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“A girl brain but a boy body:” A Critical Analysis of the ‘Born in the Wrong Body’ Narrative in Children’s Literature

Abstract

The widely recognized formula to make elementary education safer, more inclusive, and more supportive for queer and trans students is to expand access to diverse representation. A minimal body of research investigates the nuance of this formula: How does content with LGBTQ+ representation continue to perpetuate boundaries around how children can be in the world? This study examines how children’s literature, even when featuring transgender characters, can subtly reinforce narratives that inscribe a one-way medicalized and linear transition across the gender binary. Transition, then, equates to changing a ‘wrong’ body into a ‘right’ body. Specifically, this research focuses on the pervasive ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative and its three themes: gender essentialism, gender binarism, and moving from one fixed destination to another — the dominant means of describing and understanding trans, transgender, and transsexual stories. By conducting critical content analysis of five books marketed as transgender stories, this study investigates how these books interact with the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative. The findings will shed light on the potential of both children’s literature and education to break down boundaries of beingness and take care of children’s (un)gendered creativity. Keywords: born in the wrong body narrative, children’s literature, critical content analysis, elementary education, gender essentialism, gender binarism, prefixal trans, transgender studies.

Introduction

For decades, the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative has been the dominant means of describing and understanding trans stories (Gill-Peterson, 2018). What is often portrayed in movies, TV shows, autobiographies, documentaries, and children’s books is the trans subject looking in the mirror the ‘wrong’ (gendered/sexed) body reflected back (Dominic, 2021). In turn, these representations reinforce gender essentialism, an idea that inscribes sex and gender as essential or natural truths innate to one’s biology/psychology. So too, does it reinforce gender binarism: “[the] idea that there are only two social genders – man and woman – based on two and only two sexes – male and female” (Stryker, 2017, p. 12). Lastly, the ‘wrong body’ narrative demands the moving from one fixed destination to another, which includes, but is not limited to, moving from one fixed gender/sex to another fixed gender/sex, especially linearly. The enforcement of these three identified themes of the ‘wrong body’ narrative are, at best, misleading and, at worst, reinforcements of the boundaries of who can be trans and how transness can exist in society.

Research in education points to both the need for and benefit of heightened inclusion of books with LGBTQ+ content in schools to foster supportive environments for all students (Ryan et. al, 2013; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). However, we have yet to understand how books with LGBTQ+ content are capable of still defining and enforcing how children can be in the world. Therefore, this study will employ critical content analysis to identify underlying meanings, assumptions, and larger politics in the selected sources to highlight how children’s literature has the potential to define boundaries of how transness can exist in society. By analyzing how books currently interact with the ‘wrong body

narrative, this study seeks to more broadly understand the possibilities of how children can enact (un)gendered subjectivity and the capaciousness of transness in the classroom.

Review of Relevant Literature

A Note on Language

Language is a fundamental site – practically, theoretically, politically, and ethically – for the negotiation of meanings in every field of study (Valentine, 2007). Therefore, the terms used throughout this research paper must be defined and relevant literature drawn from to define such terms must be highlighted. Transgender, trans-sexual, and trans may be often thought of as identities or ontologies, but these terms are products of history, thereby social constructions that carry major political and theoretical implications (Valentine, 2007). The language used throughout this study takes a Foucauldian genealogical approach that examines the meanings, values, and investments of naming, labeling, and categorizing. Like Foucault (1978), I am interested in how these categories are not simply a discrete and objective description of the way things are, but rather these categories are productive of the very phenomena they seem to describe. The ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative carries the same circular logic; it has portrayed self to be a discrete and objective description of the way things are, but it is actually productive of the very phenomena, transness, it seeks to describe. It is vital that I make this point from the beginning because if not, my study would run the risk of producing the same boundaries formed by categorizing and naming that this study seeks to critique.

Transgender, Transsexual, Trans-

First, I start with a brief history of the term ‘transgender’ in the United States. ‘Transgender’ originated in the 1970s to describe those who lived full-time in a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth, but without any surgical intervention (Valentine, 2007). In the 1990s, the term evolved into a claim that challenged the notion of ‘normal’ and constructed a space between, around, or outside of ‘transsexual’ and ‘transvestite’ (Stryker, 2017). However, since the mid-1990s, ‘transgender’ has become widespread in progressive community-based organizations, identity-based political movements, academic debates, and medico-juridical establishments, the very institution to which ‘transgender’ was originally opposed (Valentine, 2007).

