

Jazz: The trans voice in North American children's picturebooks

Jazz: a voz trans na literatura infantil ilustrada norte-americana

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, English-language children's literature has broadened its thematic repertoire by incorporating narratives that address different dimensions of cultural and social diversity. Gender issues, for example, have received increasing attention from the publishing market, specialized criticism, and the reading public. In this context, this bibliographical and exploratory study aims to analyze *I Am Jazz*, written by Jazz Jennings and Jessica Herthel, with illustrations by Shelagh McNicholas (2014). It seeks to examine the representation of trans identity in childhood, with attention to gender stereotypes and to the way the social relationships and negotiations experienced by the protagonist are conveyed through the articulation between text and image. The theoretical framework is based on authors such as Butler (2015), Meadow (2018), Hill (2020), Favero (2020), Madalena (2021), among others. The analysis shows that the work, written by a trans author, contributes to the construction of a narrative that expands possibilities for identification and recognition for trans children in the face of a society still strongly structured by normative conceptions of gender.

Keywords: children's literature; English language; trans child character.

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Resumo

*Desde a década de 1970, a literatura infantil de língua inglesa tem ampliado seu repertório temático, incorporando narrativas que abordam diferentes dimensões da diversidade cultural e social. As questões de gênero, por exemplo, têm recebido crescente atenção mercadológica, da crítica especializada e do público leitor. Nesse contexto, este trabalho, de caráter bibliográfico-exploratório, tem por objetivo analisar a obra *I Am Jazz*, escrita por Jazz Jennings e Jessica Herthel, com ilustrações de Shelagh McNicholas (2014). Busca-se averiguar a representação da identidade trans na infância, atentando aos estereótipos de gênero e ao modo como relações sociais e negociações vividas pela protagonista são veiculados pela articulação entre texto e imagem. O aporte teórico fundamenta-se em autores como Butler (2015), Meadow (2018), Hill (2020), Favero (2020), Madalena (2021), entre outros. A análise evidencia que a obra, escrita por uma autora trans, contribui para a construção de uma narrativa que amplia as possibilidades de identificação e reconhecimento para crianças trans frente a uma sociedade ainda fortemente estruturada por concepções normativas de gênero.*

Palavras-chave: literatura infantil; língua inglesa; personagem criança trans.

Resumen

*Desde la década de 1970, la literatura infantil de lengua inglesa ha ampliado su repertorio temático, incorporando narrativas que abordan diferentes dimensiones de la diversidad cultural y social. Las cuestiones de género, por ejemplo, han recibido una atención creciente por parte del mercado editorial, la crítica especializada y el público lector. En este contexto, este trabajo, de carácter bibliográfico-exploratorio, tiene como objetivo analizar la obra *I Am Jazz*, escrita por Jazz Jennings y Jessica Herthel, con ilustraciones de Shelagh McNicholas (2014). Se busca examinar la representación de la identidad trans en la infancia, prestando atención a los estereotipos de género y al modo en que las relaciones sociales y las negociaciones vividas por la protagonista son transmitidas mediante la articulación entre texto e imagen. El marco teórico se fundamenta en autores como Butler (2015), Meadow (2018), Hill (2020), Favero (2020), Madalena (2021), entre otros. El análisis evidencia que la obra, escrita por una autora trans, contribuye a la construcción de una narrativa que amplía las posibilidades de identificación y reconocimiento para las niñas y los niños trans frente a una sociedad todavía fuertemente estructurada por concepciones normativas de género.*

Palabras clave: literatura infantil; lengua inglesa; personaje infantil trans.

THE 2000s AND TRANS CHARACTERS IN U.S. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The rigor of feminist, queer, and trans studies calls into question the power that operates according to the binary structure of the concept of gender. Authors such as Butler (2015) and Preciado (2014) confront Western thought through texts that introduce theories about multiple gender/sexual identities and their reverberations in contemporary society.

