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**The Queer Matter[s] of Boys in Dresses:  
Boy-dress entanglements in children's picturebooks  
and the materiality of gender**

**APPROVED BY  
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**The Queer Matter[s] of Boys in Dress:  
Boy-dress entanglements in children's picturebooks  
and the materiality of gender**

**by**

**Arturo Agüero, BFA**

**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

For all the sissies, tomboys, and other queer kids who did not survive childhood.

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Quiero agradecer imensamente todo el apoyo que me han dado mis hermanas y mi hermano (Mercedes, Elda y “Kikis”) que desde mi infancia me han brindado risas a diario, abrazos en abundancia, y auxilio cuando más fue necesitado. Sin ellxs no hay Arturo. Además, este breve plazo de su trayectoria académica lo ha introducido a dos increíbles colegas Chicanas (Yesenia y Kathy) cuya convivencia ha servido como materia prima para teorizar y practicar el trabajo liberatorio.

And last but certainly not least: Josh, you are my everything.

## **Abstract**

### **The Queer Matter[s] of Boys in Dresses Boy-Dress entanglements in children's picturebooks and the materiality of gender**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Keffrelyn Brown

This study collects the representations of boys in dresses in Spanish and English language picturebooks and works through the entangled matters not only of, boys and dresses, but also race, class, gender, gender expression, schooling, and their futurities. Building from queer theory, and new materialisms, this research proposes an orientation for understanding children's queerness without imposing 'adult' readings through a methodology of reading queer matter[s] by looking into picturebooks individually and across titles.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction** **[Or, How Books Come to Matter]**

This work is about picturebooks: a compilation of typography and illustrations printed onto thick paper pages, bound together, and typically flanked by wrapped cardboard facings that give the construction a particular rigidity, stability, and authoritative permanence. Before moving any further, however, I would like to take an aside, to state plainly, in the opening sentences of this research project, that picturebooks are *not* the stuff of childhood. Or at least not the stuff of *every* childhood. Currently, the average price for a children’s picturebook on the New York Time’s Best Sellers list averages at \$17.49 (“New York Times Best Sellers: Children’s Picture Books,” 2016) – that’s more than five times the national average cost of a gallon of milk (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Low-income schools, families, and communities often *feel* the cost and difficulty of acquiring print materials in ways that affluent communities do not (Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001). *We don’t all grow up with books.*

I also acknowledge that collectively, the books I will address in this research project have likely never sat on the same shelf, or even housed in the same collection, and that they have likely never been read together, one against the other. The books in question come from across the globe and have had to traverse oceans, crossing thousands of miles for me to have the luxury of reading them [safely] in the comfort of my own home; this is not the norm. I acknowledge the inherent privilege of running my own fingers over these pages, caressing text with my adult eyes, and relishing the femme depictions of a queered boyhood – a boyhood that was untouchably unreachable in the

times and spaces that my own childhood was lived in, as the bulk of this collection of texts had not yet existed. As I step into these books, these manicured versions of queer boy-child potentialities, I think about the boys (and other queer children) that haven't [yet] experienced or considered the pleasures of seeing the boy-dress. Or, the pleasures of *becoming* a boy-dress. *We don't always see ourselves in books.*

This project brings together ten picturebooks, from four continents, in two different languages – this is the entirety of picturebooks that depict the boy in a dress in both the Spanish- and English-speaking worlds. These ten books are only a tiny fraction, a small subset of children's literatures. "Boys in Dresses" can be understood as an inseparable part of what I call 'queer children's picturebooks'– which itself is a small genre. I purposefully avoid the more popular term 'queer-themed picturebooks' preferred by other scholars, and writers given my interests in renderings of queer bodies and not queer themes. 'Queer-themed,' I find, fails queer world-making on two grounds: (1) the material logics of allegories, metaphors and symbols often obstruct the embedded moralistic lessons about sex-gender difference [i.e. a blue-bodied crayon can never make red marks and therefore can never *be* red, (Hall, 2015)]; and (2) they conceal a Whites-only representational norm that invisibilizes the experiences of queer people of color: queer penguins, ducks and crayons absolve the makers and readers of picturebooks from affirming queer *people* of color.

I engage in the collection of the representations of boys in dresses in children's picturebooks to draw attention, on one level, to the physical materials we use to teach children about queer childhoods [e.g. picturebooks], and on another level, to the

intangible materials we use to communicate and teach about sex-gender [e.g. ideas]. This work addresses both by compiling these picturebooks and, rather than distill their essence, I attempt a mapping of the complex entanglements between queer subjects (actors) and queer subjects (concepts). This word play is deliberate given that I argue that queer subjects as actors and queer subjects as concepts are inherently inseparable. That said, queer subjects (in both senses of the word) are made: printed on the glossy pages of every picturebook one finds the culmination of combined efforts by many people, using a series of agreed upon conventions, to portray a sanctioned narrative. A new materialist reading of boys and dresses elucidates the prescribed social scripts for how one becomes a boy in a dress and spells out a more or less idyllic queer boyhood. It is my hope that the work in this thesis be used to model reading strategies by anyone who works with children and picturebooks, and to inform future publishing projects on how to complicate queer narratives.

Seemingly conflicting forces mire the urgency of this research: on one hand, cultural “progress” marked by the sudden surge of LGBTQ folks on primetime television, routine high-profile celebrity ‘coming out’ stories, and a series of consecutive Supreme Court ‘wins’ in the name of gay and lesbian rights (e.g. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, *United States v. Windsor*, *Hollingsworth v. Perry*); yet on the other hand little has changed and anti-LGBTQ sentiment continues to be vocal, visible and increasingly violent. This year alone, the Republican Party platform passionately condemns the aforementioned rulings and pledges to protect individuals and business that deny services and accommodations for queer people (Republican Party Platform, 2016); the murder of transgender people

has reached a record high, most of them trans women of color (Stafford, 2015); and the deadliest mass shooting on US soil to date was carried out at Pulse Night Club, a gay bar catering to queer Latinxs in Orlando, Florida, killing 49 patrons and leaving countless more injured. This isn't progress.

Schools are not immune from these anti-queer undercurrents. Students report sustained hostile school climates (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014), experience rampant bullying, especially by those who identify as transgender (Grant et al., 2011), and suicide and suicide ideation continues to disproportionately affect queer youths over their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Cover, 2012). Harassment and violence is not limited to high school and middle school campuses, it also occurs at the elementary level and gender variant and non-conforming children often bear the brunt of these abuses. Sex-gender bullying is often overlooked in these spaces precisely because of their young age; adults commonly condone these actions as innocent, childish misconduct (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012, pp. 37-40). But “innocence” is not natural: “innocent” children are made.

It may seem frivolous to think about how the research detailed in the ensuing pages of this thesis speaks to the “progress” paradox outlined above, but I argue that by looking at these picturebooks, to physically hold them and weigh seriously their transformative potential through the optics of entangled matter, we may develop critical reading strategies to undo the violence of growing up.

## THE MAKING OF [INNOCENT] CHILDREN

Children are a particular human *kind*. Popkewitz (2013) describes the fabrication of human kinds not as the creation and adoption of ‘ideas’ but rather through the “materiality of knowledge” (p. 444) – real objects and operations of ontological substance. Many of these fabrications are so deeply ‘real’, so engrained in our language and understanding of the world that we expect newborn infants, for instance, to traverse from infancy through childhood, on to youth, then adolescence, and finally adulthood – each a fictional ‘human kind’ composed of sequential developmental plateaus for acquiring the knowledges and ideologies of a fabricated idealized future. Similarly, Edelman (2004), deconstructs the pathological imagining of the immaculate child constantly under siege from the impurities of adult life (sexuality, race, class, etc.) He implies that this fabrication of human kinds [the child] “marks the fetishistic fixation on heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (Edelman, 2004, p. 21). In other words, this investment in sameness requires that we reproduce heterosexualized priming by implicitly and explicitly naming, identifying, and prescribing straightness as *the only* future. Straight children are made.

Because picturebooks are discursively inscribed with the synchrony of *early* childhood, there are certain regulatory limits to representational possibility many adults enforce. Queer picturebooks disrupt these demarcated borders of childhood naïveté and adult knowing teetering dangerously close to forbidden knowledges [illegal in some U.S. states (McGovern, 2012-2013)]. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Western world has

had to reshape childhood amidst shifting cultural, economic, and technological revolutions. In the advent of the abolition of child labor, the economic [wage-earning] value of children was replaced by the emotional pricelessness of childhood we encounter today (see Stearns, 2003; Zelizer, 1985). Children have since required constant supervision, discipline and regulation to prevent them from losing their innocence, and it is no surprise then, that literature about them and for them mirrors the fears and dangers of the knowing child (Kincaid, 1991). Sexual and gender ontologies presented in queer children's picturebooks threaten to reverse the investments in an unknowing guileless child by exposing them to the injustices of sex-gender social hierarchies. Yet, despite the continued investment in the innocent, unknowing child, inequities persist.

Social justice pedagogies often overlook the need for emancipatory methods that address non-binary genders and queer sexualities – particularly in younger years. Queer pedagogy (Shlasko, 2005; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010) has recently emerged as a teaching orientation that aims to problematize the hegemonic structures that oppress queer sex-gender positionalities but these innovations and recommendations seldom venture into elementary or early childhood classrooms (for exceptions, see Letts IV & Sears, 1999; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008). But what we forget is that silence is not neutral; these entanglements between childhood and [sex-gender] silences reflect what Mazzei (2011) refers to as a 'desiring silence,' that is, "a desire to preserve and re-produce more ... privilege" (p. 658).

## **MY INTENTIONS [“ARE THERE ANY GOOD ONES?”]**

*When I discuss my research interests in queer picturebooks with my education colleagues, I am usually met with some variation of the following response: “Oh! Do you recommend any? Are there any good ones?” I wish I had a better answer that didn’t begin with a hesitant “Well it depends on what you mean...”*

I originally began this project as an effort to map the varied representations of the queer children in picturebooks in Spanish- and English-language picturebooks. This entailed collecting, compiling lists, intermittent sorting, and lastly, producing a cartography of representational possibility. I knew the number of picturebooks depicting queer children would be small, after all, cursory web searches tend to yield only books about lesbian mothers, and gay uncles [*adults!*]; academic scholarship only yields similar findings [*more adults!*]. I persisted meticulously mining for books for about a year and half until my searches no longer yielded anything new. Up to this point, only Lester (2014) had documented having found more than two queer children: she found six queer children.

Unfortunately, the span of this project is much too limited to thoroughly engage each of these books with the attention, care, and scrutiny they deserve. Furthermore, the books I have collected are diverse in content, format, quality, country of origin, narrative style, and availability, which may require different frameworks and methods for reading. Examining all of these texts together is beyond the scope of this study. I opted to focus

this study on the microgenre “Boys in Dresses”<sup>1</sup> principally because they make up a substantial part of my queer-child picturebook collection (23.7%). Additionally, I find this study’s findings potentially relevant to educators who may be interested in fostering conversations about gender in their own classrooms by centering picturebooks. Furthermore, unlike many of the titles that comprise the broader ‘queer picturebook’ genre, most of the books in the ‘Boys in Dresses’ genre can be purchased effortlessly online, can be found relatively easy in most urban area public libraries, and occasionally one or two of these titles can even be found in-stock at mainstream brick and mortar bookstores. This material availability makes this research inquiry somewhat more accessible than say a study of mostly out-of-print, rare, and collectable picturebooks. I am particularly motivated to engage this inquiry due to the ubiquity of the dress, that despite its extremely varied permutations (a gala dress, a witch dress, a hand-made dress, a secret dress, a noisy dress, a mother’s dress, etc.), the dress remains the antithesis of masculinity; this matters.

### **Research questions.**

This research will be centrally focused on the entanglements of queer matters (gender expression, relationships, happenings) and queer matter (dresses, boys). Using a new materialist approach to reading queer matter[s] sideways, I turn to the following questions to guide my query:

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<sup>1</sup> The Boys in Dresses genre should not be confused or conflated as a misreading of trans stories. Books in the Boys in Dresses genre often ostensibly remind the viewer about the protagonist’s boy body and boy gender.

- What affects do boy-dress entanglements produce in children’s picturebooks?
- How are queer assemblages enacted, created, contested, or expanded in children’s boy-dress picturebooks?

I deliberately avoid questions that require evaluative rubrics or entail placing books into categories of ‘better’ or ‘best.’ I do not intend to ‘recommend’ books for teaching [about] queerness, doing so would place the pedagogical responsibility solely on the book, and implies that only queer picturebooks can elicit conversations about queerness, or that queer materials are a prerequisite for queer pedagogies. [Can *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963/1991) or *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980) not be a read as queer texts<sup>2</sup>?] However, I still want to engage the matters at the heart of the question: the question of pedagogical tools. What I intend to do, is model strategies for reading boy-dress picturebooks, and other genres as well, in a way that allows queerness to be children’s matters.

#### **A FEW AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES**

Following Dolores Delgado Bernal’s feminist epistemology (1998), I want to preface my own position in, with-in, and throughout this research project. Delgado Bernal argues that personal experience, along with existing literature, professional experience, and the analytic research process make up the researcher’s cultural intuition, a quality that allows a researcher to give meaning to data. I would like to begin this chapter recognizing first that my personal experience is an assemblage of diasporic

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<sup>2</sup> For queer readings of these titles see Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) and Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, and Hemingway (2008)

his/her/theirstories. Just as Anzaldúa (1987/2012) grapples with the tensions of identities in flux in her seminal text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza*, my own experience with the pressures and frictions of crossing are etched onto my body and being. Describing how México/U.S. geo-temporalities pull her body [and mine] in various directions in physical and metaphysical ways, Anzaldúa writes:

*Yo soy un puente tendido  
del mundo gabacho al del mojado  
lo pasado me estira pa' 'tras  
y lo presente pa' 'delante* (1987/2012, p. 25)

I intend to convey these discursive pulls similarly with a series of short biographical vignettes in order to briefly layer my own history onto my understanding of this research *with/through* theory, *with/through* data, and *with/through* my experiences. I present episodes rather than a continuous linear narrative not only to echo the discontinuous nature of picturebook storytelling, but also to highlight the congruencies and tensions of ‘growing sideways’, a theoretical concept that will be explained later.

### **Ignacio Zaragoza, “Shihuahua.”**

My first major experience with movement was crossing the México-U.S. border in 1992. At four years of age, I was short with long locks of curly black hair; *en ese entonces solo hablaba español* – Spanish was my first language, my mother tongue. Prior to our move to *el otro lado*, my family lived in a small town nestled in the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental in northern border-state of Chihuahua, which our neighbors

affectionately pronounced with a softer “sh-” sound [shi-WA-wa]. Ignacio Zaragoza, a small municipality surrounded only by rocky terrain and agricultural lands, was home.

Our house was an assemblage of histories and craftsmanships, a material register of the lives that had come before me/us. The layout was radial in composition. The central room bares hand-hewn beams, and adjacent to the heavy steel door, a single window facing and interior corridor serves as a historical record of original single-room home design. My grandfather’s hands shaped the jambs flanking both the window and door; I never got the chance to meet him, only his handiwork. Ancillary rooms extend around the periphery of the original architecture that continues to organically grow at its sides as new family (i.e. my *Tío’s* family) and new technologies/infrastructures (i.e. indoor plumbing) move in. The plaster-coated adobe walls smelled of a particularly earthy coolness, especially after heavy rains, and the sounds of small rocks drumming against car bottoms was an inescapable part of moving about town – though there was little need for vehicular travel to move about a town in which every address is only a few blocks from the town square, *la plaza*.

Both of my older sisters were attending primary school and, everyday, would excitedly reteach what they had learned in school in our own game of *escuelita*. They were the teachers; I was their student. Their (re)telling of school and learning fueled my hunger for being one year older, I couldn’t wait to attend school. The kindergarten schoolhouse, vividly visible from under the shade of our home’s corrugated aluminum overhang, called to me, it’s brightly muraled façade disguising a coarse stucco texture. After *la escuelita* let out, I would make the short trek to the abandoned play yard alone

and peer into the grated windows and wonder what schooling would look like, when I would learn to read like my older sisters. But I never went in.

I started school in the U.S.

### **First Books.**

My first books were purchased at an annual school book fair. Three softcover picturebooks, each enveloped in a bright primary color came home with me: *The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1990), *Corduroy* (Freeman, 1968), and *Stellaluna* (Cannon, 1998); books that, in hindsight, are testaments of love, affirmation, and femininity. These three picturebooks were secret worlds that embraced me when growing up was unkind to me as I began to discover how my growing body unwittingly betrayed its prescribed masculinity. The first, a story of a small [feminized] train engine that saves the day bringing boys and girls “toys to play with [and] good things to eat” (n.p.). When other bigger [masculinized] engines refused; she carries the weight and responsibility of her precious cargo and climbs the mountain: “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can”(n.p.) she mutters to herself. The second, the story of a teddy bear, his missing button, and a girl who, despite said missing button, is so enamored with the bear. The sharply dressed girl uses her savings to bring him home and replace his missing button – the girl and bear are made more perfect together. The third book, is a tale of a young fruit bat not allowed to be bat-like or do bat-things by her adoptive bird mother. The young bat discovers herself only after getting lost in the darkness; she survives alone in the dark precisely by being bat-like and doing bat things.

Recently, I was in my parent's home and perused the built in bookshelf packed tightly with aging books amassed from the collective childhoods of my siblings and I. There, on the third shelf, on the left, were my three books beautifully decorated with the wear of time: soft weathered corners, a sever crease on the cover, ink stains from tracing the titular characters, and a faded signature of irregularly spaced letters: A-R-T-U-R-O.

They remember me.

## **2005.**

In 2005 I began my final year of high school. I had come out the year before and, had since, been unapologetically looking for gay images, gay affirmation, and gay Latinidad. At home, my parent's silence was deafening – my mother's side glances still haunt me as do my father's shushes as he pretended to listen attentively to the commercial breaks that punctuate the ten o'clock news. Even if my parents had conceded to talk, to be open to conversation, I would have been unable to have a conversation about sexuality or sexual politics without relying on anglicisms that tasted strangely on my Spanish-speaking tongue. *¿Cómo se dice gay? ¿Cómo se dice queer? ¿Por qué no hay traducción?*

At school, a different sort of silence hung over me. Teachers were resistant to speak to/about queerness, defiantly so. They were quiet to the point where my queries seemed to get absorbed into their insistent silence – their silences were louder than my curiosity. No queer histories, literatures, sciences, or arts despite queerness making headlines with the legalization of same-gender marriage in Spain and Canada. This is

how I learned that I could only be recognized through heteronormative rubrics. School is not [for] queer.

Curiously, this same year the picturebook *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson, Parnell & Cole, 2005), a based-on-true-events story of two male penguins that hatch an abandoned egg, was published inciting a highly publicized conservative backlash. Some school libraries and city libraries were asked to remove the book from children's collections, to keep extant copies out of classrooms. "The gay penguin book", as it was "affectionately" called, was consistently the most contested book in 2006, 2007, and 2008; in 2009 it momentarily fell to second place only to climb back to the number 1 spot in 2010 (Magnuson, 2011). It would be an entire year before I would be able to get ahold of my own copy.

Later this year, *Brokeback Mountain* debuted in theatres across America amid another conservative backlash. Among my high school social circles, choosing to purchase tickets was hardly a casual decision, rather it was framed in the hushed tones of clandestine adolescent activity – almost like a like an illicit invitation uttered in a lower vocal register. "Wanna go see Brokeback?"

