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# Transgender and Non-Binary Children's Literature and the Gender Binary

Transgender and non-binary representations in media are coming more to the forefront as public figures, such as Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, portray characters and themselves in television as well as film. Recent publications, including *I Am Jazz* and *Almost Perfect*, also add to this topic. Trickle down in media coverage has begun to grow in the children's literature sphere. With increased stories about non-cisgender and gender variant children, it's interesting to ask questions about representation in these books and what they say about the gender binary. Do books like *I Am Jazz* break away from the gender binary or reinforce it? This essay will break down a number of topics to try to answer this question while analyzing *I Am Jazz*, *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, and *10,000 Dresses*. These stories appear on the surface to challenge the gender binary, however through depictions of Jazz's stereotypical girlhood and Bailey's idealization of a dress, as well as the failure of parents to create a child without "gender," these stories actually act to enforce the binary.

## Selection of Books

Before deeper analysis can begin, it would be pertinent to mention the selection of books. In searching for books, I wanted to stay at an age where target readers were around four to eight years old. This is the introductory range for children as they can still read with adults or begin to read books on their own. This will be important in unpacking the autonomy of children as seen throughout the books concerning child/parent relationships.

Another consideration in the selection of these books is the timeline of their publication. *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* was published in the 1970's, *10,000 Dresses* was published in 2008, and *I Am Jazz*, the most recent publication, appeared on shelves in 2014. These differing publication times will show the trend and evolution of language and thought surrounding transgender and non-binary children's books. This will also show the change, if any, in how the gender binary is represented, supported, or deconstructed.

The final consideration that is vital to mention is availability of resources. While in recent years there has been more transgender and gender non-conforming children's literature, there still exists a gap in content. Many books relating to transgender or gender variant topics are published for a young adult audience and not a younger audience, as the books selected were intended for. Another gap that exists is the representation of transgender boys. There is no transgender boy equivalent to *I Am Jazz,* so the analysis presented is restricted to gender variance and does not examine a complimentary trans-boy story.

**Aspects of Discussion: Why Picture Books?**

This paper will analyze several topics found within these stories including, the use of color, toy selection and representation, clothing, parental support or lack thereof, and autonomy of the children. Picture books are some of the first media that children consume and inform their views on the world and specific gender roles. What children absorb through pictures and through parent-child readings or self-reading of picture books sets them up for these beliefs. Having books with diverse characters and identities that shy away from traditional gender roles and reinforcement of harmful binary views is important in breaking down the limitations that exists in such a strict system.

Lenore J. Weitzman states in, “Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children”, that by the time they enter kindergarten, children are “able to make sex-role distinctions and express sex-role preferences. Boys already identify with masculine roles, and girls with feminine” (Weitzman, 1125). These beliefs formed at a young age come from the media aimed at children, largely children’s programing and books. Weitzman goes on further to say, “Children's books reflect cultural values and are an important instrument for persuading children to accept those values” which can produce limiting and toxic expressions of gender roles (Weitzman, 1146). Such values that are expressed in picture books reinforce the active role of men and the passive role of women, dividing roles into the typical dichotomy of women in the home and men actively working.

In this learning, children digest the belief that, “boys are more highly valued than girls. And, with regard to personality differences, they learn that boys are active and achieving while girls are passive and emotional” (Weitzman, 1146). This problematic division and education aimed at teaching gender roles can be seen whether in attempts to reverse, argue against, or in support of the notion through the three books selected.

Another reasoning for choosing picture books and the importance of studying such books lies in the purpose of picture books. Picture books are often didactic in nature, meant to educate, reinforce, or explain how the world works and our roles within them. Children learn cues regarding their behavior and facts about their world through reading with their parents, teachers, or by themselves. On the lower end of the age level for picture books, children can view the pictures and absorb the messages and story that way. As they learn to read for themselves, messages come through the words and pictures. The age range for picture books falls approximately around four to eight years-old. Hakan Stattin and Ingrid Klackenberg-Larsson

write on the subject of developmental psychology that, “toddlers between one-and-one-half and two years of age can also label other children correctly by sex. Thus, gender identity is achieved before three years of age” (Stattin and Larsson-Klackenerg, 59). Picture books work to reinforce such notions more often than not, although there is a growing collection of books that try to break down or produce different outcomes of gender representations.

One final note that needs mention before the analysis can begin is that the topic of transgender, non-binary, and gender variance in children’s literature is just starting to bloom. As the space begins to exist for non-cisgender stories, so too will research follow.

**Keywords: Gender, Sex, The Gender Binary, Performative Gender, and Innocence**

It is important to note the distinction and understand the definition of sex and gender. Judith Butler explains the difference between the two key terms as, “sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation” (Butler, Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex, 59). Commonly today, it is taught that gender comes from your mind, who you affirm yourself to be, and sex is the biological, anatomical aspects of your body. Although the latter’s definition has recently come into debate.

