarding visibility, it stands to reason that it is the visibility of minoritized populations that holds the greatest potential to disrupt capital. That being said, one

⁵⁴ Alex Verman, “Trans Visibility Won’t Save Us,” *BuzzFeed News*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alexverman/trans-visibility-wont-save-us>.

⁵⁵ Morgan Bassichis, Dean Spade, and Alexander Lee, “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement With Everything We’ve Got,” in *Captive Genders : Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex, Second Edition*, ed. Eric A. Stanley, Nat Smith, and CeCe McDonald (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015): 42.

must be mindful of, as discussed earlier, the “radical incongruities” of visual culture, wherein “our ‘transgender tipping point’ comes to pass at precisely the same political moment when women of color, and trans women of color in particular, are experiencing markedly increased instances of physical violence” (Gossett et al., xvi).⁵⁶ Thus, in the context of this project, it is not simply enough to render transgender children visible; visibility appears as a limited modality that must be deployed with a critical lens. As Gossett and the authors of *Trap Door* argue, “immense transformational and liberatory possibilities arise from what are otherwise sites of oppression or violent extraction . . . when individuals have *agency* in their representation” (Gossett et al., xvi).⁵⁷

The Trans Child as Animal: Allegorical Representation in Picture Books

A prominent motif in picture books is the use of anthropomorphized animal characters in place of actual children. This, I argue, is a particular mode of representation that relies on allegorical storytelling in order to make seemingly complex moral lessons and social issues more palatable for young readers. In this section, I will look at two picture books that make use of this allegorical framework to discuss transness in childhood, namely: Airlie Anderson’s *Neither* and Andrea J. Loney’s *BunnyBear*. In these books, transness and gender non-conformity are analogized through animal characters that transition between species or embody a non-normative amalgamation of species characteristics.

⁵⁶ Gossett et al., xvi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xvi, emphasis is mine.

According to Carolyn L. Burke and Joby G. Copenhaver, picture books that feature animal protagonists are often those that stick in the minds of readers once they have grown older. Interestingly, animals are typically used allegorically in picture books to “add emotional distance for the reader when the story message is powerful or painful” or tell a story with a more universal message (Burke and Copenhaver 205).⁵⁸ In their essay “Animals as People in Children’s Literature,” Burke and Copenhaver, both teacher educators, question the ubiquity of anthropomorphized animal characters in picture books, framing their argument around the functions of literature as a whole. These functions include: “the need to make sense of our lives and the world,” “the preservation of our understandings, knowledge, and social beliefs,” “dialogue with ourselves and with others,” “generate questions and new life alternatives,” “gain distance and transcend life threats,” “simplify . . . a life circumstance,” and “provide momentary escape from the current situation” (Burke and Copenhaver 207).⁵⁹ Interestingly, Burke and Copenhaver argue that animal characters play an important role in achieving those goals, particularly allowing children to gain distance from subject-matter while similarly being able to talk about it in a light-hearted but critical fashion. For instance, a story about social abjection or a story about an orphaned child searching for its mother become adorable tales with colorful animal characters that provide just enough distance for children to empathize with the characters while simultaneously preserving their presupposed innocence. Essentially, animal characters provide “a buffered engagement with a message of cultural significance” (Burke and Copenhaver 210).⁶⁰ What is not mentioned by Burke and Copenhaver, however, is how animal allegory interacts with social power dynamics, apart from relationships between children and their parents

⁵⁸ Carolyn L. Burke, Joby G. Copenhaver, and Marilyn Carpenter, “Animals as People in Children’s Literature,” *Language Arts; Urbana* 81, no. 3 (January 2004): 205.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

or guardians. In an allegorical tale about race and gender that feature foxes or kangaroos, how do these social markers manifest? Where do power differentials appear and how are they mitigated? Additionally, who determines the criteria for subject-matter that is too difficult for children to understand if it doesn't take the form of a chimpanzee? At stake, here is a larger question of whether representational politics begin to break down at the site of analogical depictions of social issues when they fail to address power differentials and explicitly name the issues that they discuss.

