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The Case of The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Childhood, Animality.

KARíN LESNIK-OBERSTEIN

Jacqueline Rose argued in her foundational 1984 book on psychoanalysis and children's literature, The Case of Peter Pan or: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction,[1] that children's literature and its criticism are necessarily produced by one self-defined identity - adults - on behalf of a defined 'other' - the child. However, this is emphatically not because Rose is arguing – as has been widely assumed[2] – that adults colonise, dominate, idealise or impose an identity on children. This assumption rests on the view of a common-sensical,[3] real world in which there are adults and children and where these adults might or might not allow the children differing degrees of freedom, agency, voice or authenticity. But psychoanalysis as understood by Rose offers a radical set of questions of such a common-sensical, real-world view of adults and children as separate, autonomous, physical bodies in a material world, however diverse and differentiated such adults and children might be seen to be.

Instead, Rose's interpretations of psychoanalysis are deeply interested in considering the profound implications of memory for this 'real world' and the adults and children supposedly know-able as such within it: for, as Freud argued, psychoanalysis children and childhood can only ever be known as such through memory. As he writes in the 'Preface to the Fourth Edition' to 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality': 'If mankind had been able to learn from a direct observation of children, these three essays could have remained unwritten.'[4] Key here is Freud's claim of 'direct observation' as a problem for learning about children, for even 'observation' is here subject to memory – observation cannot be 'direct' in the sense that it is always itself a retrospectively remembered 'observation'. But, going even further than this, memory for Freud is not conceived of as a set of chronological events that may or may not be recalled correctly, but instead memory is conceived of as what a person is (what

our account of ourselves is), without having the options of 'accurately' or 'inaccurately' remembering ourselves.

This is not, as is often feared, a nihilist or relativist position: it is not about saying that psychoanalysis makes the real world, materiality and the child somehow evaporate or that it relegates children to some position of absolute passivity or that psychoanalysis does not believe that people can lie about their memories or invent untrue memories. Instead, psychoanalysis is for Freud and Rose centrally interested in how childhood, but also any 'identity', is about how we are seen and defined in differing, shifting, perspectives in which how we see what we see is determined by our own interests, beliefs and investments. This is also where psychoanalytic and deconstructive thinking about the child meet in that for both this is, however, not something we necessarily know about ourselves: we cannot know our own perspective as a 'choice', but instead these perspectives constitute who we are both to ourselves and others.

As Derrida writes:

> man calls himself man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity; the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity. The approach to these limits is at once feared as a threat of death and desired as access to a life without différance. The history of man calling himself man is the articulation of all these limits among themselves. All concepts determining a non-supplementarity (nature, animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity, etc.) have evidently no truth-value (…) They have a meaning only within a closure of the game.[5]

Neither perspectives nor the others defined by them, then, can be stable or unitary, because, as Rose argues, psychoanalysis disrupts the very grounds for the 'discussions of children's fiction (in which) childhood is part of a strict developmental sequence at the

end of which stands the cohered and rational consciousness of the adult mind.'[6] Derrida argues similarly that settling on any certain knowledge of the animal, even of animals as various, 'would mean forgetting all the signs I have sought to give, tirelessly, of my attention to difference, to differences, to heterogeneities, and abyssal ruptures as against the homogenous and the continuous.'[7] Instead, both for Rose and Derrida, that 'adult mind' too is divided in terms of 'the unconscious (which) is not an object, something to be laid hold of and retrieved. It is the term which Freud used to describe the complex ways in which our very idea of ourselves as children is produced.'[8]

Rose, like Freud and Derrida, reads the investment in childhood (as well as any other 'object' or 'identity' claimed as known or knowable by others, including animals and the (post-)human) as the desire for a 'real' which defeats language and the unconscious in claiming that it can know objects and others 'objectively' and apart from itself, including the child:

> Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. (…) Peter Pan stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims – that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book, much as the book (so the claim runs) exists for them. (…) Children's literature is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but that it hangs on an impossibility of which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. [9]

Rose made this argument now more than thirty years ago but David Rudd and Antony Pavlik, the editors of the 2010 special issue of the Children's Literature Association Quarterly to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of The Case of Peter Pan, noted then in their introduction that in children's literature studies 'references to Rose's work are, more

often than not, en passant and once made, the critic then proceeds as though it were "business as usual."'[10] The special issue contributions themselves however, to my reading, also 'then (proceed) as though it were "business as usual"', even where overtly claiming to be in agreement with Rose. I will argue in this article how and why that is, however, necessarily and always the case because, as Rose's own subtitle The Impossibility of Children's Fiction claims, her understandings of psychoanalysis are in and of themselves incompatible with the liberal humanist groundings and aims of 'children's literature' which assume themselves to be in the 'real world' I described above. This is not because, as Rose stresses herself, she is claiming that it is 'impossible' to write or read children's books, but because psychoanalysis has a completely different view to children's literature criticism of what 'writing' and 'reading' (language) are about and what they can 'do', whether to or for 'children' or anybody else.