Nevertheless, understanding the difference is vital to the topic of transgender and non-binary children’s literature. Knowing these concepts and the social stigmas surrounding gender and performance of it in accordance with the binary has ramifications in society. There is a pressure to conform one’s gender expression to one’s sex. As a result, gender performance occurs.

Judith Butler examines the ideal of gender as performative in, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", that "gender is in no way a stable identity…it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Consitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, 519). Gender is not something inherent, but rather something learned through cultural education and then performed outwardly. Societal messages of conformity and gender instruct persons on how they should be performing their gender, and many perform what they believe is required of them in their own roles in the gender binary.

An example of this is a man who believes that part of being and identifying as a masculine man means he must not show emotion, as showing emotionality is linked with femininity and women. This man, who may feel pressure to hide or avoid his emotions, may also perform outward acts associated with masculinity such as hunting, working on his car, or going to the gym to 'blow off some steam'. A woman would be encouraged to embrace the emotions she is feeling and talk through her feelings with her friends.

These terms all come together to explain the gender binary. 'Binary' means two; many view the gender binary as two strict sets of identities with women being linked to femininity on one end and men being linked to masculinity on the other, without the mixing of identities and gender presentation. This comes from a belief that sex and gender are linked and that they line up accordingly. This belief is reflected in much of media which reinforces a strict understanding of the binary.

A growing belief among scholars and in mainstream society is that the gender binary, the strict definition of man and woman is not true, but rather a construction and not a set biological

fact. The view of the gender binary has moved past the strict two-set system to a view more like a spectrum with multiple identities, genders, and gender expressions within that spectrum between man and woman.

Transgender children challenge the beliefs surrounding a binary system. Children's interactions with gender and the gender binary are different than adults' as children are viewed as existing within an 'empty state' and have views of innocence thrust on them by adults. Thomas Kincaid writes that, "innocence is not, as we said, detected, but granted, not nurtured but enforced; it comes at the child as a denial of a whole host of capacities an emptying out" (Kincaid, 73). Another consideration around gender, gender identity, and the binary is how children's own agency is viewed within these terms. Children are seen as being unable to fully accept or construct their identity because of their perceived innocence and age. Gabrielle Owen writes:

> Although children are seen as gendered, they are not necessarily understood as being fully aware of what it means to be a girl or a boy, let alone of what it means to say they are something other than what adults perceive them to be. (Owen, 99)

The books sourced for this paper all interact with these terms in varying degrees and with varying effects. The idea of femininity and girlhood will be addressed in *I Am Jazz* just as the *10,000 Dresses* challenges the idea of masculinity and gender expression.

**Color: Pink, Blue, and Everything in Between**

Children's books are often split into two categories that correspond to the gender binary. There are books for girls and there are books for boys, with some unisex books. Picture books

geared toward girls often feature a pink, purple, and pastel coloring while books geared for boys often feature blues, greens, etc. *I Am Jazz, X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, and *10,000 Dresses* all employ different color schemes.

Color is a broad category as, unlike the category of clothing and toys, it is something that exists within an object while the others are objects themselves that all have specific colors. Color is closely related to clothing and toys but deserves its own section as there are historic ideas centered around the idea of color as it relates to gender and the gender binary. Color is also closely coded with a value as observed by Frank Taylor.

Taylor explains the historical depictions of gender stereotypes in children's books and the harm caused in those depictions in, "Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books". Taylor writes an activity for educators to present to sociology students to have them deconstruct the images in picture books and assign keywords to the various pictures found throughout. These pictures denote specific terms either relating to masculine or feminine traits such as "weak", "emotional", "submissive", and "passive" for feminine traits and their counterparts of "strong", "rational", "dominant", and "active" (Taylor, 304). Most of the characteristics for feminine traits carry a negative connotation except for a few such as "cooperate" and "receptive," but these terms are still heavily gendered and take a passive connotation unlike the active nature of the masculine words (Taylor, 309).

In his article, Taylor explains that the results of such activity produced a response from one of his female students, who stated, "almost all male characters doing everything important…male characters were always strong and showed lots of imagination. While female characters were weaker and usually more submissive, with their pink bows and clothing" and further states regarding color that most characters were white and middle class and, "everything

that was evil or bad was colored in black, while everything good and happy was colored in primary colors" (Taylor, 309). Color, lack of color, and attribution of color to objects informs much of the values the reader is pulling from the images. For picture books, that primary target is children. As children read a book with pink frills and a submissive, female protagonist, they associate color with trait and trait with value of person.

*X: A Fabulous Child's* Story produces a color scheme very different from the norm of gendered picture books. The book is rather colorless with the two colors presented being black and orange. These colors do not follow the typical path of picture books. The story itself is about a mother and father who decide to raise their child, X, without a gender. With this in mind, the coloring seems a deliberate choice, one meant to upend the typical gendering in children's literature.

