

ENCHANTED SELVES

Transgender Children's Persistent use of Mermaid Imagery in Self-Portraiture

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Sally Campbell Galman

University of Massachusetts at Amherst <sally@educ.umass.edu>

ABSTRACT: In recent years, there has been a surge of popular interest in the lives and experiences of transgender and gender diverse people. However, this interest has been disproportionately focused on adults and teens, on biomedical framing and persistent binarism, without paying attention to young transgender and gender diverse children's engagement with culture, media and meaning. This article presents data from an ongoing arts-based ethnographic study of young transgender and gender-diverse children (ages 3-10) in the United States. In this study, feminine-identified transgender children repeatedly drew themselves as mermaids in self-portraits and highlighted the importance of other mermaid-related play throughout their drawings and narratives. Even very young transgirls insisted that their drawings of mermaids represented the joy of being able to be their true selves, affirmations of femininity and nascent trans pride. This article begins with a brief discussion of mermaids in Western culture and media, followed by a more in-depth focus on the applicability of the mermaid as metaphor for understanding young transgirl experience, representation and feminine credentialing.

KEYWORDS: Mermaids, Gender, Children's Media, Transgender Children, Childhood, Girl Culture

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge of popular interest in the lives and experiences of transgender and gender diverse people. However, this interest has been disproportionately focused on adults and teens, on biomedical framing and persistent binarism (Ehrensaft, 2013). This article presents data from an ongoing arts-based ethnographic study of young transgender and gender-diverse children (ages 3-10) in the United States. In this study, children were asked to illustrate and paste pictures into scrapbooks depicting and describing themselves, their interests and their identities. Many young transgirls in the study repeatedly drew themselves as mermaids, and highlighted other mermaid-related play elements throughout their scrapbooks. Even very young transgirls insisted that their drawings of mermaids represented the joy of being able to be their true selves, and often referred to mermaid media as exemplars of both happy endings and desirably heightened and recognisable femininity. This article presents analyses of ethnographic and visual data to offer tentative understanding of the ways in which mermaid iconography is used by transfeminine children.

Study background

Gender awareness is keen for even the youngest children (Dykstra, 2005), and gender variation is typically well established by the time children are in preschool (Ehrensaft, 2013). While parents, teachers and other adults may initially express doubts about the veracity or durability of children's claims, transgender children, in particular, have been shown to be "statistically indistinguishable from cisgender children of the same gender identity" (Olson, Key and Eaton 2015: 469). Meanwhile, research suggests that all children, but especially those that are transgender, benefit when adults listen to and validate their stories, giving children's expressed identities primacy instead of seeking to reify an adultist gender binary (Schwartz, 2012; Sausa, 2005).

However, while it is certainly slowly growing, the body of descriptive research on the lives of transgender people remains small. As Biblarz and Savci write, "academic research on transgender people and their families is almost non-existent" (2010: 489). This is even more pronounced in the case of young transgender children, as Olson, Key and Eaton write, a "visible and growing cohort of transgender children in North America live according to their expressed gender rather than their natal sex, yet scientific research has largely ignored this population" (2015: 467). It is possible that researchers may not have seen young children as reliable informants about their own identities (Melton et al, 2014), and have therefore focused their inquiry on adults and adolescents leaving this lacuna in place. The belief that young, pre-adolescent children are not reliable informants in social science research is pervasive and rooted in a history of developmentalist theorising that positions young children as incomplete human beings who cannot reasonably know self or other (Freeman and Mathison, 2004; Graue and Walsh, 1998). Contemporary anthropologists of childhood have worked to challenge this narrative, engaging in child-centered research with even the youngest children (Henward 2015; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). However, descriptive research and cultural commentary on transgender children still follows the developmentalist pattern, by which scholars persist in generalising downward: They tacitly assume that patterns seen in pre-teen and adolescent populations will be consistent — perhaps in miniature — among younger children (Galman, 2018b). Resisting this downward generalisation is essential to scholarship in childhood. As James, Jenks and Prout write:

young children's worlds of cultural and meaning making practices constitute an "independent place with its own folklore, rituals, rules and normative constraints... within a system that is unfamiliar to [adults] and therefore to be revealed through research [to] provide the tribes of childhood... with the status of social worlds" ensuring that "such a form of childlife can begin to receive detailed annotation. (1998: 29-30).

This is perhaps magnified in the case of historically marginalised groups such as young transgender children, whose experiences may be too easily discounted or overlooked in favour of more easily obtainable data (Galman, 2018a).