I will demonstrate my arguments here in relation to my own and others' readings of a picture book, Jessica Love's Julián is a Mermaid,[11] not because this book has any particularly unique bearing on the case of The Case of Peter Pan, but precisely because I am here making a case, as Rose was in her arguments about Peter Pan: at issue is not primarily Peter Pan or Julián is a Mermaid as having a unique or especially relevant 'content' but as read in relation to the structural claims of all 'children's literature (criticism)'. Jacques Derrida writes in relation to this in The Truth in Painting:

> The passe-partout which here creates an event must not pass for a master key. You will not be able to pass it from hand to hand like a convenient instrument, a short treatise, a viaticum or even an organon or pocket canon, in short a transcendental pass, a password to open all doors, decipher all texts and keep their chains under surveillance. If you rushed to understand it in this way, I would have to issue a warning (avertissement): this forward [sic] (avertissement) is not a passe-partout.[12]

For Derrida, in other words, deconstruction and the truth in painting – the truth in picture books – is not about methods of reading to achieve known and pre-determined results discussing characters, themes, plots, contexts, issues, messages and ideologies; not about the 'what' of texts and paintings (or pictures or anything else), but the how. In my deconstructive and psychoanalytic reading of Julián is a Mermaid the consequences will therefore in any case not be children's literature (criticism) as it recognises itself and is recognised by others. Something other is at stake in such readings for the psychoanalysis for which, as Rose writes:

> Deception is (…) the very order of language. (…) Language is not something we simply use to communicate, as everything in psychoanalytic practice makes clear. Psychoanalysis directs its attention to what cannot be spoken in what is actually being said. It starts from the assumption that there is a difficulty in language (…) But the problem of language – the idea that language might be a problem – is the dimension of psychoanalysis that has been most rigorously avoided in discussions of fiction for the child.[13]

Linda Sue Park, in The New York Times sums up Julián is a Mermaid as follows:

> In the introductory spread, Julián, who seems about 6, is swimming with several abuelas [Nanas][14] all wearing bathing caps and fond, watchful gazes. Then we see Julián and his abuela on the subway, where the other passengers include three splendid mermaids. Are they figments of Julián's imagination? The text gives no hint: "This is a boy named Julián," we read. "And this is his abuela. And those are some mermaids." On closer examination the mermaids have feet and wear sandals. Three wordless spreads follow, in which Julián imagines frolicking in the ocean with dreamlike sea creatures. Once home, Julián uses household items (a curtain, ferns from a planter) to garb himself as a mermaid. When his abuela catches him, she turns her back, only to return with a gift.

> (…) In the joyous conclusion, the pair make their way to a mermaid parade (an annual event at Coney Island in Brooklyn) and join the spectacle. The final illustration shows the abuelas from the first spread, transformed into mermaids. Alongside Julián, readers learn that anyone can be a mermaid: All it takes is love and acceptance, a little imagination and a big swishy tail.[15]

Some other critics concur with this positive assessment: for Maria Popova, the book is 'a sweet story of loving acceptance and the jubilant inner transformation that takes place when one is welcomed to be and to dream beyond society's narrow templates of being and dreaming',[16] while for Elizabeth Bird:

> Julián begins to imagine himself as a mermaid (… but c)aught by his grandmother he's unsure of how to feel. That is, until she leads him by the hand to the Coney Island Mermaid Parade. They join the throng and Julián knows he belongs. With minimal language and an abundance of love, the author/illustrator gives everyone with a mermaid inside of them a tale of sweet, near speechless belonging.[17]

There have also been more critical views of the text, notably in relation to issues of gender, sexual and ethnic identities, for instance in the review of Laura Jiménez:

> for me, I keep looking at this book and I don't think it is about a trans girl, or a gender fluid kid. It is really about a boy dressing up as a mermaid. Stacy Collins very aptly pointed out, "A fish tail is not inherently feminine, unless Julián wants it to be."
>
> And, that is an issue I keep running into with this book. It isn't clear what, if anything, Julián wants to express because this isn't really Julián's story. It is Jessica Love's story, a story of a young Dominican boy, playing dress up or constructing himself (sic), as imagined by a White, cis woman who brings her identity to the work, and with her identity comes her outsider's gaze.

