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4-29-2019

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Everything I Know About Gender I Learned from a '*Little Golden Book!*'

**By**

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Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

**Cultural Studies Program  
School of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Columbia College Chicago**

May 11, 2019

Abstract:

This feminist cultural intervention examines the power children's literature has in its ability to interpellate its readers and normalize dominant gendered identities for them. It draws on the work of feminist theorists, such as bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Sandra Bem to interrogate the politics of gender and sexuality in *The Little Golden Book* series and to examine how the latter has actively worked to create specific cisnormative gender identities for its readers. In this project, Chandler Clifford shows how children's literature is used as an ideological tool to teach children how gender is performed in the outside world and what gendered subjects are supposed to be and do. Through her deconstruction of *The Little Golden Books*, from their early beginnings in the 1940s to the recent re-releases of old books and the publication of new ones in the series, Clifford argues that the series has continued to produce and reproduce the same view of cisnormative gender as a guide for children that puts gender into a reductive hierarchy that completely ignores all non-binary gender and sexual subjectivities.

Keywords (5-7): cisnormative gender roles, performative gender, feminist theory, gender schema theory, interpellation, Little Golden Books

Do the books we read as children shape who we become as adults? As longtime editorial director of Golden Books and prolific children's book author, Diane Muldrow says in the introduction to her book *Everything I Need to Know I Learned From a Little Golden Book*, "We at Golden Books think there's a good chance that many of us learned pretty much everything that really matters about life from what we read between those sturdy, gilt-bound cardboard covers" (Muldrow np). The *Little Golden Book* series were memorable to children and parents for their gold foil spines and cardboard covers. American author and illustrator, William Joyce said of the series, "To me, they are like this big lump of warmth. They are my friends! I remember how much I loved the feel of the books, the velvety coarseness of the paper they were printed on, which felt comforting" (Marcus 136). These books were inviting and allowed children to recognize themselves as well as giving them new worlds to explore. Children's first look at the outside world comes from their family and the books that their families read to them. Since 1942, when *Little Golden Book* published their first book, the gender and sexuality roles they teach to children have remained stagnant. In this project, I took a sampling of books published by *Little Golden* from each decade and analyze the gender roles and representations that are used to teach children not only what gender is, but how it should be performed. While we have "been socialized by parents and society to accept sexist thinking. We had not taken the time to figure out the roots of our perceptions" (hooks 19), this project is going to examine some of those roots that can be found in children's literature.

Children's books are one of the first steps that society uses to interpellate children into subjects of its culture by forcing them into choosing a gender identity. Children see themselves in the books that they read and those books interpellate and make subjects out of their audience.

The books act as hilters which in turn works to create subjectivity in the children that read them. Althusser argues that interpellation works best when it is invisible or natural. Seeing book after book of girls playing with dolls, children learn that dolls must then be a girl's toy. This creates a very specific viewpoint on binary gender and how each gender is supposed to perform in the real world. The work of this project is to demystify the interpellation and the ideology behind the *Little Golden Books* series to show that gender is in fact a cultural construct and not natural or essential.

### Children's Literature as a Medium

Children's literature possesses a power that some other genres of books do not. Their audience, which mainly consists of children, tend to trust these books completely and are dependent upon them in the formation of their own identities. As bell hooks says in her book, *Feminism is for Everybody*, "Children's literature is one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness precisely because beliefs and identities are still being formed" (hooks 23). While this project is focusing on early children's literature and picture books, children's literature today contains everything from early picture books teaching numbers and simple words to young adult books. The one thing in common that all of these books have is their role in helping babies all the way up to young adults form their identities.

Children's books, like all other literature, can function as a mirror, window, or a sliding glass door as Rudine Sims Bishop explores in her article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." As windows, children's books offer children a different view of the world or a culture that is unlike the world in which they live. Children can then step inside those other worlds and begin to better understand and enjoy a different culture, turning books into sliding glass doors.

However, most frequently in children's literature books function as mirrors, especially to white cisnormative children where they only see their reflection and reality in the books they read. Mirrors can be a good thing allowing literature to transform "human experience and reflect it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experience as part of the larger human experience. Reading then becomes a means of self-affirmation and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (Bishop 1). Seeing themselves in the books that they read allow children to know that they exist in a larger world and that they matter within it. It is when they are only presented with one view of the world that children can then be negatively affected. "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which they are a part"(Bishop 1). This is why it is important to look at the types of children's literature that is out there and the overall narratives that they are perpetuating, especially in early children's literature. Children begin to form their identities by as early as three years old, when they can define their categorical self, which is when they can place themselves into basic categories. Children can then have a skewed view of themselves or the world when they are only presented with one narrative in the books that they read.