The few studies that do address young children are almost entirely biomedical or clinical in nature, and understandably focus on pathology and/or treatment options rather than descriptive studies of the young children and their lived experiences (Drescher and Byne, 2012; Schwartz, 2012). Interestingly, the more robust literature base that focuses on transgender and adults and adolescents has a similar bent: the professionals who work with these populations often see transgender people through the deficit lens of pathology and correction rather than service to and celebration of the human diversity transgender people

represent (Jones et al, 2016). The body of educational research on the experiences of transgender children in school follow a similar path: most focus on adolescents and they find that transgender and other gender diverse children have been shown to have historically unequal educational outcomes compared with their cisgender peers; that schools are the locations for the most trauma and negative mental health experience; and that ethics of justice rather than care prevail in the case of caring for the unique but basic needs of transgender and gender diverse children (Holmes and Cahill, 2004; Wells, Roberts and Allan, 2012). Within these conditions, many transgender and gender diverse children are less able to take advantage of school learning opportunities because they feel understandably unsafe, hyper-vigilant and anxious in school settings (Graybill and Proctor, 2016). They are often unable to focus on content-area learning because they are experiencing stress, fear and hyper-vigilance around peer aggression, misgendering by adults and in learning materials, and appropriate bathroom access (Kahn, 2016). Still others refuse to go to school or become so distressed at the prospect of school attendance that their parents must make alternative arrangements, including homeschooling or specialised care (Galman, 2017b).

No matter how one interprets the existing body of literature, it is evident that an asset-based, descriptive portrait of resilience, contribution and even the humanising quotidian details of childhood, are sorely needed at all levels, but especially among this particular population of young children.

Methodology

The larger study from which these analyses come involved over 70 children who identify as transgender or gender diverse and their families, all of whom are in the United States. Out of this total participant group, these analyses¹ focus specifically on data from the 32 study participants who identified as transgirls² and specifically the 25 who drew or included images of mermaids in their autobiographical material, described below.

The ethnographic study design was open-ended and discovery oriented, and data collection included participant observation, interviews and artifact collection. Additionally, the study incorporated an arts-based elicitation project in which children were asked to create self-portraits and autobiographical art and narrative in provided blank scrapbooks. This project was introduced as a more developmentally-appropriate and child-centered way of structuring an interview around central questions of identity. As Punch notes, using methods that build on children's existing competencies and social location(s) can be beneficial,

¹ Of this N = 32, 28 were White, 2 Asian-American and 2 African-American. The representative vignettes I have chosen from these data include Ellie, who is White and 9 years old, and Tina, who is White and 4 years old. Further discussion of the experiences of transgirls of color with majority White Kindercultures, including Mermaid imagery, can be found in forthcoming related publications.

² The popular and empirical literature uses many terms to describe children's and adults' gender identities and experiences, including but not limited to 'transgender,' 'gender nonconforming,' 'gender-creative,' 'gender independent' and several others that may or may not be appropriate for use in all communities. Even though many of these terms have specific contextual meanings, and should be subject to careful scrutiny. For the purposes of this discussion I will use the term 'transgirl,' which was the term preferred by the included child participants and their families. The term transgender can be used to indicate a child who identifies as a different gender than was assigned at birth, and 'transgirl' is used here to denote children who were assigned male at birth but identify and are affirmed as females.

especially when more traditional interview methods may be inappropriate for children: "Since children tend to lack experience of communicating directly with unfamiliar adults in a one-to-one situation, a more innovative approach such as using task-based methods can enable children to feel more comfortable with an adult researcher" (2002: 330). As with any methodological choice, and as emphasised by Punch, these methods require constant critical reflection on the part of the researcher to be sure that their use continues to be principled, ethical, effective and beneficial.

After the children completed their books they 'read' their stories to me. This was a variation on the 'Draw, Write, Tell' technique, as per recommendations for child-centered analyses of visual material from Angell et al (2015). I used these sessions, always conducted in the child's home context, as a chance to ask questions about the images and the child's story, careful of the implicit power dynamic of my adult role in the exchange and focusing on the text, rather than the child, as the object of discussion. Without exception, the children were always eager to share their work with me, and the exchanges were positive, which may have been a function of my previous efforts at careful rapport-building. Children were allowed to keep their books and all of the art supplies provided to them as part of study participation, and I photographed the books on-site (with children's permission) to avoid physically taking the children's work from them at any point. Data analyses included a modified grounded-theory approach that incorporated both thematic analyses and extensive memoing as per Strauss and Corbin (1998). Visual analyses followed (Galman, 2017).

As will be discussed in the paragraphs that follow, out of the 32 transgirls whose data is analysed here, all but seven drew or otherwise referenced mermaids in their autobiographical material. 12 of these 25 identified the drawings as self-portraits of one kind or another³. Analysing these representations in the scrapbook materials has been a twofold task. On one hand, I have explored the meaning of the mermaid as it appears in the children's visual products and corresponding narratives and will present a strictly emic interpretation thereof. On the other hand, the children's interest in mermaids has also provided a useful *in vivo* metaphor for thinking about and analysing their stories and framing the experience of the transgirl in the context of popular US media and what has come to be known as 'Kinderculture.'⁴

The mermaid serves as an unusual but useful metaphor for thinking about the tricky identity work with which many of these children are engaged. So, it serves as something to directly interpret, but also as a frame with which to think creatively and expansively about gender identity in a line of work where theories can be deleterious and largely based on ideas of bodily dysphoria, as noted above. The mermaid as an *in vivo* metaphor provides a different way of framing children's stories about themselves as transgirls that does not include such pathologising frames. While connections between transgender identities and the mermaid are not new, this ethnographic work is the first to capture an emic interpretation of transgirls' use of mermaid imagery in their autobiographical narratives. As Hurley writes:

³ The remaining 13 included mermaids as marginalia, background material, stickers or similar pre-made pasted-in material that they did not identify as important or include in their narratives.