The gender distinction was grounded in criticism of the forced logic of converting sex into gender, which considers only biological patterns and subordinates the sociocultural and subjective construction of gender. Thus, by conceiving that a given sexual organ does not correspond directly to a given gender, these investigations acknowledged the potential of the body freed from previously established constraints. Only after such provocations did the sex/gender distinction become fundamental to understanding gender expressions as fluid and variable.

Stryker (2006, p. 254), for example, defined transgender as an “[...] umbrella term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries.” It can be observed that this proposition has been gaining ground in literature for children, which, through aesthetic enjoyment, seeks to constitute vehicles for ideas that challenge the status quo, promoting social and cultural justice. Nikolajeva (1990) argues that, against pre-established dictates, contemporary writers seek to introduce new themes and narrative resources.

Mickenberg and Nel (2011) view subtle critiques of the social order as a foundational influence whose root—and therefore radical character—lies in awakening understanding and critical awareness regarding inequity, injustice, and exploitation in the world. Consequently, the literary experience that addresses marginalized groups and social justice has a major impact on the production of literature intended for children. Themes involving death, friendships or enmities, loneliness, violence, poverty, and racism—in other words, sensitive themes—have become frequent.

Arising from various social, political, and cultural movements, gender themes in the U.S. context intensified from the 1990s onward, fostering representations that shaped the boom in gay and lesbian characters in this field. However, far from naïve optimism, Sullivan and Urraro (2017) found that, although there was growing production and acceptance of LGBTQIAPN+ issues, trans characters continued to be underrepresented in literature. This limited production is explained by the categorization of transgender identity as a taboo subject for children.

Hill (2020) points out that, in common sense, children are seen as too innocent or incapable of understanding topics such as gender diversity and sexuality. It is therefore unsurprising that, in the 2000s, when trans or nonbinary characters

appeared in works, they were particularly victimized by difficulties and exclusion resulting from heteronormative standards, which tend to rigidify gender and sexuality roles based on dichotomous and supposedly invariable gender impositions. Thus, even when subjected to violence that causes profound suffering, these characters display multiple forms of resistance, especially those supported by the self-affirmation of their gender identities.

According to Hill (2020) and Lima (2017; 2025), research on picturebooks featuring transgender characters is still scarce and generally focuses on family acceptance or bullying. Moreover, picturebooks with trans characters face bans and removals from U.S. schools and public libraries. *I Am Jazz*, for example, was one of the most frequently banned works in school contexts between 2021 and 2022. One reason for such retaliation was the notoriety it gained, since Jazz Jennings, its author, is a well-known public trans figure in the United States.

In this sense, this exploratory bibliographical article seeks to answer the following question: How does *I Am Jazz* represent trans identity in childhood, and in what ways does this representation challenge gender stereotypes and the social relationships experienced by the protagonist? This answer will be developed with attention to the articulation between text and image in the literature under investigation, thereby adding to the perception of nuances narrated by a trans author that reveal affection, a desire for acceptance, and courage. It is worth emphasizing that Jazz is a protagonist constructed through attempts, experiments, creativity, and critical awareness that lead readers to encounter a particular representation of transfeminine identity in childhood. Between subjectivity and the social impact of trans identity, the theme reverberates with echoes of citizenship and affection to show that this political child body remakes itself in engagement with disruptive and sensitive themes.

I AM JAZZ: THE TRANS SELF NARRATING

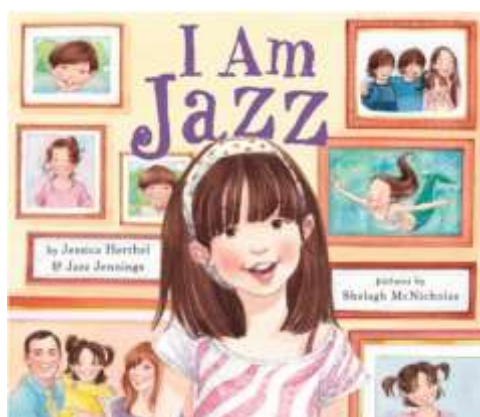
Jazz Jennings is a trans woman who, since childhood, has had considerable prominence in the U.S. context because of her participation in documentaries, authorship of books, television programs, and the creation of the TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation. Among her works, *I Am Jazz* (2014), written in partnership with

Jessica Herthel and illustrated by Shelagh McNicholas, is an autobiographical narrative dedicated to her family and to trans people in different parts of the world.