Children's literature is distinct in that it is not just for entertainment purposes. As Charles Temple, Miriam Martinez and Junko Yokota say in their textbook, *Children's Books in Children's Hands*, "good books can give children reference points for understanding their own experiences, lessons that may last a lifetime...Good books educate the imagination, as children stretch to visualize what it would be like to walk in the shoes of a character in a book" (5). Children's literature is crucial to the education of children in not only how they see themselves in

the larger world but also in how they model themselves. Since children's literature can be defined as anything read to or for children both *Children's Books in Children's Hands* and *Children & Books* by Zena Sutherland work to try to narrow that definition. Sutherland argues that besides defining children's literature by what it is not, most children's literature falls into two categories, "the useful, didactic books that were written to instruct them in manners and morals, and the adult books they read for pleasure" (6) while Temple, Martinez and Yokota stick to the broader definition that it is everything written for children. However Temple, Martinez and Yokota do narrow down when it comes to what makes outstanding children's literature. They say that outstanding children's literature expands awareness giving children "names for things in the world and for their own experiences" (9) while also exposing children to a world they do not know. One thing that these authors agree on is that children's literature is educational. In picture books children see an image and hear a word and make connections to learn concepts. These concepts are crucial for children to understand the world and culture that surrounds them. In *Children's Books in Children's Hands* the authors also looked at how children looked and responded to the literature saying, "children make interpretations, analyze text and illustrations, and generate thematic understandings of stories" (396). Children understand so much more than adults think and seemingly harmless bedtime stories can leave lasting impressions on how children view the world and shape their own self-image. If children are read fairy tales every night where the princess can only be saved by the prince and the book ends with a wedding, children will learn basic binary gender roles from this. Sutherland argues that the message in all children's literature has to fulfill certain needs in children which include the need for security, the need to love and be loved, the need to belong, the need to achieve, the need for change, the

need to know, and the need for beauty and order. By fulfilling these needs, children's literature is a crucial part in a person's psychological development. When children are only shown one narrative of the gender spectrum, they will learn to feel as though they do not belong in our society.

Since I am focusing on early children's literature, all of the books that I will be looking at are picture books. Picture books make up a huge amount of children's literature and are unique in that children do not need to rely on their imaginations to picture the stories that they are being told. In their book *How Picturebooks Work*, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott explore the art form of picturebooks and say, "making use of semiotic terminology we can say that picturebooks communicate by means of two separate signs, the iconic and the conventional" (1). Iconic signs are those where the signifier is in direct correlation to the signified while in conventional signs there is no direct correlation between the two but those who exist in the culture that produced the sign have knowledge of it. Picturebooks are their own unique art form in the way that they use text and image to form a new understanding. This project will look at the signs used by the Little Golden Book series to show how it has continued to perpetuate the same gender bias ideology throughout the different generations since the series was created.

Images can also be used to specify what the author and illustrator want the story to focus on when it comes to gender. Picturebooks tend to stick with common gender themes: boys are in blue and girls in pink. When Nikolajeva and Scott did look for more range they said, "we found it difficult to locate picturebooks where words and pictures tell different stories from the gender point of view: for instance, the verbal story being 'feminist' and the pictures more conservative in their gender construction, or the other way around" (108). Picturebooks have an immense

power over children since their audience can only understand half of its content. Most children need an adult or older child to read to them so they really can only understand the pictures by themselves. The images that the illustrators use carry the power to define gender roles to children.

Books and music have traditionally been the first forms of media that children were exposed to; however, now children are exposed to all sorts visual media whether it is on television or on Youtube. I used to babysit twin girls, who at the age of four could work an iPad that gave them access to all sorts of media that I had little to no control over, while they had almost complete control over the videos they were watching. I was able to see first hand how children were consuming media and how it has changed from when I was young. As technology and new mediums keep arising, what impact do children's books still have on the creation of a child's identity? It seems that children today watch videos and television more than any other generation. The *Little Golden Book* series has continued to remain relevant to children by having collaborations with other popular children's culture. They have collaborated with Disney, Star Wars, Sesame Street, Paw Patrol, and other popular children's television and movie programs. This way children can read and learn more about their favorite characters in books as well as movies. This has also worked to lessen the impact that books have in creating a child's identity when children consume more media than ever. However, for the purposes of this project I will solely be focusing on children's books that are originals from *Little Golden* and do not have any associations with their collaborators that have television shows or movies.

### Theoretical Framework and Methodology

When analyzing gender, I think the best theoretical framework to use is feminism. Traditionally the cisnormative view of gender is fixed and tied to a person's biological sex organs and chromosomal DNA. Feminism views gender as more fluid and the way that a person decides to identify themselves. Feminism looks at how gender is socially constructed, rather than at essential biological differences. The first wave of feminism happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Feminists of this time were focused primarily on the right for women to vote as well as other legal issues. During this time Mary Wollstonecraft advocating for the social and moral equality of the sexes. The first wave of feminism in the United States was closely related to the abolitionist movement, however it was mostly white women of a middle-class background that were the voice of the movement.

The second wave of feminism sprung up in the 1960s and lasted until around the 1980s. Women during this time were looking for equality in sexuality, the family, the workplace, with reproductive rights, *de facto* inequalities, and official legal inequalities. The second wave of feminism can be seen as a reaction to the return of domesticity after World War II. The ideologies surrounding the second wave began with Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. She examined the notion of women being perceived as "other" in the patriarchal society and that male-centered ideology was being accepted as a norm and enforced by the ongoing development of myths. However, the second wave of feminism really kicked off in America with Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* which took some of Simone de Beauvoir's ideas and articulated them into the "problem with no name" that was plaguing American housewives, the systemic sexism that taught women that their place was in the home and that if they were unhappy as housewives, it was only because they were broken

and perverse (Grady). This second wave of feminism secured a lot of legal rights for women with The Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title IX, and *Roe v. Wade*. The second wave cared deeply about the casual, systemic sexism ingrained into society and the belief that women's highest purposes were domestic and decorative, as well as the social standards that reinforced that belief. Their main goal was to point out and name sexism in our society and work on dismantling it. The second wave of feminism lost steam as society continued to paint feminist as angry, bitter, and hating all men, as well as debates within the feminist community about race and class since the "problem with no name" mostly affected white middle class women.