I argue that, when animal characters are uncritically inserted in a picture book in order to make a social message more palatable to a presupposed innocent child reader, that child is being done a disservice, as the flattening of difference that is enacted through this use of analogy negates any social specificity that the story may have had otherwise. Additionally, analogy and allegory obfuscate power relations between social actors and obscures the intersectional nature of violence as it is perpetuated by white cis-heteropatriarchy. Thus, while the child may not be present in these stories, the uncritical replacement of the child with analogous figures across species simply veils the epistemological project of picture books. In other words, let us not assume that simply because the child has been replaced by an animal that these stories are rendered harmless.

The ambiguity of allegorical picture books can also result in the misreading of certain texts and the transfer of one social message to another. Indeed, due to the lack of specificity that comes with the language of analogy, it is easy for one social message to be read for another, slipping across lines of race, ability, gender, and sexuality. For example, when I was searching for picture books to feature in this thesis, I came across Michael Hall's *Red: A Crayon's Story*, which tells the story of a blue crayon whose wrapper reads "red." At first glance, this seemed to

be a book about transness. In fact, it was featured on numerous online lists featuring picture books about gender nonconformity.⁶¹ After some research, however, I learned that *Red* was written by the author about his childhood dyslexia, not gender non-conformity.⁶² Kyle Lukoff, whose book *When Aidan Became a Brother* is discussed in my conclusion, has argued online that *Red* should not be used to teach children about transness, as it is not actually about transness. When I asked Lukoff via email to expand on his thoughts, he said that

Asking children to have to [do] the extra work of interpretation to see themselves . . . is an unfair burden. Kids shouldn't have to parse layers of metaphor for representation, they should be able to see unmediated depictions of a diverse array of humanity. . . . Endlessly comparing marginalized identities to non-human animals or objects is . . . not good, for what I hope are obvious reasons. . . . Using analogy instead of specific language denies children the use of that language; saying “you're like a blue crayon with a red wrapper” instead of “you're transgender” means that trans kids are left with some amorphous, vague idea of difference as opposed to the history, culture, and community that comes with the accurate description. . . . No analogy can be as rich as a text based in an identity. . . . No one can truly see themselves in a kitchen utensil or a group of weird duck-rabbit hybrids.⁶³

As Lukoff articulates, the use of analogy to tell stories about social issues and identity-based narratives fails when specificity is discarded in favor of palatability and universality. Nancy Leys Stepan's “Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science” and Ellen Samuels' “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse” both articulate similar arguments against analogy in the fields of scientific and social justice discourses. In both authors' articles, analogy is taken up as a problematic discursive tool that obfuscates difference and produces false equivalencies based on common assumptions.

⁶¹ *Red* went on to secure a spot on The Rainbow Book List Committee's 2016 Rainbow Book List, “a bibliography of books with significant gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning content” (2016 Rainbow Book List). For more, see <https://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>.

⁶² Hall says as much on his website. For more, see https://www.michaelhallstudio.com/books/bk_red.html.

⁶³ Kyle Lukoff, email to author, November 26, 2019.

Ultimately, metaphor and analogy do critical work here, as they not only represent certain ideas and comparisons, but they also construct new ones. Further, analogy also works to claim a certain sameness between two ideas being compared. In the context of analogical books depicting gender identity, the process of identification and experiences of prejudice are equated to processes of identification amongst animals or other non-living objects, effectively obscuring the distinct experiences of trans identity.

One book I came across in my search for picture books with themes of gender identity and transness was Airlie Anderson's *Neither*, which follows a young bird-rabbit hybrid creature who lives in the Land of This and That. In the Land of This and That, the story tells us, there only exist blue rabbits and yellow birds, or as Anderson refers to them, "this and that, these and those, one or the other," until, one day, a green bird-rabbit hybrid who calls itself Both hatches from its egg with a loud "Honk!" (Anderson).⁶⁴ The rabbits and birds promptly correct this new hatchling, telling it that it cannot be Both, it must be Neither. Neither, who is not accepted by the yellow birds or the blue rabbits, is ultimately expelled from the Land of This and That and takes off to find a new place to live while its peers taunt it with shouts of "Neither!" (Anderson).⁶⁵ After flying away from home, Neither arrives at the Land of All, where it encounters a number of creature hybrids: a purple cat with butterfly wings, a blue wolf with a unicorn horn and a pouch, a brown bear cub with bat wings. Neither, amazed by the diversity of this Land of All, is taken aback when it is accepted with open arms by the community and invited to play. Eventually, however, a bird and bunny from the Land of This and That arrive, claiming they do not fit in at home and are looking for somewhere else to live, much to the initial chagrin of Neither. Rather than rejecting the newcomers, however, Neither proudly proclaims that, in the

⁶⁴ Airlie Anderson, *Neither* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Land of All, “everyone fits in” (Anderson).⁶⁶ In the end, the Land of All, receives many new residents from the Land of This and That who literally flock to this community where “all [are] welcome” (Anderson).⁶⁷ The final pages of the book feature myriad images of colorful creature hybrids who have all come to the Land of All in search of a place where they might be celebrated for their non-conformity. In the end, resolution takes the form of all creatures living in harmony.