The picturebook, which received an honorable mention on the American Library Association's Rainbow Project Book List Award (2015), addresses Jazz's trajectory. Although she was born with a body anatomically designated as male, she perceived herself as different from a very early age. In narrating her own story, the protagonist reveals how comfortable she felt expressing herself as a girl. Her efforts to have others recognize her as she truly is are described throughout the book. Through *I Am Jazz*, Jazz Jennings fictionalizes her life, self-discovery, and resilience.

The visual approach developed by Shelagh McNicholas for the 29-page picturebook brings the reader closer to the protagonist's subjectivity. On the cover itself, shown in Illustration 1, it is possible to observe indications of the work's narrative trajectory, as well as the presence of sophisticated and meticulously developed visual resources. The half-title and title page, also marked by illustrations, are carefully designed so that the reader approaches the work with a more mature perspective on some of the aspects encountered through the proposed figurative style.

Illustration 1: Cover.



Source: Jennings et al. (2014).

The cover draws attention because of the numerous picture frames displayed, most of which show the girl happy at different stages of her transition. Among them, the photograph in which Jazz appears dressed as a mermaid is particularly noteworthy, a symbol to which many trans children are drawn, as Galman (2018)

emphasized when observing their persistent use of mermaid imagery in self-portraits. The femininity, mystery, and duality of this magical creature—half woman and half fish—expand children's imaginative possibilities of freedom. According to Madalena (2021, p. 17), this fascination of transfeminine children with mermaids “is sometimes explained by the fact that these mythological creatures do not have genitals, the most obvious sexual characteristic which, naturally, will cause anguish to many of these children”; therefore, in the imagination of the trans child, this figure offers possibilities for transformation and recognition.

By acquainting the reader with the multiple ways in which the trans girl expresses herself, the narrator-protagonist introduces the work by presenting herself. Her favorite color is pink, and among the activities she enjoys are dancing, swimming, playing ball, drawing, putting on makeup, singing, and pretending to be a pop star. Her long hair and use of dresses are also noted. For Oliveira (2018, p. 125),

The construction of a gender identity, female or male, finds in hair one of its most important symbolic elements. Letting it grow means identifying as a woman, while cutting it means moving closer to a male identity, requiring, in the case of children, family consent.

The language of femininity is present from the beginning of the narrative in order to demonstrate Jazz's personal satisfaction in “becoming” a girl. Her joy lies in her self-presentation. Although trans authorship predates this work, the transfeminine child protagonist narrates her own existence through word and image, outlining the critical understanding of the world and the collective that Yunes (2016) calls the construction of the self in autofiction. Initially, in shaping the plot, Jazz the author proposes her fictionalized subjectivity through Jazz the protagonist. Her relationships and their reverberations are then presented, providing readers with her way of understanding herself and the world.

Illustration 2: Moments.



Source: Jennings et al. (2014).

In the opening pages, as shown in Illustration 2, preferences and play make up the entire creative process, and it is through them that Jazz explains how she sees herself in the world. McNicholas consistently chooses to place the protagonist in the foreground and from different angles. Even with multiple images arranged on the page, it is clear that the field of vision is entirely directed toward the Self that narrates; thus, the illustrator alternates parallel projections with a predominance of depth.

In addition to the symbolism of hair, the image of femininity is also presented when the character introduces her two best friends, who like high heels and princess dresses. It is when her friends enter the narrative plane that the character reveals: “But I’m not exactly like Samantha and Casey” (Jennings et al., 2014), bringing to light that she is a trans child.