In *10,000 Dresses*, Bailey, a transgender girl whose family will not support her identity, dreams of dresses every night when she goes to sleep. Nancy Silverrod of the San Francisco Public Library notes that *10,000 Dresses*, is ''successful on many levels. It accurately portrays a family resistant to a child's gender variant interests and feelings, it provides that child with outside support through an accepting friendship, and it is simply told with illustrations that are child-friendly and colorful" (Silverrod). While colorful, the book strays away from the typical feminine pastels in favor of starker, richer colors like deep blues, vivid oranges, and popping pinks.

The color selection in *I Am Jazz* is different than the two previously mentioned stories. This book follows a typical coloring found in books gendered for girls. The very first page of the book features Jazz lounging on her pink bed with pink pillows and a mermaid doll sitting next to

her wearing soft blue colors. The soft pastels carry throughout the book in clothing and in choice of toys.

Picture books are some of the first media that children digest, it informs much of their understanding of the world and the roles played—the norms—of the society they inhabit. Color is a major part of the education in these books. Ellen Handler Spitz writes in, *Inside Picture Books*, that, "Images circulate in the culture that convey gender and other stereotypes even before we quite realize what is happening. Before we can catch our breath, children are hooked on fixed ideas, not only about gender and color, but also about size, shape, strength, pecking order, personal attributes, and the meaning of behavior" (Handler Spitz, 204). The question proceeds, what exactly is color teaching the children, reading the picture books?

The colors in picture books ascribe to the gender roles expected of the children reading them. For girls, like Jazz, that is to be as soft and feminine as the pink of her bed. For boys in traditional books aimed at them, they can be loud and rambunctious, just like the colors of their books. In *10,000 Dresses*, with Bailey a young transgender girl, the color scheme follows closely with most boy's books but also bends that narrative with sparkling dresses of bright, feminine colors. To further understand color is to also see how it is used in relation to clothing and toys.

**Clothing**

Just as color is presented in different ways through the picture books, so too are clothes used differently and for differing reasons. Traditional picture book attire for girls often places them in frilly dresses or skirts which can limit activity and activeness of the characters. Boys are often not depicted in activity-restricting clothing. Clothing is a vital part of inspection in picture books and it is vital as well to understand in what context the clothing is being used, such as a

mother wearing a dress while cleaning dishes or a son running down the football field in a jersey and dirt-stained pants.

Color in *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* is muted and non-specific, just as the topic of gender neutrality is presented. It is meant to straddle the line between explicitly male and explicitly female. The clothing, which lack most color, does the same type of job. X sports checkered overalls in the story and as the book progresses and the children begin to want to mimic X in dress and mannerisms. X's classmates begin to see a sense of freedom of expression in X that they desire resulting in a change in clothing to signal a change in gender role opinions. Gould writes:

> Susie, who sat next to X in class, suddenly refused to wear pink dresses to school any more. She insisted on wearing red-and-white checked overalls – just like X's overalls, she told her parents, were much better for climbing monkey bars.

For Susie, tossing the pink dress—a heavily gendered piece of clothing— is a means of discarding her own gendered upbringing and asserting her own autonomy over her choices. Likewise, Jim, a "football nut" adorns his football outfit, sans helmet, and pushes said helmet around in a doll carriage as if it were a baby, singing a lullaby to it as he runs around the football field (Gould).

An interesting difference between the two children emerges. Susie, to discard her gender roles, ceased wearing a pink dress. Instead she wore the gender-neutral checkered overalls. Jim still had to wear his sports clothing, something heavily coded as masculine and male, while outwardly performing his own rendition of 'motherhood' to his football helmet. For Susie, she

had to discard a color of femininity (pink) and the clothing that is also coded feminine (a dress). Jim is depicted as being unable to drop his gender role completely. It seems that the picture book is saying that Jim can act out in a nurturing manner, but he must still wear masculine clothing, never fully able to drop his role.

Both children are active in their roles, monkey bar climbing for Susie, and running around a sports field for Jim. These are masculine coded activities. The conclusion drawn here from these two characters is that for Jim and those who were reared to adhere to the male side of the gender binary, they cannot remove their masculine clothing if they also drop other gender roles. Susie enters into a non-binary sphere as depicted by the book simply by refusing to wear a certain kind of clothing. While X dresses outside of typical gendered norms, at least trying to carve out a gender-neutral identity through clothing, Bailey and Jazz Jennings actively embrace the stereotypical clothing and depiction of femininity.