⁴ Kinderculture is what we think of when we talk about culture that is marketed specifically to children. Steinberg (2011) defines the Kinderculture as a corporate construction of childhood specifically aimed to construct the child as a consumer. This can be analysed, just like any other artifact, to inform how children and childhood are constructed and also how children are positioned in a given culture.

No ethnographic study on the link between transgirls and the little mermaid exists, but information about the lives and treatment of transgender children is emerging which suggests how much there is at stake in paying attention to the kinds of stories and voices associated with these young people. (2014: 259).

For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to present two participant cases as representative vignettes. Vignettes are commonly used in ethnographic writing as windows into participant experience, portrayals of key happenings in the field, and moments of “thick description” intended to transport the reader to the smells and sights and textures of the field site so that they may judge the ethnographer’s interpretations in context (Geertz, 1973). Geertz was especially keen to distinguish mere reporting from the work of descriptive ethnography as a mark of quality:

It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. (1973: 16)

So, we are here not merely counting mermaids in children’s artwork, but rather describing the context of the identification. Drawing from the Geertzian tradition, Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Le describe ethnographic vignettes as “an evocative way to provide readers with a sense of what it was like to *be there* in the field (2014: 8). Further, the ethnographic vignette is more than a compelling read; the “evidentiary power of such vignettes lies in their plausible, vivid, and authentic insights into the life-world of the participants” (ibid: 7).

The representative vignettes featured here focus on two girls: Ellie⁵, who is 9 years old, and Tina, who is 4 years old. Ellie’s responses and experience are largely representative of the older group of participants, while Tina’s are more indicative of patterns in the younger set. For example, as will be discussed below, Ellie’s drawing is heavily and consciously representational, and she has labored significantly to be sure that the product is realistic and readably by an external public. Meanwhile, Tina’s — like the artwork of many preschool aged children — is presented as an expression of abstract process.

Finally, a note about the scope of discussion and analyses: while the literature on mermaids is diverse and international, I will be focusing here on a small subset of Western interpretations and cultural histories of mermaids as antecedents to participant experience, media diet and meaning-making. I acknowledge the richness of the panoply of non-Western mermaid traditions and folklore; however these are not present in the participant cultural milieu and as such are excluded from discussion and analyses. Similarly, the available literature on Western mermaid folklore, media and cultural lineage is extensive and not discussed in an exhaustive fashion as part of these analyses,⁶ in favor of privileging participant narratives. Indeed, the literature provided here is a small lens intended to heighten our understanding of the girls and their interest in mermaids. Lastly, and in keeping with the overall trend in the literature described above, I only very cautiously incorporate

⁵ All participant names herein are pseudonyms, and all place names and other potentially identifying details have been changed to protect participant privacy.

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the mermaid in media and culture across contexts and outside the Western canon or the young children’s media and Kinderculture diet, please see Hayward (2017).

some of the literature on adolescent girls' mermaid culture: My focus is decidedly on younger transgirls, and not as minaturisations of the categorically different experiences of older girls.

On mermaids and metaphors

Before I discuss the contemporary mermaid as she appears in the participant's US cultural and Kinderculture environment, I want to first draw attention to the early modern context as foundational to the *in vivo* metaphor in place for these analyses. As Pedersen writes, "the mermaid helps us reflect on how bodies transgress social boundaries" (2015: 9) in the early modern contexts, with carryover to contemporary understanding. Pedersen's exploration of the mermaid as a window into the history of gender and sexuality in early modern England (and, notably beyond), begins by asking "What is the sex of a mermaid? What is the gender? [she is] the sexed and gendered body that resists clear categorical frameworks" (ibid: 1-3). Then, as now, the mermaid stood for a challenge or disruption to the existing order and to categorisation systems in the existing schema of religious and folk belief. This extended to understandings of sex and gender, where the mermaid can be seen as an early symbol of hybridity, challenge and contradiction. We see the modern connection immediately. "Much like the term mermaid," writes Pedersen, "the term 'transgender' contracts and expands in particular situated contexts" (ibid: 54). And this is not done neatly, but has been interpreted in a range of different and difficult ways by contemporary people and today's historians and writers. Pedersen continues, noting that the mermaid "is a figure that gains her identity through deep incoherence" (ibid: 14).

In an era where iconography often took the place of literacy, mermaids were sometimes portrayed on church walls, holding combs and gazing into mirrors, (Gachot, 1996). Pedersen (2015) notes that the mirror may have also signified mirage-like deception, but there are also instances where Mermaids appear as positive figures in these same contexts. As Woodcock (2007) found, mermaids in church carvings were also sometimes depicted with small fishes in their grasp, but Pedersen observes that this is complicated because the mermaid is also a fish, like Christ; while "on a more fundamental level, the fish as a Christian symbol may make the mermaid a potential rival with Christ for the Christian soul" (2015: 12) it is ultimately suggestive of her upside-down, complicating power and the many contradictory ways in which she might be interpreted. An object of fascination, then as now, the mermaid is still something that resists simple interpretations and easy categorisations.