> And, I think that is what bothers me the most. It isn't JUST that Jessica Love isn't a trans person of color. It is that there is nowhere in the book where I am not aware that this is another book about looking AT a trans body. [18]

I want to consider here first of all that although there are distinctive and important differences between the positive and the more critical reviews, nevertheless they are in fact all founded on the same ways of thinking about childhood, gender, sexuality and ethnicity: staying for the moment within the parameters of children's literature criticism, in all these reviews Julián is on the one hand seen and defined in the perspective of another, in, for instance: 'as imagined by a White, cis woman', 'Julián, who seems about 6', 'we see Julián', 'Julián uses household items', but on the other hand 'Julián' is claimed, for instance, to 'imagine', 'be', 'dream', 'feel', 'know', 'want to express' and 'belong'. In such a reading, we, the readers, learn something about how those who are not themselves 'Julián' see, think about, and look at 'Julián', but we also learn about how 'Julián' himself (sic)[19] imagines, is, wants, dreams, feels, knows and belongs. But if I shift to a psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading, then there is no 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand': instead, I read all the claims as a perspective on 'Julián', not as a suppression of a 'Julián' that is there, now ignored or over-ruled, but because any 'Julián' (or anything) is constituted psychoanalytically and deconstructively speaking from elsewhere, to begin with as a past (retrospection); a production of memory, as all texts are retrospectively narrated. Equally, in the pictures I can see 'Julián', which for this kind of reading entails that this cannot be 'Julián's' own view, but only a perspective on him from elsewhere. I will also be considering here ongoingly what it even means for me to claim that 'I can see "Julián"' in the pictures, for how do I read what 'Julián' there is to be seen as such? As Derrida writes:

> The signatory promises, it seems to 'say' in painting, by painting the truth and even, if you like, the truth in painting (…) We have not got to the end of this speech act

> promising perhaps a painting act. With this verbal promise, this performative which does not describe anything, (the painter) does something, as much as and more than he says. But in doing so he promises that he will say the truth in painting. (…) the allegory of truth in painting is far from offering itself completely naked on a canvas.[20]

In other words: no matter what I write about my reading of Julián is a Mermaid's text or pictures, it cannot be somehow the text or pictures 'themselves', 'naked on a canvas', but is already my 'writing', also as my 'writing' of 'reading' and 'writing'.

The consequences of such a shift are, then, profound: I cannot claim a knowledge of 'Julián' as somehow emanating from himself directly, spontaneously, authentically, constituting a superior, 'true', knowledge to that knowledge which was claimed as not his 'own' view but that of someone else, to whom 'Julián' 'seems about 6', or those 'we' who 'see Julián' or know that he 'uses household items'. Neither can there be an author whose experiences and identities could guarantee such a superior, 'true', knowledge by, for instance, not being 'White, cis' but instead themselves also a 'trans person of color'. Instead, my reading is necessarily now about how perspectives make all the claims about 'Julián' and how that constitutes those perspectives themselves, as much as reading within the parameters of children's literature criticism is after all the only way children's literature critics – working within their parameters - can read.[21] For this different reading, Derrida argues:

> And if you bide your time awhile here in these pages, you would discover that I cannot dominate the situation, or translate it, or describe it. I cannot report what is going on in it, or narrate it, or depict it, or pronounce or mimic it, or offer it up to be read or formalized without remainder.[22]

In other words, as I explained above, reading psychoanalytically and deconstructively cannot deliver results that 'make sense' for children's literature critics: for both Rose and Derrida, it cannot deliver the child 'without remainder'.

This also, therefore, poses specific challenges to the positive reviews' conclusions that '(a)longside Julián, readers learn that anyone can be a mermaid', or about 'the jubilant inner transformation that takes place when one is welcomed to be and to dream beyond society's narrow templates of being and dreaming', or that 'the author/ illustrator gives everyone with a mermaid inside of them a tale of sweet, near speechless belonging', but equally so to the critical review's knowledge of what a 'fish tail', 'a mermaid' or a 'trans body' are. To begin with, all these perspectives know[23] here what a 'mermaid' is and is not. Critic Robbie Voss claims that for Derrida the mermaid is inherently 'undecidable' because she is 'both woman and fish, human and animal', but being known to be 'both' does not, in Derrida's arguments, constitute 'undecidability' as the 'woman', 'fish', 'human' and 'animal' are after all each decidedly distinguished and known as such in Voss's claims.[24] Instead, I read that according to the reviews' perspectives, neither 'Julián' nor 'readers' are 'mermaids', as they have to 'learn that anyone can be a mermaid', where 'anyone' are also something different from 'mermaids' as they 'can be a mermaid' (my italics) but therefore are also known not always to be able to be. Similarly, 'the author/ illustrator' and 'everyone' are different from 'mermaids', although 'everyone' is divided up into those that do and those that do not – 'with' – 'a mermaid inside of them', where 'everyone' is known as something more than and other to, a mermaid. The 'everyone' is also a 'them', so that this perspective does not include itself in the 'everyone' that is 'given (…) a tale of sweet, near speechless belonging', although it does know about the 'tale' without having been 'given' it. In any case, those 'with a mermaid inside of them' are known not have this 'tale' to begin with as it must be 'given' to them by the 'author/ illustrator'. Finally, what is 'given' to 'everyone' is 'a tale' not 'belonging' to? itself although Julián also 'knows he belongs' according to the perspective.

