The Big Kids Book Club: Reading Children's Books as an Intimate Practice of Care with and for Black Queer Life

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The Big Kids Book Club brings together our perspectives and experiences as Black women and gender nonconforming people engaged in youth work, advocacy, and research; Black feminist cultural production; and Black queer parenting. In this article we center Black queer (and) feminist approaches with interest in how Black queer children's narratives take us beyond representation and into realms of resignifying and worldmaking. Our roundtable discussions explore what it means to encounter children's books written with Black queer life in mind and demonstrate a relational reading practice that reads and gathers in Black queer spaces while expanding possibilities for Black life.

Key words: *children's literature, Black studies, gender studies, relational reading*

Welcome to the Big Kids Book Club

The Big Kids Book Club (the BKBC) is a Black queer feminist reading practice in which we gather and discuss children's books as a method of knowledge valuation that embraces and enacts care for Black queer children. Here, as three big kids ("adults") reading together, we encounter three children's books as though they are comrades linked in arms in a literary struggle for a liberated world: *Julián Is a Mermaid* written and illustrated by Jessica Love (2018); *My Rainbow* written by Trinity and DeShanna Neal (2020), illustrated by Art Twink; and *Being You* written by Megan Madison and Jessica Ralli (2021a), illustrated by Andy Passchier. We formed this club in 2022 when Lindsay Herriot reached out to Shaunasea Brown, having appreciated her turn to children's books and use of autoethnographic methods in her chapter on Black women's and girl's hair and self-love (Brown, 2019). In accepting Herriot's invitation to contribute to this special issue by sharing an article on gender, sexuality, and Black girlhood, Brown reached out to Mila Mendez and Juanita Stephen in the hopes that we might collaborate. This article offers our perspectives as Black women and gender nonconforming people engaged in youth work, advocacy, and research, Black feminist cultural production, and Black queer parenting.

As we think with texts written with children and their caregivers as the primary audiences, we do so keeping in

mind children subject to past and ongoing genocides, imperial domination, and political action that limit their safety and self-determination. We insist on the interconnections among freedom struggles worldwide and call for an end to the imperial violences occurring in Congo, Haiti, Palestine, and Sudan and the return of children—alive and murdered—to their families. We come to this work as people living in the settler colonial state of Canada and working within institutions constructed to uphold its settler colonial project and to further its multicultural imperatives (Thobani, 2007).

While Canada presents itself as a peaceful, welcoming, multicultural safe-haven, we vehemently reject these narratives on both historical and contemporary grounds. Our project takes up Rinaldo Walcott's reckoning with multiculturalism as a lie through the recognition that it is "a racial contract premised on European modernity's categorizations of people" that also constructs non-white people as "other" through a celebration of diversity (Walcott, 2011, p. 18; Walcott, 2019, p. 397). Canada, "despite its pretensions of being a 'benevolent' nation-state," write Maynard and Simpson (2022, p. 9), is responsible for "much of the unmaking of Black and Indigenous lives and the ecosystems that have historically sustained our lives, spanning Turtle Island, the Caribbean, Africa, and South and Central America" (p. 9).

From our shared and differing positionalities, we three authors engaged in a collective experience of reading children's books that were written with Black queer young people in mind (as subjects and audiences), believing these to be theoretical texts and invitations to create other worlds. We outline our experience here as a response to a question raised in this special issue concerning childhood studies' complicity in disciplining children who do not conform to normative ideals of childhood. Our use of "Black queer" in part answers this question because it is meant to be read triply—as "Black, queer," "Black/queer," and "BlackQueer"—signifying the various relationships that the subjects and audiences of the text have to queerness while marking how white supremacist logics render Black people and Black families "on the outside of [cis]heteronormativity" (Cohen, 1997, p. 481). Using a Black feminist lens, we use these books as an invitation to read differently by exploring how they counter the invisibility of Black queer children and their childhoods.

Through our reading practice, the BKBC shared emergent interests in the following questions: What might these books teach Black queer young people about their bodies in the context of a world with categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability? How might these books animate the intersection of Blackness and queerness as one of belonging rather than injury? How might these books incite Black queer imaginations for what *body*, *family*, or *choice* mean beyond the hegemonic axiological and teleological rubrics of liberal identity categories, medical models of difference, human rights frameworks, and/or the carceral system? After all, Black queer (and) feminist epistemologies teach us that knowledge valuation is not a neutral process (Collins, 1990), that the symbolic order of language as a mode of knowledge production is overdetermined by violent systems including whiteness, heterosexuality, cissexism, and ableism, and that to otherwise (re)produce and (re)value Black queer life, we must conjure new ways of meaning making: in language and grammar (Spillers, 1987), in the realm of the aesthetic (Wynter, 1992), in the practice of bodily relations (Lorde, 1984), and through our practices of reading (Sharpe, 2016).