The third wave of feminism can be traced to the early 1990s with the Anita Hill testimony and the emergence of the riot grrrl groups in the music scene. It was during the third wave that the term intersectionality took prominence in the movement. Intersectionality, which was introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, was used to describe the idea that women experience layers of oppression that includes gender, race and class. The third wave also included Judith Butler's views of gender performativity. No one is born a gender, rather gender is a phenomenon that is produced and reproduced constantly in how children act and what they see in the world. The way that gender normative roles are taught to children turns the culturally constructed gender roles into essentialized categories. With the emergence of the internet, the third wave of feminism was able to create a global community for feminist to fight for a wider range of human experiences that included the fight for trans rights for the first time. The third wave worked to break down all essentialized categories when it came to gender. So for this paper it is important to understand where the feminist movement came from, but I will mostly be

working with the concepts from the third wave and their work with breaking down gender categories and their intersectionality.

As bell hooks says, “simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 1). While the word feminism brings up mixed emotions in most people, hooks’ definition is the one that I choose to work with since at its core all feminists want equality not just for women but for everyone. Feminism is not about making men the enemy, and in many ways feminism is about helping men to succeed by getting rid of the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”, as hooks calls it. hooks includes race and class in her description of the patriarchy because humans do not exist as one thing, we exist within races, classes, and sexes which are almost impossible to separate. As long as this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy “socializes boys to be ‘killers’ ...patriarchal violence against women and children will continue” (hooks 65). As much as feminism is about tearing down the patriarchy to protect and uplift women, men will also benefit from the movement. As girls are being told to look pretty and stay in the home, thus confining them to certain subjectivities, boys are being told that they need to be aggressive and support a family, which is also confining them to almost the opposite subjectivities as girls. The feminism that I will be referencing is about breaking down these binaries that say men and women must be opposites that only do specific tasks.

Feminism also looks at how gender is categorized and placed in a hierarchy giving the power to men. I want to look at the “sex/gender” system, which is defined as a set of arrangements where a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. Since I am analyzing how gender performativity is taught to children through the roles that characters play in the books and what a female and a male look like, I will also be using Judith

Butler's theories of gender performativity. I explore how children are taught to accept specific gender roles and how gender is performative. No one is born a gender, rather gender is a phenomenon that is produced and reproduced constantly in how children act and what they see in the world.

Gender schema theory (GST), which is taken from feminism's views on gender, posits "that depictions of female and male gender roles impact children's development of gender identity...GST states that the focal point of analysis must be on gender roles and whether or not they perpetuate stereotypes, as gender bias depicted in children's books can contribute to children's socialization and self-identity" (Koss 33). Gender schema theory, which was introduced in 1981 by Sandra Bem, works with how individuals are gendered in society and how biological sex characteristics are essentialized and transmitted throughout a society. "Children develop ideas and theories about what it means to be masculine or feminine (called gender schemas) from an early age and use these theories to categorize information, make decisions, and regulate behavior" (Starr and Zurbriggen 567). Bem uses gender schema theory to talk about how societies create and enforce gender schemas and pass them onto children, sometimes unconsciously. Bem argues for the importance of the gender schema theoretical framework by saying, "Specifically, gender schema theory argues that because American culture is so gender polarizing in its discourse and its social institutions, children come to be gender schematic (or gender polarizing) themselves without even realizing it. Gender schematicity, in turn, helps lead children to become conventionally sex-typed" (qtd. in Starr and Zurbriggen 567). By looking at the *Little Golden Books* through the theoretical frameworks of feminism and gender schema I

was able to deconstruct how the books are recreating the cisnormative gender roles and teaching them to children as examples.

The theory of interpellation was introduced by Louis Althusser to show how we encounter our culture's values and internalize them and make them a part of ourselves. Interpellation works by creating subjects through a culture's institutions and the dominant ideologies those institutions propagate. As Althusser says in his article, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses"

I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (np).

As we are born "always already subjects" as Althusser says, we are born into a culture that already has ruling ideologies that govern how the society works, and as we are born we are labeled male or female on our birth certificates interpellating us into our culture's gender ideology.

Since I am looking at a series of books, I used narrative and textual analysis to deconstruct them. The narrative analysis lets me look at how the messages about gender are created and told in a specific way that tells the story of what a man and a woman are to children. A textual analysis in combination with the narrative analysis allows me to look at the books as a whole. Using a textual analysis, I was able to fully dissect the language used in the books to help me figure out the messages that the books are reproducing. I also studied the signs and words

that are being used and the stories that being sold to parents and children. Since the books have been around for a long time I want to deconstruct the messages that they are trying to create through hermeneutics and looking at the history that these books have been through. The combination of all of these methods helped me to provide a full picture of the gender construction that is made and taught to children.

Cultural studies is concerned with how culture is produced, enacted and consumed, I cannot do that without also analyzing the images that make up the majority of the pages of the books. When most kids first get introduced to the *Little Golden Books* they can not read them, but they can look at the images and hear the words being spoken by their parents or another adult. They can really only consume the images by themselves. The images subtling tell the story of gender, in a powerful way, because this is how children first see the outside world. Children can be told about a tiger or an elephant, but it is when they see what those animals look like in real life they can fully understand the concepts; the same can be said when telling them about gender roles.