In the case of ‘the jubilant inner transformation’, this is known only to take place subject to ‘when one is welcomed’, so that the perspective here is different from the ‘one’ in knowing already to have been ‘welcomed’ itself and in knowing that it is already beyond ‘society’s narrow templates of being and dreaming’. The perspective also does still ‘be and dream’, however, so that ‘being and dreaming’ are not themselves ‘narrow templates’. The welcoming is from where the perspective is already – ‘beyond’, as well as being known by the perspective to be prior to itself in order for it to know that it has already been ‘welcomed’. Paradoxically, this entails that the prior of ‘welcoming’ is within the perspective nevertheless in order to be known as such. The ‘one’, however, is initially still within ‘society’s narrow templates’ and without ‘the jubilant inner transformation’. The ‘inner transformation’ is also known from elsewhere, despite its being ‘inner’ and is known too therefore to be different from an ‘outer transformation’, although this also entails an inevitable collapse of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ in both being able to be known to be a ‘transformation’ that can take, or has taken, place.

Being or becoming (in part) a mermaid here is about a belonging which apparently is to do with ‘joyous’, ‘jubilant inner transformation’ and also ‘love’. In a very general sense, this could be read to be about a liberation from ‘society’s narrow templates’ by a perspective which already knows itself to be liberated and this may be connected to how this book is rated highly in several LGBTQ+ reviews and blogs, including being awarded the 2019 Stonewall Book Award.[25] The author, Jessica Love, is quoted by Josh Jackman on the website PinkNews as saying:

> There’s something about mermaids. Who knows if that’s because they’re magical creatures who can live between two realities or because they don’t have any genitals, or because they’re f***ing great.

> But as soon as I noticed that, I was like: 'Oh my god, there's a parade in New York every summer called The Coney Island Mermaid Parade.

This is claimed to be also about 'gender questioning children' and for 'kids (…) like Julian'.[26] Liberation through belonging here is known then to be about a difference, but it is also an already known and specific difference: in the case in Love's comments as quoted by Jackman the difference is 'something about' mermaids – not mermaids themselves – and that 'something about' is governed ('if') by one or more of three options: 'magical creatures who can live between two realities', 'don't have any genitals', 'or because they're fu***ing great', but in any case none of this was 'noticed' initially. Love explains that she only 'noticed' this when 'I was reading all these parenting blogs and this theme of mermaids is a thread that runs through so many of these different kids' experiences'.[27] Here too, Love knows the 'kids' not to be mermaids, but in any case to be 'different', although they all are known in Love's reading of the 'parenting blogs' to be 'kids' nonetheless and to have 'experiences'. The connection Love makes according to Jackman between 'gender questioning children', 'kids (…) like Julián' and 'mermaids' is that 'something about', whereby 'gender questioning' is then apparently about being 'magical creatures who can live between two realities', or not having 'any genitals' or 'because they're f***ing great', none of which, however, is actually seen to be the case for the 'gender questioning children' or 'different kids' as they are known to be 'children' and 'kids' and not 'mermaids'.

'Gender questioning children' and 'different kids' are known by Love therefore to know that they are not themselves 'magical creatures who can live between two realities', to know that they have 'genitals' and are also known possibly ('who knows if?') to regret this about themselves in finding the mermaids to be 'f***ing great' in these respects. According to Jackman, Love 'says that she hopes to convey the message to trans children that "you're loved. You're beautiful. You are loved"', whereby 'trans children' presumably not only are

thought not initially already to know (sufficiently) that they are loved or beautiful but are also part of the 'different kids' and 'gender questioning children' who are not 'magical creatures who can live between two realities' and who do 'have any genitals'.[28] 'Children' can here 'question' 'gender' but can also be 'trans', which are apparently not the same thing. In order to 'question' 'gender' the 'children' must be known to know about it, however, from a position that is other to 'gender', but they are not known to question 'child', for instance – making 'child' an identity apart from and prior to 'gender', with 'gender' only to be questioned. Being a 'magical creature' is in this perspective known by the children to be able to be and do something else they cannot do either, which is 'live between two realities', so that the children are known to know that they do live either in 'two realities' or in one or the other of the two, where the 'between' is not itself a reality.

In the case of 'trans children', they are also known neither to question 'child' nor 'trans' but simply to be so. If one aspect of this is claimed to be an aspiration not to 'have any genitals', then this implies that there is a knowledge that the (trans) children too know that they do 'have any genitals'. Does this imply that according to the perspective being a 'trans child' or a 'gender questioning child' is about wanting no longer to have the genitals that they know they have? Are 'any genitals' known to be the site of 'questioning gender' or being 'trans' for children? Are 'any genitals' 'gender'? Is the aspiration not to 'have any genitals' 'trans'? If it may seem from current, wide-spread discussions both academic and popular that 'gender questioning' and 'trans' are – common-sensically - precisely about 'genitals', then the question from a psychoanalytic and deconstructive perspective is precisely: how and why? As leading theorist of transexuality (sic) David Valentine, writes:

> the meanings and values attached to genitals retain a primacy of reference. To put it another way, non-transexual genitals (and other parts of the non-transexual male and female body that index sex/ gender) are rich with signification, carrying far more