According to Susan Stryker (1994), a definition of transgender, disengaging from the medico-juridical is, “all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (p. 251). It is important to note, however, that not all iterations of ‘transgender’ refer to the process of “queer[ing] socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (Stryker, 1994, p. 251). It has a very strong meaning in the medical establishment that is strictly limited to a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which effectively is a medicalized performance of the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative. The pathological implications and meanings of ‘transgender’ are borrowed from its predecessor, ‘transsexual’ (Gill-Peterson, 2018). ‘Transsexual’ can be traced back to early sexology research in the early twentieth century. ‘Transsexual’ is often considered an out-of-date term but has ironically become synonymous with the more contemporary ‘transgender’ (Stryker, 2017).

2017). That is, the two terms have come to mean a “one-way, one-time, medicalized transition across the gender binary” (Stryker, 2017, p. 38). As such, this study uses Stryker’s (1994) definition of transgender strategically to disengage with the strong institutional meanings of transgender and to a more broad, all-encompassing sense of the word.

Last, ‘trans’ or ‘transness’ is invoked throughout the paper in a capacious sense, referring to how it has been theorized in trans studies, as a prefix or with an asterisk, to mark a political distinction from medical, pathological, and institutional meanings that have been accrued to the term ‘transgender’ (Gill-Peterson, 2018). This meaning of trans has the capacity to not only mean those who have undergone experiences commonly attributed to transgender people, such as: experiencing constant medical and psychological surveillance; having legislation passed to invalidate one’s (gendered) reality; encountering violence on the street because one’s voice; body, or manner-isms do not ‘match’ assessed gender cues (Bey, 2022). But trans also has the capacity to mean those who “deploy their (un)gendered embodiment, (un)gendered intellectual apparatuses, and (un)gendered politics in ways that do the work of transing – a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces” (Bey, 2022, p. 77). Prefixal trans is a practice that disassembles and reassembles what gender, subjectivity, and gendered subjectivity can mean, functioning as a mode of analysis rather than a mere identity category. This practice does not typically manifest in books marketed to be “transgender” (e.g. featured on a publisher’s ‘transgender’ booklist or put on a front of store display at a bookstore during pride month). Children’s books that do the work of transing, as defined above, blur the lines between the real vs. imaginary, possible vs. impossible, powerful vs. powerless, etc. They encourage children to question how things came to be

and show them the tools they possess to create the world around them – some of the most important roles education should play in the young lives of students (Freire, 1970). This includes nurturing (un)gendered creativity, exploring countless ways to be (or not be) (Bey, 2024). Books that do the aforementioned work are already out there (see Jordan, 1971; Limón, 2024; Thom, 2017), but by dominant standards would not be considered a “transgender” story. This research paper will utilize all three of these terms: transgender, trans-sexual, and trans (or transness) strategically to carry the meanings described above. While language continues to evolve and meanings of such terms are still under debate, these definitions are strongly rooted in current relevant literature, thereby rooted in historical contextualization, trans theory, gender theory, and queer theory. Recognizing the difference and nuance of each of these terms is important to understanding the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative and its evolution.

‘Born in the wrong body’

Originating from the medicalized and institutionalized understandings of ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual,’ the ‘born in the wrong body’ narrative demands, as Stryker (2017) notes, a “one-way, one-time, medicalized transition across the gender binary” (p. 38). This narrative has dominantly defined the boundaries of transness since the mid twentieth century (Gill-Peterson, 2018). It is a historized narrative, not an ontological one, that goes like this: to be trans, transgender, or transexual, one’s internal, psychological, or intrinsic gender identity must be mismatched with one’s biological sex assigned at birth. Transition, then, is strictly limited to the process of turning one’s ‘wrong’ body into a ‘right’ body through medical interventions. This narrative is commonly depicted in media where the