Yes. Yes I do.

### **"But I'm a Boy ... Right?"**

Children and gender have a complicated relationship: always in question yet never *a question*. Gender is frequently used as a sorting machine for their lives: "we're going to the bathroom, please make two lines...", "I need everyone to sit boy-girl-boy-

girl ...”, “Stop picking on the girls...” Yet we [adults] are mortified by sincerity of a child asking a stranger “are you a boy or a girl?” exposing the violence of the sorting machine we reproduce daily.

Children are expected to understand the nuanced visual and performative languages of gender expression without any formal instruction; they must rely solely on the hidden curriculums of gender socialization. [Aside:] My pedagogical practice is to develop and write my curriculum through student inquiries, enveloping student questions with relevant literature, planning experiences to speak to their inquiries, and inviting experts to speak to our class on these subjects. I was presented with an opportunistic question recently when a student approached me, sporting shoulder-length, glossy, black hair, and asked in a soft whimper: “but I’m a boy ... right?” The question had stemmed from a discussion between two other students who had arrived at different schemas for conceptualizing “boy” and “girl.” [Is long hair a girl thing? Can boys have long hair?]

I decided to design a curricular unit to introduce language and concepts relevant to gender identity and gender expression. In doing so, I began to search for materials that contest dominant hegemonic discourses of sex/gender binarism; I thought materials specifically privileging the child’s perspective would be especially relevant. I went to my personal library and visited the local libraries and was underwhelmed by the absence of queer child characters. I made do with what I had, and since then, I’ve been thinking about a question of my own: where are they? Where is the Queer Child<sup>3</sup>?

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<sup>3</sup> Moving forward, I will capitalize Queer Child to refer collectively to the broader categories of queer-child subjectivities whereas the lower-case iteration ‘queer child’ is used to refer to a specific [singular] queer-

I continued searching for picturebooks depicting queer children, scouring the internet with words “picturebook,” “queer,” and “child” in my queries ... which yielded no new titles, only picturebooks about queer adults. Language collapsed when queering the child. Inputting “gay children” as search terms yielded results for the auto-corrected “gay-themed children’s ...”; a search for “lesbian children” became “children of lesbians.” [Is Boolean logic (of childhood) heterosexist?]

### **WHY THE QUEER CHILD OF PICTUREBOOKS?**

As an early childhood educator, picturebooks are the bread and butter of my classroom curriculum. Picturebooks of all genres comprise an essential part of the written curriculum. They not only stimulate a variety of literacy skills including vocabulary development, comprehension, higher order thinking skills, and verbal communication skills, they also help us learn about wide range of subjects. From life cycles to civil servants, love and loss, ethics, dreams, (in)equity, and innumerable other themes; picturebooks reliably deliver the curricular content of earliest elementary and pre-primary classrooms. So, if picturebooks furnish the epistemological architecture of children’s educational experiences, what might be learned from the Queer Child of picturebooks?

### **A GUIDE TO THE CHAPTERS**

This study will be presented in six chapters. This first chapter provided the context and urgency of exploring queerness in early childhood through the use of

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child subject. I use the gender inclusive pronouns they/them/theirs to refer to the Queer Child when necessary.

picturebooks. Chapter two will provide an overview of literature relevant to the queer children of picturebooks. Rather than merely point to a gap in the literature, I present a meandering triangulation of scholarship about picturebooks, queerness, and the child subject. In chapter three I will outline a conceptual framework for reading the queerness of children in picturebooks. Building from queer theory, and new materialisms, I will propose an orientation for understanding children's queerness without imposing 'adult' readings. Chapter four will outline a methodology of reading queer matter[s]. This will entail a rationale and procedure for the collection of books and outline how to read queerly. Next, chapter five will provide a systematic description of each of the ten books and the boy-dress entanglements within. Chapter six will bring the book matter[s] into contact with each other and explore the queer assemblages enacted and created by the boy-dress across titles. The final chapter offers concluding thoughts.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review [Or, Looking for The Queer Child]**

This literature review is not about the boy in a dress. This review entangles him (the boy in a dress) into/with the body of the Queer Child. I do not want to present a taxonomic framework for ‘kinds of queer children,’ so instead I flatten these distinctions bringing boys in dresses into contact with the Queer Child, in community. When I refer to the Queer Child, I simultaneously point to the boy in a dress and his other queer peers: both are constitutive of the same matter[s].

And yet, this review of the literature is also not about *them*, the Queer Child of picturebooks– in the flesh and blood – or ink and paper, if you will. This review is less about their material reality and more about their ghostly image. The Queer Child remains at large, missing from the academic literature, and rather than simply point to gap in scholarly research, I propose tracing the contours of where they *could* be; where they *should* be. I will attempt to map the making of the onto-epistemological grid, which has allowed [and prevented] them from existing in the first place, apropos literature authored for young children. Through a review of relevant scholarship, I interrogate the worlds of possibility made conceivable by books depicting the impossible singularity: the picturebook, the queer, and the child. To make sense of the absence of the queer child from the canon of academic writing about the picturebook, this paper is necessarily organized into three parts outlined above. Each section overlaps on adjacent concepts so as to triangulate their phantasmal presence.

## WHAT IS A PICTUREBOOK?

First, I want to highlight the obvious: picturebooks are different. Following Sipe (2001, 2008), Kiefer (2011) and other picturebook scholars, I use the compound term “picturebook” over the more lexically conventional “picture book” or “illustrated book” to refer, broadly, to a printed book that makes use of both images and words to create meaning. This neologism – *picturebook* – highlights the synergistic interdependence and inseparability of image and text. In other words, picturebooks do not privilege words over pictures; both are semiotically charged signs that must be interpreted in conjunction with one another - though sometimes titles and genres do privilege the visual (wordless picturebooks, for example). I strongly favor Barbara Bader’s definition:

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of picture and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. (as cited in Kiefer, 2011, p. 87)

This definition addresses the multiple forces that act upon a picturebook (craftsmanship, economic markets, history, and culture) and also the forces that a picturebook enacts on its readers (its physical manipulation, the strategic presentation of narrative features). This definition also recognizes that picturebooks are chiefly for a *child to experience*. Whether the child is reading or being read to, whether the child selected the picturebook or not, whether the child appreciates it or not, or whether the book is enjoyable to adults or not, the telos is the same: to be experienced by a child.

Additionally, I also want to underscore the novelty of picturebooks by briefly outlining picturebook research across three motifs: historical, operational, and experiential. These themes will serve as a primer for understanding how picturebooks work, why they work the way they do, and, later, how they construct the Queer Child of picturebooks.

### **Genealogy.**

First, genealogical research locates the picturebook as a relatively recent development in the literary world. The earliest literatures written specifically for children have, since their inception, been limited to works of a pedagogical nature (for transmitting literacy, morals, religion, etc.) and been prohibitively expensive and therefore only available to wealthier families given the costs of manufacture and export/import (Murray, 1998; Avery & Kinnell, 1995). As late as the mid 1800's, more than a century after the publication of the first children's genres, the birth of the modern picturebook emerged bearing the stylistic traditions we still see today – conventions largely attributed to the British author/illustrator Randolph Caldecott, of the eponymous picturebook award for exemplary illustrations (Salisbury & Styles, 2012; Murray 1998; Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2013; Kiefer, 2011). Picturebooks today explore a wide range of subjects, come in a variety of formats, are marketed to a variety of audiences, and yet the legacy of the picturebook as a pedagogical instrument continues – as opposed to using picturebooks as instruments of pleasure. Haynes and Murriss (2012) point to this framing of books as “message carriers” as exemplified by teacher book-selection

criteria, such as avoiding books that convey the “wrong message” (such as rejecting a book that incorrectly misrepresents the phases of the moon). Picturebooks, with and without adult interventions, act as teachers themselves.

### **Technology.**

Technological research documents how picturebooks make use of literary, engineering, and intellectual developments and how they address difficult or challenging topics. Cataloguing paratexts as literary inventions, for example has comprised a major body of work in the systematic study of picturebooks.

A paratextual element, at least if it consists of a message that has taken on material form, necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful or more prudent distance. (Genette, 1997, p. 4)

Much of contemporary research is concerned with how these paratextual elements like endpapers (the pages binding the book pages to the cardboard covers), gutters (the seam running down the center of the book where two pages meet), page turns, fonts, paper choices, covers, and dust jackets, to name a few, differentiate picturebooks from other book formats (Sipe & McGuire, 2006; Lewis 2001; Gressnich, 2012; Duran & Bosch, 2013; Bjorvand, 2014). Scholarship in this area is particularly interested in how contemporary printing and manufacturing processes have developed new meaning-making modalities for makers of picturebooks to expand narrative practices.

Intellectual innovation in picturebooks is another active site for scholarship. The

use of metafictional devices (narrative features that self-references the story/book/object's own awareness of itself as a story/book/object) in postmodernist picturebooks, for example, has drawn attention from multiple researchers (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2010; Goldstone, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Anstey, 2002; Serafini, 2012). Collectively, these writings about the postmodernist narrativity stress a concern about how to adequately prepare young readers to decipher these complicated stories. Similarly, a related branch of picturebook research engages the intellectual capacity of books [and to some extent children] to grasp the complex ethical, philosophical or otherwise "adult" matters including, but not limited to, social (in)equality, death, colonialism, and sexuality (Mickenberg & Nel, 2011; Pantaleo, 2004; Salisbury & Styles, 2012; Haynes & Murriss, 2012; Bradford, 2007; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014).

### **Phenomenology.**

Lastly phenomenological research explains how children engage in the reading of picturebooks, and how they derive meaning from their pages. Research in this area is specifically concerned with the reader-picturebook interactions (Bellorín & Silvia-Díaz, 2013; Lewis, 2001; Sipe, 2000; Sipe & McGuire, 2006; Paley, 1997). Not all of phenomenological work makes use of child-readers, for example Bang's *Picture This: How pictures work* (2000) is an arts-based, exploratory study of meaning making from an illustrator's point of view. Using color, shapes, perspective, and other elements and principles of art, Bang tests the limits and efficacy of representation and narrativity by working through what the colors, shapes and perspectives *do* to the reader.

Sipe's *Storytime: Young Children's Literacy Understanding in the Classroom* (2008) presents a comprehensive, grounded theory for understanding how children read picturebooks. He argues that "no text, no matter how detailed, can describe every action, situation, or character in exhaustive detail. One of the reader's main jobs is to fill in these gaps by inference" (p. 56). He later adds that the role of a reader is an active one, and that the relationship between image-text<sup>4</sup> and reader can be compared to that of blueprints and a carpenter, and as such, image-text might be better thought of as an event and not object (p. 57). In other words, rather than think of children and/or adults as readers, or picturebooks as 'finished' books, Sipe invites us to consider the moment(s) of being with(in) the image-text as the (self)actualization of the picturebook. No picturebook is complete without its reader(s).

### **What is *not* a picturebook?**

To limit the scope of this study, I find it useful to also explicitly define the not-picturebook. In this study, I am intentionally excluding works that fall beyond the genealogical, technological, and phenomenological borders outlined above and exclude coloring books, illustrated novels, instructional materials/instruction guides, and comics/graphic novels.

Coloring books for example, are visual, printed media designed, mostly, for children to decorate with colors using crayons, markers or other implements. Although

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<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the definition of 'picturebook' as image and text composite, rather than refer to these works as a 'text,' I refer to them as an 'image-text' to reflect the synergy and indispensability of the two intra-actions.

some texts do contain linear or episodic narrative features, coloring books are designed to be discarded; they're a consumable commodity with a finite "shelf life." If used conventionally, every page will have been saturated with color, rendering it useless to its 'reader' who can no longer revisit its pages. Picturebooks on the other hand, can be used and reused, visited again and again almost indefinitely [when used conventionally]. This study will not include coloring books even if they depict queer children [i.e. *Sometimes The Spoon Runs Away With Another Spoon* (Bunnell & Kusnitz, 2010) and, *Girls Will Be Boys Will Be Girls Will Be...: A coloring book* (Bunnell & Reinheimer, 2004).]

Illustrated novels will also be excluded in this study given that they are, first and foremost, text-based literary objects; the provided illustrations only supplement what is already there. That is to say, reading these novels can be done without reading the images without losing meaning. Illustrated novels like *The Boy in the Dress* (Walliams & Blake, 2009) will not be included.

Instructional materials, educational guides, reference texts, what I call informational texts, will also be excluded. Although these materials, especially when designed for elementary classrooms, bear many resemblances to picturebooks (illustrated pages, pedagogically oriented, designed with young readers in mind, etc.), informational texts do not invite students to co-construct worlds. Picturebooks are heavily dependent on readers to imaginatively fill in the points of indeterminacy as their gaze shifts at every page turn or image transition (Sipe, 2001; Sipe, 2012), whereas informational texts attempt to avoid ambiguity and present only a series of facts. *The Gender Book* (Hill & Mays, 2013), *Homophobia: Deal with it and turn prejudice into pride* (Solomon &

Johnson, 2013), and both girl and boy versions of *What's Happening to Me?* (Meredith & Leschnikoff, 2006; Frith & Larkum, 2006) all discuss queerness in childhood, but will not be included in this study.

Comics and graphic novels are literary forms very closely related picturebooks. Both depend on the synergy of image and text, both employ similar visual narrative strategies, both capitalize on the drama of page turns and yet they *feel* very different: the audience is different. I am not implying that each literary form cannot be appreciated by people of all ages, but instead argue that the picturebook privileges the youngest readership. My interest is in literature for the youngest audiences and for this reason, I will exclude graphic novels like *Boy Princess* (Kim, 2006), the story of boy forced to clandestinely stand in for his sister, a soon-to-be-bride who runs away just days before getting to a prince.

### **The “Adult” World of Children’s Picturebooks.**

In addition to positioning adults as the mediating physical ‘voice’ between picturebooks and young [preliterate] children, adults play deceptively active authorial, curatorial and interpretative functions within the world of children’s picturebooks, which merits discussing. Preceding ‘picturebooks’ with the qualifier ‘children’s’ [as in “children’s picturebooks”] obscures the amount of adult work that goes into creating, selecting and decoding picturebooks. In the opening pages of Murray’s *American Children’s Literatures and the Construction of Childhood* (1998), the author suggests:

If we bear in mind that children's literature of any era is much more apt to reflect the ideals to which adults want children, families, and society to aspire than it is to reflect *actual* children, families, and societies, then children's literature can serve as a window into culture ... In Western culture, children's literature has been one of the chief sources through which adults could teach, persuade, and elevate particular values and social mores for the next generation (p. 2, emphasis in original)

This "adult" world is especially visible when one considers that although children read children's books,

Adults are usually the ones who write, edit, translate, publish, market, stock, sell, buy, teach, and give books to and for children. They are the ones who decide what is appropriate for young readers or not, and how to depict certain topics [or not] (Epstein, 2013, p.15).

I do not want to imply that children have no agency, no preferences, or desires for the picturebooks they experience, rather my intention is to establish that picturebooks, as cultural commodities, reflect a hierarchical model of legitimated [adult] knowledge production and dissemination. The adult use of picturebooks to fabricate an *idealized* notion of children's futures is of particular interest to me as I investigate [*idealized*] Queer Child possibility. Adults literally write the book.

## **QUEER PICTUREBOOKS**

*"Neither children nor literature for them can be extricated from politics. By*

*choice or by default, children often get drawn into the “adult” worlds of politics, violence, and power struggles” (Mickenberg & Nel, 2011, p. 445).*

In 2000, Day compiled a 268 page annotated bibliography cataloguing children’s and young adult literature with lesbian and gay themes, subjects and characters. The collection begins with picturebook literature and identifies 27 distinct picturebook titles; none of which depict a queer childhood (Day, 2000). Much has changed around the world since the publication of this compendium, both in terms of legal and cultural recognition of queer subjectivities. Nepal, New Zealand and Australian citizens can designate a third (non-binary) gender on their passports (Sharma 2015); legalized same-gender marriage has spread widely through South America, North America, Western Europe, and South Africa (Garcias, 2016; Waxman 2015). The United States, specifically, has witnessed the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) declared unconstitutional, queer characters now populate children’s television programming (Puglise, 2016; Mey, 2015) and overall, and non-heteronormative children are increasingly being made visible and recast as potential consumers (figure 1) reality television stars (figure 2), models (figure 3), musical theater characters (figure 4), and of course, as the subject of children’s picturebooks (figure 5).



*Figure 1.* Still from a Barbie Doll commercial depicting a boy for the first time ever for Moschino Barbie campaign ([Moschino Official], 2015).



*Figure 2.* Marketing materials for Jazz Jennings' reality TV show *I Am Jazz* (TLC, 2016).



*Figure 3.* Jaden Smith (far right) in Luis Vuitton Spring 2016 womenswear advertising campaign (Webber, 2016).



Figure 4. Theatrical poster for Tony Award winning musical *Fun Home* starring Sydney Lucas (far left) as Small Alison (Marcus, 2015).

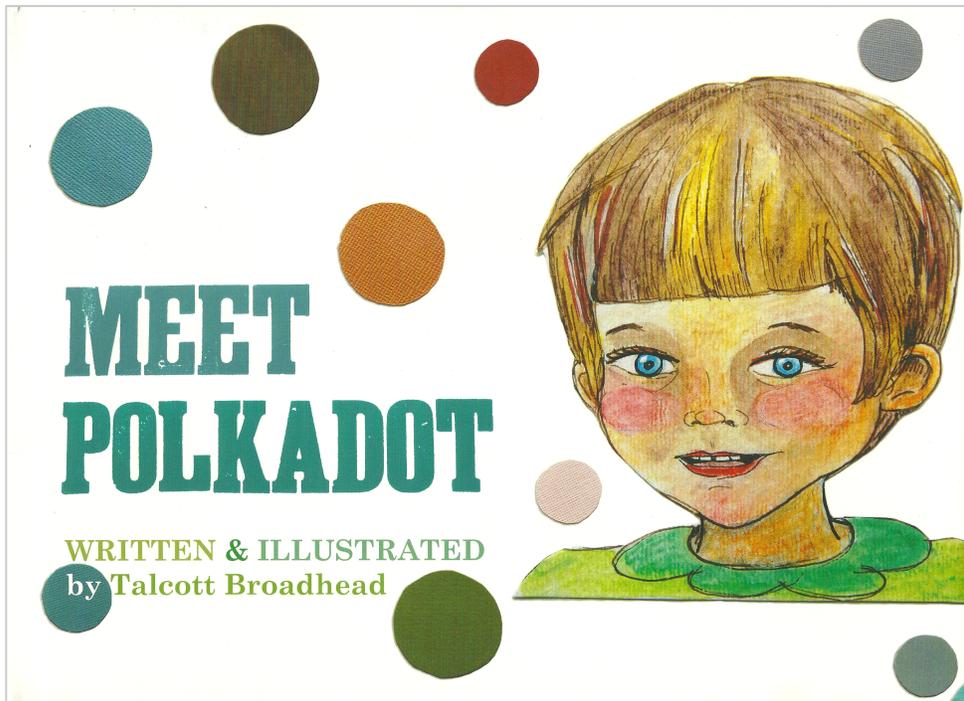


Figure 5. *Meet Polkadot* front cover, the story of a non-binary child (Broadhead, 2013).

