



## **“Doing” Gender Differently: Exposing the Porous Nature of Gender Norms through Children’s Literature** —Michelle Jeffries

Mike, Nadia. *Leah’s Mustache Party*, illustrated by Charlene Chua, Inhabit Media, 2016. 27 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 9781772270815.

Fullerton, Alma. *Hand over Hand*, illustrated by Renné

Benoit, Second Story, 2017. 22 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 9781772600155.

Cassidy, Sara. *A Boy Named Queen*. Groundwood Books, 2016. 77 pp. \$14.95 hc. ISBN 9781554989058.

The texts under review in this essay all focus on protagonists who challenge gender norms. In *Leah’s Mustache Party*, Leah wears a pirate costume and mustache at Halloween, while the other girls wear princess and fairy costumes. She then decides to wear her mustache in other environments and in doing so disrupts gendered notions of costuming and appearance. In *Hand over Hand*, the idea of women’s work and men’s work is challenged in a Filipino fishing village as a young girl convinces her grandfather to take her fishing. The other fishermen in the village are quite convinced she will not catch any fish because she is a girl. *A Boy Named Queen* explores gendered notions of appearance, roles, and names alongside bullying, friendship, and individuality.

In exploring these books, I draw on Judith Butler’s conception of gender as performative. The notion of performativity challenges perceptions of gender as “natural” and innate, instead positioning gender as an effect of repeated material and discursive acts within a regulatory framework. From this perspective, gender is not something we are; rather, it is something we *do*, that is, perform. Thus, while gender expression may appear to be a natural outcome of one’s sex, gender is actually reproduced and generated through unconscious repeated speech and bodily actions. It is in the repetition over time that performance of gender is concealed and appears as being caused by one’s sex. These gendered performances are regulated and policed in multiple ways to (re)produce normative and socially acceptable

(intelligible) ways of *doing* gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). In other words, gendered meanings are regulatory fictions inscribed onto bodies and produced through performative practice (Bunch 39-40). These normative meanings are framed by the heterosexual matrix, a cultural grid of intelligibility through which sex, gender, and desire are constructed and interpreted as intelligible and through which normative ideals of “femininity” and “masculinity” are produced as a hierarchical binary (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). The heterosexual matrix demonstrates how the production of gender is concealed over time and therefore the normative constructions of gender and sexuality are naturalized rather than acknowledged as an effect of regulatory practices. The production of power, indicating what is culturally acceptable and not acceptable, intelligible and unintelligible, designates who is marginalized and excluded in dominant culture (Butler, *Gender Trouble*).

While the concept of unconscious reiteration of gendered performances within the heterosexual matrix could be considered to imply a subject “trapped within a discourse it has no power to evade or to alter” (Salih 58), Butler considers subjects to have agency. This concept of agency, also known as “performative resignification” (Gowlett 406) is useful for this review essay. For Butler, the social and psychic, performative process of *becoming* gendered occurs as a part of the paradox of subjection, whereby power is both external to the subject, acting from the outside, subordinating, regulating and constraining

the subject, as well as productive in that it also forms the subject. As a part of this process, therefore, the subject relies on subjection in order to live. Butler contends that “if conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated [and] the subject is precisely the site of such reiteration, a repetition that is never merely mechanical” (*Psychic* 16). Here, Butler contends that subjects repetitively perform gendered discourses and power relations and in this repetition conditions of power are maintained and generated. Butler claims that performativity, therefore, is “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies* 2). This production is concealed to the point that the effect appears natural and to be that which is named. The notion of performativity as a reiterative and a citational practice is important when one considers Butler’s notion of agency, as she argues that in each reiteration of the citational chain, that is, in each repeated performance of cultural norms, there is a possibility that the performance will be repeated differently. Therefore, for Butler, agency is not deliberate, yet it disrupts and unsettles, and because it works within the norms that already exist, an altered repetition demonstrates that “social norms are porous and can be reworked” (Gowlett 416). Each text discussed in this essay holds examples of protagonists altering citational chains, that is, performing reiterations differently from the norm. By performing in ways that differ from normative, intelligible performances of gender in their everyday lives, they disrupt gender norms, often altering these norms and



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revealing their porous nature. Agency, here, is viewed more as “an alteration and recrafting of the rules” (Gowlett 406) which produce the subject, through an alteration to the repetition of signifiers.