The cover of *10,000 Dresses* makes a bold statement with Bailey front and center, occupying the middle of the page in a feminine and sparkly dress while sporting short hair and lacking other typically feminine dressing qualities. The theme of the book itself focuses on the feminine apparel of a dress and the desire to create 10,000 different kinds through Bailey's imagination. The item of clothing with close ties to femininity and historical girlhood is a central figure, a dream, of young transgender Bailey. It exists as a dream initially as both parents and Bailey's brother outright reject Bailey's identity as a girl, seen through her dreams of dresses. The dresses in this story act as both a physical item, a tool and experience of girlhood, as well as a metaphorical desire of Bailey to embrace and to be allowed to embrace her femininity and girl identity.

What is interesting to analyze in *10,000 Dresses* is the way clothing is depicted on Bailey as well as her parents. Bailey is depicted in more masculine clothing, although the jean shorts and plain white t-shirt exist in a semi gender neutral state. It leans masculine in this book also due to the clothing choices of the other characters. Bailey's male sibling and his friends wear similar clothing. Bailey's father wears jeans and a checkered shirt. Bailey's mother wears a skirt.

Activity and context of clothing is important as well. In this story, the characters adhere to the gender binary through their clothing and their activities. Bailey's father and brother are depicted outside, her brother playing sports and her father picking weeds out of the garden. Their clothes, comfortable, masculine, and able to withstand physical activity. On the other side, Bailey's mother is confined to the indoors, into a historically female sphere of the kitchen. Bailey's mother can wear a skirt, a piece of clothing that restricts activities in ways her husband and son's clothing do not because she is put into a less active role. She clips coupons, a precursor to shopping.

It is obvious that Bailey's world is heavily gendered and adheres to the gender binary. This strict adherence to the gender binary is so important that around her family, Bailey can only wear dresses within her dreams and imagination. When the topic of designing and wearing dresses comes up, her brother responds violently, "get out of here before I kick you!" (Ewert). To break the rules of clothing would result in violence, a real threat to transgender and gender nonconforming individuals.

To find acceptance, Bailey runs from home, encountering a neighborhood girl who supports her dream and helps her make and wear dresses. The book ends with both girls wearing matching dresses. In the end, Bailey adheres to a gender normative view of clothing. The

violence and anger directed at her comes as a result of her clothing expression, a metaphor in this book for her transgender identity.

Jazz in *I Am Jazz* is similar in sticking closely within the gender binary but takes this a step further by linking her feminine dress and its close association to the idea of childhood innocence. In the book, Jazz is pictured mostly in feminine clothing, wearing costumes and outfits associated and with the idea of being a girl or even a woman. On the second page of the book, Jazz flashes a smile at the reader, wearing a sparkling white princess dress with a matching tiara (Herthel and Jennings, 2). On the fourth page, Jazz is seen dressed as a mermaid swimming in a pool and on the page directly after that, Jazz wears a different princess dress with her friends, who are also dressed up in similar costumes (Herthel and Jennings, 4-5). While her brothers play basketball in shorts and t-shirts, Jazz dances on the page, clad in a pink ballerina outfit, complete with a flower crown. On the next page, while her sister brushes her hair in front of a make-up mirror, Jazz twirls in yet another princess dress (Herthel and Jennings, 12).

Jazz takes the models of girlhood dress and imagination, the ballerina, the mermaid, and the princess, to assert her identity as a girl. Not only is it a dress, but, specifically, a princess dress, which conjures up an image of girlhood in general as well as the closely linked ideal of innocence. Jazz uses innocence as a tool to solidify her identity to the viewer and reader. These images of mermaids and ballerinas are so closely tied to girlhood, that Jazz naturally fits there. Owen writes about the mermaid outfit, that it is “under the cover of childhood innocence” and used to “stabilize such queerness in comfortable and comforting ways” (Owen, 105). This use reinforces notions of a binary but flips the script on prescribed innocence.

**Toys**

Just as colors and clothing inform supposed gender roles in picture books, toys also inform much of gender roles. A girl may be shown with a doll, something denoting motherhood and caregiving which are historically feminine roles. A boy may be shown playing with action figures, trucks, or soldiers, denoting activeness and work outside of a home environment.

The premise of *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* is to show what Gould, the author, believed constituted a gender-neutral child and the benefits of such a rearing. In 1978 and in the present age, toys are still very gendered and stores clearly label aisles specifically based on the gender binary. The story depicts a rather stereotypical view of toys, despite its aims of neutrality.

The first true instance of toys comes when X is greeted by family and friends, bearing gifts for the new baby. X is given a football helmet and a pink-flowered romper, and relatives are upset and even disgusted that the parents would not designate a gender and choose between a world of either football helmets or pink-flower rompers. These items are metaphors for the gender binary and the nature of pushing and conforming to one side of it based on the child's sex assigned at birth. What is interesting about the family reaction is that later X is seen with a slew of toys ranging from dolls and tea sets to boxing gloves and airplanes, as if the toys are irrelevant in the first place. Perhaps this is the agency of the child, deciding that all toys are fine toys to play with because the child is not confined and expected to adhere to certain rules of play.