Illustration 3: Drawing the true self.



Source: Jennings et al. (2014).

In addition to the textual explanation of her transgender identity, the illustrator also uses a visual approach, as in the image above. At her study table, Jazz draws how she felt when she still presented herself as a boy: she was always upset or had a storm cloud above her head. As a girl, however, the drawings are filled with positivity, represented by the presence of the sun and open spaces, which makes it possible to say that the character appropriates the narrative function in her illustrations to tell her own story. Briefly commenting on the work, Miller (2022, p. 148) states that “drawing is a strategy of resilience that helps Jazz rebound from being misgendered and misunderstood. In pictures, she is able to explore a sense of self she doesn’t have the words to articulate.” As a result of the two artistic manifestations, the mixing of techniques becomes evident, since the work includes watercolor, wash, and crayon, to name a few.

The images painted by the girl establish a harmonious relationship with her words, as they depict an upset boy and, in other cases, a happy girl, since, she says, she has a girl’s brain but a boy’s body. In her words: “This is called transgender. I was born this way!” (Jennings et al., 2014). Her statement expresses what it means not to feel that one belongs to the gender assigned by anatomy. Thus, in speaking about herself, the work maintains the conflictual “wrong-body” discourse (Engdahl, 2014). Nevertheless, one understands their need to explain how they feel and, likewise, the importance of certain clarifications for the cisgender child who will encounter the work.

Despite the explanation presented in the work, it is important to emphasize that the character also marks her differences in relation to her best friends by claiming a political-social category to which she belongs. In this sense, being a trans child is not equivalent to being a cis child, because it involves specific experiences of recognition, identity affirmation, and social negotiation of one’s own body and subjectivity. Another aspect to be observed is her statement that she was born a girl, since from childhood she used to tell her mother that she was a good girl in response to the statement that Jazz was a good boy.

Although the illustrations show the child character with various toys, including cars and dolls, typically feminine clothing predominates—necklaces, a princess crown, dresses—as does the character’s appearance as a girl. Over time, through

the narrator-protagonist's own voice, it becomes clear that she gradually moves closer to the feminine and away from the masculine, even in the face of criticism from her brothers: "As I got older, I hardly ever played with trucks or tools or superheroes. Only princesses and mermaid costumes. My brothers told me this was girl stuff. I kept right on playing" (Jennings et al., 2014). Consequently, conversations about her dream of being a girl and her desire to become a beautiful woman were shared with her sister, as illustrated in Illustration 4.

Illustration 4: Favorite color



Source: Jennings et al. (2014)

The representation of two colors in particular draws attention: Blue is generally associated with illustrations in which the character needs to make explicit moments when she lived in a male condition or with the clothing of her brothers and parents; pink, in turn, is directly linked to her femininity or her transgender process. Interestingly, Eva Heller (2013, p. 402) stated that "dressing children in colorful clothes only became popular after 1920, when it became possible to manufacture colors resistant to boiling. And it was only with colorful fashion for babies that pink became a feminine color." Furthermore, travesti researcher Oliveira (2018, p. 119) highlights that:

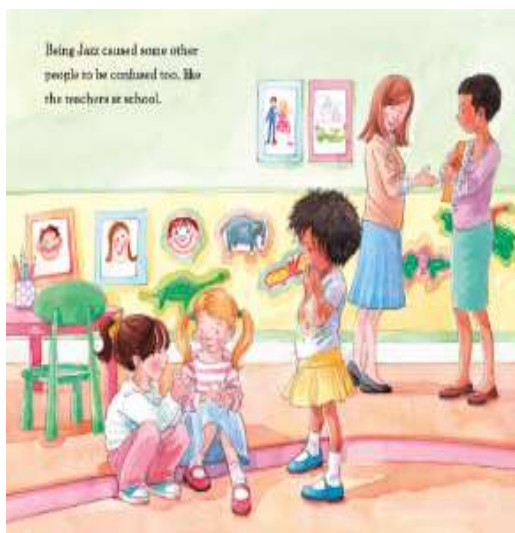
the colors pink and blue represent, quite specifically, in various cultures, the feminine and masculine universes, respectively, in order to indicate, even before birth, the correct way each child should be treated. This is intended to strengthen the constitutive

elements of their femininity or masculinity, directly associated with their biological gender.