In order to best analyze how the *Little Golden Book* series has been perpetuating the same cisnormative gender bias since the 1940s I need to take a historical approach when looking at the books in the series. I organized all the books that *Little Golden Books* has published and took out all the ones made in collaboration with Disney, *Sesame Street*, Barbie and with other popular children's culture brands. I want to focus on the impact that *Little Golden* made and continues to make without the connotations that Disney and other children brands bring to the books. I also took out all the books that focus on counting and the ABC's, I want to focus on the children's books that tell a narrative and explore how that narrative is transformed into various gender

identities. I organized the remaining titles by the year that they were published. I took a random sample from each decade to show the gender narratives that are being shown and explored in each book. I deconstructed each of the books and looked at the stories that they tell as well as the images that they use to tell those stories. I want to look at they types of characters that are created, are they flat or round? And what role does gender play in the creation of those characters. I paid a close attention to where each character is seen and what kinds of dialogue they have. Are women only seen as mothers inside the home or do they have agency over their own lives? Using these questions, I explored how gender is recreated in the *Little Golden Books* are taught to children.

In her book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Butler asks “Could language injure us, if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings? Beings which require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms?” (1-2). Children’s books are used to introduce children to language, more specifically the written and visual language of a culture. Butler is looking at which words injure and how calling someone a name can affect their own identity. “By being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call” (2). Children are inaugurated into a speech of a culture that then defines their subjectivity. Simply put by being interpellated into a culture through language, children are than subjects of what a certain social existence. By labeling a child male or female when they are born, puts the weight of those terms on that child for the rest of their lives.

Materials: The *Little Golden Book Series*

In 1942, a collaboration between the Artist and Writers Guild (a division of Western Publishing) and Simon and Schuster led to the creation of the *Little Golden Book* series. Georges Duplaix, who was the head of the Artist and Writers Guild at the time, wanted to make good quality children's books that were affordable and durable. This led to the 25¢ revolution, while other children's books were being sold for \$2 or \$3. This was a risky venture for everyone involved, but because they printed a run of 50,000 copies of each book instead of the standard 25,000 they were able to keep the cost of their books low. Within five months of the first printing, a third printing had been exhausted with 1.5 million copies sold. Due to the high printing volume, Western Publishing was allotted more paper during the World War II rations than rival publishers. "Overwhelmed by the public's response, the publisher felt compelled that spring to apologize to booksellers both for continuing shortfalls in its inventory and for the decision to postpone the release of the next four *Little Golden Books* from February to May 1943" (Marcus 51). World War II helped cement *Little Golden Books* as a competitor in the children's publishing game. In her "My Day" column, First Lady at the time, Eleanor Roosevelt urged parents to read aloud to their children as a way to boost morale and *Little Golden Books* gave parents an ample supply of books to choose from. The low cost helped parents feel thrifty in a time of war. The books even came with patriotic messages for kids. On the back flaps of some of the books featured ways that the beloved characters they were reading were helping in the war effort and how the children could help as well. In 1947 5 million books were sold.

The *Little Golden Book* series also worked hard at marketing their books unlike the other publishers at the time. "To encourage retail customers to make multiple purchases, booksellers were given cardboard slipcase boxes gaily printed to resemble suitcases and sized to hold either

four or six books each” (Marcus 51). Also when they released their book *Doctor Dan the Bandage Man* they teamed up with Johnson & Johnson to sell the book along with bandaids. They ran print and television ads that marketed the two products together. While other children’s literature at the time was working on being established and getting praise by librarians, the Golden Books were “in stark defiance of this well-established pattern, *Little Golden Books* were designed as impulse-buy items that parents would purchase not because an authority had praised them but because the books were affordable, visually appealing, and ready at hand” (Marcus 57-58). The books had colorful and happy covers that children gravitated towards and because of their low-cost parents were more inclined to buy the books for their children.

Perhaps the greatest marketing tool utilized was making children active participants in their reading. “The series number assigned to each book made it easy for youngsters to keep track of the titles they did or did not yet own. The name plaque printed on the inside front cover, bearing the legend “This Book belongs to,” reinforce the child's pride in ownership” (Marcus 59). Due to the cheap price, parents did not mind if their children wrote in the books and children were able to start creating their own libraries out of the *Little Golden Books* that they collected. Each book is unique to its owner.

The *Little Golden Books* series worked hard to make sure that their titles remained relevant throughout the decades. They collaborated with the best children’s authors and illustrators like Margaret Wise Brown, Richard Scarry, and Garth Williams due to their access with the Artist and Writers Guild. They also kept up with trends in children’s popular culture. Five years after Walt Disney created Mickey Mouse, in 1933 while the *Little Golden Books* were still just an idea, Western Publishing reached out to Disney to license the character in their

books. Since its creation Disney has always been a part of the *Little Golden Books*, and in 1971 the people at *Little Golden Books* saw the potential in a new children's educational show called *Sesame Street* and has worked in publishing their characters in their books ever since.

In the 1960s, there was a push to have a more psychological component to children's books to help them better understand themselves. "As undergraduate psychology courses demystified the entire field for growing numbers of Americans, and as seeing a therapist began to lose its stigma, experts in childhood development urged that children's books be given a more definite role in helping young people to "cope" with their emotional growing pains" (Marcus 191). Writers at *Little Golden Books* teamed up with Dr. Robert E. Switzer, director of the Menninger Clinic's Children's Division to come up with new books that parents could read with their children to help the children understand what is going on with their emotions and psychological development. The first four titles produced were *I'm a Boy*, *I'm a Girl*, *Sometimes I Get Angry*, and *Look at Me Now!*. While these books were created to help children these titles suggest that they also have strict guidelines when it comes to gender. There is a book for boys and a book for girls which clearly defines that there are only two genders and that this is how each of those genders should behave.