Just as legal, economic, cultural, and social spheres have shifted how queer people, and queer discourses are (mis)understood, (mis)treated, (de)valued (to varying degrees) – the publishing world is no exception. More than 15 years have passed since the publication of the (in)famous “gay penguin book” [*And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005)]; it is now a canonized veteran of banned book lists. Queer picturebooks and queer children’s literatures broadly are experiencing a renaissance. To illustrate, consider the recently compiled a list of “40 LGBTQ-Friendly Picture Books for Ages 0-5” (Alkhatib, 2014) published on Autostraddle, an online queer-women’s magazine. When organized by publication date, the marked increase of queer publication activity between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21st is hard to overlook (see table 1). Between 2001 and 2010, the publication of queer picturebooks quadrupled and more than doubled the output of the three decades that preceded it; 2011 to 2020 appears to be on trend to exceed this creative productivity.

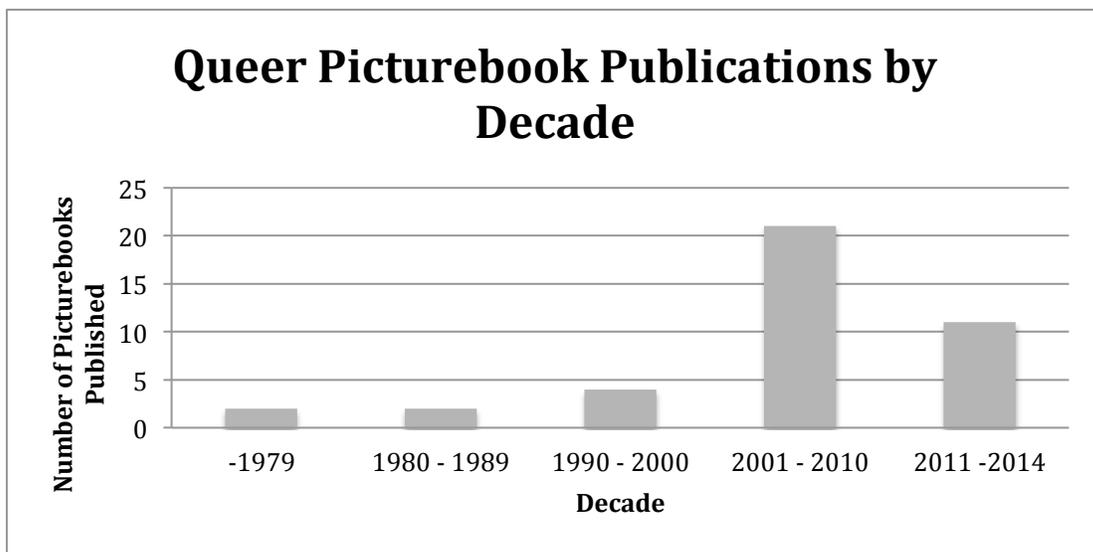


Table 1. Queer picturebook publications by decade. Data from Alkhatib’s *40 LGBTQ-Friendly Picture Books for Ages 0-5* (2014)

And yet, research on queerness in children's literature has largely focused on Young Adult (YA) texts and not picturebooks, positioning queer knowledges [and subjectivities] beyond the scope of early childhood. Placing 'young children' and 'queer' side by side threatens to interrupt the fictions of the innocent pre-sexual child, so most educators, parents, and other adults that come into contact with children collude in the omission of sex-gender education. This omission is neither neutral nor benign: it undoes the humanity of children by rejecting their capacity for reason and empathy.

Two books devoted solely to the subject of queerness and children's literature have been published in the last five years: Abate and Kidd's *Over The Rainbow: Queer children's and young adult literature* (2011), and Epstein's *Are The Kids All Right? The representation of LGBTQ characters in children's and young adult lit* (2013). Although both propose prominently in their titles an examination of queer subjects in children's literature, the picturebook format appears in only one of thirteen chapters in the former, and discussed peripherally in the latter. The Queer Child of picturebooks does not appear in *Over The Rainbow*, and of the twenty picturebooks listed in *Are The Kids All Right?* only two feature queer children.

Research that specifically addresses queerness in the picturebook format comprises only a small part of the queer literature scholarship corpus. Work in this area continues to be uncharted terrain with highly variable foci, methods, and picturebook selections. With few exceptions, research generally fall into one of five categories: (a) *compilations and lists of queer picturebooks* (Day, 2000; Epstein, 2013; Cedeira Serantes & Cencerrado Malmierca, 2006; Sapp 2010; Mickenberg & Nel, 2011; Naidoo, 2012,

2013), (b) *teacher and pre-service teacher reactions to queer picturebooks* (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010), (c) *critiques of the essentializing tropes found in queer picture books* (Esposito, 2009; Crisp, 2011; Lester, 2014; Shimanoff, Elia, & Yep, 2012), (d) *libraries and accessibility to queer media* (Day, 2013; Stewing, 1994; Williams & Deyoe, 2015), and (e) *reading 'straight'/heterostream<sup>5</sup> texts queerly* (Huskey, 2002; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013).

These studies largely ignore the material “thingness” of picturebooks: three of the five categories listed above don’t even require the researcher to open a queer picturebook, and only *compilations and lists of queer picturebooks* and *critiques of the essentializing tropes found in queer picture books* make use of the picturebook’s image-text content. Furthermore, the lists tend to be very superficial and quickly become obsolete given the publishing trends described in earlier, and critiques often hinge their analysis predominantly on text and altogether ignoring the text-image composite that defines the picturebook format. Returning to the earlier discussion about ‘queer-themed picturebooks’ and ‘queer picturebooks’, most of these studies are content with themes and few center the queer body as the salient subject. In the following section, I highlight a few studies that do address the queer body in picturebooks to further distil how academic writing has positioned the representation of the Queer Child [or not] in relation to other queer adult bodies.

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<sup>5</sup> Following Urrieta’s (2010) diffractive conceptualization of ‘mainstream’ as an entanglement of “whitestream” and “malestream” ways of knowing, I use the term “heterostream” to name the privileging of heterosexuality as the default sexuality in everyday spaces and environments like schools or literature subjects.

## **Representations of Queers in Picturebooks.**

New research at the intersection of queer picturebooks and cultural studies has been nonexistent until very recently. This research engages the picturebook beyond the literary, that is, as a cultural product, as a socio-historical document, and as a meaning-maker. Three broad subjects emerge within this literature: the meaning of coupled queers, children's readings, and queer picturebook norms.

### ***The meaning of coupled queers.***

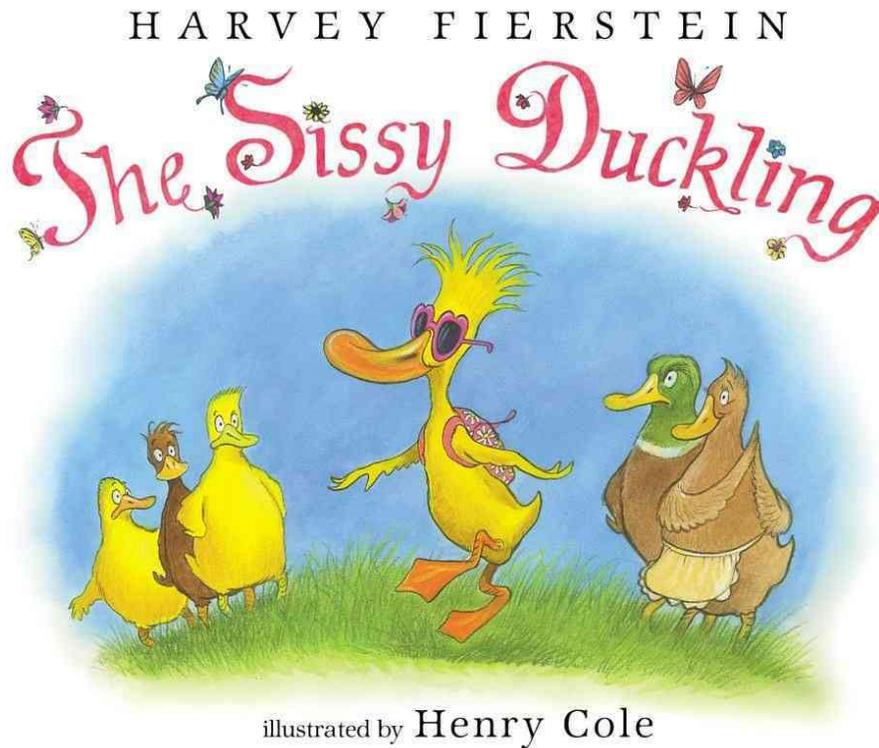
Esposito (2010) examines the assimilationist frameworks that privilege heterosexuality in lesbian-centric picturebooks. She finds that lesbian motherhood is framed as a series of problems (not having a daddy, not wanting to be outed, etc.) and rather than engage with the politics of human difference *with* lesbian ways of being and knowing, picturebooks de-queer, or depoliticize unequal power relations between queer and non-queer subjects by investing in [heterosexual] state apparatuses like marriage [previously unrecognized by many governments] to 'normalize'. Furthermore, subjecting lesbian-headed households to abuse is framed as a learning experience for hetero-headed families who must learn a lesson about the humanity of the 'other' – as such queer subjects are only rendered visible [and human] apropos the hetero gaze. Queer coupling and meaning-making is also a focus for Epstein (2012) as she deconstructs and historicizes the overrepresentation of same-gender weddings in picturebooks about LGBTQ persons through legal and cultural readings of marriage. Her study finds that picturebooks reflect the cultural and legal paradigms of queer coupling in the context of

their publishing country; Scandinavian picturebooks, for example, depicted same-gender marriage with greater frequency than British or American picturebooks. Similarly, Sunderland and Mcglashan (2013) interrogate the meaning of queer parenthood vis-à-vis picturebook covers by considering how the text, and visual signs clue the reader about what the book is about. Signs, symbols, and signifiers are mined as vehicles for queer intelligibility.

### ***Children's readings.***

Although queer picturebooks were not their primary focus, Cullen and Sandy's (2009) research documented a severely understudied phenomenon: queer picturebooks in children's hands. Their participatory action research project recorded the implementation of a critical sex-gender curriculum in a primary school classroom. The paper includes a salient interaction with a student and a university researcher interacting with the book *The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein & Cole, 2002) in which the student (mis)reads Sissy Duckling's flamboyant demeanor (figure 6) as a masculine [heterosexual] "pimp" performance, "you know, he gets all the girls" the student explains (p. 147). While the student's racial, ethnic or cultural background is not made clear, I do find this reading interesting in light of both the author's and illustrator's Whiteness and in the intersectional potentialities within the gender and sexuality curriculum being implemented. Specifically, how does Sissy Duckling's *doing* of queerness (by dressing his body in colorful accessories) ossify White pairings of flamboyance and femininity

and deny the masculine gestures of Black dandyism<sup>6</sup> (see Miller, 2010)? And related to this question, how do these White tropes that entangle fashion, femininity and frivolousness (re)produce misogyny?



*Figure 4. The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein & Cole, 2002) front cover. Sissy Duckling’s gender expression could be read differently as masculine or femme depending on the readership.

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<sup>6</sup>Miller’s (2010) monograph of the Black Dandy – that is, an entanglement between Black men’s bodies and a decadent sartorial styling – “exists in the space between masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual, seeming and being” (p. 5). She makes an important argument that dandy masculinities, despite their contradictory affect, “can, at once, subvert and fulfill normative categories of [masculine] identities” (p. 5).

### *Norms for representing queers.*

Joosen (2010) queries the ideology that informs how translators interpret Flemish queer picturebooks for English audiences strategically by either explicitly heterosexualizing queer content, or highlighting implicit queer subtext. She proposes the following hypothesis; “a taboo [in this case, queerness] seems to be more easily accepted in a book for young readers when it is the explicit focus of the story and can thus be used in classroom discussion and public debate” (p. 115). Huskey (2002) on the other hand, provides queer readings for two picturebooks but first defends her reading by prominently pointing out that a *desiring* queer child is inherently unillustratable, given that this depiction would flirt dangerously with the right-wing myth of queer recruitment.

Produced under financial constraints that favor undistinguished illustrations and unimpressive book design, gay-themed picture books embrace their limitations, allowing the book to support the ideological message, “Nothing overly appetizing or fun here.” Rigorously separating the pleasures of the eye from the gay-themed picture book keeps the text as free from seduction as possible, as if the book itself were the mythic pedophile who haunts any discursive connection of “gay” and “child.” (p. 68)

She proposes that this is perhaps why many a queer picturebook lacks authentic and captivating narrative tensions, and instead rely on safe [but boring] stories that serve as little more than pretext to an otherwise uneventful exposé of queer domesticity. Her work interrogates the meaning ‘queer’ and advocates for a more active [desiring] subjectivity over a passive [identity-based] one. Ford (2011) also grapples with the questions of

definitions, representations, and picturebook norms when she interrogates two picturebooks from the same author [though different illustrators] and their disparate representational strategies. She concludes that a more sanitized and de-queered picturebook is more likely to garner mainstream market success and critical acclaim than a picturebook that brazenly parades its own queerness.

***Comprehensive studies.***

Although all of these works highlight useful lines of inquiry in understanding the broader span of queer picturebooks, their scopes are much too limited to allow for theorizing about the genre as a whole. Some scholars have attempted to theorize about the body of work as a whole, for example Sapp (2010) proposes chronological and thematic categories but is limited by the number of books he examines (53 books) which include no books printed after 2007, and, more troubling, is the lack of justification for their ‘queered’ reading. This oversight fails to account for any picturebooks depicting trans characters, queer characters of color, and of course: queer children. Moreover the thematic categories only describe the books’ content and do not theorize the ideologies implicit in them, or unpack their cultural pedagogies. Epstein’s *Are the Kids All Right?* (2013), mentioned previously, has similar limitations: despite its book-length analysis, it does not theorize about the picturebook format specifically, rather, it interchangeably uses picturebooks, middle grade books, young adult novels, and short story anthologies to categorically think through large expansive themes stereotyped portrayals, issue-based books, and queer diversity.

Larralde (2014) does similar work, pulling from both English language and Spanish language texts worldwide. Here too, the work of compiling queer children's literatures (including picturebooks and novels) proves to be an invaluable resource for people interested in this literary area (particularly in regards to books in Spanish), but what stands out is how the researcher systematically analyses these literatures by genre (realism, fantasy, animal) rather than format (novel, picturebook). Her multimethodology research allows her to not only look at the queer children's literatures broadly but also intimately with in-depth case studies that intertextually speak to other texts to draw conclusions about representations of queerness, publication trends, and queer epistemic knowledge. Here too, however, the Queer Child was a minor subject, a spectral musing.

All of the studies that attempted to provide comprehensive lists for all queer picturebook publications vary greatly in the selected titles: no two lists look even remotely similar. This discrepancy is likely due to a variety of reasons including: the difficulty and cost associated with collecting international books, researcher fluency in other languages, the obstacles inherent to acquiring retired and collectable titles, and the relative invisibility – and often financial instability – of feminist and queer micro-presses that often produce these works in small runs, with little to no marketing, and often only available in limited geographical areas. While the internet has made unearthing these obscure and hard-to-find titles a bit easier, copyrights and supply/demand market forces continue to make getting ahold of specific vintage titles prohibitively costly.

## THE QUEER CHILD OF PICTUREBOOKS

In the introduction to her book on the subject of [fictional] queer children, Stockton (2009) writes:

Even if we meet them [queer children] in our lives and reading... they are not in history... they are not a matter of historians' writings or of the general public's belief. The silences surrounding the queerness of children happen to be broken – loquaciously broken and almost only – by fictional forms. (p. 2)

Lester echoes this profound absence of not only queer children, but specifically of queer children of color writing:

Of the 68 books examined, there are 102 queer, human, adult main characters; only 11 of them are discernibly of color; 10 can pass for White or for characters of color; and 81 are discernibly White. There are six queer, human, children characters; five are White and one is discernibly non-White (2014, p. 255)

What is it about their bodies or their matters that prevent the Queer Child from materializing before us? I want to underscore three studies that engage queer-child assemblages; interestingly enough, they do so by engaging material and discursive entanglements between queerness and children.

Ford (2011), mentioned previously, places two of Lesléa Newman's books side by side and questions the commercial, critical, and intellectual success. Ford focuses her attention on the protagonists' images in two picturebooks that portray lesbian and gay adults: in one picturebook, the child (Heather) is depicted as a queerly androgynous and *knowing* child; the other a normative, feminine, *unknowing* girl (Zoe). The book about

Heather and her two mommies received lackluster reviews and didn't sell well, it is, after all, a story about an un-feminine girl with lesbian mothers and a less than subtle title that highlights the girl's intimate proximity to queer worlds: *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Sauza, 1989). Ford argued that the more commercially successful picturebook, *Too Far Away To Touch* (Newman & Stock, 1981), manages to garner higher critical acclaim perhaps because it abides heavily to the restrictions of the gender binary (heavily gendered markers like skirts, headband, and long locks of blonde hair) and maintaining queerness as a 'thing-apart' from the girl protagonist. Zoe remains at a safe distance from queer bodies and queer discourses that threaten her innocent, unknowing embodiment; her uncle's gay body is on the brink of death from AIDS related complications and, as the title implies, queerness and children are unavoidably "too far away to touch." Implicitly, Ford argues that the queer-child book makes for an unsellable book. In her words: "consumers prefer products with recognizable logos. In children's literature the equivalent is ... the representation of the "perfectly" male or female child" (p. 210) An investment in innocent children requires that queer materials and discourses *remain* "too far away to touch." Although Ford does not engage with what queer-child assemblages do per se, her analysis instead steps back and looks at what queer-child-*picturebook* assemblages do, how queer-child matter[s] push and pull a consumer<sup>7</sup>.

Larralde (2014), also mentioned above, discusses the 'doing' of queerness by a queer child-body in *El vestido de mamá* [Momma's Dress] (Umpi & Moraes, 2013), a

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<sup>7</sup> Ford almost preemptively predicts a 2015 [de-queered] reprint of *Heather Has Two Mommies* (this time featuring new illustrations by Laura Cornell). The new illustrations depict a *new* Heather, who spends the majority of the picturebook sporting a tutu and a purple lily in her hair – her mommies too, undergo a feminizing makeover complete with longer hair, earrings and smaller body frames.

book included in my own study. Larralde engages with the question of whether this book belongs in the LGBT picturebook canon despite an absence of clearly defined LGBT identities. She concludes that in spite of an explicit LGBT naming, the boy protagonist questions socially acceptable masculine representations by donning his mother's green sequined dress – that it queers boy-masculinity, expanding the limits of possible social enactments and presentations sideways. The picturebook's author also responded similarly to the tensions of a boy-dress relationship to LGBT genres saying that “no creo que sea literatura LGBT porque no se centra en la identidad de género, pero si propone un acercamiento a cuestiones queer” [I don't think it [*El vestido de mamá*] is LGBT literature because it doesn't focus on gender identity, but it does suggest a coming together with queer matters] (Larralde, 2014). *El vestido de mamá* is the only queer-child picturebook included in Larralde's study on queer picturebooks, and notably is the only book whose queerness is questioned. Here again, the researcher takes a question of what queer assemblages *do*, not to the boy, but to the book. Researcher/reader and author discuss the book's queer matters but leaves queer matter (boys and/in dresses) out of the conversation.