Consequently, following these sociocultural traces, the colors mentioned in the text and made explicit in the illustrations present gender mannerisms through the cisnormative standards adopted.

Represented in Illustration 5, the gaze and judgment of others are placed in the background of the illustration, because the character's existence and appearance are what matter. Allusively, it is as if those gazes and judgments had to remain far away, or even as if they were not something that could prevent the character from being who she truly needs to be. The illustrator uses an unlimited viewing angle whose unit—the main character—is the tension or point of direction.

Illustration 5: The gaze of the other.



Source: Jennings et al. (2014).

The watercolor technique, combined with a powerful effect of shadow and light, gives fluidity to the narrative. According to Tomazzoli (2014), this technique also produces lightness and inner calm, which can be perceived in Jazz's own characteristics: a fluid, delicate character in search of harmony.

Although she is allowed to wear feminine clothing in the privacy of her home, Jazz feels upset about having to wear masculine clothing in public spaces. This regulatory role played by the family leads her to live a double life, a reality common to many trans children. Meadow (2018) analyzes this phenomenon when discussing

differences in the clothes worn by trans boys and girls at home and at school. This distinction occurs as a protective strategy adopted by parents, who fear the possible negative consequences of harassment, threats, psychological and physical violence, as well as social disapproval caused by deviation from dress norms.

As parents go through moments of anguish, doubt, and suffering during their children's transition process, they seek to minimize as much as possible the risks their children may face. In the book analyzed, this family regulation is presented as a moment of extreme sadness experienced by Jazz: "Still, I never gave up trying to convince them. Pretending I was a boy felt like telling a lie" (Jennings et al., 2014). The character's articulation of being a trans girl is an insurgent act of resistance in the narrative. Here, the noun "lie" appears in the narrative as a feeling of dissatisfaction.

The day everything changed was described as wonderful, with the help of a doctor so that the situation surrounding the child could in fact be understood. A diagnosis of transgender identity is given: "That night at bedtime, my parents both hugged me and said, we understand now. Be who you are. We love you no matter what. This made me smile, smile and smile" (Jennings et al., 2014). It is noteworthy that support through unconditional love functions as a device of acceptance; however, understanding what was really happening with the trans child could only be achieved with the help of a professional, an authorized medical gaze. For Preciado (2013), "[...] it is impossible for a child to rebel politically against adult discourse: the child is always a body that is not recognized as having the right to govern itself." There is, then, a search for a certificate of truth from an adult specialist who holds knowledge-power, since professional discourse gives authenticity to the trans child's words.

On the other hand, the resistance and search for recognition in *I Am Jazz* can also be understood through the social relations discussed by Qvortrup (2010). For the author, children are seen as social agents, and childhood is perceived as a structural category that does not disappear but is constantly transformed. This occurs because children are actors whose actions modify the structures in which they are embedded. Thus, as a social agent, the protagonist, by narrating herself, claims authority over her own identity, enabling a debate about trans child agency.

Through the children's narrative under analysis, it is also possible to emphasize that trans studies consider that many families are involved in intellectual activities of research, support, and health care with the aim of reconstructing their understandings of gender. The search for understandings and epistemologies aimed at improving the reality of transgender children is growing, and this also finds space in fiction. According to Favero,

Transsexuality, because it is still constituted as a personality disorder, or even as a clinical demand (see gender dysphoria), undergoes a diagnostic process through speech. It is through discourse, in a medical office, that the symptomatology of deviant gender is identified (Favero, 2020, p. 54).