In order to best understand the gender and sexuality categories that *Little Golden* has worked to create over the many decades, I looked at a random sampling of eight books that they have published throughout the years. These include books that are all original *Little Golden* books and none that are done with any of their collaborators, such as Disney or *Sesame Street*. I focus on the narratives that *Little Golden* is working to create and sell and not get confused by the narratives that a company like Disney has already worked to create for children. I also

filtered out all the books that had animal protagonists since I wanted to focus on books that had children as the protagonists. These are the books that truly mirror the outside world to children.

### Analysis of Books and Findings

#### Little Golden Books in Postwar America

In 1949 *Little Golden Books* published *We Like to do Things* by Walter M. Mason and illustrated by Steffie Lerch. It shows children doing various activities that they like. Throughout the book the boys and the girls are mostly separated in the activities that they like to enjoy. This separates the genders and shows that the two have separate and opposite identities and activities that they should like to enjoy. The boys are seen making things, raking things, shaking things, gluing things, and chewing things, while the girls are shown sewing things, growing things, blowing things, patching things and hatching things. All of the activities have been gendered throughout the years this book takes those cisnormative gender roles and is teaching them to their children readers.

Once the book established that boys and girls are different through their separate activities, it shows how the two different genders each do the same task but in different gendered ways. Both genders are seen strutting to things, cutting things, bending things and mending things, however how they are doing those tasks are completely different. When the children are shown strutting to things, there are two boys. One is dressed as a soldier with a toy sword marching, while the other boy is dressed as a Native American wearing a feather headdress with his arms crossed, which is also culturally insensitive. The girl in the illustration is seen in a dress as a majorette. Majorettes are baton twirlers whose twirling performance is often accompanied by dance or gymnastics, and they are primarily associated with marching bands during parades.

While any gender could be a soldier or a Native American, majorettes are only women. Women are pigeonholed into gendered costumes while boys are allowed to be whatever they want.

When the children are cutting things, again it shows the children in separate gendered tasks. The girls are wearing pristine bows and dresses as they cut a rose and cut a birthday cake. The boy, however, is in a field shown with dirty clothes and mud on his face as he carves a whistle for himself. A similar scene occurs when the children are shown bending things. One boy is working on a construction project while the other boy is wearing a Native American headdress and making himself a bow with arrows around his feet. The boys are outside playing and being adventurous, while the girl is shown inside making Christmas decorations of mistletoe. It is shown that it is the girls' job to make the home pretty and prioritize that. This is even more apparent when the children are shown mending things. Girls are shown to be sewing things, patching things, and on the page on mending things again the girl is shown sewing. By showing girls sewing, repetitively throughout the book it enforces the message that sewing is girls' work.

In 1949, when this book was published, America was coming out of World War II and returning to everyday life. Women that were needed to work in factories during the war were told to go back into the home so the returning men could have their jobs back. It is no wonder why the children's book of the era wanted defined gender roles to show where women belonged and where men belonged.

In 1950, *Little Golden* published one of their classics, *Doctor Dan the Bandage Man* by Helen Gaspard and illustrated by Corinne Malvern, which was reprinted in the 1970s and 1990s. *Doctor Dan the Bandage Man* is about a young boy named Dan who gets hurt and gets a bandage and then gives bandages to his sister, his sister's doll, the family dog, and even his dad.

The story is rather simple however it does seem to only show one side of boyhood and masculinity. When Dan gets hurt playing cowboys with his friends, all of which are male, he runs to his mom. “Now his mother was always glad to see Dan. But a cowboy crying? How could that be? ‘Why, that’s nothing to cry over,’ Mother said when she saw the bright red spot” (Gaspard np). Lissa Paul and Philip Nel in their book, *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, looked at the term girlhood, they also looked at what the term boyhood means and comes from. The term boyhood goes all the way back to when boy referred to someone of lower status or a slave yet the term manhood “is often defined by the ability to dominate, care for, or exercise power over others, but such behaviors can be difficult or impossible for male youths, poor men, or men of color” (Paul and Nel np). Thus boyhood as a term has always been complicated as being a boy means being an incomplete man. Here boys are shown to be playing men as they play cowboys in the full outfits while shooting at each other with fake guns. When Dan runs to his mother for comfort it is also telling children that mothers are there for comfort, however the book does not give the mother a name and she is shown as being a person who’s only responsibility in the world is to take care of Dan. The mother also remarks that cowboys cannot cry, showing that Dan is failing in his attempt to be a man because he is crying.

The only other girl in the story is Dan’s sister, Carly, who is seen playing with her baby doll. The children are coded as being different in many aspects throughout the book in regards to their genders. Dan, the boy, plays cowboys, he wears overalls, and he is seen growing and learning to take care of the people around him. Carly, the girl, is shown in a dress, playing with a babydoll, and she is dependent on her brother. Instead of Dan teaching Carly to learn to bandage herself, she learns that when she is hurt she will rely on Dan to help her.