trans subject looks in the mirror and sees a body that does not feel like their own, evoking feelings of gender dysphoria (Koch-Rein, 2014). Access to gender-affirming care, space, and the social recognition to move through the world as a *true* and *legible* transgender person hinges on receiving a gender dysphoria diagnosis from a mental health professional (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). This enforcement has made the 'wrong body' narrative the dominant understanding of transness, making it appear to be the most accurate description. Though this narrative is extremely important to some, the 'wrong body' narrative has not become dominant because trans people have made it so; instead, institutions of science, medicine, and psychology have created it. It is a product of pathologizing. To understand how the 'wrong body' narrative became so pervasive, we must look to the invention of sex and gender themselves and their implications for gender essentialism, gender binarism, and the demand of moving from one fixed destination to another. In the mid twentieth century, the concept of gender was introduced to resolve a crisis in the understanding of sex (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Scientific research had revealed that sex was not a simple binary, lacking clear biological or psychological determinants (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). All people are born with variations in chromosomes, genitalia, and gonadal development. Ignoring intrinsic mutability, influential sexologist, Dr. John Money, and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University invented the concept of gender to reinforce the binary model of sex (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Money (1955) defined gender as the psychosocial dimension of sex, encompassing "all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively", (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p. 115). This invention created two dimensions of identity: gender as a psychologically innate 'truth' and sex as a biologically innate 'truth'

'truth,' as well as dictated male and female as fixed destinations to be reached for 'normal' development; however, this notion of gender/sex as an innate 'truth' is flawed, as Bettcher (2014) argues:

How can one take seriously the view that one's self-conception as a bingo player is innate given that bingo and therefore bingo players are cultural creations? To be sure, one might (conceivably) have innate skills that make one a good bingo player (and presumably one would be good at playing similar games as well). But the conception of oneself as a bingo player can't be innate, given bingo itself is a contingent cultural phenomenon. The same is true in the case of gender [and sex]. (p. 388)

While it was Money's gender paradigm that would finally permit medical transition and gender re-assignment in the United States on a large scale, ironically, it is the same paradigm that determines the types of trans people eligible for such treatment (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Subsequently, the 'wrong body' narrative and its genesis in gender binarism confines transness to developmental teleologies that culminate in heterosexual masculinity or femininity (Gill-Peterson, 2018). By the end of the 1970s, the 'wrong body' narrative became an inescapable model for trans identity and experience, defining the meaning of legible transness that is now widely represented in children's books.

Children's Literature and Education

Representations of transness in children's literature are not new; representations of gender that blur the lines of gendered subjectivity and normativity have existed for decades (Matthews, 2023). What is a recent phenomenon, though, is the publication of children's picture books explicitly aimed at helping young children conceptualize sex,

gender, and transness. This first began in 2008 with the publication of *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, a book about a trans girl who dreams of wearing extravagant dresses. Since then, research in education has highlighted the need for, and benefits of, including LGBTQ+ inclusive books in schools to foster supportive spaces for all (Ryan et. al, 2013; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). Education scholars argue for a balance of books that operate as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Books act as mirrors when the reader can see their own lives reflected in a book and self-affirm their lives as part of the larger human experience. Books can also act as windows, allowing readers to view familiar or unfamiliar worlds from the outside. Books act as sliding glass doors when readers can walk through in imagination to become part of the world created by the author. Bishop (1990) argues that an ideal children's book for the classroom can serve as a mirror for some students and a window or sliding glass door for others. Yet, a gap remains in understanding how children's books, serving various functions, still reinforce boundaries around how children can be in the world and become apparatuses for how children categorize themselves and others as different.

Previous literature focusing on the content of the books themselves and their representations of transness have looked at how children's books with transgender protagonists or narrators reinforce gender assumptions: the gender binary, gender essentialism, sex/gender congruency, and gender stability (Capuzza, 2020). Another has investigated representations of race, social class, gender identity, and gender performance (Crawley, 2017). And another has looked at how representations of transgender characters have challenged or reinforced the gender binary (Hill,

2023). However, none of these articles study the representations of the 'wrong body' narrative in children's literature and how this single rigid archetype demands normativity and dampens children's (un)gender(ed) creativity.