*X* also features a toy shop and the father trying to figure out what toy a gender-neutral child could or even should play with. This in and of itself is interesting as it puts a normative script of play onto toys. Mr. Jones is not buying or looking for toys that X would enjoy but looking specifically for gender neutral toys in the same way a parent would specifically travel down a toy aisle looking for gendered items for their son or daughter. It seems then, that Gould is arguing, that the toy is only coded gender neutral if the child is and embraces gender neutrality.

Toys play much less of a role in *10,000 Dresses*. Here, Bailey's attention is placed on clothing, but the act of clothe making can be seen as play. The two areas of play and toys can be seen in the dress making and in Bailey's brother's soccer playing. Bailey and the neighborhood girl, bond and produce clothing together, which becomes an identity building moment, as this older girl helps Bailey to physically manifest her gender identity when she is unable to do so elsewhere. Therefore, the clothing making becomes an active and affirming activity for Bailey. It is the triumph of her struggle throughout the book. On the other hand, her brother's sports play is coded with a toxic and violent masculinity. His active play is interrupted by the aggressive threat thrown at Bailey.

*10,000 Dresses* does not aim to upend or disagree with gendered toys and play as X tries to. Bailey, her brother, and the neighbor girl help affirm the strict view of the gender binary through their play. The brother is engaged in active play, sports, which has been historically linked to men and masculinity. He embodies aggressive and violent reactions apparent in toxic masculinity through his threat. Bailey and the neighbor girl do manage to actively sculpt Bailey's own interpretation and desire for her identity, but it falls along the binary as well. Just as Jazz used innocence in clothing to assert her identity of girl, so too does Bailey in dress making.

The toys in *Jazz* follow closely within the gender binary, with a few exceptions that could potentially be viewed as challenging it. The book features many toys and childhood activities that are used and performed by Jazz, her siblings, as well as friends and classmates. Jazz is seen in several instances of girlhood play. She is seen dancing in a ballerina costume as well as cheerleading with her friends. She uses dresses and costumes to play dress up with friends and plays with dolls. Her brothers are seen playing basketball while Jazz dances in a ballet outfit.

These are moments that feed into the notions of the binary. There are moments where Jazz breaks away from what Bailey's representation was and what X's family tried to produce.

Jazz plays in stereotypically girly ways with her clothing and choice of activity. Her brothers too follow that line by playing sports and her sister uses make up and brushes her hair (Herthel and Jennings, 5). The difference that exists in *Jazz* that is absent in *10,000 Dresses* and within X's story is that Jazz also participates in activities that are active and coded for boys in some instances. Jazz may play with dolls and sit and draw, but she also runs around actively outside. On the same page that Jazz is seen playing dress up with her two girl friends, she is also seen jumping around and cartwheeling a very dynamic activity. This is active play but cartwheeling and jumping around are associated with gymnastics and tumbling, girl coded activities and sports. Still, this inclusion of action grants Jazz active moments of play. Jazz does not feel limited to the passive roles of girlhood, but actively embraces toys, games, and play that requires activity.

This is also seen as Jazz plays soccer on a girls' soccer team. At first it is a cause of tension as she is told that she cannot play on a girls' team, however, the next page displays her triumph as she plays soccer, controlling the ball on a field during a game (Herthel and Jennings, 20-21). Jazz's family displays less resistance to her choice in play. Before visiting a doctor together where her parents were told that she was transgender, Jazz only remarked that they limited her clothing choices in public. Perhaps this change from Bailey to Jazz signifies a shift in expectations around toys and play with children.

In 2015, Target, a major retailer announced that would be removing signage from their stores designating "boy" and "girl" (Cunha). The toys would still be grouped together with linked toys, dolls with dolls, and trucks with other trucks. Color schemes from the toy

manufactures themselves likely still code those toys and color them based on the binary. This seems to be a shift gradually in the direction of breaking down coded gender barriers of play. This move from Target drew huge backlash from some parenting groups and rallying support from others. This introduces another vital topic on the subject of transgender and gender nonconforming children and the binary: parental support.

**Parental Support**

Children in society live in a state of neutered autonomy; their decisions, dress, beliefs, etcetera often influenced and controlled by their home environment and parental support or lack thereof. The three stories, much like in presentation of gendered objects, display a difference of parental support.

*X: A Fabulous Child's Story* is the most unique of the three in terms of depicting parental support for gender noncompliance. Unlike the other two stories, which shows characters vocally supporting and voicing their own autonomy over their gender and gender expression, X's parents, the nondescript, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, chose their child's gender identity as a gender nonconforming child. What's further interesting, is the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Jones were selected for their role by government scientists for this "Xperiment," which would be the child's, X's, life (Gould). The decision is thereby marked by the parents and the government program, not the child's own agency.