Towards the end of the book we meet the father, “Next day Daddy was home from work. He went out to mow the lawn” (Gaspard np). By comparing the way that we are introduced to the mother and the father shows the places and domains in the home where men and women belong. The mother was seen inside the home taking care of the children. The father, on the other hand, has a job and when he is home is seen outside the home working on the lawn. After Dan puts a bandage on his dad, the dad thanks him by giving him a handshake. This shows that men cannot show affection towards one another, even if they are father and son. Seeing as this book was written and published in the 1950s, the gender roles that this book creates and teaches to children are traditionally cisnormative.

#### *Little Golden Books during the Civil Rights Era*

*The Boy with a Drum* by David L. Harrison and pictures by Eloise Wilkin was published by *Little Golden Books* in 1969. The story follows a young boy who bangs his toy drum around his farm. While the book only focuses on the young boy and the animals around the farm, it does show the agency and freedom that this young boy is given. The boy is allowed to walk around and be by himself and he is completely safe. The book starts with the boy heading out with the sunrise and ends with him marching into the night, “They all marched away to the top of a hill—if they haven’t stopped marching, they’ll be marching still” (Harrison np). The boy is allowed to stay away from home and be gone at night time surrounded by animal friends. Boys have similar societal pressures put on them, just like girls, however what is expected from boys differs greatly. Boys are to be adventurers and explorers, they are troublesome with no fear of consequences. Children’s books are grooming young men to hold a higher status in society. This

book is making it okay for boys to travel and explore and shows them that as they enter the world they will be safe from all harm.

For the 1970s, I analyzed *The Big Enough Helper* by Nancy Hall and illustrated Tom O'Sullivan that was published in 1978. In this book a young girl named Suzy goes to the laundromat with her mom and wants to help her but her mom does not think that Suzy is old enough to help. When Suzy and her mom get to the laundromat there are only women seen inside. This shows that doing laundry is a chore that should only be done by women. When Suzy kept bothering her mother, her mother gave Suzy her doll to play with, "Suzy found an empty laundry cart and carefully placed Dolly inside. 'You are my baby,' Suzy whispered gently to her doll, 'and when you get big, you can help me. We'll have fun doing things together'" (Hall np). *Little Golden* continues to gender code toys that children are seen using. Dolls continue to represent a "girls" toy.

When Suzy does try to help her mother she ends up making an even bigger mess. Suzy's mom sits Suzy down and then a man comes up to Suzy and asks for her help. While the main point of the story is that Suzy is able to help this man as he shows her how to do laundry it also shows that Suzy should help this man. Since the man was nice to Suzy and makes her laugh, she helps him do laundry and take care of his own baby. It shows a sort of transactional relationship that women should have with men. Men teach women something and then women are indebted to men. This book was published in 1978 during the second wave of feminism, when women were working for the right to be seen based on their own merits. Women were fighting against workplace harassment and sexual harassment in general. In order to combat the feminists, the media and society at large painted the second wave feminists as man hating, bitter and unhappy.

This book shows that a girl can be happy when a man lets her help him while her own mother is too busy. This book is actively working to combat the feminist message.

### Little Golden Books during the Reagan Era

The 1980s showed the end of the second wave feminism by saying that women got what they wanted. More women were in the workplace, laws had been passed that prevented workplace harassment and guaranteed equal pay. Many people took these victories at their word instead of seeing what was still broken in American society. *The Friendly Book* by Margaret Wise Brown and illustrated by Garth Williams published originally in 1954 but re-published and printed in 1982 shows how gender roles in 1982 and 1954 remained the same. This book lists what the unknown narrator likes as in cars, trains, stars, and dogs while showing animals doing the various activities associated with those things. On the pages talking about cars, boy animals are seen driving cars and giving tours, while the girl animals are always seen riding behind the men and wearing hats and bows. On the stars page a boy bunny is seen exploring the night sky in an air balloon.

In Donna Ferguson's article, "Must Monsters Always be Male? Huge Gender Bias Revealed in Children's Books" she found that "males were more typically embodied as powerful, wild and potentially dangerous beasts such as dragons, bears and tigers, while females tended to anthropomorphise smaller and more vulnerable creatures such as birds, cats and insects" (Ferguson). These books are creating differences in boys and girls. Boys are big and strong, so girls must be small and weak. They are also, not so subtly, saying that men should have power and be represented as powerful animals. Throughout the book girls are shown as non-threatening animals, such as bunnies, ducks, dogs, birds and humans.

For the 1990s, I looked at *I Love You, Mommy!* by Edie Evans and illustrated by Rusty Fletcher. The book shows various children with their mothers as they explain why they love their moms. However, while the message of children loving their moms is important, the book also reads as a “how to” book for girls on how to be the perfect mother, and if you fall short of any of this you are not perfect. It also emphasizes the fact that women are supposed to stay home and their only focus should be their children. As bell hooks calls, “‘the enemy within,’ referring to our internalized sexism. We all knew firsthand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval...” (hooks 14). This book can be seen as teaching girls how to perform their gender, and in order to do that they have to be the best mother and to judge other mothers that chose to leave their kids and go to work, instead of showing girls that they can love their children and still work outside the home.

The mothers in the book are seen playing and constantly entertaining their children, taking them on outings to the museum, the fair and even a ball game. This book works to show that it is primarily the mother’s responsibility to take care of the children as moms are seen coaching the children’s sports and putting them to bed. The moms in this book do not have any agency or life outside of their children. Their children’s interest become their own, as seen by the mother coaching her son’s basketball team. The only sign of a father figure in the entire book is on the cover. In a picture frame beside the mom and her two kids as she reads them a story is a photo of the family with a father. This also works to show that the only way to be a family is for a woman to be a mother and take care of the children, while a man is a father that is off at work

and away from the home. The 1990s saw the resurgence of feminism, so like the 1970s, it makes sense that *Little Golden* would want to make clear and defined gender roles.