Children’s literature plays a powerful role in shaping children’s understandings of gender and gender(ed) identities (Clasen and Hassel 73-74). The books discussed here importantly provide examples of young people performing gender in ways that trouble the heterosexual matrix with regard to gender roles and performance. Such books afford provide children opportunities to question and challenge gender norms. Each of these books offers openings to consider normative gender performances with children and to trouble such norms.

### **Mustaches for Girls: Challenging Norms of Gendered Costuming and Appearance**

*Leah’s Mustache Party* written by Nadia Mike and illustrated by Charlene Chua is a playful book about a young girl named Leah who likes to wear mustaches. The story begins on Halloween night when Leah is in her bedroom, getting ready to go trick-or-treating. As she looks at herself in the mirror wearing a pirate costume, she cannot shake the feeling that something is missing. When she realizes exactly what that is, she says to her mom, “I need a mustache. All the pirates in the movies have mustaches” (5). Leah’s mom happily paints a mustache on her face and Leah is absolutely delighted—so delighted in fact that she later makes the decision to wear mustaches often, whether as a part of a costume or not. She wears painted mustaches of various shapes, colours, and sizes, in all kinds of places,

including at home, outside, and in school. After many months, when her birthday is approaching, Leah decides to have a mustache party and delivers the invitations sporting various styled mustaches above her upper lip. “Make sure you wear a mustache!” (16) Leah happily tells each of her friends. However, not everyone understands the concept of a mustache party at first. For instance, alongside an illustration of a friend holding the mustache-shaped invitation that Leah had just handed her, the text reads as follows:

“Why are you having a mustache party?” one of Leah’s friends asked. She had never heard of a mustache party before. Most of her friends had princess or fairy parties with pink dresses and fancy crowns.

“Because I think mustaches are cool!” Leah replied, as she handed her friend a mustache-shaped invitation. (19)

An illustration alongside this text shows Leah’s friend looking a little confused, as she holds the mustache-shaped invitation while envisioning other girls wearing fancy crowns. This page demonstrates a troubling of gender norms produced within the heterosexual matrix, a moment of possibility which is held in each new reiteration of a gendered performance, where the citational chain can be altered. Leah alters the normative performance of “girl” each time she wears a mustache

and her mustache party troubles the “doing” of “girls” birthday parties as princess or fairy themed. Leah interrupted the citational chain of performing girl by “doing” girl differently. For Butler, this is the possibility held in each reiteration of a performance of gender. Although there is a little confusion initially among Leah’s friends because this form of party is not intelligible as a girls’ party, they catch on quickly. Her birthday celebration is full of fun and mustaches, some big and bushy and others short and prickly. Leah and all of her friends have a wonderful time at the party.

This book is useful for disrupting notions of gendered costumes and appearance with young children. Leah demonstrates an awareness that the normalized performance of “girl” involves wearing princess and fairy costumes. The popularity of princess costumes at Halloween is certainly reflected in consumer reporting. For instance, in eleven of the past thirteen years in the United States, princess costumes have been reported as the most popular Halloween children’s costume in the annual Halloween Consumer Top Costumes Survey (National Retail Federation). While the survey does not report on gender, research by Lisa M. Dinella on Halloween costume choices in early childhood found that girls preferred “feminine” costumes, with princesses as the most popular, and boys tended to choose “masculine” costumes, with the majority preferring a superhero theme. The data show a real need for books such as this, which challenge gendered

costuming and appearance. Costumes are not just relevant to holidays, however. In early childhood settings, notions of girl-appropriate and boy-appropriate clothing can be seen in the everyday play among children. Certainly in my own experiences within early childhood settings, I have witnessed children policing each other's costume choices in the dress-up corner entirely based on normative gendered concepts. This policing as a part of the process of subjection forms part of the regulatory frame that underpins the heterosexual matrix. This book would be helpful in addressing and challenging such normative gendered notions that constrain gender performance in early childhood settings.