Investigation

Drawing from the relevant literature, the following are the definitions of the three identified themes of 'wrong body' narratives that will guide this analysis: (1) *Gender essentialism* is the idea that sex and gender are essential or natural *truths* innate to one's biology/psychology. (2) *Gender binarism* is the "idea that there are only two social genders – man and woman – based on two and only two sexes – male and female" (Stryker, 2017, p. 12). (3) *Moving from one fixed destination to another* includes, but is not limited to, moving from one fixed gender/sex to another fixed gender/sex, especially linearly. This study analyzed elementary school picture books marketed to be transgender stories written in English and published between 2014-2019. Books were chosen using GLSEN's National Student Council's "2021 Elementary School Booklist," as GLSEN's work is often used to inform library purchases and elementary school classroom offerings. Using a slightly outdated list, like the 2021 list, also increases the probability these books are now books are now available in schools. GLSEN's Elementary School Booklist contains ten titles. Of the ten titles, five were excluded for falling outside the scope of the study: *And Tango Makes Three*, *A is for Activist*, *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag*, *Prince & Knight*, and *Neither*.¹

This process of elimination resulted in five books that fit more closely under the scope of the study. In the books *I am Jazz*, *When Aidan Became a Brother*, and *Sam!*, the word "transgender" is featured in the text itself, the author's note, or

both. So, these three books were automatically included under the scope of the study. The books *Introducing Teddy* and *Julián is a Mermaid* do not explicitly include the word “transgender,” but are still considered under the scope of the study because they each fall under Stryker’s (1994)

definition of transgender: “an umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (p. 251). The final booklist resulted in five books as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Children’s Books from the “2021 Elementary School Book List” (GLSEN, 2021)

| Title of Book | Author(s) | Illustrator | Year of Publication | Publisher |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| I Am Jazz | Jessica Herthal, Jazz Jennings | Shelagh McNicholas | 2014 | Dial Books |
| Introducing Teddy | Jessica Walton | Dougal MacPherson | 2016 | Bloomsbury USA Childrens |
| Julián is a Mermaid | Jessica Love | Jessica Love | 2018 | Candlewick |
| When Aidan Became a Brother | Kyle Lukoff | Kaylanni Juanita | 2019 | Lee & Low Books |
| Sam! | Dani Gabriel | Robert Liu-Trujillo | 2019 | Penny Candy Books |

Analysis of the Textual and Visual Content

To analyze the books, the study conducted a critical content analysis of texts to explore the underlying messages within those works, especially related to issues of power. Texts are read against the social/historical background to which they are produced, with particular attention devoted to considering the data *with* theory as we analyze, not just before and after the data is reviewed (Short, 2017). Following Paulo Freire (1970), the “critical” lens of critical content analysis involves critique (questioning ‘truth’, what is, and who benefits), hope (asking what if and consi-

dering new possibilities), and action (taking action for reconstruction) (Short, 2017, p. 5-6). The initial reading of each book considered both textual and visual content simultaneously in recognition that text and visuals work together to convey deeper meanings (Snipe, 1998). I first approached the texts as a reader, noting personal reactions and reflections. These initial observations were recorded through annotations directly on the book pages (Short, 2017). A second reading focused on uncovering the implicit meanings embedded within the textual and visual content. This analysis draws on Short’s (2017) suggested lines of inquiry: focalization (Whose story is told?

¹I use the term “destination” strategically to encompass the various signifiers that allude to moving from one fixed gender/sex to another. In this study, it is important to distinguish that these signifiers are not in fact gender/sex. For example, in *I Am Jazz*, the visual content uses blue and pink colors to allude to moving from one fixed gender/sex (blue) to another fixed gender/sex (pink), when color is not gender/sex, it is a color. Instead I understand color, for example, as a more broadly understood “destination.” If I were to define Jazz’s move from one fixed color to another as moving from one fixed gender identity to another, this would reinforce the assumption that colors do define gender/sex instead of upholding that such distinctions about what a ‘boy’ is and what a ‘girl’ is are historicized ideas rooted in social culture and traditions. Additionally, if I were to define this theme as moving from one fixed gender identity to another it would belie the aim of my critique of the ‘wrong body narrative’ because it too implies that gender inherently engenders a ‘right’ body and a ‘wrong’ body.