No doubt, *Neither* is a touching story about a creature treated as abject who goes on to find community with other non-normative creatures who accept it. Ultimately, the Land of All serves as a utopian community where all creatures are accepted, regardless of their species characteristics. In this case, cross-species hybridism serves as a metaphor for gender fluidity. Thus, the decision of these creatures to settle in the Land of All represents a rejection of conformity or gender normativity and a celebration of gender diversity.

Similarly, *BunnyBear* by Andrea J. Loney is another picture book with a strikingly similar plot that uses animal allegory to discuss transness. In *BunnyBear*, the transgender child and dimorphous species hybrids are replaced by rabbits, bears, and other woodland animals who just don’t identify with who they are expected to be by the world around them. The main character of the story, the titular Bunnybear, is understood by his family of bears to be a bear. He is encouraged to growl, eat meat, and inspire fear in other animals just like a bear is expected to behave. Bunnybear, however, does not identify with the behaviors that he is expected to perform as a bear. Indeed, Bunnybear is “more than a bear,” as, “when he [is] alone, he [loves] to bounce through the forest, wiggle his nose, and nibble on the strawberries” (Loney).⁶⁸ These behaviors are what “[make] him feel free and light and happy” (Loney).⁶⁹ When Bunnybear is chastised for

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Andrea J. Loney, *Bunnybear* (Chicago, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company, 2017).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

his non-normative behaviors, however, he runs away from home, attempting to make community with a family of rabbits who are immediately terrified of him. Having been rejected by both bears and rabbits, Bunnybear is left dejected until he meets a bunny named Grizzlybun, a rabbit that identifies more with beariness: being “burly and loud” and eating “whatever [she] wants” (Loney).⁷⁰ Bunnybear and Grizzlybun soon become close friends, inviting all of the animals of the forest to a picnic hosted by the rabbits. In the end, both Grizzlybun and Bunnybear are accepted by their communities and celebrated for who they are.

Both *BunnyBear* and *Neither* appear to tackle the topic of trans identity without actually talking about transness. Indeed, while these books are marketed as texts that teach children about trans identity, both Loney and Anderson fail to mention gender at all in their stories. In a blog post on lgbtqreads.com featuring Airlie Anderson, Dahlia Adler, the post’s curator, refers to *Neither* as a genderfluid main character; however, *Neither* is not gender fluid. In fact, none of the characters in *Neither* are explicitly gendered. The lack of gender in this book raises the question of how young readers are supposed to interpret species non-conformity as gender fluidity. In fact, in the blog post, Anderson admits that she did not set out to write a book about gender non-conformity. She notes that that book’s story and its colorful characters were rather a product of a sleep-deprived, hallucinatory haze she entered in the aftermath of the birth of her child. Retrospectively, however, Anderson mentions that the book was perhaps subconsciously inspired by a transgender student she had in an art class:

“Around the time I had the initial dream [of *Neither*], I had been teaching art classes to an inspiring group of middle schoolers. One of them had been identifying as female, and over the course of the next year, transitioned to identifying as male. The idea of questioning something as ingrained in our society as gender made me think of my characters and story in a new light. My student’s fluidity opened my mind to many different modes of representation and expression . . . Even though I didn’t realize it at the time,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

this student [had] a remarkable effect on the creation of *Neither*, who seemed to almost spontaneously generate in my mind. All I had to do was stand aside and let the character hatch.” (Anderson)⁷¹

It seems, then, that the gendered subtext of *Neither* was purely accidental, inspired retroactively by a transgender child whom the author found inspiring.