### **“Girls can't fish”: Challenging the Binary of Female and Male Work**

*Hand Over Hand*, written by Alma Fullerton and illustrated by Renné Benoit, is set in a Filipino fishing village. The protagonist, a young Filipina girl named Nina, dearly wants to go fishing with her grandfather, on his old banca boat. Yet each time she asks to go, he answers, “A boat is not the place for a girl.” The performance of “girl” in Nina's village involves drying fish on the shore. This is one aspect of the socially acceptable performance of girl. Through repeated discourse, performance, and regulation, Nina and her grandfather have learned and (re)produced notions of male and female work: that fishing is men's work and her job, as a female, is drying fish on the shore. She is established as a gendered subject through “recognizable

standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 22) that position female and male work as separate and in binary opposition to each other. Through the same lens, she is also produced as a subject that is *unable* to fish purely because of her gender. However, subjection also creates the possibility for a different way of “doing” to emerge. As has been discussed, Butler's view of “agency” asserts that it is possible for the subject to be altered “*within* the structures that constrain it,” and that agency involves a “re crafting of the rules” (Gowlett 406) that produce the subject through altered repetition. In the story, on a particular day, such a re crafting of the rules of “girl” emerges. It begins when Nina asks her grandfather, Lolo, if she can go fishing with him. This is not the first time she has asked, but it is the first time he has agreed. The conversation unfolds:

Nina asks, “Can I go with you?”

“Fishing makes for a long, hard day.” Lolo answers. “A boat is not the place for a girl. Your job is on shore.”

“But I have no more fish to dry, and with two of us we can catch twice as many fish to sell at the market tomorrow,” Nina says.

“You'll bait your own hook?” Lolo asks.

“Yes!” Nina answers.

“And remove your own fish?” Lolo asks.

“Yes! Yes!” Nina answers.

“Okay, we will try it. Just for today.”

We can see here that girls are produced in particular ways: not suited to boats; not able to manage long, hard days. Girls are therefore produced in a form of fragility and men as strong and more able. These discourses reflect an oppositional binary of male/female that signifies the production of “feminine” and “masculine” within the regulatory frame of the heterosexual matrix. When Nina asks to go fishing, and Lolo agrees, the citational chain that produces girls as unable to take long trips in the boat and fish is interrupted, and a possibility that norms may be reworked emerges.

As Lolo and Nina set out at sunrise on the old banca boat, her presence is challenged by the returning night fishermen who scoff, yelling out to Lolo, “You old fool. Girls can’t fish. Their place is on shore.” In this moment, when the night fishermen yell out the rules of gender performance, we see discursive attempts to regulate and police gender norms. Lolo and Nina, however, continue their journey. When Lolo and Nina reach the fishing grounds, Lolo teaches Nina the skills she needs for fishing: baiting the hooks, dropping in the fishing line, jigging the line, and pulling it in when there is a tug. After quite some time, Nina notices that Lolo has caught many fish while she hasn’t even felt a tug on her line. She becomes discouraged at this point, attributing lack of success to her gender, rather than to limited experience and skill. These are the discourses that have produced her, after all, those that position girls as unable to fish. She says to Lolo, “Maybe those fisherman were right. Girls can’t fish.”



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Nina's doubts create another moment of possibility for interruption to the citational chain of "doing" girl. This is a moment where the chain could have continued unaltered, reinforced in a way, after an attempt at a different performance of "girl," that is, a girl that fished, resulting in no fish being caught. Lolo could have agreed and returned back to shore with Nina, gender norms reinforced and steered. However, rather than reinforce the discourses which have produced Lolo as a subject and which, in the paradox of subjection, he has also generated, Lolo challenges Nina's attribution of the cause of not catching a fish to her gender. "Posh!" he says. "The fish can't tell you're a girl." Here, Lolo breaks the citational chain of "girl," challenging her to continue fishing. With this encouragement, Nina starts to reflect critically rather than draw a causal connection between her gender and the lack of fish on her line. To problem solve, she begins to pull in the fishing line to check on the bait and, in doing so, she hooks a very large fish. She pulls in this large fish, hand over hand, just as Lolo had done throughout the day. This action, reflected in the book's title, shows that successful fishing involves particular skills and is not related to gender. Nina and young readers learn that it is skill development, practice, experience, and confidence that allow us to achieve our goals, not our gender. In other words, gender is not the cause of our roles and actions; rather, gender is an effect.

