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Transchildren and the Discipline of Children's Literature

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Oh, if you were a little boy,
 And I was a little girl—
 Why you would have some whiskers grow
 And then my hair would curl.
 Ah! If I could have whiskers grow,
 I'd let you have my curls;
 But what's the use of wishing it—
 Boys never can be girls.

—KATE GREENAWAY, "WISHES"

In 1992 a delegation from the Colombia Human Rights Committee of Washington, D. C. and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights interviewed a group of transvestite sex workers. One of their complaints was that the police would round up people like them and take them to a site known as the "road to Choachi," a winding road with sharp precipices, from which they were thrown to their death.

—JUAN PABLO ORDONEZ

Children's literature" is a deceptively simple term. In the United States, among other things, it names a commodified, politically charged industry of texts created, produced, and selected for use with children. Children's literature also describes a field of academic endeavor that is part complicitous in the discipline (regulation, constraint) both of the

corpus of children's texts and of the ideological body of the child within those texts, and in part committed to the critical interrogation of the multiple political investitures in and around "the child" as cultural construction. My concern in this essay is, first, to analyze the multiple relations between children's literature and a particular gender minority, transchildren; that is, children whose experience and sense of their gender does not allow them to fit their sexed bodies into seamless accord with a congruent, conventional gender identity. The disciplinarity (in both senses) of these relations, I will argue, has permitted us, as readers, occasionally to play among such children, but almost never to recognize them.¹ Second, I want to illuminate the liberatory role that children's literature, conceived as a matrix of creative texts and critical inquiries, can play in creating interpretive strategies, curricular revisions, and pedagogical interventions that will contribute substantially to the amelioration of the condition of cultural, institutional, and political neglect through which transchildren have been denied their reality, and their worth. Finally, I will suggest a theoretical reconceptualization of gender that would make possible an aesthetic transumption of romantic and realist impulses in children's literature into what I will call *sublime realism*. Such a transumption could occur either as a reading of existent texts or a writing of new ones.

The historical desire to deny, by one means or another, the reality of alternative forms of sex and gender vividly reflects the intrapsychic as well as the institutional stakes involved in the maintenance of the false binary male ("adult," dominant) / nonmale ("child," subordinate).² The threat of the loss, through contamination or degeneration, of the a priori symbolic value of masculinity creates unprocessed anxiety, and unexamined, or rationalized, antipathy—the necessary conditions for the efflorescence of gynophobia or transphobia. According to the heterological logic of transphobia, insofar as transgendered persons do not accommodate themselves to a heterocentric ideology of gender that inter-pret reproductive functions as the naturalized basis of differential power relations, they must be made to do so. They must, that is, be institutionally and discursively disciplined, since masculinity is not a matter of anatomy but of meaning.

In *Gender Shock*, her exposé of the institutional maltreatment of transchildren, Phyllis Burke writes:

If a doctor believes that there is a link between gender nonconformity and adult homosexuality, something that has never been

proven, and further believes that adult homosexuality is a mental illness, [a gender-nonconforming child] will be aggressively treated with behaviorism, psychiatric drugs and counseling. This is known as "reparative" or "conversion" therapy, and the American Psychiatric Association has yet to forbid the practice. . . . As a result, hundreds of adolescents, either suspected of being gay because of gender nonconformity or self-declared as gay, are involuntarily locked into psychiatric hospitals.³

It is partially for the sake of such children—that their moral and material existence not be denied—and partially for the sake of our other children's education toward joyful acceptance and compassionate inclusion of their trans sisters and brothers that we must both create and acknowledge their presence in children's literature.⁴

He acts like a sissy. He has expressed the wish to be a girl. He doesn't play with boys. He's afraid of boys, because he's afraid to play boys' games. He used to dress in girls' clothing. He would still like to, only we have absolutely put our foot down.⁵

As a discipline and as a body of texts, children's literature continues to operate on the basis of an outmoded binary paradigm of gender, in part because psychiatry, the social sciences, legal theory, education, and the humanities continue to function, for the most part, as though it had not already been clearly demonstrated that there are neither two sexes and two genders, nor two sex/genders.⁶ Psychiatrist Richard Green's work on nontraditionally gendered boys exemplifies the extent to which academic research continues to be constrained by conservative assumptions that inhibit more complex, and more realistic, theorizations of gender. In *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality*—still the authoritative work on the subject—Green sets out to determine the gender characteristics and developmental patterns of sixty-six "feminine boys." While Green notes that "the 'feminine' boys had few behavioral problems other than sexual identity conflict," he implies that the majority of the boys in his study meet the criteria for a diagnosis of "Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood" in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, III.⁷

But why should atypical gender expression be understood as a behavioral problem at all—that is, something unhealthy or destructive to

the individual or those around hir?⁸ Isn't it likely that feminine boy behavior is most likely to be a "problem" either because parents feel embarrassed (in a male-dominant society, their boy is acting like a member of the "weaker sex"), or because the child's peers torment hir? And in each of these cases, isn't the problem accurately diagnosed as the parents' or the peers', not the feminine boy's? Rather than "treating" transchildren, shouldn't we provide counseling for adults and children whose speech and behavior clearly shows them to be transphobic—that is, irrationally anxious and fearful in the presence of gender diversity?

