

Reading Gender through the Metaphor of Water in New Queer Children's Literature

This project uses water as a metaphor to trace and theorize the textual construction of gender creative performativities in children's picture books. I use reading strategies informed by queer studies, childhood studies, and narrative theory to identify and interpret children's relationships to gender as depicted in what I contend is an emerging subgenre of children's literature – a subgenre that foregrounds children's desire for non-binary and non-normative gender expressions and identifications. The metaphor of water allows us to think through seeming paradoxes such as the temporality of fixity, and authenticity without essence, apparent paradoxes that are intrinsic to the gendered experiences of children depicted in what I refer to as "new queer children's literature."

I use the term "new queer children's literature" to identify a shift in queer content depicted in children's picture books beginning around 2007 with the publication of texts like Marcus Ewert's *10,000 Dresses* and Cheryl Kilodavis's *My Princess Boy*. These picture books focus on gender creative children protagonists, as opposed to the cisgender gay and lesbian adult characters found in early queer children's literature, including the popular *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman.

I begin my presentation by identifying texts I include under the heading new queer children's literature such as Jazz Jennings and Jessica Herthel's *I am Jazz*, Brook Pessin-Whedbee's *Who are You: The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity*, and Lesléa Newman's *Sparkle Boy*. I then use the metaphor of water to identify and interpret seeming paradoxes in new queer children's literature. For instance, the water metaphor helps us see authenticity without essence, after all, water is not essentially liquid, ice, or gas, but is authentically each of those things, at least possibly, for a time. Children, like water, are capable of transformation. By playing with these textual tensions, and producing a reading read through the metaphor of water, provocative understandings of children's literature and children's gender emerge.