From whose point of view?), social processes of characters (Who has power? Who has agency?), and closure (How is the story resolved? What are the assumptions in the story closure?) as well as genre and the intended audience. I filled out a worksheet responding to these lines of inquiry for each of the five books. From these steps, I identified key quotes and images that reinforce or challenge each of the three identified themes (gender essentialism, gender binarism, and moving from one fixed destination to another).

Gender Essentialism

The first important theme of the ‘wrong body’ narrative is the underlying logic that makes the narrative so, gender essentialism. In *I am Jazz*, the protagonist, Jazz, also the co-author of the book, describes the reason why she is different from other “girls” is that “I have a girl brain but a boy body. This is called transgender. I was born this way!” (Herthal & Jennings, 2014, p.10). This quote is full of essentialist assumptions. First, it assumes there is something about her brain that makes it “girl,” then it assumes there is something about her body that makes it “boy.” However, as the literature review demonstrated “girl brain” and “boy body” are historical ideas, not ontological ones. How can “girl,” a social and historical construction, be an intrinsic, natural truth innate to one’s brain? The same question can be asked of “boy body.” How can “boy,” a social and historical construction, be an intrinsic, natural truth innate to one’s body? From this, the quote also equates the gender essentialist “girl brain but a boy body” with being transgender. This rhetorical move implies that the definition of transgender, or a version simplified enough to explain to children, is a girl/boy brain but a boy/girl body. This ‘kid-friendly’ definition reinforces the ‘wrong body’ meanings of transgender which only obscures the

nonlinearity, multiplicity, and capaciousness of transness.

In *Introducing Teddy*, gender essentialism is also central to the plot. Firstly, the cover of the book is an illustration of the protagonist looking in the mirror (Figure 1). Teddy’s reflection has a bow on the top of teddy’s head and a smile, while the non-reflected ‘real’ body appears sad with a bowtie around teddy’s neck. The mirror is an important object for the ‘wrong body’ narrative as it is often used to visually show what being ‘born in the wrong body’ looks and feels like. Gender essentialism is also reflected in the text. In explaining to their friend, Errol, what has been making them feel down, the protagonist says: “I need to be myself, Errol. In my heart, I’ve always known that I’m a girl teddy, not a boy teddy. I wish my name was Tilly, not Thomas.” (Walton, 2016, p.15). Phrases like “in my heart” and “I’ve always known” imply that being a “girl teddy, not a boy teddy” is an innate truth to the protagonist’s biology/psychology.

Figure 1

Cover Art of *Introducing Teddy*



Illustration by Dougal MacPherson from Walton, J. (2016). *Introducing Teddy*. Bloomsbury USA Childrens.

Gender essentialism is also reflected in the book description of *Introducing Teddy*, demonstrating how central this theme is to the plot of the book: “Girl or boy, only you know who you are on the inside” (Walton, 2016). This phrase of “on the inside” again points to girlhood, in this case, being innate to one’s ‘insides.’ It is implying that being ‘born in the wrong body’ or, by extension, transness, is lying dormant inside the body. Similarly, in *Sam!*, Sam tells his sister he is transgender by saying: “Maggie, I don’t feel like a girl inside. I’ve never been a girl” (Gabriel, 2019, p. 20). This book also uses the word “inside” implying here that girlhood is not innate to Sam, but boyhood is. These descriptions of transness are in an effort to make transness understandable and digestible to a young audience. However, in doing so, it is reinforcing gender/sex as something innate to one’s biology or psychology instead of as a product of history, pathology, and power. In contrast, *When Aidan Became a Brother* challenges gender essentialism, and, in turn, the ‘wrong body’ narrative. Firstly, the book itself is not so much focused on Aidan’s gender transition as it is on Aidan’s quest to become the best big brother he can be. The first 8 out of 30 pages focus on Aidan, who he is, what he likes/does not like, and how he feels. Then, the next 22 out of 30 pages focus on Aidan doing things to try to become the best big brother to his unborn younger sibling. In the first 8 pages that do focus on Aidan, gender essentialism is challenged specifically in this quote: “He [Aidan] had always felt trapped in his bedroom before they fixed it, but his new sibling wouldn’t have to feel that way” (Lukoff, 2019, p.16). Usually, the word “trapped” refers to being ‘trapped in the wrong body,’ but here it is re-appropriated to refer to being trapped in what others expected him to be and do; trapped in the regime of gender itself. This is further demonstrated in this quote: “When Aidan was bor-