Again, why should transgender behavior be assumed to connote "sexual identity conflict"? The children in Green's study seem, for the most part, remarkably *un*conflicted. They gravitate to dolls or mommy play as "naturally" as most other anatomical males gravitate to ball games and roughhousing. The conflict, in fact, is a matter of definitional categories. Hence, it is a conflict that should be attributed mutually to culture and to science, not to the transchild.

Green and his associates are both the consequences of their own constructed assumptions about gender, and contributors, in their turn, to the oppression of alternatively gendered children both directly, in their therapeutic practices, and indirectly, in that the gender ideology structuring their research perpetuates parental and societal conservatism with respect to gender. Together, physician and socioculture absorb and promote the notion that nurturing, or even permitting, alternative sexes and genders subjects a child to unnecessary hardship and discomfort. That suppression of a subject's "deviant" gendering might itself cause profound suffering is seldom acknowledged.⁹

In Green's study, while a minority of feminine boys were entered into formal treatment to attempt to eradicate their transbehaviors, the only choices that seem to have occurred to either Green or the study members' parents were professional intervention or informal attempts "gently to discourage the [feminine] behaviors as they occurred."¹⁰ No one speaks of affirming a child's developing identity, except as that identity is (mis)understood to be truly masculine, beneath a veneer of affectation or deviance constituted as effeminacy. To the extent that this kind of attitude, filtered through multiple professional (medical, psychiatric, psychological), academic, and popular discourses, comes to shape and color the social understanding of gender, it creates massive pressure on authors, producers, and marketers of designated children's

texts to stigmatize, and thus in practice largely to avoid, allusion to, or representation of, transchildren.

Among the specific obstacles to more inclusive representations of gender in books for children are the vexed relations between author, publisher, and consumer. In "H/Z: Why Lesléa Newman Makes Heather into Zoe," reprinted in this volume, Elizabeth A. Ford describes the market pressures that appear to have motivated Lesléa Newman to move from Heather, the tomboyish protagonist of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, to Zoe, the flawlessly feminine heroine of *Too Far Away to Touch*. Arguing that "Heather provokes the fear that gay or lesbian parents will produce gay or lesbian children because her clothing, her features, her body, signal *androgynous child*, not *boy* or *girl*,"¹¹ whereas Zoe, "a pretty, white, blonde female child,"¹² "signals stereotyped femininity in every way that Heather does not,"¹³ Ford concludes that "you may skirt, but not approach a gay/lesbian theme in literature for children *and* sell your book if, and only if, the gender identity of your young protagonist is unambiguous."¹⁴ In the contemporary American world of children's literature, author reacts to publisher, who reacts to school, library, and bookstore constituencies, which react to their fear of "trouble" (read parents). One parent/constituent indignantly accusing a school board or library commission of condoning the dissemination of immoral or inappropriate materials will usually send everyone involved into crisis control mode—which all too often has the effective result of the despised work being removed from circulation.

Another important factor contributing to the effacement of transchildren from the accessible corpus of children's literature is the way in which the subject of gender is approached in textbooks designed for training teachers of children's literature—persons who clearly play a significant role in mediating the purchasing relations between publisher and adult/child consumer. In most of these, gender is assumed to be a clear, commonsense notion; but, in fact, it amounts to a confused version of the medically approved sex/gender binary: gender denotes sex, and/or sexed identity, and/or sexed social role, as needed. In a chart in her textbook on children's literature, *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*, Donna E. Norton asserts that ten- to twelve-year-old children "have developed strong associations with gender-typed expectations: Girls may fail in 'masculine' tasks, boys in 'feminine' tasks."¹⁵ She suggests that teachers "provide books and dis-

cussions that avoid sex-stereotyped roles," and "emphasize that both sexes can succeed in many roles."¹⁶ This, of course, is unexceptionable in its intent to avoid the tracking of children into narrow models of sex-appropriate behavior. But through her conflation of the categories of sex and gender ("gender-typed," "sex-stereotyped"), and her assumption that there are only two ("both") sexes/genders, Norton creates a conceptual dead end: it is impossible for her to envision strategies for accessing the gendered complexity—which is the gendered reality—of polymorphous or alternatively gendered children, since she understands all children as either pregender or, in effect, as conventionally sexed/gendered adults.¹⁷

Clearly, the educators must be reeducated, and this is a task that must begin from the top, with informed, enlightened faculty in a variety of academic disciplines, including psychology, biology, history, English, education, communications, theater arts, anthropology, and sociology. Most crucially, this reeducative process must be fostered within the field of children's literature, simply because stories, whether literary, oral, or audiovisual, are the cultural medium through which the largest number of people are molded, moved, and inspired to value and accept the diverse ways of being human.

Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.

—WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

If, in the interests of an ethical as well as an aesthetic realism, we seek explicit representations of transchildren in children's literature itself, we will, as we might expect, seek largely in vain—for the taboos of the adult operate, as a crucial political determinant of the adult/child distinction, to define and circumscribe the culture of the child. The first order of business, then, in the reconstruction of sex and gender in and for children, is to jettison the outdated dimorphic notions of sex and gender, and start talking, teaching, and writing about intersexed people, masculine girls (and not just the domestic tomboy who falls in line at puberty), feminine boys, male-bodied and female-bodied two-spirit children (recall the boygirl character in the Dustin Hoffman film *Little Big Man*), and so on.¹⁸

In *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose quotes, at some length, an anonymous critic in the

Times Literary Supplement addressing the question of aesthetic value and its durability, on the occasion of J. M. Barrie's death in 1937. Among other universalist claims, the critic asserts that "the test of validity in any work of art is its realism on its own plane."¹⁹ Rose poses, obliquely, the obvious poststructural reservations about the critic's "Concept of the literary as truth":²⁰ that it is essentialist; ahistorical; oblivious to its own conflation of ideology, textuality, and reason; and so on. Yet, granting Rose the need to scrutinize truth claims, especially in their always political relation to symbolic systems, it seems to me that the *TLS* critic is right, if we understand his statement as a philosophically nominalist one. The test of a successful children's text would then become, not its adherence, beneath the whimsy and invention, to a founding set of realist or idealist assumptions, but its capacity to reflect its characters' phenomenological and psychosocial reality with an intensity that could facilitate the engagement of the child reader's or child auditor's own perceptions, fantasies, and desires.

A realism of this contingent sort, that recognizes the materiality of the individual and the psychostructural force of desire, colored by experience, is arguably the most effective in delineating the individualities of transchildren. As a kind of textual practice, *sublime realism* would dedicate itself to the production of as fully knowledgeable and efficacious a representation of the subject, and his/his world as might be viable within the imaginative and conceptual range of the intended audience.

Pending the creation of a substantial body of specifically transchildren's literature, we can intervene in the reproductive cycle of transphobia through strategies of transreading: intuiting/interpreting the gender of child characters as not necessarily perfectly aligned with their anatomies. Transreading may involve as simple a move as locating a male identity in a female body (for example, the practice of casting female actresses in the role of Peter Pan). Or it may constitute itself as a much subtler imaginative enactment of a much wider range of identities. For if there is no such thing as "the opposite sex" (unless we restrict the corporeality and signification of sex to the radically limited sphere of species reproduction), there is assuredly no such thing as an "opposite gender."²¹ Often, we are given considerable interpretive leeway in reading character by the text itself—and for that matter, who is to deny us—after postmodernism, after intertextuality and hypertextuality—the right to play a bit beyond the bounds of interpretive legitimacy if we so choose?

In a section of *Through the Eyes of a Child* titled "Guidelines for Selecting Controversial Fiction," Donna E. Norton quotes Dorothy Butler at length, to the effect that those who would tamper with the canon of children's literature to advance their antiracist, antisexist, etc., agendas reveal "an arrogance which may be excused as ignorance, but must not be tolerated."²² But suppose one is less interested in removing "Cinderella" from children's reading lists or in marketing a PC knock-off, than in offering a way of reading Perrault's version as a kaleidoscope of fantasies of transformation that might include a boy dressing up as a girl, or *becoming* a girl, for the duration of the story (or at least until "midnight")? After all, we tacitly expect child readers (most often girls) to (cross)identify with the male protagonists of the vast majority of children's stories, from Peter Rabbit to Winnie the Pooh, to Peter Pan, to Bartholomew Cubbins. If this form of gender transitivity is acceptable, why not also encourage further flights of the gendered imagination: for example, reading Cinderella as a male-bodied character, or Robin Hood (like Peter Pan) as a female-bodied one, and explaining that some children (and adults) identify fundamentally (not just transiently) across sex/gender lines; or drawing attention to alternatively gendered beings like fairies, who are not always represented as clearly either masculine or feminine?

One response might be not "Why not?" but "Why?" A cogent answer to this question, I believe, is the same that I would provide to Norton's question, "Are children harmed by the male and female stereotypes developed in traditional literature?"²³ Children *are* harmed by the male and female stereotypes developed in traditional literature. First, if the stereotypes are uncorrected, they contribute to the construction and validation of retrograde, politically unequal meanings for males and females. Further, the hegemony of the binary model of sex/gender effaces the indefinite range of variant genderings, enforces that effacement with taboo: Gender "deviance," if it is visible at all, is sick, disgusting, and immoral. The big feet, graceless carriage, physical unattractiveness, and aggressive attitude of Cinderella's stepsisters mark them simultaneously as masculine and bad, their "inappropriate" masculinity a semiotics of their moral character. Rather than capitulate to the demeaning, phobia-inducing conventions of gender representation, then, we should act on Dayann K. McClenathan's suggestion, as paraphrased by Norton, that "problems in books can provide some children with opportunities for identification and allow other children opportunities to empathize with their peers."²⁴