Mermaids inside: Tina

Before I even began formal analyses of the visual data, I noticed that time and time again many transgirl participants' self-portraits involved mermaids. Further, when I asked the children who the mermaids were (expecting them to be imaginary friends, toys, or figures from popular media) I was surprised when more than one child replied with something like, "Oh, that is me. I am a mermaid." On one occasion I responded, without thinking, "I love that you are pretending to be a mermaid," and was sharply corrected by the young child who replied with seriousness, "No, I am not pretending." Young children's pretend play has diverse purposes and is framed in a variety of ways (Galman, 2017a). However, child participants' close identification with and interest in mermaids was borne out in the stories that the parents told about the play they saw their transfeminine daughters engaged in, the play I have observed, the images they created, and the media they selected and consumed. Like most children with rich, imaginative internal lives that they employ to build positive

self-concepts and resilient selves, one participant told me that she was “a mermaid inside.”

The images the children created and shared with me varied in style but rarely in substance. Some drawings were very stylised and representational, like 9-year-old Ellie’s (see Figure 1), which was created by copying an image from a popular online drawing class because she wanted her drawing to be representational and readable by others. Ellie pointed out that she was still working on drawing this kind of mermaid, and that a final product would eventually have hair and skin color to match her own. “My friends love my mermaid drawings,” she noted with pride. Her mother affirmed that she was frequently tasked with decorating her schoolmates folders with mermaid pictures identical to this one, and drawing this stylised mermaid had become a trademark skill in her peer group.



Figure 1 – 9 year old Ellie’s drawing

Others, especially those from younger children, were less representational and required more participant interpretation (see Figure 2). Figure 2 is a mermaid self-portrait from Tina, age 4. Small for her age, with brown curly pigtails, Tina appeared at the front door wearing a teal tutu and soft, pink, leather ballet slippers when I arrived to see her book. She took my hand and led me from the front door to the bright red overstuffed sofa in her living room. “Sit here,” she said, patting the sofa with a small hand decorated in sparkly light pink nail polish. “I have finished all the art for you,” she said, with some seriousness, “Now you must to pay attention to me when I read my book to you.” We sat on the sofa together and went through every page, most of which were decorated with stickers and crayon drawings of the things that were most important to Tina. On one page, Tina lingered, running her small finger over the lines. “I am a mermaid in this picture. See my tail?” she said, “It is sparkling

with scales and the light is coming off it. I am swimming with my friend.” Tina noted each line coming off the tail meant to represent the shining light emanating from her person. Her friend, notably, is not shining because “my friend is not a mermaid. She is just swimming.” Tina highlights her own difference, and it is nothing short of magical. The friend in question was never named, but Tina’s mother said that she does not have any transgender friends, and the friend was certainly Nora, who lived next door and had a pool. The girls spent nearly every day all summer long playing in the pool together, and Tina’s mother laughed when she described watching them sprawled “like little beached whales” on the pool deck with towels on their heads to stand for long mermaid hair. Tina had a little bit more hair this year and had graduated to tiny tufts of pigtails, but last summer, her mother said, she had been growing out her short “boy haircut” and may have felt self-conscious:

She begged us for a ‘girl wig’ that summer, because her hair was so short. She had turned four and had transitioned socially the previous spring in preschool, and we knew that this year would be the first year she would start out as Tina, using she/her pronouns, in her class. She wanted that long hair so badly and I was glad she and Nora both played the game with the towels — it made it seem more okay — her pretend bought us a little bit of time.



Figure 2 – 4 year old Tina’s portrait of herself as a mermaid.

On previous visits, Tina had taken me to see her bedroom, where her toys and stuffed animals and dress-up clothing resided. On this visit I noticed that she had a new collection

of ornate, sparkling barrettes for her growing hair. They shone like fish scales, and more than once Tina absentmindedly ran her small fingers over the green and white sequined barrette in her hair that day. For her upcoming fifth birthday, Tina had requested a swimsuit “with scales on it” for the upcoming summer with Nora. “Then we can play mermaids some more.” I asked Tina if she wanted a mermaid tail for swimming. She sighed, “I *did* want one, but Mommy said they are not safe⁷. So I will get a shiny swimsuit and just do like this” — at which point she laid on the floor and kicked her feet together in unison like a mermaid’s tail. I said that she looked great. She nodded enthusiastically.