As Hortense Spillers (1987) offers, "to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness" (p. 65). While drawing from Spillers' work, we ask, how might children's books strengthen the inherently inventive capacities of the young mind in search of understanding and belonging, where Black queer can come to mean expansion, love, and care? In this way, we conceived of the BKBC as a space to read as a practice of proximity and relationality rooted in Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 1990).

Reading together allowed us to prioritize connectedness and dialogue as opposed to isolation and individual ego, to enter conversations with curatorial and caring investments in the texts, as opposed to a foremost desire to critique and or disprove, and to integrate our lived experiences in the process of our interpretation as credible criterion for discerning meaning. In this article, we offer our conversation on *Julián Is a Mermaid, My Rainbow,* and *Being You*, framed by the questions above and written as an interplay of edited transcription and collaborative synthesis.

We also read the theoretical contributions of these texts in ways that do not get caught up in what Barbara Christian (1988) calls *the race for theory*. Christian tells us that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic" (p. 52). We exemplify this in our choice to not include a theory section in this article, advocating instead for the development of a relational reading practice rooted in an intimate practice of theorizing that signals "how we know what we know" and "how we read what we read" (Christian, 1987, p. 57).

Through our relational reading practice, we draw connections between the narratives and illustrations, and Black feminist theories on Blackness, queerness, culture, and social struggle to highlight possibilities for understanding family/kinship, Black ordinariness, Black trans girl hair politics, Black queer affirming language, and critiques of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). We argue that to experience children's books in ways that affirm Black queer lives requires a dialogic reading practice rooted in relationality and Black queer (and) feminist ways of knowing. We model our reading practice in the structure of this article as a means of taking dialogue seriously as a mode of knowledge production—one that is not subsumed within the false hierarchy of text as the superior mode of knowledge dissemination. Dialogue is central to Paulo Freire's approach to liberatory education, as "the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 14), and is also central to Black feminist practices, as indicated by bell hooks (1994), who turns to self-dialogue for the intimacy and familiarity it provides that are not possible in the essay (p. 45). By thinking aloud, storytelling, asking questions, and offering insights, we emphasize how readers of all ages can generate a collective pedagogical experience. We assert that inquiry becomes collaborative through dialogue, allowing us to reflect together on what we (do not) know and sealing the relationship between those involved in dialogic knowledge practices, as well as with the texts they collectively engage.

This article reflects how our dialogic reading practice uplifts the potentiality of children's books to create worlds where Black and queer signify expansive love and care across time and space. We end by offering Black redaction and Black annotation, first conceptualized by Christina Sharpe (2016) in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as strategies for being in dialogue with texts that Black kids (big and small) can employ with a commitment to reading relationally in the ways we have here. As we centre a Black queer (and) feminist dialogic reading practice, we are not writing for all readers, yet we still invite all readers to consider how to develop a relational reading practice that takes seriously the theoretical contributions of children's literature.

Developing relational reading pedagogies

As members of the BKBC, our relational pedagogical reading strategy is grounded in Black queer (and) feminist thought and practice. Our aim is to develop collaborative approaches to learn and grow alongside children who are members of a subjective category and are often denied recognition as meaning makers of relevance. As we read, discover, and theorize together, we aim to reveal and revel in how children might embody their own Black queer (and) feminist epistemologies as both the subjects and readers of texts. This aim is scaffolded by a belief that proximity is a necessary form of intimacy in Black queer (and) feminist reading: The text does not come alive until you relate to it!

Proximity here includes reading together as a simultaneous activity, where readers bring the fullness of their experiences as embodied knowledge to bear on the text, and reading the children's books in close succession as if they were each chapters in a larger kids anthology about Black queer living. It is through these proximities that we realize these books are meant to be experienced together in a multitude of ways. These proximities offer a capacious view of a landscape of (im)possibilities accessible within the pages of children's books that reveal the joys, challenges, and opportunities within Black queer children's liberatory struggles. It is through these proximities that the everyday ecosystem of body, language, community, and aesthetic within Black queer (and) feminist meaning making becomes apparent.