Despite pervasive political investments in the maintenance of binary models of gender, legible in the practice of child psychiatry, the education of teachers, and the marketing of literature for children, some texts that either are, or could easily be, considered children's literature or film exist that present characters who are clearly transgendered, or fantasizing transgendering, in one way or another. Mark Twain's eponymous "Hellfire Hotchkiss," for example, is a stalwart young fantasy figure of female masculinity, when we meet him, but one who, with his opposite number, the feminine boy Oscar (Thug) Carpenter, is ultimately destined to a narrative limbo.²⁵ The beginning of the fragment in which they appear is promising. Seventeen-year-old Thug is described as flighty, "a creature of enthusiasms" of short duration,²⁶ and in need of encouragement, of which his father observes, "The boy that needs much of it is a girl in disguise. He ought to put on petticoats."²⁷ Hellfire, on the other hand, is "a hardy and determined fighter,"²⁸ more competent in the "masculine arts . . . than any boy of her age in the town."²⁹ The common wisdom is that "Hellfire Hotchkiss is the only genuwyne male man in this town and Thug Carpenter's the only genuwyne female girl, if you leave out sex and just consider the business facts."³⁰

However, once past the novelty of his conception, Twain seems to have been unable to get a real purchase on his characters. He is finally unable to engage imaginatively with Thug to any significant extent (that is to say, he resists, or is incapable of, identification with Thug), so s/he stops speaking to him and drops out of the narrative after his rescue from drowning by Hellfire. Twain's problem maintaining the latter character is the classic heteronormative one: what do you do with a tomboy once she's too old to be a tomboy? Permanent gender transitivity and lesbian sexuality are equally "impossible," and after a few lingering years of fighting fires and beating up town bullies, Hellfire is finally confronted by his Aunt Betsy, and informed that he is the subject of sexual (ironically heterosexual) gossip. At this point, Hellfire vows to bring himself into accord with the mores for one of his bodily (female) sex, and the narrative breaks off, but not before Hellfire soliloquizes as follows:

Thug Carpenter is out of his sphere, I am out of mine. Neither of us can arrive at any success in life, we shall always be hampered and fretted and kept back by our misplaced sexes, and in the end defeated by them, whereas if we could change we should stand as good a chance as any of the young people in the town.³¹

That there is no closure to this tale can be pedagogically useful, if frustrating for young readers. A little historical background may make it possible to elicit the recognition, in adolescent readers, that a life without resolution, in various senses, has been precisely the fate of numberless nontraditionally gendered and/or nontraditionally sexually oriented Americans in the last two centuries.³²

It will continue to be difficult for contemporary authors and filmmakers, as it was for Twain, to conceive and create realistic representations of alternative gender while the available theoretical and pedagogical models of gender remain so limited and inadequate. Jessica Benjamin's work, in conjunction with the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott, offers a way of thinking about gender that can help to break down the anachronistic paradigm of dimorphism and to integrate the abstractions of theory into the lives of historical subjects. Benjamin begins *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* by pointing out that the intrapsychic (psychoanalytic) and intersubjective (object relations) models of personality development are nonexclusive even though they are incongruent. Using the separate lenses of each theoretical matrix allows us, Benjamin argues, to foreground the subject's structuration through layerings of identification and to recognize the definitive difference between the subject and the other-as-subject that is crucial to a genuine engagement with another human being. This balancing of theoretical perspectives in fact mimes the internal psychic balance that is necessary for optimal development of the individual as an interrelational, rather than dominant (or subordinate), being.

One of the critical implications of this model of accommodation is that the terms of competing theories need to be conceptualized less rigidly. Thus, Benjamin suggests reconceiving identity as identification: "In giving up the notion of identity, reified as thing, one need not (and should not) throw out the notion of identification, as internal psychic process."³³ Correspondingly, the categories of gender need to become more fluid: The idea that the child renounces the other's prerogatives in the oedipal phase seems to misconstrue gender identity as a final achievement, a cohesive, stable system. . . . A gendered self-representation is continually destabilized by conflicting mandates and identifications, requiring a capacity for living with contradiction that is in no way culturally supported.³⁴ There is thus a need "to decenter the notion of gender identification, so that it refers to the plurality of devel-

opmental positions rather than to a unilinear line of development, which is ultimately referable to . . . anatomical difference."³⁵

Implicit in Benjamin's conception of gender as identificatory rather than identical is the potential for variable (trans)gender subjectivities, and even coincident multiple gender identifications. Such a theory licenses transreading as a specifically literary practice, I would argue, in that the capacity for (re)memory, fantasy, and imaginative identification that constructs the subject (through the mediation of culture) is the same that actualizes the identification of the reading subject with the literary character (through the mediation of the text). Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and other reader reception theorists, furthermore, have made it abundantly clear that readers (which of course we all are, as we become enculturated) are always in at least two places at once: we retain a strategic sense of self and world against which to understand and evaluate the textual world with whose characters we simultaneously identify.³⁶