Mermaids and children’s media

As Hayward (2017) observes, the generally queer and specifically trans associations with mermaids pervade much of 20th and 21st century media culture as exemplary of the logic of normative disruption and denaturalisation that is at the core of Transgender Studies. However, these examples would probably not be familiar to study participants⁸. The only intersection of transgender identity and mermaid play that any participant was familiar with was Jazz Jennings, author of one of the very first books about a transgender child, who frequently portrays herself as a mermaid in publicity photos and even hosts pool parties at family gender conferences that feature her prominently in her mermaid tail. Many young trans or gender creative children know who Jazz (Jennings) is because Jazz is proud of being trans, and they have become aware of her promotional photos and other materials that highlight her interest in mermaids (Hurley, 2014). During one visit, Tina and I had read her favorite book, Jennings’s *I am Jazz*, (2014). In this children’s book, Jazz is featured on the cover⁹ swimming with one of the mermaid tails that Tina wanted so badly. This image is small, and located just to the center right of the cover, but it would have been important to Tina and other readers. While Tina was too young to have read Jazz’s subsequent book focused on her teenage years (2016), she would have been delighted to learn that Jazz professes that she is “still obsessed with mermaids” and shares a photo of herself modeling a mermaid tail in a swimming pool in the book (ibid: 142).

The other mermaid all the participants knew was Ariel, from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989). Even the casual observer might note that the majority of mermaid aficionados effectively perform homages to Ariel, incorporating what Hayward describes as the “four main design elements: a green, scaled fish tail that ends at her waist with a small collar... long, thick auburn tresses (that swirl around in the sea and bob around in the air); a slim, naked upper body with breasts cupped in purple clam shells; and a pretty face distinguished by large eyes and a gleaming smile” (2017: 35-36). In the children’s renderings, the little shell brassieres indicate femaleness but also solve a practical problem; As Jessie, age 6, said, “You cannot show everyone your boobs.”

⁷ Interestingly, several mothers — including both Tina and Ellie’s — said that these latex tails were not safe. I understand that they are very difficult to swim in and, also, quite expensive.

⁸ While there are many service organisations, both the US and other contexts, that use mermaid iconography or symbolism, these organisations were unknown to study participants.

⁹ See the cover image reproduced from Herthel and Jennings (2014) online at: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/315643/i-am-jazz-by-jessica-herthel-illustrated-by-shelagh-mcnicholas/9780803741072> - accessed 6th May 2018.

Children's drawings and stories frequently borrow from media in this way, including but not limited to Disney; however, as I've written in other work (Galman, 2017a), this does not make their self-expression any less authentic. Like adults, children are savvy curators of the media influences in their environment, incorporating it into their art, meaning systems and play. They do not simply reproduce media, but instead use it for specific purposes, including the aspirational and affirming. Disney's Ariel is the ultimate in mermaid-ness for these young study participants and was the primary source of mermaid knowledge, even for Ellie, who at age 9 had begun small but largely misunderstood forays into tween and teen media¹⁰. Ariel was attractive to participants because she is both beautiful and an aspirant feminine ideal — and most importantly, instantly recognisable as both. For the transgirls in this study, who were assigned male at birth, being recognised as a girl was of paramount importance (but with a twist, as we will see). Further, there are no ugly mermaids in the sample, as, without exception, these children see themselves as beautiful in their authenticity.

More than a girl: Ellie

While lots of children decorate their bedrooms, bookbags and notebooks with Disney's mermaid princess, for the transgirls in this study, being a mermaid is not necessarily about participating in Kinderculture or being a part of older, tween and teen girls' "mermaid aficionado culture" (Hayward, 2017: 129). Rather, it may be more about demonstrating feminine credentials and affirming transfeminine identity as a more significant kind of femininity, beyond reproach and proudly, powerfully outside of the binary order.

One study participant, Ellie, who is the artist behind Figure 1, had long been interested in mermaids. Nine years old when she made this drawing, Ellie says knew she was a girl from the time she was two years old. "I was never a boy," said Ellie, tossing her long, chlorine-and-sun-bleached blond hair over one shoulder and laying back on her stuffed-animal covered bed. "I have *always* been a girl. It's just that, before, I was a baby and couldn't talk to tell anyone!" She swung her legs high over her head and flipped herself out of bed in one lithe movement. "I used to tell my mother that my clothes itched but really I didn't want to wear all the cargo shorts with camo and footballs and dumb stuff on them." She made a noise and wrinkled up her tanned, freckled nose and squeezed her sky blue eyes shut. Ellie's mother concurred, saying that she was initially concerned about the detergent she was using, or that Ellie had some kind of sensory disorder because she always complained that every item of clothing itched — until she noticed that Ellie didn't have that reaction when she wore her older sister's ultra-feminine hand-me-downs. Now a 4th grader, she transitioned socially in Kindergarten.