Lastly, Flanagan (2008) brings together “children's cross-dressing literature” composed of novels and two picturebooks written in English and Swedish. In her analysis, Flanagan beautifully maps the tangled up bodies and discourses that trace a boy's becoming of a boy-dress [and thereby unbecoming a boy]. Although this research is not grounded in a new materialist framework, Flanagan notes the curious [queer?] affects the dresses produce, eliciting new ways of walking and moving, new desires and

pleasures, and new reflections in the mirror – that is, new subjectivities, new personhoods. Flanagan makes distinctions between books that use boy-dress becomings to belittle femininity, and those that do not; both picturebooks fall into the latter category and all but one of the novels are included in the former. I intend to expand on Flanagan’s findings by putting a total of 9 books, most of which have been published since 2008, into contact with each other.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I stitched together scholarship on picturebooks, adult queers in picturebooks, and queer-child picturebooks and exposed the entangled seams of the boy-dress and the Queer Child. Despite their relative obscurity in the expansive picturebook literature – and literature about this literature – the Queer Child *does* exist. If the growing publication trends detailed in chapter one are any indication, the hostile word of picturebooks is not enough to deter them from “a liveable [queer] life” (Butler, 1990/2008, p. xxviii).

In the next chapter I will develop a conceptual framework for reading queer matter[s] sideways, by bringing together queer theory’s child and new materialist perspectives. Doing so will provide the structure for how to discuss queerness and its relation to the world at large.

### **Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework [Or, What do Queers/Picturebooks Do?]**

In this chapter, I will grapple with theory – thinking with/through it to conceptualize a framework with which to read queerness in children in picturebooks. I focus on two questions that shape how I approach my research: *what do queers do?*, and *what picturebooks do?* As I engage these questions with/through a ‘growing sideways’ theory and a new materialist approach, I explain the rejection of heteronormative futures as the materialization of a queer project and develop an architecture for reading queer matter[s] sideways.

#### **WHAT DO QUEER DO?**

Meet the protagonists of two unruly – but very well known – picturebooks that teeter between the categories of queer and not: *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979) and *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980). The former is a story about a boy who “didn’t like to do things that boys are supposed to” (n.p.); he preferred to dance and was teased for it. The latter story is about of a princess who rescues a perfectly primed prince and refuses his snide marriage proposal. In the two texts, the protagonists – both children – are presented with the challenges of growing up [heteronormatively] and each responds differently.

But is this difference... queer?

We all know that Oliver Button is a sissy, the writing is literally on the wall (figure 7), but is identifying him as queer a “‘reading too much into things’ reading”

(Doty, 1993)? Even if I could enter the pages and meet him face to face, is it fair or reasonable to ask a young boy about his identity politics? As for Elizabeth, the paper bag princess, is her rejection of princesshood indefinite or impermanent? Is she or isn't she queer [now]? Even if I too was a picturebook character, I wouldn't be able to determine definitively what happens after her walk into the sunset – the story ends. I cannot ask them about growing up.

Perhaps growing *up* is the problem...

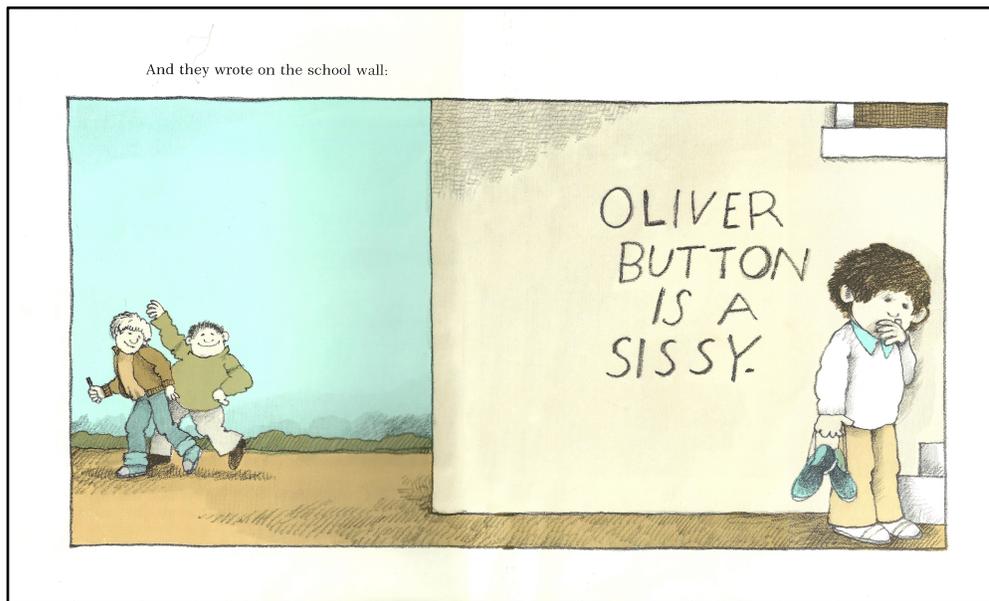


Figure 7. The writing on the wall: Oliver Button is a sissy (dePaola, 1979).

### **On growing sideways.**

Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) has been an invaluable resource for mapping the possibilities of reading queerly the subjectivity of the child of fiction. Although her book does not explicitly name the

picturebook as a generative source for developing her theories of fictional queer childhood, relying instead on film and non-children's literature genres, her conceptualization of growing sideways proves to be incredibly useful tool for understanding the queer child of picturebooks. In this book, she uses psychoanalytic, literary, and film theories to reclaim infantilizing discourses that frame queers as child-like, regressive, and deficient subjects. She posits that if queers are unable to "grow-up," perhaps then, they "grow sideways," and that in this (dis)rupture of maturation we might find a productive space for queer imagining – even if it isn't (re)productive:

“Growing up ” may be a short sighted, limited rendering of human growth one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved. By contrast, “growing sideways” suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives of their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing “adults” and “children” into lateral contact of surprising sorts. (p. 11)

In other words, “growing sideways” can occur at any time, at any age, for any reason whereas “growing up” can only be exercised in betwixt childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, the lateral [sideways] contact between adults and children, elevates child ways of knowing and ways of being by decentering adult ontologies and epistemologies rendering both as simultaneously valid.

In *The Queer Child*, Stockton proposes four distinct iterations of the queer child in fiction: the ghostly gay child (a specter of hindsight derived the syllogistic logic of “I'm a gay adult now, therefore I was a gay child then”); the grown homosexual (the adult with arrested development, refusing to grow up); the child queered by Freud

(otherwise known as a “not-yet-straight” child precociously aware of the boundaries between the world of children and the world of adults); and the child queered by innocence or color (an “othered” child with an otherwise normative development but made strange by their lack of [cultural] knowledge of the [White] adult majority). She adds that these versions seldom appear immaculately presented as neat examples of one or the other, and she instead advocates for a “braided” reading of the queer child, and thinking about how different versions might overlap, converge, and ebb in and out of a given narrative. Although this matrix does appear to have some immediate utility for reading the Queer Child of picturebooks, by providing categorical templates with which to sort the characters of this study, technically, only two of the four classifications are available: only two are discursively *and* materially “a child”. In Stockton’s words:

[Sideways] growth is made especially palpable by the fiction of the [ghostly] gay child – the publicly impossible child whose identity *is* deferral (sometimes powerfully and happily so) and an act of growing sideways, by virtue of its *future retroaction* as a child. (p. 11)

Just as the ‘grown homosexual’ can only be made possible by the embodiment of an adult, the ‘ghostly gay child’ too can only be brought to life through the retrospect of an adult person. Whose vantage point is privileged? Even so, Stockton’s theory of growing sideways can be reworked to specifically conceptualize the queer child in the picturebook. By further distilling her work, growing sideways can be understood as a move towards, or an investment in ways of being that resist a heteronormative future, what Edelman (2004) calls repronarrativity, or reproductive futurism. That is, if the

future of growing up is defined only as a desire for [heterosexual] marriage and [biological] reproduction (e.g. “when you grow up and have kids...”) then growing sideways rests on delaying, rejecting, circumventing, or reinventing those futures and forging ahead into queer world-making. Queerness is a temporality, a radical reimagining of pasts, presents, and futures (see Halberstam, 2005).

With a ‘growing sideways’ lens, one can look to Baldacchino and Malefant’s *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (2014) and observe the eponymous protagonist, a red-haired boy, as he goes about his school day. In the second opening, the red-haired Morris is depicted in various small intimate moments unassumingly engaging in painting, singing, eating and playing. At the page turn, something queer happens. A two page spread shows Morris in a fuzzy tangerine dress that makes a “swish, swish, swish” (n.p.) noise when he walks and twirls euphorically – his body literally and metaphorically growing sideways as he rejects normative boyhood (figure 8). In this moment of pleasure, Morris makes his experience *more* perfect by pairing a tangerine dress with shoes that go “click, click, click” (n.p.). Despite other girls and boys chiding him, constantly reminding him that boys do not wear dresses, Morris insists: “this boy does” (n.p.). By growing sideways, Morris Micklewhite is able to expand the narrow limitations of boyhood, and to unfurl new worlds of possibility: queer worlds.



Figure 8. Morris Micklewhite puts on a tangerine dress [and grows sideways] (Baldacchino & Malefant, 2014).

### What about ‘queer’?

Using a growing sideways framework, “queer” becomes a new site rife with possibilities beyond the limiting formula of Queer = LGBT. Shlasko skillfully undertakes the question of defining ‘queer’. Ze argued that to many of us, “queer is *not* simply shorthand for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, same-gender-loving, intersexed, and so on (although it is often used that way in casual parlance). Neither is it easy to define” (2005, p. 123, emphasis in original). ‘Queer,’ Shlasko finds, can be understood as both a subject position and a politic, which need not always correlate together. Specifically, as a subject position, ‘queer’ makes references to those individuals whose gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, sexual behaviors, and

biological sex lie outside of the borders of [hetero]normative practices. This widened umbrella-term makes space for those whose embodiment cannot be adequately summarized by the magic of four letters – LGBT<sup>8</sup>. But limiting queer as a noun – albeit an inclusive one – presents significant problems, namely that it doesn’t *do* anything. [How can we tell if Morris Micklewhite is queer?] Queer as a politic on the other hand “rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, 1991, p. 16). In other words, queer as a politic *does* something: in Warner’s words “it has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization ... as the site of violence” (1991, p.16). Hegemonic fictions (i.e. compulsory heterosexuality, the gender binary, innocence of childhood, boys don’t wear dresses, etc.) are precisely what a queer politic disrupts.

Growing sideways engages the latter definition – queer as a politic – by calling attention to interrupted heteronormative futures. In a treatise on emancipatory methods grounded in oppositional practices [like wearing tangerine dresses?], Sandoval (2002) argues that “simply being “homosexual” [LGBTQ] ... [is] not sufficient grounds on which to call up this new emancipatory mode of praxis” (p. 23). This thesis engages the ‘doings’ of queerness through/as the act of growing sideways.

Defining queer in this way, through/as the act of growing sideways, allows for a (re)politicizing of LGBTQ movements by shifting away from the rhetoric of “I was born

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<sup>8</sup> Queer as a subject position may include, for example, people who may (or may not) identify as asexual, intersex, polyamorous, androgynous, femme/feminine, or butch/masculine. None of these minoritized subjectivities can be represented in totality within an LGBT framework. This has led to the adoption and proliferation of the extended LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer] acronym or some variation of it.

this way” – a terrifyingly, biologically-deterministic rallying cry – and towards an active model of inventing, improvising, and innovating alternative political and personal possibilities [like becoming a boy-dress]. Famously, Sedgwick (2004) spoke to the dangers of this passive queer rhetoric that implicitly correlates queerness as pathology, or more perniciously, foreshadows the potential [future] of queer eradication. She writes:

What whets these fantasies more dangerously ... is the presentation, often in ostensibly or authentically gay-affirmative contexts, of biologically based “explanations” for deviant behavior that are absolutely invariably couched in terms of “excess”, “deficiency”, or “imbalance” ... If I had ever, in any medium, seen any researcher or popularizer refer even once to any supposed gay-producing circumstances as the *proper* hormone balance or the *conductive* endocrine environment for gay generation, I would be less chilled by the breezes of all this technological confidence. (Sedgwick, 2004, p. 147, emphasis in original)

Growing sideways answers the call for a truly affirmative framing of queer ontogenesis by mapping a queer *doing/being* as counterpublics (Muñoz, 1999), that is, subaltern movements that fall outside of majoritarian practices and become recognizable through their transgressive actions. It undoes the “straight until proven queer” assumption of childhood by explicitly positioning both queer and straight temporalities as processes rather than endpoints; that is to say, one is *always* becoming queer and/or straight. Straight pasts, queer futures, and all other iterations of queer/not-queer temporal positions are nonetheless made richer by sideways-growing actors through their working and reworking of bodies and discourses. This *doing* of queerness has the power to transform,

transcend and transgress existing figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998/2001).

Positioning queer at the nexus of counterpublics, politics and growing sideways speaks to the projects of solidarity, movement, and world-making as proposed by queer theorists of color. Cohen (1997), for example, suggested “that the process of movement-building be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (p. 458). Muñoz (1999) echoed this political posture in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* arguing that “disidentifications is not an apolitical middle ground between the positions of [assimilation] and [separatism] ... disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power” (pp. 18-19). Similarly, Kumashiro (2000), in a treatise on anti-oppressive pedagogy, proposes that rather than organize curriculum around a collection of known knowledges, an anti-oppressive [sideways-growing] classroom should “participate in the ongoing, never-completed construction of knowledge, students must always look beyond what is known; they must ask, “what is not said?” and then go to places that until now have been foreclosed” (pp. 43-44).

To summarize, queer is a politic; a deliberate reverie into the waters of unscripted sex-gender possibility without the safety of ontological cartographies. To queer is to unravel the threads of heteronormativity, dye the fibers if necessary, and reweave, knit and purl, and stitch together new vestments for moving through the world.

## WHAT DO PICTUREBOOKS DO?

What *do* picturebooks *do*? I have been toiling with this question incessantly since I first began to conceptualize this project. Picturebook research described in the previous chapter is largely concerned with anthropocentric questions: [broadly] How do *people* make picturebooks? How do *people* read/use picturebooks? Why do *people* make picturebooks this way? These lines of inquiry feel odd to me, and bizarrely one sided. Do picturebooks have a say? Or for that matter, do the boys that inhabit picturebook pages? What about their dresses?

My experiences as a person of color, an educator of young children, a researcher, a fashion enthusiast, and collector of picturebooks beckon me to look beyond the human. This cultural intuition (Sandoval, 2000) has profoundly shaped how I observe the world. In my own preprimary classroom I loved watching children-picturebook encounters and negotiations: how large hardcover picturebooks sink into a child's lap and rectangular covers pressed against their knees; how cheap and flimsy picturebooks would routinely become rolled cylinders for children's eyes to look through like a telescope, the soft cover never to regain their flatness; how students sift through classroom library collections, making a final selection by literally weighing a book with each arm. Picturebooks have a real, physical, material presence that children interact *with/into*. New materialist frames have proven to be indispensable in articulating these picturebook-child encounters and mapping their material-discursive entanglements.

## **New materialisms.**

Before expanding this section, I want to begin with a material-discursive musing, a mapping of entangled bodies and clothing [and lipstick] that may help illustrate three of new materialisms' themes: beyond the social, 'matter' that matters, and entanglements (Barad, 2007).

Alok Vaid-Menon is a transfeminine South Asian American poet, they are one half of the performance art/spoken word collaborative DarkMatter, based in New York City. In a short video for the online magazine Refinery29, close-ups of the poet's dark skin and the affects of clothing, jewelry, and makeup fill the screen (figure 9). Their lips are stained in soft but piercing lavender hue. A voiceover of Alok's own narration gives the following account:

When you are assigned male at birth you have to fight like fucking hell to be feminine. There is a material consequence to me presenting feminine... the minute I wear lipstick, or the minute I put on earrings, or the minute I'm wearing a skirt, like, my entire reality shifts; and that's just, like, what our world is. (Refinery29, 2015)

*[What is it about that lavender lipstick? What does it do? How does the lipstick reconfigure Alok's body? Are they still the same person?]*



Figure 9. Still from Refinery29's video featuring Alok Vaid-Menon (Refinery29, 2015).

***Beyond the social.***

Hultman & Lenz Taguchi (2010) provide a brief history of the emergence of new materialisms as a feminist critique of poststructuralism's "anthropocentric gaze" that privileges humans above all other matter. Its principal criticism is that language and discourse (both human-only activity) cannot, and must not be the only sites of inquiry [and theorization], doing so "reduces our world to a *social* world, consisting of only humans and neglecting all other *non*-human forces that are at play" (emphasis original, p. 526). New materialisms place human and non-human/more-than-human actors as equal and active participants in the process of world making – not *just* people. [*What about that lavender lipstick?*]

In Alok's description of the "world change" that comes about with the application

of lipstick points directly to symbiotic relationship between the animate and inanimate. Simultaneously it *is* and *isn't* the lipstick, it *is* and *isn't* the stubble... it's both. Pairing Alok's body with the affects of femininity queers their gender from an assigned male at birth, to a feminine of center. By that logic, picturebooks are more than pictures and words. A new materialist reading of reading the picturebooks encourages us to move beyond tracing the top-down transmission of ideas from author to reader, and instead emboldens us to contemplate the relationships between child-author-pages, to engage in a horizontal/sideways reading of bodies and books, placed side by side, each reading the other.

***Matter that matters.***

'Matter' matters. In new materialist research, there is no subject, no object; only what Barad (2007) calls "intra-actions."

The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual "interaction," which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular articulations of the world) become meaningful. (Barad, 2007, p. 139-140)

The 'doing' of phenomena is only made visible through/between matter-relationships (Barad, 2012; Barad 2007). In other words, "reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind phenomena but of things-in-phenomena" (Barad, 2007, p.

140), and as such, there are no causes or effects – only becomings [-with lipstick?, -with picturebooks?] Under a new materialist framework, matter [e.g. “things”] doesn’t exist as a peripheral prop in a social world, after all, matter is not a passive substance, nor does it cease to exist in the absence of language, culture, or signification (Barad, 2003). Instead, materiality can be understood as the phenomena of intra-active forces or a “congealing of agency” (Barad, 2007, p. 227).

In the example described earlier, the waxy wetness of the lavender lip color interacting with Alok’s body (their unmasked stubble, their tenor voice), other affects (earrings, creepers, embellished blouses), and the discourses embedded within them materialize a gender expression outside the binary of man or woman. This is gender mattering. Conflicting forces congeal and, quite literally, reconfigure the contours of Alok’s flesh. Alok becomes Alok (the transfeminine South Asian American poet) just as the lipstick does too; both are made of the same matter.

### ***Entanglements.***

New materialisms examine “how relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate affect and are affected” (Fox & Alldred, 2015, p. 399) and argue that “*phenomena are constitutive of reality*” (emphasis original, Barad, 2007, p. 206). This event-centric framework allows us to think about stubble and lipstick, and about children and picturebooks not as ‘things,’ but instead as mutually constitutive matter; they grow sideways! Furthermore, matter is inseparable from the discursive – they cannot be dissociated from one another given that both are intra-actively enmeshed, folded into the

other (Barad, 2003). Barad (2003) has this to say about material-discursive entanglements:

Material discursive practices are specific iterative enactments – agential intra-actions – through which matter is differentially engaged and articulated (in the emergence of boundaries and meanings), reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities in the iterative dynamics of intra-activity that is agency. (p. 822-823)

There is no “before” or “after” an intra-action between matter and discourse, only an incessant reconfiguration of material-discursive conditions. Agency is the materialization of those reconfigurations.