### Contemporary *Little Golden Books*

To examine the 2000s, I reviewed a book that was originally published in 1951 and then re-published in 1979 and 2006. I will be looking at the 2006 version of *Two Little Gardeners* by Margaret Wise Brown and Edith Thacher Hurd and illustrated by Gertrude Elliott. The story follows two gardeners as they plant seeds and take care of their garden until they can harvest the crops and make a feast. The book never uses any other pronoun except for they, it is the illustrations that show a boy and a girl gardening. The girl is seen in red overalls with a bow always in her hair.

As they garden the boy and the girl do equal work showing that they are both responsible for the garden. Both the boy and the girl are also in the kitchen making a feast with their harvest. While the genders are seen as equal in this book, they still decided to show a boy and a girl instead of having two of the same sex or including any non binary people. They decided to keep the story heteronormative showing the kids how to have the perfect heteronormative life. The book functions as a way to teach children the correct way that they should play house. While this is the first book that shows men and women being equal it also works to exclude all non binary people. The book was written only using the pronoun they, and it was the illustrators choice to draw a boy and a girl. Seeing as this book was originally published in 1951, they could have decided to stick with the original drawing, except the fact that they decided to re-publish it without any updates suggests how *Little Golden Books* continues with the same view of the two genders instead of expanding their view of gender.

The last book that I analyzed is *I Can Do It!* by Trish Holland and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley Newton published in 2014. The book follows a young girl named Holly throughout her day as she tries to do everything by herself. The website for Penguin Random House, which now owns the *Little Golden* series, describes the book as, “Holly’s not a baby anymore. She can dress, eat, and clean up all by herself . . . almost!” While Holly keeps trying to do tasks by herself, she keeps messing up and the book points this out as wrong. “Holly said, ‘I can do it!’ And she did—kind of” (Holland np). Everytime Holly does anything the book continues to point out that she did it wrong. This shows children, especially young girls who see themselves mirrored in Holly, that when they try to do tasks by themselves they might get it wrong as well, instead of encouraging young children to be creative and that there is no right way to dress. It makes light of Holly’s constant mistakes and the readers are supposed to think that all of her mistakes are small and cute, showing that girls are allowed to mess up on small mistakes and still be deemed adorable.

The book also shows Holly’s mom, sister, grandma, female teacher, and female babysitter all trying to help her along the way. This highlights the role that women must taking in caretaking. These jobs are specifically coded as female. The only males in the book come in at dinner time when her older brother tries to fill Holly’s plate and her dad reads her a bedtime story. In fact the only character that Holly asks for help from is her father, “But Holly said, ‘I’m too tired. Can you help me, Daddy?’”(Holland np). It shows that girls are supposed to only ask for help from a man and that men are supposed to always be around to help young girls. Holly is surrounded by women all day long, and the only time she wants any help is from her father, who

is dressed as though he has been at work all day. This book, while published in 2014, is still using cisnormative gender roles to code which gender is capable of which tasks.

Holly, herself, is very much coded as a cisnormative female character. Her room is covered in flowers with her stuffed animals and dolls. She is constantly in pink and every time she is outside, she is surrounded by birds and butterflies. This is teaching young girls that in order to perform their gender correctly, they need to look and be just like Holly. The last page is just an illustration of Holly sleeping, tucked in bed, surrounded by a wreath of flowers, butterflies and a bow which is reminiscent of the old nursery rhyme “What are little girls made of?/ Sugar and spice and everything nice./ That's what little girls are made of” (Unknown) which can be dated back to the early nineteenth century.

When looking at all the *Little Golden Books* together, it is interesting to note that three of the books do not mention gender at all, and that it is the illustrations that differentiate the genders. More specifically, in *We Like to do Things* (1949), *The Friendly Book* (1982), and *Two Little Gardeners* (2006), the books are written with no mention of gender. In *We Like to do Things* the only pronoun used is “we”, meaning that the books are written from a group of children’s perspective showing what they like to do. However, through the illustrations it is clearly shown what “we” meaning girls like to do is different from the “we” that represents boys. *The Friendly Book* is written from the first-person perspective with “I” as they list off everything that they like. *The Two Little Gardeners* is written with the gender neutral “they”, yet the book still manages to be cisnormative. Three out of the eight books that I looked at have no specific gender mentioned in them, and all of the covers can be seen as gender neutral with a boy and a

girl on each of them. *Little Golden Books*, however, works to make sure to include gender and teach children what each gender is supposed to do through the illustrations.

By breaking down the characters in each of the books, five out of the eight books feature women in traditional cisnormative gender roles. Women are shown as mothers, daughters, sisters, teachers, and grandmas. In the other three books women are seen as non-threatening animals (*The Friendly Book*), a gardener (*Two Little Gardeners*), and in the last book, *The Boy with a Drum* there are no women in the book at all. The male characters in the books are shown to be fathers and sons while also being friendly strangers, adventurers and learning valuable skills to one day become a doctor. In Janice McCabe's article "Gender in Twentieth-Century Children's Books: Patterns of Disparity in Titles and Central Characters" she says, "by preschool, children have learned to categorize themselves and other into one of two gender identity categories"(McCabe et al. 199). These books are helping children to create their identities from such a young age.