In their books, as Anderson does not incorporate any gendered language and Loney leaves gender unexamined, both authors allow difference more generally to stand in for whatever metaphor the reader wishes to read into these stories, choosing to reject a specific message of gender fluidity in favor of a more universal message of non-conformity. The analogical use of species dimorphism and cross-species identification as gender fluidity flattens gendered subjection to merely a matter of general difference and abjection, a simplification that belies the specificities of transgender life experiences. What’s more, through this flattening of difference, gender could easily be swapped out in either of these stories for race, socio-economic class, disability, or sexuality. This flattening is problematic as it conflates the differences inherent to various overlapping experiences of abjection. As black feminist scholars have taught us, no being is purely gendered without racialized, economic, or ableist implications. Thus, to write a story about gender without mentioning gender and simultaneously allowing species dimorphism to instead stand in for difference writ-large effectively does little for transgender youth who yearn to see themselves represented in the books that they read. Universalism denies the specificity of trans experience and allows authors to promote books about gender diversity without engaging with the subject matter in any substantial way. Essentially, in their attempts to

⁷¹ Anderson, Airlie. “*Neither* Illustrator Airlie Anderson on Creating a Genderfluid Picture Book: A Guest Post.” *LGBTQ Reads* (blog). June 18, 2018. <https://lgbtqreads.com/2018/06/18/neither-author-illustrator-airlie-anderson-on-creating-a-genderfluid-picture-book-a-guest-post/>.

cover transness without naming it outright, neither *Bunnybear* nor *Neither* are about gender—let alone trans identity—at all.

Mermaids and Incomplete Representation

While the books mentioned previously provide allegorical figures of transness that I believe fail to effectively engage with gender, power, or differing experiences of trans life, the question remains as to whether metaphor and allegory are entirely harmful tools for engaging with trans youth. As a matter of fact, might we have already existing representations of transness in allegorical formations? In a moment, I consider the fictional figure of the mermaid to be one such allegory. As a question of semiotics, I believe this brings to light the inherent incompleteness of representation. Incomplete representations are those that do not necessarily hit the nail on the head of radical storytelling, but nonetheless provide a window of opportunity for something more, for an imperfect but sometimes sufficient playground of imagining otherwise.

Mermaids have emerged as a consistent motif in the stories and recollections of trans youth. The allure of mermaids as analogy for trans children seems to lie in the fact that mermaids are fantastically gendered yet non-sexed creatures that have the potential to open magical worlds of possibility beyond the gendered binaries of human construction. While mermaid figures in lore and Disney films carry with them worrisome histories of capitalist co-optation and sexualized deviancy, perhaps there is room here for a critical deployment of the figure of the mermaid as an incomplete metaphor to celebrate trans childhood and imagine fantastical possibilities of becoming—notwithstanding their potential to simply entertain!

Ultimately, the radical potential discussed here does not lie within the figure of the mermaid itself. Indeed, mermaids manifest as merely one of many cultural signifiers that can easily be adopted by harmful discourses of gender and medicalization. In fact, in a pamphlet provided to parents of transgender children by the Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., an interest in mermaids is listed as an early sign that a young person assigned male at birth might identify as a girl. In early adolescence, the pamphlet reads: “Boys may show an interest in women’s clothes, shoes, hair and make-up. They play-act and identify with female characters such as Barbie™, The Little Mermaid™, Snow White or Cinderella. They wish to have or may pretend to have long hair, prefer girls as playmates, and avoid rough-and-tumble play and team sports” (Tuerk et al. 2).⁷² The mermaid as a feature of medical diagnosis, while bizarre, presents a serious concern, as this process of medicalization necessarily pathologizes the trans child and figures them as a problem to be dealt with. Conversely, however, it seems as though the consistent fascination with mermaids by young trans girls lends itself to a queer disidentification that has the potential to elide the grasp of medical discourse, especially when the mermaid is used not as a calcified signifying figure of transness, but instead a transitive representation in tandem with transness that can open new worlds of gender exploration and elusive trans embodiment. Defined by Jose Muñoz and recapitulated by Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black*, disidentification refers to a world-making process enacted by minoritized subjects wherein cultural artifacts are wielded in opposition to their intended purposes to uplift those rendered abject and disrupt the functioning of capitalism. As “[disidentification] in no way means to discard,” practicing disidentification through the lens of queer of color critique allows us to “[decode] cultural fields not from a position outside those fields, but from within them”

⁷² Catherine Tuerk, Edgardo Menvielle, and James de Jesus, “If You Are Concerned About Your Child’s Gender Behaviors: A Guide for Parents” (Children’s National Medical Center, 2003), 2.