-n, everyone thought he was a girl. His parents gave him a pretty name. His room looked like a girl’s room. And he wore clothes that other girls liked wearing” (Lukoff, 2019, p.2). Using the phrase “Everyone thought he was a girl” instead of simply “he was a girl” implies that gender/sex or girlhood/boyhood or femaleness/maleness are not innate to our ontologies, they are assignments. As reflected in this book, it is these assignments that make people feel trapped, not transness. Boyhood or girlhood does not lie dormant trapped inside one’s body, it is pre-scribed by societal convention.

Gender Binarism

First, in *I am Jazz*, gender binarism is prevalent in both text and illustrations. In the quote, “As I got a little older, I hardly ever played with trucks or tools or superheroes. Only princesses and mermaid costumes. My brothers told me this was girl stuff. I kept right on playing,” Jazz demonstrates the legibility of her girlhood by positioning it in total opposition to boyhood or “boy stuff” (trucks, tools, and superheroes) (Herthal & Jennings, 2014, p.13). The existence, reality, and legibility of Jazz’s girlhood throughout the book is based in liking “girl stuff,” not “boy stuff,” perpetuating the idea that “boy stuff” and “girl stuff” exist in the first place, as well as the idea that it is Jazz’s interest in “girl stuff” (princesses and mermaid costumes) that makes her a girl. On the same page as the quote above is an illustration of Jazz next to her twin brothers. Jazz is in a pink, sparkly dress and wearing a tiara, which is strategically contrasted by her brothers in blue shirts and khaki shorts, with one dribbling a basketball (see Figure 2). This pink/ blue contrast further reinforces gender binarism by placing Jazz’s girlhood in opposition to her brothers’ boyhood with the purpose of making Jazz’s girlhood legible.

Figure 2

Jazz next to her brothers.



Illustration by Shelagh McNicholas from Jennings, J., & Haerthal, J. (2014). *I am Jazz*. Dial Books.

There is another illustration that appears multiple times in the background of the text. It is a drawing of a boy in blue next to a girl in a pink dress (Figure 3). While this background image is not fundamental to the plot of the story, it demonstrates the extent to which gender binarism is a fundamental subliminal logic of the book, the narrative it portrays, and the ‘wrong body’.

Figure 3

Drawing of a boy and girl.



Illustration by Shelagh McNicholas from Jennings, J., & Haerthal, J. (2014). *I am Jazz*. Dial Books.

In *Introducing Teddy*, gender binarism appears in this quote, “I don’t care if you’re a girl teddy or a boy teddy! What matters is that you are my friend” (Walton, 2016, p. 17). While this rhetorical move is meant to be heartwarming to the reader, it reinforces gender binarism by presenting the only options of gendered beingness as “girl teddy or a boy teddy.” This implies that maybe Errol would “care” if his best friend was something other than a “girl teddy” or “boy teddy,” or not even a teddy at all. Gender binarism also appears in *Sam!* in a moment when Sam is reflecting on something that happened at school that made him feel particularly sad. Through tears Sam says,

One of the kids in my class kept talking about what boys are supposed to be like. They’re supposed to be buff. They’re supposed to be good at sports...He said boys are born a certain way and girls are born a certain way. Was I born wrong? (p. 25)

This quote superbly demonstrates the interconnectedness between gender binarism and the ‘wrong body’ narrative. The gender assignments as described in the quote, boys/girls being “born a certain way,” make those who transgress, disrupt, or otherwise queer socially constructed boundaries feel “wrong” (Stryker, 1994). However, this specific quote, as well as the book as a whole, still reinforces gender binarism as a tenet of the ‘wrong body’ narrative. Sam’s feelings of wrongness are misplaced as being ‘born in the wrong body’ instead of the feelings of wrongness being a product of the boundaries of beingness, reproduced and enforced everyday.