When they return to shore, Nina and Lolo once again come across the night fisherman, this time heading out

to sea. As the night fishermen repeat their calls that girls cannot fish, they discover Nina's catch and learn that, contrary to village discourses, girls can fish. On the final page we see this results in village-wide changes. Here, there is an image of Nina and Lolo looking out over the water, ready with buckets for a day of fishing. Also on the shore are many fishermen heading out to fish with the girls of their family. Villagers now understand that girls can indeed fish. As with *The Mustache Party*, gender norms are exposed as porous through performative resignification, and space is opened up for an alternative doing.

This book demonstrates how repeated discursive and bodily acts performed within regulatory frameworks (in this case the ways, rules, and discourses of the village) reproduce and generate gender with the effect of gendered performance appearing as innate and natural. It also demonstrates that, within the constraints that constitute subjects through repeated performance, there is also the possibility to perform differently. In Butler's view of performative agency, there is not a deliberate attempt to change the structures of society through these actions (Gowlett 406). However, the alternation troubles existing social norms and reveals that they are not, after all, "natural." Gender norms are constructed and permeable. The interruption to the citational chain creates possibility for notions of intelligibility and social norms to change, which is certainly the case in the conclusion of this story.

### **Challenging Binaries of “Feminine” and “Masculine”**

*A Boy Named Queen* by Sara Cassidy, is a warm, humorous, and thought-provoking short chapter book that invites young readers to consider gender norms, othering, bullying, diversity, individuality, uniqueness, and friendship. These complex concepts are woven into the narrative skilfully by the author in ways that provoke reflection, yet also create space for lightness and fun.

The protagonist is Evelyn, a unique and imaginative grade-five girl. We journey with her as she navigates family and school life, and as she makes a new friend, Queen. Queen is new to Evelyn’s school and is unlike anyone she has ever known. He has long hair, eats Brussels sprouts and quinoa, dresses uniquely, is not too rattled by what others think, *and* his name is Queen. Right from the moment Queen arrives in Evelyn’s classroom, he is subject to teasing by other children based on normative notions of gender. Evelyn and Queen become fast friends and throughout the story we learn about their likes and dislikes and their unique ways of moving and being in the world as individuals; we observe their friendship blossom through challenges and laughter. Through this friendship, Evelyn learns not to be so concerned about what other people think.

The book contains eight fairly short chapters, most about eight pages long, which seems appropriate given the target age group and the complexity of concepts contained within. In terms of gender norms, this book explores several concepts, including hair, clothing, and

names. For instance, Queen’s hair is long and Evelyn’s hair is short, challenging conservative binary notions of “feminine” and “masculine” and gendered ideas about appropriate gendered hairstyles. Early in the book, we read “Nadine Pratt has grown her hair long, which means that Evelyn is the only girl in grade five with short hair. She hopes her mother doesn’t find out. What if she makes her grow her hair long, too?” (19). These few sentences tell us that all of the other girls in Evelyn’s grade have long hair, but she prefers her hair short. It also demonstrates the power parents potentially have over children’s appearance and the challenges this may create if a child performs gender in non-dominant ways. We can also see from this passage that Evelyn is willing to perform “girl” differently from the other girls in her class, a performance that carries with it a message for young readers that it is okay to make choices against the status quo.

Notions of gendered clothing are also explored in the book. For instance, on his first day of school Queen wears a pink shirt, a colour that is often constructed as a girls’ colour. Another example relates to Evelyn’s clothes. When Evelyn attends Queen’s birthday party, her mother compels her to wear a dress, and her feelings about wearing such apparel are made clear by the author:

Evelyn feels like she’s wearing a costume. She feels like she’s pretending to be someone she’s not. . . . Her mother said the dress makes her look graceful. But it’s the opposite. She feels clunky and stiff. The only thing





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keeping her from joining the weekend field hockey team is the uniform. That awful short skirt. Luckily, Girl Guides lets her choose between pants and a skirt. She chooses the pants.

But she's not allowed to go to Queen's birthday party in pants. (47-48).

Sections such as this provide opportunities for children to interrogate gender norms with regard to appearance. These concepts relate to subverting gender through particular choices of clothing styles.

Queen's name introduces another gender-related concept explored in the book. When Queen shares his name with the class at the request of the classroom teacher, Mr Zhang, the teacher's response is, "Queen? Q-u-e-e-n. Really?" From here on in, Mr Zhang pronounces Queen's name incorrectly, making it sound like *Quee*. This shows the teacher's discomfort with calling a boy "Queen" in front of the class. Later in the book, when Evelyn tells her mother that Queen has invited her to his birthday party, her mother's response is as follows:

"I'm invited to a birthday party." [Evelyn] blurts when her mother is ready.