(Ferguson 4).⁷³ Importantly, however, disidentification remains distinct from assimilation or liberal moves to inclusion, as it operates as a mode of critique and necessarily evades capture by capitalism. Through the lens of queer of color critique, disidentification represents the liberatory potential of the trap door of identification, wherein world-making acts might provide a portal to either exciting undercommons and new worlds of flourishing or to capture by capitalist logics of flexibility and inclusion. I want to consider the mermaid as a vexed figure of incomplete representation that can, through queer misreading and disidentification, be used as an alternative allegorical depiction of transness in children's media.

Mermaids appear in two books I have already discussed: *I am Jazz*, and *Julián is a Mermaid*. Across these two books, however, mermaids are mobilized to different ends, demonstrating the semiotic trap door inherent in any incomplete representation. In *I am Jazz* and Jazz Jennings' interview with Barbara Walters, mermaids produce a calcifying effect, serving as an explanation for Jazz's transness that locate her transness in medical discourse and burdensome childhood fascination. In her picture book, Jennings is pictured alongside stuffed mermaid toys. She also tells us "[she loves] mermaids" and that "sometimes [she] even [wears] a mermaid tail in the pool" (Herthel and Jennings).⁷⁴ In fact, on the page that Jennings explains that she is transgender, she is pictured sitting next to her stuffed mermaid toy, implying a distinct connection between her fascination with mermaids and her trans identity. Additionally, in her interview with Barbara Walters, Jennings' mother explains her daughter's fascination with mermaids as a matter of biological fantasy: "I believe it is because of the ambiguous genitalia," she says, "there is nothing below the waist but a tail. And how appealing is that for somebody

⁷³ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.

⁷⁴ Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, *I Am Jazz* (New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2014).

who doesn't like what's down there?" ("20:20 My Secret Self Complete Documentary").⁷⁵

Jennings herself explains to Walters that she likes mermaids "because they're different than us . . . because they have tails" ("Secret Self").⁷⁶ For Jazz Jennings, it seems, her fascination with mermaids cements her transness, operating as an explanation for why she is the way she is. This representation of transness circles around a medicalized model of gender deviance, wherein transness can be understood merely as an enjoyment of supposed girl things or boy things, an aberration that is to be tolerated, not celebrated.

In *Julián is a Mermaid*, on the other hand, mermaids simultaneously provide a young genderqueer child a portal to other worlds of gendered fantasy and the material conditions to communicate his gendered self with family while joining in community with others like him. Here, the mermaid is merely a vehicle for the representation of his genderfluidity, not an explanation for it. As Julián floats weightlessly through imagined kelp forests with a tail and long, flowing hair, his genderqueer identity is entirely internal, not marked by consumption or medicalized fixation. Indeed, when Julián's grandmother discovers his love of mermaids, she seems to immediately understand her grandchild, taking him to a mermaid parade where he can picture his future as a looks out over the crowd of drag queens, trans people, and others dressed in mermaid glam. For Julián, mermaids are more than an explanation for gender deviance: they are a portal to new ways of experiencing life and growing up genderqueer.

Perhaps, then, incomplete representations can be enough. Although analogical representations of transness and genderqueer identity miss the mark more often than not, there is

⁷⁵ "20:20 My Secret Self Complete Documentary," YouTube video, 42:06, posted by "Rikki Arundel," March 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ_BHY5RolA

⁷⁶ Ibid.

something to be said for the possibility of magical thinking and the reproduction of trans subjectivity through a fantastical lens.

CONCLUSION

What should I do? Where do I fit in? Where can I fit in? HERE!
We are transgender. We are not one or the other. We flow free like
water in a river. We are non-binary. We're not *just* girls. We're not
just boys. . . . Being transgender is being free. Being transgender is
fearless. Being transgender is beautiful.