This matters because beyond thinking about the child-picturebook pairings, we can also think about other phenomena at play: child-picturebook-story intra-actions, child-picturebook-story-learning intra-actions, child-picturebook-story-learning-gender intra-actions, etc... [*But are these stories real? Do they matter?*]

Thinking back to Sipe’s (2008) invitation to conceptualize reading as moments, as being with[in] the image-text, new materialism lends the language of matter that matters to think about how children-picturebook encounters intra-act with image-text. According to Sullivan (2012), “‘Matter’ is inextricable from the I/eye that perceives it: perception makes ‘matter’ matter, it makes ‘some-thing’ (that is no-thing) (un)become *as such*, it makes ‘it’ intelligible” (p. 300, emphasis in original). In their entanglement, child-book-stories are made to matter. Picturebook stories are real. Picturebook stories [are] matter.

### *New materialisms and the picturebook.*

Although, new materialist inquiry can be found in a variety of education fields, I want to underscore the particularly curious corpus that relational frameworks (such as new materialisms) and early childhood studies have engendered. Scholars entangled in childhood and ‘things’-of-childhood have explored early childhood teacher education (Lenz Taguchi, 2010a), pedagogy (Pacini-Ketchabaw, di Tomasso & Nxumalo, 2014; Nxumalo, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2010a; Lenz Taguchi, 2010b), and school organizational practices (Nxumalo, Pacini-Ketchabaw & Rowan, 2011; Lenz Taguchi, 2011); and yet new materialist picturebook research with rare exceptions remains uncharted territory (see Murriss, 2016). Despite this absence, I see incredible potential for reading the queerness of children in picturebooks.

### **A PROPOSAL FOR READING QUEER MATTER[S] SIDEWAYS**

I propose a conceptual framework derived primarily from growing sideways and new materialisms in which physical queer matter (human and nonhuman) and intangible queer matters (discourses) come together in what I call “queer matter[s].” In this way queerness entails a becoming with/through/against the restrictions and constrictions of “growing up” – materially *and* discursively. We return to figure 8, or rather, figure 8 returns to us, it’s mattering prominently on display reminding us to observe various entangled queer matter[s] (boys, dresses, shoes, clicks, swishes, spins, boyhoods, femininities, rules, genders) visually, aurally, kinesthetically, tactilely and haptically.

Centering queer matter[s] in the reading of boy-in-a-dress picturebooks makes for a more productive research endeavor. In one of the final chapters of *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) argues for a more negative queer scholarship; that is, one that embraces contradiction and ugliness alongside resilience and affirmation. Halberstam writes:

it is conventional to describe early narrative of gay and lesbian life as “hidden from history”... you could [also] say that that gay and lesbian scholars have also hidden history, unsavory histories, and have a tendency to select from historical archives only narratives that please.” (2011, p. 148)

So, rather than catalogue ‘good’ and ‘bad’ representations, or historicize only “hidden from history” image-texts I will use a new materialist framework to map the material-discursive terrains of queer mattering. I will assemble and connect disparate, and at times contradictory, representations into a vibrant tableau of queer-child potentialities.

This framework makes it possible to comprehend the queerness of illustrated children without wielding the asymmetrical power of adults. It refutes the limiting iterations of an identity-based queer subject by “verb-ing” a queer politic. And lastly, it engages the question of how to read queerly. The next chapter will provide greater detail on the methods used in this study and illustrate the process of becoming a sideways researcher by relearning how to read... queerly.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **[Or, How to Encounter the Queer Child of Picturebooks]**

In this chapter I will describe the research methods that guided this study paying particular attention to the community-based practices of collecting materials and to the reading strategy used that outlines the intra-actional contract between reader and picturebook. Specifically, I borrow from Hogan's (2016) "feminist shelf" practices to give contour to Queer Child literature collections and explore Yusoff's (2013) musings on "insensible matter" to develop a procedural optic for reading queer matter[s] in boys-in-dresses picturebooks.

#### **BOOK COLLECTIONS**

Sourcing books for this study required an exhaustive transnational hunt for books using a wide variety of methods. As I noted earlier, I have been collecting queer picturebooks for some time, so in some ways, this research project began even before I had arrived at the research questions that guide this study. My decision to begin collecting these materials arose from the incredible difficulty of not just locating these picturebooks, but of even identifying them in the first place is an arduous process. A trip to a local library, for example, will reveal that

Users have two primary ways to search for books, other than asking a librarian. A patron can search in the catalog or browse the shelves... Libraries do a really good job of serving searchers. Readers who know exactly what they want can go to the catalog, look up a book, write down the call number, and locate the book on the shelves. However, libraries often don't do a very good job of serving browsers. (Kaplan, Giffard, Still-Schiff, & Dolloff, 2013, pp. 31-32)

Given the overinvestment in the fiction of child innocence, searching “queer children” in library catalogs (and variations on this theme) tend to yield little to nothing from picturebook collections. Browsing is an even more futile endeavor; picturebooks, like other works of fiction under the Dewey Decimal System, are organized alphabetically by author’s last name – not exactly useful for this kind of search. I would need to find titles differently. I took my search elsewhere.

### **The “queer picturebook shelf.”**

Hogan (2016) creates the term “feminist shelf” to refer to the recontextualization of feminist literatures “so that reading [becomes] relational, a call to accountability that [requires] action” (p. 109). Similarly, one can image a practice of the “queer picturebook shelf” in which communities of bibliophiles, educators, academics, parents, and guardians exchange conversations, collections, readings, and programing to grow sideways not just the bodies queer of knowledge but also access to them. I sourced picturebooks from four distinct archival networks to co-assemble the most complete queer children’s picturebook shelf: online, brick and mortar, academic, and individual archives.

#### ***Online archives.***

Online communities proved to be very fruitful in the hunt for queer picturebooks. In fact, most of the titles in my collection come from various lists and bibliographies compiled by individual, institutions, and various digital media outlets shaping the “queer picturebook shelf”. I conducted meticulous searches using combinations of keywords like “picturebook” [or “picture book”/“children’s literature”] alongside terms like “queer,” “LGBT,” “LGBTQ,” “gay,” “lesbian”, “transgender,” “gender,” “sexuality,” “gender-variant,” and/or “gender non-conforming” and more. This was done in both Spanish and

English. These searches returned an abundance of mainstream and LGBTQ-interest magazines articles (“21 LGBT Picture Books,” 2016; Alkhatib, 2014; Pizarro, 2014; Carter, 2014), librarian bibliographies (“Rainbow Book List,” n.d.; Silverrod, 2009; Joe Fortes Library, n.d.), user generated bibliographies (Listopia, 2011; Wobema, n.d.), advocacy groups recommendations (Jen, 2012; “Diverse Books For Your School,” n.d.) and entire websites dedicated to cataloguing queer children’s literature (Sarles, n.d.; Wind, n.d.).

### ***Brick and mortar archives.***

Brick and mortar bookstores have also been an invaluable resource. Visiting small, independently run bookstores, particularly those that align themselves with liberatory politics (feminist bookstores, gay and lesbian bookstores, bookstores serving communities of color, etc.) have been especially active institutions in practicing the “queer picturebook shelf.” In addition to perusing their curated selections in the Children’s Books section of each bookstore I visit, the conversations I have had with the staff have connected me with additional bookstores and resources, and in turn I exchanged recommended picturebooks to carry in stock. The archives are constantly growing sideways.

In addition to making personal visits to local bookstores in the Austin area and the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, I reached out to gay and lesbian booksellers in Buenos Aires and Barcelona – these were the only places where I was able to acquire Spanish-language queer picturebooks.

### ***Academic archives.***

Digging through the academic archives was a slow process that required a systematic review of scholarship of children’s literature and gender and sexuality. I

extracted individual examples and case studies, of queer picturebooks as cited in annotated bibliographies (Epstein, 2013; Naidoo, 2012; Day, 2000), articles (Lester, 2014; Esposito, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Allan et al., 2008; Cedeira Serantes & Cencerrado Malmierca, 2008; Day, 2013), and books (Lallarde, 2014; Naidoo, 2013; Ford, 2011; Flanagan, 2008, Abate and Kidd, 2011). Surprisingly, most of these works cited less than 5 picturebooks and those that cited picturebooks depicting queer human children were rare.

### ***Personal archives.***

In addition to sourcing titles from online communities, bookstore communities, and academic communities, I was also informed of additional titles via a personal network of educators, librarians, scholars, and parent/guardians. These contacts were especially productive at practicing the “queer picturebook shelf” by providing me unexpected queer(ed) readings of picturebooks past and present. [*“Hey, did you hear the one about the boy who decided he didn’t want to be a boy anymore?”*<sup>9</sup> *“Well... I read this one to my son last week, do you think these two are a couple?”*<sup>10</sup>] It’s important to validate these receptions as queer – independent of the authorial intent. According to Doty (1993), “queer reception doesn’t stand outside of personal and cultural histories; it is part of the articulations of these histories” (p. 15). Reading practices, theirs and mine, are part of the “queer picturebook shelf” practice.

### **Culling the list.**

Individual titles from each of the four archives were compiled in a spreadsheet until new entries were no longer found. From this list, I extracted only those picturebooks

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<sup>9</sup> *Robo-Sauce* (Rubin & Salmieri, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> *Barbar’s Little Girl* (de Brunhoff, 2001)

that (a) featured queer children in some capacity and (b) clearly fit the ‘picturebook’ definition described earlier. Book descriptions and reviews were not always entirely clear regarding whether they fit these two conditions so, whenever possible, I looked to annotations, audio/video excerpts, and firsthand descriptions of these materials before acquiring them. When in doubt, I acquired the book anyway and made the decision with picturebook in hand.

Most titles were not readily available from local libraries, so purchasing them was, in most cases, the only way to get ahold of them. Buying was in itself an incredibly complicated process of contacting booksellers, collectors, publishers, and author/illustrators in four continents given that some titles are out of print, and that politically motivated children’s picturebooks tend to be niche market [queer picturebooks are not exactly apolitical commodities].

All picturebooks were read and sorted into emerging categories and grouped by similarities or differences. The sheer abundance of boys-in-dresses stood out starkly as *very* specific queer narrative – echoed variously by many “real-life” news articles and blog posts (nerdyapple, 2010; Garcia, 2012; Rosenberg, 2013; Dicker, 2014). Also, as mentioned previously, the boys-in-dresses cluster coincidentally features mostly still-in-print picturebooks, which I believe makes for an especially relevant and productive inquiry.

### **READING INSENSIBLE MATTER**

Reading picturebooks as events, per Sipe’s (2008) suggestion, with the image-text laying the blueprints and the readers assembling its meaning, requires the bridging of the real and the virtual; readers’ feet never *really* step into these ‘architectural’ renderings. Reader constructions are assemblages built from the wealth of knowledge and

experiences but always remain in the space *between* their bodies and picturebooks. Palpable to the reader. Insensible to others.

In a recent article about ethics of biodiversity loss, Yusoff (2013) argued for the need to acknowledge the millions upon millions of species that have yet to be ‘discovered’ as a requisite for thinking about a response to the extinction of both known and anonymous species. More importantly, Yusoff questions how to map the environmental entanglements through a relational ontology (like new materialisms) when these biotic subjects are not known, not seen, and not sensible through human affects. She asks “how to relate, to write, to sense, and to make intelligible that which is beyond me[?]” (p. 209). While the image-text of the picturebook *is* perceivable (by looking and reading), a temporal and spatial dislocation of ‘real world’ embodiment and picturebook embodiment, threatens to foreclose possible [human] reader and [picturebook] character entanglements. [*Can I really see Morris Micklewhite and his tangerine dress?*] Yusoff’s novel proposition suggests “thinking along the edge of the insensible might offer a way into an expanded realm of relationality that queries the exclusions that govern the sphere of intelligibility” (p. 209). In the case of picturebooks, thinking along the edge of the pages of *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* might be a site for growing [sideways] our understanding of the heterosexist worlds of picturebooks and ‘child-development.’

Yusoff’s proposal hinges heavily on the thought experiment of ‘cohabitation’ (p. 214), which she describes as a sharing of place and/or circumstance between the insensible subject and us. But, there is a caveat: “the recognition of that which cannot,

and will not, be brought to the sense requires a response, then, that is not configured through a mode of auto-affection, but through a mode of relating that is indifferent to ‘us’ and holds fast to that indifference” (p. 209). In other words, in the process of reading picturebook matter[s], I must be insensible to the picturebook itself – I must recognize that stepping into the picturebook is a breach in consent; researcher-picturebook intra-actions can occur between our two matter[s] (Lenz Taguchi, 2011) but not inside one or the other.

### **OPTICS FOR CLOSE READINGS**

Guided by a new materialist focus on the intra-actions between things, all things animate and inanimate take on similarly active roles. Dresses, for example, will be inescapable matter[s] in this study. I will be attentive to the “active [forces], relational and dis-connective effects, as well as the gestural expressions of human and more-than-human bodies” (Nxumalo, 2016, p. 647) and map the networks of threads and discourses that suture the dresses together, as well as those intra-actions that bind boys to their dresses.

Using the optics of reading insensible matter, I read Morris and his tangerine dress (figure 8) through the aural pleasures of becoming a boy-dress [*swish, swish, swish*], through the tactile sensations of a fuzzy polyester fabric [*crinkle, crinkle, crinkle*], through the memories of my own mother discovering me with her sewing kit, through the knot-in-the-pit-of-your-stomach feeling when savoring forbidden fruit... and also through contradictions. [*Why wont Morris Micklewhite share the dress? Why does he*

*search for earthly creatures on a queer planet? Whose dress is it anyway?]* To do so, I calibrate my readings to focus on three things: (a) boy-dress matters, (b) queer matter[s], and (c) contested matter[s]. Boy-dress matter[s] will trace the threads that bring boys and dresses into contact with each other and explore the productive nature of their boy-dress becomings. Queer matter[s] will widen the focal lens to account for queer material-discursive entanglements that fold into the boy dress. Lastly, contested matter[s] will highlight contradictory doings (and undoings) of queer-child becomings. In these readings, my queer matter[s] become entangled with theirs, materializing before me, and mattering in the spaces between the boy in the pages and the boy who needed him growing up.

This chapter I laid out the proposed reading strategies and foci for reading queer matter[s] in boy-dress children's picturebooks. This includes an attention to vibrant materiality of image-text matter undergirded by the logical and ethical limits to reading just outside the picturebook; my observations limited to the imagined cohabitations with said matter.

## **Chapter 5: Reading the Picturebook [Or, Mapping Boy-Dress Becomings]**

In this chapter I will map boy-dress entanglements in boys-in-dresses picturebooks. I explore three picturebooks in depth by opening with a short summary of the picturebook's plot, describing the story's narration superficially and at a distance, before cohabitating with its insensible matter through a closer reading of the image-text's queer matter[s] as outlined in previous chapters. As I move closer and closer along the edges of the picturebook pages, I will piece together portraits of the boy-dress and attend to entangled queer matter[s]. I highlight three of the ten picturebooks, reading one by one, slowly moving them closer together on the "queer picturebook shelf" to provide exemplars of what it might mean to engage in a sideways reading of queer matter[s]. These examples were selected to illustrate a wide range of boy-dress potentialities, their boy-dress matter[s], queer matter[s], and contested matter[s]. Together they weave a complex cartography of material-discursive entanglements but are by no means exhaustive, complete, or definitive. Following the in-depth readings, I will place all the books selected for this study side by side on the same "queer picturebook shelf" and observe their book-to-book intra-actions. As the stories and pages of the multiple books rub together I'll engage with contested queer-child renderings of boy-dress figurings.

### **THE BOOKS**

The ten books that make up the boys-in-dresses microgenre of the Spanish- and English-speaking world, in no particular order, are:

- *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman, Hoffman & Case, 2014)
- *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (DePaola, 1979)
- *El vestido de mamá* (Umpi & Moraes, 2013)

- *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, & Malenfant, 2014)
- *El niño perfecto* (González & Cormand Rifa, 2012)
- *Roland Humphrey is Wearing a What?* (Kiernan-Johnson & Revenaugh, 2012)
- *My Princess Boy: A mom's story about a young boy who loves to dress up* (Kilodavis & DeSimone, 2011)
- *I Am a Boy* (Stachowicz & Stachowicz, 2015)
- *Princess Max* (Stiller & Rogers; 2001)
- *Jesse's Dream Skirt* (Mack & Buchanan, 1979)

**JACOB'S NEW DRESS (HOFFMAN, HOFFMAN & CASE, 2014)**



*Figure 10.* Boy-dress encounter (Jacob and a scalloped purple dress).

**A summary.**

Jacob, the titular character, loves playing in his classroom's dress-up center. Here, he finds his classmates are not too keen on his decision to put on a shiny pink dress and pretend to be a princess; a disagreement gets louder and his teacher intervenes to placate the disagreement between Jacob and his classmate. After school, Jacob follows up with his mother, asking her if boys can wear dresses. She responds in the affirmative. Her

response, however, is quickly tested when Jacob asks for permission to wear a dress to school – mom hesitates. The following morning, Jacob fashions a “dress-thing” (n.p.) from a bath towel; dad frowns (disapprovingly) and mom isn’t too happy about the matter either but makes a concession: if he is going to wear the “dress-thing” to school, he must wear shorts and shirt under it. Later that day at school, his classmate Christopher tears the “dress-thing” from Jacob’s body and exposes its improvised construction as nothing more than a towel. Later that day, Jacob begs his mother for a dress to call his own until she folds. She takes out a sewing machine and assists her son in making a purple frock. At school, Jacob’s new dress gets mixed reviews but Jacob remains unfazed. He loves his new dress.

### **Boy-dress matter[s].**

Jacob is a White, blond-haired boy early in his elementary school career. He is communicative with his peers, his parents and his teachers and seldom struggles in making his emotions heard and his desires met. On various occasions, his body is overcome with “that can’t-breathe feeling” (n.p.) produced by the intra-actions of his desire to wear dresses and his parent’s affective attunement to his desires (their silences, sideway glances, etc.). Even without the dress on his body – or perhaps because of it – his body proactively *feels* the condemnation his becoming boy-dress desires produce. The dresses in his life (four of them in this book) are highly contextual and meaning-laden objects that are indispensable teachers of doing gender.

### ***Costume-dress encounters.***

Jacob’s first two dresses, the princess dress and the witch dress, teach Jacob that dresses can be restrictive garments that limit his spatial and temporal movements. The first is an ankle-length shift dress with three-quarter length sleeves in a shiny pink fabric;

a decorative star sits just below the wide neckline (likely stretched out from repeated wear) that reveals the wearer's clothes worn underneath it. The witch dress, fits slightly above the ankle (perhaps due to Jacob's growing body) and is covered in a dark black lace and edged with a decorative trim. The skirt is wide and responsive to Jacob's dance-like movements echoing the boy's swaying hips. Importantly, these two dresses are constitutive of specific time-spaces (e.g. during playtime *and* at the dress-up corner; at neighborhood doorsteps *and* on Halloween night); they are comprised not just of matter (i.e. fibers) but also of time *and* space, what Barad (2007) calls *spacetime mattering*. This constitutive formation of evanescent temporality, fixed space, and fantasy-play produce and materialize the 'costume-dress,' that when worn correctly, proclaim loudly "this is not really me"/"I don't always dress like this." Because of this, the costume-dress comes with another [unsaid] caveat: only for girls. While Jacob transgresses these unstated expectations to different extents, his classroom peers and surrounding adults invest their energies in upholding these boy-girl binaries. His mom, for example, reminds him that a witch dress is "for dress up at home" (n.p.), and recognizes that Jacob, in a witch dress outside of Halloween is, in actuality, less a boy and more a new boy-dress construction. Wearing the witch dress in public, outside of this temporal restriction, undoes its 'Halloween-ness' and by extension, may lose its inherent witchyness. It is no surprise then, that a follow up question about purchasing a not-witch dress (e.g. a dress for school) is met with silence – a loudly implied "no." Jacob's mother hesitantly decides to not allow her son to wear the [not-]witch dress to school. She gives him a dishonest explanation about how "it would get dirty at school" (n.p.). [Is a boy-in-a-dress also a less-than-a-boy? If so, what sexist hierarchies are being deployed, and what is Jacob learning about femininity?]

