

Swimming Against the Current: Constructing Gender through Magical Identifications in *I am Jazz* and “Growing Up Trans”

Queer theorists such as Kathryn Bond Stockton and Gabrielle Owen have persuasively argued that contemporary depictions of transgender children do little to challenge gender norms. Indeed, the trans children in recent televised specials often appear to perform gender quite normatively. In this paper, however, I examine texts by and about trans kids to see how these children create identities that challenge binary notions of gender through identifications with non-human creatures whose genders are more complicated than the medicalized notions of “male” and “female” that they are typically encouraged to pursue.

Specifically, I focus on Jazz Jennings’s obsession with mermaids – both *20/20*’s “Transgender at 11” and the first episode of Jennings’s reality show open with shots of her swimming underwater in a mermaid tail that she made herself. *I am Jazz*, a children’s picture book coauthored by Jennings, features images of mermaids in the background of many illustrations. These mermaids present a potentially queer subtext to the apparently normative story of Jazz’s femininity.

According to her mother, Jazz loves mermaids “because of the ambiguous genitalia,”¹ and, when read through the lens of Disney’s “Little Mermaid,” (from whom Ariel, a teenaged girl in *Frontline*’s “Growing Up Trans,” takes her name), the mermaid can also be read as a trans- species/transsexed figure, with whom these girls may identify both because of her plasticity and her otherness.

I read these girls’ relations to mermaids both as part of a discourse of magical transformation that challenges medicalized discourses of gender transition, and in terms of recent work by trans writers within animal studies, particularly Florentin Fèlix Morin, who explores a metaphorical identification with a hippopotamus as an escape from stifling binaries of adult/child, male/female, straight/queer. This turn to the non-human is complicated, however, by the need of trans child-subjects to be recognized as both fully human and fully female/male – a need that playing into gender binaries may help fulfill. The mermaid both fits into and challenges these binaries, suggesting openings for girls like Jazz and Ariel to creatively embody more playful, fluid, and individualized feminine genders.

¹ “Transgender at 11: Listening to Jazz.” *20/20*, January 19, 2013.