I had visited Ellie before, and been given a tour of her bedroom, which was stacked floor-to-ceiling with stuffed animals, soccer trophies and brightly colored plastic bins containing everything from collections of tiny rubber figurines to plastic horses and Lego bricks to half-

¹⁰ Ellie's mother and father affirmed that her media usage was carefully monitored, and the few movies that she had asked to watch that were for older girls were certainly misunderstood (as is clear in the case of *Aquamarine*). It is entirely possible that in a few years Ellie would certainly be a candidate for what Hayward (2017) describes as "mermaid aficionado culture," though there is very little written about how transgirls' adolescent experiences may or may not be different from that of cisgender tweens and teens, and how the early and middle childhood interest in mermaids may change, disappear or be transformed in a landscape of hormone blockers, cross-hormone treatments and the minefield of middle and high school.

empty bottles of bubble-gum scented nail polish. As was the case for many children in the study, her scrapbook was displayed prominently for me to see on the day of my scheduled visit. When we looked at her book together, Ellie began with the mermaid page. "I am still doing the erasing, and I'll color it in later, but you can see how I drew it here." She showed me a few other sketches on her desk, all near-exact copies of the pencil drawing in her scrapbook. "My mom paid for me to do an online drawing class, where you follow along to learn to draw things, and make the eyes like this [she put her hands around her eyes and gave me her best sad puppy dog eyes, laughing] I'm getting really good! Mermaids are my favorite thing to draw and this one is supposed to be what I look like as a mermaid." She pulled her hair over her shoulder and straightened her posture where she knelt next to me on the floor, as if unconsciously posing in alignment with the picture she had drawn.

Ellie and her friends do a fair amount of mermaid play, though her mother notes that Ellie is the one of the group who is the most interested in mermaids and her mother thinks that this is one thing that makes her companionship fun for the other girls. Her mother showed me pictures of Ellie posing with her legs wrapped in blankets and a towel wrapped around her head, pretending to have long hair while laying on an imaginary beach. Then another picture of Ellie perched beside the swimming pool with her legs held tightly together, feet in the water, smiling broadly behind sunglasses. In an echo of Tina's lament, Ellie peeks over her mother's shoulder as we are looking at that photo and adds, "I really want one of those mermaid tail swimsuits, but Mom says they are too hard to swim in - I'm going to save up my own money."

Ellie has seen some movies and TV shows about mermaids, though her longtime favorite is Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, which she first saw as a young child and still watches on DVD. She told me that she had a new favorite, a movie about "teenagers" where a group of girls have a mermaid who is their friend and lives in the ocean, who hears their secret wishes and who she uses her powers to help them¹¹. "I know that show isn't real," Ellie says, rolling her eyes, "But it's beautiful and it is fun. I'm kind of like the mermaid girl with my friends—I'm a little bit away from them, but I help them and they tell me their secrets."

But not all mermaid media agreed with Ellie: "I don't like the mermaid shows where the mermaid becomes a person, or has to hide or be afraid or sit in bathtubs all the time, or has to give up what makes them special just to get feet, like in Ariel [*The Little Mermaid*]." Ellie saw the mermaid movie, *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984) recently with a babysitter, and says the scene where Daryl Hannah's mermaid character Madison is cruelly outed and left to flop around on the floor was frightening. "She maybe should not have tried to hide, then that man couldn't have [outed her]. But in the end, she goes back to the sea, so that is a happy ending." Like many young children (and certainly many adults and others, too) Ellie finds a happy ending key to enjoying a story. I asked her if she thought it was a mistake for the mermaid in *Splash* to come out of the ocean in the first place but didn't get an answer. Instead Ellie asked if I would like her to draw a mermaid for me, in my research notebook, with curly hair like mine. I agreed and continue to treasure this gift.

¹¹ This is Ellie's rather obviously inaccurate synopsis of the film *Aquamarine* (Elizabeth Allen Rosebaum, 2006). Her mother insists that this was the movie she watched, though her description suggests she may have only watched part of it, or interpreted what she saw along the available schema of her age group. Given her following statements about how she does not like the mermaid shows where the mermaid has to hide her mermaid-ness, it makes me wonder if this is in fact the movie she is describing at all.

Many transgender children in the study found the idea of keeping their identities secret very stressful, even though, at first, parents think this option — hiding a child's transness and attempting to pass them as cisgender — seems practical. Ellie didn't tell anyone she was identified male at birth when she was first starting school, and she says it was very hard for her because she was always afraid of being found out. "I would sit down in the bathroom because people can tell if you are standing, and I tried not to wear shoes that people would know it was me. Kids would climb under the stall to see if they thought it was me."

But, she says, "things got a lot better when I stopped hiding and told everyone in Kindergarten that I was a girl with a penis. Now it's fine. I have friends and people know I *am* a girl but also more than a girl." When I asked what she meant by "more" than a girl, Ellie shrugged her shoulders. "You're a girl, and you are like every girl. But I am a girl who has *something more*. I'm a girl but also more than a girl." I reflected on how she described her relationship with her friends as being, somehow, "a little bit away" from her friends. Maybe she was noting how being an openly transgender girl was really being Girl+, more than a girl, imbued with not just the superpower of being convener of fun mermaid games, or the special mermaid artist, but also in possession of a valuable perspective on gender, femininity and identity that could potentially benefit cisgender girls.