> meaning than they can bearand most importantly, they carry the meaning of the natural and the original.[29]

In other words, neither psychoanalysis nor deconstruction nor Valentine accept that 'genitals' are 'literal': that they determine being a 'man' or a 'woman' or 'trans' or 'non-trans' somehow in and of themselves or that they could even be a 'themselves'. Instead, for Valentine, 'genitals' are about 'signification', 'the meaning of the natural and the original'. Concerned with this issue are also the very frequently assumed differences between 'sex' and 'gender': if, as Valentine argues, 'sex/ gender' is 'indexed' by 'non-transexual genitals and other parts of the non-transexual male and female body' then this does not permit 'sex' to be a 'literal' with 'gender' as a 'figurative' or 'symbolic'. This also connects to Love's claims about the 'trans' and 'gender questioning' children, for if the children are all known to know they 'have any genitals' then 'genitals' are here claimed to be the same in being 'any genitals' at all. At the same time, 'gender' is known not to be about 'any genitals', as 'gender' is 'questioned' while 'any genitals' are either had or not had, but in any case not, here, 'questioned' even as the children are known not to want to have them but to be mermaids – who don't - instead. As Daniel Monk argues in reading childhood in relation to homophobic bullying and campaigns against such bullying:

> The acknowledgement of homophobic bullying could suggest that that there is a space for including LGBT youth within the category of legitimate childhood. But it is important to explore the conditions of this inclusion. One of these 'conditions' appears to be that queer youth conforms to the cultural definitions of innocent (and ideally non-sexual) childhood.[30]

, Reading both childhood and trans(gender) in perspective, retrospectively, according to Rose and Derrida's arguments, Julián is not claimed to be either a 'gender questioning' nor a 'trans' child in Julián is a Mermaid, nor, as I already wrote above, can I read Julián to be a

mermaid (although for different reasons and with different consequences than in the critical review of Jiminéz), despite the title's claim that 'Julián is a mermaid'. First, the title claim relies on a (necessarily retrospectively) known difference between 'Julián' and 'mermaid' in order to claim that one 'is' the other. To my reading, this has to do with the knowledge that 'This is a boy named Julián (…) And those are some mermaids', [31] so that 'Julián' is only how 'this boy' is known to be 'named' by others. 'This boy' too is 'this' in being known to be one of other 'boys' and it is 'this boy' but 'those are some mermaids', so that the boy and the mermaids are each known to be in a different relation to the perspective. In the picture, I read 'this (…) boy named Julián. And this is his abuela' to be about a difference in frame: 'this' is in a different frame to 'those' and when 'this' and 'those' in the next picture are instead within the same frame, 'Julián LOVES mermaids'.[32] Being within the same frame seems, then, to be about the difference between what the perspective claims it sees itself and what it claims it knows Julián to see and 'LOVE', although in both pictures I see Julián, so that it cannot be my seeing of his seeing or his 'LOVE', but only about the perspectives' shift in claims in terms of what it knows about Julián. Again, as I have explained previously, this is not about a loss of 'agency' or 'authenticity' of the child: the consequence of psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading is that the 'child's' vision or feelings or knowledge are not available in and of themselves as themselves, but instead are always a claim from elsewhere, in order even to known what 'a child's vision' is.

I take Linda Sue Park in her review to be surprised by something to do with 'those (…) mermaids' as she writes that 'On closer examination the mermaids have feet and wear sandals.' If this is indeed a surprise 'on closer examination', then for Park it is not what 'mermaids' are expected to have; instead, they should have 'a big swishy tail.'[33] The having of 'feet and wear(ing) sandals' instead of 'a big swishy tail' may also be due to 'mermaids' being something 'three mesmerizing women' are 'dressed up as',[34] or that Julián 'garb(s)

himself as a mermaid',[35] or that there is the 'The Coney Island Mermaid Parade'.[36] Even Park's triumphant conclusion that 'The final illustration shows the abuelas from the first spread, transformed into mermaids' I can read in terms of the 'abuelas'' 'transformation into mermaids' being about their bathing costumes now including a 'large swishy tail' as the 'tails' are of the same pattern as the bathing costumes in the 'introductory spread'.[37] This is not about my wanting to claim that the abuelas in the final illustration are not really mermaids but also 'just' 'dressed up' (compare also the claim of Jiminéz that it 'is really about a boy dressing up as a mermaid'), but instead to consider what it means to read 'mermaids' (but also anything else) here as 'real' or as 'dressed up'? And how is this constituted as a 'transformation'? Is a 'large swishy tail' which is a repetition of the pattern of the bathing suits either a 'cover' over something else 'underneath' ('dressed up') or 'the mermaid body' itself? What kind of reading does this both rely on and produce? (How) does this, for instance, have anything to do with Jackman's claim that for Love being a mermaid has to do with not 'having any genitals'? Are the genitals 'dressed up' because they are known still to be present 'underneath'? Or are 'any genitals' removed or replaced by 'the big swishy tail'? Is that what the 'transformation' is? How would I know about any of this? Where and how can I read this in Julián is a Mermaid?