—Lourdes Rivas, *They Call Me Mix/Me Llamán Maestre*

Thus far, this thesis has sought to understand the rising prevalence of picture books with trans and gender non-conforming characters in the context of the neoliberal marketplace of children's book publishing and the rhetorical precedent of representational politics. I have argued that, in the case of picture books for transgender and gender non-conforming children that rely on and reinscribe liberal feminist logics of inclusion and resolution, the socio-political status-quo is ultimately upheld, rather than critically reimagined, as transgender and gender non-conforming children are depicted as passive subjects reliant upon the kindness and affirmation of those around them, powerless to the tides of social discourse that precede their very existence. Plagued by ghostly apparitions of imagined childhoods and harmful teleological figurations of child development, children's books in general emerge not as benign educational tools, but instead serve to recreate, represent, and inform the subjectivities of young children as they come to understand the world around them. Thus, as I have shown, these books cannot be taken at face value. In my first chapter, I engaged with critical childhood studies, queer theory, and comparative literary studies, in order to interrogate the figuration of the Child through medical, political, and social discourses. I demonstrated how mainstream perceptions of child development are coded by racist and ableist notions of success, failure, growing up and what it means to be a child or child-like. I argued that these narratives, which privilege a normative teleology of child development that ascend the fully realized, white, cisgender, able-bodied, male

subject, are inherently dangerous and further marginalize children who are queered by race, gender, ability, or socioeconomic class. Further, looking to David Eng, Claudia Castañeda, and Julian Gill-Peterson I traced the Child historically through social, anthropological, and medical discourses of development, elucidating the ways in which the Child is bound up with racist histories of developmental taxonomies. Therefore, the Child has emerged as a technology of power. In my project, that Child has taken shape in picture books, wherein normative social scripts and epistemological frameworks are recapitulated and presented as pseudo-representational social justice discourse; however, as I demonstrated in my second chapter, books that leave the Child behind in favor of analogical depictions of anthropomorphized animals do not negate the potentially troublesome figure of the Child. Instead, these animal characters present new problems as they attempt to universalize specific messages of trans acceptance and fall into the trap of white neoliberalism that allows well-meaning cisgender authors to capitalize off of social justice discourse without actually engaging with the topic that they claim to represent.

The representational project of picture books for trans and gender non-conforming children is thus a complex and contested terrain of representations and misrepresentations that, if imagined uncritically, runs the risk of reinscribing liberal social scripts of resolution and inclusion, which run contrary to the goals of radical trans liberation as I have come to understand them.

In these closing thoughts, I want to look to two picture books that effectively represent what I consider to be a radical politics of imaginative futurity, questioning the teleological dead-end of transgender childhood. In this final move, I push towards a substantive reimagining of what it might look like in children's literature to not only respond to transgender childhood as a

reality, but to imagine worlds of possibility opened up by the celebration of transgender existence on a larger scale. Kyle Lukoff's *When Aidan Became a Brother* and Lourdes Rivas' *They Call Me Mix/Me Llanan Maestre* are two such books that, I argue, refuse to romanticize the imagined innocence of childhood, effectively disrupting the hegemonic epistemological force of the Child. As they present trans childhood through personal stories of self-discovery, Lukoff and Rivas show trans childhood as a social position that opens up new worlds of imagining otherwise and shaping change in the world. Most importantly, these two authors refigure the future, or *growing up*, as the realm of all children, not just those whose futurity is presupposed along racial, gendered, or classed lines.

Lukoff's *When Aidan Became a Brother* tells the story of Aidan, a young trans boy whose mother is expecting a second child. While the book begins with a recollection of Aidan's own transition, which happens early in his life, the majority of the story focuses on his mother's pregnancy. Aidan spends a majority of the book helping his parents prepare for the arrival of this new baby. As he helps them prepare, Aidan is careful not to use gendered language and works to ensure that, when the baby is born, it will not experience the same unhappiness he felt when he was expected to be a girl in his earliest years. Indeed, Aidan "wanted to make sure this baby would feel understood right away" (Lukoff).⁷⁷ As he goes out shopping with his mother and father, Aidan contemplates how to make this baby feel most welcome. As he and his parents are barraged with questions about the baby's gender, Aidan grows more and more uncomfortable as he worries that his sibling might "feel like [he] did when [he] was little" (Lukoff).⁷⁸ However, his mother consoles him, reassuring that "when [Aidan] was born, [they] didn't know [he was]

⁷⁷ Kyle Lukoff, *When Aidan Became a Brother* (New York: Lee and Low Books Inc., 2019).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

going to be [their] son” (Lukoff).⁷⁹ She tells Aidan that, while they made a mistake assuming his gender, Aidan helped them to learn how to “love someone for exactly who they are” (Lukoff).⁸⁰ Aidan considers this the next day and finds solace: “Maybe everything wouldn’t be perfect for his baby. Maybe [Aidan] would have to fix mistakes he didn’t even know he was making. And maybe that was okay” (Lukoff).⁸¹ In a touching final scene, Aidan is shown sitting in a chair kissing his baby sibling, surrounded by his family. As photos are taken and presents are delivered, letter-shaped balloons proclaim: “IT’S A BABY” (Lukoff).⁸²