Through this lens, we read for what worlds have existed and continue to be imagined and built by Black queer young people. In this way, our reading practice intervenes in and occurs outside of the ways EDI narratives uphold white supremacy: tokenizing or making spectacular the ordinary lives of non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people (Walcott, 2019). Rather, we get close to the Black (queer) children and families whose lives we glean on the pages of these books through witnessing who they are, what they love, how they live, who they trust, and what they desire on an average day. The everydayness captured within these texts coincides with a Black feminist tradition of making sense of the world around us in ways that are not always in response to white supremacy (Willis & Lewis, 1999).

JS: Okay, so. ... Have we read the books?

MM: If these work, I've read these books. ... Do we want to go story by story? Do we wanna think about each text on its own? And together later, or something? ... Maybe let's start with one, but if one leads into the other, that's great, too.

SB: Yes, agreed.

MM: How about *Julián Is a Mermaid*? Should we start there?

Julián Is a Mermaid

JS: So, I first found this book when I was in South Africa the first time. I was in a bookstore, and I encountered it and fell in love with it immediately. I like that so much of my understanding, or the meaning that I make from the story, came from the pictures and not just from the words. Like, it really relied on us understanding how Julián was seeing the world and making sense of these beautiful mermaids that he saw, and his desire to be a mermaid, and how he took that on. So much of that happened in the pictures, and then we had, really, minimal text to carry us through this story. So, in that way it's really beautiful for reading with small children who are at a level of literacy where they're engaging with books in different ways. They're not reading the words. Children are reading the pictures, they're paying attention to whatever images or colours or shapes or textures catch their eye—or mouth, if they're young enough. They're turning pages backwards and forwards. And it made me think about the way that I would read this story with a young child who has no interest in the text (or the text *as text*)—stopping to ask questions like *What do you see? What do you feel?* Because there's so much that's happening in this book beyond just what the text says.

MM: I'm flipping through it again and paying attention to the images, and I didn't notice that there are actually so many pages that don't have text on them. Because I'm drawn to reading, my eye just goes looking for the text to give me context. But it's actually, as you're saying, Julián is reading a book about mermaids, and then this later series of pages without text on it starts with Julián looking at the book and then diving into the book and then being in the images in the book, and when they get to the stop on the subway, that's when Julián pops back out of it. So it's this very meta experience of Julián finding

> a way through the pictures. There's something here, too, about what Julián is accessing through his book is also what we are accessing through this book.

Love's artwork illuminates immense possibilities for theorizing Black queer children's experiences. *Julián Is a Mermaid* transports the reader into a world set in a suburban home and the town where Julián lives with his grandmother, Abuela. The neighbourhood doubles as a subaquatic universe where fish, stingrays, eels, jellyfish, and other sea creatures—especially mermaids—dwell.

On what appears to be a typical day, Julián reads a book while seated next to his abuela on the subway train. Along the way, three mermaids board the train and catch his attention. He tells Abuela as they make their way home that he, too, is a mermaid. Once home, Julián has a "good idea" (p. 15) and meticulously crafts an outfit from objects around the house. He borrows a window curtain (to form a tail around his waist), a house plant (for flowing hair), and a bouquet from the vase on a dresser (to adorn his tresses with flowers) to transform into his true self: a mermaid. Startled by the abrupt appearance of Abuela in the midst of his self-transformation, he awaits her full response when she says, "Come here, mijo" (p. 22). Julián was not in trouble, however; rather, he is encouraged to continue his adornment as Abuela hands him a string of pearls to complete his curated look. Together, they join a procession of other mermaids and creatures who, like Julián, parade as unique, colourful, self-determined beings toward the expansive welcome of the ocean where their underwater kin celebrate in tandem.

In the front endpapers of this book, we are immersed in a swimming pool where Julián is surrounded by his abuela and several other swimmers—likely abuelas, too—who transform into mermaids alongside Julián by the back endpapers. The unique colours of the abuela-mermaid tails mirror the colours and patterns of their bathing suits. The absence of a pool deck places this collective of mermaids in a sea of endless possibilities. While some abuela-mermaids look out for Julián with a watchful eye, others look elsewhere. Julián looks directly at the reader with a head of long, flowing hair and a content smile indicating that he is right where he ought to be.