D. W. Winnicott's model of play as a practice crucial to the child in her evolving sense of self-in-social-relation combined, in turn, with Hans-Georg Gadamer's theorization of play and the hermeneutic consciousness seems to me to offer a richly suggestive model for the social negotiation of gender in childhood, through the flexible process of provisional (transitioning) identification that Benjamin delineates. For Winnicott, play is a crucial, creative practice that enables the child to include, gradually, experimentally, and safely, external objects within the sphere of her ego-consciousness as subjects themselves. The process begins by a taking of inanimate objects (toys, etc.) into the isolated fantasy world of the child: "In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling."³⁷

Play, as such, is not possible if its content is dictated from outside. It comprises a proactive, creative articulation of the subject with her environment: "The precariousness of play belongs to the fact that it is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived."³⁸ With practice and confidence the child can move from insular fantasy play toward the eventual sharing of cultural roles and relations with other subjects. Winnicott writes: "There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences."³⁹

Gadamer provides a more philosophically oriented vision of play. For Gadamer, play is a mediatory, indefinitely repetitive "movement backwards and forwards"⁴⁰ that, like the physical environment in which we exist, takes us up into itself so that we *become* our play: "Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in his play."⁴¹ "All playing," then, "is a being-played."⁴² Being-played, in turn, is necessarily a condition of transformation and exchange. Thus, while one's play need not necessarily involve another person, "There is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself."⁴³ In, and as, the to-and-fro of play, the subject is perpetually in relation to an Other. If we think Gadamer's notion of play as repetition and exchange in the context of Winnicott's analysis of child development, specifically as elucidating the fantasmatics and dialogics of gender formation, we can conceptualize gendering as absorption *into* a play that is *for* both self and Other.⁴⁴

Let us see how this works in Kate Greenaway's "Wishes," first published in 1885 in *Marginal Garden*, a kind of Mother Goose assemblage of brief, whimsical, vaguely moral poems and illustrations that "depicts the day-to-day life of children and their mothers."⁴⁵ "Play is always representation," Gadamer asserts,⁴⁶ and in "Wishes" we see a boy fantasizing his own transformation into "girl," and that of his playmate into "boy." Gadamer shows us where this leads:

In spending oneself on the task of the game, one is, in fact, playing oneself out. The self-representation of the game involves the player's achieving, as it were, his own self-representation by playing, i.e., representing something.⁴⁷

In this case, of course (as in many others), what is represented is the self—or more precisely, the desire of the subject for the achievement of his own self-representation. This is why "it becomes finally meaningless to distinguish in this sphere [of play] between literal and metaphorical usage,"⁴⁸ since gender, in particular, is as much the metaphorization of the literal as it is the literalization of the metaphoric. The game, however (as always), is also one of exchange (whiskers for "boy," curls for "girl")—a game in which the girl is offered a parallel part that she must accept if this particular fantasy of inversion is to be played.

In Greenaway's poem, the boy initiates the fantasy of exchange. The girl responds by entering into this play-within-a-play of gender, and acceding with apparent enthusiasm to the proposed terms. She then quickly retreats from the game on the grounds of efficacy ("what's the use of wishing it") and reason ("Boys never can be girls"—note, however, that she does not explicitly deny herself the potential to be a boy). For a moment, both children have been absorbed. Then, the poem, and the play, are over. Gadamer writes that "the game itself is a risk for the player,"⁴⁹ and here the risk for one player has felt too great—for after all, as Gadamer notes, "One can only play with serious possibilities."⁵⁰

One of the delights of the poem, it seems to me, is that it represents the "boy" as the dreamer (who perhaps continues to play, in fantastic silence, beyond the "end" of the game), and the "girl" as the practical one, so that the gender roles of the two are already transposed before the possibility of such a transposition is raised. As is the case with Hellfire Hotchkiss and Thug Carpenter, the "business facts" of sexual difference in this play couple may be more importantly matters of gender than of sex—and, moreover, of a gender that is not necessarily congruent with the bodily sex of either subject.

French director Alain Berliner's 1997 film *Ma Vie en Rose* represents a far more intense experience of the play of gender. Ludovic, a seven-year-old with three older siblings (a girl and two boys) and suburban middle-class parents who had hoped for a girl, believes (or hopes) the s/he is a girl. S/he cross-dresses whenever possible and gravitates to girls and women and their activities (dolls, dance, romantic fantasies and rituals). "It's a scientific matter," Ludo announces, explaining his very out transgender behavior (an ongoing source of embarrassment to his would-be upwardly mobile parents) as the result of his other X chromosome's having accidentally fallen into the trash on its way down from heaven. And indeed, Ludo may turn out to be a true transsexual. In the meanwhile, as Ludo instructs Jerome, the boy next door, s/he is "a girlboy." The film evolves into a bitter struggle by Ludo to keep "playing" (a French Barbie lookalike is Ludo's fairy godmother) while his family, and the people of the neighborhood marshal their combined social, political, and cultural resources to force Ludo to stop.