Discussion: The dysphoria myth and beyond

When I tell adults that many transgirls draw themselves as mermaids, their most common response I receive is that this must be a function of dysphoria, or of hating the parts of one's body that do not align with the affirmed gender. More than one parent or other adult has told me that mermaids must be attractive to transgirls because the mermaid does not seem to have genitalia, so being a mermaid erases painful dysphoria associated with having a penis. However, not only did most transgirls in my study not have demonstrable dysphoria, they actually valued their non-binary body. As one said, "Having a penis is very convenient in case you need to pee outside. I think I will keep mine. A girl can have any kind of body, you know." While more empirical study is needed in this area, it seems that for this young generation of transgender people, the idea of dysphoria may be more complex than many cisgender adults comprehend. It is possible that many transgender children and young teenagers really do not experience dysphoria as defined in this way (Finch, 2015; Schultz, 2018). The idea of dysphoria as a driver and motivator may be a cisgender assumption that simply doesn't play out in most of the available data (Galman, 2018a). Interestingly, Jazz Jennings - arguably the only transgender teen mermaid aficionado of whom study participants were aware - notes an identical experience in her 2016 autobiography. She writes:

Mermaids [are] my thing. I've been obsessed with them my entire life and I continue to be obsessed with them even today. Someone once told my mom that it's really common for transgender kids to be into mermaids because they don't have genitalia. I guess the idea is that for trans children, having no genitalia is better than having the wrong genitalia. I can see the logic in that theory, but at that age all I was aware of was that mermaids were the most beautiful creatures imaginable. (2016: 17).

To point out one flaw in the mermaids-don't-have-genitals argument, the transgender boys in the study did not draw, nor were they remotely interested in, mermaids. And participants simply did not see their genitalia as 'wrong,' nor did their mermaid identification and play come from a place of concealment or shame. Instead, like Ellie, many transgirls used

mermaid iconography to demonstrate trans pride and heightened, valued, feminine credentialing. Mermaids are not just feminine; For participants, they were heightened in their femininity. Like Jazz, Ellie, Tina and the others knew that mermaids are “the most beautiful creatures imaginable.” So, on one hand, the mermaid is among the ‘gold standard’ in feminine credentialing devices available for young girls, as she represents and is marketed as the exclusive province of girlhood and girl culture (Fraser, 2014). In the contemporary era, the mermaid is deeply emblematic of Western girl culture (Hayward, 2017). As Fraser describes, the story becomes an indelible part of girl culture “because Andersen’s tale is structured around girlhood, growing up and moving between cultures” (2014: 247). The “cultures” that the girl navigates can be theorised as representing any of the many possible liminal spaces that confront girls: between girlhood and womanhood, in the metamorphosis of puberty and sexual maturity, or the jolt from innocence to experience, or even feminist awakening (Fraser, 2014; Takahara, 2006). Hayward also found that for teenage and pre-teen mermaid aficionados, the mermaid is attractive because she represents an escape from the rigors of often painful change and liminality “through mermaids’ impossible bodies and the environmental and social contexts they inhabit” (2017: 131).

In these cases, the mermaid may represent not just a symbolic cultural broker in any of these senses, but also a tangible metaphor for transgirls who move between transgender and cisgender worlds while simultaneously occupying a liminal position in their daily realities as girls who are more-than-girls. In short, it is one thing to move between cultures, and quite another to live in-between as a constant border-crosser, and to do so with pride. The children in this study are not seeking what Hayward characterises as an escape from themselves, womanhood or the “adult socio-sexual milieu” (2017: 129). Instead, they are proud of who they are and keen to find representation of what it feels like to be in joyful, prideful, liminality.

Meanwhile, Takahara has argued that the mermaid, as part of “girl consciousness,” is a powerful symbol of alternative conceptions of gender and power available to all girls, as “in both thought and deed, they far transcend the usual gender models. While acknowledging their female bodies, these girls refuse their assigned gender role, thus questioning the whole notion of gender itself” (2006: 188-189). Takahara’s analyses of the mermaid trope in modern girl culture media positions the cultural journey as symbolic of a girl’s personal awakening and power, independent of the heterosexual romance narrative, the male gaze, or axial heteronormativity. Instead, and as borne out in post-Disney *The Little Mermaid* media, this focus is on girls’ personal growth and investment in themselves and positive, supportive relationships other girls (Takahara, 2006; Kearney, 2002).

As in the case of princess play, a girl who identifies with and plays with mermaid metaphors and identities can be publicly credentialed as feminine and recognised as a ‘real’¹² girl without entering into the realm of sexual availability or, necessarily, the concomitant male gaze. Arguably, the mermaid is a kind of princess¹³ - literally in the case of the Little Mermaid, a daughter of the Sea King - but mermaids of all kinds were more attractive to study participants of all ages than were human princesses. The preponderance of princess play in US culture, and the greater availability of princess Kinderculture (see Hains, 2014) in particular, begs the question of why more transgirls in this study chose mermaids over princesses. Based on these tentative analyses, I propose that, for transgender girls, a princess

¹² I put ‘real’ girl in scare quotes here because I affirm that transgender women and girls are, and have always been, real, authentic, females.