Wearing the princess dress, another dress-costume, requires the activated use of a child's imagination and an unbecoming of a heteronormative-boy-child. Just as much as wearing the dinosaur costume necessitates a dinosaur-child becoming, wearing a princess dress entails a becoming of a princess-child. This transformation is a complex gender project. Like other gender performativities (Butler 1990/2008), child-princess becomings are highly contextual readymade identities that facilitate the doings of 'emphasized femininity' (Wohlwend, 2011; Wohlwend 2009). So when his teacher reminds him that "the dress-up corner is where we come to use our imaginations" (n.p) the teacher prompts the princess-dress-boy to remember that this is not a permanent becoming – that sooner or later, Jacob should cede his queer-child being, and surrender the princess dress, its feminine presentation, and its transformative powers.

In both instances, adults transform the dresses into costumes to (re)orient Jacob's sideways growth into a more supposedly developmentally appropriate heterosexual narrative of growing up. By invoking the materially-discursive language of dresses ("real" clothes) and costumes (clothes for pretending), Jacob's teacher and mother reframe boy-dress entanglements as a developmentally appropriate boy-costume assemblages devoid of gender politics [because boys can momentarily *pretend* to be princesses and witches].

### ***Handmade dress encounters.***

Encounters with the two other dresses, the "dress-thing" and the new dress, make for different becomings. The "dress-thing" comes to be when Jacob fashions a makeshift dress from a large blue-and-white bath towel. His mother, perhaps unsure about the categorical limits of "dress," sees the covering, and calls it a "dress-thing," a term Jacob happily adopts and shares at school. The "dress-thing" is an asymmetrical dress draped

over a single shoulder and wraps around the body much like a wrap-dress envelops the body from both sides (figure 11). A wide ribbon holds the terrycloth garment together at the waist, and comes together as a large floppy bow that sits on the waist, giving balance to the asymmetry of the single shoulder. More ribbon wraps the wearer’s arm and, again, is secured with another bow. The thick fabric, designed to wick moisture away from the body, keeps the body snug and warm. The pleasurable and comforting affect of the textile is what motivates Jacob to transform the towel in the first place; as he lays on the floor, swaddled in a nest of towels, Jacob feels the towel’s warmth and it *gives* him the idea – to become *with* it.



Figure 11. Jacob and the “dress-thing” before and after mom tells him to wear shorts and a shirt underneath (n.p.)

The new dress is *the* dress, the one featured prominently nine times on the book cover – the one alluded to in the title. The dress itself is a knee-length, scalloped dress in a deep violet hue likely cut from a knit fabric (figure 10). There are no visible fasteners

like buttons or zippers which means the dress is necessarily stretchy (much like a t-shirt) to account for the stretching involved in slipping over his head – it moves comfortably with every twist of his body. Two white ruffled layers hug the torso and compliment a pair of short sleeves also scalloped and cut from the same white fabric. Importantly, the dress is not a commercially available product manufactured abroad and purchased in a big box store, rather, it was stitched together by hand (and a personal sewing machine), borne from the affective and productive labors of mother and child, in the relative safety, comfort, and privilege of their formal dining room.

These two dresses produce different affective entanglements; both dresses become dresses through physical and affective labors of *making*. Furthermore, both boy-dress entanglements are held together by the pleasures of the intra-acting matters of boy-skin and woven/knit-fibers that produce not only physiological (e.g. warming of the boy's body) but also metaphysical affects (e.g. remembering his mother). Jacob's new dress in particular is different from the others because it engenders from the efforts of mother and child – their affective and productive labor is stitched into the garment as a materialization of their bonds. When the new dress hangs over Jacob's body, they become invincible; they deflect the taunting of the gender police. The boy and the new dress are in actuality more than a boy-dress assemblage: they produce a boy-mother-dress entanglement. The dress's fibers are embedded with a mother's love, support, and protection, so the dress envelops the boy in a "soft, cottony, *magic* armor" (emphasis in original, n.p.). As Jacob "rub[s] the hem of his dress, looking at the little stiches he'd sewn together. He could hear Ms. Wilson and the other kids talking, but their words sounded far way" (n.p.). This entanglement has the power to subdue his classmate's taunting, taunting that would otherwise make a dress-less Jacob cry.

### **Queer matter[s].**

The various boy-dress encounters in *Jacob's New Dress* involve more than just a boy and a dress. In addition to boy matter and dress matter, Jacob's various dresses reveal other entangled assemblages that facilitate the boy-dress' movement in and out of queer discourses including the production of patriarchy the affect of labor.

### ***(Re)producing patriarchy.***

As mentioned above, Jacob, his mother, and his teacher are active participants in Jacob's entanglement with masculinity, but so are the boys and men in his life. Jacob's father, for example, maintains a distance not only to his boy-dress child but also to the labors of homemaking and child rearing. Whereas Jacob's mother can be seen milling about in various parts of the home (the kitchen, the dining room, Jacob's bedroom) and at Jacob's school, tending to his emotional needs and insecurities, his father can only be found in one part of the home: alone in the family living room where he interacts with his family at a distance. The most intimate moment shared between the father-son duo is when Jacob shows his father the finished new dress modeled on his small frame. Dad examines the dress, touches *only* the dress, and responds to the dress with a backhanded compliment "well, its not what I would wear, but you look great" (n.p.). Dad asserts his masculine-man-body as a not-dress-body and retreats to his chair. The diverging embodied desires of father and son push their bodies further apart.

Christopher, a classmate, is another masculine actor who's doing of gender intra-acts with Jacob's own doings of gender. Just as Jacob's father attempts to keep his distance from the boy-dress, Christopher refuses to entertain boy-dress entanglements and makes gestures to dissuade and untangle boy-dress relations with demands and physical force. The story opens, for example, with Christopher insisting: "Jacob, put on the knight armor. That's what a boy wears!" (n.p). Christopher also shares a rather

violent episode with Jacob in which the “dress-thing” is ripped off of Jacob’s body which I will discuss in greater detail below. I highlight Christopher-Jacob intra-actions to highlight their relational networks, of embodied masculine/boy flows. Christopher appears to constantly harass Jacob in an effort to fix or restore a masculine deficit brought about by boy-dress entanglements. The two boys are bound by the material-discursive notion of “boy” – a shared gender identity with contradictory embodiments and conflicting views on the future of growing up, or growing sideways.

***Labors of dress-making.***

The dress-making labors of making the “dress-thing” and the new dress are implicated in multiple sexist projects, among them: (a) upholding gender binary logics of ‘boy stuff for boys,’ and (b) obscuring the reality of child-labor and feminized labor in the garment industry.

The new dress, much like the “dress-thing,” is a garment that was made by and for a boy (with the help of a mother) – effectively rendering the “that’s a girl’s dress” argument ineffective. Here, queer matter[s] simultaneously expand boy potentialities and reinforce sexist hierarchies by unnecessarily (re)inventing the boy-dress, not to be confused with the girl-dress or the child-dress. The boy dress interrupts normative clothing practices by moving “dress” squarely under the category “boy” making possible other gender crossings [*skirts? lavender lipstick?*]. This (re)invention also opens the door to make recognizable other ambivalent assemblages where assigned gender and embodied gender are discordant. Conversely, relying so heavily on the modifier “boy” in boy-dress makes the assumption that there are underlying material differences between it and its girl-dress counterpart; but the difference is discursive, not material. Much like “chick flick”/ “girly movie” is the [feminized] diminutive of a “film,” marking a

distinction between girl-dress and boy-dress materializes the same value-based distinction.

Jacob's retracing of the small hand-stitched hemline reminds him that unlike other dresses, this is a *boy's* dress. Jacob is now able to affirm his own masculine boyness that has been an enduring question for the young boy [e.g. "Christopher says boys can't wear dresses ... can they?" (n.p.); "there are all sorts of ways to be a boy... right?" (n.p.)] Jacob might now experience his new dress on his body as a *masculine*-boy-dress becoming. This in turn overrides his embodied desire to play dress-up where the costume-dress' spacetime-mattering limits the boy's movement (to the confines of the dress-up corner) and the boy's gender performativity (to feminine characters). Jacob can now rest assured that he is in fact a masculine boy ... in a dress; the labored meanings of the new dress allow Jacob the gendered safety of becoming a masculine-boy-dress. [An ironic twist!] The boy, wearing a boy's dress, grows sideways not by doing away with the gender binary, but somewhat paradoxically, by upholding it.

The products of children's labor are also obliquely pointed to and made invisible by Jacob's White body, and by dressing the dress-making motivations as gender-based and not labor-based. Jacob labored physically in the making of his dress by applying a hem to the scalloped edging, and labored emotionally by convincing his mother to allow him the safe space requisite of a boy-dress becoming. While his efforts do not go unnoticed, I'm struck by the pedagogical potential of allowing Jacob to think about the market forces that shape his next garment purchase or with encounters with other clothing. One such moment occurs on the first day Jacob wears his new dress to school as he encounters his best friend, a Black girl named Emily, wearing a similar dress. "He found Emily inside and showed her his new dress. They found matching colors in their clothes and laughed: purple and white!" (n.p.). The dresses found each other, mirroring

an uncanny resemblance that reflected only material similitudes but not the discourses of labor, race of the wearer, or the gender of the child inside. A commercially available dress – like Emily’s – invokes different networks of clothing materialities. The garment industry continues to deploy colonial frameworks for producing textiles, manufacturing commodities, and distributing goods and images, forming subjects, and regulating the body (see Kaiser, 2012) that are evident on Emily’s girl-dress body. The vestiges of a masculine/feminine dichotomy stress Jacob’s and Emily’s difference: masculine, original, hand-made, and motherly on one side - feminine, duplicate, mass-produced, and anonymous on the other.

### **Contested matter[s].**

Contested queer matter[s] are also active sites for Jacob’s queer mattering. I will explore two such matters that make visible both the safety and the dangers in boy-dress becomings: walls that protect/contain Jacob, and attire that prevents/muffles violence.

#### ***Walls that protect/contain.***

First, Jacob’s family’s material privilege erects walls that shield Jacob from external violence, but in doing so, limit the boy-dress’ public visibility and mobility. Jacob’s mother, for example, condones the dress-becoming but only within the walls of the family’s two-story home (such as with the witch dress). In his own room, Jacob, the boy-dress, moves about, dancing and twirling freely – free from other’s gaze (including his father’s) but at the same time, the walls imprison the boy-dress who is not allowed a spacetime mattering outside in open air. With very few exceptions, public becomings of a boy-dress are heavily regulated temporal events – one can imagine the witch dress as an artifact of a past Halloween, worn only once, likely used to trick-or-treat around Jacob’s middle class neighborhood and under the watchful eye of a parent standing by.

The walls of Jacob's school, another affluent space given the 11:1 student-teacher ratio, also prevents violence (though not microaggressions) from ensuing; his teacher is present and attuned to interrupting student "hubbub" (n.p.). Here again, the dress must remain indoors, in the designated corner not to be enjoyed in the publics of a sunlit schoolyard. Things from the dress-up corner must stay in the dress-up corner.

***Attire that prevents/muffles violence.***

I also want to draw attention to the fabrication of 'real clothes' that foreshadow a materialization of misogynist violence against boy-dresses. While the "dress-thing" wrapped around Jacob's body produces a sense of confidence and self-worth embodied by the boy-dress assemblage, to his parents, the dress-thing is unrecognizable as a dress, or even 'real clothes'; this has material consequences that literally lead to the "dress-thing's" undoing/disentanglement. The boy-towel-dress incites a father's frown and disapproving "you can't go to school like that" (n.p.). The boy-towel-dress' mother echoes this dismissal and illegibility of the boy-towel-dress, she sees the towel-dress as a 'less-than-a-dress' (calling it a "dress-thing") and her insistence that Jacob wear shorts and shirt ('real clothes') under his invented outfit ('not-real clothes'), make the boy-towel-dress entanglement more unstable and more unrecognizable to others around him (figure 11). Much like costume-dresses are also not-dresses and require 'real clothes' be worn underneath; the "dress-thing" is then rendered as another not-dress. This reorders the violence of ripping of a young boy's clothes (the "dress-thing") as a non-violent, inconsequential offense. "Christopher ... yanked off Jacob's *towel* ... [and] Jacob watched Christopher wave the *towel* like a capture flag" (emphasis added, n.p.). The boy-dress's body is refigured and read instead as an untangled boy-*with*-towel. As such, the towel's semiotic meaning is reworked through violence inflicted on the boy-dress in

much the same way the revealing clothing is used to justify rape (Sterling, 1995) or hoodies to justify murder (Wemple, 2013). Had Jacob’s “dress-thing” been worn as ‘*real* clothes,’ that is without shorts and shirt underneath, Christopher’s undoing of the “dress-thing” might have been made more difficult by the material-discursive function of ‘*real* clothes.’ Ripping a classmate’s ‘*real* clothes’ off would likely result in a severe entanglement of parents-administrators-[sexual]harassment-litigation.

**OLIVER BUTTON IS A SISSY (DEPAOLA, 1979)**



*Figure 12.* Boy-dress encounter (Oliver Button and a teal pashmina).

**A summary.**

Oliver Button is different – he doesn’t like to do the things that boys do... people call him a sissy. Much to his father’s chagrin, Oliver prefers playing with paper dolls and costumes over playing baseball or football. Both his mother and father insist Oliver do something active, like play ball, to get adequate exercise to which he gleefully responds

with a proposal: dancing. The boy's parents enroll him in a dance school, which only worsens the taunting and teasing he endures at school. Oliver's queer desires are made more visible, and his sissiness confirmed with a scrawled message on the school's façade: "OLIVER BUTTON IS A SISSY." Despite this abuse, Oliver Button enters a community talent show and prepares over the course of a month. The day of the show, his choreography wins over the audience and while he does not walk away with the first prize, the next day at school proves to be a more welcoming experience – the graffiti that once taunted him now reads "OLIVER BUTTON IS A ~~SISSY~~ STAR!"

### **Boy-dress matter[s].**

Oliver Button is a young White boy, shorter than many of his schoolmates. He has auburn hair and spends a lot of time on his own making drawings, taking strolls in the woods, and reading books. Although Oliver himself does not explicitly identify himself as a sissy, he does understand his difference through related gender-discursive language (i.e. not liking "boy things"). Early in the story, Oliver climbs into the attic and opens a chest full of what can only be assumed to be vintage clothing stored and long forgotten. The large trunk beckons him to explore its contents: gloves, hats, and other apparel spill out and onto the floor, near Oliver's bare feet. As the young Oliver runs his fingers over the aged fabrics, he picks up a long stretch of teal fabric, feels the gravitational pull, and brings the cloth closer to his torso as a great smile fills his face. The intra-active forces between the boy and the teal fabric produce a flurry of pleasures and embodied desires to become a more-than-boy.

Oliver Button's shawl is – from a design perspective – plain, but not necessarily bland. The piercing teal hue radiates from the unembellished fabric, likely made from luxury materials like cashmere or silk charmeuse that pairs perfectly with a matching

millinery creation. And although his “movie star” get-up consists of little more than the draped, teal pashmina and a feathered cloche hat, I argue that this ensemble is a ‘dress.’ Oliver’s dance teacher, Ms. Leah, wears a remarkably similar shawl, in the same color, wrapped around herself in much the same way Oliver does when he plays make-believe as a movie star. The pashmina is a dress.

Here, in the relative safety and privacy of an attic, Oliver and the teal pashmina become a boy-dress and allow him to escape the incessant reminder/burden of being a sissy. Although the shawl-hat assemblage (henceforth interchangeably referred to as a ‘dress’) is comprised of woman-matter, to Oliver, the dress is a “costume,” an instrument of play and make-believe that allows him to momentarily escape the prescribed sissy-boy entanglement he is forced to inhabit; placing a costume-shawl on his body transforms Oliver into an [ungendered] movie star, a more-than-child entanglement! In this way, becoming a boy-dress is a vehicle for undoing the abject sissy position his body is shoehorned into. The boy-dress assemblage, through this child’s discursive play, is a place of immense pleasure where dancing and singing is not only acceptable, it is encouraged and celebrated. However, the combined pashmina-hat-boy matter is only a momentary becoming quickly undone by his father’s [heterosexual] gaze that disapproves of the queering of the boy’s body apropos the pashmina-hat-boy entanglement. This ensemble produces a scorned affect in Oliver’s father, as he bemoans with a sour face “Oliver, don’t be such a sissy! Go out and play baseball or football or basketball. Any kind of ball!” (n.p.). His father recognizes the draped shawl as a gender transgression – a product of growing sideways – and intends to end it immediately. Oliver Button never returns to the attic trunk nor to its luxe contents.

### **Queer matter[s].**

Power is always at play with bodies, histories, and other matter[s], their forces constantly acting and intra-acting. In addition to the specter of sissiness pulling and pushing on Oliver's body, Whiteness and child-development are also active participants in shaping his queer (un)becomings.

### ***White matter[s].***

Oliver Button lives in a largely White world. The few Brown and Black folks in Oliver's world remain just outside his line of sight (e.g. apart from him in class, out of reach at the school yard, behind him at the talent show). They share space with him but he cannot *see* them and the more he entangles his body in the matters of dance, the more Whiteness becomes a salient part of his body's figuration. These racial striations in turn widen the distance between White matter and Color matter. Following the big community talent show, people of color are no longer visible.

His move away from sissiness and into stardom is implicated in a racialized becoming: Oliver becomes entangled with a very particular White history-image. At the big community talent show, Oliver enters the stage from the right decked in a white tuxedo and straw boater hat popular in the United States during the 1920's (Tortura & Eubank, 2010); the outfit looks as if it could have walked out of a production of the musical *Show Boat*. This sartorial affect transports Oliver to an era situated almost at the halfway point between Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and Brown v. Board of Education (1954) where de jure and de facto racial segregation were constitutively entangled. Oliver's queer (un)becoming is made possible through a very contextual White-(re)becoming. So important are these artifacts in the White-stardom entanglement that the boater hat and shoes (re)appear on the book's back cover as if to remind the reader of the intra-active power of race-clothes. Here again, however, the White-stardom-boy-dance

assemblage lacks a permanent spacetime mattering. After the curtain falls, Jacob must go home and later return to school, left with only with a shadow of the limelight's glow. In a study about masculinity and sexuality in high school, Pascoe (2007) observed a similar phenomenon with boys in theatre programs: White boys experienced a temporary suspension of the pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity. These boys, just like Oliver, were afforded provisional licenses to explore sideways masculinities by the theatre curtains and the spectating audiences.