When other children X interacts with begin to copy clothing or decide to become Xs themselves, they are met with anger by their parents. The children begin to perform and act in ways that are not stereotypical of their gender. Gould writes, "their parents weren't one bit pleased with Peggy's wonderful biology experiments, or with Joe's terrific needlepoint pillows" and that the parents, "were furious" (Gould). Besides the scientists and X's parents, no one

seems to fully support the view of abandoning beliefs that existed surrounding gender, and, in fact, any steps outside of normative roles resulted in anger. This fury is also seen in *10,000 Dresses*.

Bailey faces the biggest obstacle in terms of familial support. When Bailey dreams of dresses and is filled with joy, she runs to her mother to tell her of her dream and her wishes. The dress here stands for not just a symbol of girlhood but a symbol of Bailey's gender identity, her desire to be seen as a girl by her family and the world. After the first dream is revealed, Bailey goes to her mother who is clipping coupons in the kitchen. She tells her about the dream and asks for her mother to buy her one. Instead her mother says, "Bailey, what are you talking about? You're a boy. Boys don't wear dresses" (Ewert). The mother further dismisses Bailey and her identity by telling her, "don't mention dresses again!" (Ewert).

After another dream, Bailey seeks out her father and tells him about her dream. He is out in the garden and Bailey asks if he can grow her the flowers for her dress. Similarly, to her mother, Bailey's father repeats the same phrasing that, "you're a boy. Boys don't wear dresses!" and dismisses her away (Ewert). The next dream causes Bailey to seek out her brother and tell him about her dream. Instead of support or even curiosity, Bailey is met with disgust and then a violent threat. Her brother says, "that's gross. You're a boy!" and then, "get out of here, before I kick you!" (Ewert).

Unconditional love and support are not what Bailey receives from her parents. After the disappointment and rejection from her family, she runs down the street and finds a neighbor girl sewing dresses. The picture book ends with them making dresses together, Bailey finally finding support and affirmation from a girl not related to her. In all four relationships and especially with the parents, much is said about gender identity, acceptance, and the gender binary.

All three members of Bailey's family are depicted in stereotypical roles: her mother is in the kitchen performing inside household duties, her father is performing physical work outside the home, and her brother is playing sports with local boys (Ewert). Even with the inclusion of the proper pronouns of 'her' and 'she' throughout the book, the world of gender variance and transgender children is depicted as one without family support and one where a lack of gender compliance results in violence and rejection.

Still, considering the support outside the home, Bailey's world is colored with the idea that she is 'othered'. The book ends then with this dual problem, the acceptance from outside and the rejection inside of the family. It's a mixed message for sure. Children reading this may pick up on an unintended lesson: if you don't follow the rules of society around you, your family may reject you. The hope, the light at the end of the tunnel, is support outside the bonds of family. Considering the time that this was published, ten years ago in 2008, this is a simultaneous step forward and a step back. Media did not often depict an affirmation of gender variance or transgender identity, especially in children, but even in this depiction, it is met with family shame, dismissal, and threats of violence. Moving forward to *I Am Jazz*, we see a large shift in parents' acceptance.

In the first nine pages of *I Am Jazz,* Jazz is seen playing with friends, dressing up in costumes, swimming with a mermaid tail and other activities coded girl. It isn't until the tenth page that her mother appears. Unlike *10,000 Dresses*, when Jazz's mother tells her that she is a "good boy", Jazz fiercely corrects her and explicitly states, "no, Mama. Good GIRL!" (Herthel and Jennings, 10). Jazz is not met with dismissal on this page from her mother and in the next page while saying her family was confused, her siblings do not threaten violence or dismiss her, but watch her with love, unsure of the situation (Herthel and Jennings, 11). In the following

pages, Jazz is met with the same confusion and some insistence to stick to the gender binary from her brothers when she plays with toys historically associated with girlhood, but she is still allowed in her own space to act and play as she wants (Herthel and Jennings, 11-13). When her brothers inform her that she was using, "girl stuff", Jazz, "kept right on playing" (Herthel and Jennings, 11). These family interactions are without malicious responses, more curiosities and cautions, perhaps thinking Jazz would soon adhere to the same rules and binary they follow.

On page thirteen, we see the first resistance to Jazz's gender identity. Her parents are each holding one of her hands while they walk through a park, Jazz is dressed not in her preferred dresses, but rather shorts and a t-shirt. The text above them reads, "sometimes my parents let me wear my sister's dresses around the house. But whenever we went out, I had to put on my boy clothes again. This made me mad!" (Herthel and Jennings, 13). In the beginning, her desires for girl coded objects and dress were met with bemusement and allowed within the private sphere of the family, but they were not allowed to be presented outwardly to the world.