All of the characters throughout the books are shown to be flat characters. Flat characters are characters that are usually known for one personality trait and do not change over the course of the story. This can best be seen in *I Can Do It!* with the main character Holly. Throughout the book Holly is known for wanting to do things by herself and continually messing up or doing things incorrectly. The book ends with Holly's last line being "I can do it" as she drifts off to sleep. Flat characters are used in children's books to help children learn to understand basic character types, especially in early picture books. Since the books I looked at were short picture books, the authors did not have time to create more complex characters.

The *Little Golden Books* clearly create a world with only two genders in it: males and females. Despite the fact that some of the books were written with no mention of gender, they still managed to make sure gender was included and that the gender roles were explicit. Girls are shown as inside the home and in need of men to help them, while boys are shown as adventurers outside the home. Amanda Diekmann, Wind Goodfriend and Stephanie Goodwin explore how gender can be ascribed to power in their article “Dynamic Stereotypes of Power: Perceived Change and Stability in Gender Hierarchies”. They posit that through an indirect path the social roles that each gender have led to “gender stereotypes that rationalize why each sex is suited to wield power within a certain domain. Because women have traditionally held power within the private sphere of home and family, the type of power considered more appropriate for them is dyadic power, in that they influence others in close relationships” (202). The power that women have suits the role of a traditional female. As women try to grab power that is deemed only appropriate for men they are no longer characterized as suitable or traditional women. *Little Golden Books* makes sure to only give little girls access to traditional women in the characters that they create.

As women have worked to gain more power throughout the twentieth century, their roles in children’s literature show a symbolic annihilation “suggesting that the underlying message conveyed to children is that women and girls occupy a less central role in society than do men or boys” (McCabe et al. 201). The underrepresentation of female characters in children’s books show how women are not viewed in an equal manner to men. Serious gaps continue to persist in the amount of titles and characters in books that are men and women. Not only are girls underrepresented in children’s literature, but when they are represented only one major narrative

of girlhood exists. In Marjorie N. Allen's book *What Are Little Girls Made of?* she explores how characters in children's book help young girls define who they are and how they build their own self-worth. Like McCabe, Allen notes that "the majority of picture books in publisher's catalogs feature boys or androgynous animals, and in bookstores the majority of picture books on display feature boys on the covers" (Allen 21). Many have noted that girls will read books about boys but no boy would want to read a "girl" book. This seems to mean that the male experience is equal to the human experience, but the female experience is something that is only for females to know and read about. This limits the roles that men and women can then play out in the world. She also states, "shallow characterizations of females in children's books do little to increase the prestige of women, and far too many popular children's books have a tendency to relegate girls to a lesser role" (Allen 107). In Deborah A. Prentice and Dale T. Miller's article and study "Essentializing Differences Between Women and Men", they looked to deconstruct the essentialized differences between men and women that the gender binary has created. They state that essentialized differences come from two related assumptions, "First, people assume that members of an essentialized category share a deep, underlying similarity (the essence) that constrains many of their observable features...Second, people assume that the essence of a category is immutable, and so, to a large extent, are the features constrained by it" (Prentice and Miller 129). For example, if a child is born with male biological sex characteristics (i.e. a penis) then that child is gendered as a male and must learn to act in the the typical male role that that specific culture deems acceptable and cannot change their sex or gender. Gender schema theory works to show how this is not the case, but it is culture that created the gender and sexuality binary and then made the binary seem natural. These essentialized social categories have become

what we view as the typical male and female gender roles. However, in their research they have learned that gender roles are not in fact essentialized and males and females are much more alike than they are different, but the way that the categories are essentialized by everyone in a society shows that essentialized gender roles do carry immense power.

The symbolic annihilation that McCabe is talking about can also be used to refer to the non binary children that are looking for themselves in children's books. *Little Golden Books* has created a world without any representation for non binary children and from the sample of books I looked at there is no LGBTQ representation either. These books are written to teach children what a cisnormative life looks like and how they are supposed to perform their gender. In "Theorizing Gender Ideologies Through Experiences of Misgendering", Sonny M. Nordmarken works to show how misgendering due to the gender binary creates a hierarchy of power within gender. He claims that,

Notions that gender is fixed, signified by genitals, and a 'natural matter of fact' that men are inherently perpetrators of violence and that women are inherently victims, that men are masculine and women are feminine, and that all individuals are cisgender and are either men or women. These notions erase the existence of gender minorities and contribute to the idea that Trans people are pretenders and deceivers (Nordmarken 1).

By creating only two genders, many people are completely excluded from society. Since they do not fit into a specific gender role, society has no clue what to do with them, and most of their time works to undermine them by misgendering them. This form of subjugation works to completely erase the Trans experience.

## Conclusions

Children's books are important to the formation of their young reader's identities. They are instructional tools for children to use to first see the world outside of themselves and then work to figure out where they belong in that world. We are all born in medias res into a set of circumstances and into a culture that we have no control over. Children's books are an important tool to teach and interpellate children as subjects of that culture. The *Little Golden Books* series has been used to promote the same cisnormative view of gender and sexuality to children since its creation in 1942.

A broad range of diverse books are needed to help children better understand not only their own subject position in the world, but to understand people around them that may be different from themselves. While I chose to focus on gender, this issue extends to race, class, and disabilities as well. More research is needed in looking at children's books in those areas so all children can feel like they belong in the world regardless of their gender, race, class, and abilities.

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