Given the central role that water plays throughout this text, along with Love's inclusion of cultural traditions like carnival, we recognize the various ways this text signals a Caribbean diasporic lineage. Reading the book from North America, water gestures in part to the violent histories of the transatlantic slave trade, during which enslaved Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas by ship via the Atlantic Ocean, into which many jumped or were thrown overboard to their deaths. Black feminist writings on water account for this complex Black experience. These include such works as Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1999), in which protagonist Anyanwu's transformation into a dolphin registers as a reclamatory practice of joy and freedom, Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020), in which kinship with water dwellers becomes a potential means of collective survival in this age of extraction, exploitation, and displacement, and Sharpe's use of "residence time" (p. 41) in *In the Wake*. Residence time pays attention to the Black bodies in the ocean and the fact that "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today" (p. 40) and continue to be joined by those who lose their lives at sea in the contemporary wake(s) of slavery's afterlives.

Read in this lineage, Julián's imagined transformation into a sea creature, held by a sea creature matriarch resembling Abuela, signals the ways in which the ocean holds both harm and healing in the Black imagination. Furthermore, the sea holds the queer potentialities of (re)making gender as the site of a foundational "ungendering" in the Middle Passage (Amideo, 2021; Spillers, 1987, p. 72). As a site of reckoning with the racially gendered violences of coloniality, the sea thus holds great significance for the descendants of enslaved Africans throughout the Americas who survived on Julián's behalf, as well as our own, including those who did not survive on land but might still be kin underwater.

> **SB:** When I read Julián, I was first struck by the beautiful illustrations of all kinds of bodies. As soon as you open it, we have thicc [read thick] aunties with their swimming caps on. I think it really beautifully captures the variety of people that we encounter [in our communities] every day. I like the familiarity of it, which we don't often see. For example, in the other texts, like *Being You*, I think they are doing [that work] very differently. There's a bunch of words in those other texts, whereas with Julián we just sit with these illustrations and are able to take part in the same conversation about going beyond gender definitions and just deciding who you are on your own terms. Also, I think [that] what I love most about Julián's book is their relationship with their abuela. They're just talking about what family support looks like and really disrupting that tendency to construct Black families as largely toxic when it comes to Black queer family members, and that's not the only story—Black queer people are also embraced for who they are, and I feel like we don't see that enough. I think that was most beautiful for me. And also kind of relatable. … I remember seeing my own grandmother help my cousin put bubbles into their "hair." They would take a towel to get long, flowy hair like Julián does with the house plant, and Grandma would help them put bubbles in it to give them pigtails. When I read this I was like, this is such a beautiful and relatable story about other ways of just building family and loving everyone for who they are. Especially at such a young age.

While this book tells a personal story between Julián and his grandmother, the presence of his fellow mermaids underwater and other characters we encounter along the way also highlight that Love's book is firmly rooted in community and reflects a Black queer feminist practice. In placing Black (boy) freedom at the centre of this text while underscoring how this freedom is made possible through queer gathering, *Julián Is a Mermaid* exemplifies the kind of environment that is necessary for Black queer children to thrive. The dynamics of kinship counter the limiting narratives that depict Black Caribbean families and the wider region as homogeneously homo/bi/transphobic (Attai et al., 2020). There is no conflict experienced here, and the narrative of Julián's gender exploration does not rely on tropes of confusion, fear, secrecy, or alienation. Julián, Abuela, and their community of sea dwellers march, sing, swim, and dance collectively as they chart alternative pathways toward freedom. They do so without reliance on liberal terms of identity to craft spaces of belonging—rather, it is Julián's inventiveness that prompts communal connections.

In the second book, Trinity and DeShanna Neal's *My Rainbow* (2020), we read similar themes of Black ordinariness, creativity, and care via the perspectives of Black queer families.

My Rainbow

My Rainbow, coauthored by Trinity (who shares the name of the book's protagonist) and her parent DeShanna Neal (2020), provides a colourfully immersive glimpse into Trinity's world made possible by her surrounding family—mom, dad, Lucien, Hyperion, Little Thane, and their soft-haired pet, Peter Porker. On the cover, Trinity sports a tightly coiled blue, purple, and pink-coloured Afro along with a big smile that rivals the twinkling stars adorning her hair and eyes. The vibrant illustrations gesture toward the reading experience to follow. The story opens with Trinity, a young Black autistic trans girl, spending time with her siblings in imaginative play. The warm and comfortable living area is brimming with books, plants, a cooing baby, and morning sunlight and provides insights for the reader about what is required to cultivate spaces that "feel safe" (p. 2).