"Whose birthday?"

"The new boy."

"What new boy?"

"Queen."

"Quinn, you mean."

“No, Queen.”

“Quentin.”

“Queen.”

“That’s not a boy’s name.” (45-46)

Evelyn’s mother uses the phrase “a boy named Queen” (47) several times after this exchange when they are talking about the party. These exchanges show some of the ways that gender may be regulated by others, in this instance through fixed ideas about gendered names. At the end of the book we find out the origins of Queen’s name and he talks about how people’s reactions help him to know what kind of people they are and if he can trust them. He points out that Evelyn never seemed to notice his name was different and he trusted her straight away. This teaches children important lessons about the impact their behaviour and reactions may have on others.

When Queen first shares his name with the class, the children laugh. As the narrative continues, Queen’s name is used by two classmates, Connor and Parker, to bully him. For instance, when Queen first joins the classroom, Connor points at Queen’s bag and says, “That’s where the queen keeps her crown” (22). At another time Parker sings out, “Here comes the queen!” (50) when Queen is approaching. Their bullying takes other forms beyond verbal teasing as well, such as breaking Queen’s pencils and flicking around the nibs, and intimidating Queen by pedalling around him in tight circles on their bikes while taking photos. In many of these instances, we gain insight

into Evelyn’s physical reactions in witnessing these events, such as “Evelyn’s heart thuds. Her face prickles” (22). Descriptions such as these invite opportunities to explain to children what it feels like to witness bullying and for children to reflect on their own experiences of witnessing lateral, verbal, and physical violence and how best to respond.

There are also opportunities within the book for children to explore their own normative thinking in relation to bullying. In one instance, when Evelyn and Queen talk about a club that he has started, Evelyn is teased about being Queen’s “lady in waiting” (50) by Connor and Parker. Here she reacts differently than she has in the past because she has now become a target of bullying merely for being Queen’s friend. The book reads,

Evelyn flushes with heat. She’s embarrassed. She trembles. She’s angry. But she’s not mad at Connor and Parker. She’s mad at Queen! This is *his* fault. If he didn’t have such a strange name. If he wore clothes like everyone else, and didn’t start clubs.

Kids don’t start clubs. Teachers start clubs. (50)

This short section introduces the complex concept of victim-blaming. Here Evelyn blames Queen for the violence that is being enacted upon him. Evelyn is a kind girl, but in this moment, when she has become a target of bullying, she blames Queen for it. In doing this, she positions his performance of gender and his individuality

as the cause of the bullying. This is not a usual reaction for Evelyn, and the contrast provides a valuable opportunity for discussion with children about victim-blaming.

The book repeatedly challenges normative gender performances, but again, not with characters purposely attempting to subvert and change the norms of society. As has been discussed throughout this essay, for Butler, agency is not related to a prediscursive essence trying to enact on the world to make change. Rather it is about the unconscious repeated performances that constitute gendered subjectivities, and that each performative act contains possibilities for an altered performance. In this book, the characters perform their gender in ways that produce a feeling of difference or unintelligibility within social norms; the book examines some of the challenges of living outside these cultural norms, and some of the constraints and enablements of doing so. Whereas in the previous two books, where the protagonist had an adult supporter or encourager in their altered performances, this book involves two children dealing with the reactions of adults and children around them who view intelligibility through the heterosexual matrix. This is a relevant and useful step beyond the previous texts, given the target age.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these books provides opportunities to examine normative notions of gender roles and performance with young children. Young children are subjectivated through cultural norms and regulations about appropriate ways to perform gender in many spaces, including through family, culture, media, schools, and other institutions. As individuals repeatedly perform gendered speech and actions within these regulatory frames, gender appears as natural and innate. However, according to Butler, gender is not something we are, it is an action, a doing, a performance. As each of us performs with and for others, there is always the possibility for an alteration to the citational chain so that gender might be performed differently. In this way, the “naturalness” of gender roles and expressions is troubled and interrupted, and the porousness of such norms is revealed. By disrupting ideas about gender norms and normative gender performance, books such as these provide children with opportunities to question and challenge some of the ways the constructedness of gender is concealed. This troubling of gender opens up possibilities to *do* gender differently.

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