In *When Aidan Became a Brother*, gender binarism is challenged several times throughout both the written text and illustrations. First on page 13, Aidan is shopping for things for his sibling and on the way a lady asks, “Are you having a boy or girl?” to Aidan’s mom. Then the text says, “Aidan didn’t

like it when people asked if he was a boy or a girl, and he hoped the baby couldn't hear yet. He was glad when Mom just smiled and said, 'I'm having a baby'" (Lukoff, 2019). A similar situation occurs later when Aidan goes with his dad to find paint for the baby's nursery:

"Are you excited for your new brother or sister?" asked the paint guy. "I'm excited to be a big brother," Aidan said. The paint guy looked con-fused. Aidan could tell that he wanted to ask a different question, and was glad to have his dad there. (p.14)

Then on page 18, there is an illustration of books laid out on a table with Aidan writing and coloring in them. One of the books has the title "50,000+ Names for Boys and Girls," but it is covered with tape written over it to read, "50,000+ Names for Babies and Babies" (Figure 4).

Figure 4

50,000+ Names for Babies and Babies



Illustration by Kaylani Juanita from Lukoff, K. (2019). *When Aidan became a brother*. Lee & Low Books.

These Three examples offer an important alternative narrative to the dominant 'wrong body' narrative. Aidan is hurt when others enforce boundaries of beingness, like gender binarism, on him or his unborn sibling. By identifying Aidan's bad feelings as a result of the pervasiveness of gender binarism in society and the quotidian interactions he has with it, it erodes the perceived 'natural-ness' of binarism.

Moving From One Fixed Destination to Another

The idea of moving from one fixed destination to another confines transition (a broad sense of the word, not just referring to gender transition) to a single space, single time. It forces us to show who I *was* to know who I *am*; a stable subjectivity. However, such boundaries constrict how children can be in the world. For example, in *I Am Jazz*, the illustration on the back of the book coinciding with the book description shows "boy" Jazz on the left and "girl" Jazz on the right appearing visually on visually on a timeline that starts on the left and ends on the right (Figure 5). And in the book itself, there is a drastic contrast between sad "boy" Jazz appearing under storm clouds with tears, and a frown (Figure 6) and happy "girl" Jazz who is dressed in pink, under sunshine, smiling, and holding hands with friends (Figure 7). These visual manifestations of moving from one fixed destination to another portray transition as a linear, uncomplicated, process marked with a beginning and end, here beginning with Jazz being a "boy" and ending with Jazz becoming a fully realized "girl."

Figure 5

Back cover of *I Am Jazz*

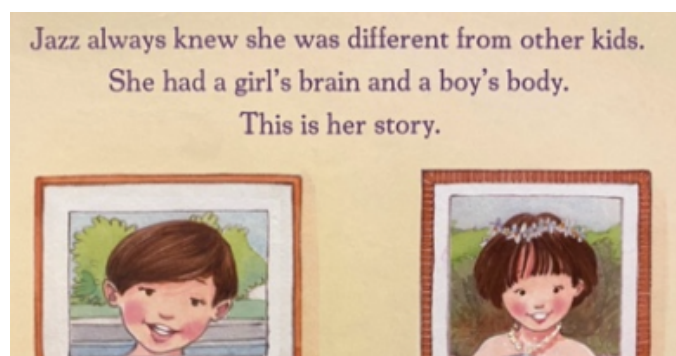


Illustration by Shelagh McNicholas from Jennings, J., & Haerthal, J. (2014). *I am Jazz*. Dial Books.

Figure 6

Sad “boy” Jazz



Illustration by Shelagh McNicholas from Jennings, J., & Haerthal, J. (2014). *I am Jazz*. Dial Books.

Figure 7

Happy “girl” Jazz

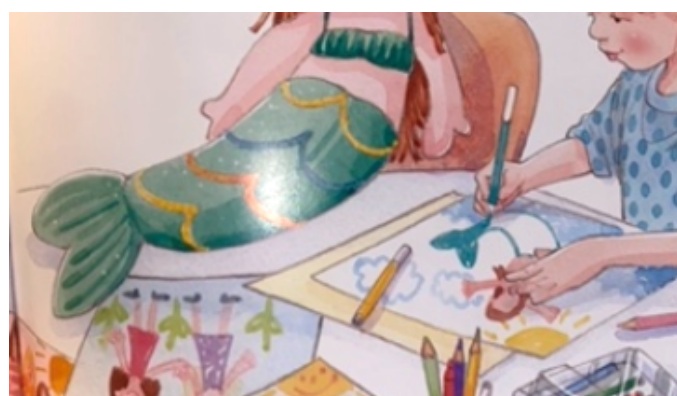


Illustration by Shelagh McNicholas from Jennings, J., & Haerthal, J. (2014). *I am Jazz*. Dial Books.