The acceptance of Jazz occurs, not through Jazz's own declarations, but through a doctor who tells her parents that Jazz is transgender. The next page features them lovingly embracing her and declaring that they would, "love [her] no matter what" (Herthel and Jennings, 17). The acceptance of Jazz comes from a medical environment and not through her own declarations. Still this picture book affirms that Jazz is the one behind her own identity with the repetitions of the statement, "I Am Jazz" which appear on the first and last pages of the book as well as in the title (Herthel and Jennings).

The support from family in *I Am Jazz* is so very different from the support in *10,000 Dresses* and also markedly different from the parents in *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*. In a historical scope, if the books were placed on a timeline, parent support changed from imposing

and creating a gender identity for their child while attempting to reject the gender binary in X, rejecting the child's gender identity and a strict adherence to the binary in *10,000 Dresses*, to an evolution of private acceptance into public acceptance and affirmation of gender identity in *I Am Jazz*. Hand in hand with family and parental acceptance is the autonomy of the child.

**Autonomy**

The most important factor in transgender and gender non-conforming identities and representations is the autonomy of the child. Gender identity and expression is a deeply personal and individual aspect of our lives. For children, they experience an onslaught of expectations and rules surrounding identity and expression. There has been a marked improvement from the era of X, where parents can dictate the terms of identity without regard to the autonomy of their child, to the era of Jazz where she explicitly dictates the terms of her identity and experience.

On the surface, Mr. and Mrs. Jones deciding to raise their child without traditional gender roles appears to be a decision to abandon the binary. But in the span of the book, neither the researchers, nor Mr. and Mrs. Jones stop to ask their child what they want. Their parenting is not organic either. When they agreed on the "Xperiment", they received an instructional guide on raising their child. In times of confusion or trouble, neither parent checks in on X to see what X wants, needs, or suggests. They instead consult the manual which presents suggestions, rules, and guidance.

One section of the manual states, "Other Children have to obey all the silly boy-girl rules, because their parents taught them to" which is interesting on further inspection, as this suggests the other parents are raising their children incorrectly (Gould). This is criticizing other parents for deciding how their children identify while this is exactly what Mr. and Mrs. Jones are doing to X. Does X have any choice in how they are raised? The instructions continue with, "Lucky X

– you don't have to stick to the rules at all! All you have to do is be yourself. We're not saying it'll be easy" (Gould). This is an apparent contradiction as the researchers have dictated how each parent should act and what they should do in raising their child. X has no control over these choices and has not since they were born.

The other children in the book see a freedom to be and exist outside of their own limitations placed on them by society and their families. There is a huge difference in X's identity and those who begin to mimic X. X's upbringing is marked by the researchers and Mr. and Mrs. Jones decision to raise the child in a gender-neutral way, or at least the way they interpret that. The book makes no mention if X likes these methods or if there was ever a point they questioned or disagreed with them. The parents are firmly in control. The other children make the decisions on their own. Susie and Jim, the girl who stops wearing dresses and the boy that uses the doll carriage, make the decision themselves to break free of gendered norms.

Finally, after the parents are angered at X and their children ditching what they see as proper gender expectations, X is forced to be examined. The manual prepares for this, alerting the Joneses that, "'Sooner or later,' it said, 'X will have to be Xamined by a Psychiatrist. This may be the only way any of us will know for sure whether X is mixed up or whether everyone else is'" (Gould). This is a troubling conclusion. This further removes autonomy from X and places it in medical professionals' hands. In stating that this experiment will prove whether to not the identity is valid or if X and others like X are "mixed up" it sets a dangerous standard that in the end, the identity is not the child's but adults to determine. It seems these problems stem from a lack of a voice from X, even in moments where they do affirm themselves to be 'X'. Even if X wants to be 'X', the decision was never theirs in the first place.

Bailey is a marked improvement from X. Marcus Ewert, the writer uses feminine pronouns of ‘her’ and ‘she, even as Bailey’s family rejects this identity with their repetitions of calling her a ‘boy’. The author’s use of the correct pronouns seems to be an intercession on the behalf of Bailey, her own voice being recognized.

It is a mixed messaged for readers. There is the hope for Bailey holding on to her dreams and her identity, despite a family that rejects and refuses to acknowledge what she affirms herself to be. Positivity exists in the character of the neighbor girl who listens and acknowledges Bailey’s identity and wants in life, telling her, “you’re the coolest girl I’ve ever met” (Ewert). Despite the negative and violent reaction from the family, Bailey is firmly in control of her identity.

While Bailey never vocally asserts her identity as a girl and the reader finds that out through the context clues of the story, Jazz is different. From the cover, she vocally asserts her identity in the very title of *I Am Jazz*. Additionally, on the first and last page the same declaration is made using the same phrasing. From the beginning, Jazz is depicted as affirming her identity, the story follows as if everyone else needed to understand and accept what she has already known.