***Children as not-yet-human.***

In *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, children are understood to be not-yet-human. The child is positioned as a body in need of various affects and knowledges before becoming fully human [adults]. Schooling, exercise, and breakfast are just a few of the matter[s] needed to transform not-yet human children into full-fledged human adults; normative gender performances are another key ingredient. Parents, schools, and community talent shows are pedagogical machines complicit in the teaching of heteronormative gender performativities. They incentivize children to grow *up* by policing their embodied desires and punishing their not-yet human subjectivity until children successfully partake in *heteronormative* sex-gender practices.

Parents are gender-teachers and are crucial actors for transforming the not-yet-human children in full-grown heterosexuals. Oliver's father, for example, quickly recognizes the boy-dress entanglement in the attic instantly as a queer assemblage and interrupts it with a "sissy" indictment. Exercise (e.g. sports) is the recommended antidote for ridding Oliver of his feminine pleasures; perhaps his father's line of thinking is that a more massive Oliver is an Oliver with more masculine matter (Adams, 2005). Although not a ball game – dancing is ultimately deemed an acceptable masculine pastime because

of its discursive-material proximity to ‘exercise.’ Oliver’s mother also concerns herself with regulating her son’s body echoing the same exercise discourse and prioritizing Oliver’s physical growth over his emotional [sideways] growth when she dismisses his reticence to go to school by dismissively saying “that’s silly ... come on an eat your breakfast. You’ll be late” (n.p).

Just as Oliver’s father, calls him a sissy, the school’s administration also seems to condone this barrage of insults given that the defamatory graffiti remains on the school’s façade for the weeks and weeks leading up to the community talent show. Schools are supposed to be neutral sites for teaching children and house neutral knowledges; yet the effaced wall boldly tells Oliver that school is in fact *not* neutral, and makes the hidden gender curriculum anything but hidden. The writing on the wall is a materialization of the school’s no-sissy policy literally spelling itself out. The daily assault whittles away Oliver’s embodied queer desires until he unbecomes the sissy. Until then, he is not welcome at school but truancy is not an option, legal matters require Oliver tolerate the abuses at school or his parents pay for his transgressions. The only solution is for Oliver to grow *up*. When he does (through his White-stardom-boy-dance mattering), the writing on the wall is in fact refigured to reward Oliver for his heteronormative-boy becoming but the specter of the sissy lingers, hidden only by a cursory strikeout. The school takes his queer not-yet-human body and strains his queer matter[s] until a recognizable masculinity is made visible: stardom will suffice.

Community talent shows are another disciplining body that rewards not-yet-human children for emulating gender-normative performativities. Despite wooing the audience and eliciting a thunderous applause, Oliver does not take home the first prize. The winner is a similarly aged girl-child who also performed a dance routine. With both children on stage the similarities of their entangled matter is uncannily plentiful: both are

young, White, children, dressed in white costumes, wearing hats, and performing dance routines with batons (figure 13). The girl, however, is wearing heeled knee-high boots and a leotard that exposes her arms and legs. Her hair is curled and voluminous and a touch of rouge contours her high cheekbones. Her exaggerated and sexualized feminine affect fits more neatly into the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990/2008). Roxie Valentine, the baton-twirling contestant, is announced as the winner and the audience erupts in a celebratory raucous.

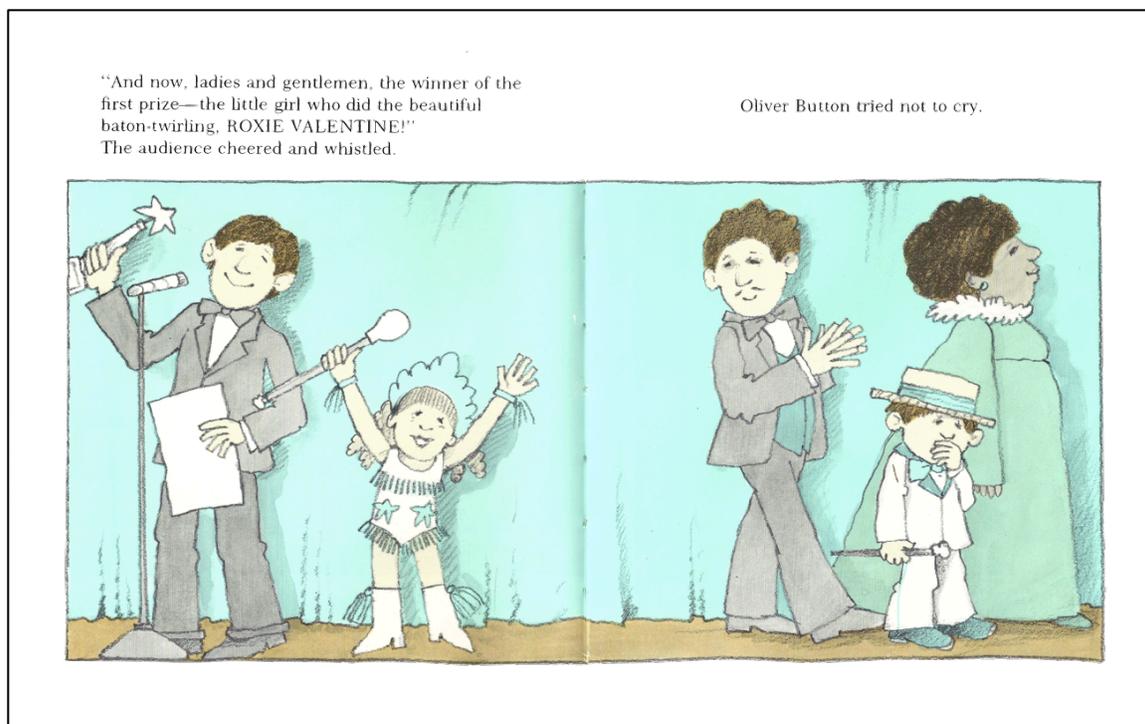


Figure 13. Roxie Valentine and Oliver Button and their gender performance on stage (n.p.).

### Contested matter[s].

Two spacetimematterings are of critical importance in *Oliver Button is a Sissy*: ‘safety’ at home and school, and male dancing as queer/not-queer. These constructions contest heteronormative arrangements of ‘home’ and ‘school’ as safe places for children

while simultaneously emphasizing the muddled, contradictory potentialities in the spaces between queer and not-queer.

***Home and school as ‘safe.’***

Popular discourses will have you believe homes and schools are havens for children but countless research on queer youth trouble these sites as anything *but* safe for queer youth (Kosciw, et al., 2014; Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012; Ray, 2006). It is no surprise then, that Oliver avoids both whenever possible.

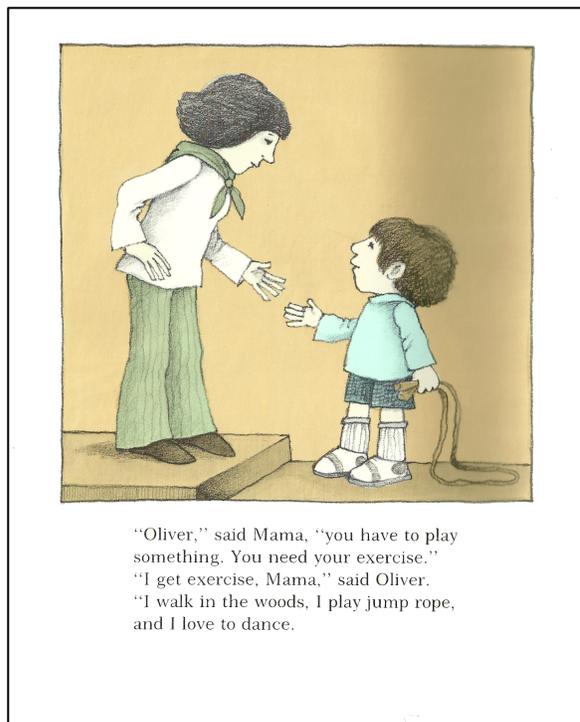
Oliver doesn’t spend much time at home. [*I can relate.*] He spends so little time in his family home that the only room that materializes fully – for the reader – is the attic, not the boy’s room, the living room or the family kitchen. Only the attic materializes furnishings and architectural details that reflect Oliver’s intimate knowledge of the space (figure 14). In fact, with one exception (figure 15), Oliver Button is never depicted in the family home after the attic episode in which his father demands the boy-dress exit the home and “go out[side]” to play “any kind of ball” (n.p). His home isn’t filled with intra-active things that comfort him; there are no affective pleasures or desires to entangle with besides the now untouchable trunk in the attic. So different is his home-matter from his queer-body matter that one to the other is insensible.

Then he would sing and dance  
and make believe he was a movie star.

"Oliver," said his papa. "Don't be such a sissy!  
Go out and play baseball or football or basketball.  
Any kind of ball!"



*Figure 14.* The attic materializes fully, Oliver intra-acts with attic-matter (n.p.).



*Figure 15.* Oliver’s dematerialized home devoid of intra-active home-matter (n.p.).

Furthermore, there are moments when Oliver does not want to attend school because the school has positioned itself as an anti-sissy institution-place. As outlined earlier, the writing on the wall blatantly calls out to Oliver that sissies are not welcome. Counting the month Oliver spent practicing his routine, and adding the weeks of dance lessons prior to the talent show, leaves the school’s administration fully culpable in actively sustaining a hostile environment by refusing to power wash or paint over the epithet. In the end, it is not the school-administration that remedies the textual assault, the graffiti encounters another indelible marker yet again through intra-actions of classmates and revisionary history. The insult becomes a well-meaning compliment, but Oliver’s queer history lingers as a pernicious threat to future gender transgressions. “~~OLIVER~~ **OLIVER BUTTON IS A SISSY STAR!**” (n.p.) (figure 16).

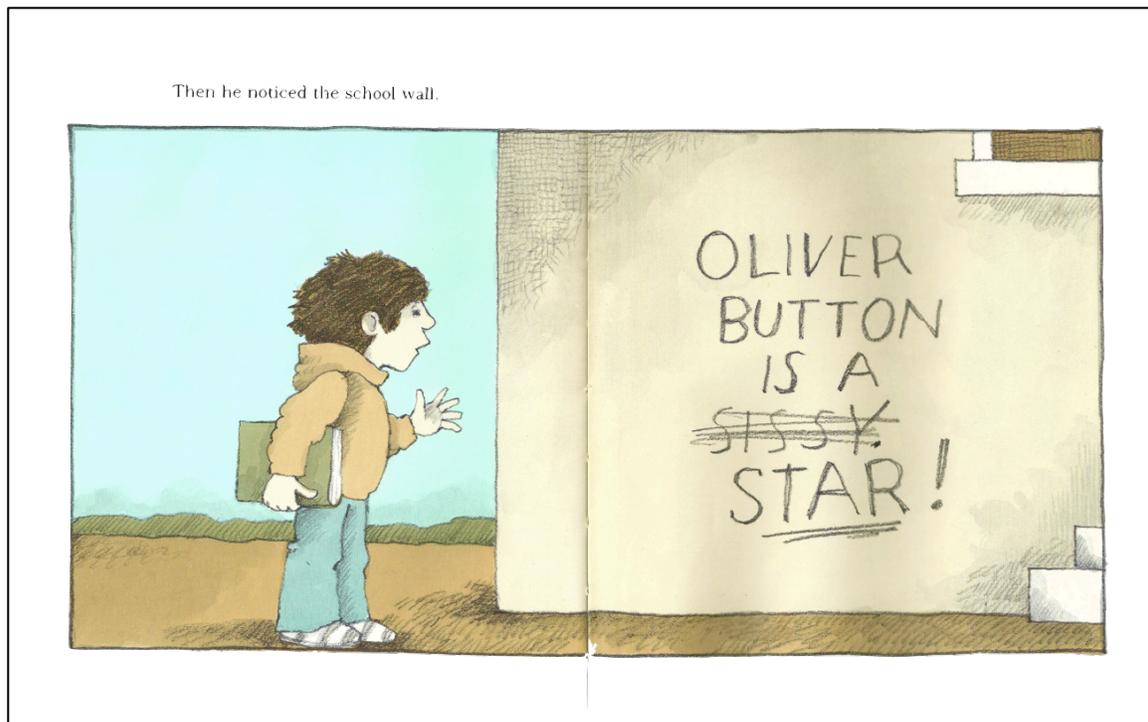


Figure 16. The witting on the wall is revisited (n.p.)

*Dancing as un/queer.*

Oliver recognizes his own dancing abilities early on and demonstrates great promise. In fact, prior to enrolling in Ms. Leah's Dancing School, Oliver had to first convince his mother by performing a little jig for her. Both parents agree to send him to Ms. Leah's Dance School, though dad justifies his rationale as having more to do with his desire to get his son exercising. His tap dance instructor too recognizes Oliver's talents when, after seeing his unwavering dedication and practice, she personally recommends him as a worthy contestant for the community talent show and encourages his parents to support him in this contest. Instead of becoming the boy-dress onstage however, Oliver Button explores other material-discursive becomings with the help of his parents and teacher. Oliver the dancer, later to be know as Oliver the star, is a carefully curated gender project that attempts to recontextualize Oliver's queer dance-desires into a more

acceptable masculine terrain. He takes advantage of the often contradictory meanings of men who dance well – at times invoking “fag” discourses and other times linked to masculine prowess (Pascoe, 2007; Adams, 2005). Oliver’s masculine-dancer entanglement described earlier attempts to (re)cast and (re)cover Oliver’s gender presentation and becomes enmeshed into the racialized images his costume-dance elicits. Despite the tap shoes originally understood as a sissy-shoes construction, when paired with other masculine-clothing affects in the context of public spectatorship and winner-take-all competitive stakes, Oliver’s sissiness is overwritten as stardom – a more acceptable sideways masculinity. Masculine, but still a little sassy.

**EL VESTIDO DE MAMÁ (UMPI & MORAES, 2013)**



*Figure 16.* Boy-dress encounter (el niño and his mother’s green dress)

### **A summary.**

*El vestido de mamá* opens with a first person account of *el niño*<sup>11</sup> and his family dressed for a variety of occasions, for example, swimsuits for beach trips, bundled up with hats and gloves up for the wintertime, and gala attire for those extra special parties. At those events, *el niño*'s mother wears a gorgeous green beaded gown that she takes out of a clear garment bag; it glitters and sparkles and makes *el niño* wonder how the tiny iridescent beads are attached to the fabric. When no one is watching, *el niño* slips into the green dress. Now dressed in the shiny green gown, he giggles at his reflection, hops up and down on the couch, and lounges around watching TV without giving too much thought to his boy-dress intra-actions. This particular day, *el niño* ventures outside and encounters similarly aged peers at the local park. Instead of playing with him, the other children stare, point, and laugh, until *el niño* breaks down in tears and runs home, soiled dress in tow. Upon arriving at his front door, *el niño*'s parents shriek at the sight of the boy, the dress, and the stains; again, the boy runs for cover and hides in his room. *El niño*'s parents comfort the crying boy and explain that the horror is in seeing a soiled dress, *not* [necessarily] the boy in a dress. Following an explanation of how the dress is expensive and delicate, and after a big family hug, we are left with the question of what the boy will wear to [future] extra special parties.

### **Boy-dress matter[s].**

*El niño*'s dress is in actuality not *his* dress, as the title's namesake suggests, the dress belongs to his mother. The dress itself is a custom made-to-measure piece made especially for the boy's mother. The dress is an asymmetrical, floor-length gown made of

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<sup>11</sup> Given that the picturebook is narrated in the first person from the point of view of a young boy, the reader never learns the protagonist's name. I want to honor this artistic decision to the fullest extent possible so I refer to this character as 'el niño' italicizing this Spanish loan-word only once, and avoiding any capitalizations indicative of a proper noun (like a name).

a heavily embellished green fabric swarming with tiny iridescent stones that look like candies. A single ruby-like stone setting rests on the left breast creating an illusion of a brooch tacking the shoulder and bust fabrics. The beaded textile wraps the trunk and gives way to a long side slit that intermittently reveals the length of the wearer's leg. When worn by its intended wearer, el niño's mother, the dress gives shape to an empire waisted silhouette: form fitting up top and just below the sternum, a roomier fit extending to a widened hem. Colors dance over the draped fabric as light refracts through the faceted stones. El niño's mother and the dress glide through the room as if floating on air; it fits her like a glove.

The dress hangs limply on the boy.

El niño's shorter stature and smaller frame keep the green gown from soaring – hanging from his shoulder, the dress puddles at his feet and drags behind him as he moves to and fro. He runs his hands over the fabric feeling the miniscule stones on his skin and the boy-dress intra-actions materialize into a deluge of ideas and observations of what *could* be. [*What else could be made from cuts of this fabric? (Sports uniforms? Hero capes?) How is mom's dress different from others on TV? (Not as shiny? Not as long? Not as special.)*] What the boy-dress discovers is that the dress' specialness is a discursive invitation to gaze unto the dressed body woven into its fibers. So loud are these calls for attention that the boy-dress himself cannot help but stare at his own reflections, and even seek out additional apparitions. “Cuando uso el vestido de mamá me observo en todos los espejos de la casa” [When I put on my mom's dress, I look at myself in all of the mirrors at home] (n.p.). So it is no surprise then, that when he ventures outside to a local park, everyone stares; a dress like this pulls on the spectator's attention, drawing their focus in, giving them something worth looking at. But the effect the

onlooker's gaze produces is flipped: instead of awe, the boy-dress inspires shock. And pointing. And laughing.

This disastrous trip to the park seems to have been el niño's first lesson in growing sideways. This lesson highlights how el niño's boy-dress becoming differs, in some respects, from boy-dress becomings in other picturebooks. Unlike his picturebook counterparts, el niño is drawn to the dress not because an embodied desire to transform himself or affirm a queer-boy identity, but instead, a desire to place himself into the fanciful fibers and understand its inexplicable magic [*How is it washed without water? How do the stones stay put without thread? Why does the dress evoke visceral reactions?*]. The entangled matters between boy and dress are materialized less by queer desires and queer knowledges and more by their absence, in other words, el niño knows not the unwritten rules of boys' repudiation of dresses.

### **Queer matter[s].**

Although el niño's boy-dress encounter lacks a deliberate queer politic, queer matter[s] materialize their agency and contribute to the boy-dress becoming. Among a myriad of other forces, class and non-knowledge facilitate the serendipitous intra-actions with[in] the boy-dress becoming. As these matters are folded into each other, a lesson materializes before el niño about the limits of normative boyhood.

### ***Class.***

There is no denying el niño's affluent background. His upper-middle to upper class upbringing is instantly apparent by multiple references to the materiality of wealth (vacations to the beach, visits to the drycleaners, bespoke clothing, etc.) though the sparkly green dress singlehandedly makes that clear. The story of the dress is itself a materialist account of fundamental capitalist principles and investment discourses.

For instance, consider the dress' origin story: a tailor designs a dress inspired by – and a product of – the multibillion dollar global fashion industry that imports/exports ideas, images, labors and mass-market goods (Kaiser, 2012); the tailor takes precise measurements of the mother's body and drafts a pattern using commercially available cottons, papers, and tools manufactured abroad; he acquires the necessary yardage of embellished green fabric, itself an entanglement of imported silk, colonial legacies, artisanal beads, and feminized labors; he then assembles the dress from cut pieces on an industrial grade sewing machine commonly used in factory environments; a final brooch-like stone setting is applied by hand using needle and thread adding to the dress' monetary value with every hand applied-stitch; the finished bespoke garment is then exchanged for a premium in the local currency – likely Uruguayan pesos, given the author's nationality. After the dress comes home with el niño's family an investment discourse literally cloaks the dress in a clear plastic garment bag thereby confirming [and materializing] the dress's value. Similarly, like many investments, the dress requires periodic maintenance: cleaning. The dress' value matters so much that a specially concocted chemistry is necessary for making the dress clean again! Dry cleaning is the only way to go. This expensive dress, worn at expensive parties, can only retain its value through an expensive cleaning system. Access to these class matters were vital to el niño's boy-dress becoming. His mattering much like other queer identities are shaped by commerce, commodity and capitalism (see D'Emilio, 1993).