As the illustrations transport the reader, following the siblings' imagination from their living area to the purple hues of outer space and the glint of stars and spaceships, we are brought back to the ground as Trinity stares at her Black doll and longs after the length of its hair. She expresses her longing and worry that girls need long hair, as her mom, Little Thane, Peter Porker, and even the figure in the painting on the wall seem to listen with care and concern. Trinity says to her mother, "People don't care if cisgender girls like you have short hair. But it's different

for transgender girls. I *need* long hair" (p. 11). With this statement, Trinity complicates the internalization of Eurocentric beauty standards that depend on the presence of long (straight) hair for them to be read as beautiful (Brown, 2018, 2019), demonstrating the self-led possibilities that Black trans girls use to redefine beauty standards.

Later in the text, while Trinity's parents are struggling to know how to support their daughter, Lucien enters the room and confidently asserts that he can help. Lucien and his mother venture to the beauty supply store, where we find them surrounded by walls of wigs and extensions of different lengths, textures, and colours. They both know that none of them seem quite right for Trinity—the wigs are too long, and Trinity does not like hair touching her neck. Some wigs are too straight for Trinity, Mom remarks, noting that Trinity is "a beautiful Black girl and her curly hair is *already* perfect" (p. 16, emphasis in original). This text centres Black trans girls' perspectives to bolster discourses on Black hair politics that affirm natural Black hairstyles (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Mercer, 1994; Prince, 2009). *My Rainbow* extends these hair conversations by not only reminding us that curly-haired Afros are perfectly beautiful, but also that the need for long hair is different and perhaps more imperative for trans girls.

This beauty supply store trip also details for the reader how this family collectively embraces Trinity's neurodivergent and gendered knowledge. It is through them keeping the fullness of Trinity at the forefront of their minds that they instead decide she will need her own custom rainbow wig. Trinity's mom stays up late in the night to craft a wig with the guidance of YouTube tutorials and the fuel of hot coffee. The next morning, Trinity wakes up to the hair she already knew she always wanted.

> **JS:** [*My Rainbow*] does the work of disrupting the expectation that education and learning happen in one direction—from the adult to the child—because Lucien is the one who's like, "Let me help you all. You're struggling." I thought that that was really beautiful, and that also the story depicts the parents as being very receptive to that and taking the child's lead.
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> **MM:** I also love the disruption of gender politics in that it is Lucien who knows to go to the wig store.
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> **SB:** I love just how unapologetically Black this text is. Look at the hair store. We have different wigs on display, the packs of hair and all different colours. And even the person at the counter, Maya, goes by they/them pronouns. I think they are showing the everydayness of being Black and queer without announcing it. It's just a regular experience. I'm going to the hair store and this is who works there.
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> **MM:** I also am loving how this book does something with the intersection of Trinity's autisticness and transness, without it being didactic. Or again, about teaching an adult or an audience a lesson. It's just, here's this reality of I want long hair, and I have sensory sensitivities, and I want to be able to be trans in my way and have my sensory needs met, and I can do all those things.
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> **SB:** Yeah, love looks like staying up 'til 3:00 a.m. to make a wig for a child. That is beautiful, right? And yeah, going back to what you were saying, Mila, about all of Trinity's intersections, being disabled, trans, Black, what have you. ... This is essentially a conversation about hair, and that's it. I think it beautifully shows how there's a tendency for, I don't know, Black individuals to be a spokesperson for any particular one of those identities, while having to minimize one under the other. Are you gonna focus on your queer experiences? Your experience of race? Whatever. But, no. This is more accurate to me in terms of how Black people live life every day—we're not obsessed about [only] one thing.
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> **JS:** And it's an anchor, really. The conversation being about Black hair makes it so that it cannot be separated from Black people. This isn't a story that can just be extrapolated to talk about a trans-autistic experience. This is a Black trans autistic girl who is talking about showing up in the world in a way that feels right for her. And having to say to her mom, who is really trying to affirm her gender identity: You don't understand. It is not the same. We are not the same. [She is saying] that the politics

of hair for a Black cisgender girl or woman and a Black transgender girl are not the same, and telling her mom, I need you to understand that. This important discussion is anchored in this story about Black hair, and therefore it's a very important story.

As with *Julián Is a Mermaid*, *My Rainbow* is also a story of crafting, family, and Black queer belonging. Despite being a text that all readers can appreciate, it is written and illustrated with Black readers in mind, who are more likely to recognize the details that enliven the everyday tableaus of embodied intimacy and care on each page. Whoever the reader(s), experiencing *My Rainbow* in proximity with *Julián Is a Mermaid* opens one to the expanse of the Black queer world as lived by children and their families.