Lourdes Rivas’ *They Call Me Mix/Me Llamán Maestre* similarly presents an affirmative image of trans childhood. Uniquely, however, Rivas’ story actually allows the transgender child to become a trans adult. Most, if not all, books I have considered thus far remain in the domain of childhood: the trans child is frozen in time. In *They Call Me Mix/Me Llamán Maestre*, however, the trans child who is figured in a majority of the book eventually grows up to become a teacher.

They Call Me Mix/Me Llamán Maestre is a self-published, autobiographical story of Lourdes Rivas’ own childhood. The book is written in both English and Spanish. Rivas, who identifies as non-binary, tells the story of how they came to understand their own gender: “As a kid, I never felt like just a girl. . . . I also didn’t feel like just a boy. I knew in my heart that I could never choose one or the other. . . . I always felt like a little of both.” (Rivas 8-10).⁸³ The second half of the book explains that, while people may not understand Rivas’ gender identity, they find solace in community. Rivas is shown through multiple stages of their life surrounded

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lourdes Rivas, *They Call Me Mix/Me Llamán Maestre* (Self-Published, 2018): 8-10.

by queer and trans friends holding signs of affirmation. As Rivas grows up, they describe the comfort they feel as they have “met and made friends with other smart, talented, and beautiful non-binary people” (Rivas 23).⁸⁴ Rivas ultimately grows up to be a teacher. On one page, they are shown standing in front of their classroom, teaching their students about “respecting all genders” (Rivas 27).⁸⁵

Ultimately, both Lukoff and Rivas commit to an unabashedly affirmative vision of trans childhood. Aidan’s story shows a young trans boy who worries that his baby sibling will feel the same discomfort with their gender that he felt when he was younger. In an effort to make sure this doesn’t happen, Aidan and his parents choose from lists of gender-neutral names and insist that others do not gender their new baby. Rivas’ story introduces the reader, perhaps for the first time, to the concept of non-binary gender identification, showing themselves through their life to paint an image of what transgender becoming looks like over time. *When Aidan Became a Brother* showcases the transformative nature of trans childhood. Through a recollection of his own childhood experiences, Aidan draws upon his own worldview to make his world a better place for his sibling. Aidan’s perspective as a trans child allows him to understand gendered representations in ways that his parents do not; however, it is not assumed that Aidan’s transness magically imbues him with the ability to perfectly create a gender-affirmative world for his sibling. Indeed, as he frets that the baby will still be uncomfortable, Aidan comes to terms with the fact that he may make mistakes and that he will learn from those mistakes. Similarly, Rivas’ identity as non-binary remains an important part of their life as they age. When they become a teacher, they use their own positionality to teach their students about transness and gender nonconformity. Transness is more than a personal identifier for both of these characters: it is a

⁸⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 27.

perspective from which power and inequity can be critiqued and greater change can be made.

Rivas and Aidan do not ask to be included in the neoliberal nation-state; rather, they both form their own communities and open up doorways to radical futures of belonging.

In the end, both stories present affirmative, specific visions of trans childhood that engage with the radical possibilities that are opened up when trans childhood is embraced, rather than suppressed. Both Lukoff and Rivas' books represent what it looks like to actively "wish that there be trans children" and to affirm "that to grow trans and live trans childhood is not merely a possibility but a happy and desirable one" (Gill-Peterson 207).⁸⁶

The intention of this thesis has always been to understand how to best uplift and affirm the developing subjectivities of trans children without falling into the trap of liberal logics of inclusion and respectability. While this project has been limited in its scope, I have sought to identify picture books as social texts that hold immense world-shaping capabilities. In pursuit of this intervention, I encourage other feminist and trans scholars to simultaneously turn to childhood and futurity as sites through which radical political work may be done. Most importantly, however, we must uncover new ways of speaking about trans childhoods that do not subtend colonial logics of development, biology, and knowledge production. It is on us to continue the work of imagining otherwise and, most importantly, allow children to lead the way as they define their own subjectivities and ways of being in the world.

⁸⁶ Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 207.

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