Trouble starts when Ludo announces that s/he and Jerome are "going to marry when I'm not a boy." Ludo subsequently stages a mock wedding (dressed in a pink satin dress that once belonged to Jerome's

deceased sister), which is interrupted by Jerome's mother just as Ludo is informing Jerome that he may kiss her. Ludo's high femme gender causes her to be misread by Jerome's father and others as gay, which, in a Catholic society, is understood as the next thing to damnation. A harrowing series of violent and transphobic confrontations (including some with her parents) drives Ludo to attempt to kill herself by going to sleep in a freezer. Ludo's father (who works for Jerome's dad) loses his job, and the family is hounded from the neighborhood, with many re-creations inside the family and out.

In the new neighborhood Ludo is approached by a transboy named Christine. The two make friends, and at the latter's birthday party exchange clothes: Christine's dress for Ludo's cavalier outfit. After a final burst of hysteria from Ludo's mother, her parents finally decide to leave her to her own devices. The film ends with Ludo, in Christine's satin dress, chain-dancing with the other children.

Ludo's heavily constructed sense of what "girl" means instantiates Gadamér's contention that a child at play (specifically, in *Truth and Method*, a child engaged in what Gadamér calls "dressing-up") desires to represent herself in such a way that only what is represented exists. The child does not want at any cost to be discovered behind his disguise. He intends that what he represents should exist, and if something is to be guessed, then this is it. What it "is" should be recognized.⁵¹ But if our first response is to deplore Ludo's somewhat commodified sense of gender (as cultural feminists have often deplored male-to-female transsexuals), we should perhaps interrogate our own need to discipline gender variance into more and less correct forms.⁵²

In any case, the film is (utterly irrationally) rated R, and hence could not be taught, in public schools, at least as a children's text. But it is, certainly, a children's story, in the sense that it focuses on a child in a social world composed of other children and adults, engaged in a moral drama, mediated through a fantasy life in which the protagonist's lack of social power is compensated for by her imaginative ability to transform herself freely, through her own agency (like Alice in *Wonderland*), and to fly away, escaping the constraints of her condition, to a marvelous alternative world (like Peter Pan, Dorothy, and many others). But Ludo is free, also, to return, and to continue growing, the stronger for her experience.

The boy is mother of the woman.

—U. C. KNOEPFLMACHER

I want to close with a brief speculation on the origins of transgender in children that I intend as a suggestive vision rather than as a thoroughly supportable claim. The first step toward this vision is mundane in the extreme, but it also represents a counterreformation against the decaying, but still reigning orthodoxy of an unreconstructed poststructuralism: it may be that children like Ludo are moved—as, indeed, are all children—to pursue the directions of gender that they do partially as the result of genetic and other biological factors. Ludo's speculation about her "lost" X chromosome ("c'est une matière scientifique") may be more than a child's fantasy (even if the fantasy itself is as significant a formative element of her gender as the somatic elements involved).

We must acknowledge that historically, we have been disproportionately interested in the reproductive anatomy and physiology of the body, as a determinant of sex differences. We are beginning to understand that the female body is, in fact, much less different from the male than post-Renaissance male discourse on the subject had led us to believe. Furthermore, we know that many humans are neither "male" nor "female," at least according to strict biological definitions of those terms. At the same time, we also know that there is evidence (albeit inconclusive) for statistically significant differences in male and female developmental rates, predilections for certain kinds of large and small motor activities, patterns of conscious and unconscious identification, and patterns of social cohesion or lack of cohesion, among other characteristics. We should therefore be willing to think of sex, and of genes, and of gender as perhaps being related, but in much more subtle, complex, and negotiable ways than have generally been conceived.

The question is whether it really is senseless to say, not necessarily that a male-to-female transchild is a girl in a boy's body, but that s/he is not a boy. This, in turn, leads not necessarily to Judith Butler's point that male and female are constructed categories, but perhaps to a way of understanding the relation between the biochemistry of the body and the formation of embodied consciousness (and consciousness of the body) as a dynamic potentiation. Ludo, then, may not *feel* like a boy (gender) because s/he may not *be becoming*, psychosomatically and ecobiologically, a boy (sex/gender) in the way that most boys (sex) do.

Genes are only and always elements of extremely complex biochemical psychodevelopmental processes that do not take place either entirely predictably, nor in a vacuum (environmental factors affect child development at every step, prenatally as well as postnatally). However, it may be that genetic, endocrinological, bioenvironmental (ecological and biosocial) factors make possible or potentiate the development, through the dynamics of play theorized above, within a child whose reproductive anatomy is male, of an *affinity* for females, female connections, and female communities, or for specifically transcommunities, if these exist in the child's world. Affinity, in turn, might shape itself as *affiliation*—the sense that I belong with, and am comfortable with, the kind of people my society calls “women” (or xaniths or hijras or mahus) and/or with the behaviors, styles of self-presentation, and activities that such people engage in, in my field of perception (as well as, perhaps, a disaffiliation with men).