What about, for instance, the smaller mermaid at the bottom of 'the final illustration'? Its 'tail' is the only one which is not a repetition of the patterns of the bathing suits in the introductory spread. This instead looks to me as the same mermaid as the one that I see on pages 4-5, which Linda Sue Park takes to be the final one of the 'Three wordless spreads (which) follow, in which Julián imagines frolicking in the ocean with dreamlike sea creatures' and which Elizabeth Bird considers, similarly, as part of 'Julián begins to imagine himself as a mermaid'. This may also be the 'dreaming' of which Popova writes.[38] The tropes of the child's 'imagination' and 'dream' are perhaps some of the most persistent and

prevalent in Western Romantic and post-Romantic constructions of childhood. Yet again, the reviewers' - and children's literature critics' – claims that these are Julián's 'own' 'imagination' and 'dream' cannot be read as such in psychoanalytic and deconstructive readings: instead, what is at stake for the perspective of the 'three wordless spreads'? First, the three spreads are between Julián and 'his abuela' being on the subway and leaving it on p. 9 when 'his abuela' is claimed to say 'Let's go, honey. This is our stop'. In the first 'wordless spread' (pp. 3-4) I can see a subway window frame some urban apartment buildings but with a green wash of colour splashes also within the frame with the buildings. The green wash and splashes of colour also are in most of the rest of page 3 and all of page 4, 5 and 6 and much of pages 7 and 8 as well as most but not all of the 'introductory spread' and all of the 'final illustration' and are different from the colours of the rest of the pages of the book. The 'introductory spread', pages 17-18 and the 'final illustration' do not have words either, although this is not mentioned by Park, so that perhaps for Park the 'wordlessness' of the 'three spreads' is somehow different to spreads that do not have words: there are what Park calls the 'dreamlike sea creatures' in 'the three wordless spreads' although not in the other spreads that do not have words, so that 'imagination' and 'dream' can be constituted for Park as 'wordless' when words are known to be lacking, so that, paradoxically, their lack is here a gain if the imagination and dream are claimed to lead to Julián to 'think(ing) of (…) becoming a mermaid himself'.[39]

But '(B)ecoming a mermaid himself' is something that is known to be 'all he can think of', according to the back cover blurb, differently to the 'Julián imagines' or 'begins to imagine' of Park and Bird. Also, when Julián 'garbs himself as a mermaid'[40] this is 'Julián has an idea' (p. 15) which is therefore not Julián's 'own' idea, but what is claimed to be known about Julián and what an 'idea' is from elsewhere. In the pictures, the removal of sandals, shirt and shorts and the addition of fern, flowers, lip-stick and curtains are known to

be the 'idea' that Julián 'has'. (pp. 15-18) I can read that 'Julián' is known as such when he 'is a mermaid' (cover and 'final illustration') but there is known to be an 'I' in 'Nana, I am also a mermaid' (p. 13), where, as with Julián, the 'I' is known to be both different to a mermaid and in excess of the mermaid in being known to claim that 'I' is 'also a mermaid'. In '(a)ll he can think of is becoming a mermaid himself' (back cover blurb), there is known to be a 'he' that 'can think (…) of himself' 'becoming a mermaid', so that not only is 'he' known not to be a mermaid but 'himself' also remains different from 'a mermaid': 'a mermaid' is something that it is known 'he' knows 'himself' can 'become', but is not, just as being a mermaid is something that 'I am also'.

I have offered here, necessarily, only sections of readings of Julián is Mermaid and some of its reviews, but my interest has been to demonstrate how and why psychoanalytic and deconstructive readings cannot tell you what children, humans, animals or mermaids (or anyone/ thing) are, think, see, imagine, dream, feel or love – or even to believe this is an aim that can and should be achieved – but instead read what is at stake for perspectives which claim to know such things about what they define as other to themselves.

[1] Jacqueline Rose, The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction (Philadelphia. PA, Pennsylvania University Press, 1992 (1984)). Key, closely related, psychoanalytic and/ or deconstructive readings of the child in developmental psychology include: Erica Burman, Deconstructing Developmental Psychology (London, Routledge, third edition 2016 (1994)); in neuroscience: Jan De Vos, The Metamorphoses of the Brain: Neurologisation and its Discontents (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Karín

Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Children's Literature, Cognitivism and Neuroscience' in Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Childhood in Contemporary Britain: Literature, Media and Society, edited by Ralf Schneider and Sandra Dinter (London, Routledge, 2017), 67-85; in evolutionary psychology and theory of language acquisition: Karín Lesnik-Oberstein and Neil Cocks, 'Back to Where We Came From, Evolutionary Psychology and Children's Literature and Media', in Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia: Books, Toys and Contemporary Media Culture, edited by Elisabeth Wesseling (London, Routledge, 2017), 318-37. These works all offer a different understanding of the implications of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology for thinking about childhood and children's literature than much recent work in children's literature studies on neuroscience such as that of, for instance, Maria Nikolajeva, in, 'What is it Like to be a Child? Childness in the Age of Neuroscience', Children's Literature in Education, 50: 1 (2019), 23-37.