Reading them together is like creating a wormhole between the living rooms of these two Black queer children. You can see Julián and Trinity, in their separate homes, perhaps across borders, "marvelling at [their own] inventiveness" (Spillers, 1987, p. 65) with the support of their caregivers in a wide-reaching refusal of racialized gender norms. In the safety of their homes, Julián and Trinity experience the space and confidence to inhabit and expand their gender expressions. Neither protagonist's gender story begins with injury (bullying, exclusion, dismissal, doubt) but rather in a space of held intimacy. For Julián, his subaquatic transformations mirror his terrestrial self-fashioning. For Trinity, her celestial play continues on Earth through the rainbow she embodies. Intergenerational kinship and knowledge exchange is central to these Black queer explorations of self and self-fashioning. In both texts, the passing of knowledge from elder to child and/or child(ren) to elder(s) prompts a critical Black queer (and) feminist epistemological intervention in ageist presumptions about knowledge production and Black queer acceptance. Critical to communicating this within each text is the minimal or strategic use of language. While use of contemporary gender terms is often mobilized as an indicator of progressive values, and a lack of knowledge or struggle with these terms is often taken as evidence of bigotry, *Julián Is a Mermaid* and *My Rainbow* engage language in contextual ways that emphasize embodied cultural care that extends beyond learning new terms. For Julián, the word *mermaid* is all that's needed for him and Abuela to share the experience of his gender expansion. For Trinity, she uses the terms *cisgender* and *transgender* when she is trying to maintain the connection with her mom in her gendered desires.

In the dialogue to follow, we further explore the complex and careful ways in which language is deployed to affirm Black queer experiences across the texts being studied. Due to such nuances, we maintain important distinctions between what a queer-affirming EDI-centered book like *Being You* (discussed in the following section) has the capacity to do in comparison to the transformative possibilities made possible via Black-centered queer children's books like *Julián Is a Mermaid* and *My Rainbow*.

MM: I love that Trinity is the only one who whips out a technical term to be able to say, Okay, adult mom, so that you get what I'm saying, let me use the vocabulary that you're steeped in. I don't need it, but you clearly need it, and that she's the one that teaches it. It's not like Being You, where an omniscient narrator speaks down to say "cisgender means ____," you know? While we know that has its place, it feels like Trinity doesn't need those words. That's not what I'm rooting this in. I'm just trying to help you to understand and be able to love and support me intimately. That's what that language is, and it's a good example of when the contemporary terms are actually helpful versus when it becomes a distraction from why that language is needed in the first place.

JS: In a way, what that sounds like is that Being You is more of a child-friendly textbook. Do you know what I mean? Here's some theory, some language. It's explicitly teaching words. These words do these things, and these other words do these things. Whereas for Trinity's story, we only get some of that language when it helps us to understand what the sticking point is. Here's how I can use that language to help usher us over this hurdle. But we need to get over this hurdle.

> **MM:** Yeah, what are we actually wanting language to do when we're teaching kids to use it? In this current social moment, out of which books like Being You and that whole series came (First Conversations about race [Our Skin, Madison & Ralli, 2021b], gender [Being You, Madison & Ralli, 2021a], consent [Yes! No!, Madison & Ralli, 2022], etc.), in some ways, those cater to a desire for correctness or to not offend or hurt. But it feels different than the way language creates intimacy in My Rainbow or Julián Is a Mermaid. Part of that I think is because it's language coming from the way that children are trying to use language first, which is to build intimacy. They're not trying to be politically correct or, you know, not say the wrong thing.

Ultimately, it is the scene in the beauty store where *My Rainbow* both incites and invites Black queer imaginations for what body means—that the body is an invitation to create equitable social worlds rather than perceiving the social world as an invitation for only certain bodies. While Western categories of identity are still recovering from their epistemological roots in biological determinism—the inherently racist, sexist, and ableist system of knowledge that suggested social inequalities were rooted in biological differences—*My Rainbow* narrativizes a liberatory Black queer feminist epistemology whereby Blackness, transness, and neurodiversity are invitations to create and build the spaces, resources, and skills we need so that everyone can thrive.

> **MM:** This is how we build worlds. This is how we consider each other deeply and personally up close, and what our needs are. And then we make the spaces that we are going to thrive in and be ourselves in. They're really books about crafting. Crafting space and place from actual experience. And from the ground up, from the youngest of them.