In many cases, the clinic, as a space of knowledge-power, diagnoses the speech of trans children, subjugating them through a cisnormative worldview. Regarding trans characters and the medical gaze, Hill (2020) states that

The questioning of their humanity also occurs when trans children have to explain their gender identity to other people, such as medical professionals or, often, in the case of the children in these books, teachers, parents, or peers. Because their gender identity cannot be defined by other people, and they have to explain how they identify, their humanity is put at risk (Hill, 2020, p. 93).

However, in the words of the narrator-protagonist, this moment is decisive in her life and in the construction of the narrative: "Mom and Dad told me I could start wearing girl clothes to school, and growing my hair long. They even let me change my name to Jazz. Being JAZZ felt much more like being ME." (Jennings et al., 2014). Through the flashback device, she recounts her process of feeling truly complete and perceiving the joy in her existence.

Through the mother's awareness of the obstacles of prejudice, her participation also consists in guiding her daughter: "Mom said that being Jazz would make me different from the other kids at school, but that being different is okay" (Jennings et al., 2014). In reporting on being different, the confusion experienced by other people is clearly exposed, especially by the teachers in question, who at first, out of lack of understanding, tried to make her use the boys' restroom and play on the boys' team. In this way, the narrative brings to light much of what still needs to be

considered regarding the socialization processes of trans children and their use of public spaces, such as safe restroom use, giving visibility to trans children at school, as Robertson (2018) points out.

Fortunately, the girl highlights the change in the teachers' behavior. However, she reveals that other children disrespect her by calling her by her deadname. Faced with this process of othering and subalternity, the young character recalls that many people want to be her friend and demonstrates her resilience in the face of the transphobic processes she encounters. Concluding her presentation by revealing her inner self, she reaffirms herself by saying: "I don't mind being different. Different is special! I think what matters most is what a person is like inside. And inside, I am happy. I am having fun. I am proud! I am Jazz!" (Jennings et al., 2014). Thus, the girl leaves her message of empowerment.

Illustration 6: Back cover.



Source: Jennings et al. (2014).

The final aspect to be highlighted is the back cover, which, like the final page, presents photographs of young Jazz, bringing the reading experience to a close with a kind of before-and-after view of the character. Through these images, it is possible to observe the accessories considered feminine that she begins to use after her transition. Interestingly, in both representations, the character appears happy.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In analyzing *I Am Jazz*, the aim was to understand how U.S. children's picturebook literature has been creating possible spaces for the emergence of

narratives that challenge gender normativities and broaden forms of childhood representation. In a context in which trans characters still occupy a place of scarcity and silencing, the work stands out by inscribing a transfeminine protagonist who narrates herself, articulating subjectivity, memory, affection, and resistance.

The investigation showed that the relationship between word and image is central to the construction of the narrative, since Shelagh McNicholas's visual project not only accompanies the verbal text but also enhances meanings concerning the trans experience in childhood. Colors, framing, expressions, and visual symbols act as narrative devices that construct Jazz's identity, making visible conflicts, desires, processes of self-affirmation, and ways of existing in the face of cisnormative impositions.

In addition, the work was found to mobilize recurring issues in the experiences of trans children, such as family regulation, the need for medical validation, difficulties of socialization in school spaces, and multiple forms of violence and social surveillance. Even so, far from a narrative marked exclusively by suffering, *I Am Jazz* produces an aesthetics of affection by investing in relationships of acceptance, love, and recognition, highlighting the power of self-affirmation and the construction of a possible childhood.

In this sense, the work analyzed is understood to function as a cultural and political artifact by displacing crystallized imaginaries about gender, body, and childhood, proposing other possibilities of existence and intelligibility for trans children. Thus, Jazz's voice reverberates not only as individual testimony but as the symbolic inscription of a trans presence in children's picturebook literature, opening paths for new research and for the circulation of narratives committed to the plurality of childhoods and to social justice.

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