Despite knowing and stating this explicitly, her parents force Jazz into masculine clothing while in public, only allowing her true gender expression at home. Jazz says that despite this situation, “I never gave up trying to convince them” (Herthel and Jennings, 14). Despite her own assertions, the acceptance of her identity at home does not come from her but from the comments of doctors, a sentiment echoing the psychiatrist in *X*. Ultimately, Jazz was not able to convince her parents on her own and they took her to the doctor who Jazz says, “spoke to my parents and I heard the word ‘transgender’ for the first time” (Herthel and Jennings, 15). After this meeting

with the doctor, the parents affirmed their love in their daughter and Jazz was officially able to express her identity in private as well as in public.

There is a moment earlier in the book before the doctor visit where we see Jazz assert herself, despite her parents not accepting it as of that point. Jazz and her mother sit on the floor with toys circling them. On her mother's side are building blocks and toy trucks, signifying the 'boy' identity the family imposes on Jazz. Jazz is ignoring the 'boy' toys and instead plays with dolls and a stuffed bear. The text accompanying this image is Jazz's mom calling Jazz a, "good boy" and Jazz responding with a fierce refusal of this identity by saying, "no. Mama. Good GIRL!" (Herthel and Jennings, 10). Here in the display of toys and in the verbal affirmation of her identity, we see Jazz attempting to assert her autonomy.

In a thread of history, we see the gradual shift in these stories from X, to Bailey, to Jazz in placing the autonomy more in the hands of children. These narratives are shifting more toward acceptance and further from angry and violent reactions, as observed in the former two. Still, autonomy hits a road bump with the tendency to portray and rely on medical professionals for the 'truth' rather than from the children themselves. This seems to also circle back to the notion that children are 'empty' and lack agency and understanding of themselves in the way adults do.

All of this considered, a question arrives related to the gender binary and the autonomy of the child. Would Jazz's parents have accepted their daughters claims if she still wanted to present in more masculine ways? Transgender children face rejection and push-back from those around them that they couldn't possibly be any gender identity other than their assigned gender. The rejection is seen in all three stories. It appears that Jazz employs a gender expression that closely is linked to the binary, using innocence as a means to secure that position. Owen writes, "innocence is working to convince adult viewers" and that it, "works to validate…Jazz, but it

could be deployed just as easily to invalidate" (Owen, 103). Owen goes on to further explain innocence as a tool, stating, "Innocence is the currency of exchange in stories of transgender children" (Owen, 104). Jazz uses the image of the mermaid, to attach herself to an idea of innocence and girlhood. For her acceptance, even with her autonomous claims, these two are vital ingredients needed to produce an outcome that accepts her.

**Conclusion:**

Picture books including transgender and gender nonconforming children as characters and their themes have increased in number recently. From *X: A Fabulous Child's Story* to *10,000 Dresses* and to *I Am Jazz*, children's literature has seen a marked change in representing these stories. Recent stories focus more on the child and their claims about their identity, with stories written decades ago focusing more on the parents and less on the voice of the child in question. The shift is gradual, as can be seen in the difference of experience between Bailey in *10,000 Dresses* and Jazz in *I Am Jazz*. Themes of rejection, medical intervention, and the gendering of clothing, toys, play, and other experiences of children have persisted. Transgender stories both challenge and reinforce the gender binary. The gender binary has relied on a strict male and female system based on a shallow understanding of gender that excludes the existence of transgender and non-binary persons. Transgender and non-binary persons challenge the acceptance of a shallow understanding of gender.

Despite the challenge they pose, trans persons tend to fall into binary roles. This can be seen in Jazz's stereotypical girlhood of mermaids, dresses, and girlhood play, Bailey's idealization of dresses as a manifestation of her gender, and the failure of X's parents to create their child without "gender". That being said, there must be a consideration to the lived experiences of transgender children. Jazz faces obstacles in school with classmates mocking her

and a world that is markedly more violent to transwomen. Bailey lives in a strictly gendered house where her identity and feelings are dismissed and where her desire for girlhood is threatened with violence. Perhaps their appeals to typical gender norms are a mechanism for survival; the more they can ascribe to gender roles the less they can be ostracized, harassed, or dismissed for deviating from them. And a further consideration, perhaps their gender presentation and adherence to stereotypical gender roles are true to them. Jazz is one of the authors telling her own story within her picture book. She is painting her world as she experienced it. That deserves attention too.

Stories about transgender and gender nonconforming children are rare but are increasing in number. There are deficits in that no equivalent trans boy story exists like *Jazz* and most of these stories support an adherence to the gender binary. With the progress that has been made in the timeframe between these three books, it seems that the trajectory of these stories is widening to allow for an increased representation of transgender and non-binary characters.

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