***Non-knowledge.***

El niño's boy-dress entanglement is largely made possible by the boy's non-knowledge. Rather than attribute the boy's state of not knowing about gender scripts as a product of childhood innocence – a concept I rejected in the introduction of this thesis – I

borrow from Gross' (2007) use of 'non-knowledge' as a "a type of knowledge that can frame the unknown so that the unknown can be taken into account in future planning" (p. 751). Not knowing is a common theme that organizes various moments of el niño's life. From not knowing how dry cleaners work, to not understanding how the beads stick to fabric without thread, or why people shriek at the sight of a boy-dress entanglement, el niño is often left without explanations. This state of not-knowing is not an accident, it's symptomatic of the fabrication of 'childhood,' a liminal state of culturally sanctioned ignorance that positions children – erroneously – in a tabula rasa framework<sup>12</sup>. Irony, again, brings together seemingly contradictory matters into contact with each other: heteronormative ideals (non-knowledge) and queer performativity (gender transgressions) find each other producing queer children. Finding el niño in his mother's dress is an unintended consequence of the entangled non-knowledges, queer knowledges, and children's bodies caught in between.

### **Contested matter[s].**

Just as class and non-knowledge facilitate the queer boy-dress becoming, other matters come into contact with the boy-dress in complex and contradictory relational flows. Distinctions between private and public property, for example, produce inconsistent affects in boy-dress encounters, just as the shapes of the boy *and* the dress are variable and materially contingent.

### ***Private/public matters.***

The embodied affects produced by this entanglement push and pull on the boy-dress's body moving him in and out of public and private spaces, and the distinction

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<sup>12</sup> In *The Queer Child*, Stockton (2009) finds a similar queer child in literature and cinema. What she calls "the child queered by innocence," is the normative child, who in a state of not-knowing about the world, seems strange and peculiar despite epitomizing the "innocence"

between private and public property is heavily entwined with class matters described earlier. First, it's important to highlight the spacetime-mattering that occurs when the dress is taken out of the plastic sheath, out of hibernation, and made to matter at a formal event. Under these conditions, the dress traverses from one private space (the owner's home) to another (an upscale party) in a highly orchestrated ritual intended to communicate a heightened femininity and exaggerated class performance (jewelry, makeup, perfume, hair styling, etc.). Simply put, the dress is unwearable under any other circumstance. But given el niño's record with non-knowledges, the dress' "for special occasions only" caveat was insufficiently clear... or the gown's sparkle too seductive and magical.

With the dress now on his body, the boy is entranced by other optic intra-actions, namely, how sunlight dances with the dress matter, intensifying the bead's diffractive output, and making the boy-dress shine as bright as the sun. But what is a formal evening dress, without formality or evenings? What does a fancy dress become in public? Here is where the embodied affects of the boy-dress diverges from the socially accepted *queer* boy-child meanings attributed to such images. Whereas el niño reacts to the pleasantness the dress elicits (i.e. the sparkles, memories of his mother, the magic of floating stones, the mysteries of the dry cleaners, etc.) the other children see a dematerializing boy, his boy-ness/masculinity replaced by a similarly dematerializing dress, soiled and severely out of place. Everything about the dress is wrong: it's too big, too shiny, and too formal to belong in the park and everyone except the boy-dress realizes this. Once his body comes to realize the grave mistake, a rush of warmth floods his ears and chest, his knees begin to tremble, and a sudden urge to cry overcomes him. The walk home is worse. The dress fails to materialize the pleasant sensations it had before, and instead of radiating

like the sun, the boy-dress' surroundings disintegrate into a vast emptiness that fills the distance between him and his home (figure 17).



Figure 17. Taunting dematerializes el niño's surroundings. He walks home in the emptiness (n.p.)

Once at home, another confusing episode unfolds as el niño's parents also react with horror as they lay eyes on him. It suddenly makes sense: it's not the public/private spaces that are the problem, it's public/private property. El niño strips off the dress in a flash and hides in his room. His parents comfort him in his room and carefully explain that the dress is incredibly expensive and that it should stay put away – save for special occasions - lest it wear away too quickly. In the spirit of limiting children's knowledge about dangerous matters (e.g. gender, gender variance, etc.) there is no discussion about whether boys should wear dresses or not. This reproduction of non-knowledge leaves el niño wondering how he will know when its ok to don the dress – *when* not *if*. The story

ends with an illustration of the boy in a boy-sized dress on the back cover endpapers<sup>13</sup> without cuing the reader about its real or virtual materiality.

***Shaping the dress/body.***

On the surface, *El vestido de mamá* is a story about one dress and the adventures that unfold upon encountering two distinct bodies (a mother and her son), but, material-discursively, *two* dresses materialize. The dress is first introduced to the readers on the mother's body revealing a perfect union of flesh and textile, one made for the other. This version of the dress fits snugly on the body and communicates a very cohesive classed and gendered social position. The same dress hanging from el niño's shoulders becomes a different dress that brings incongruous subjects into contact with each other: a big dress and a small boy. This version of the dress sags, drags, and sinks to the floor and confuses others with disjointed social information. [*Is that a boy or a girl? Is that a nice dress or an ugly dress?*] This distinction raises a curious question: does the dress refigure the body or does the body refigure the dress?

Evidence of the former (a dress that refigures the body), arises as the boy-dress relearns to walk, being careful not to trip walking down the stairs, taking small delicate steps that would otherwise be unnecessary in el niño's everyday garb. Wearing the dress also spawns an embodied desire to look at oneself in the mirror and admire the affects the body-dress produces; both mother and son surrender to the pleasures of reflections when the dress is on their body. Similarly, recent experimental research in the field of embodied cognition appears to support the argument that clothes change the wearer (see Adam & Galinsky, 2012). The flipside is that bodies also transform clothes. El niño is

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<sup>13</sup> Endpapers are pages flanking the front and back covers of picturebooks (especially in hardcover formats) and "constitute a space between where the reader is neither outside nor yet inside the story" (Sipe & McGuire, 2006, p. 292).

fully aware of how different the dress looks on his body as opposed to on his mothers; this is by design. Recalling the dress' genesis, the boy rationalizes that different body measurements cannot reproduce the same body-dress, and that what prevents him from wearing the same dress is his physicality – not necessarily his gender or anatomy. This confusion comes to matter in the picturebook's endpapers when we see, for the first time, an idealized boy-dress encounter: a fitted silhouette, cut from the same magical fabric, and styled with matching shoes. [*But what changed? The boy or the dress?*]

### **MOVING TOWARDS A SIDEWAYS READING OF QUEER PICTUREBOOK SHELF**

In this chapter I modeled what reading queer matter[s] looks like by reading picturebooks with a new materialist framework and mapping the networks of matter and discourse found in boys in dresses picturebooks. I read each of the three picturebooks individually and in the following chapter I will make a sideways movement towards reading across picturebooks along the queer picturebook shelf.

## **Chapter 6: Reading The Shelf [Or, Mapping Queer-Child Epistemologies]**

### **THE SHELF**

I place all ten books together.

They lean on each other and share their secrets amongst themselves and the longer they sit next to each other, the more their stories begin to ebb and flow into one another. A sideways reading *across* the collection of boy-dress titles reproduces and reifies many of the themes discussed earlier in this chapter by adding complexity to the layered representational logics of boy-dress entanglements. I divide this chapter into two sections to better illustrate the ways in which boys-in-dresses picturebooks speak to each other – and the reader – through narrative mattering and material affects. The first section transcribes the murmured exchanges that occur within the picturebooks collection drawing connections and disconnections between their shared stories. The ensuing section will then weigh the physical picturebooks themselves and consider how their objecthood regulates reader-picturebook intra-actions.

### **Story matter[s].**

The stories contained and disseminated by the picturebooks on the shelf put into conversation three salient matters: dresses, places, and people. These matter[s] transcend the material confines of picturebook covers and assemble a larger narrative about boys who wear dresses.

### ***Dresses.***

Dresses take on meaningful roles in this collection – they are essential in building the narrative architecture in all the picturebooks on this shelf, principally, because a boy wearing a dress is always positioned as a problem. Even in picturebooks that lack a

substantiated plot (*I Am A Boy, My Princess Boy*), the boy-dress materializes solely for the purpose of having to overcome the ‘problem’ of wearing a dress. These picturebooks replicate the same boy-dress-problem storyline instead of imagining new possibilities and normalizing gender variance. I have yet to come across a story, for example, of boy who returns a lost puppy to its rightful owner wearing pretty yellow dress, or a story about a boy in a nightgown who overcomes his fear of the dark.

Furthermore, a typology of dress ‘kinds’ emerges by considering how boy-dress-desire is prefaced and/or justified: dresses that confirm, dresses that transform, and dresses that adorn. Dresses that affirm are found in stories that organize boy-dress-desires as an embodied drive to assert a boy’s sideways boy-gender (*Jacob’s New Dress, Jesse’s Dream Skirt, Ronald Humphrey is Wearing a What?, Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress, My Princess Boy*). These realized boy-dress pairings rely on “born this way” rhetoric and ironically emphasize their *boy* gender through dress-wearing. Dresses that confirm expand the limits of ‘boy’ by modeling boys that achieve gender-actualization in boy-dress encounters. Dresses that transform are found in stories in which a boy becomes someone/something else upon encountering the dress (*El niño perfecto, Princess Max, Oliver Button is a Sissy*). These dresses constrain boy-dress existences to specific temporal contexts and severely restrict their movements from materializing in the future. Max and Oliver, for example, become the boy-dress only during playtime (as does Jacob with the princess-dress). Similarly, the boy in *El niño perfecto* spends his entire day waiting for nighttime when everyone is asleep to slip into a velvet gown. These transformations have seemingly contradictory messages about embodying queer simultaneously affirming their queerness in that moment and denying the boys a dress-filled future. Dresses that adorn are found in stories where boys find themselves wearing dresses not because they want to become someone/something else or

from a need to assert their femininity, but rather from an aesthetic sensibility (*El vestido de mama, I Am a Boy*). In these picturebooks, boy-dress encounters materialize from a magnetism to beautiful materials and pretty things. Here, again, an attempt is made to normalize dress-desire by asserting the boy's masculine-gender and his otherwise gender-congruent pleasures (i.e. playing soccer, playing with swords and trucks), as if to counteract and override the feminizing nature of dressing in dresses.

### *Places.*

Place is also of utmost importance in regulating the boy-dress. With minor exceptions, home and school appear to be the only places where the boy-dress materializes. Both of these places are, for the most part, private indoor spaces that limit the boy-dress' movement to the confines of the four walls. Collectively, institutionalizing these spaces as the only sites for boy-dress becomings undermines the potential for queer world-making; permission to wear the dress *only* at home and/or school is not much of a liberation – it's a concession. [*Does the boy-dress visit eateries with his family? Does he visit groceries stores? Libraries?*] This is why *My Princess Boy* stands out, in this regard, from the rest of the picturebooks included in this study: our<sup>14</sup> princess boy does not live hidden away at home or school is always out and about. Not once is our princess boy depicted indoors away from the public gaze. Mom's narration further accounts for other public sites in which the princess-boy moves about freely like shopping centers and neighborhood sidewalks. Our princess boy is deeply committed to the politics of reifying queer counterpublics through “the production of an intervention within the majoritarian public sphere that confronts phobic ideology” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 143). His public

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the possessive “my” used in the title and in the narrative voice of the boy's mother, I follow in the author's suggestion, rooted in a call for empathy and solidarity: “My Princess Boy is *your* Princess Boy” (emphasis added, Kilodavis & Desimone, 2009, n.p.).

performance of princess-boyhood challenges commonly held assumptions about the ‘naturalness’ or ‘common sense’ of doing gender in ways that wearing a dress in a private room does not. Furthermore, unlike el niño in *El vestido de mamá*, who also ventures into public spaces in his dress, our princess boy is disinterested in learning about appropriate spaces for boy-dress spacetime-matterings – every space, every time, is great spacetime.

### ***People.***

Specific people matter[s] draw my attention as I read boys-in-dresses picturebooks laterally along the shelf: social positions and teacher presences.

Children in these books, in small and big ways, push against heteronormative gender expression by donning the dress, but in most other respects, the books outline a monolithic queer-child-family social position with little divergence. White, middle class, and two-parent households appears to be the golden standard. In these ten books there is only one Black protagonist, one can pass as either Latinx or White, another is ambiguously illustrated in black and white outlines, and all others are White with blond or red hair. This White default feels strange given the conscious decision to illustrate multi-ethnic social environments in eight of the ten books; but then again, not much has changed since Larrick published *The All-White World of Children's Books* in 1965 (see Koss, 2015). Middle class seems to be another ubiquitous trope as illustrated by countless references to material wealth (i.e. children with their own room, formal dining rooms, overflowing toy chests, references to leisurely travel, and in some cases an abundance of dresses). I approach depictions of class critically because limiting images of adults who respect queer children to middle class subjects, reifies the assumption that low-income families are inherently intolerant or homophobic, or conversely, that wealth breeds queerness somehow; I take issue with both. Although some picturebooks in the broader

queer picturebook genre make explicit and implicit references to working class, and other low income social positions [see for example *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert & Ray, 2008) and *Antonio's Card/La tarjeta de Antonio* (Gonzalez & Álvarez, 2005)], the boys-in-dresses genre has shyly stayed away and instead established large homes as boy-dress prerequisite.

Teacher presences also traverse these books in peculiar ways. In the five books where the boy's can be seen inside school spaces (*Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, *Ronald Humphrey is Wearing a What?*, *Jacob's New Dress*, *Jesse's Dream Skirt*, and *Oliver Button is a Sissy*) the boy-dress materializes in only four of the stories – Oliver leaves his pashmina at home. In the remaining stories, where the boy-dress becoming occurs at school teacher intra-action are widely varied from not being present, to leading a lesson about boys in dresses. First, teacher absences in *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* and in *Ronald Humphrey is Wearing a What?* worry me – being a teacher myself – because in their absence Morris and Ronald become bullying targets and the abuse goes without adult intervention. This echoes Cianciotto and Cahill's (2012) observations about teachers implicitly condoning by dismissing homophobic attitudes and actions as 'immaturity.' It also materializes how alone and unprotected queer bodies feel in heteronormative spaces where queer violence is sanctioned as a heteronormalizing tool in disciplining apparatuses – like schools. Present teachers in *Jacob's New Dress* and *Jesse's Dream Skirt* on the other hand, take active roles in reshaping child bodies; they do so, however, with contradictory ideologies. While Jacob's teacher gently offers redirections for Jacob's gender transgressions to fix his gender crossing and restore binary logics, Jesse's teacher takes the opposite approach. Instead of asking Jesse to grow up, his teacher invites others to grow sideways by engaging the class in a critical conversation about hegemonic masculinity, then improvising skirts for his students and

one for himself to understand the intra-active reconfiguring of bodies (of any gender) and skirts. Although not everyone accepts the invitation to dance and twirl in skirts, the teacher has at least established that there will be no condemnation of boy-dress becomings.

### **Picturebook matter[s].**

Picturebook are physical objects. In this section I will explore material-discursive enactments between bodies and books. I highlight these reader-book intra-actions to draw attention to the to outline how queer knowledges are epistemologically organized to produce, reproduce, or otherwise obscure specific queer knowledges.

I use the term ‘findability’ to refer to relative ease or difficulty of discovering, locating, and acquiring these picturebooks, which in turn can be used to how available these images, texts, and knowledges are to wide audiences. Both the picturebook’s physicality (how it’s constructed, labeled, and glued together, etc.) and the structures that house and distribute books (classification systems, library collections, publishing houses, etc.) shape how findable the book is. First, children’s picturebooks are seldom organized categorically by subject because as works of fiction, the default is to sort alphabetically by author’s last name (Kaplan et al., 2013). So just as it would be difficult to rummage through for a good book about puppies, it would even harder to peruse shelves looking for boys in dresses given the relative scarcity. Furthermore, picturebooks are not usually page-heavy tomes, they seldom go past 32 pages, so when printed they become long slender objects that must communicate, on the sliver of space that is the book spine, what the book contents are. This creates a standard of using only the textual title to communicate the picturebook’s plot; this is not the best method for guiding preliterate children. Additionally, picturebooks tend to come in one of two formats: hardback or

paperback. The softcover is riddled with additional design flaws. Although a softcover makes the picturebook substantially more affordable, it decreases its longevity so in turn disqualifies it from being added to library collections, reduces the spine to nothing more than a crease, and gives the book and overall feel of a more disposable commodity. Three of the books in this study are exclusively available in softcover print (*El vestido de mamá*, *I Am a Boy*, and *El niño perfecto*).

The findability of boys-in-dresses picturebooks is also affected by their unsearchability. Of the ten books, for example, only half are included in the metadata database WorldCat<sup>15</sup>, and cursory “boy in a dress” search only connects readers to three of the titles (*Jacob’s New Dress*, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, and *My Princess Boy*). Lastly, the most obvious barrier to the picturebooks’ findability is their scarcity. Half of the titles are a mish-mash of self-published books, books from micro-publishers, and [now defunct] independent presses. Small presses means small printing runs and limited geographical reach. All of internationally published books, for example, were only available in their geographic region.

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<sup>15</sup> According to its website, WorldCat is “the world’s largest network of library content and services” that connects to more than 10,000 library collections, and touts more than 2 billion items of searchable inventory (“WorldCat,” n.d.).

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion** **[Or, Where Do We Go From Here?]**

This is the part where I should say something about the transcendence of queer picturebooks, or more specifically of boys-in-dresses picturebooks. Here is where I should spell out their transformative powers and cite the urgency of consuming these books feverishly.

I will not do that [per se.]

In fact, as I reflect on my collection of picturebooks, I have to admit a difficult truth: they're not good. Most of these picturebooks lack that *je ne sais quoi* that makes memorable picturebooks memorable. That's because boys-in-dresses picturebooks are not written to invoke the pleasures of reading; they're tools shaped for a specific purpose. Queer picturebooks broadly, much like many notable 'multicultural' picturebooks, are often written to address the need for diverse images, texts, and knowledges with pedagogical intension preceding the publication. I call these "issue-based picturebooks." These books tend to be cumbersome and morally heavy handed with a "we should treat people like people no matter how different" theme. They stop short of developing other narrative features like a fun plot or multi-dimensional characters and instead narrate dry, unimaginative ways to tolerate others. Issue-based books are cut from a different cloth, so why do we read them like [good] works of literary fiction?

My hope is that alternative reading strategies may salvage these books from the annals of books-you-only-read-once. Reading queer matter[s], as described in this thesis, can enliven, embolden, and give vibrancy to an otherwise plot-less story. I, for example, was once cynical about their inability to do much of anything, suddenly found myself returning to some of these books to get a closer look. I keep coming back to look sideways at the matter before me. I cannot stop thinking about their queer matter[s]!

That said, I also argue that we should not limit these sideways readings to books about queer children. I encourage others to apply these reading methods when consuming all sorts of media across any genre; I encourage everyone to peer closer, lean in and behold sideways the matter[s] at play.

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