Of the books used for this study, *When Aidan Became a Brother* and *Julián is a Mermaid* challenged the idea of moving from one fixed destination to another the most frequently and consistently. First, in the author’s note of *When Aidan Became a Brother*, Kyle Lukoff writes, “Life for Aidan, and for all different kinds of kids, will be full of growth and change. I don’t know what the future holds for him, but I hope he lives in a world that supports and believes in him. Thank you for helping create that world” (2019, p. 32). This is drastically different from the back book cover of *I Am Jazz* that consolidates Jazz’s (gendered) life to a linear transition.

Instead, Lukoff emphasizes that children’s lives are “full of growth and change,” implying they don’t ever stop transitioning through all sorts of parts of life. Finally in *Julián is a Mermaid*, challenging moving from one fixed destination is central to the plot of the story. The book is almost entirely illustrations and follows a young child named Julián who is also a mermaid. Julián does not just dream of *becoming* a mermaid, the book follows him showing his abuela that he *is* a mermaid, blurring the strict boundaries placed on what is imaginary and what is real, as well as what is human and what is non-human. For example, on pages 37-38, Julián’s abuela takes him to join the other mermaids, some look human-like and some do not (Figure 8). Therefore, *Julián is a Mermaid* allows children to take care of their (un)gender(ed) creativity by eroding the borders placed around what is real, what is imaginary, and what is possible.

Figure 8

Julián and the mermaids

Illustration by Jessica Love from Love, J. (2018). *Julián is a mermaid*. Candlewick.

Discussion

Limitations and Future Study

This study used Stryker's (1994) definition of transgender. This definition was used to strategically disengage with the medicalized and institutionalized meanings of the word "transgender" but still limited the books that could be included in this study. When compiling the booklist, books with the most challenges to the 'wrong body' narrative did not fall under this study's definition of transgender and were, therefore, excluded from the study. This major limitation for the study meant that selected books were more likely to reinforce the 'wrong body' narrative. The book selection showcases that transgender can hardly be thought of without the 'wrong body' narrative; they have become almost synonymous.

A large body of work on prefixal trans showcases that there are already other ways to be outside of the 'wrong body' narrative. And as seen from the results of this study, it seems that books dominantly considered to be "transgender" undermine the work of prefixal trans. Meanwhile, books that are not marketed or dominantly considered to be "transgender" books, do the work of prefixal trans, and by extension, challenge the 'wrong body' narrative. The work to be done, then, is to

seize and reinterpret possibilities of life and livability that we have been taught and pursue something more than what we have been given. A generation of conceptual and theoretical work that investigates the possibilities of prefixal trans, a transness (as defined above in the literature review) that undermines normative constructs of gender (and race) in the classroom or in children's books, is needed. Specifically, this would involve scholars thinking through, writing about, and excavating questions such as, what power does prefixal trans have as a means of knowledge for early childhood education? To what extent does the current education system undermine the power of prefixal trans? And how can we, as a society, take care of our children's (un)gender(ed) creativity?

Recognizing that children's literature plays an important role in helping children understand the world around them, this research underscores the pervasive influence of the 'wrong body' narrative in children's literature. By critically examining books marketed as transgender stories, this study shows the need for expanding the repertoire of narratives available. When children can understand the capaciousness, illegibility, and radicality of transness, outside of the restrictive 'born in the wrong body narrative,' the boundaries around transness can progressively fade. This work has major implications for the types of books in classrooms and the kinds of stories publications should publish, but also education in general: curriculum, education structure, classroom environments, etc. Children's literature plays a vital role in mediating children's understandings of gender and transness, and, in turn, themselves, peers, and the world around them.

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