> **JS:** Yes, I think that also makes me think that the audiences for these books are really different. *Julián Is a Mermaid* and *My Rainbow* are very much written for Black audiences. Black children, Black families broadly defined, but *Being You* is more for adults [of no racial specification]. There is an expectation that they'll read it with children, but that book is written with adults in mind.

Our conversations probe the different kinds of relationalities made possible by these texts.

Being You

Being You by Madison and Ralli (2021a) was created to be an introductory conversation about gender. As a board book with accompanying child-like illustrations, it is clear that this introduction is one that imagines a young audience. The book's illustrations celebrate difference by portraying people across intersections of race, gender, religion, and ability, asking the reader to think deeply about what makes them special through prompts such as "There's only one you in the whole world. Isn't that amazing?" (p. 1). The book invites children and their co-readers to (re)imagine gender as a strategy to affirm the fullness of who they are by asking questions such as "What did your grown-ups call you when you were born?" (p. 8) or "What do you love about your body?" (p. 4). However, the didactic sections at the book's conclusion invite readers of all ages to learn, including definitions of terms like *gender assignment*, *patriarchy*, and *feminism*.

The book continues by stating that "you are the expert in being YOU" (p. 11). This simple yet profound claim bolsters the various self-led ways that youth of all races might discover and celebrate who they are. Some illustrations portray a variety of individuals stating their fluid gender identifications, such as, "TODAY I FEEL LIKE A BOY!," "I'M AN IN-BETWEENER!," or "I'M TRANS" (pp. 11–12). Their identifications through this text offer the reader insight into the complexities of gender assignments, stereotypes, gender expression/play, and pronouns to be further unpacked when they "continue the conversation" (p. 29). The difference in the functionality of this text compared to the others previously discussed lies in the risk of people reading *Being You* in ways that reify the covert

assumption that children do not already know themselves. What *Julián Is a Mermaid* and *My Rainbow* inversely demonstrate is that queer-affirming spaces already exist for Black queer and trans youth. The tensions between these texts not only illuminate the stifling limitations of white supremacist heteropatriarchal structures but also how centering Black queer children's experiences gestures toward other possibilities that operate beyond violent colonial structures.

Additional tensions become more evident in the illustration of children encountering the wall of United States presidents. The accompanying prompt reads, "Have you noticed any unfair rules about gender?" (p. 20) without calling into question the single portrait of a Black man on the wall of otherwise white men. It is an example of how opportunities for conversations about race are overlooked in *Being You*. This book also raises additional questions such as, "What unfair things do you notice?" and "What can you say or do about them?" (p. 26). While such inquiries show how these authors recognize the capacity for youth to be agents of social change, the earlier pages regarding unfair gender rules operate under the assumption that what constitutes societal unfairness can be unpacked via just one axis of analysis. This raises the question about how children's books can be used as a tool to teach children about the overlapping ways that power and privilege function and what is required from us to work "together to make things more fair" (p. 24). To partially answer this question, we raise the few words of acknowledgement that illustrator Passchier left on the book's back cover: "For you, if you need to read these words." This nuanced invitation, framed by the suggestion of a need—perhaps for language, perhaps for clarity—undercuts some of our critiques of this overall text and filters the primary intended audience.

While at times the imagery and narrative in *Being You* reads as overly simplistic, this didactic also serves to uphold the deceptions laced within Canada's multicultural image and/or America's melting pot. The "if" in Passchier's statement instead leaves room to suggest that those who might need to read this book are not the children who are already trusted as knowers of their own bodies. This suggestion, at least to the BKBC, implies that those who need to read this book are those who have internalized myths about white cisheteronormativity and ableism. This underlying objective to build a world that is more fair ultimately requires more work from some than others. The "if" then also serves to create some necessary distance for those like Trinity or Julián who have long been doing just that. Thus, read in proximity with *My Rainbow* and *Julián Is a Mermaid*, *Being You* serves a function distinct from that of the other texts.

Conclusion: Black redaction and Black annotation as a relational reading practice

We have described and demonstrated a Black queer feminist reading practice that centers on relationality within, between, and among the texts and their readers. While this practice emerged from our combined Black queer (and) feminist knowledges, experiences, and theoretical lineages, we argue that all readers can learn to center Black queer life beyond the frames of liberal EDI or injury when they read children's stories that include Black queer characters. We offer Black annotation and Black redaction as an example of such practices that encourage a different relationship to text and image. Through Black annotation and Black redaction, the reader can actively search within the texts and images for the signs of Black life and the persistence and care to be found there, which at times may be more easily accessible (as is the case with Love's and Neal's books) and at times may require further reading than the imperatives of EDI and multiculturalism.