For example, Ludo dances, with women and by himself. Ludo's fondness for expressive dance, as a form of play, may be part of his affinity for women (in his case, though not as a theorem, since many boys dance, for many reasons). Ludo's pattern of group dancing with women reminds me of Margaret Mead's anecdote of the Omaha Indian adolescent repeated by Walter L. Williams in his book on Native American two-spirit people, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*:

At dances in which the sexes danced separately, he would begin the evening dressed as a man and dancing with the men, and then, as if acting under some irresistible compulsion, he would begin to move closer and closer to the women, as he did so putting on one piece of jewelry after another. Finally a shawl would appear, and at the end of the evening he would be dressed as a berdache, a transvestite. The people were just beginning to speak of him as “she.”⁵³

There is already much evidence that femaleness is not a condition of being that begins with a beginning (two chromosomes, say), but rather a becoming that, as embryo/infant and environment interact, may take an indefinite number of modal shapes, some of which are more common than others. The femaleness, or transness, if one prefers, of a child like Ludo, or the Omaha Indian youth, may be a rich, genetically and biochemically influenced strand in the tapestry of what might, with an-

other genetic, psychobiological, and biosocial history, have become actualized as a “male.”

Let us hold the speculative space of gender open until we know more, and let us open, in the meanwhile, the sociopolitical and aesthetic question of the representation of (trans)gender in children's literature. If it is manifestly untrue, in life and, as we have seen, in literature and film, that children come in only two genders, can we, should we, continue to deny reality, fantasy, moral standing, and political rights to those who are alternatively gendered? Children in contemporary American children's literature come in all shapes, sizes, races, religions, and economic conditions. When it comes to the semiotics of gender, there are almost more girls pictured in pants than in skirts. Why not a boy in a dress? Who is it, finally, that is going to be upset by such a depiction (and it is important not to assume that anyone is): children or fearful adults? And if that fear is phobic and discriminatory, ought we to capitulate to it, under the pretense of objectivity?

Let us commit ourselves to an unabashed romanticism of imagination, in the creation and interpretation of texts for children—but to a romanticism redefined to include a range of child subjectivities so broad, and at the same time so individually distinct, as to constitute what I have called a sublime realism. For it is my contention that the child does not only long, in some transient way, for the transformation of the real into the imaginary, but that, in fact, the most profound desire of the child is precisely to transform the romantic (the fantastic, the fantastic) into the real. This, it seems to me, is the project both of the Wordsworthian and the Lacanian child.

Let us strive, in particular, for a sublime realism of subjectivity—the kind of life-affirming, child-affirming psychosocial realism that not only recognizes, but celebrates, diversities of gender, sexuality, race, and culture on the multiple intersecting planes of the polymorphous carnival of wonders we call childhood.

NOTES

1. I refer to the academic discipline of children's literature, the pedagogy and curriculum of which are largely governed by the binary model of gender reflected in Donna E. Norton's work below; and to the more insidious, because less conscious and systematic, gender policing of the content of children's literature in the United States by teachers, parents, libraries, publishers, authors, agents, bookstores, trade groups, churches, and community organizations.

2. In this hierarchy, "child" includes women; children; transpeople; intersexed persons; "sissies," or homosexuals; and even, contingently, men of color, and "common," or working-class, white men.
3. Phyllis Burke, *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female* (New York: Doubleday-Ancor, 1996), 85.
4. That transchildren exist in significant numbers is not open to question. The very existence of the diagnostic category "Gender Identity Disorder in Children," according to which discrimination passes for science in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV), testifies to the existence of a population of transgendered children large enough to warrant its existence.
5. Richard Green, *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 2.
6. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Julia Epstein, *Altered Conditions: Disease, Medicine, and Storytelling* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, eds., *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," *The Sciences*, March–April 1993, 20–25; Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins-BasicBooks, 1992); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon, 1996); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone, 1994); Ruth Hubbard, "Gender and Genitals: Constructs of Sex and Gender," *Social Text* 46–47 (1996): 157–65; Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).
7. Green, *Sissy Boy Syndrome*, 13. Note that the DSM-III used a slightly different diagnostic name than the DSM-IV uses, above.
8. Transgender pronouns are in flux at the moment. Here I use male pronouns for female-to-male transpeople, to emphasize that masculinity is not a born privilege. I use "hir," "hir," and "s/he" for male-to-female transpeople, to respect the history of negative—and positive—difference that belongs to born-female human beings.
9. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 162–63, for a critique of Green. It is worth noting that in a work, *The Transsexual Experiment* (London: Hogarth, 1975), that is in some ways quite harsh, Robert Stoller writes, "We see the terrible pain and sadness in these little boys as we force them to resolve their bisexuality. . . . They are like refugees driven from a beloved homeland. . . . Compelled by neighbors, companions, siblings, teach-