¹³ After all, even the Starbucks’ mermaid has a crown.

offers an inadequate feminine credential: A princess is just a girl, a real girl but void of special magic. As Ellie said, her realness as a girl is not in question. Instead, she looked to mermaid play and imagery to emphasise and embody her identity as more-than-a-girl. Her femininity is different, heightened – even magical. Feminine credentialing, then, is not about the over-the-top camp of objectified ‘girliness’ but rather about agentively embracing and owning the symbolism of defiant difference as power and magic. It goes without saying that cisgender women and girls could benefit from this perspective as they navigate the treacherous waters of Western feminine norms, objectification, sexualisation and loss (Daley, 1991). As young cisgender girls move through adolescent, what authenticity is lost in the quest to ‘pass’ as something else? Lessons from transgirl experience could be particularly instructive here.

Importantly, credentialing is different from passing because credentialing is visible, without omission or deception of a trans reality. To wit: very few participants in the study overall hid their transness from peers. Rather, they were out as trans and while they wanted to be seen as girls, they were intensely proud of their trans-ness, and felt no compulsion to hide this part of their identities. In the words of Ellie, they were girls, but also *more than girls*. Similarly, mermaids are women, but with magic and power, existing outside of the arbitrary binary order of things, and as such *more than women*. Rather than assimilate, they wished to accommodate, and be credentialed but maintain their transness, their magic, and their difference. It is with this insistence they stake their claim to living lives outside the binary, and also how they remove the scary part of discovery. They do not have to be afraid of outing-as-discovery because they never sought to hide in the first place. It is possible that these affirming and positive childhood identity experiences will create better adolescent journeys for these girls, and fewer painful and self-destructive experiences common to previous generations of trans teens and adults.

Conclusion: Modern day mermaids and contemporary contexts

The data explored in this article was collected in the context of American hate politics and the 2016/17 election, the culmination of which brought pain and uncertainty to transgender people in the United States (2017b). After what looked like a new dawn of acceptance and promise for transgender children and youth under the Obama administration, the first weeks of 2017 brought a dramatic rollback in their protections (DeVogue and Grinberg, 2017.) Most children only wanted to use appropriate school restrooms and request other reasonable changes to institutional practice, but this was seen as an affront to the fervent, zealous Christian extremism embodied by the Trump regime. It is no surprise that today’s patriarchs and theocrats sought to drive transgender children out with legislative magic.

Notably, as I concluded data analyses for this article, the American president was featured as a keynote speaker at a gathering of the Values Voter Summit event organised by the Family Research Council, a Southern Poverty Law Center-recognised anti-LGTBQ hate group¹⁴. He has since taken other legislative steps to make life difficult for transgender people, especially children, via the removal of K-12 school and health protections (Oppenheim, 2017; Pear, 2018). Most significantly, in January 2018, the US president created a new office of Health and Human Services called The Conscience and Freedom of Religion Division, the purpose of which is to support medical and other practitioners when they refuse to provide care for transgender people because to do so is a violation of their religious beliefs. The vehemence

¹⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/values-voter-summit-whose-values>

of Trump's attack on transgender children speaks to past and contemporary fears of "the sexed and gendered body that resists clear categorical frameworks" (Pedersen, 2015: 3). For example, earlier this year, the US president endorsed a judge who said that transgender children were "tools of the devil" sent to advance "Satan's agenda" (Massie and Kaczynski, 2017: online).

Regardless of the many connections between transphobic American politics and policy and some aspects of mermaid folklore, it is important to explicitly state that transgender people are not magical beings. To suggest that they are is to exoticise, other and dehumanise them. Similarly, mermaids remain problematic as icons of belonging for trans- or cisgender girls. Even in contemporary children's media, mermaids are often voiceless, subhuman, petty, stupid and even dangerous. Disney's *Peter Pan* mermaids are "beautiful, scantily clad non-human female characters" on a "male-centered fantasy island" (Shiple, 2012: 158), and the mermaids in animated children's television programs do not always fare better (Galman and Mallozzi, 2015). (Similarly, there are not that many Black or Latina mermaids in western media. While interrogations of the racism and lack of representation of people of colour in children's cartoons and other media show significant negative impacts on children of colour and the perpetuation of racism and bias among White children (Dobrow, 2016), this may prove even more deleterious for transgirls of color, and more research in this area is sorely needed.

Finally, at the center of this discussion is children's - and ultimately all people's - fundamental right to gender self-identification. In Denmark, home of the original Little Mermaid, children are legally recognised as people with rights and therefore parents may not beat and abuse them (Boer and Kronborg, 2016). This distinction is not made in the United States, where children are things, but not people, groomed to consume but of little value themselves, and may be beaten with relative impunity (Nicks, 2014). In that context, until children are seen as full and complete people, their chances of having their right to gender self-determination recognised are slim. However, mermaids remain useful and powerful tools for identity development and play among the transgirls in this study. Mermaid play and imagery helped them make sense of being different, liminal and even powerful. It also helped them navigate pain, consider alternative and creative paths for living, and begin to explore what it means to be transgressively feminine in a positive and age-appropriate way. This could be a major contribution to how adults might emphasise and support healthy femininities and development for all girls.

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