[2] Some of my prior analyses of such mis-readings of Rose's The Case of Peter Pan include: Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child (Oxford, Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1994); Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Children's Literature Criticism', Cultural Critique, 45, (Spring 2000), 222-43; Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Introduction. Children's Literature, New Approaches' in Children's Literature: New Approaches, edited by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, (Houndmills, Palgrave, 2004), 1-25; Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Childhood, Queer Theory, and Feminism', Feminist Theory, 11:3 (2010), 309-21; Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Introduction, Voice, Agency and the Child' in Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood edited by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (Houndmills, Palgrave, 2011), 1-18; Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Gender, Childhood and Children's Literature, the CIRCL Approach', Asian Women, 32:2 (2016), 1-26; Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Children's Literature, Sexual Identity, Gender and Childhood', BREAC: An Online Journal of Irish Studies (2016),

https://breac.nd.edu/articles/childrens-literature-sexual-identity-gender-and-childhood/, consulted 13 June 2019, 5.20 m.

[3] hClifford Geertz, 'Common Sense as a Cultural System', The Antioch Review, 33:1 (1975), 5-26, provides an alternative, classic, critique of 'common sense'.

[4] Sigmund Freud, 'Preface to the Fourth Edition' in Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in Sigmund Freud, A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works, SE, vol. VII (1901-1905), translated by and general editor James Strachey (Toronto, The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1968), 133-135, 133.

[5] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MA., Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 244-5. Italics in original.

In relation specifically to issues on (sexual) identity in connection to Derrida's arguments, the key theorist for issues on (sexual) identity read deconstructively is Judith Butler, for instance in her book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London, Routledge, 1990). I analyse the same mis-readings of Butler's work as that of Jacqueline Rose in: Karín Lesnik-Oberstein and Stephen Thomson, 'What is Queer Theory Doing With the Child?', Parallax, 8: 1 (2002), 35-46; Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Childhood, Queer Theory, and Feminism'; Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Children's Literature, Sexual Identity, Gender and Childhood'; Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Gender, Childhood and Children's Literature, the CIRCL Approach'; Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, On Having an Own Child: Reproductive Technologies and the Cultural Construction of Childhood (London, Karnac, 2008).

David Valentine's Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2007) and David Valentine, 'Sue E. Generous, Toward a Theory of Non-Transexuality', Feminist Studies 38: 1 (2012), 185-211, offer non-essentialist analyses of transgender.

For psychoanalytic and deconstructive readings of the 'animal' specifically in relation to the child and children's literature, see: Sue Walsh, 'Animal/ Child, It's the "Real" Thing' in Yearbook of English Studies on 'Children in Literature', edited by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 32 (2002), 151-63; Sue Walsh, Kipling's Children's Literature: Language, Identity and Constructions of Childhood (London, Routledge, 2010); Sue Walsh, 'The Child in Wolf's Clothing, The Meanings of the "Wolf" and Questions of Identity in Jack London's White Fang', European Journal of American Culture, 32:1 (2013), 55-77.

In relation to my discussions here of the mis-readings of Rose and Butler's arguments, the same mis-readings occur also of Walsh's arguments on children's literature and animals; some of the most recent examples of this include Amy Ratelle, Animality and Children's Literature and Film (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Anna Feuerstein and Carmen Nolte-Odhiambo, Childhood and Pethood in Literature and Culture: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies and Animal Studies (London, Routledge, 2017), Zoe Jaques, Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg (London, Routledge, 2015).

[6] Rose, The Case of Peter Pan, 13.

[7] Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)', translated by David Wills, Critical Inquiry, 28: 2 (Winter, 2002), 369-418, 398.

[8] Rose, The Case of Peter Pan, 12.

[9] Rose, The Case of Peter Pan, 1.

[10] David Rudd and Anthony Pavlik (eds.), 'The (Im)Possibility of Children's Fiction, Rose Twenty-Five Years On', Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 35: 3 (2010), 223-229, 225.

[11] Jessica Love, Julian is a Mermaid (London, Walker Books, 2018) and Jessica Love, Julián is a Mermaid (Somerville, Mass., Candlewick Publishers, 2018). In my discussion I will follow the edition used in the texts I am reading and include page references in parentheses.

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[12] Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 1987 (1978)), 12.

[13] Rose, The Case of Peter Pan, 16.

[14] 'Abuela' (here pluralised by Linda Sue Park) is the Spanish in the American edition, translated in the English edition as 'Nana'. The implications of the Spanish word in an otherwise English language text in the American edition and the translation in the English edition are touched on later in this article in relation to issues of ethnic identity.