- ers, and finally 'the police'—us therapists—to leave this lovely homeland, they cannot help but fight against us, and as our power begins to show its full strength, their fight to return home goes underground into fantasy" (92). Toward the end of the book, Stoller reflects, "I wonder how much anguish we have a right to bring to them. I would not ask, were our success in getting them to create masculinity deep and true. But core gender identity is so fixed so early, and to try to remove it and replace it with its opposite—masculinity, the most alien identity the boy could create—is a cruel process. . . . one begins to wonder: might it not be no worse, and perhaps a bit better, if one encouraged the feminization process. So far neither we nor anyone else—probably—has dared" (273–75). Cross-cultural anthropological knowledge would allow Stoller to recognize that in fact many other societies, and some in our own country—Native American peoples with two-spirit traditions, contemporary urban drag families—have dared to give freedom and support to feminine boys in following their own gender direction. See Williams, *Spirit and Flesh*, and the film *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jeanie Livingston.
10. Green, *Sissy Boy Syndrome*, 266.
11. Elizabeth A. Ford, "H/Z: Why Lesléa Newman Makes Heather into Zoe," in "Lesbian/Gay Literature for Children and Young Adults," ed. Kenneth Kidd, special issue of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 23 (1998): 129.
12. *Ibid.*, 130.
13. *Ibid.*, 131.
14. *Ibid.*, 132. Ford notes that the commercial viability of such a book also depends on maintaining "a 'safe' distance between child and gay adult characters" (128).
15. Donna E. Norton, *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 33.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Donna E. Norton also uses the phrase "the opposite sex" (33), which of course transparently binarizes sex as a conceptual category. Other children's literature textbooks make similar assumptions about gender. In *Children's Books in Children's Hands* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), Charles Temple and his colleagues (including Miriam Martinez, Junko Yokota, and Alice Naylor) claim that "well-written gender-sensitive literature fights stereotypes by depicting the diversity and multidimensionality of men and women, girls and boys" (110). They recommend *Max*, by Rachel Isadora, which they describe as about a boy who "defies the stereotype that 'boys don't dance' when he finds that dance lessons are a good warm-up to his afternoon baseball games" (110), and *William's Doll*, by Charlotte Zolotow, in which Grandmother "gets William a doll so that he can prepare for when he will be a father" (130). In each case, mildly transgressive gender behaviors are quickly recuperated into traditionally masculine, heterosexual contexts and outcomes. Where is the "diversity" in this? I would suggest that finding out that each boy is really utterly appropriately masculine accomplishes nothing but the insidious reinforcement of the disciplinary norms that are ostensibly being challenged.
18. For critical reviews of twenty-six of the most important works on trans-

- gender, see Jody Norton, "Transsexualism/Transgenderism: Theoretical, Psychological, and Medical Accounts," and "Transsexualism/Transgenderism: History, Politics, and Cultural Formations," in the *Reader's Guide to Lesbian and Gay Studies*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000).
19. "Barrie as Dramatist: A Divided Mind," *Times Literary Supplement* 26 (June 1937): 469.
 20. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 112.
 21. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; also see Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes," and *Myths of Gender*.
 22. Dorothy Butler, "From Books to Buttons: Reflections from the Thirties to the Eighties," in *The Arbutnot Lectures: 1980-1989* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1990), 37, quoted in Norton, *Eyes of a Child*, 447.
 23. Norton, *Eyes of a Child*, 281.
 24. *Ibid.*, 447.
 25. See Susan Gillman, *Dark Twins: Imposture and Identity in Mark Twain's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 108-10, for a brief critical discussion of "Hellfire Hotchkiss."
 26. Mark Twain, "Hellfire Hotchkiss," in *Mark Twain's Satires and Burlesques*, ed. Franklin R. Rogers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 177.
 27. *Ibid.*, 178.
 28. *Ibid.*, 194.
 29. *Ibid.*, 195.
 30. *Ibid.*, 187.
 31. *Ibid.*, 199.
 32. Resources for such a discussion include George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: HarperCollins-BasicBooks, 1994); Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993); David F. Greenburg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin-Meridian, 1992) and *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary* (New York: Richard Gallen, 1994).
 33. Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 51.
 34. *Ibid.*, 70.
 35. *Ibid.*, 126.
 36. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). See also Jody Norton, "History, Rememory, Transformation: Actualizing Literary Value," *Centennial Review* 38 (1994): 589-602.
 37. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 51.
 38. *Ibid.*, 50.
 39. *Ibid.*, 51.
 40. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 93.
 41. *Ibid.*, 92.
 42. *Ibid.*, 95.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. See Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, in *Gender Trouble*, and Lacan's notion of the mutually reflective logic of representation, most readily accessible in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).
 45. The first epigraph to this essay.
 46. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 97.
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. *Ibid.*, 94.
 49. *Ibid.*, 95.
 50. *Ibid.*
 51. *Ibid.*, 102.
 52. There are few truly balanced perspectives yet available on the ethics of transsexuality and transgenderism. See Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* and Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) for two interesting analyses of forms of female-to-male transitioning and their ethical implications.
 53. Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Morrow-Quill, 1963), 294-95.