Sharpe (2016) conceptualized Black annotation and Black redaction as practices of reading and seeing where we proceed with the knowledge that the totality of the climate is anti-Black, and yet we insist that Black life persists in spite of this violence. Sharpe argued that through these practices, we can call something different out of the conventional representational materials that discursively enclose Black personhood in the hold of the ship, what

Sharpe termed the "orthography of the wake" (p. 20). This orthography has gendered consequences, as within it, Sharpe shows us, words such as *girl*, *boy*, *mother*, and *brother* lose their meaning when abutted with Black.

Through Black annotation and Black redaction, Sharpe (2016) sees, reads, and breathes Black life in the wake "into and out of all the violences and more" (p. 130). For example, in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, she revisits the photograph of a Haitian girl who has the word *SHIP* affixed to her forehead. Rather than staying with the violence of the note, Sharpe extends her looking beyond its frame and finds the leaf "stuck in her still neat braids. And I think: somebody braided her hair before that earthquake hit" (p. 120). The girl's braids mark an everyday practice of living and are evidence of deep care, aliveness, and Black girlhood. It is not an exceptional act that this Black annotation reveals, a liberal heroism of civil rights that this girl has needed to enact in order to be found worthy in the archive. Rather, it is the evidence of relationality, proximity, and intimacy that this annotation calls to the foreground, and in doing so it is the word *ship* that recedes, redacted. While Sharpe does not write explicitly for children, we extend her conceptual offerings as important to readers of all ages.

> **JS:** I've taken pieces of tape and put them over [problematic parts of other books] so that we don't have to read them exactly as written because the rest of the story is great. It's my way of asking: Are there ways that we can still use this text? Is it editable? Is there a way that we can, you know, still find value in it and read around, or adjust, or edit, or remix, or redact?
>
> **MM:** If we also just wait for every book to do exactly what we need it to do, we'd just be constantly throwing out books. Do you mark it up together? Do you cross it out in a way that's visible, so that, you know, kids are also actively learning that texts are editable? They were written by someone, and they can be edited in real time. They are not stagnant things.
>
> **SB:** Yeah, yeah! I think it's important to discuss our responsibility as big kids as we encounter these texts and are sharing them with children. What do we do to help make these edits? What is our responsibility? What are we doing to eliminate words? Is it useful? Are we trying to [advance our own priorities] or are we doing something else?
>
> **JS:** Imagine developing a reading practice with children that allows them to think about books as living texts that they can engage with—not that they just have to consume or reject, but they can *engage* with them. 'Cause when I was younger, I was taught that you don't write in books. Which, like, I get, but … then as I got older I really had to *learn* that I could write in the margins, I could underline things … and that doesn't have to be just when you get to postsecondary when you're reading a text for class. It can be part of your everyday practice that you engage with the book, and you can ask questions back to the text, and you can note where there's a discrepancy.
>
> **MM:** Reading with kids with Black annotation and Black redaction also teaches them to be particular kinds of researchers and, again, not a Western researcher but, say, a Black-feminist-epistemology-type researcher, where no matter what age you are, you already come to the text with knowledge that's valuable. Meaning that the text actually comes to life in the context of your own living.

Black annotation and Black redaction allow us to read children's books in ways that affirm Black queer lives because it trains us to be intimate with the text and to look for intimacy, rather than injury, within the everyday lives of their characters. In doing so, Black annotation and Black redaction uplift the potentiality of children's books to create worlds where Black and queer signify, for all readers, expansive love and care across time and space. Knowing that Black liberation would necessitate the liberation of all peoples (Combahee River Collective, 1977), it is essential for those invested in liberation to adopt—and encourage Black children to develop—a relationship to reading texts that is not one of passive consumption. This relational reading practice should be one wherein their

ideas, observations, experiences, and knowledge are free to claim space in the praxis of imaginative worldmaking, preferably experienced together rather than apart.

To those deeply engaged with Black studies, Black queer studies, or Black feminisms, we invite you to extend that engagement toward relational reading practices with the kids (big and small) in your lives and the children's books you encounter. To all readers of this article, we encourage you to engage with children's books that are written with Black queer children at the centre, children who do not conform to normative ideals of childhood but embrace transformation and self-determination on their own terms and in the grace of their communities. What these texts can offer us goes beyond a diverse narrative, and training our relational reading practices can invite us into the liberatory worlding that Black queer children do every day.

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