[15] Linda Sue Park, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/books/review/childrens-picture-anxiety-kindness-kerascoet-jessica-love.html, consulted 10 January 2019, 2:15 pm. It might be claimed that in using reviews I am not engaging with academic children's literature criticism, but in fact I read in both a reliance on the same structural assumptions (the same 'various dualisms') as I explain further throughout this article.

[16] Maria Popova, https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/06/07/julian-is-a-mermaid-jessica-love/, consulted 10 January 2019, 3:18 p.m.

[17] Elizabeth Bird, http://blogs.slj.com/afuse8production/2018/01/05/review-of-the-day-julian-is-a-mermaid-by-jessica-love/, consulted 10 January 2019, 3:46 p.m.

[18] Laura Jiménez, https://booktoss.blog/2018/09/24/trans-people-arent-mythical-creatures/, consulted 13 June 2019, 4:33 p.m. For another review reflecting on how Jiménez's review challenged her initial, positive, reception of Julián is a Mermaid: Beverly Slapin, http://decoloresreviews.blogspot.com/2018/09/another-look-at-julian-is-mermaid.html, consulted 13 June 2019, 4:55 p.m.

[19] I will discuss issues around pronouns and gender specifically later on, including why I write 'himself' here.

[20] Derrida, The Truth in Painting, 8-9.

[21] I write this fully aware of the fact that very many children's literature critics have written extensively about childhood as 'constructed' or 'idealised', but this in no way detracts from my reading of those claims as in turn always resting on a child underneath or behind all that construction or idealisation who is, after all, not constructed, but simply true and real. My extensive analyses of this are referenced under footnote 1, but other relevant analyses are: Neil Cocks, Student Centred: Education, Freedom and the Idea of Audience (Ashby de la Zouch, Inkermen Press/ Axis Series, 2009); Neil Cocks, The Peripheral Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature and its Criticism (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Sue Walsh, Kipling's Children's Literature.

[22] Derrida, The Truth in Painting, 2

[23] I would like to stress here again that as part and parcel of reading psychoanalytically and deconstructively, I am not claiming that 'perspectives' here are the authors' (and reviewers') intentions, I cannot know their intentions in this sense. Neither are authorship or reviewership any the more exempt from the psychoanalytic and deconstructive disruptions of 'identity' as unitary and autonomous 'objects' as with any other 'identity', including the child.

[24] Robbie Voss, 'Mermaid Musings, or, "There is Not Enough Woman to Make Love to, and Too Much Fish to Fry.'" Amsterdam Social Science, 4:1 (2012), 67-72, 68.

[25] It may be noted that the more critical views with respect to LGBTQ+ issues, such as those of Jiménez, nevertheless again rely on the same, underpinning, critical assumptions.

[26] Josh Jackman, https://www.Jackman.co.uk/2019/02/17/trans-kids-book-julian-is-a-mermaid-awards/, consulted 12 April 2019, 10:24 a.m.

[27] https://www.Jackman.co.uk/2019/02/17/trans-kids-book-julian-is-a-mermaid-awards/, consulted 12 April 2019, 11:28 a.m.

[28] My more extensive analyses of perspectives on queer identities, transexuality (sic), transgender and childhood and children's literature include:Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson, 'What is Queer Theory Doing With the Child?'; Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Childhood, Queer Theory, and Feminism'; Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Children's Literature, Sexual Identity, Gender and Childhood'.

[29] Valentine, 'Sue E. Generous, Toward a Theory of Non-Transexuality', 199.

[30] Daniel Monk, 'Homophobic Bullying, A Queer Tale of Childhood Politics' in Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood, edited by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 55-73, 61. Italics in original.

[31] Julián is a Mermaid, 1. Julián is a Mermaid has no page numbers, but I will count pages myself as starting at page 1 from this page with 'This is a boy named Julián'.

[32] Julián is a Mermaid, 2.

[33] Park, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/books/review/childrens-picture-anxiety-kindness-kerascoet-jessica-love.html

[34] Julián is a Mermaid, back cover blurb.

[35] Park, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/books/review/childrens-picture-anxiety-kindness-kerascoet-jessica-love.html

[36] Jackman, https://www.Jackman.co.uk/2019/02/17/trans-kids-book-julian-is-a-mermaid-awards/

[37] Julián is a Mermaid, in what Linda Sue Park calls the 'initial spread' and 'final illustration', https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/books/review/childrens-picture-anxiety-kindness-kerascoet-jessica-love.html

[38] Park, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/books/review/childrens-picture-anxiety-kindness-kerascoet-jessica-love.html ; Bird, http://blogs.slj.com/afuse8production/2018/01/05/review-of-the-day-julian-is-a-mermaid-by-jessica-love/; Popova, http://blogs.slj.com/afuse8production/2018/01/05/review-of-the-day-julian-is-a-mermaid-by-jessica-love/

[39] Julián is a Mermaid, back cover blurb.

[40] Park, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/books/review/childrens-picture-anxiety-kindness-kerascoet-jessica-love.html